Cultural codes as catalysts for collective conscientisation in environmental adult education: Mr. Floatie, tree squatting and Save-our-Surfers

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This study examines how cultural codes in environmental adult education can be used to 'frame' collective identity, develop counter-hegemonic ideologies, and catalyse 'educative-activism' within social movements. Three diverse examples are discussed, spanning environmental movements in urban Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, the redwoods of northern California, and the coral reefs and beaches of Hawai'i, respectively. The first, Mr. Floatie and his fight for sewage treatment, illustrates how art, humour and drama can be employed to mobilise the public, media and government to action. The second, Julia Butterfly Hill and her 738-day squat in a redwood tree, shows how cultural codes embodied in both tree and woman catalysed social action for forest preservation. The third, the grassroots organisation Save Our Surf, demonstrates the effectiveness of education and activism through immediate, multiple

and short-term symbolic appeals for help, leading to long-term
success in Hawaiian coastal conservation.

Introduction

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-globalisation, Indigenous rights, environmental and
other 'identity' movements), one of the central concerns has been, and
remains today, the role of social movements in facilitating individual
and collective learning, and, conversely, the role of adult learning
and activist-educators in advancing social movements (Foley 1999,
2001; Hill & Clover 2003; Branagan & Boughton 2003; Hall & Turay
2006; Ollis 2008; Flowers & Chodkiewicz 2009). Social movements
are recognised 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), and
pedagogical sites in which adults engage in purposeful, embodied
learning (Ollis 2008).

In contrast to the economic determinism of class struggle in 'old'
labour, workers' party and trade union movements, new social
movements 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 (Beuchler 1995). In the environmental
movement, as in other social movement contexts, the process of
'educative-activism' and 'conscientisation' is critically important
(Clover 2002). *Conscientisation* is Paulo Freire's (2007) 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 overturn these. Educative-
activism for progressive social change works to revive and legitimise

people's local, often invisible environmental knowledge, and to create alternative, indigenous 'epistemic communities' challenging dominant knowledge systems (Hall 2006). Humour, music and art are central to much of the 'cultural learning' which takes place within new social movements, including the environmental movement (Fien & Passingham 2002; Branagan 2005; Clover & Stalker 2005; Clover & Stalker 2008; Ehrich 2010). 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 catalyse action for collective change (Fraser 1990; Mayo 1999).

In social movements, 'cultural codes' or 'frames' provide alternative cognitive frameworks for personal transformation and collective thinking, identity and action (Mayo 2005; Carroll 1997). These codes challenge dominant meaning systems and transform 'common sense' understandings of public issues. Departing from Marxist analysis of class struggle as the engine of social change, new social movements are understood as 'instances of cultural and political praxis through which new identities are formed, new ways of life tested, and new forms of community prefigured' (Carroll 1997: 16–17). That is, within our post-industrial societies, new identities and new political spaces are constructed in flexible, shifting 'networks of meaning' drawing together and mobilising disperse social actors, not only to challenge dominant cultural codes and revealing the forms of power sustaining them, but also to propose alternative ideological frames (counter-hegemonic ideologies) and new ways of living.

While every dominant state or corporate entity has a legitimating 'frame', every social movement has a contesting 'counter-frame' (della Porta et al. 2006). A counter-frame or cultural code is understood as an 'interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the "world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of actions within one's present

or past environment'; in its strategic function, it is 'action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activists and campaigns of a social movement organization' (Snow & Benford, quoted in della Porta et al. 2006: 252). Moreover, frames are 'both individual and social. A frame is an individually held cognitive schema but is important in collective action insofar as it is shared by enough individuals to channel their behaviors in shared and patterned ways' (Johnston 2002: 65–66). As Lakoff (2010: 71) tells us, these frames are 'physically realized in neural circuits in the brain. All of our knowledge makes use of frames, and every word is defined through the frames it neurally activates'. As such, he argues that there is a strong need for the environmental movement to frame its messages more effectively so that they might be more readily taken up by the public.

