

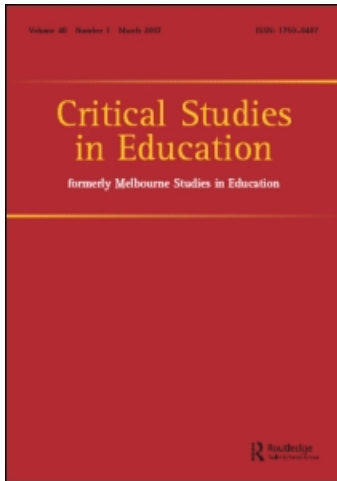
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### Learning to survive the 'Shopocalypse': Reverend Billy's anti-consumption 'pedagogy of the unknown'

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## Learning to survive the ‘Shopocalypse’: Reverend Billy’s anti-consumption ‘pedagogy of the unknown’

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This paper explores the ‘social movement learning’ operating within one site of critical public pedagogy and, specifically, examines how the anti-consumption activist group *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping* encourages transitional spaces of learning through a ‘pedagogy of the unknown.’ Bill Talen, a.k.a. ‘Reverend Billy’, is an anti-consumption activist who utilizes performance art as a form of critical public pedagogy. Through an analysis of his performances gathered from numerous sources including video, audio interviews and written scripts, this paper discusses how Reverend Billy’s work operates as a form of critical public pedagogy. This paper posits that Reverend Billy: (1) deliberately tries to avoid categorizing himself, so he remains a kind of ‘uncategorizable’ pedagogue and ‘unknowable’ preacher who (2) preaches against the ‘known’ consumerist script, he (3) enacts a pedagogy of the unknown and *performs* the unknown, as he focuses on asking questions and enacting ‘exalted acts of embarrassment’ that are unsanctioned in everyday life to (4) disturb customers long enough so that they can (5) back away from the product, away from the consumerist script, into what Reverend Billy calls ‘the fabulous unknown’. This pedagogy of the unknown seeks to open the ‘transitional spaces’ so necessary for critical learning about consumerism to take place.

**Keywords:** consumption; critical pedagogy of consumption; public pedagogy; social movement learning

### Introduction

There is increasing interest among critical educators – especially those interested in the learning taking place outside of formal institutions – in understanding social movements that operate within civil society (Dykstra & Law, 1994; Holst, 2002); these social movements are seen as ‘sites of learning, meaning making and resistance’ (Hill, 2002, p. 182). One emerging social movement that has received little attention among educational scholars focuses on resisting consumerism and consumption. This anti-consumption social movement ‘attempt[s] to transform various elements of the social order surrounding consumption and marketing’ (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004, p. 691), questions the taken-for-granted assumption that consuming is natural and good and aims to disrupt the naturalization of consumer culture (Princen, Maniates, & Conca, 2002; Sandlin & Milam, 2008). While some scholars have addressed the critical learning that is involved in consumption and its resistance (Hoechsmann, 2007; Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Martens, 2005;

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Reynolds, 2004; Sandlin & McLaren, 2010; Sandlin & Milam, 2008; Spring, 2003), much of this work is either theoretical or has focused on illuminating the reproductive or hegemonic aspects of consumerism. Additionally, authors focusing on this area still have not fully explored how critical pedagogies are actually *enacted* in such social movement contexts. As an educator who is interested in exploring the possibilities of anti-consumption critical pedagogies, in this research I sought to examine a particular 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 education within the context of the anti-consumption activism of Reverend Billy.

Bill Talen is an anti-consumption activist and performance artist based in New York City, who takes on the persona of ‘Reverend Billy’.<sup>1</sup> The Reverend is the leader of the ‘Church of Stop Shopping’ and adopts the persona of a Southern, conservative, evangelical preacher – a la Jimmy Swaggart – including pouffy hair and a white suit (see Figure 1). He stages ‘comic theatrical service[s]’ (Lane, 2002, p. 60) – structured as 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 acts out a call-and-response style of preaching as members of the audience respond with ‘Amen!’ and ‘Hallelujah!’ Reverend Billy also performs ‘retail interventions’ in public spaces and retail stores along with the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir; his targets include the Disney Company, Starbucks, Wal-Mart and Victoria’s Secret.

In this article, I expand upon recent research in which I explored anti-consumption culture jamming as critical public pedagogy (Sandlin & Milam, 2008). In that research I focused on two culture jamming activist groups, Reverend Billy and *Adbusters*<sup>2</sup>, to explore how the everyday enactments of culture jamming operated as critical public



Figure 1. Reverend Billy (photo courtesy of Fred Askew).

pedagogy. I also explicated how culture jamming works as curriculum, as it seeks to foster participatory and resistant cultural production, to engage learners corporeally, to enact a political poetics and to open transitional spaces through ‘détournement’ (literally a ‘turning around’ or a double take). One idea that emerged in my previous research was the concept of the ‘unknown;’ I argued that effective culture-jamming-as-critical-pedagogy engages with curricular spaces that are open, unnamed and *possible*. In this current article, I turn my attention solely to an in-depth examination of Reverend Billy. I expand upon this notion of the ‘unknown,’ and more fully explore how Reverend Billy embodies and enacts the unknown and how Reverend Billy uses the unknown as a pedagogical space of possibility and social transformation.

