

FLIP SKIRT FATALES: HOW MEDIA FETISH SIDELINES CHEERLEADERS

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Abstract: Cheerleading is a highly commodified and mass mediated feminised spectacle which attracts intense vitriol from a range of ostensibly disparate social groups. These include feminists, social conservatives, cultural elites, sports administrators and fans, mainstream media commentators and members of the general public. Complicating these negative framings is the fact that cheerleaders are simultaneously sexually fetishised in pornography, pop culture and the news media. That a relatively unremarkable feminine athletic endeavour provokes such intense cultural anxiety and sexual obsession makes cheerleading a singularly revealing object of study. This article uses textual analysis, and fetish, antifandom, scapegoating and anti-Americanism theory to make sense of the ambivalence, obsession, contradiction, sexualisation and disavowal so often associated with cheerleading. It shows that cheerleading occupies a provocative and liminal cultural status in so far as it has been both stripped yet also hyper-invested with meaning via a range of fetishistic logics. The news media's obsession (and fetishistic disavowals of its obsession) with cheerleaders reveals the oppressive and disempowering ramifications of contemporary cultural responses to young women whose sexualities are both coveted and despised. It also shows that the critical discourse generated by groups traditionally associated with female oppression and that generated by many feminists can intersect in an ideological pincer movement which leaves young women associated with activities such as cheerleading sidelined and largely without allies.

INTRODUCTION: BOILING CHEERLEADERS ALIVE

Marty Beckerman is an American humour writer whose all-encompassing contempt for the mass mediated feminised spectacle of cheerleading has become a lynchpin of his career. He was once fired from a newspaper for asking a 13-year-old female cheerleader how it felt to be “a urine stain on the toilet seat of America” (cited in Traister, 2002). He is also the author of a collection of journalistic non-fiction called *Death to all Cheerleaders* in which he dismisses cheerleaders as a “race of loose bimbos with the brain capacity of squirrel faeces” (2000, p. 43). “If a daughter of mine wanted to be a cheerleader I would boil her alive,” he told a UK newspaper. “But not ‘till

I killed her, just until I killed her dreams” (cited in Wells, 2006). While Beckerman’s comments are extreme examples of the vitriol frequently directed at cheerleaders, thematically they share many similarities with mainstream discourse generated by a range of ostensibly disparate social groups including feminists, social conservatives, cultural elites, sports administrators and fans, mainstream media commentators and members of the general public. This rhetoric commonly frames cheerleaders as any combination of frivolous, talentless, inane, vain, trashy, promiscuous, exhibitionist, overly commodified agents of Americanisation and disruptive to key feminist, sporting and religious ideals. Complicating these negative framings is the fact that cheerleaders are simultaneously sexually fetishised in pornography, pop culture and the news media. That a relatively unremarkable feminine athletic endeavour provokes such intense cultural anxiety and sexual obsession makes cheerleading a singularly revealing object of study.

This article will explore the usefulness of academic work on antifandom, scapegoating and anti-Americanism beneath an overarching analytical umbrella of fetish theory in making sense of the ambivalence, obsession, contradiction, sexualisation and disavowal so often associated with cheerleading. Fetish theory helps explain the complex relationship between the media’s obsessive fixation with cheerleaders and its repeated, strident claims that cheerleading is meaningless and unworthy of attention. This article applies a layered and historically promiscuous understanding of fetish to show that cheerleading occupies a provocative and liminal cultural status in so far as it has been both stripped yet also hyper-invested with meaning via a range of fetishistic logics. This fetishisation occurs, most obviously, within the realms of pornography and pop culture. But it is the news media’s obsession (and fetishistic disavowals of its obsession) with cheerleaders that reveals most about the oppressive and disempowering ramifications of contemporary cultural responses to young women whose sexualities are both coveted and despised. This includes the use of anti-cheerleading rhetoric to insinuate that cheerleaders may be partly to blame when they are the victims of mishaps and violent crime. The fetishistic tendencies apparent in the textual vitriol directed towards cheerleaders will also be unpacked to shed new light on the nature and consequence of the darker elements of antifandom (Gray, 2003; 2005).

HISTORY AND DISTINCTIONS

Cheerleading began in the elite domain of US college sports in the mid- to late 1800s when “charismatic, highly visible” students known as “rooter kings” or “yell masters” (Hanson, 1995, p.11) began leading spectators in boisterous, military-style cheers on the sides of football fields. Since then, it has undergone momentous transformations in its structure, style and content, as well as in the socio-economic status, race and gender of its participants. The two most dramatic and significant historical changes have involved cheerleading’s metamorphosis from an elite and exclusively masculine to an overwhelmingly feminine practice, and its split, in the 1990s, into professional dance-orientated and competitive athletic streams. While cheerleading’s original *raison d’être* was to provide “emotional support to an athletic team during competition” (ibid, p. 120), both competitive and professional cheerleaders now occupy increasingly autonomous roles: professional cheerleaders as stand-alone dance entertainers who appear independently in a range of contexts as well as on the sidelines of sporting events, and competitive cheerleaders as unallied athletes who face off at cheerleading competitions. Contrary to the common framing of cheerleaders as talentless in media discourse, competitive cheerleading is an elite athletic activity involving high-level tumbling, stunting, and gymnastics. Advocates are also lobbying – so far unsuccessfully – for its inclusion as a medial-sport in future Olympic Games (Oakes, 2009). In contrast to the stagnating participation rates of pursuits such as football and basketball, cheerleading currently stands as one of America’s fastest growing sports, with the number of US cheerleaders reaching 4 million in 2007 and the US spirit industry doubling in value between 2003

and 2008 to become a \$2 billion empire (Torgovnick, 2008a, p. xiv). After a listless start as a cultural export, competitive cheerleading programs now exist in at least 60 countries (“International Cheer Union”) and there is a growing interest in subversive cheerleading practices such as gay and lesbian squads, radical activist squads, and senior citizen squads (Adams & Bettis, 2003, p. 4, 27-28). Ignorance and/or confusion relating to the distinctions involved in contemporary cheerleading practice mean the term usually appears in media and popular discourse as an amorphous, collapsible catch-all. This contributes to cheerleading’s location on a provocative cultural faultline (Lumby, 1997, p. 95) and participants’ liminal status between sex workers and athletes. Unless stated otherwise, this article uses the terms “cheerleader” and “cheerleading” to refer to female practitioners¹ of all manifestations of the sport. While this risks replicating the distinction-related issues arising from other framings of cheerleading, it is necessary because the focus of this analysis concerns media discourse and cultural representations of cheerleading rather than the putative activity.

