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"Just Because I Dance Like a Ho I'm Not a Ho": Cheerleading at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender

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Feminist sociologists of sport have critiqued cheerleading for perpetuating gendered divisions of labor and dismissing women's athleticism. However, no research has centered the experiences of black college cheerleaders or cheerleaders with formal feminist education. Through ethnography and interviews with cheerleaders who attend a historically black college (HBCU) for women, this research reveals how race, class, gender, and ideological perspective mutually inform the HBCU cheerleading style and how cheerleaders interpret their own performances. Squad members deploy womanist language, adopt a sexual politics of respectability off the court, and emphasize the cultural constraint of choreography to negotiate a perceived contradiction between being upwardly mobile black college women and participating in sexualized extracurricular athletics. This intersectional analysis makes visible limits to the liberal feminist ideal of individual empowerment for women in sport and the importance of institutional context in race and gender theory.

Les sociologues du sport féministes ont critiqué le cheerleading car il perpétuait des divisions sexistes du travail et dénigrait le talent athlétique des femmes. Cependant, aucune recherche n'a porté sur les expériences de meneuses de claque au niveau universitaire qui sont noires ou des meneuses de claque qui ont une éducation féministe formelle. Grâce à une étude ethnographique et à des entrevues avec des meneuses de claque qui sont inscrites dans une université pour femmes historiquement noire (HBCU), cette étude révèle comme la race, la classe sociale, le genre, et la perspective idéologique façonnent mutuellement le style de cheerleading de HBCU et comment les meneuses de claque interprètent leurs propres performances. Les membres de l'équipe utilisent un langage womaniste, adoptent une politique sexuelle de respectabilité en dehors du cheerleading, et mettent l'accent sur la contrainte culturelle de la chorégraphie pour négocier la contradiction perçue entre être des femmes étudiantes noires qui veulent monter dans la hiérarchie et participer à des activités sportives extracurriculaires sexualisées. Cette analyse intersectionnelle rend visibles les limites de l'idéal libéral féministe de l'émancipation individuelle des femmes en sport et l'importance du contexte institutionnel dans la théorie de la race et du genre

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Introduction: Cheerleading in Place

Still dark outside at 6:15am on a crisp October morning, eighteen students from Spelman, a Historically Black women's college, gathered on the track beside the Morehouse College football field. Panting and sweating after running the usual three-mile warm-up around the West End neighborhood of Atlanta, GA, the Morehouse cheerleaders were just beginning practice. An iPod blasts rapper Mike Jones' (2007) "Drop & Gimme Fifty" on a portable speaker set, cutting through the silence of the still-sleeping campus. The captain of the squad was especially stern and serious this morning because the annual homecoming game was only a few weeks away. This would be largest audience the Morehouse cheerleading squad would perform for yet, and the captain wanted to impress the crowd. In preparation for inevitable scrutiny from alumnae cheerleaders who would be joining the current team on the field that day, the group reviewed each sideline routine individually and motion-by-motion. It was imperative that the new members to the team had learned each dance correctly. Taking her turn, one first year cheerleader stepped in front of her teammates to perform. She was stopped a few seconds into the routine, squatting with her legs spread and her hands on her knees by a senior member of the team who barked, "this is *not* ADW. Get low!"

Spelman's ADW course, short for African Diaspora and the World, is jokingly nicknamed "Anti-Dude Workshop" by neighboring students at Morehouse College, a Historically Black College (HBCU) for men, because of its emphasis on black women's historic and contemporary oppression by race, class, and gender. All students at Spelman College receive instruction about gender hierarchies though this mandatory, yearlong course for first-year students. Feminism, as taught in ADW, includes work by thinkers such as Ruth Hubbard (1988), Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Johnetta B. Cole (2004), the Combahee River Collective (1977), and Patricia Hill Collins (2004). Given ADW's focus on the African Diaspora, the curriculum introduces womanism to discuss the limits to white-centered feminism before the 1960s and to focus on women of color's historical experiences. For example, first-year Spelman students learn about Sarah Bartmann, the "Hottentot Venus," and how her backside was exhibited in "freak shows" throughout Europe to discuss women's racialized sexual exploitation throughout history, and the hypersexual *jezebel* stereotype (Thomson, 1997).

While the ADW course does not explicitly offer strategies to students about how to navigate these pernicious representations of black women, some black professionals in the United States have adopted values of sexual purity and monogamy to convince more socially powerful whites to shift their focus from race to culture to explain socioeconomic differences (Gaines, 1996). For example, elite black women in the United States have a long history of investment in a politics of respectability that adheres to hegemonic gender roles in an effort to resist stereotypes that black women are sexually and morally deviant. The progressive Black Women's Club Movement in the early 20th century is the epitome of this pursuit (Gaines 1996; Higginbotham 1993). Exaggerated sexuality became associated with black working-class culture, against which middle-class respectability became defined. For black women, sexual piety has been a means to accomplishing both racial uplift and class mobility. While the discourse of respectability has been a somewhat successful