### Theoretical framings

In this study I draw from educational research and theory focused on consumption and learning, public pedagogy, social movement learning and the notion of the ‘unknown’. First, I am guided by recent work within education that focuses on cultural studies approaches to consumption and on how consumption and consumerism are related to learning and pedagogy, especially the work examining informal pedagogy outside of institutions such as schools. Especially helpful to me are Usher, Bryant and Johnston’s (1997) perspectives on how consumption, education and learning converge. They see consumption as being inextricably tied to learning, as they argue that consumption is connected with a variety of social practices – all of which involve learning. Their notion of *critical practices* is connected specifically to the kinds of pedagogy Reverend Billy enacts. Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997) explain that critical practices occur both inside and outside of formal educational institutions and engage with processes of both production and consumption, especially against products of consumer capitalism such as waste and environmental pollution. They further argue that critical resistance takes place not only by working against material products and processes of oppression tied to consumption, but also in the cultural and symbolic realms, through images ‘and the signification of, and investments made in, particular images’ (p. 20). Critical practices necessitate critical learning and a stance of reflexivity about self and society.

Second, I seek to understand Reverend Billy’s work using the concept of *social movement learning*, specifically focusing on the external educative or ‘public education’ aspects of social movements (Dykstra & Law, 1994). Dykstra and Law argue that the ‘external’ dimension of social movements involves a particular kind of critical pedagogy that focuses on (1) *raising social consciousness* – that is, helping ‘audience members’ to question the every-dayness of life, to de-habitualize routines and to learn to unmask relations of power that help to manufacture consent, (2) *critical thinking* – that is, helping people engage in a process that involves understanding the political, economic and social forces that influence daily life, (3) *experiential learning*, through which people engage in action and are challenged to clarify not only what they believe but what they are actually willing to do on behalf of those beliefs and (4) *opening up and expanding the imagination* of the general public and those involved in the movement, through clarifying visions, opening up spaces for transcendent thinking, and encouraging people to create alternative ways of living and being in the world.

This ‘external educative’ aspect of social movements can also be positioned as a form of public pedagogy. Thus, I view the work of anti-consumption social movement educators such as Reverend Billy as ‘critical public pedagogy’ and draw upon the work of curriculum theorists such as Giroux (2000) and Ellsworth (2005), who focus on everyday

life and popular culture as sites of education and learning. Educators who examine *critical* public pedagogy often draw from a Gramscian cultural studies framework, which examines the politics of culture and the possibilities it holds for resistance (Bennett, 1998). However, while many educators interested in public pedagogy take a Gramscian perspective on culture, the vast majority of work has focused on reproduction, not resistance. Therefore, in this research I am particularly interested in culture as a site of resistance, which Duncombe (2002) defines as ‘culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure’ (p. 5).

I find the work of Ellsworth (2005) particularly helpful in exploring the possibilities for resistance in public pedagogies. While Giroux (2003) and other public pedagogy researchers focus on the importance of educators (including both public intellectuals and classroom teachers) facilitating critical transformational learning experiences through rational critical dialogue that deconstructs hegemonic popular culture (what Giroux [2001] calls ‘interpretation as intervention’ [p. 588]), Ellsworth takes a different approach. Ellsworth’s vision of critical transformational pedagogy focuses more on embodied, holistic, performative, intersubjective and aesthetic aspects of teaching and learning and sees transformation and learning as more tentative and ambiguous. Ellsworth (2005) argues, for example, that the most powerful learning experiences arise out of pedagogies that ‘emphasize noncognitive, nonrepresentational processes and events such as movement, sensation, intensity, rhythm, passage, and self-augmenting change’ (p. 6). Ellsworth argues that people do not experience critical learning in a neat, straightforward, linear, or orderly fashion – they have not ‘entered “the niceness of a framed neat closed experience”’ but rather have ‘fallen into life as opened and unfinished’ (p. 123). She further explains that new ways of seeing and interacting with the world ‘can be released only through movement into and within the messy intervals of space and time between the “things” we already know and between the “beings” we have already made of ourselves and others’ (p. 123). Ellsworth states that the ‘in-between’ is the site where personal, social and cultural learning and transformations occur. The ‘in-between’ is ‘the only place – the place around identities, between identities – where becoming, an openness to futurity, outstrips the conservational impetus to retain cohesion and unity’ (p. 123). In fact, Ellsworth argues that openness and in-betweenness – moving away from cohesion and unity – are actually what constitute critical learning.

This ‘unknown’ is conceptualized by various curriculum theorists as the ‘in-between’ (Reynolds, 2004), ‘getting lost’ (Lather, 2004), a ‘pedagogy of the unknowable’ (Ellsworth, 1989), ‘transitional spaces’ and learning as ‘becoming’ (Ellsworth, 2005). For Lather (2004), it is through getting lost that interesting learning can start: getting lost concerns ‘dispersing rather than capturing meanings, and producing bafflement rather than solutions’ (p. 2). And for Ellsworth (2005), ‘transitional spaces’ are spaces where knowing is incomplete and unfinished; in Ellsworth’s words, transformational pedagogies are those ‘through which we come to have the surprising, incomplete knowings, ideas, and sensations that undo us and set us in motion toward an open future’ (pp. 17–18). The unknown is often explored through art, music, dance and other non-cognitive ways of being and knowing. Entering into the unknown, pedagogically, involves avoiding certainty and encouraging exploration. In a pedagogy of the unknown, narratives and ideas are always partial – ‘in the sense that the meaning of an individual’s or group’s experience is never [completely] self-evident or complete’ (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 318). Indeed, curriculum theorists who explore the concept of the unknown posit that critical education is most powerful when it demonstrates the pedagogical force of not dictating ‘the final correct answer’ (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 76).