FETISH AND THE SUM OF CHEERLEADING PARTS

My research has involved the textual analysis of approximately 1000 cheerleading texts in Anglophone media over a three-year period. Frequently framed as universal objects of male desire, the representation of cheerleaders is an extraordinarily popular theme in heterosexual Western pornography², and also saturates popular culture and the mainstream media. Up until the early 21st century, it was rare to find news media texts that reported on cheerleading in the straightforward, fact-orientated style characterising the bulk of media reporting of other sports. There has been a marked increase in the number of quotidian sports stories on cheerleading in the news media since the international boom in competitive cheerleading following the 2000 release of the feature film *Bring It On*. That said, a large proportion of contemporary cheerleading-themed news media texts still involves coverage which is not sports-orientated in nature. These relate to topics such as: sex scandals; crimes; entertainment-orientated taxonomies; debates; and accidents and injuries that are associated with external events such as car crashes rather than cheerleading practice. Media coverage of cheerleading-related sex scandals (as opposed to sex crimes) became common after the rise of professional cheerleading in the US in the 1970s. In 1979, the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders successfully stopped a New York theatre from screening *Debbie Does Dallas* (Farmany, 1988) after a judge agreed there could be confusion between the squad and what he described as a “gross and revolting sex film” (Miller, 2002, p. 152). In the same year, two Denver Pony Express cheerleaders were dismissed for appearing in *Playboy* (Hanson 1995, p. 54). More recent cheerleading-related sex scandals involve the disciplining of cheerleaders – often via expulsion from educational institutional or squads – after the posting of semi-nude, nude or sexually suggestive photographs on the internet³. Other sex-related scandals have involved varsity and professional cheerleaders – as well as cheerleading coaches – caught posing for pornographic magazines or appearing in pornographic films, sometimes in their official cheerleading uniforms⁴.

While the dearth of quotidian sports coverage of cheerleading in the mainstream news media conforms with content analysis showing women’s sport “to be grossly underrepresented in the media” (Rowe, 1995, p. 134), the glut of other types of cheerleading-related material suggests that the media’s relationship with cheerleading is one of fetishistic fixation in addition to neglect.

The etymological, historical and cultural roots of the term “fetish” spans religious, anthropological, economic, psycho-sexual and popular contexts and is well-suited as a theoretical lens and tool for explicating the media’s complex and conflicting relationship with cheerleaders. A commonly quoted definition of fetish in the religious sense comes from English anthropologist

Edward Burnett Tylor who, in 1871, wrote that a fetish object “is treated as having personal consciousness and power, is talked with, worshipped, prayed to, sacrificed to, petted or ill-treated with references to its past or present behavior to its votaries” (cited in Budge, 1988, p. 57). Media discourse often frames cheerleaders as embodying the spirit of modern “evils” such as commercialism, Americanism, sexualisation, spectacle and exhibitionism. Additionally, cheerleaders are the subject – either literally or metaphorically – of worship and petting *as well as* sacrifice and ill-treatment, and – again consistent with Tylor’s love/hate thematic – the cult of cheerleading includes votaries of the activity as well as votaries of its castigation. In this sense, cheerleading also displays the characteristics of a taboo as described by Edmund Leach in structural anthropology (1962) in that – as Australian media studies scholar John Hartley puts it in relation to juvenation in the news media – it “attracts compulsive attention, simultaneous attraction and repulsion, alternate over-valuation and under-valuation, ritualization and denial, and (compulsively repeated) responses ranging from sacralization to attempted extirpation: ‘revelling’ to ‘scandalizing’ ...” (1998).

In 1867, Karl Marx drew parallels with the mystical thinking of the “mist-enveloped regions of the religious world” when he used “commodity fetishism” to describe industrial capitalism’s divorcing of (and subsequent forgetting of the divorcing of) human contributions from the value-form of commodities (1867). This, he argued, rendered the latter as “queer” things “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties”:

so soon as [a table] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent... and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was (ibid).

Commodity fetishism involves – at the most pessimistic reading – a deliberately exploitative and manipulative enshrouding and/or – more sanguinely – an involuntary forgetting or overlooking. Either way, the result is that the relationship between workers and the products of their labour remains “merely a relationship between things” while the real social relationships of production are concealed (Fine & Saad-Filho, 2004, pp. 25-26). This type of alienation is frequently said to be evident in the commodification and objectification of women and their sexual value to men, and is also evident in the packaging and selling of cheerleaders. Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism is equally germane to one of the central arguments of this article: that women athletes are changed into queer⁵, social hieroglyphics as soon as they step forth as cheerleaders.

Reduced to the sum of their parts, competitive female cheerleaders seem unremarkable in sporting contexts. Their uniforms are not unlike those worn in relatively controversy-free sports such as Australian netball and are often more substantial than those worn by competitors of either genders in triathlons, while the routines they perform and the athletic skills they require bear many similarities to those of Olympic gymnasts. Professional sideline cheerleaders, parsed to their aesthetic and athletic ones and zeros, seem similarly commonplace. Their apparel, dance steps and conspicuous smiles mirror those of countless musical chorus-lines. Yet the heat and nature of the discursive ejaculations accompanying both competitive and professional cheerleaders suggests that cheerleading wholes transcend the sum of cheerleading parts in ways which are regarded by consumers of cheerleading and cheerleading-related discourse as both wonderful *and* grotesque. In the context of cheerleading fetishes, therefore, French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s “magical thinking”⁶ can be framed as involving a forgetting, overlooking or ignorance (willful or otherwise) of the ordinariness of the individual elements which together constitute the activity of cheerleading. This magical – or at the very least idiosyncratic – thinking endows cheerleaders and cheerleading with significant cultural

potency but also subsumes the human elements extant in the fetishised subject. As American anthropologist David Graeber writes in relation to fetish:

We create things, and then, because we don't understand how we did it, we end up treating our own creations as if they had power over us. We fall down and worship that which we ourselves have made (2007, p. 117).