strategy toward economic inclusion for some women, it also enforces and reproduces restrictive notions of femininity on black women who are burdened with the responsibility to represent the race (Mitchell, 2004; Higginbotham, 1993). Given the particular significance of sexuality for black women, Spelman students' status as aspiring black professionals in a society that marginalizes them by race and gender, and their exposure to feminist theorizing, I ask: What role does a sexual politics of respectability have in the 21st century HBCU athletic context? Do Morehouse cheerleaders see their participation in sexualized extracurricular sport as a contradiction to what they learn about the legacy of black women's marginalization in society at Spelman? In what ways are their performances potentially feminist? In what follows, I analyze twelve months of participant observation on the Morehouse cheerleading squad and six interviews with Morehouse cheerleaders to revise previous arguments about gender and cheerleading, which minimally interrogate race or class and center predominantly white cheerleading teams.

Race, Class, Gender, and Cheerleading

While cheerleading was characteristically feminized, erotized, and devalued in the early twentieth century (Hanson, 1995), post Title- IX, cheerleading has evolved to become more competitive and athletic (Adams & Bettis, 2003a, 2003b), blurring a formerly clear distinction between cheering and sport. Most twenty-first century cheerleaders are expected to be flexible jumpers, strong stunters, and agile tumblers who cheer alongside and apart from men's athletics. Even though some scholars believe that cheerleading's athletic demands challenge ideas that women should be passive onlookers (Adams & Bettis, 2003a, 2003b; Hanson, 1995; Eder and Parker, 1987), others assert that cheerleaders apologize for their athletic deviations from femininity through erotic appeals to the heterosexual male gaze (Grindstaff & West, 2006). Feminist sociologists who study cheerleading have critiqued the sport for perpetuating gendered divisions of labor and exemplifying patriarchy (Hanson, 1995; Davis, 1990). Scholars seem to agree that "cheerleaders, for all their athleticism, toughness, and risk-taking do not disrupt twenty-first century, taken-for-granted notions of normative femininity and masculinity" (Adams & Bettis 2003a); cheerleading's supportive function on the sidelines of basketball courts and football fields while men athletes compete is used as evidence for this claim.

Although feminist conversation about cheerleading has been useful in critiquing embodied gender hierarchies, this literature understudies other dimensions of cheerleaders' identities, such as race, culture and ideological perspective. Not only do black women and white women tend to have qualitatively different relationships to power and resources in the United States, but also HBCU cheerleaders and white cheerleaders operate within different cultural contexts. Accordingly, studying black college cheerleaders can illuminate the situational and performative nature of gender. For one, many black cheerleading teams use a different dance aesthetic than predominantly white teams. African American cheerleaders in racially segregated environments in the 1950s and 1960s employed a particular style of performance inspired by the expressive nature of black popular music and the Baptist church (Adams & Bettis, 2003b). After desegregation following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, cheerleading became a site where black and white performance

norms collided, which may have contributed to the underrepresentation and exclusion of women of color from the sport (Adams & Bettis, 2003b). Yet, a culturally specific aesthetic has been able to thrive at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). In contrast to predominantly white cheerleading squads who typically employ robotic and militaristic movements, HBCU cheerleaders use a more sexualized and dance-like performance style informed by hip-hop culture. Performers "pop" their backs, "get low", and accentuate their hips as shown in the popular movies *Drumline* (Stone, 2002) and *Stomp the Yard* (White, 2007).

Unlike white middle-class cheerleaders about which most cheerleading literature has theorized, black women occupy marginalized spaces in both race and gender hierarchies. Even though both black and white cheerleading performances are often sexualized, sexuality has a particular significance for black women because of persistent racist and hypersexualized notions of blackness. As Patricia Hill Collins (2005) explains, reclaiming, repurposing, and redefining sexuality has unique potential for black women:

> In the context of a new racism, men and women who rescue and redefine sexuality as a source of power rooted in spirituality, expressiveness, and love can craft new understandings of Black masculinity and Black femininity needed for a progressive Black sexual politics. When reclaimed by individuals and groups, redefined ideas about sexuality and sexual practices can operate as sources of joy, pleasure, and empowerment that simultaneously affirm and transcend individual sexual pleasure for social good. (P. 51)

Hip-hop feminism strives to do just by reclaiming feminism for people of color and repurposing hip-hop for women's self-expression. Centering the lives of "sistas of the post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-soul, hip hop generation" (Morgan, 1999: 57), hip-hop feminism combines black feminist consciousness with hip-hop's aesthetic and politics. Hip-hop grew out of and responds to the racial, political and economic oppression of working-class and poor black people, thus hip-hop feminism is concerned with the ways that deindustrialization, rollbacks to affirmative action and social programs, and increasing black urban poverty have affected those coming of age since the conservative backlash of the 1980s and 1990s (Durham, 2007). Despite the incontestable misogyny in much of hip-hop, hip-hop feminists recognize that women are both consumers and producers of hip-hop, and embrace the complexity and contradictions in black women's lived experiences (Peoples, 2008; Morgan, 1999). Further, Keyes (2000) points out that women have been involved in hip-hop throughout its history, and that women in hip-hop create a space to redefine themselves, become empowered, and make their own decisions (p. 265). With an emphasis on creative expression alongside and beyond academic projects, hip-hop feminists celebrate women's sexual subjectivity and embrace a prosex stance against the pressures of respectability politics (Durham, Cooper & Morris, 2012).

