

Activism Based in Embarrassment: The Anti-Consumption Spirituality of the Reverend Billy

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This essay is a response to recent arguments that carnivalesque-based activism is not effective in provoking larger cultural changes. I specifically focus on the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping as an example of playful dissent that interrupts the space of inhumane transnational chains and influences corporate practices. The Reverend Billy employs tactics that are built on intentional self-embarrassment and compassion for the “consumer.” The specific tactics of the Reverend Billy avoid the usual carnivalesque approach of parody, thus provide more opportunities to build solidarity with the public.

Introduction

Playful street protest has been instrumental in the anti-globalization movement that began in the 1990's. From the Radical Cheerleaders to the Yes Men, these playful protestors gained notoriety and a loyal following by speaking out against social issues ranging from government incompetence to corporate domination. In spite of this early popularity, more recently groups against the War in Iraq who have employed similar tactics have been met with less enthusiasm, criticized as elitist and ineffectual given post 9/11 sentiments and the “War on Terror.” Marcyrose Chvasta agrees that carnival “is a powerful community building source” (12), but also suggests that “expressing felt anger mobilizes government more effectively than (gleefully ironic or otherwise) celebration [...] no policy, or law, or budget will change unless the State feels threatened” (13).¹ While this may be true to a large extent, I believe it is

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¹Although Chvasta doesn't specifically find that playful protest creates possibilities outside of community involvement, she most certainly raises the issue on how we must discuss the efficacy of carnivalesque approaches to dissent, not simply celebrate their playful antics. It is my hope that my employment of Kirk Fuoss alongside the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping provides further debate regarding this significant issue. Thus, I view my work as not critiquing Chvasta's claims, rather as building on this important and challenging discussion. I am not arguing that other playful activists “adopt” the Reverend Billy's tactics. I

somewhat short sighted to equivocally dismiss playful protest as insignificant, especially against corporate America.² I posit that “felt anger” can be exhibited within a playful persona, and this tactic when employed in interrupting the “flow” of business not only disrupts but ultimately can influence corporate practices.

A prime example of an effective playful protest group is the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, an anti-consumer group located in New York City. Although similar to other activist groups based within the carnivalesque approach, the Church of Stop Shopping differ from their fellow protestors who mainly engage within street protest and frame their antics with play based in parody. The Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping primarily concentrate on invading retail chain stores. The figurehead for the Church of Stop Shopping, Bill Talen, builds his persona of the Reverend Billy on “inspired foolishness” (Talen 2003 66). For Talen, inspired foolishness is based on embarrassing himself by invading transnational corporations where he is unwelcome.

The Reverend Billy is also unique among anti-globalization activists in that his persona and that of the Church of Stop Shopping is not built on parody.³ Parody has

simply present this as an activist group that, through dissent based in play, are able to connect with their communities as well as “force” transnational corporations to alter their practices (specifically the Starbucks corporation).

² To briefly define play here is warranted. Victor Turner has stated that the significance of play is that we fool around with “elements of the familiar and de-familiarize them” (1982 27). Play is a communication act, which is simultaneously a subjective experience and a social one that provides a space for participation, critique, and culture building. Turner suggests that such experiences can form a bridge for social expression and bonding. He claims that, “these experiences that erupt from or disrupt routinized, repetitive behavior begin with shocks of pain or pleasure ... what happens next is an anxious need to find meaning in what has disconcerted us” (1986 36). Playful activity can lend itself to individual consciousness raising, encouraging an impulse to connect with others and to communicate about what has been experienced (see Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Abrahams 1986).

³ Personal communication with Bill Talen, August 24, 2008. Bill Talen does not consider the Church of Stop Shopping as necessarily “against” parody. He sees their group coexisting with these ideas. He states, “We stopped being mostly-parody after 9/11, when the downtown New York community wanted a kind of fellowship but preferred our non-deistic and funny approach. We were surprised at the baptisms and weddings and funerals that followed. Key point: the parody and play and serious politics and wonderful singing and -- all the elements are in the mix and we especially were surprised to discover how parody can co-exist with truly moving church moments. Journalists often ask ‘Are you parody or are you real?’ and that’s a false dilemma. The parody helps make the community, we shout Change-a-lujah! together. So we defend against the object of the parody, the homophobic war-mongering televangelist, but push off into our own ‘Fabulous Worship.’” Although I understand Talen’s resistance against this simplistic dichotomy, his persona as the Reverend Billy is not parody, in the traditional notion of parody as a character or an event built on critiquing the original. Through Kirk Fuoss’ approach, later in the essay, I demonstrate this distinction.

been discussed as creating alienation, not solidarity, with both “traditional” activists and the mainstream public.⁴ As an imitation of an original work employed to ridicule the “original form” (Harold), parody can be fun for the participants but can also involve a clever insider “snub.” In essence, there is a difference between carnivalesque protest that is inspiring and results in solidarity versus more parody-based approaches that have been accused of being negative, critical of potential allies, and pretentious and mean-spirited.

Focusing on this unique aspect of play based performance, which resides outside of parody; I specifically examine the Reverend Billy's employment of spirituality based in compassion for the “consumer” as a motivating force behind his activism. This persona based in compassion, rather than simply a result of Talen “playing” a reverend to be ironic, he actually has become a spiritual leader in his own right. The invasion of transnational corporations provides moments of chaos within that space that can instigate changes in business practices, at the same time that Talen's willingness to embarrass himself for the cause, his persona built on compassion, not parody, lends itself to public solidarity, thereby, increasing the size of the movement.