The term fetish was popularised in a psycho-sexual context in the late 1880s by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the sexologist who, "termed it a pathology, a deviant sexual practice, and a perversion" that involved erotic attachments to and sexual gratification from objects rather than people (Wray, 1998). In the early 20th century, Sigmund Freud used the word in the context of his Oedipal complex, in which a boy fears his mother's lack of a penis is a result of castration and that his subsequent fears are so overwhelming that "the prerational consciousness 'disavows' the sight of female genitals... believing instead that Mother really does have a penis" (Pietz, p. 314). In adolescence, a fetish object may become "a symbolic substitute displacing the disavowed mother's penis that the fetishist knows does not exist but... believes in nonetheless" (ibid). As with commodity fetishism, both thaumaturgic thought and forgetfulness are involved in fetishisation in the psycho-sexual sense. American cultural and social theorist Matt Wray notes that the Freudian fetish involves a kind of "creative denial... that helps the fetishist ward off anxiety and restore a sense of well-being, all the while producing a kind of amnesia" (1998). Fetish, in this sense, is useful when framing discursive interest in cheerleading because of these objectifications, depersonalisations and object substitutions.

References to fetish in contemporary popular discourse are used playfully to signify "any thing or activity to which one is irrationally devoted" ('Fetish') or "an obsession or fixation, usually expressed in ritualistic behaviour" (*Macquarie Concise Dictionary*, p. 409). Contemporary popular and academic discourse often collapses some or all of the definitions from the term's etymological, historical and cultural history, invoking images of salaciousness, alienation, reification, supernatural powers, pathologisation, manipulation, and/or a sense that the focus of a fetish may not deliver its promised bliss and is not to be trusted. There is a suggestion that those in the grip of a fetish have an unjustified and irrational fixation or preoccupation, and blindness to an object or subject's "real" nature. It is this resonant, palimpsestic definition of fetish that underpins my use of the term in this essay.

SHOWING THE UNSHOWABLE

An overall media tendency to vilify cheerleading often involves framing cheerleaders as culpable in relation to scandal or misadventure even if their involvement in these incidents is marginal or their role could reasonably be viewed as "innocent". This occurs via a number of media practices ranging from insinuation to outright editorial declaration, and is ethically problematic, particularly where it apports blame to women who are the victims of sex and/or violent crime. In such cases, culpability is often implied via textual proximity and the referencing of negative cheerleading stereotypes to connect cheerleading and undesirable outcomes. An example is a 2002 newspaper article about the strangulation of a 13-year-old described as a "promiscuous internet Lolita" (Johnston, 2002). The victim's cheerleader status is included in the first paragraph which may imply that it is linked to (or possibly even responsible for) both her promiscuous behaviour and her death. This case is typical of media coverage of murder cases in which victims' status as cheerleaders or former cheerleaders is routinely privileged over other facts which could reasonably be viewed as being more pertinent⁷.

A possible reading of these texts is that cheerleaders have a potent, perhaps irresistible, appeal which may incite others to sexually-motivated violence and serve as a mitigating factor

in criminal defence. The suggestion that cheerleaders may be partly or wholly to blame for attacks against them and/or that men cannot reasonably be expected to behave decorously (or legally) in their presence is articulated more flagrantly in the readers' comment sections accompanying on-line news media reports about such incidents. Beneath a 2009 piece about a cheerleading coach arrested for having sexual contact with minors, for instance, several readers direct rage toward whichever "idiot" was responsible for putting a 23-year-old man in charge of a group of school cheerleaders in the first place, suggesting this person should be arrested, too (caringmsnurse commenting on Lovelady, 2009; CelticLady9 commenting on Lovelady, 2009). The implication is that a man can not be expected to control himself under such circumstances.

The gratuitous use of cheerleading as a descriptor for protagonists in news media reports combined with the force of pre-existing negative cheerleading stereotypes may also produce implications of blame. In 2008, a Florida high school student died from a rare genetic disorder triggered by certain anesthetics after undergoing surgery to correct a birth defect and augment her breasts. "Florida High School Varsity Cheerleader Dies after Breast Implant Surgery" (2008) and "High School Cheerleader Dies of Breast Surgery Complications" (Donaldson-Evans, 2008) were typical of the headlines associated with news coverage of this incident. Given that vanity and conceit is a common negative stereotype associated with female cheerleaders (Hanson, 1995, p. 104), one reasonable reading of these media constructions is that cheerleading-related narcissism may have held some responsibility for the death. Imputations of culpability extend, more broadly, to the practice of cheerleading itself which is frequently framed as a powerful force which can exert an adverse influence on individuals and may therefore be partly or wholly to blame for misadventure which occurs (or which can be constructed semiotically as occurring) near it.

The news media practice of castigating cheerleaders as generically blameworthy without acknowledging its own role in the creation and/or amplification of this guilt exemplifies a broader issue of news media disavowal in relation to cheerleading. As discussed, disavowal in the Freudian fetishistic sense refers to a boy both seeing and not seeing his mother's "missing penis": he "'knows' what he has seen (female genitals), but denies it, focusing on his new fetish/ replacement penis, and convincing himself that he "'doesn't know'" (Albury, 2002, p. 50). In addition to seeing but not seeing its role in the constitution of cheerleading culpability, news media disavowal and denial is evident in terms of its editorial dismissal of cheerleading's worth, relevance and/or interest value while simultaneously producing large volumes of discourse focusing on the activity. It is also common for news media reports to question or criticise the "glamour quotient"⁸ cheerleading adds to sport without acknowledging that – by accompanying these and other cheerleading-related texts with images of the offending performers and deeds – cheerleading also adds a glamour quotient to the news media. Complaining about cheerleading while showing visuals of the very thing being denounced fits well with the Freudian notion of fetishism as disavowal. An example is a story by an on-line Australian sports columnist who calls for an end to cheerleading and complains that even media critiques of cheerleaders are used as an excuse to run sexy, objectified photographs of cheerleaders (Musolino, 2009). His piece is accompanied by a photograph of a sexy, unnamed cheerleader. This irony was not lost on readers, with one posting that she or he "only clicked on this story because of the picture attached to it" (WA, commenting on *ibid*). Such practices may also be connected with a more general media disavowal and "visceral suspicion" of visual beauty, especially the kind associated with the female human form (Hartley & Rennie, 2004, p. 459)⁹. The publication of sexualised photographs of cheerleaders alongside media narratives railing against the sexualisation of cheerleaders also illustrates what Hartley and Lumby describe as "the relationship between the

desire to watch and to watch over" (2003, p. 54). As Hartley puts it:

Often the news media deal with the tension between their own propensity to communicate via sexualized young people, and their own tendencies to police young people's sexuality (and therefore everyone else's), by having their cake and eating it; showing the pictures (communicatively, democratically) while wagging their fingers (truth-seekingly, governmentally) (1998).

The proliferation of texts expressing surprise that cheerleading is more difficult or impressive than an author or author's interviewees previously believed also exemplifies news media disavowal because, while ostensibly championing cheerleading, the positioning and privileging of negative stereotypes is likely to contribute to the continued existence and potency of these stereotypes. Texts constructed in this manner occur so routinely that the approach could almost be classed as a template for "positive" coverage of cheerleading in the news media. Consider a Scottish newspaper report stating that its goal is to correct inaccurate cheerleading stereotypes yet which marvels at the absence of "pom-poms, cheesy grins or mini-skirts" (Diamond, 2009), as well as the opening lines of a New Zealand news story about a local squad competing in an international competition:

When most people think of cheerleading, they think of pompoms, short skirts and over-excited girls squealing and shouting as the blokes play footy. But as it turns out... [c]heerleading is gruelling, hard work and a sport in its own right... ("Cheerleading – it's not just pompoms and squealing girls", 2009).

Supposedly promoting a positive view of cheerleaders, these texts clearly situate negative stereotypes as the dominant norm. As a result, it is feasible that any reader who did not previously associate cheerleading with pom-poms, short skirts and over-excited girls squealing may do so after accessing these stories. This effect can be better understood by considering theories of psychological reactance, and the paradoxical consequences of "thought suppression" in which telling someone not to think of a subject is believed to produce "the very obsession or preoccupation that it is directed against" (Wegner et al, 1987, p. 5). As such, an American journalist's plea for readers to, "Forget the American archetype of blond cheerleader in tight sweater pining for the muscled quarterback" (Brady, 2002), is likely to be counterproductive. It is also possible that outwardly packaging a text as pro-cheerleading may permit mainstream journalists to be more acerbic than they would be if a story was blatantly anti-cheerleading and therefore required more justification and evidence to support editorial criticism.

LOVING TO HATE

The final section of this article is devoted to an exploration of the fetishistic nature of the rhetorical vitriol directed towards cheerleaders and the potential pleasure taken from readers or viewers who experience the fascination/aversion encoded in this discourse. A significant proportion of media discourse framing cheerleading involves criticism ranging from passing put-downs and sober critiques, to what could be classed as antilocution or hate speech¹⁰. While Beckerman's writing sits within the genre of hyperbolic "shock" humour (Traister, 2002), his anti-cheerleader rhetoric contain levels of vitriol and aggression which are unusual even for his creative genre, and which break a number of taboos regarding the expression of sexual interest and aggression towards school-aged children. His return, again and again, to extravagant damnations of cheerleaders is emblematic of the obsessive discourse generated by many of cheerleading's detractors. As Indian journalist Gitanjali Sharma writes of the controversies about cheerleading at Indian cricket matches:

The so-called guardians of Indian culture... continue to carry images of

cheerleaders long after they perform at stadiums. They have carried them in their minds, preserved them, dwelt on them, obsessed about them, exaggerated them, magnified them and finally blown them out of proportion just about everywhere... (2008).

The most extreme examples of anti-cheerleading discourse are usually (but not always) located on-line in non-mainstream sites, blogs and readers' comments sections, and are undoubtedly influenced by the broader trend of "cyber-disinhibition" (Rosenbaum, 2007). That said, there are significant similarities between unchecked cyber censure targetting cheerleaders and mainstream media criticism. These similarities are both thematic and *energetic* – in that the nature of the discourse suggests many of these critics gain pleasure from publically expressing their objections to cheerleading, to the point where their interest in this activity can be interpreted as fetishistic. In addition to the experiencing of personal pleasure, vitriol directed at cheerleaders serves a number of other psychological, social and cultural purposes which can be interrogated with reference to academic work relating to antifandom and scapegoating, in combination with this essay's overarching employment of fetish theory. Academic work on anti-Americanism¹¹ is also instructive because cheerleading is widely regarded as being quintessentially American and as epitomising many of the qualities and phenomena outsiders find problematic about the US.

Media texts often frame cheerleading as being both ridiculous and threatening, and tend to be all-encompassing and essentialist in nature. "Cheerleading seems to produce a social toxin that poisons the brain of anyone it touches – the girls, their parents, teachers, administrators and the public," one American newspaper columnist writes in a piece arguing that the sport should be abandoned entirely (Parks, 2007). Such texts are rarely evidenced or even reality-based critiques but are antonymous and indicative of a "blank bias" (O'Brien, cited in Markovits, 1997, p. viii). It is also common for anti-cheerleading discourse to involve the "sudden inructions of prejudice into irrelevant contexts" which American psychologist Gordon Allport uses as a measure of the intensity and salience of a hostile attitude (2000, p. 40). An examination of media discourse suggests that cheerleading has become a code word for a range of ills associated with contemporary – and particularly American contemporary – culture. The widespread discursive agreement on the objectionable nature of cheerleaders also shares similarities with US-based academic Andrei S. Markovits' framing of anti-American discourse as a lingua franca – a "sort of global antinomy, a mutually shared language of opposition to and resistance against the real and perceived ills of modernity" (2007, pp. 27, 1). Cheerleading in this sense is a tangible object of contempt that – fetishistically – stands in for less tangible fears such as those relating to raunch-, youth-, and trash-culture. As such, criticisms of the activity are likely to "reveal more about the individual or group passing judgment" (O'Connor, 2004, p. 89)¹² than they do about the object of hatred. Rather than attempting to determine whether cheerleaders "deserve" the criticism they receive, therefore, it is far more instructive to examine the possible motivations of – and consequent benefits which may accrue to – critics both on a micro and macro level.