This paper comprises an interpretive historical analysis (Merriam 1998) of three cases of creative protest in the environmental movement, each illustrating the power of 'frames' or cultural codes to transform and radicalise popular understandings of environmental issues, to develop local knowledge, and to provoke social change. The three cases considered here are the public art, activism and humour of Mr. Floatie in Victoria, Canada from 2004 to the present; tree squatting by Julia Butterfly Hill in northern California from 1997–1999 and her subsequent activism; and the environmental protest of surfer-activist John Kelly and the organisation Save-our-Surfers (SOS) in Hawai'i in the 1960s and 1970s.

Research for the study was based on newspaper accounts, websites, secondary publications, and online, archival materials at the University of Hawai'i in the case of SOS (UHM 2011). For the first case of Mr. Floatie, all available uploaded internet videos were reviewed (eight); including such classics as 'Mr. Floatie pushes for poo power' (about sewage pollution and bio fuel conversion), 'Mr. Floatie serves lunch' and 'Mr. Floatie learns to sail' (in which Mr.

Floatie teaches about waste management and sings his trademark song: 'I'm Mr. Floatie, the ocean-going poo. If you live in Victoria, I came from you'). An exhaustive search was also made of local news media websites and archives on the internet (including *The Tyee*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Georgia Straight*, *Victoria Times Colonist* and several local Seattle papers), as well as Canadian Broadcasting Corporation sites, and numerous blogs and environmental action websites (e.g. Conservation Connection, Victoria Sewage Alliance). The website of Mr. Floatie's parent organisation, People Opposed to Outfall Pollution, also served as a fertile source of data. For the second case of Julia Butterfly Hill, out of hundreds of videos, nine which focused specifically on her 1997–99 tree sit were used as data for the study, along with some 20 newspaper, television and web-based media accounts, blogs and websites. Hill's published books, personal blog, and the website of Circle of Life (an organisation she founded post-tree sit) also provided data for the study. For the third case of SOS, online newspaper archives and the unpublished materials in the Save Our Surf digital archive (roughly 300 posters, newsletters, announcements, flyers, articles, photographs and pamphlets) were the main data sources for the study.

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 several 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, British-like 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 (which separates the city and greater Vancouver

Island from Washington State). At present, an average of 40 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 kilometre out into the Strait (Gilbert 2010).

Since 2004, the efforts of Mr. Floatie and a related non-governmental organisation, People Opposed to Outfall Pollution (POOP), have helped to galvanise public support in favour of sewage treatment, an issue largely 'side-stepped' by an intransigent Victoria government. Mr. Floatie has appeared at numerous public meetings, he ran for mayor in 2005, and he has helped to organise such events as the First Annual Victoria Toilet Regatta (POOP 2011). Using a combination of humour, 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 humour cheerfully emanate from Mr. Floatie, making good copy for journalists and community activists alike.

Much in the same way, for instance, as the Raging Grannies (another creative protest group with origins in Victoria, Canada) have used satirical and humorous song to promote 'cultural learning' within social movements (Roy 2000), so has Mr. Floatie given the problem of sewage a recognisable public face, drawing on the catalytic power of humour. This is easily 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; he wanted to see 'some movement on the issue'; and, after losing his bid for mayor, he '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 clean-up efforts, was an 'endangered faeces', and that 'some communities have a town fool; Victoria has a town stool' (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 in Victoria. Mr. Floatie's run for mayor in 2005, for example, generated stories that ran in more than 50 newspapers in North America (Heiman 2006). In another successful endeavour in public environmental education, the first annual Victoria Toilet Regatta, held in July 2005 in Victoria's inner harbour (also the seat of provincial government), drew 400 spectators. They watched nine contestants paddling boats such as 'Montezuma's Revenge', 'Gas Bag' and 'Floattete' (POOP 2011). Notably, Mr. Floatie has been used as a humorous hook into more serious examinations of sewage as well; for example, articles on treatment status and options in Victoria and in Canada at large (MacLeod 2006; MacQueen 2005). Working less visibly, the Victoria Sewage Alliance, a coalition of environmental and labour 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 eventual 'outcome' of Mr. Floatie's environmental activism, together with that of supporting NGOs, the media and public, was a 2006 Provincial order requiring Victoria to have a detailed plan and fixed schedule for sewage treatment implementation established by June 2007 (MacLeod 2006). At that time, most observers believed the city would have sewage treatment in place by the 2010 Winter Olympics, allowing it to avoid the potential embarrassment of its sewage-sullied image being broadcast to the world. By 2009, local government had approved a $1.2 billion plan to build four sewage treatment plants to handle the millions of gallons of raw sewage that the City of Victoria pumped daily into the Strait of Juan de Fuca (Le