For example, in her study on black women hip hop artists, Rana Emerson (2002) discusses how some black women in hip-hop have reclaimed and revised their sexuality through their music videos. Even while conforming to stereotypical hypersexual imagery, women hip-hop artists tend to also display their strength,

toughness, and independence to create multifaceted displays of black womanhood. In this way, women in hip-hop assert subjectivity and avoid becoming victims of patriarchy by relying on external validation from men (Emerson, 2002). Likewise, cheerleaders balance hegemonic feminine displays through stunting, gymnastics, and jumping, all of which require athletic skill and training. Thus, Morehouse cheerleaders' use of hip-hop styles and music, despite their sexualized nature, might be a form of self-valuation and not solely intended to please the heterosexual male viewer.

Yet, scholars largely critique cheerleading from an outsider perspective, neglecting to inquire about cheerleaders' own ideological perspectives and how they might inform their experiences. For example, Davis (1990) uses Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "male gaze" to discuss the audience's assumed heterosexual masculine subjectivity, which objectifies women cheerleaders and leaves them passively subordinated. While this research is helpful in understanding relationships between audiences and women performers, it suggests that women are widely uncritical of and do not contribute to the production of eroticized performances that they participate in. In actuality, many contemporary feminists have reclaimed activities that feminists in the past have deemed exploitative and/or objectifying, from embracing traditionally domestic work through crafting to regaining sexual pleasure through feminist pornography. Feminists, postfeminists, LGBT groups and senior citizens alike have even repurposed cheerleading as a protest strategy, simultaneously drawing pleasure from and critiquing the sport's deep cultural symbolism (Reger, 2011; Adams & Bettis, 2003).

Methodology

Morehouse College and Spelman College are the only two neighboring HBCU single-sex institutions for higher education, making them informative environments within which to study the relationships between race, gender and sport. Nestled in the West End neighborhood of Atlanta, GA, the schools have a rich history of civil rights activism and racial uplift pursuits. In the 1940s, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. attended Morehouse College and was politicized and mentored by Morehouse's then president Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays (Mays, 2003). Students at both colleges were active in the Civil Rights Movement through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), student groups, and local churches as recounted by Harry G. Lefever in *Undaunted by the Fight* (2005), a book dedicated to the history of Spelman students' activism in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, Spelman is a center for feminist activism and research and was the first HBCU to offer a Comparative Women's Studies major. In 2004, Spelman received wide publicity for its student-led protest against rapper Nelly's sexist depictions of women in his "Tip Drill" music video (Terrero, 2003). The Toni Cade Bambara Scholar Activism Conference and the Women of Color Conferences that it hosts every year evidence Spelman's commitment to feminist activism and theorizing. Even though Morehouse and Spelman students take a majority of their classes on

their home campuses, students frequently cross the Spelman gates to participate in community service organizations, sorority and fraternity events, honors societies, governing bodies, and performance groups. The Morehouse cheerleading team is just one form of collaboration between Morehouse and Spelman students.

I spent a total of twelve months as a participant observer on the Morehouse College cheerleading squad during the 2009–2010 athletic season. Although I did not return to the Morehouse cheerleading squad after this season ended, I was asked to help the team prepare for their annual competition and continued to take notes at associated practices and events in 2011 and 2012. I tried out for the Morehouse cheerleading team in May 2009, participating in the same audition process as the rest of my teammates. I collected ethnographic data at games, practices, social events, competitions and team meetings. Through the first several months, I was forced to retain a degree of outsider status to the Morehouse cheerleading team because my membership was not guaranteed until after I passed a series of tests, try-outs, and bonding experiences that concluded at the end of the basketball season in the spring of 2010. Further, a strong hierarchy based on seniority, or the number of full seasons a cheerleader has completed, characterizes the group. Only returning cheerleaders are included in decision-making processes and teaching new cheerleaders routines. As a result, returning cheerleaders are the most influential in retaining the entertainment style of the squad. Since I was new to the team when I was collecting data, my participation minimally affected the culture of the group.

I supplemented my ethnographic data with collaborative semistructured interviews with six Morehouse cheerleaders, who all identified as Black or African-American. Interview questions addressed respondents' experiences as Spelman students, their participation on the Morehouse cheerleading squad, and their views on feminism, broadly speaking. I did not use any modifiers to signify specific strands of feminist thought in my interview questions, but instead allowed cheerleaders to explain to me their own interpretations of feminism. I inquired about how cheerleaders perceive the team's performance aesthetic, the values of the squad, and their peers' responses to their performances as cheerleaders.