## Methodology

The concept of ‘bricolage’ (Kincheloe, 2001) aptly describes methodology in cultural studies (Alasuutari, 1995). That is, educational scholars using the framework of cultural studies to examine popular culture must be ‘pragmatic and strategic in choosing and applying different methods and practices’ (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 2). Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram and Tincknell (2004) argue that while there are a variety of specific methods used in cultural studies, in general there are two broad approaches to methodology, what they call *readings*, which focus on understanding culture through textual means and *meetings*, which focus on direct encounters with other humans, via ethnographic methods. In this study I was concerned both with *readings* and *meetings* as I sought to understand how Reverend Billy’s public pedagogy is actually enacted and also how he conceives of his pedagogical intent. Like Ellsworth (2005), I used secondary data of scholars who have studied Reverend Billy and from the activists who work with and document their activism with Reverend Billy – ‘the words and concepts of others’ – as ‘raw material’ (p. 13). Data also included film footage from two documentaries (Post & Palacios, 2002; Sharpe, 2001) as well as: shorter films found on Reverend Billy’s website; audio mp3s of Reverend Billy’s sermons, blessings and songs; audio mp3s and text of various interviews of Reverend Billy/Bill Talen; Bill Talen’s autobiography; correspondence between audience members and Reverend Billy posted on his website; newspaper and magazine articles about Reverend Billy; various postings from Reverend Billy’s website, including retail interventions; and academic articles specifically focused on Reverend Billy and his work (Grote, 2002; Kalb, 2001; Lane, 2002; Littler, 2005). I viewed the various texts produced by or about Reverend Billy – including visual, written and performative texts – as ‘cultural texts’ and, drawing upon McKee’s (2003) approach to interpretive cultural textual analysis, I *read*, or sought to understand, how Reverend Billy positions and constructs himself, how he creates alternative visions of the world and how he articulates these visions and educates others about them. I was also interested in understanding how Reverend Billy views and critiques the world around him and how both he and the audiences who see him perform make sense of his work, which led me to also seek out the *meetings* captured in the data I gathered, where Reverend Billy and audience members discuss their views on the activism Reverend Billy enacts. The views of Reverend Billy are more prominent than those of audience members in the data I gathered, however, so in many cases I can only theorize about how audiences receive and engage with his pedagogy. Fully exploring audience reactions and engagements is a project for future research.

I first encountered Reverend Billy’s work several years ago when I was researching ‘culture jamming’ as a potential enactment of critical pedagogy. I viewed a documentary featuring Reverend Billy’s anti-consumption work and was intrigued by his use of music and humor and by his appropriation of the persona of an evangelical preacher. I have reached out to Reverend Billy over the last few years as I have sought to understand his work and its potential as critical consumer education and critical public pedagogy. As I discuss in depth elsewhere (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010), my relationship with and to Reverend Billy and his work has raised ethical issues for me, especially around the question of how to ‘research’ critical public pedagogues or social activists without ‘colonizing’ their work. Reflection on these ethical issues has led me to advocate for a ‘methodology of discomfort’ (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010, p. 353) wherein researchers must ‘be willing to eject the academic mandates of reduction, dissection, and evaluation, embodying instead a disposition of *critical celebration* of the prospects of an Other pedagogy and ways of understanding teaching and learning that upend and unearth our own comfortable, stable notions

of educational practice and meaning' (pp. 356–357). I seek to understand Reverend Billy's public pedagogy but also forward this understanding as incomplete and tentative.

## Findings

As a form of critical public 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). Reverend Billy's activism targets 'the noxious effects of consumerism, transnational capital, and the privatization of public space and culture' (Lane, 2002, p. 60). Against such commercialized forces and consequences of neoliberalism, Reverend Billy promotes local businesses, fair and sustainable trade, community activism, just labor practices, the arts and creative engagement with neighbors and community (Lane, 2002). I see Reverend Billy's anti-consumption cultural resistance as an example of a 'pedagogically charged' practice that is not typically viewed as educational, but one that opens 'the aesthetic in new and unprecedented ways to teaching and learning' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 9). Ellsworth claims that in order to understand how certain types and spaces of learning can constitute transformative experience, we should look towards those spaces and practices such as 'museum exhibitions, aesthetic practice, social action, and even entertainment' (p. 9) that 'allow aesthetic experience to open to the registers or forms of experience that we call teaching and learning' (pp. 8–9). I posit that Reverend Billy's activism constitutes such a practice and argue that the educational power of Reverend Billy's work lies in its ability to ignite the imagination of audience members, which helps them envision different ways of interacting with consumer culture. In what follows, I first describe how Reverend Billy enacts an important part of his critical pedagogy in the act of avoiding being categorized and labeled and thus becomes an 'unknown preacher with an unknown God.' Next, I explore one of the targets of his activism: the 'known' consumerist script that Reverend Billy believes has taken hold of consumers. I also describe how Reverend Billy performs 'exalted acts of embarrassment' that consist of actions that run counter to the kinds of activities that are sanctioned in consumer culture. I argue that Reverend Billy performs these acts of embarrassment in order to rouse consumers out of their familiar (consumption-driven) routines, so that they can embrace what Reverend Billy calls 'the fabulous unknown'. I posit that this pedagogy of the unknown can open up the 'transitional spaces' (Ellsworth, 2005) so necessary for critical learning to take place.

