AMERICAN BEAUTY: THE CHEERLEDER IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE

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The idea for a course dedicated solely to cheerleaders was a result of the astute observations and critical analyses raised by students in the “Multietnic Sports Narratives and Race in the Post-Civil Rights Era” freshman seminar here at UCLA. Although cheerleaders were not the explicit focus of the class, our conversation kept drifting toward these figures who were marginal in the various texts that we read (for example, H.G. Bissinger’s Friday Night Lights) but who clearly played a pivotal role in the narratives. So when the opportunity presented itself, I decided to devote an entire ten weeks to the icon of cheerleader.

I needed the course as much for personal reasons as for academic ones. When I was in junior high school, I made the cheerleading squad, first as an “alternate”—on standby in case someone dropped from the team—and then, a few weeks later, as the real thing. As is true in most junior high or high schools, a cheerleader held a distinctive but contradictory status among her peers. On the one hand, she embodies the ideas of conventional femininity because she uses her body (voice, hands, legs, hips) to support the team and to encourage the community or the body of fans to do the same. Yet a cheerleader is also not expected to know anything about the sport for which she cheers. Some of us, for example, didn’t know what a “first down” is. We often asked each other if our team was on offense or defense now. We couldn’t recognize set plays. True fans, like many of our mothers in the bleachers, were knowledgeable and often attempted to call plays from the stands.

In our school, only the coolest, hippest, “flyest” girls made the squad, but I was not a “fly” girl. I was physically stiff, had no identifiable rhythm, and I wore glasses. I found out later that Coach Marsh liked me because I was an honor student and he wanted to overturn the stereotype that cheerleaders were dumb. The fact that I am black only increased my value in his eyes, because in my school to be smart was to

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be "white" and very, very few white girls became cheerleaders. So there I was, a token Oreo trying to affect some version of coolness in Kenny Capers sneakers and a short skirt. Over time, I found my rhythm and got a boyfriend and some trendy eyeglass frames, but I could not shake the "brainiac" label, and I became known, for better or worse, as the "smart one" on the squad.

Fast forward to my senior year in high school: Mr. Welsh, my English teacher, convinced me to apply to his alma mater, Georgetown University, principally for academic reasons but also because the university sought its first black cheerleader in school history. I applied and was accepted, but I rejected the school's $20,000+ scholarship offer. This rebuff symbolized my denouncement of cheerleading for "feminism" because I believed that the two were incompatible. In other words, I thought that one could not possibly be a feminist and a cheerleader. What's more, I learned that my nearly all-black squad was an anomaly. It was clear from television, movies, and other forms of popular culture that real cheerleaders were white girls.

Despite my tension with and ambivalence toward this cultural phenomenon, I still consider myself a cheerleader of sorts. And I needed an outlet to reconcile the popular images of the cheerleader figure with my own lived experiences as a young black woman in the suburbs who used the sport as an entrée into the black community. And although Coach Marsh also enacted his own version of compulsory heterosexuality when he encouraged each of us to pair up with someone on the football team, I recognize that he was also shielding us from popular notions of black girls being too "fast" because to be a George Washington Junior High School cheerleader was an honor that few girls could achieve in our city.

This special elite status obscured other social realities: in our town, cheerleaders were not regarded as athletes. For the most part, people considered cheerleading a sideshow spectacle and not a sport. This perception is grounded in post-World War II culture, which emphasized female cooperation and traditional femininity simultaneous with masculine virility and competitiveness. For instance, our all-girl squad reinforced the manliness of the competitive and award-winning all-male football and basketball teams. Girls cheered and boys played.

In the spring of 2002 when I was a graduate student at UCLA, I designed and taught a course called "American Beauty: The Cheer-
leader in American Literature and Popular Culture.” The title, taken from the award-winning film of the same name, invites the students to “look closer” at this figure and to perhaps question their assumptions about gender and femininity in particular. The course was primarily literature-based, although I did include supplemental essays and book chapters to help augment the day’s reading. For instance, we read several sections from Mary Ellen Hanson’s Go! Fight! Win! Cheerleading in American Culture (1995) to learn more about the history of cheerleading and its impact on popular culture. Most students were shocked to learn that in its inception, cheerleading was an exclusively male endeavor. bell hooks’s essay, “Marginality as a Site of Resistance,” particularly was pivotal. We continually asked, how can spectators, particularly female spectators, move from a marginalized position of relative subordination—where we are on the sidelines or not in the picture at all—to a position of empowerment? How can we root for the team and still assert our own voices? hooks helped us theorize these ideas. Ultimately, I wanted the class to think broadly about what it means to cheer and to consider how a cheerleader can be an agent of social change and not stasis.