2009). In 2011, however, there was still much public debate over how sewage treatment would be financed, but movement on the issue was no longer in doubt. As Mr. Floatie reflected on the earlier success of his activism, 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' (Mason 2006).

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 humour, but of courage, conviction and persistence in symbolic social action. In her principled stand against the logging of old growth forest in the redwoods of northern California, Julia Hill helped to catalyse public support against old growth redwood 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 old growth redwood forest, including Luna, the tree.

Child of an itinerant, trailer-travelling 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, travelled to California on a journey of self-discovery. 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 (Oldenburg 2004; Hill 2000).

On her 6-by-4 foot wooden perch, Julia Butterfly 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 American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier, for example, presented her (*in absentia*) with a 'defender of the woods' award at a local rally in her honour; 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, digital camera, video camera and walkie-talkies (Hill 2000). During her stay, she conducted over 1,000 phone interviews from the tree (Callahan n.d.), 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, her expansive spirit and faith in the protection of at least one 'ancient tree'. Early on, she endured: (a) attacks from giant logging helicopters 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 clear-cuts (ibid.). Neither was nature always kind to her: perched hundreds of feet up 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, and having become a media star and international spokesperson for the environmental movement in the process, on 18 December, 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. Since

that day, Hill has continued her struggle on behalf of the environment and other causes. In 1999, she established Circle of Life, a non-governmental organisation 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 continues to be a featured speaker at social protests of many kinds, writes an on-going activist blog about environmental issues (Hill 2011), has written two books, and has been the subject of several film documentaries, numerous songs and an episode of the popular cartoon, The Simpsons, called 'Lisa the Tree Hugger'. Hill has also inspired others to tree squat, including a Fayetteville, Arkansas grandmother who sat 30 feet up in a tree for three weeks (Callahan, n.d.). By 2004, Hill was receiving over 500 speaking offers a year, and preached a message of love of life and the human connection to all living things (Oldenburg 2004). As part of her message, however, she also popularised 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, the tree.

Like Mr. Floatie, Julia Butterfly Hill has clearly been a catalyst for peaceful 'educative-activism' and has offered an alternative 'reading of the world' on issues of forest preservation and environmentalism. 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 forest 'management' (Hill 2005):

> 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.

Save Our Surf

Along with Julia Butterfly Hill and Mr. Floatie, the third case, that of lifelong surfer, activist and Hawaiian resident John Kelly and the non-governmental organisation, Save Our Surf (SOS), demonstrates the wide resonance of protest symbols, as well as their attachment to place. The case of SOS 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 2011). In this, SOS tapped into a vein of solidarity with the Hawaiian 'surfing community'—some 30,000–100,000 people strong—and also allied itself with the native Hawaiian land rights and sovereignty movement (Kelly 1996).

Although the world of surfing has today become a $7 billion global industry (SIMA 2009) 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 native Hawaiians: it was practised by Hawaiian Royalty as '*he'e nalu*' or wave-sliding, and first popularised in the 1910s by athlete and Hawaiian royalty Duke Khahanamoku (SurfArt 2006). This history, and the sharing of common ground (and surf), made the alliance of SOS with native Hawaiians 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 grassroots environmental movement within the larger context of the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement, lending political force to a variety of native Hawaiian land and ocean tenure disputes, with inspiring results.