### *An unknown preacher with an unknown God*

An important part of Reverend Billy's pedagogy of the unknown is grounded in who he is and how he presents himself to his audiences. Reverend Billy structures himself as a kind of 'unknown' pedagogue, as he purposely tries to resist labeling and categorization. Landau (2005) argues that 'Reverend Billy prides himself on the fact that he defies interpretation. In fact, no one is quite sure just who or what he is' (para 2) and Reverend Billy sees himself as playing multiple roles (Post & Palacios, 2002). For instance, Reverend Billy sates, 'I wouldn't hazard a guess whether I'm an artist or a political person, or a spiritual worker. Probably other words, too, that are equally incomplete in describing what we're doing' (as interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2002).

One of the main aspects of his work that Reverend Billy tries to keep ambiguous is his relationship with religion. He invokes intentionally confusing and ambiguous statements regarding what he believes, as he proclaims, 'Put the odd back in God!' (Talen, 2003,

p. 169) and ‘We believe in the God that people who don’t believe in God believe in’ (Talen, 2003, p. 169). In his work he incorporates the language, the passion and the style of a particular form of evangelical religion, which further adds to this ambiguity. One sermon at a Starbucks store is described by a journalist in this way, for example:

‘Hallelujah!’ he [Reverend Billy] shouts through a white cardboard megaphone as he bursts through the door. ‘This is an abusive place, children! It has landed in this neighborhood like a space alien! The union busting, the genetically-engineered milk, the fake bohemianism! But we don’t have to be here, children! This is the Good News!’ (Dee, 2004, para 5)

To further complicate this religious ambiguity, over time the Reverend has relied less and less on irony and thus increasingly comes across as sincerely religious or spiritual. Dee (2004) argues:

Anyone who goes to a Reverend Billy service these days expecting a high dose of camp is in for a confrontation with a profoundly odd sincerity. . . . [At a recent ‘church’ service] several yellow-robed choir members circulated in the minutes before the show with rolls of duct tape, with which they good-naturedly covered any visible logos on the congregants’ clothing – the rejection of worldliness, as Durkee [Talen’s wife and fellow activist] points out, being a theme common to most religious experiences. (para 26)

In fact, Reverend Billy *does* believe in something – Reverend Billy’s services are ‘a reaffirmation, in a ritualistic setting, of a common core of spiritual values’ (Dee, 2004, para 25) and are becoming increasingly indistinguishable from real church services.

Reverend Billy values the ambiguity that he helps create in audiences. Lane (2002) states that when the Reverend is asked, point blank, if he is a ‘real’ preacher, ‘The Reverend does not answer. At best he winks’ (p. 79). This embodiment of ambiguity is a tactic that helps push audience members into a state of confusion, which is where, I posit, the critical possibilities of his work lie. Dee (2004) states, for example, that the Reverend is not a ‘real minister’ – but adds that it ‘generally takes people a minute or two to figure that out, and this confusion over the exact derivation of his authority is the space in which he thrives’ (para 5). And Lane (2002) argues that ‘his unwillingness to answer, an unwillingness finally to commit to any form of positive identity, is part of the answer’ (p. 79).

Reverend Billy, then, embodies ‘the unknown’ as he illustrates how to live in ambiguity – not just with regard to his own persona but also in terms of refusing to merely substitute his own script to replace the consumerist script he preaches against. This multi-layered refusal on the part of Reverend Billy can be seen as a pedagogical strategy that seeks to encourage audience members to question their taken-for-granted understandings of life. Lane (2002), for instance, posits that Reverend Billy offers a ‘theatrical and political equivalent to negative dialectics’ (p. 80) in his practice. She goes on to argue that, indeed, Reverend Billy’s message would be lost if he gave an unambiguous answer to audiences:

If dialectics is the ‘consistent sense of nonidentity,’ then Talen can’t afford a positive identity: the minute he offers a reconciliation, of any kind, of the social contradictions he seeks to reveal, the dialectical potential opened by his work disappears. That negativity – never really being any one thing – becomes a means to an end he cannot name. (p. 80)

That is, this presentation and embodiment of ambiguity forces audience members into a space where there is actually a possibility to learn and to come to some deeper understanding of new ways of living:



In the blur between the real church and real theatre, sustaining this negativity is the Reverend's most genuine, and perhaps most spiritual act. It is an everyday, renewable sacrifice: he commits himself to an endless negativity in order to make possible new configurations, new revelations, new ways of imagining being in public, being a public, beyond the retail church of shopping. (Lane, 2002, p. 80)

### ***Stuck in the known: the consumerist script***

One theme that is consistent throughout Reverend Billy's work is that the lives of those living in consumer culture have been commodified and 'scripted'. Through his public pedagogy, he aims to help consumers<sup>3</sup> recognize the typically unconscious, unrecognized and taken-for-granted ways in which society is structured according to the dictates of consumer culture. This consumerist script constitutes the 'known' – the pre-set, the pre-determined – that Reverend Billy seeks to move beyond. Reverend Billy problematizes this consumerist script through preaching against three of its aspects: (1) the ideology of consumerism, (2) the ways in which consumerism mediates human experiences and (3) the omnipresence of consumption in consumers' everyday lives.

First, Reverend Billy argues that the ideology of consumerism has taken control of human life and that consumers believe products can fulfill their needs and make them whole. He sums up this ideology when he argues that the promise of consumerism is to 'just keep buying our products and we'll give you eternity and you'll be just like that smiling celebrity on the glossy surface of that Victoria's Secret package'. He also explains that:

We're just buying things and we think that that's the way we construct the meaning in our lives. And we wonder why we have an empty feeling, a dull feeling. Of course they want us to have that empty dull feeling because we just get into that vicious cycle where we have to go back and buy something else.