Andrew Boyd states that if new protest movements aim to broaden their appeal to public sentiments, they need to continue to engage in what the “public” considers “turn-ons” (250). Such “turn-ons” include compassion, courage, idealism, fun, and humor. There is an imperative need to present positivity, compassion, and fun within social protest today. Before discussing the Reverend's compassion for the consumer and the inevitable embarrassment of invading corporate chains, a brief outline of the Church of Stop Shopping and an overview of the carnivalesque approach of the 1990s, is warranted.⁵

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping

The Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping is a certified non-profit and includes a music director, a manager, a choir director overseeing a substantial choir, and several musicians. A couple of friends manage the group website, which includes

⁴ Christine Harold argues that the limitations of parody “as a revelatory device is that this device has been enthusiastically embraced by marketers as well” (192). In addition, parody “can only *react*. It is a rhetoric that resentfully tells its audience ‘things are not as they should be’ without affirming possible alternatives” (emphasis in original 192).

⁵ The carnivalesque as a radical strategy of dissent is based in Mikhail Bakhtin's work. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White critique this celebration of Bakhtin's work specifically citing that when the carnival is over “the slave returns to being the slave,” thus nothing is changed. Given that the carnival was a sanctioned space of “turning things on their head” and these events changed nothing as far as class structure, it can be seen as a means of social control alongside an “intensely powerful semiotic realm precisely because bourgeois culture constructed its self-identity by rejecting it” (202). Thus, although the carnival allowed for a sense of freedom and play, it is not necessarily progressive in changing the conditions of oppression.

photos and video documentation (Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping). The increasing popularity of this movement is demonstrated by the growing size of the choir and musicians alongside the increasing “hits” on their webpage.⁶ In addition, the Reverend Billy and his church received even greater attention when Morgan Spurlock (director of *Supersize Me*) produced the documentary *What Would Jesus Buy?* which centers on the Church and their anti-consumer tactics during the Christmas holiday season of 2006.

The Reverend Billy first stood in front of the Disney Store in Times Square in 1997 as a solo performer. Two years later he appeared in the documentary *The Gods of Times Square*. In the film, we witness him preaching in front of the Times Square Disney Store holding a large stuffed Mickey Mouse as he shouts, “Mickey Mouse is the Anti-Christ!” The Reverend is no longer the lone preacher on the corner. A choir and many devoted followers now surround him. In addition to retail interventions, the Church of Stop Shopping holds “raptures” and “revivals” surrounding First Amendment issues, “neighborhood defense,” and “global and environmental justice.”⁷ The movement concentrates on opposing the destruction of neighborhoods by transnational organizations that offer “fake communities” in place of locally owned spaces.

The philosophy of the Church of Stop Shopping surrounds the imminent “Shopocalypse,” which assumes the end of humanity will come about through manic consumption. The Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping movement understand play as an innovative strategy given that transnational corporations are so insipid that they don’t know how to react to silliness in political protest—and therein lies the possibility for absurdity as a viable mode of social dissent. Those chain stores and “boutiques” that have become familiar with the Church of Stop Shopping invasions include Disney, Victoria’s Secret, and Starbucks (who all are guilty of numerous human rights and environmental violations).⁸ The chaos the Reverend Billy

⁶ Personal communication with Bill Talen on August 24, 2008. He states, “Our audiences in NYC at the Highline Ballroom often have 400-500 folks. Website peaked this May at 180,000 hits, which is more than the hit-wave at the release of the film last year. I just think consumerism, chains and malls - its all coming into focus.”

⁷ In June of 2007, the Reverend Billy was arrested for chanting the words of the First Amendment too close to the New York City police force. During a Critical Mass Demonstration, he was arrested for “harassment” for reciting the 44 words of the First Amendment in Union Square (Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping).

⁸ Although both Disney and Victoria’s Secret have numerous human rights and environmental violations, given their reliance on sweatshop labor, I want to use Starbucks as a specific example here. Starbucks has been a major player in the Church of Stop Shopping movement for the last several years, and given this attention, Starbucks has been forced to respond to the tactics of this movement. Briefly, Starbucks is a large transnational corporation trying to pass itself off as a neighborhood coffee shop, they however, actually force locally owned coffee shops out of business. Starbucks buys their coffee through brokers instead of paying farmers

brings to these retail chains has not been ignored, as he has been arrested many times, as well as being banned from entering any Starbucks worldwide (this has not deterred him from continuing to do so, however). Talen states, “Starbucks ... is nothing if not humorless. In fact, the first thing you can say about chain stores and malls, all those overcommodified ‘planned communities,’ is that no one there can really *play*” (2003 emphasis in original 4).

The Church of Stop Shopping encourage citizens to come play with them, to frequent a space less contrived, and to live a life of their own making. They believe “that buying is not as interesting as not-buying” (Talen 2003 xiii); thus “when we Back Away from the product, all kinds of Life rushes back in” (Talen 2006 91). This space of refusal encourages resistance “by bringing back the human details and building our lives moment by moment. Our own voice is coming back, we feel our personal past re-arriving” (91). This movement posits that our private lives have disappeared under the dulling blanket of capitalist over-consumption; we shop not only to fill our lives with momentary pleasure, but also to be together, to belong, to avoid facing the unknown.