Even though all members of the team were invited to participate in the study, I recruited participants by contacting them individually to avoid making the rest of the squad aware of each individual cheerleader's choice to participate or not to participate in an interview. Each interview took place on Spelman's campus, either in the student center, library, or dormitory study rooms. Given that these interviews took place at different stages during my three-years as a participant observer, interviewees are not from any single team roster, but from a relatively large pool of Morehouse cheerleading participants. This helps to defend against identifying individual cheerleaders. All cheerleaders will be referred to using pseudonyms.

My participation on the team certainly affected my rapport in the interviews. Not only had I spent a great amount of time with my interviewees as a teammate in the cheerleading capacity, but we also went to school together and moved in overlapping social circles. They most likely felt comfortable opening up to me and sharing their feelings because we developed a sense of trust over time. I related personally to this topic as a member of the team, so I employed the reflexive dyadic interviewing method (Berg, 2001), which allows for both researcher and participant to disclose personal experiences, reflections, and feelings. This type of interview

helps alleviate perceived power dynamics between participant and researcher. I wanted to create an intimate interview experience where my participants felt comfortable to critique a group that we were both members of, especially since I was asking for information that concerned their sexuality and reputations.

I began cheerleading in middle school at age twelve, so by the time I began this project I had over eight years of experience in cheerleading communities. However, there were never more than two other women of color on my middle or high school cheerleading teams. My previous teams employed the mainstream spirited and sharp cheerleading performance style and our audience consisted mostly of parents of athletes. In contrast, Morehouse cheerleaders' audience is predominantly made up of men students at Morehouse College. Because I transitioned from a majority white to an all-Black HBCU cheerleading team, I was especially sensitive to changes in team values, performance styles, and expectations.

I employ what Leslie McCall (2005) calls the intracategorical approach to intersectional research, which examines within-group experiences to challenge feminism that centers the experiences of white, middle-class women. The intersectionality paradigm links patriarchy to other forms of domination like racism, classism, and heterosexism. As Adia Harvey Wingfield (2009) points out, race is inherently implicated in gendered concepts, so intersectional research makes explicit how race, class and gender intersect to shape experience. An intersectional approach to gender and sport research exposes the relationships between race, class, gender, ideology and the body as they manifest themselves in the everyday lives of athletes. In contrast, most research that attends to race in sport is intercategorical, comparing experiences across racial categories in the same context. Few scholars consider black athletes' experiences in majority-black contexts where culturally distinct processes are at work. Furthermore, while the intersectionality and sport literature about black male athletes is growing (for examples, see Montez de Oca, 2012; Carrington, 2010; Hartmann, 2001), few scholars study black women in sport and even fewer include a class analysis (Bruening, 2005; Birrell, 1990). Analyzing cheerleading from an intracategorical intersectional perspective demonstrates how cheerleading can elicit both pleasure and shame for black college women in race and class-specific ways. In writing about black cheerleaders, I do not mean to generalize or homogenize those who share these athletic, racial, and gender identities. Instead, my goal is to reveal how race, class and gender mutually inform HBCU cheerleaders' performance styles and interpretations of their own work.

Findings

The results of this study indicate that the gendered division of labor in sport is not experienced as marginalizing. For these black women cheerleaders, intersections of race, class and gender facilitate a different reception of the sidelining of their cheerleading work. At the same time, Morehouse cheerleaders do not describe cheerleading performances entirely positively. In interviews, cheerleaders were critical of the style that the team employs, using words with negative connotations like "skankily", "ho", "degrading", "trashy", and "vulgar." Further, cheerleaders report a contradiction between their work as cheerleaders and what they learn at Spelman. Tiara explained, "[a Spelman woman] carries herself well ... you know,

not out there being crazy or wild." Yet, she describes Morehouse cheerleading performances this way:

> Oh wow. I feel like they're not looked at as being a positive thing. Because some of the dances are a little um...vulgar I would say. Or a little...they could be crazy a little bit. And the music style. Okay, I'm just going to speak towards last year's performances. Last year's performance to me was pretty negative as far as our song choices and maybe our dance moves that we chose.

Despite fearing for their reputations because of their sexually provocative cheerleading routines, every cheerleader I interviewed was happy about her decision to join the team, proud of the squad's technique, and committed to cheering.

Interviews and participant observation reveal that cheerleaders deploy womanist language and adhere to a sexual politics of respectability to rationalize and negotiate their participation on the team given a perceived contradiction between their sidelined, eroticized performances for Morehouse men and their status as upwardly-mobile Spelman students. Cheerleaders draw upon shared cultural knowledge to develop these tactics, which in turn hold them responsible to norms at Spelman College and Morehouse athletic events—two otherwise disparate contexts. Even despite compartmentalizing their behavior by place and time, cheerleaders remain ambivalent about their use of a sexualized, hip-hop aesthetic, to which they are held accountable through competition with other teams.