Reviling cheerleaders is likely to serve a number of psychological functions for individuals including the "pleasant catharsis" of speaking one's mind (Allport, 2000, p. 40) and/or the self affirmation that can be obtained through derogating others (Fein & Spencer, 2000). In a study of audience responses to Martha Stewart media texts, US communications scholar Melissa A. Click notes that while some regular viewers and readers watch *Martha Stewart Living* to relax and escape, others report "amusement, irritation, or anger when watching the show" (2007, p. 310). Critics of cheerleading are likely to experience similar emotions, though I wish to nuance Click's findings by arguing that while viewers may not use words such as relaxation and escapism when referring to the deliberate consumption of texts they dislike, these may

still be appropriate terms to describe their experiences. Criticising cheerleaders may also offer a form of gratifying revenge for negative personal experiences associated with cheerleading in high school which Adams and Bettis note remain potent and influential memories for many adult Americans (2003, p. 7). While cheerleading's cultural status is liminal, contradictory and contested, its huge presence in terms of numbers of practitioners and mediated representations mean that it is far from a subaltern subculture. Some deprecation of cheerleaders, therefore, may relate to the taste distinctions theorised by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and be part of a broader backlash to cultural products enjoying mass popularity. Looked at in this light, the popularity of cheerleading may not mitigate, so much as provoke discourses of ridicule and contempt. The positive stereotype of cheerleaders as wholesome, peppy, perky and popular (Hanson, 1995, p. 6) may also endow detractors with a degree of subcultural capital (McRobbie & Thornton, 1996) and fit into a broader 1980s and 1990s backlash against what is referred to in popular discourse as "political correctness". That said, criticising cheerleaders may also offer those who do *not* wish to be framed as politically incorrect a loophole when negotiating current norms on what is and is not "acceptable" to say about young women and, to a lesser extent, children and the working class. So long as a denunciation is framed as being first and foremost about cheerleading (even if cheerleading looks very much like a proxy for other concerns), these critics are likely to receive a metaphorical "get out of jail free" card.

How then, to explain the existence of a mediasphere which permits the vilification of cheerleaders – often as a stand-in for girls and young women – with impunity? One explanation is that feminists, the usual gatekeepers for mediated misogyny, actually generate a substantial sub-section of anti-cheerleader vitriol. Cheerleading's popularity and cultural power also makes it possible to rationalise and package anti-cheerleader rhetoric as harmless, justified, and possibly even courageous and righteous. As Markovits writes in relation to European anti-Americanism, by directing prejudice at "a Mr Big, and a seemingly retrograde and evil one at that" citizens who have "rightly dislodged many... previously held prejudices from acceptable public interaction" can indulge in prejudice not only guilt-free but convinced that they are acting "morally, justly, and virtuously" (1997, pp. 221-2). According to O'Brien, what makes anti-Americanism (and, I would add, anti-cheerleaderism) distinctive as well as different from other prejudices, is the question of power:

Whereas discrimination against peoples considered weak and helpless is viewed as abhorrent behavior, this isn't. Anti-Americanism is regarded as a form of fighting back. It's battling against an eight-hundred-pound gorilla which... [is] "threatening, powerful, clumsy, yet also inferior" (cited *ibid*, p. viii).

The relationship between vitriol and the perceived power of an object of hatred is also addressed by UK media researcher Vivi Theodoropoulou who argues that "it is a series of emotions such as fear, admiration, respect, and envy for the *opposing* threat that cause hatred" (2007, p. 316). She references the ancient Greek term *Antipalon deos* which has come to express "the mutual fear between opponents, enemies, or adversaries that ensures unity and cohesion in the interior of the rival camps, and a state of balance between them" (*ibid*, p. 318). Feminism's complicit and participatory role in cheerleader vilification as well as the "Mr (Ms?) Big" dynamic outlined above are particularly relevant when considering anti-cheerleading vitriol generated by mainstream media outlets where there are both institutional and tacit rules influencing what can be said about whom in which way. It is hard to imagine Beckerman's thoughts on school girl cheerleaders being regarded as humorous or even tolerable if they had been directed towards school girl track and field athletes or basketballers. As with anti-American rhetoric, cheerleading offers an excuse for "public expressions of humiliation" that are rarely acceptable elsewhere (Markovits, 2007, p. 15). Cheerleading crimes and scandals also offer an opportunity

for villificatory and misogynist discourse (likely to be deemed socially offensive in other contexts) to be framed as a reasonable chastising of a dangerous wrong-doer. This is problematic because the justificatory “evidence” offered – if any evidence is offered at all – is likely to be influenced by the aforementioned tendency for media discourse to frame cheerleaders as being overly or unfairly culpable when they are involved – or can be framed as being involved – in scandals and crimes. In relation to the Martha Stewart corporate fraud case, US communications scholar Carol A. Stabile argues that the disproportionate levels and triumphalist tone of the media attention devoted to Stewart’s downfall exposed “the deep vein of misogyny that continues to exist in the US culture industry” (2004). It seems likely that the coverage of and mediated reaction to cheerleading-related scandals and crimes is similar.