Through his playfully compassionate persona, the Reverend Billy instigates involvement and solidarity rather than “scolding the sinners.” Shopping has gone from being a utilitarian necessity to a distraction to a giver of meaning and purpose. The Reverend embraces addicted shoppers, chain-store junkies; he understands that their pain and loneliness is a result of the lack of meaning in their lives and their desire for community. He tells them, “The product needs you worse than you need it” (Talen 2003 xiii) and beckons those who would otherwise consume to create their own “chosen stories” (83). The significance of the Reverend’s movement lies not only in his approach but also in his dedication to growing problems in the United States,

directly, which results in cheap coffee for them and low wages for the coffee farmers. The brochure that the Church of Stop Shopping hands out to Starbucks patrons is double-sided. The front of the brochure reads “What is Fair Trade?” and explains that fair trade means “creating opportunities for economically disadvantaged producers, transparency and accountability, capacity building and empowerment, payment of a fair price, gender equity, healthy and just working conditions, environmental protection.” The back of the brochure asks “Is Starbucks Fair Trade?” and answers “No!” Stating that Starbucks coffee is less than 5% Fair Trade, the brochure goes on to explain the billions of dollars of revenue, asking patrons to tell Starbucks to go Fair Trade (one might also ask them why they refuse to let their employees form a union). The brochure cites several sources under “find out more”: organicconsumers.com, starbucksunion.org, deansbeans.org, revbilly.com. This is an important tactic in that “once you give a shopper a sheet, security can’t intercede—they don’t pull the paper from the customer’s hands” (Talen 2006 25-26). What makes Starbucks unique in comparison to Disney or Victoria’s Secret is that it is not merely a place to shop but is a space for people to gather together. Ray Oldenburg describes this as a “Third Space” outside of work and home. Obviously these spaces are important to community and democracy. However, Starbucks may provide “the space” but they are not a community supporter given their practices of forcing out locally owned coffee shops.

including over-consumption, the increasing sense of isolation and loss of community spaces, and a culture besieged by advertising.

The Reverend's tactics and philosophy can be viewed as a response to serious problems currently facing the U.S. regarding human rights and the environment.⁹ Playful protest presents one possibility of addressing the glaring problem of over-consumption and isolation in this country. Advertisers have made moves in the last few decades that have propelled the problem of over-consumption to a scale that is increasingly destructive and menacing. These shifts include the fact that our identities are becoming ever more defined by what we buy, with marketing tactics concentrating more on our values and beliefs (Langman). Our health is suffering from manic consumerism (Whybrow), our social isolation increasing (Fountain; Vedantam), and our freedoms are being further reduced to "choice"—devaluing democratic activity and culture building (Docherty).¹⁰ In his examination of an assortment of surveys taken in the 1980s and 1990s, Peter Whybrow found a "declining satisfaction with life in America" (3). He states, "If the goal is to discover happiness, taking back one's personal time from the impersonal demands of the merchant is a place to start" (240). The Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping come out of the tradition of

⁹ A short list of some of the problems in the U.S. that have been recently discussed by journalists and academics: International corporations and the corporate-owned media have been highly effective in representing their own interests while the health of Americans and others has not been a priority. We have increasingly seen human rights and environmental issues demonized as "liberal." Morality based in these ideas has been replaced by "values," which are used to control and repress certain groups of people and their social and sexual practices. Our civil liberties have been handed over for "security," our environmental health for big profit, our taxes for more war machines, our news media for fear propaganda, our government for corporate corruption and control. Beyond the U.S., globalization has continued and intensified slavery in the Third World.

¹⁰ Lauren Langman, in her article "From Subject to Citizen to Consumer: Embodiment and the Mediation of Hegemony," contends that the body is always central to an ideological shift in society. Be it from divine right to nationalism to consumerism, "every society regulates ways for people to find bodily pleasures, alleviate fear, and assuage fears of death" (168). So, "the key unit for understanding bodies and identities today is thus the global consumer society with its myriad subcultures of hedonistic consumptions" (183). In his book *American Mania: When More is Not Enough*, Peter Whybrow contends that Americans are in a "hallowed search for happiness [that] has been hijacked by a discomfoting and frenzied activity" (4). He claims, "It is clear to me that many Americans are experiencing a discomfort for which they have little explanation" (3). One reason for this discomfort may be our increasing social isolation. Shankar Vedantam, writing in the *Washington Post*, and Henry Fountain for *The New York Times*, discuss "high-quality random surveys" that were conducted in 2004 and found that a quarter of Americans have no one they can confide in. In addition, fifty percent more people than in the previous study in 1985 reported their spouse as the only one with whom they could discuss personal problems.

carnavalesque protest, which has a long history but specifically in the 21st century became significant during the anti-globalization movement of the 1990's.

Carnival with a Cause¹¹

Carnavalesque protests occurs, according to M. Lane Bruner, when “those benefiting from rampant political corruption lose their sense of humor, become ridiculous in their seriousness, but are incapable for one reason or another, of silencing their prankster publics” (136). The practice of humor in the politics of “human drama” has a very long history. In *The Comedy of Democracy*, James Combs and Dan Nimmo explore the relationship between humor and politics. They claim that, “politics is so serious it must be taken humorously. Politics, like life, is too important a thing to take seriously” (2). The tensions between “shifting humors” of the state and the actions of “critical citizens” can be a significant component in understanding how the carnivalesque is a valuable protest tactic (Bruner 136).¹²

The advent of the anti-globalization movement, and specifically the 1999 WTO protest in Seattle, saw the carnivalesque appear in dissent in ways that the United States had never experienced. According to Bruner's analysis, the carnivalesque became an important tool of dissent at this time in U.S. history due to the prevalence of the “sick and humorless [state, and] the bland and diverting forms of public entertainments” widely offered by corporate media (137). The WTO protest was significant in that it brought in a form of coalition building that had not been seen before. This included not only a breathtaking range of carnivalesque forms, but also new alliances between activist groups who were not usually united. Andrew Boyd describes this coalition with vivid examples: “I watched a hundred sea turtles face down riot cops, a gang of Santas stumble through a cloud of tear gas, and a burly Teamster march shoulder to shoulder with a pair of Lesbian Avengers naked to the waist except for a strip of black electrical tape across each nipple” (245). Uniting against imperialist forms of globalization created unlikely coalitions: union organizers, soccer moms, anarchists, critical mass, ACT UP, and thousands of children and young people came together in solidarity.¹³

¹¹ Janet Thomas used this expression in her book *The Battle of Seattle: The Story Behind and Beyond the WTO Demonstration* Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 2000.