And in his biography he argues that consumerism is not simply selling us products, but is seeking to sell us whole ways of life. He states that, within consumerism, 'a company persuades us that a whole way of life is indicated by the sacred acceptance of a running shoe, a cup of burned-tasting coffee, a smiling rat' (Talen, 2003, p. 122). However, he argues that these promises always remain unfulfilled.

Another aspect of the consumerist script that Reverend Billy frequently discusses is how consumers' lives are mediated by products. He argues that humans no longer have their own authentic memories, thoughts or behaviors. Instead, they lead simulated lives that are mediated and crafted by multinational corporations. He proclaims, for example, 'Advertising erases our personal dreams!' Reverend Billy often critiques the Disney Company as being particularly implicated in this mediation process. He states, for example:

Pull on those stainless-steel Mickey Mouse doorknobs [which open into the Disney Store] and it is like you are stepping into a tanning coffin full of smiling pom-poms. The first thing every pom face has in common is that each appears to be smiling with an air of assumed knowledge about your personal life. Snow White whispers to you about your virginity, Simba knows about your ambition, Donald Duck wants to help you with your earnest clumsiness. . . . You find yourself thanking these totemic polyester smilers for the life you lived. Your life events begin to reorganize to fit Disney's schedule; you induce a false childhood. Now you sincerely believe that Peter Pan mediated you out of your sandbox, that when the Little Mermaid walked on land you lost your cherry. (Talen, 2003, p. 71)

Finally, Reverend Billy seeks to trouble the taken-for-granted omnipresence of consumption that structures everyday actions, thoughts and behaviors. He argues that consumers' whole lives are infused with and structured by shopping and consumption, as he states, 'the repetition of logos, the repetition of industrial imagery has become so extreme, we're living in a super mall' (Landau, 2005, para 7). As consumers exist within this world of hyperconsumption, their actions are increasingly scripted; their responses are dictated by the 'very strong' 'psychic architecture' of consumer culture. Reverend Billy argues that consumerist culture 'is saturated with constructions, advertisements, sales jobs, and Pavlovian drill masters' (Landau, 2005, para 13). When existing in consumer culture, people know what to do, and how to act, it is hard to break out of this 'known' existence. Reverend Billy describes this script:

You walk to the product, you browse, you reach for the product, you pick up the product, you walk the product to the counter, you swipe your credit card, you bag the product, you take it out the door. It's very set and yet, that limited number of gestures . . . it's a formal dance, a consumer dance, that is called freedom, that is called democracy. And it's anything but. (Landau, 2005, para 4)

And in a response to a letter someone wrote to him on his webpage, Reverend Billy further argues that consumerism tells people what to think and how to act and dictates what is sanctioned:

Consumerism has us facing one way – toward the product. We're in formation. Our gestures, our memories, and our senses are all organized toward the point of purchase. All day long, they have got people yearning forward, marching toward a completion of the consumption event. . . . We sense that something is going wrong, but we are told that the solution to any problems is to buy more. (Reverend Billy, Letter to 'Noy,' on webpage)

The consumerist script, then, defines what is acceptable and taken for granted – in other words, what can and should be 'known.' Operating within this consumer architecture is safe and comfortable, as it provides answers and entertainment and the 'script' of life. However, Reverend Billy states that this script is also stripping us of our authenticity and of life itself. In the same letter to Noy, he states, 'Even Democracy, Independence, Love – our grandest ideas of ourselves – are now products, available for a price. It looks like part of the price, part of that discount deal, is blindness and death' (Reverend Billy, Letter to 'Noy,' on webpage).

### ***Performing the unknown: an unexpected kind of activism***

With the intention of helping people break out of this script, Reverend Billy enacts a 'pedagogy of the unknown', which uses strategies of activism such as music, humor, art and theater as 'political poetics' (Sandlin & Milam, 2008). Reverend Billy believes these forms of activism are more appropriate and effective than traditional social movement strategies. He explains that, 'We're in for a time of strangeness. . . . Social change will take unrecognizable forms'. He further describes his political poetics:

I'm using strategies like entertainment, comedy, music . . . 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. (interview in Post & Palacios, 2002)

Through these various ‘unexpected’ forms of activism, Reverend Billy seeks to engage his audiences corporeally, to create community and to provide entrée into politics, as Reverend Billy and his audiences come together to create and share resistant culture (Sandlin & Milam, 2008).

Another part of enacting a pedagogy of the unknown consists of exposing the ‘unknown’ or hidden social, environmental, economic and cultural costs behind the products that we buy. Lane (2002), for instance, shares an example of one Reverend Billy sermon, in which Reverend Billy shares a story about buying coffee at a local store. As he reaches for the coffee:

‘I’m having a moment of accidental entry into another world,’ he says, as he narrates a lyrical but lurid vision of the coffee plantation where the beans were grown, replete with underpaid growers and threatening goon squads. . . . He is ‘seeing backward, upstream, into who made this, who worked, who lived, who gave, who was stopped’ . . . [he says:] ‘I realized, I was not alone. Next to me is a man. He’s been standing there for a long time, but now I see him.’ The presence of that worker, underpaid and exploited in circumstances comparable to those that produced the sweatshop coffee, has prompted all exploited and fetishized labor to be momentarily revealed. (p. 76)

Through exposing the ‘unknown’ that many people ignore or do not know about, Reverend Billy seeks to help audience members begin envisioning and enacting a ‘life politics’ (Giddens, 1991), through which individuals might begin seeing themselves as intertwined with others and could begin to see social issues and injustices as connected with their own lives. Reverend Billy hopes that as individuals start to develop a consciousness of life politics, they can begin to enact ‘civil labor’, which consists of engaging with/in local communities in order to increase *collective* social capital (Rojek, 2001).