Deploying Womanist Language

Even though all of the members of the Morehouse cheerleading team had completed or were currently enrolled in the mandatory African Diaspora and the World course with its explicitly feminist focus, none of the cheerleaders I interviewed self-identified as a feminist. Serena, a new member to the team, states, "I think [ADW] kind of makes you open your eyes. After you've had ADW, you do kind of think of things a little differently. Not to say that you become a feminist or like... men are evil and women rule the world type thing but you just start to think." As a group, those interviewed are critical of radical feminist ideas, saying that they highly value relationships and partnerships between men and women. Danielle feels that "sometimes feminism like degrades the power of men and I don't think that it should in a sense." Similarly, Tiara thinks that feminism as presented by Spelman is "more on women power and lesbian power and that's kind of irritating to me." As Katie says, "Like, being at this school, they're like 'be a free thinking woman! DO this! You can do everything by yourself!' I'm like no, actually eventually I'm going to need a man in my life." Ashley articulates this valuation of relationships between men and women as "womanist" as opposed to a feminist:

> I do not consider myself a feminist. I feel like I'm more of a womanist. I do not consider myself a feminist because I feel like they stress the fact that feminists do not need the male role to work alongside them. I feel like a woman and male work in a partnership in order to succeed. I kind of don't like how the feminist denounces the male.

Alice Walker (1983), a former Spelman student, coins womanism as:

> A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (P. xi)

The womanist movement emerged in response to the exclusion of black women's experiences from white-centered feminism in the mid-20th century. Like much of feminist theory, womanism has a range of definitions and interpretations. However, common across much of womanist and black feminist thought is an emphasis on including black men in efforts to resist race and class oppression while advocating for gender equality within all of society (Collins, 2000; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Davis, 1981). These cheerleaders, like many women of color, distance themselves from forms of feminism that advance separatism to subvert patriarchy. Women of color feminists have long critiqued liberal feminism's conceptualization of a public/private divide, since black and working class women have been discriminated against alongside men in their communities and labored outside the home (Birrell, 1990; Davis, 1981). Liberal feminism's call for inclusion in public spaces often does not speak to women of color's experiences or to their investment in unified community uplift. Both black women and black men face racial oppression and have a stake in each other's survival.

A liberal feminist agenda in sports seeks to increase women's athletic participation and is critical of the gendered division of labor in sport. For example, Davis (1990) asserts women's emotional support of men's physical labor though cheerleading reflects hegemonic gender roles to women's disadvantage. However, womanist perspective celebrates women's strength, culture, and emotional expression. A womanist cheerleader might receive pleasure working expressively on the sidelines to cocreate the sporting event. After all, cheerleading *is* a form of women's culture today. Accordingly, a womanist cheerleader may not feel the need to be on the court playing basketball to feel empowered as an athlete. Because sport is one of the few contexts where black men are celebrated, it is also a space where black women can celebrate Black endurance. Majors (1990) notes, "due to structural limitations, a black man may be impotent in the intellectual, political, and corporate world, but he can nevertheless display a potent personal style...in athletic competition, with a verve that borders on the spectacular" (p. 111). Tiara references this idea, stating, "I believe that a woman should be able to take care of herself and not have to rely on a man, but I feel like at the same token a you should be able to also back that down to let your man feel like a man." Tiara's statement is reminiscent of "race motherhood" in the early 20th century (Chapman 2012), or black women's devotion to advancing the race through work in the private sphere and supporting black men's aspirations. Through Morehouse cheerleading, black women partner with and support black men, demonstrating strength and emotion within and despite gender-segregated roles. While cheerleaders critiqued lesbian feminism, white-centered liberal feminism, and the ADW class in interviews and on the field, they used the womanist language they acquired from the course as a

cultural resource to develop a navigational strategy that validated their cheerleading work as an act of community.

Adhering to a Sexual Politics of Respectability

Patricia Hill Collins (2005) suggests black girls can tap into hip-hop's message of "bootylicious" women empowerment if they are informed about Sarah Bartmann's legacy. Does an understanding of black women's historical objectification allow Morehouse cheerleaders to use their sexualized performances to define themselves on their own terms? Their relegation of public sexual display to the athletic realm suggests otherwise. While performing, cheerleaders' identities as Spelman students moderate the way that audiences respond to the team, shielding them from reputational harm. Ashley further explains:

> They understand that as Spelman women, you can be both. You can be able to please the guys standing in front chanting you on with your jumps as well as show up and be respected as a woman. So, some women just can't do both, and because of who we are we can do both. Some people don't have that gift. Yes we can show you that we can dance and we look good, but we are still classy.

In her comment, Ashley ties classiness and respectability to the meaning of Spelman womanhood. The College's reputation as the premier HBCU for women separates Morehouse cheerleaders from common pernicious stereotypes about black working-class women as welfare queens, at-risk youth, sapphires, and jezebels. As "black professional women-in-training," the provocative nature of their cheerleading routines is almost always understood as performance and not an indicator of promiscuity.