¹² M. Lane Bruner's research is a thorough examination of how the carnivalesque has been employed throughout history, including moments when it triumphed and others where it failed miserably (resulting in citizens being killed in their dissent). I will not attempt to retrace this history of the carnivalesque but to further her argument that the success of the carnivalesque in protest is not only dependent on how “humorless” the state is, and how threatened, but also how “humorless” transnational corporations are, and how threatened.

¹³ Since the WTO protest in Seattle in 1999, social protests have become more fragmented, based as much in affirmation and creativity than in anger. In *Grassroots Resistance*, Robert Goldberg defines social movements as “a formally organized group that acts consciously and

After the Bush administration declared a “War on Terror” in response to 9/11 and peace protests began worldwide, some of the carnivalesque tactics alienated both those with a history of participating in “anti-war” protests and the mainstream public. This alienation could perhaps be traced to the use of parody in carnivalesque protest tactics. For example, at anti-war street protests from 2001 to 2004 one could hear the parodist’s disorienting spin applied to traditional protest slogans, such as: “We shall overbomb,” “All we are saying is give war a chance,” “We need oil, we need gas, watch out world we’ll kick your ass” (Shepard 2003b par. 23-24), and “Start the bombing now! Start the bombing now! Two, four, six, eight, we are people who hate hate hate!” (Shepard 2003a par. 1).

What was funny and clever in dissent against globalization in the late 1990s translated to the public and more traditional anti-war protestors as mean-spirited and pretentious when employed in protests against the Iraq War. We should not dismiss playful protest altogether, though, despite the apparent problems of dissent based in parody to connect with the public. Given that U.S. citizens are already alienated, a form of play that potentially alienates them further seems antithetical. Because play encompasses more than parody, diverse forms of playful dissent should be considered. The Reverend Billy creates solidarity by avoiding the negativity and intellectual pretension that has accompanied some playful protest tactics based in parody. Rather than answer injustice with sarcasm, he answers with spirituality, humor, and compassion.

**“Let Me Lift My Hand! Let Me Turn My Head! O Lord,
I Got Nike Swooshes On My Underwear! Oh Help Me!”**

The Reverend Billy suggests a shift in perception in opposition to the excessive advertising and consumption that has dominated U.S. culture and that attempts to define our individual identity and our relationships with others based upon what we buy. In a 2002 interview Talen stated, “I want to use imagery and language that changes the way people look at things. I don’t separate out the arts from political work. And I don’t separate arts and political work from spiritual work. I don’t lay

with some continuity to propose or resist change through collective action ... a social movement is an ‘organized group’ having a coherent internal structure, leadership, a written statement of purpose, membership, and a logistical base” (2). Policy change is often the ruler by which the “success or failure” of a social movement is measured, Charles Tilly’s contention in the last chapter of his book *Social Movements 1768-2004* that as for the future of social movements, “triumph, alas [is] exceedingly unlikely” (157), demonstrates this bias. The way that social movements are defined and the way their “success” is measured, does not mirror social protest since, at least, the 1999 WTO protest in Seattle and the globalization movement in general. Thus, there is an imperative need to evaluate the efficacy of new social protest movements beyond policy changes and outside of beyond a formal group structure.

claim to any of those labels, that is one way of thinking that I don't ascribe to" (Post and Palacious).

Although both activists and scholars have explored the relationship between art and activism, the concept of spirituality within protest has not received much attention. Talen's religious fervor has roots in his family. After being raised by evangelical parents, whom he found repressive, Talen transformed himself into the Reverend Billy, a preacher against over-consumption and inhumane corporate chains. His relationship to Christian ethics is closer to actual tenets of Christianity than one might expect. His ethics include forgiveness, humility, compassion, generosity, and service to his community. As Georgia Harkness contends in *Christian Ethics*, democracy and evangelism are connected.¹⁴ Though Talen finds the practice of many Christian churches hypocritical, his practice demonstrates that the Reverend Billy understands a major Christian principle, "the futility of massive accumulations of goods as sources of security" (Harkness par. 55). The title of an article by Brad Tytel, "The Reluctant Religion of the Reverend Billy," cleverly summarizes Talen's complicated relationship to organized spirituality.

Tytel's article is both an example of an attempt at specific classification—which demonstrates the problematic nature of working too diligently for "precise" definitions—and an investigation of the questions that pervade the "authenticity" of the Reverend Billy. Tytel asks, "If the preacher is fake, but he preaches his sermon sincerely to the crowd of authentic believers, is it an act or is it conviction" (par. 3)? Tytel is preoccupied with what is "authentic" and "inauthentic" within Talen's performance as the Reverend Billy. He asserts, "When he answers questions, it is hard to tell how sincere he is, because he still seems half-immersed in his role" (par. 21). Tytel finally decides that the Reverend Billy's "costume and his retail exorcisms may be parody, but only in their medium, not in their message" (par. 9). The medium of the Reverend Billy does not easily translate to parody, given that parody requires a ridiculing of the original form. Talen is not ridiculing religion; he is embodying it, his mission is to connect isolated and bored citizens with a peopled life built outside of consumption. This is not completely divorced from basic tenants of Christianity.

The message of spirituality that the Reverend Billy offers has resulted in "a growing following as a performer, but [he] is also frequently sought out by local groups just as an actual spiritual leader might be" (Kalb 162). Jonathan Kalb examines the creation of the Reverend Billy, focusing specifically on how Talen has balanced the relationship between emotion, irony, and spirituality. Kalb claims that Talen, by understanding what is effective as radical activist theater today—as opposed to what was practiced in the 1960s and is now often seen as "earnest and naïve"—has created a "religious expression in a much more sophisticated and ironic fashion" (164). Talen understands his tactics as a result of the influence of two of his comedic heroes,

¹⁴ Georgia Harkness makes this claim based on the following chapters from the King James Version of the Holy Bible: Luke 12: 16-21; Matthew 12:22; Mark 4: 19.

Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman, combined with the inspiration of New York's Pentecostal churches. In an interview with Kalb, Talen explains, "It's a delicate operation, because the whole 'spiritual' thing has been completely hijacked. All the language has been hijacked by people we're in mortal combat against: if it's not the right-wing fundamentalists, then it's the New Agers, who are just as fundamentalist. But if you start by simply saying 'Stop shopping!' and then stop right there, then suddenly we're all at the edge of this abyss together, and it's the beginning of an invitation back into your own individual chaos" (Kalb 165).

"Why a preacher?" Jill Lane asks in her article on the Reverend Billy. Lane sees a problem with the Reverend Billy, a white male offering up a space for "young, disaffected, white audiences" with a persona predominately based in African American Baptist churches (79). However, Talen is not unaware of his privileged position. Lane concludes, "he uses this privilege tactically, gaining access to privileged spaces, and commanding attention of those who would otherwise dismiss his message" (71). Despite the inability to reconcile the obvious challenge of a white man employing tactics of mostly black ministers, there is something clearly compelling about the Reverend Billy, a sincerity that centers his activism. This sincerity is based in his compassion for the "consumer," his desire to rescue "realities, memories, and even history itself" (73).

The Reverend Billy's employment of spirituality and compassion can be viewed as an attempt to create social engagement through "putting himself out there." He does this with the goal of attempting to alter the way citizens in the U.S. look at capitalism and consumption. Lauren Berlant proposes that rather than defining compassion as an organic emotion we should consider it a "social and aesthetic technology of belonging" (par. 8). The Reverend Billy sidesteps the privilege that is often ascribed to those who "feel compassion" for those who are in distress by engaging with his own very real fear and embarrassment.

Talen believes that to be successful activists at this time in history requires a willingness to appear ridiculous, to make a public spectacle of ourselves. He states that his work involves "Exalted Embarrassment" (Talen 2006 212) and he sees himself as providing one example of what may be necessary to be a rebel who wants to gain attention from a public that is over-stimulated and cynical.¹⁵ By centering his protest in playfulness built on embarrassing himself, the Reverend Billy affords moments of disconcertion and consciousness raising.

"I Suppose All of This Was a Necessary Violence"

Talen has stated that in his early days as the Reverend Billy—before the Stop Shopping Church surrounded him—he was lonely. He comments, "I had no

¹⁵ In Talen's 2003 book, he called these moments "True Embarrassment." In his 2006 book he uses the term "Exalted Embarrassment."

audience, just thousands of people with frowns, in profile. Oh, I hate that one-eared stare” (Talen 2003 56). Talen is forthright in discussing his relationship with making a fool of himself as an activist, and also how he became more kind and developed a deeper understanding of the desire to “consume,” calling it the “comforting ghost gesture of shopping” (xv).

The Reverend states that he found his “True” or “Exalted” embarrassment on a trip out of a Disney Store in New York City’s Times Square. He had been arrested, handcuffed to a large Mickey Mouse doll (which he had purchased and was using as a prop to decry Disney), and was taunted by shoppers as they left the store. The shoppers wildly “brandished their receipts” and “puppeteered their toys” across the trunk of the police car. Talen states, “[The cop] was glad to see that he started a new folk tradition, the taunting of trapped activists” (Talen 2003 67). Talen asserts that he is following the tradition of a great deal of activists who came before him; “they have all done something nervously awkward at first . . . making a fool out of yourself, being embarrassed, that is the first step” (Post and Palacios).¹⁶ It is embarrassing for the Reverend Billy and his Church to enter these retail spaces, as they are clearly not wanted there—not by the employees and sometimes not by the customers. Although occasionally met with interest and humor, Talen recalls a “moment” when he danced with a “very big Starbucks worker,” who came from behind the counter to tell him to leave—“we did dance together, he was smiling” (2003 318). More often, though, the Church of Stop Shopping is met with angry employees and managers, confused patrons, and eventually the police. Of course, they also have days where customers follow them into the street and they dance and sing hymns, motivating the church to continue their mission. Despite the arrests and the occasional “harrowing experience,” Talen asserts, “embarrassment is the signal that we have found their power” (Lane 71).

Because embarrassment as a human emotion is not easily defined or understood, it is imperative to briefly address how embarrassment could function as a tactic for creating solidarity. Luke Purshouse attempts to address the issue of embarrassment as a philosophical notion that is largely neglected in research. Two concepts of embarrassment that he explores are the embarrassment of witnesses and the relationship of etiquette to embarrassment. Embarrassment should be understood as requiring an interpersonal situation. That is, it is difficult to be embarrassed without another person’s possible evaluation to reflect upon. However, there is also the possibility of imagining another’s evaluation and becoming embarrassed as a result

¹⁶ Talen states, “We go into these privatized commons, with wave upon wave of intense, precision fools. Actions. The Guerrilla Girls, Andy Kaufman—all the people who stop us to start us. Jesus and Mary. Time’s up. Reclaim the Streets. . . . Let’s say Abbie Hoffman on the balcony of the New York Stock Exchange, throwing money down on the frothing, teeth-gnashing traders” (2003 2-3).