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: 90). SOS was in essence a loosely structured grassroots organisation which came to life only as needed: 'SOS remains 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: 3). Adopting a kind of local 'guerrilla' activism, SOS had no membership, no by-laws, no central office or budget, and operated mainly by issuing calls to action (an 'SOS'). Among numerous SOS calls to protest destruction of surf, reefs and ocean shores from government and developers, for example, was an appeal to action against the further development of famed Waikiki Beach (Figure 1).

Figure 1:   SOS call to action

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SOS

Last Chance to Save Our Waikiki Surf!
Attend this Public Hearing
Wednesday December 10, 3:30pm
Waikiki—Kapahulu Library
Park at the zoo or shell
Come as you are—boards, bikinis, etc.

Queen's surf… is being threatened by the State's Kuhio beach widening project.

SOS   Of 143 surfing sites from Koko Head to Pearl   **SOS**
Harbor, 110 are scheduled to be destroyed under
present state plans. Those remaining would
be unsurfable due to overcrowding. Plans are
already advanced—some blueprints approved.
This is <u>not</u> a joke. SOS needs your help!
                    Save Our Surf!

Speak up now--   SOS Chairman
        or   John Kelly
Wipe out forever!   Ph: 734–8234

SOS

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Source: adapted from UHM (2011) SOS digital collection

In a time before the internet, before social networking and cell phones, SOS leafleting, 'surfer flick' movie nights, song festivals, media campaigns, and above all, informed and vocal participation at public hearings, marches and rallies, were very effective methods to organise environmental protests, with impressive results. As one newspaper column put it (Udall & Stansbury 1974: 1):

> This brash style has worked beautifully up to now. Kelly's young brigadiers gather facts, prepare broadside handbills, edit crisis newspapers and tangle with leading establishment planners and businessmen in public hearings. Their batting average to date has been remarkably high. In a state where developers and land speculators are still riding high, the surfers have won most of the major fights they have entered. Critics of Kelly and SOS question their strident rhetoric, and call him "communistic" for his anti-capitalist rhetoric. But to us, Save Our Surf is a bright story of participatory democracy. Any time high school youngsters can do battle for the environment and hold their own with the establishment elders, all of us should applaud.

In addition to organising protests, SOS also helped to develop a non-profit print shop, and, importantly, a library of government planning documents, reports and photographs used to inform the public about dubious and covert development plans. In 1974, for example, leaked reports from a large resort development on Kauai detailed political payoffs and corruption 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 the Kuhio Beach widening project (see Figure 1 above) and the dredging of reefs around eastern O'ahu, being instrumental in the creation of Sand Island Park, and struggling against the evictions of tenants, farmers and fishers at various junctures in time (UHM 2011). All in all, SOS is credited with winning 34 major environmental victories in Hawai'i during the 1960s and 70s (Kelly 1996), in large part due to its ability to educate and mobilise the public around environmental issues on short notice, and with persistent calls for help.

Conclusion

As these three cases make clear, creative, cultural codes and symbolic actions can effectively serve as a catalyst for conscientisation and educative-activism in the environmental movement. As Mr. Floatie's

success teaches us, satirical humour is a powerful tool in environmental adult education. Commenting on the Raging Grannies, a group of elder women who write and perform satirical protest songs, Roy (2000) concludes that '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 questions naturally arise: 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 not only led to her own personal education and transformation into an environmental activist, but also 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 critical environmental issue. Julia Butterfly Hill herself also acted as 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 then 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 grassroots activists who were allied with the struggles of native Hawaiians and other marginalised communities. Symbolically, SOS was 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, the cases of SOS, Mr Floatie and Julia Butterfly Hill embodied cultural codes which acted as strong catalysts for collective conscientisation in environmental adult education; they were powerful expressions of individual and collective thinking, adult learning, identity, and action for social change.

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