Even still, cheerleaders compartmentalize any public sexual displays to the athletic context and adhere to a sexual politics of respectability off of the court. In fact, this is a point of discussion on the agenda at the annual Morehouse cheerleading try-out informational meeting. Heather references this admonition, reflecting, "I remember a comment that the captain made in the beginning of the year like now that you're a Morehouse cheerleader people will notice you ... So now that we're in the public eye we have to be careful with our actions ... Don't be seen with a bunch of different guys at different times on different days." Ashley expresses the same idea, stating, "I think we place a lot of importance on, this may seem kind of shallow, but our relationship with boys, particularly boys on the team that we cheer for because cheerleaders always have the stigma of messing with the quarterback and the star player on the basketball team. We also have to remember that we are people's role models." In a similar effort to manage the team's reputation, the Morehouse cheerleading captain instituted a compulsory mentoring program for high school students to show the community that Morehouse cheerleaders are civically engaged and more than just women on display. The Morehouse cheerleading rules and regulations wield sexual piety and reputation management as racial uplift strategies. This simultaneous heteronormative performance for the male gaze and concern with marriage-eligible respectability maintains heteropatriarchal gender norms.

Cheerleaders self-police their relationships with men for fear of being considered promiscuous. For example, Serena states, "I know that just because I dance like a ho, I'm not a ho. Just because I do something does not make me something. Unless I act upon it, which I don't." Similarly, Ashley points to how she behaves on her own time as evidence of her values:

> I feel like my own image is so clean that I can't get a reputation for it even though I know I can. It just bounces off me because I know what I do when I go home. I don't do anything! Even though it may seem as if through our dances we may hold ourselves to a different standard...we still have the same standard."

When cheerleaders are in uniform wearing the Morehouse College name and colors, they are identified with a history of black upward mobility. If they were to exhibit sexuality without the uniform on, cheerleaders would be in jeopardy of reifying or being identified with stereotypes about black women as deviant from white middle-class values. To minimize this risk, cheerleaders fall back on respectability politics off of the court. Ashley clarifies her desire to manage her reputation, stating:

> It's all about image. But in the real world, that's really what it comes down to. If you go in for an interview, someone may have the same credentials but it's all about if you impress that person on an eye-to-eye level–how you came to them. They're going to pick you over the other person. You always have to be at your best appearance.

Her comment recognizes how adherence to white, middle-class culture, not just one's achievements and abilities, influence black women's real chances for professional success. For example, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) found that employers in Boston and Chicago were 50% more likely to contact applicants whose resumes had white-sounding names than those with equal qualifications and black sounding names for jobs. As upwardly mobile black college women who are likely to transition into predominantly white professional environments, Spelman students would put a lot at stake by rejecting the role of culture in class mobility.

Even though a politics of respectability is not explicitly discussed at Spelman, the rules and traditions of the school demonstrate its presence in the College's culture. For example, former Spelman student Alice Walker and alumna Beverly Guy-Sheftall (2010) recall when Spelman mandated that all first and third-year students underwent pelvic examinations to discover pregnancies. Alice Walker asserts that "the purpose of these carefully timed examinations was to police and regulate the sexuality of Spelman students," which ultimately served to produce "virgins and ladies rather than activists and leaders in the tradition of Harriet Tubman" (Walker. 2010, p. XXIX-XXX). Today, Spelman might still be seen as perpetuating hegemonic notions of femininity by mandating that students own a "respectable and conservative" white dress or skirt to be worn for all College ceremonies (Spelman College 2013). In addition, men's presence on campus is heavily monitored, and male visitors to students' dorm rooms are scrutinized by camera surveillance, sign-in sheet, and strictly enforced curfews. In a similar effort to control students' sexuality, Morehouse instituted an "Appropriate Attire Policy" that banned its

students from wearing women's clothing on campus in 2009. Through surveillance and repression of students' sexuality, Spelman and Morehouse embody the motto of the Black Women's Club Movement "Lifting as We Climb" in an effort to socialize students into the white, middle-class culture that many will occupy in their professional and social lives upon graduation.

Morehouse cheerleaders are both coerced by team mandates and individually consent to approximating a sexually "pure" femininity outside of the context of cheerleading, suggesting that a politics of respectability are internalized and at work. Collins (2005) argues, "the antidote to a gender-specific racial oppression that advances controlling images of deviant Black sexuality does not lie in embracing a conservative politics of respectability that mimics the beliefs of those responsible for the sexually repressive culture in the first place" (p. 51). However, the reputational risk is perceived to be too high for Morehouse cheerleaders to advance a more progressive use of the erotic to challenge a restrictive black sexual politics beyond their cheerleading performances. Their behavior is indicative of their attained and/or aspiring middle-class status as college students as well as their identities as minority women.

Ambivalence and Contradictions: Feminism and Hip-Hop Cheerleading

As choreographers of their own routines, Morehouse cheerleaders participate in the production of their own sexualized displays. Some literature on feminism and performance argues that women performers are able to reclaim their sexuality and pleasure through self-determination (Reger, 2011; Adams & Bettis, 2003a, 2003b; Emerson, 2002; Keyes, 2000). As such, Morehouse cheerleaders' self-choreographed performances could potentially critique both Spelman's and dominant hip-hop culture's notions of ideal black womanhood, as many hip-hop feminists have done. However, instead using self-choreography to reclaim their subjectivity, Morehouse cheerleaders adhere to a raced and gendered hip-hop aesthetic about which they feel ambivalent.