(for example, What would that person think if they could see me behave in this way?).¹⁷

Given the definition of embarrassment as requiring an interpersonal situation, Purshouse proposes the phenomenon of someone “witnessing” a situation and feeling embarrassed for another as a result of empathy for the person who has suffered the embarrassment. This situation does not require that the witness would necessarily feel embarrassed if the tables were turned, as “it is possible that certain situations may force one to empathize with someone else’s circumstances, given the *intensity* with which they are imposed on one’s consciousness” (Purshouse, emphasis added, 525-26). When Talen enters retail spaces for his political theater, there is no question that he is entering an awkward situation. One can catch the patrons sneaking a look at the Reverend Billy and can sense their uncomfortable stance as Talen exorcises the cash register and the choir crowds in, clapping and singing. Of the many emotional reactions one can read on the customers’ faces, a very common reaction is embarrassment. The looking at him and looking away, the attempts to act as if nothing is happening, the hiding behind their 16-ounce Frappuccinos, are all possible reactions to being genuinely unsettled. Such reactions do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the Reverend Billy gains respect from some of these patrons by making a fool of himself; obviously, one cannot speak definitively about emotional responses. However, customers’ reactions to his tactics in these spaces where he is not following “the rules” does warrant consideration of this possibility.

In regard to the idea that embarrassment is related to violating someone’s expectation of us, a notion based in Erving Goffman’s research, Purshouse argues that violating “etiquette” does not always result in embarrassment. Often violating another’s expectations of us is met by amusement or other reactions. Further, according to Goffman, there are moments when we are embarrassed without considering others’ expectations. Situations arise where we can feel embarrassed from “the sheer *amounts* of attention we receive from others” (Purshouse emphasis in original 530). There is also the possibility that we might feel “ambivalent to the exposure” and still be embarrassed. That is, we can both “desire and be averse to it simultaneously,” a result of voluntarily entering situations where we know we will

¹⁷ There are researchers who disagree with this. Purshouse utilizes B. Szabados’s “Embarrassment and Self-Esteem” in the *Journal of Philosophical Research*. Szabados employs the term “self-embarrassment” to define a situation when a subject remembers a moment from the past and feels embarrassed. However, this shows an overlap between the emotion of embarrassment and the emotion of shame. Purshouse does not see Szabados’s account as a rejection of what Purshouse is proposing, stating that remembering the moment of embarrassment does not necessitate that the subject is considering it in terms of what the “other” thought or considering what another would think if they knew this about the moment. Embarrassment then is “essentially about the *exposure* of one person to another” (emphasis in original 530), while shame involves a “negative evaluation of an aspect of one’s own conduct or character” (519).

likely be embarrassed (531). Talen's own embarrassment is a consequence of his role as a figurehead in this playful protest show. The reactions of the witnesses to his antics range from anger to amusement to empathy.

Further illuminating this issue, in a recent survey William Sharkey, Hee Sun Park, and Rachel Kim found that the goal cited most often by those who would intentionally embarrass themselves was to show solidarity or to socialize into a group. Their research concentrated on the goals, tactics, and responses to those who would engage in intentional self-embarrassment. They compared these results of their surveys to earlier communication models that found embarrassment to be unwanted and that failed to recognize the possibility that someone would discomfit her- or himself deliberately.¹⁸ Given Purhouse's argument and Sharkey, Park, and Kim's research, I posit that moments of embarrassment provide the possibility of heightening our awareness of being in the world. These moments can be the consequence of witnessing an intensely embarrassing situation or by participating in self-embarrassment for the purpose of gaining solidarity with others. The "Exalted Embarrassment" that Talen channels to be the Reverend Billy can be understood as a solidarity tactic. A *Publishers Weekly* review of Talen's first book, touches upon this understanding, stating the Reverend is, "re-introducing a much-needed sense of fun to Manhattan's somber and overregulated plazas . . . Talen never confuses the employee with the corporation or mere disruption with thoughtful protest, and the discipline and inventiveness of his crusade demonstrates that sometimes the absurdities of power are best undercut with absurdity, and greed with generosity" (par. 1). In his willingness to embarrass himself by disrupting these retail spaces the Reverend Billy is attempting to create solidarity while inviting participation and offering a perspective outside of the capitalist system of consumption. The Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping are saying: Stop shopping and start living.

"The Revolution Is Just a Neighborhood. Three Talkers on the Corner. Amen."

The need for a change in the lifestyle of Americans is indicated in recent research that has found Americans lonely and unhealthy, suffering collectively from over-consumption exacerbated by the more insidious strategies of advertisers who target the public's values and beliefs as a means to sell their products. As advertising encroaches on more public space and comes to dominate aesthetic culture, activists have become increasingly creative in finding ways to disrupt the "usual" state of

¹⁸ There was acknowledgement in previous studies that we will embarrass others intentionally, usually to negatively ban others' behavior (e.g., criticizing someone in front of others to get her/him to stop the behavior) (Sharkey et al.), or to institute or retain power in a relationship but with no acknowledgement that one would purposefully embarrass himself or herself for any reason

affairs. If such activist tactics can be accomplished with kindness and a sense of fun, there is a better chance to raise consciousness, rather than to further alienate. That is, passing blanket judgments on those who frequent Starbucks or shop at Disney is not a viable tactic for empowering citizens who already feel alienated from each other and are offered few options for leisure outside of shopping and other forms of consumption. The Church of Stop Shopping believes that “the product-centered life . . . keeps the stuff stuffed, the people quiet. There is just no imagination at work” (Talen 2003 85). The Reverend Billy does not reprimand the shopper: “The consumers are the souls that must be saved. But never forget: *we are all sinners*” (Talen emphasis in original 2006 23). Through compassion, he invites citizens to consider another lifestyle, or at least to take a break from the hip facade of Starbucks and come outside and sing and play with the Church. Therefore, the Church demonstrates itself to be a playful space for its participants. Michelle Smith, named the Church of Stop Shopping singer-of-the-month January 2007, states,

The Stop Shopping Choir has provided me with this wonderful way of making a contribution to society that not everyone is so lucky to find. It has been amazing to meet people all over the country and overseas who are engaged in the conflict between big business and the well being of this planet. All are committed to finding clever and humorous ways to encourage people to think about “shopping” - how it can be louder than a vote in a ballot box. The good energy that fills the air after every performance is a beautiful high that has kept me in this choir since I joined in 2000. Everyone who has contributed to this project over the years should be lauded. Sing on (Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping/blog/?cat=11)!