A final part of Reverend Billy’s pedagogy of the unknown involves enacting what he calls ‘the Church of Exalted Embarrassment’. According to Reverend Billy, moving into spaces that are not scripted by consumerism involves engaging in activities that make people feel ‘odd’. He argues, ‘If you achieved a state of exalted embarrassment, you’ve probably done something right’ (Reverend Billy, interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2002). It is in this moving out of comfort levels and feeling embarrassed – which comes from behaving in ways that are unexpected and unsanctioned – where hope for social change lies, according to Reverend Billy, who repeatedly calls for this ‘revolution of exalted embarrassment’. He seeks out this embarrassment in his own work, calls himself a ‘clown’ and a ‘fool’ and embraces the idea that individuals cannot be causing real social change if they are safe and comfortable. For example, he states: ‘It is time to be rude. It is time to be embarrassed. If you really do something that just makes you SHAKE with the feeling of being inappropriate, you’ve probably found a strut, a structure of their culture that was supposed to be there. You’ve violated something. You’ve discovered their power’ (Reverend Billy, interviewed in Sharpe, 2001). According to Reverend Billy, being uncomfortable, then, is necessary to break out of consumerist scripts. He states that many of his heroes – such as Dario Fo, Abby Hoffman and Richard Pryor – were not afraid to ‘poke their head out, to do something in public’. And Reverend Billy believes that our current times demand such embarrassment: ‘The old “dare to be foolish” never applied at any time more than it does right now’, he argues (in Post & Palacios, 2002).

### ***Learning into the unknown: ‘Blessed are those of you who disturb the customers’<sup>4</sup>***

Through his pedagogy of the unknown, Reverend Billy tries to disturb, to interrupt and to cause dissonance in audience members. He states, ‘When I am reincarnated as a lefty

Jimmy Swaggart, holy-rolling some virulent politics about shopping, wrapping it in a Pentecostal joke, these sleepy people will be interrupted. Interrupt: into the rupture. Not the Rapture, the Rupture' (Talen, 2003, pp. 5–6). Commenting on a 'retail intervention' in a Disney store, he explains:

I think it was successful in that we were just able to be there long enough so that we were able to contact lots of tourists. And they heard an objection to the Disney company's value system. They heard an objection which for a lot of them was totally surprising. A lot of people, it is utterly surprising to object to Disney for any reason at all. They look at you [shows a confused look on his face] – 'What? What? Disney's bad??' (Reverend Billy, interviewed in Sharpe, 2001)

This state of confusion and surprise is exactly what he seeks in his activism. He explains:

I love it if I see somebody and their jaw's down and their eyes are . . . [shows a confused look, eyes staring blankly] . . . 'What is this?' – 'What is this guy doing – what – what – Mickey's the devil, and, but . . . he's not a Christian? – What? – What? – Is he an actor, is this a stunt?' – and you see them looking around, and they're looking at the cameras and they're trying to add it up. (Reverend Billy, as interviewed in Sharpe, 2001)

Reverend Billy posits that transformative learning can only take place when people are suspended in this state of unknowingness. He argues, '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, interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2002). And when commenting on why he juxtaposes the Disney company with symbols of religion – for instance, when he marches in front of the Disney store with a huge stuffed Mickey Mouse 'crucified on a cross,' he sates, 'We're taking two great organized religions and grinding them together and *trying to confuse people so they can think in a new way*' (Reverend Billy, interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2002, emphasis mine). This dissonance is so important for learning that Reverend Billy tries to hold people in that state of unknown for as long as possible, for, as he explains, 'As soon as they can add it up it's less important to them. If that suspension takes place for 2 or 3 or 4 minutes, they're gonna take that home and they're gonna still be thinking about it a week later' (Reverend Billy, as interviewed in Sharpe, 2001). According to Reverend Billy's pedagogical philosophy, this kind of dissonance is necessary for critical learning to happen.

***Learning to embrace the unknown: 'Blessed are the consumers, for you shall be free from living by products'***

Instead of accepting a scripted life of consumerism, Reverend Billy encourages audiences 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), that is – to embrace the exhilarating and terrifying "*unknown*":

We shop because we fear life. We shop because we want to banish from life something we identify with death, the un/known. It waits for us in that bright, unclaimed space. Of course, we are trained to think of what we can't know as a bad thing. Actually, it is the source of the brightness; it is why this space has no owner. . . . The rejection of living-by-products . . . [has] in it an acceptance of the unknown, which is always waiting with the glorious indifference of the fires that float above us in the night sky. (Talen, 2003, p. xv)

Reverend Billy admits that embracing the ‘unknown’ is hard, as in doing so, consumers must provide their own life ‘script’. He explains, ‘when people break out of that consumerist spell, it’s much more difficult. They start building their own life. And that’s the difficulty we want. We want to be in the diffi-cult’ (Reverend Billy, in Landau, 2005, para 15). However difficult it may be, though, Reverend Billy posits that engaging in an unscripted life outside of consumerism also enables a sense of freedom, as it reignites imagination and authenticity:

Talking ideally about freedom is a hard thing to do. But backing away from the product is a kind of marking for freedom in today’s society. Backing away from the product, you’re backing through the door of life: you’re backing through a door into another room, and that new room is your native experience. You’re no longer commoditized. And that’s a very special thing to do. (Reverend Billy, as interviewed in Landau, 2005, para 14)

Reverend Billy posits that when individuals are in the ‘unknown’ – a space free from commercialized memories, stories and ways of being – they are able create their own stories, to sing their own songs, to get in touch with their own hopes and dreams. When individuals are in these spaces, they begin to experience what Reverend Billy calls ‘Godsightings’ – those moments of freedom that stand outside of commercialized culture and foster authenticity. Reverend Billy shares his own personal Godsightings in his memoir (Talen, 2003) and audience members share their own Godsightings on Reverend Billy’s website. Reverend Billy explains:

Godsightings can become very clear and return again and again, like daydreams. They can be so strong that they stop you and demand that you recognize your identity. Godsightings change your face. You become your extreme self. After all, not participating in the commodified life can be a full-time job. You might get flooded with unexpected codes of intelligence, whole stories like memories from the future with secret beatings of drums, logic systems that float around in the dark looking for an argument, beauty, patterns of cooperation in elements that were thought to be chaotic, talking tattoos, laughing fits, and visions of Peace. (Talen, 2003, p. 84)

For Reverend Billy, the ‘unknown’ holds hope of social and political change, as it is a space where humans are free to be their most passionate, free, creative selves. And it is this potential for social change that the unknown holds that is precisely the reason that it is threatening to corporations – the unknown is a ‘bright and unclaimed space that the corporations must desperately hide’ (Talen, 2003, p. xiv).

## Discussion

When the continuity of meaning is interrupted, what sort of conversation becomes possible? (Sandlos, 2004, p. 24)

As a site of consumptive learning, or learning-in-and-through-consumption-and-its-resistance, I posit that Reverend Billy’s pedagogy of the unknown constitutes a ‘critical practice’ that engages with the processes of production and consumption. Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997) explain that these critical practices necessitate critical learning and a stance of reflexivity about self and society. Through these critical practices, Reverend Billy’s anti-consumption activism is a site of social movement learning that aims to educate the public about the economic, political, environmental and social consequences of

rampant consumer capitalism. In Dykstra and Law's (1994) framework, this social movement 'public education' or 'public pedagogy' raises social consciousness, encourages critical thinking and engages audiences in experiential learning. Another important aspect of the 'critical public pedagogy' of social movements is how they help to expand the imaginations of the public and the activists involved in the movement. Reverend Billy does this, I posit, through his pedagogy of the unknown, as he, through aesthetic and non-rational means, creates moments of disjuncture, which open up transitional spaces. It is in these transitional spaces where imagination is allowed to blossom, which can lead to social change.

Reverend Billy's pedagogy shows us that an important part of fostering critical imagination is interrupting the everyday flow of people's lives, so that they begin to feel moments of disjuncture. Framing himself as 'unknowable,' enacting an unexpected pedagogy, which relies on performance, singing, dancing and other less didactic and rational ways of knowing and teaching than traditional social movements, and 'disturbing' the customer in ways that help them 'see' the consumerist script surrounding them leads to moments of disjuncture, where learning can occur. Ellsworth (2005) argues that pedagogy is powerful when it brings 'inside and outside, self and other, personal and social into relation' (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 38). Further, learning is critically pedagogical when it creates the possibility for both inside and outside – self and society – to be disrupted and refigured. Jarvis (2006), too, 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). As in Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort, it is only when we are in these moments of dissonance that learning can occur. In the context of Reverend Billy's work, disjuncture's learning moment is tied directly to re-establishing our relationships with consumer capitalism. According to Ellsworth (2005), these moments of suspension of self and stricture constitute powerful learning moments: 'Learning takes place in the movement/sensation of the self in dissolution' (p. 157). Indeed, Reverend Billy seeks out this dissolution of the self and counts it as the moment of the possibility of change.

Moments of disjuncture help to open up spaces of the unknown, which, for Reverend Billy, exist outside the commercial, commodified culture of the culture industries. To Reverend Billy, the 'unknown' represents hope and possibility. The learning moment within Reverend Billy's spaces of the unknown is also similar to the Deleuzian 'in-between' (Reynolds, 2004). Reynolds, drawing upon Deleuze, and sounding very much like Reverend Billy's critique of the consumerist script, argues that 'brand-name capitalism limits the ability to become' (p. 30) because it places its own market-driven conditions upon people – 'a body's transformational boundary is always already limited and indexed to its buying power' (p. 30). Reynolds (2004) posits that we must work the Deleuzian 'in-between', where the possibilities for transgression lie. He states, 'we always have to develop new lines of flight—lines of flight (becomings) that allow, however, contingently, briefly, or momentarily for us to soar vertically like a bird or slither horizontally, silently like a snake weaving our way amid the constant reconfigurations, co-optations, and movements of the brand-name corporate order' (p. 31). Reynolds also draws upon Deleuze's notion of the 'AND', which for Deleuze was the space of imagination and social change. Reynolds quotes Deleuze:

AND is neither one thing or the other, it is always in-between, between two things; it's the border line, there's always a border, a line of flight or flow, only we don't see it, because it the least perceptible of all things. And yet it's along this line of flight that things come to pass, becomings evolve, revolutions take shape. The strong people aren't the ones on one side or the other, power lies on the border. (Deleuze, 1995, p. 45)

For Reynolds:

The 'struggle' is to keep on finding lines that disrupt and overturn the brand-name corporate order. . . . Never resting is always being in the AND. We must see the possibilities in the space in between, because multiplicity is always in the AND. (Reynolds, 2004, p. 32)

Like Deleuze's 'AND,' Reverend Billy consistently asks a similar question – 'WHA?' – as in Marvin Gaye's famous phrase 'What's going on?' In doing so, Reverend Billy thus positions the question as more powerful than the answer and encourages us to live in and with the power of 'The Question', the unknown. He states:

What is really going on? Well, we don't know. Children, here's the punchline. We love it that we don't know. We love it that we're asking the question again and again. Because we love life itself as life has presented itself. That's enough. That's amazing enough. Let's spend the rest of our lives being simply amazed by it. Amen? This question in every head, it is our hope. It is life's statement before the fictional gods are forced on the children, before the logos glow from the toys that hang over the crib, before the violent threats of Hell are explained to the uncomprehending child. We're wondering if, when we act with the power of the The Question, could that be as strong as our fundamentalist opponent, who that has The Answer. Business people stride toward their future. Expanding quarterly earning is their Word of God. Their born-again buddies have another ledger, but the same violence. Opposing these people, their force, with a question?

To Reverend Billy, social change cannot occur without a move into embracing the unknown, for it is in the unknown where individuals have the space and freedom to reclaim their own memories and to have the imagination to envision new ways of living. Reverend Billy argues that, indeed, reclaiming our own memories is an important part of social activism:

So much of resisting transnational corporations is remembering things that we've been told to forget. What story do I have that isn't a part of a product's language? When my neighborhood's working, those are the stories that come up. (Talen, 2003, p. 122–123)

The freedom of the unknown, then, is the freedom to create more democratic, community-focused ways of living that are not bound by commercial interests:

Social change will come when we value our own stories more than the media's special effects. If you follow a good Godsighting out to the end of its logic, you will find a pushing/back of the empire of products. . . . Godsightings are outside commercialism. They have too much unknown. Each of them would eventually be illegal. But, really, the thing about Godsightings that is full of strange change is that Godsightings make more Godsightings. The bright unclaimed space becomes vast with memories remembering memories, visions seeing visions. (Talen, 2003, pp. 89–90)

Reverend Billy's pedagogy of the unknown highlights the importance of a space of uncertainty for critical learning and, more importantly, for the possibility of social change. Bringing this back to a focus on social movement learning, and the external 'public

pedagogy' of social justice-oriented social movements, Reverend Billy's work demonstrates not only that, indeed, imagination is important for social change, but also demonstrates how social movement actors can spark the imagination. Reverend Billy's 'unexpected activism' and refusal to be boxed in lead to these moments of disjuncture that are necessary for one's critical imagination to take flight. Without imagination there is no possibility for re-creating and re-envisioning other ways of living; in the case of Reverend Billy's activism, this re-envisioning is specifically linked to living as much as possible outside of the grip of multinational corporations. Reverend Billy, through his pedagogy of the unknown, seeks to foster social consciousness among audience members, whereby they can come to question the everydayness of their lives and strip routine from its habitual foundations (Dykstra & Law, 1994). Reverend Billy also engages audience members in anti-consumption action, which engages audience imaginations, opening up spaces where individuals can consider alternatives to their current relationships with consumption (Dykstra & Law, 1994). Indeed, Crowther (2006) argues that social movement education 'requires openness to question and doubt' (p. 178).

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### Notes

1. One reviewer of this paper pointed out that I needed to make a clearer distinction throughout the article between the performer/activist Bill Talen and the 'character' Reverend Billy. This is difficult to do because, according to Bill Talen's autobiography (Talen, 2003), while 'Reverend Billy' started as simply a 'character' that Bill Talen enacted, the activist and the persona seem to be increasingly linked. In a recent conversation I had with Bill Talen, he slipped in and out of 'character' many times throughout the course of two hours. Additionally, he shared a story that revealed that the 'character' might be becoming less 'ironic' and more 'real.' He discussed how one day shortly after September 11, 2001, he was crossing the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City, dressed in his preacher outfit. A woman in great distress about 9/11 approached him, called him 'Father' and asked him to pray with her. He told me that at that moment he felt like a 'real' preacher – that the woman needed comforting and that he prayed with her. He also shared that he does not frame what he does in terms of 'fake' and 'real' preaching; that he and his 'church' provide community for those seeking it.
2. *Adbusters* is a magazine produced by the Adbusters Media Foundation, based in Vancouver, Canada. Its content focuses on how marketing and mass media colonize space and how global capitalism and over-consumption are destroying natural environments (Rumbo, 2002). *Adbusters* is reader-supported and not-for-profit and has an international circulation of 85,000. It contains reader-generated materials, commentaries by activists and photographs and stories depicting readers' social activism.
3. Reverend Billy includes himself in this category of 'consumer', which I have previously argued is another important part of his critical public pedagogy (see Sandlin & Milam, 2008). For example, in one sermon filmed by Post and Palacios (2002), he exclaims, 'We are all sinners'. This implication of himself in his critiques of consumption might allow him to more easily form relationships with his audiences than other activists who might take a more oppositional stance against their audiences.
4. This line, as well as the quote in the header of the next section, is from Reverend Billy's song 'The Beatitudes of Buylessness'. The full line states, 'Blessed are those of you who disturb the customers, you might be loving your neighbor.' Reverend Billy thus sees the disruption discussed in this section as a form of education, as necessary and important and even as an act of love.



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