Ruth Doan MacDougall’s The Cheerleader (1973) anchored the course. A cult hit among many young women in the 1970s, the novel reflects the feminist tradition of its day. Snowy, the heroine, like me, rejects cheerleading in favor of a more radical definition of femininity that leads her toward academia and an all-women’s college. This rejection is a common theme found in the pilot episode of “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” Jill McCorkle’s The Cheer Leader (1984), and other texts. I felt it was important to find texts where the two are not mutually exclusive, which is why we ended the course with the idea of radical possibilities such as those found in the film But I’m a Cheerleader (1999), whose protagonist is a lesbian teenager. The class also observed that a cheerleader often represents idealized white femininity. But in texts like The Justus Girls (2001) by Evelyn “Slim” Lambright, women of color often create alternative models, such as drill teams, flag teams, or dance squads. These cheerleader subcategories allowed us to think of cheerleading as a genre, and they opened up ways for us to consider and include a range of cheerleaders in the canon.

As I arranged the syllabus I realized that there were many other themes that I wanted to include but I could not because of the quarter system’s limitations. I decided to let students research other topics not on the syl-
labus and to present their findings as a group. These topics included: World Wrestling Entertainment Divas who cheer outside of the ring for individual male wrestlers; Radical Cheerleaders; American Cheerleader magazine; and the representation of cheerleaders in rock and rap music videos.

By all indications, the course was a success. At the very least, I challenged the students to take the material seriously and to question their own assumptions not just about cheerleaders but about the social construction of gender, the definition of "athlete," and the importance of popular culture. Most students admitted that before they enrolled in the course they thought the course would be an easy "A." In her final reflection paper, one student wrote: "When I signed up for this class, I didn't really know what to expect. I wondered how we would fill ten weeks talking about cheerleaders. To be honest I questioned if this class would be as unsubstantial as the cheerleaders we would be studying are sometimes portrayed. . . Over the last ten weeks, I have been exposed to both the best and the worst a cheerleader can be in literature, movies, and reality. . . I have as many mixed feelings and messages about cheerleaders as I did before I entered this class, only now they are more intellectual."

A colleague once asked, "Are cheerleaders relevant in the late twenty-first century?" His inquiry is well taken in light of the recent gains of high-profile female athletes such as Serena and Venus Williams. In addition, contemporary films such as Bend It Like Beckham (2002) glamorize competitive women's sports while mainstream movies continue to demonize and trivialize cheerleaders. Why would a girl settle for being a cheerleader when she has more opportunities than ever to take center stage as an athlete and have fans cheer for her? And yet, for better or worse, the cheerleading figure remains popular. Since I taught my course, there have been a number of films released that feature cheerleaders, including Bring It On Again (2004), the straight-to-video "sequel" of the original with an all-new cast; the Roy Schneider vehicle The Hot Chick (2002); and the campy films Cheerleader Ninjas (2002) and Cheerleader Queens (2003). Kimberlee Bortfeld, a University of California at Berkeley graduate student, directed an award-winning documentary, Cheerleader (2003), and the Radical Cheerleaders are the subject of a new documentary film. Over time, I hope that academic scholarship will address the complexities of cheerleaders, and the text Cheerleader: An American Icon (2004) by Natalie Guice Adams and Pamela Jean Bettis is a step in that direction. The pre-
ponderance of cheerleader figures in contemporary mass media prompts me to teach the course again—this time focusing less on literature and more on cultural history. The UCLA Spirit Squad, for example, has a rich but little-known history of participating in progressive social issues. Back in 1968, the yell leaders not only cheered against rival Cal Berkeley, they also protested against the Vietnam War. I would also like to develop a class that looks further at the role of cheerleading within African-American culture, again viewing it as a pathway for black female mobility, as well as an avenue for cultural resistance.

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In his book, Death to All Cheerleaders (2000), Marty Beckerman, a 17-year-old humor columnist formerly of The Anchorage Daily News, declares that adolescent culture is in a "tailspin of meaninglessness" and that cheerleaders particularly symbolize modern teenagers' lack of substance. In fact, Beckerman once asked a cheerleader how it feels to be a "urine stain on the toilet seat of America."

In contemporary American popular culture, the female cheerleader icon is fraught with contradictory social meanings: on the one hand, she symbolizes purity, innocence, and youthfulness; on the other hand, she represents sexuality and temptation. A cheerleader epitomizes both success and female achievement but also, as Beckerman believes, she symbolizes vapidity and mindlessness. In almost all instances, she represents idealized white femininity. The goal of this course is to explore the often-conflicting—but potentially subversive—meanings of this figure as it appears in a survey of American short stories, novels, and feature films.

In this course, we will discuss how these writers and filmmakers each grapple with the themes of race, class, region, and sexual differences in their work. And we will consider how genre (such as short story, science fiction, romance, documentary, satire) shapes our understanding of these themes. Finally, our goal is to become sharper readers of the various cultural texts (such as film) that surround us.

Required Texts
Hanson, Go! Fight! Win!: Cheerleading in American Culture
Jill McCorkle, The Cheer Leader
Ruth Doan MacDougall, The Cheerleader
R.L. Stine, Cheerleaders: The First Evil
Course Requirements

Response Papers (20%)
Four times this quarter, you will be required to write a two-page typed response to the day's reading. Often I will direct the responses with a topic or question, but there will also be opportunities to explore your own interests. The papers serve two purposes: to stimulate discussion in the seminar and to help develop the argumentative and analytical skills required in the final paper.