When the Reverend Billy enters various retail establishments one thing becomes very clear—these are spaces designed for purchasing, not for playing. There is no posturing on his part, nor is there the attitude that he is somehow “better” than those sipping coffee or purchasing items; there is no “better” here, he is merely the outsider, the one violating the rules of etiquette for how to behave in this setting. Lane understands this tactic as “a poetics of useful embarrassment: the body inappropriately blocking the smart mob of shopping is the first step in answering corporate capitalism and its culture-for-sale” (61). The embarrassment that Talen feels as he creates his chaos is apparent; whether the patrons think he is brave or crazy, there is almost always a sense of “how embarrassing.” Maybe this embarrassment is a consequence of the *intensity* of the scene the Reverend Billy generates, how the “witnesses” would feel if they were in Talen’s shoes, perhaps it is simply the embarrassment involved in the overwhelming disruption of this space reserved for light music and caffeine consumption, or browsing and shopping. As previous research has noted, the effect of embarrassment does act as a moment of solidarity. Kirk Fuoss, in his framework for evaluating the efficacy of performances of social protest, employs modes “to analyze how cultural performance instantiates contestation” (xiv). These modes involve the direction of efficacy and strategies of efficacy and are determined by three spheres (or levels) of performance, the textual, spatial, and conceptual. Before applying these three modes to the Reverend Billy’s

approach, I must briefly discuss Fuoss' influences and his general notions of protest and effectivity. Following the work of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, Fuoss posits that there is a dialectical relationship between performance and the community: performances create and re-create community as community creates and re-creates performance. Fuoss also understands the relationship between community and contestation as "interdependent, not contradictory" (xiv). Finally, performances are essentially contestatory. However, those performances that advocate for change are often overt, while those that attempt to maintain the status quo are often covert.

The direction of effectivity of the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping is clearly that of overt resistance to the current state of affairs in the United States. The strategies of this movement that allow me to make this claim primarily concern its use of non-sanctioned spaces and Bill Talen's employment of both appropriation and identification as textual choices in the performance of the Reverend Billy.

Fuoss claims that the direction of efficacy can be partially determined by the use of sanctioned or non-sanctioned spaces, understanding that oftentimes dominant culture will "sometimes sanction exposure to small doses of what it opposes" (92). The Reverend Billy's invasions of Starbucks, Disney, Victoria's Secret, and other retail stores are not sanctioned by these corporate bodies; in fact, he has been jailed over fifty times for his antics and recently has been barred from entering any Starbucks nationally. In 2000, a memorandum was sent to NYC Starbucks employees, advising them on "What to do if the Reverend Billy is in my store?"¹⁹ In 2004, the Starbucks Corporation in California issued a temporary restraining order against Talen, barring him from being within 250-feet of any Starbucks—this order also barred him from entering any Starbucks nationwide until July of 2007 (Sottile). On November 1, 2007, Talen was found guilty in a Los Angeles City Court for obstructing a lawful business and went to jail for ten days. The judge agreed with the LA prosecutor, stating, "there couldn't be any politics from [the Reverend Billy's] side" (Talen 2004 par. 3). Talen has stated he will not follow the court order to stay away from Starbucks.

Tony Perucci, in his recent article "Guilty as Sin: The Trial of Reverend Billy and the Exorcism of the Sacred Cash Register," followed this court case and the issue of performance as interfering in "the flow of capital" (316). He states, "the City Attorney's case, and her closing argument in particular, reveal the ways in which the

¹⁹ The one-page document was an internal memorandum circulated to all NYC branches of Starbucks in 2000. Bill Talen received a copy of the document from an ex-Starbucks employee. Under "What should I do if the Reverend Billy is in my Store?" there are four steps of protocol that employees are instructed to follow. First, "treat him as any other customer and do not respond to him or his devotees' antics." Second, "ask him politely to leave the store." Third, "call the police if he does not leave." Fourth, "page your district manager" (Talen 2003 no page number). The memo goes on to state that that employees should not respond to the media: "Do not answer any questions. Nothing is off the record." "What should I do if the Reverend Billy is in my Store?" became the title of Bill Talen's 2003 book.

state (in collusion with and compelled by the Starbucks Corporation) recognizes the interruptive power of performance as threatening what she characterized as the 'sacredness' of the flow of capital: in her sanctification of the flow of capital, the City Attorney reveals the ways in which Reverend Billy's performance was not only criminal but also a sacrilege against market fundamentalism" (316). These tactics by Starbucks are a sign that the Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping's direction of efficacy is both overt and resistant. Of course, there could be the claim that all attention, even of the Reverend Billy variety, is "good for business." However, this does not seem to be the case, given that the reaction of these retail chains demonstrates that they feel threatened by the Reverend's performances and message.