During one memorable football game, the rival team's cheerleaders performed an eroticized dance routine that received roaring applause from the audience in the stands. Peering over her shoulder into the crowd, the captain saw that Morehouse's fans were fixated on the other side of the field at the other team's cheerleaders. Responding to our neglect, she called a team huddle and ordered us to get lower, pop harder, and be sexier for our next dance. We were instructed to bend over and tie our shoes facing the other team to reveal our "spankies," the undergarments cheerleaders wear beneath their uniforms. Neither my team nor opposing squad was able to achieve lasting loyalty from the fans, so we went back and forth, dancing and shaking in an effort to win the crowd's approval.

When I asked interviewees to describe the way the team dances, many of them compared the Morehouse cheerleading team to other HBCU performance groups, arguing that a wider aesthetic informs how Morehouse cheerleaders perform. Ashley, a first-year cheerleader, mentions, "I feel like we compete with the dancers of the band. Just 'cause they can do that, we can do it too! It's kind of like an ongoing, *loving* battle of attention-grabbing." Ashley further rationalizes Morehouse cheerleading's performance aesthetic by stating that fraternity step shows at Morehouse

are "much worse" and that the general Spelman population dances suggestively at parties. Serena echoed this sentiment when I asked her about our team's controversial halftime performance the year before: "I guess just being at an HBCU I expected so much worse. Not to say that that wasn't bad, but the videos I've seen of HBCUs or how they're even portrayed in the media—you'd just think that they'd be so much worse." In fact, each interviewee mentioned that black women in the media inspire the way Morehouse cheerleaders perform.

Morehouse cheerleading choreography, like many other HBCU dance routines, draws upon hip-hop as a cultural resource where an eroticization of women performers is a common strategy for entertainment. However, those interviewed express that they are sometimes left feeling conflicted about the style of their routines. For instance, Danielle relays, "there's boys at Morehouse and in pleasing boys you have to do certain things that you're uncomfortable with because of the media." Interestingly, her comment ignores the large and visible gay population at Morehouse, and coincides with broader heteronormative assumptions the colleges also make in their attempts to socialize students into white, middle-class culture. Even still, cheerleaders are constrained by the expectation that they perform toward the heterosexual male-gaze, and are held accountable to a hip-hop style through competition with other HBCU teams and athlete-performers. While it was our captain's decision to employ performance tactics that highlighted our sexuality, and particularly our posteriors, her decision was not made out of the sky. Self-choreography, like all group-based agency, is constrained and enabled by social contexts that are already raced, classed and gendered. The cheerleaders I interviewed rationalized the contradiction between their cheerleading performances and their status as Spelman students by pointing to a diminished agency to cheer any other way and following a sexual politics of respectability on their own time.

While hip-hop feminists have generated performances aimed at self-definition and self-valuation, as students who are striving for upward mobility in an increasingly neoliberal context, adopting a politics of respectability in lieu of hip-hop feminism may feel like a surer survival tactic for these black women. With contemporary shifts toward unrestrained markets, privatization, the decline in social welfare, and a retreat from affirmative action policies in the name of individualism, individuals, like the market itself, are increasingly considered privately responsible for their own success or failure (Duggan, 2003). Coupled with a legacy of pitting Black women's sexuality against the political and economic interests of elite groups through tropes like the "welfare queen," the stakes are especially high for black women applying for jobs in mostly-white companies and admission to predominantly white universities when they graduate. As Durham, Cooper, and Morris (2013) acknowledge in their hip-hop feminist "womanifesto", a greater response and engagement against normative respectability politics by hip-hop feminists is necessary for more women of color to feel secure adopting an prosex stance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Existing feminist literature on cheerleading largely asserts that the activity exemplifies patriarchy at work in sport by sidelining and eroticizing women's athleticism. As women who stand on the sidelines to cheer on men athletes, often employing emphasized femininity to entertain, existing literature suggests that Morehouse

cheerleaders should feel objectified through their participation on the team (Grind-staff and West, 2006; Hanson, 1995). But without exception, they do not resist their physical separation from male athletes and audience members. Even with a working knowledge of feminism, cheerleaders generally enjoy their participation on the team and continue to cheer during and after taking the ADW course. In fact, the Morehouse cheerleaders I interviewed question any feminist perspectives that devalue men. This further highlights the importance of considering athletes' own ideological perspectives in gender and sport research, as cheerleaders' participation in the sport can actually be revealing of their politics.