AMBIVALENCE, ANTIFANDOM AND HATESHIP WITH BENEFITS

Ambivalence is a frequent feature of mediated vitriol directed at cheerleaders and is better understood by considering academic work addressing the complexities and paradoxes of the intense relationships between love and hate. UK cultural studies scholar Sara Ahmed, for instance, writes of the way hate generates its object “as defence against injury”, noting that “it is a common theme within so-called hate groups to declare themselves as organisations of love” (2004, p. 42). This holds true with anti-cheerleading rhetoric generated by groups such as feminists, moral conservatives and sports fans who frame their dislike of cheerleading as a part of a protective love of other things (for example, feminine liberation, youthful morality and sporting purity) that they see as being under threat and perhaps even hated by those who promote, practice, or even merely tolerate cheerleading. One of the popular understandings of the love/hate axis is that these two emotions exist side by side in a paradoxical marriage of mutual opposition to each other yet parallel focus in terms of subject. Much cheerleading-directed vitriol, however, suggests that the act of hating can itself be an intensely pleasurable and psychologically affirming activity, and may be actively pursued for these benefits. As UK cultural studies scholar Jonathan Gray notes in relation to the activities of antifans, some audience members may deliberately expose themselves to texts they dislike “precisely to raise their blood pressure” (2005, p. 853). Much of the “love” that exists in the context of anti-cheerleading vitriol, therefore, does not relate to cheerleaders or cheerleading but to the pleasures gained from hating them. This is distinct to other, popular understandings of love/hate responses in which someone may love some aspects of cheerleading yet hate others.

The love/hate nature of much mediated vitriol directed at cheerleaders is caused by and is also constitutive of cheerleading’s sexual and cultural liminality. Beckerman, for example, is highly dismissive and derisive of the high school cheerleaders he interviews, yet still expresses an interest in having sex with them (2000, p. 43). Such articulations of both desire and contempt for cheerleaders may be because their detractors find them sexually desirable yet view them as possessing either: (a) a surplus of sexual availability (thereby making them worthy of contempt because they are seen as “sluts”); or (b) a deficit of sexual availability in that they are seen as unavailable to anyone except the most elite, alpha males (thereby making contempt a more psychologically tolerable reaction than feelings of rejection-related inadequacy). Either way, the sexualised female cheerleading subject can’t win. Relevant, here, are Ahmed’s conclusions on the intimacy and intensity involved in hating when she notes that hate involves an excessive need and is opposed to indifference rather than love:

Certainly, within psychological theories of prejudice, hate is seen as tied up with love. Or, to put it more precisely, love is understood as the pre-condition of hate... There can, in fact, be no hatred until there has been long-continued frustration and disappointment... As Mikkel Borch-Jacobson puts it, “Hate wants to get its

hands on the other; it wants to touch even when it wants to destroy” ... (2004, pp. 50, 51).

Another explanation for ambivalent sexual responses relates to conflicting representations of cheerleading as both a wholesome activity for prepubescent children as well as a highly sexualised performance by and for sexually available adults. This could render desire for cheerleaders psychologically confusing as it raises pedophilic and hebephilic taboos. Mixed message vitriol is also likely to be generated by critics of cheerleading who experience a sexual desire for cheerleaders yet have contempt for the activity, which means they could be expressing a displaced contempt for their own predilections.

In a more general sense, the paradoxical pleasures gained from actively hating cheerleading texts can be better fathomed by considering theories relating to antifandom – a term pioneered by Gray to describe the practice of actively disliking genres, texts, or personalities (2003; 2005). He makes the case that:

hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and “effects” or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture (2005, p. 841).

In relation to the textual reception continuum, Gray proposes that pleasure and displeasure responses be positioned not on opposite ends of a spectrum, but on a Möbius strip, with the behaviours and performances of textual lovers and loathers “resembling, if not replicating, each other” (2005, p. 845). Fans of cheerleading texts (be they fans of mediated discourse or actual acts of cheerleading) are not restricted to the common understanding of this term, but also include Gray’s antifans – committed textual consumers who claim to dislike or even detest cheerleaders. Publically loathing texts can be creative and performative to the point where antifans may consciously or subconsciously compete to produce the most original, humorous or politically incorrect anti-cheerleading response. Gray notes that some antifans expose themselves to texts they dislike as “an intellectual-rational challenge” that allows access to “intellectual, comic, and cultural capital” via the engagement of “witty and analytical textual deconstruction” (2005, p. 853). Some expressions of cheerleading-related antifandom involve what can be best described as engaged enagement. Others are less informed – or at least informed by an active avoidance. On an internet forum dedicated to expressions of hatred for films, a contributor states that they refuse to watch any cheerleading movies. “EWWWWWWWW!” this post reads, “I HATE THOSE!” (Amplify commenting on “What movie do you refuse to watch?”). Given that this poster refuses to watch cheerleading movies, it begs the question of how they know they hate them. Gray, however, argues that it would be rash to dismiss such comments because even un-read texts clearly have meaning and relevance to antifan audiences in that they inspire and require “the language of physical repulsion” (2005, p. 848). His conclusion is that in cases such as these, the moral rather than the aesthetic “or even the rational-realistic” text has been read and responded to (ibid) – a conceptual framing which fits with the generic, non-specific nature of much anti-cheerleading vitriol.

In addition to the individual benefits gained by those who experience and express vitriol towards cheerleading, there are benefits which relate to aggregations. The “in-group” cohesion offered by the collective rejection of an “out-group” (Allport, 2000) is a concept which has been explored at length in a diverse range of fields including psychology, philosophy, sociology, and political, cultural and media studies. A sociological take of the role of the “other” can be found in the work of UK academic Kathryn Woodward who writes of the process of identities forming in relation to “what they are not” (1997, p. 35). Political scholars such as Barry Rubin and Judith