Midterm Explication Paper (20%)
The purpose of the midterm exercise is to ensure that the analytical skills required in the final paper are in place.

Final Paper (30%)
A final critical paper (8 to 10 pages) will be due during exam week. The essay should focus on analysis of a literary text, providing historical background only when it enhances the argument. A proposal will be due near the end of the term, and you will be required to confer with me.

Class Participation (30%)
Participation, for the purposes of this class, consists of thoughtful contribution to the classroom and online discussions, attending office hours, and leading one class presentation. (Details to follow.)

Course Schedule

Week One (April 4)—Introduction: From Object to Subject
What are commonly held stereotypes about cheerleaders? What anxieties about gender, race, sexuality, and class do these stereotypes reveal? What are the competing arguments made about cheerleading in contemporary popular texts? How do these respective texts arrive at these arguments? How is male authority established?
Viewing: The Competition, clip from American Beauty

Week Two (April 11)—The Cheerleader in the Popular Imagination
According to Hanson, what do the positive and negative stereotypes about cheerleading reveal about femininity and masculinity? What are
Due: Response Paper 1

**Week Three (April 18)—Rethinking the 1950s as a Decade of Consensus**
According to Grundy, what historical and cultural changes contributed to the decline of female participation in team sports? How does this shift affect the public’s perception of cheerleading at this time? How does MacDougall reimagine the 1950s as a decade of innocence and domestic tranquility?
MacDougall, *The Cheerleader*; Jones, “From Amazons to Glamazons”

**Week Four (April 25)—Awakenings**
Is this a feminist text?
MacDougall, *The Cheerleader* continued
Due: Response Paper 2

**Week Five (May 2)—Life in the Bell Jar**
How does this novel undermine the myth of the “popular girl”? What does Jo’s focus on and preoccupation with photographs and images reveal about her identity? Compare and contrast Snowy to Jo. How do the novels’ narrative structure and form contribute to our understanding of the two protagonists? How does geographic region contribute to their identities?
McCorkle, *The Cheer Leader*

**Week Six (May 9)—Commodifying Race**
Think of how “style” is racialized, particularly in cheerleading. What kinds of privileges do the El Toro cheerleaders have in comparison to the East Compton squad? Do you see any hope for a feminist solidarity between these two groups?
Frye, “On Being White”; Ryan, “Once It Was Only Sis-Boom-Bah! Collegiate Cheerleaders”; Hanson, “Content and Style”; Discussion: *Bring It On*
Due: Response Paper 3
**Week Seven (May 16)—From Margin to Center**

In popular texts, cheerleaders are almost always white. What happens to our understanding of femininity when cheerleaders are portrayed as another racial group? What insights do these texts share about traditional definitions of femininity? How is sexuality treated? How do these images compare to the other texts we have read?

hooks, “Marginality as Site of Resistance”; Ferrell, “Can You Say My Name?”; excerpts from *The Justus Girls*

Viewing: *But I’m an Urban Cheerleader*

Due: Midterm Exam

**Week Eight (May 23)—He’s Our Man. If He Can’t Do It, No One Can**

What is the relationship between cheerleading and capitalism? What are Evan’s and Karim’s motivations for becoming cheerleaders? Think about how cheerleaders represent national (as opposed to local or regional) identity.

Hanson, “From Those Who Yell to Those Who Sell”; Klein, *The Cheerleader*

Viewing: *E! Cheerleaders*

Due: Response Paper 4

**Week Nine (May 30)—Save Us from Ourselves: Cheerleaders in Science Fiction**

A number of adolescent fiction titles feature cheerleaders as both the embodiment of evil and ideal heroines (or slayers). What does this dichotomy reveal about the anxiety of adolescence, as well as the ambivalence of womanhood and female sexuality?

Stine: *Cheerleaders: The First Evil*

Viewing, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* “The Witch”

**Week Ten (June 6)—Radical Cheerleaders**

How does this film undermine our expectations about traditional gender roles? How does the notion of a lesbian cheerleader alter our perceptions of this icon? Consider, as Hanson does, what happens to the cheerleader figure if she is no longer portrayed in conventionally feminine terms.

Discussion: *But I’m a Cheerleader,* Hanson, “Thinking About Cheerleading”
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NOTES

Thanks to the students in the sports narrative seminar who inspired the direction of the “American Beauty” course. And thanks to those in the cheerleading class who make me want to do it all over again.

i It is common for colleges and universities to offer full or partial scholarships to recruit cheerleaders; however, the NCAA does not recognize cheerleading as a sport, and the Education Department says that drill teams, cheerleaders, and the like can’t be considered athletic programs for the purpose of complying with Title IX. In September 2003, the University of Maryland deemed cheerleading a varsity sport, igniting criticism among many female sports advocates.