Furthermore, an intracategorical intersectional approach shows how some black women experience cheerleading differently due to their knowledge of black women's history of race-specific gender exploitation and a culturally particular performance style. Intracategorical intersectional analysis of this all-black cheerleading squad makes visible limits to the white-centered liberal feminist ideal of individual empowerment for women. Unlike many middle-class white women, black women tend to feel a shared stake in racial uplift with black men and have worked alongside them in the midst of economic and social marginalization from slavery to the present. The black cheerleaders in this study deploy womanist language and arguably engage in race motherhood, which references this history. From a womanist perspective, cheerleading can embody collaborative engagement with black men to uplift the race by celebrating black masculinity alongside black women's strength. Cheerleaders' use of womanist language enables them to rationalize their participation in the activity in a way that aligns with their position as students at a Historically Black women's college. Thus, cheerleading does not inherently or uniformly devalue women. The existing literature on cheerleading has focused on predominantly white, middle-class cheerleading squads, obscuring the particular ways in which cheerleaders of color find pleasure in performance, relate to feminism, and experience ambivalence based on their positions within interlocking race, class, and gender hierarchies.

More broadly, this research expands the literature on intersectionality by foregrounding how institutional contexts inform women's choices. This research extends the growing literature on sport and intersectionality beyond a taken-for-granted a white mainstream athletic context. Turning an intersectional lens onto black spaces like Spelman and Morehouse highlights the ways in which interlocking systems of race, class, and gender hierarchies shape both interactions *and* institutions. An intracategorical approach to intersectionality highlights how the provocative style of Morehouse cheerleading choreography, except in very rare instances, is not regarded as sexually deviant if performed in the HBCU athletic context. Instead, a culturally specific performance style determines how HBCU women perform. Protected by class privilege as students at an elite HBCU, cheerleaders face few repercussions for their work *as cheerleaders* and are almost always encouraged by audiences to dance the way they do. By seeking to understand Morehouse cheerleading dynamics in their own institutional context as opposed to in reference to the mainstream performance style that predominantly white teams employ, the salience of culture and class at the interactional-level emerges.

Moreover, by paying attention to the ways in which race, class, and gender hierarchies shape institutional contexts as well as individual behaviors, we can better understand the cultural scripts, symbols, policies, and legacies of resistance

that black women are responding to as they "do" race, class, and gender (West & Fenstermaker 1995). Institutions rank femininities and masculinities through laws, policies, collective representations, and symbols (Musto, 2014; Connell, 2009; Messner, 2000; Lorber, 1994; Thorne, 1993), which in turn shape behavior at the interactional level. The Morehouse cheerleading case supports theory that gender is an interactional and contextual process (West and Zimmerman, 1987):

> ... Marking or displaying gender must be finely fitted to social situations and modified or transformed as the occasion demands. Doing gender consists of managing such occasions so that, whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender- appropriate or, as the case may be, gender *inappropriate,* that is, *accountable.* (p. 135)

Cheerleaders compartmentalize the way they do gender by context; the systems of accountability they navigate are shaped by their shifting intersectional positions as black college women at a Historically Black College for women, at HBCU athletic events, and as aspiring professionals. On one hand, Morehouse cheerleaders are held accountable to a hip-hop style in competition for audience approval with rival HBCU cheerleading teams at Morehouse football and basketball games. In these spaces, eroticized notions of black femininity win out and cheerleaders choreograph within those boundaries. On the other hand, Morehouse cheerleaders fear that their cheerleading performances will damage their reputations off of the court, as they will likely be employed or educated at predominantly white institutions in the future. As upwardly mobile black college women, they seek to gain leverage in a society that marginalizes them by race and gender through strategically adhering to a sexual politics of respectability off of the court, a strategy that is further enforced through institutional policies at Spelman College. That is to say, Morehouse cheerleaders navigate inherently contradictory systems of accountability in "doing" black womanhood across institutional contexts, as they move off the court, onto campus, and into their communities.

The fact that cheerleaders' understandings of gender did not uniformly align with hegemonic cultural beliefs or a single racial uplift strategy further implies that race and gender theory must always take class and context seriously. For example, while an embrace of hip-hop feminism could advance a more progressive celebration of Black women's sexual agency, hip-hop feminist strategies are unlikely to be embraced in institutions whose goals are to teach black women how to navigate predominantly white professional environments where racist and sexist representations of black women put them at an immediate disadvantage. Unfortunately, adhering to a sexual politics of respectability that often reinscribes white, capitalist heteropatriarchy is a much simpler and proven strategy for aspiring middle-class black women. Yet importantly, cheerleaders did not default to enacting chastity in all situations, which implies that intersecting race, class, gender hierarchies can become less (or differently) oppressive depending on the setting.

Future research that broadens intracategorical intersectional analysis beyond black-white comparison will allow us to contemplate more fully about race, culture, gender, and sport. It is important to consider the experiences of cheerleaders in predominantly Latino, Native American, Jewish, Muslim and Asian American communities, for all people live within intersecting racial-ethnic, class, gender,

and sexual hierarchies. Other minority cheerleaders face different stereotypes and that could inform their strategies for navigating assumptions onlookers have about them as cheerleaders and as women. Scholars might extend the scope of this line of research past cheerleaders to audiences and the athletes they cheer for to understand whether a womanist or hip-hop feminist analogy is used by others who cocreate athletic environments. In addition, scholars could examine how black cheerleaders without formal feminist education reflect upon their participation in the sport to explore more fully the relationships between ideology, race, and culture.

Acknowledgments

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