Colp Rubin note the transfer of “psychological insecurity” into hostility directed outwards (2004, p. 22). In the field of media studies, Hartley’s case is that news is organised around strategies of inclusion and exclusion which create the domains of “wedom and theydom” and permit an insidious rather than “open, offensive prejudice” against those who are “unlike us” and therefore “like each other” (1992, pp. 206-9). This is particularly relevant when considering the proliferation of media representations in which cheerleaders appear unnamed or headless in visuals, framed both literally and metaphorically as being part of an indistinguishable mass of “others”. Explorations of the generic communal benefits of public disapprobation – particularly in response to issues of crime and deviance – can also be found in moral panic theory. In a discussion of “the age of the moral panic”, UK sociologist Kenneth Thompson refers to French sociologist Émile Durkheim’s argument that public indignation about social deviance is functionally beneficial for recreating social unity (1988, pp. 2, 23). This, he notes, is similar to Marx’s view that the criminal “renders a ‘service’ by arousing the moral and aesthetic feelings of the public” (cited *ibid*, p. 23). The theories of French philosopher René Girard also offer valuable insights into the social cohesion gained when adversaries form a “*de facto* allegiance against a common enemy” (2003, p. 26) in the form of a scapegoat, particularly if this occurs when extant cultural orders are on shifting or uncertain ground. Of Girard’s work, Australian academic Chris Fleming refers to the way “the tension and unrest bedeviling a community is purged, temporarily at least, by inflicting the violent rage of a mob on a victim or group of victims” (2004, p. 48). While it is rare for literal violence to be directed towards cheerleaders, textual aggression is still likely to serve a Girardian function in terms of its unifying and affirming effect among, in particular, feminist groups and moral conservatives (though on an intra rather than inter group level). It is worth noting Hartley’s identification of a post Cold War, post-postmodernist political splintering, which has stripped the political left in particular of a sense of shared opposition, making a search for new “enemies” a priority (1992, p. 15). Cheerleaders may provide a reassuring sense of threat in this regard, particularly given the widespread agreement about their objectionable nature: condemning them is something the entire family (in a sociological sense) can enjoy and bond over.

The content, production and function of cheerleader-directed vitriol contains a number of fetishistic elements relating to, among other things, surrogates overloaded with meaning, psychological displacements and creative disavowals of intent. Also relevant in a fetishistic sense is the lack of differentiation between individual cheerleaders and *all* cheerleaders, and the forgetting or ignoring that an entire sporting group is frequently blamed (usually via gendered logics) for isolated, often manufactured or exaggerated incidents. Additionally, the tolerance and/or expressing of vitriol by groups and institutions which, in other contexts, would be likely to censure (or censor) such discourse, facilitates the opportunistic and fetishistic use of cheerleading subjects as an excuse for misogyny. The commodification of cheerleaders which occurs via the economic exchange of cultural artifacts and texts hosting cheerleader-directed vitriol can be framed as fetishistic in the alienation-related, Marxist sense because cheerleader-targetted vitriol is rarely concerned with the lived realities of cheerleading practice¹³, but is circulated and traded to supply a complex set of demands relating to individual, group and social psychologies – as well as to accrue various capitals. (In addition to the literal sale of books such as Beckerman’s, such discourses have the potential to metaphorically “sell” feminist, moral conservative and sports-related ideologies.) Also relevant when considering the psychological displacement involved in the fetishistic articulation of loathing towards cheerleaders is Ahmed’s case that, rather than residing in a given subject or object, hate is economic, circulating between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement. Such feelings become fetishes – “qualities that seem to reside in objects” – when the history of their production and circulation has been erased (2004, p. 11). This holds true for cheerleader-

directed vitriol because, while cheerleaders are framed as being intrinsically deserving of hate, understandings of cheerleaders as unworthy are heavily reliant on mediated, self-serving constructions. As such, cheerleaders can be viewed not so much as the cause of others' vitriol, but as convenient vessels and mediums for this emotion. Fetishistic forces can also be identified in the selection and persecution of cheerleaders as scapegoats. Fleming notes, for instance, that effective Girardian scapegoats often hold an ambiguous or liminal social status in which they are both marginal and internal to a community: rather than being seen as victims, they are instead invariably viewed "as victimizers *par excellence*" (2004, p. 50). This is achieved, in part, via the misrepresentation and exaggeration of scapegoats' alleged crimes, with persecutors often attributing to their victims "remarkable – indeed, often supernatural – capacities that [imbue] their malevolence with extraordinary malignancy" (ibid). While the "supernatural" capacities of cheerleaders may be metaphorical rather than literal, the collective female cheerleader which emerges from accumulated discourses of vitriol is a figure of great power. She is responsible for every adolescent hurt and rejection; for the triumph of mass, trash culture; for the corruption of children; and the destruction of the purity and glory of sport. She is every bad thing a young woman has ever done and will ever do.

CONCLUSION

Erotic and economic, the female cheerleader has a potent symbolic charge which is both more and less than the sum of her parts. This paradox exists because cheerleading is the focus of fetishistic discursive activity which overloads and hyper-invests the feminised cheerleading subject with meaning yet also empties her out so that she becomes alienable and fungible¹⁶ – an economic, symbolic and ideological commodity. Cheerleaders appear in media discourse as signifiers for norms relating to the best and worst aspects of sexualised femininity. They are framed as embodying the heights of feminine decorum as well as, more frequently, the depths of feminine disrepute. As a result, themes and symbols of respectability vie with those of taboo, reflecting the unfixed, unstable and contested nature of idealised imaginings of contemporary femininity, as well as societal tensions between denial and desire. The contradictions evident in mediated representations of cheerleaders also occur in a meta sense. Dialectics of crisis (regarding the sexual, cultural, moral and ideological threats supposedly posed by cheerleading) and urgings of containment exist alongside an obsessive and fetishistic news media interest in cheerleading as a journalistic subject. As a result, texts advancing surveillance and suppression occur simultaneously with subtexts and actions suggestive of voyeurism and exposure. While the mediation of cheerleading clearly "does complex cultural work"¹⁶ in terms of gender and sexuality sense-making, a number of serious consequences are likely to flow from or at least be associated with the discursive paradigms framing cheerleading. Rather than entering the lengthy and well-documented debate over the consequences of sexual objectification, it should simply be noted that the relentless degree to which the cheerleader's "sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her"¹⁶ may: have negative psychological consequences for individual cheerleaders¹⁷; fuel negative perceptions (and ongoing negative media framings) of cheerleading as an activity; and contribute to a continuing tendency to objectify women overall. Vitriolic rhetoric focussed on cheerleading is also likely to:

- (1) contribute to a disempowering reduction in the reputation of both cheerleaders individually and cheerleading overall¹⁸;
- (2) contribute to making cheerleading more physically dangerous by framing it as an activity unworthy of rigorous safety consideration and institutional support (institutional

weaknesses and disorganisation have been identified as key factors in cheerleading's high injury rates [Muellar & Cantu, 2008, p. 44]¹⁹;

(3) provide a socially sanctioned outlet for discourses of vitriol (that would normally be considered socially unacceptable in mainstream media contexts) such as those associated with misogyny, classism and racism (in relation to dialogues of hate directed at America);

(4) lead to prejudicial action against and / or, at the very least, continued textual aggression towards cheerleaders. While there is no evidence of a direct, causal link between textual and physical aggression towards cheerleaders, cogent are Gray's findings that the darker dimensions of antifandom such as pseudo "revenge" or punishment fantasies reveal an "e-lynch mob mentality" and a "dire need for a socialpsychological examination of textual hatred" (2005, p. 851). There are also strong indications that antilocution of such intensity "is almost certain to be backed up by discriminatory action" (Allport, 2000, p. 40).