In addition to Starbucks being threatened enough by the antics of the Reverend Billy to create a manual for their employees, and to pursue legal action, recent campaigns and controversies demonstrate that this corporation has had to rethink its strategies. Since 2000, Starbucks has attempted to show their company as supporting "fair trade coffee" (despite the fact that only 6% of their coffee pays a fair wage to the farmers, and none of the espresso in which they make their drinks is fair trade)(Organic Consumers Association). A more recent critique by the owner Howard Schultz, the founder and Chairman of Starbucks, in regards to their extensive growth (they have gone from 1,000 stores to 13,000 stores in 10 years), further illuminates that bad press, which should include the Reverend Billy's antics, have affected their reputation. Schultz states, "Some people even call our stores sterile, cookie cutter, no longer reflecting the passion our partners feel about our coffee" (Gross par. 2). He goes on to say, "the need to build so many outlets at once has resulted in 'stores that no longer have the soul of the past and reflect a chain of stores vs. the warm feeling of a neighborhood store'" (par. 11). The irony of this statement, and the power of the Church of Stop Shopping in invading this corporation, can be illuminated by simply presenting testimonies that the Reverend Billy has offered on his invasions of Starbucks. Talen states, "were in the fake café, and we can't know the real price of that latte" (2003 14); "O God Almighty, save us from consumer happiness, that vague pleasantness of hipness by default" (17). Despite the inability to concretely "assume" that these changes in policy and perception of the Starbucks Corporation are a consequence of seven years of Church of Stop Shopping invasions, it would be a misnomer not to credit this movement for bringing awareness and contributing to changes within this organization.

The success of the Church of Stop Shopping centers on the complicated persona of the Reverend Billy. The employment of identification, not simply appropriation, with the character of the Reverend Billy is a crucial indication of the differences between the play of this social protest movement versus other playful parody groups previously mentioned. Appropriation as a tactic often is represented by parody. Fuoss defines appropriation as "taking over for one's own uses something that originated with another individual or group. It may involve retaining some the original in an untransmuted form (re-citation) or creatively transforming it (parody)" (88). The Reverend Billy is not a re-citation of an original nor does it fit into a kind of parody

where “the author/performer intentionally misquotes the original in such a manner it is recognized by audiences, but recognized precisely as having been transgressed” (88-89). For example, the Reverend Billy is not a parody of the Reverend Billy Graham, where he is employing the language of a minister to critique religious hypocrisy. The Reverend is an appropriation of a minister, not to critique but to create a character that is probably closer to a spiritual leader than may be first understood. The ironic tone doesn’t mask that this character is concerned with uniting neighborhoods against large corporations that attempt to make their communities a “super-mall” and their identities and relationships defined by what they buy. By questioning the unquestionable—“Isn’t shopping the one thing we’re not suppose to question at all?”—Talen begins a conversation that has larger implications than when first considered (2003 191).

By employing identification as central to this protest movement, the Reverend Billy’s use of self-embarrassment alongside his compassionate spirituality for the “consumer” constructs a social protest movement that both critiques consumer-based culture by emphasizing commonalities of citizens seeking to find meaning outside of this prescribed lifestyle. Fuoss defines identification as opposed to dissociation: “while identification highlights commonalities among individuals or groups, dissociation points out differences that separate them” (88). This us/them strategy employed by social movements generally can also be seen in parody performances, which usually focus on why “we” are different than “them.” Less focus is given to our commonalities, what brings us together as concerned citizens. The Reverend Billy identifies with those caught in the consumer machine, those bored and lonely and feeling that they have few choices in U.S. culture except to define themselves by consumption, those who see their neighbors only from across the aisle. The Reverend spends as much time discussing what desires and needs are common among those people who witness him in their chain coffee shop or local Victoria’s Secret outlet, as he does the “evils” of that corporate space.

The Reverend Billy has stated that he sees no distinct lines between activism, artistry, and spirituality, and his approach demonstrates this. He also displays a sense of humor about what he is creating as this figurehead, whether he is exorcising the cash register at a Victoria’s Secret, crucifying a Mickey Mouse doll, or preaching the “hipness by default” of Starbucks. He is always aware that he is playing to make a point (Talen 2003 17). Although Talen is sincere in his ideology, his methods reveal that he doesn’t take himself so seriously.

Lane discusses the “humorless state,” and given the official reactions to the Reverend Billy’s playful interventions, we can safely say that not only does our government suffer from a lack of humor but that large corporations reveal a similar tendency. Play often reveals something unusual about “the usual,” and given the conformity and sameness of existence promoted by corporate ideologies, this playful engagement appears both welcome and necessary. The nature of play tends to change during times of crisis and the Reverend Billy provides an example of how playful

activism may have efficacy when performed in a non-sanctioned space with a spiritual agenda and a willingness to make a fool of oneself for one's principles.

Interrupting the advertising and capitalist cultural norms by offering other choices is the beginning of a movement promoting social change. Talen states, "We're trying to find the thing called neighborhood, called *community* . . . we're looking for it on the sidewalks out here, trying to reawaken it in the heart of commodification" (2003 emphasis in original 18). By the willingness to make a fool of himself, by demonstrating compassion and motivating through spirituality, the Reverend Billy centers his activism outside of the pretension offered by protest based merely in parody. By engaging in embarrassing himself he embodies an empathetic character that initiates camaraderie with those who desire to create meaning in their lives outside of what the merchant persistently encourages. As the police were escorting Talen out of a Starbucks, he recalls, "I'm nearing the door and shaking hands and I feel a tenderness for these people. The cops allow me to slow down in order to clasp outstretched hands and receive little thank-yous like preachers always do at the end of a service" (2003 17); and then the "people put their lattes down and join us on the traffic island. We sing and sing in our own portable commercial-free zone" (18).

It is the time, like many times before, for citizens to actively create the world we want to live in and to rebel against injustices that we see. Playful protest, as it has been explored within this analysis, provides a space to build meanings outside of those offered up by the merchant and the transnational corporate structure of consumption. By creating positive antics and playful encounters outside of the destructive turn in capitalism—enormous chain retail stores and copycat boutiques—activists not only interrupt this flow of consumption, they offer a great time and possibly moments of enlightenment.

Can I get a Hallelujah?

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