As with European anti-Americanism in which "the US must be identified as the singular threat to democracy" for "stupidity and bloodshed to vanish from Europe" (Revel, 2003), cheerleading is frequently cast as the "monster scapegoat" (ibid) representing all that is wrong with feminised youth culture, mass culture and contemporary sport. This weakens potentially rational and justifiable critiques of cheerleading and the broader social ills it is alleged to represent, as well as encouraging the unfair and unrealistic notion that curtailing or killing off cheerleading would act as a sociocultural cure-all. It also crystallises the predicaments faced by "femininity and feminine bodies" (Urla & Swedland, 2008, p. 232) in an era in which the critical discourse generated by groups traditionally associated with female oppression and the critical discourse generated by many feminists are intersecting in an ideological pincer movement which leaves young women associated with activities such as cheerleading simultaneously hyper-eroticised and sidelined; and largely without allies.

ENDNOTES

- 1 While increasing numbers of men are returning to cheerleading practice (Adams & Bettis, 2003, p. 4.), examining the ramifications of this phenomenon lies beyond the scope of this article.
- 2 Quantitative measures of cheerleading-themed pornography are impossible to obtain, but Google searches do provide some useful insights. In May and June, 2009, I conducted a number of searches using the word "porn" combined with the words "cheerleader", "cheerleaders" and/or "cheerleading" which yielded an average of 5 million results. This compared to a search for "porn" alone which yielded an average of 220 million results. While sportswomen of all persuasions are frequently "trivialized, infantilized and sexualized" (O'Reilly & Cahn, 2007, p. 266), my research suggests that cheerleading appears in hard-core heterosexual pornography far more frequently than other female sporting endeavours. This is supported by the work of Australian media academics Alan McKee, Katherine Albury and Catharine Lumby whose list of 50 bestselling X-rated videos and DVDs in Australia in 2003 includes two cheerleading-related titles (2008, p. 50). None of the other 48 films in this list involve women's sport (McKee, 2009, pers. comm. 4 June).
- 3 Examples include lists addressing subjects such as superlative male cheerleaders ("Top

- 5: Famous former male cheerleaders", 2009), on-screen cheerleaders ("The 10 Hottest On-Screen Cheerleaders", 2009) and cheerleading scandals (G, 2008).
- 4 See: G, 2008; Marquis, 2009; et al.
- 5 In this context I am using "queer" not in the contemporary politicised sense but, as Marx does, to refer to something that is odd.⁶
- 6 This is the term Baudrillard uses in relation to fetish in *For a critique of the political economy of the sign* (1981, p. 90).
- 7 See also: "Cheerleader fatally stabbed by boyfriend", 2007; "Couple accused of killing cheerleader", 2008; "Cheerleader Murder Lands In Court 2 Years Later", 2008; et al.
- 8 An example is "IPL-2: Cheerleaders to add glamour quotient" (Ghose, 2009). It is also worth noting the argument of British journalist Rachel Johnson who writes that the "beauty quotient" of female journalistic subjects is one of the informal rules governing whether and how women appear in news photographs in UK news culture (2001).
- 9 John Hartley and Ellie Rennie argue that this phenomenon stems from the Reformation and "is still manifest in the modern dedication to truth in its written form" (2004, p. 459).
- 10 Antilocution – often used interchangeably with "hate speech" – refers to verbal rejection and is the first stage in a five-step intensity scale measuring the manifestation of prejudice devised by Gordon Allport in the 1950s (2000, p. 39).
- 11 See: O'Connor, 2004; Markovits, 2007; Ceaser, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Revel, 2003; et al.
- 12 O'Connor's quote is in reference to anti-Americanism.
- 13 In this context I am separating cheerleading-directed vitriol such as Beckerman's from critiques in which the claims are more modest and supported by evidence (such as a Time magazine argument that cheerleading is dangerous because it is under-regulated [Kingsbury, 2008]).
- 14 "Economic anthropologist" James G. Carrier, who defines fungible as "capable of replacing or being replaced by another item meeting the requisite definition", notes that both objects and people can acquire this status in commodity relationships (1995, p. 28-29).
- 15 American communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser uses this phrase in relation to the Miss America beauty pageant, although her focus extends to race and nationalism in addition to gender (1999, p. 30).
- 16 This is poststructuralist feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky's definition of sexual objectification (1990, p. 26).
- 17 See the work of American psychologists Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts on the mental health risks linked to the individual self-objectification which often follows cultural practices of social objectification (1997).
- 18 UK sociologist John Thompson notes that, "in a world where symbolic capital is a scarce and valuable resource, reputation really does matter" and can "spread beyond the lives of the individuals concerned, weakening or even undermining the institutions or policies with which they are or have been linked" (1997, p. 57).
- 19 My research supports the findings of US women's sports researchers Jean O' Reilly and

Susan K. Cahn who argue that an “absence of information and accurate representation can influence athletic experience” (2007, p. 264). In relation to women’s boxing, they note that the media often treats: “women’s events as a spectacle, freak show, or sidelight to the main event rather than a legitimate activity. When matches are sold to the public as spectacle rather than as evenly matched competitions, boxers do not always receive adequate preparation... The media, then, not only report the news but shape the culture of sport, influencing the news they then report” (ibid).

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