STOP CHEERING FOR *CHEER*: GENDER, CLASS, AND CONSERVATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE ON THE LITTLE SCREEN

by

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Depictions of cheerleading as the essence of normative, American femininity in film have created fecund ground for reality and docuseries productions about the cheer world. Netflix's *Cheer* (2020) has been lauded for overturning archetypal depictions of cherry-pie, white, feminine, middle-class, heterosexual cheerleaders in favor of portraying the individual histories of diverse cast members. This project works to fill in the gap in the glowing reception *Cheer* has generated by analyzing the formal devices deployed by the show to render reductive depictions of women and working-class people. I pull from a variety of theoretical frameworks to deconstruct the show's formal techniques and revivify the nuanced performance of women characters representing their lived experience of oppression.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Literature Review	4
Chapter 1: Framing Sexism	13
Chapter 2: “We Live in Two Different Worlds:” Classism and Sexism in *Cheer*	27
Chapter 3: Disidentifying in the Classroom	45
Conclusion	55

List of Figures

Figure 1. Simianer poses in front of Aldama in the Navarro uniform 23
Figure 2. Close-up shot of a Navarro cheerleader's chest 25
Figure 3: Infantilizing mise-en-scene 29
Figure 4: Benito Skinner jokes about Brumback's teddy bear 29
Figure 6: Backdating establishing shot of masculine stature holding out a football 35
Figure 7: A shot of Navarro cheerleaders practicing the cancan in cowboy boots framed from over Monica Aldama's shoulder 36
Figure 8: Monica Aldama and her children at the Navarro livestock expo 44
Figure 9: Monica Aldama and Chris Aldama in an old photograph 46
Figure 10: Satirical map of the United States 52
Figure 11: James Thomas taking notes while Professor Amanda Morrison speaks 57
Figure 12: Professor Amanda Morrison lecturing in front of an American flag 58

Introduction

Netflix docuseries *Cheer* (2020), directed by Greg Whiteley, became a cultural phenomenon in early 2020, causing an avalanche of think-pieces from *New York Magazine, Vulture, Vogue, The Guardian, The New Yorker,* and *Time Magazine*. *Cheer* memes have become a sensation. One of the stars, La'Darius Marshall, is on *The Cut's* April 2020 cover. Other cast members have been featured on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (NBC 2003-2020). Several cast members had front row seats at a New York Fashion Week show (Wetmore). Wherever they go, they're a sensation. The show follows the intimate lives of five athletes on the best junior college cheerleading team in the US in six nail-biting episodes that climax at the national cheerleading championships in Daytona Beach, Florida.[1] The series has become renowned in part for its supposed breakdown of cultural archetypes about cheerleading and its humanistic portrayal of the athletes. Rather than spotlighting the athletes primarily as dancers or sex objects, these college superstars come from diverse economic, racial, and family backgrounds, and *Cheer* takes pains to uncover their individual histories. At times, it also forefronts sexism in cheerleading and puts to rest any question about the extreme athletic demands of the sport. However, while *Cheer* breaks down some stereotypes about the cheer world, and at certain points does expose sexism in cheerleading, its formal and narrative techniques repeatedly contradict the show's widely applauded progressivism. *Cheer* positions Monica Aldama, the head coach, as a purveyor of toxic beauty standards and the "male gaze" through deceptive confessional sequences that replicate antiquated, patriarchal camera framing—a portrayal that ultimately elides the

[1] Besides an iconic cheerleading location, Daytona Beach is known as a hotspot for college-age spring breakers and for the Daytona 500 NASCAR race.

nuanced critiques she and her team are making about their lived experiences. By reading against the grain of these sequences, it is possible to see the powerful moment shared between Aldama and one of her athletes and deceptive editing that redoubles toxic portrayals of women in the show itself.

Such editing at times displaces widespread sexism in the professional world onto Corsicana, the small town in which *Cheer* is set. The series represents the town as socially and temporally regressive at certain moments in the show, rendering a deeply intolerant depiction of rural, working-class America as a unsophisticated, white, working-class space. In the first episode, *Cheer* uses calculated reaction shots and framing to reduce Professor Amanda Morrison's complex performance of conservative, Red American identity to its stereotyped rudiments, draining her moment on the screen of the disidentificatory mockery she embodies. While *Cheer* ostensibly exposes sexism in cheerleading and attempts to critique conservative culture, its formal narrative techniques obscure the nuanced, intersectional critiques the cast members make about their lived knowledge of oppression and displace systemic misogyny onto powerful women characters and Corsicana. Even as queer people of color are ostensibly centered, *Cheer* redoubles reductive depictions of women and rural working-class people.

Cheer comes from a long line of fiction and non-fiction depictions of cheerleading that capitalize on the Americana drama of an iconic competitive sport undampened by "dumb, boring boys" (Reid)—the wet rag of masculine frigidity with which conventional sports dramas have to contend. (While there are men in *Cheer*, they are anything but archetypes of masculine taciturnity.) Movies such as *Heathers* (Lehmann 1988), *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Babbit 1999), *American Beauty* (Mendes

1999), *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama 2009), *Sugar and Spice* (McDougall 2001), *John Tucker Must Die* (Thomas 2006), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Kuzui 1992), and the entire *Bring It On* franchise (Reed, Rash, Woodruff, Adetuyi, Santostefano 2000-2017) have turned cheerleading into a genre in-and-of-itself. Each of these films uses the archetype of cheerleaders as skinny, primarily white, middle class, straight embodiments of femininity to tell their stories. Whether indulging more simplistic depictions of conventionally attractive, power-hungry, cheerleading women or challenging cheerleading stereotypes to render more complex women characters by eschewing heterosexual normativity and traditional romantic and hero narratives—these films pivot around cheerleading tropes. Such emblematic cinematic representations of apple-pie-femininity have created fecund ground for reality programs such as *Cheer Squad* (Freeform 2016), *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders* (CMT 2006-2019), *Cheerleader Nation* (Lifetime 2006), *Cheer Perfection* (TLC 2012-2013), *Cheerleader Generation* (Lifetime 2019), and *Cheer* (Netflix 2020). The release of three new cheerleading shows in one year—*Cheer, Dare Me*, and *Cheerleader Generation*—caused 2020 to be dubbed "the era of the cheer show" (Reid).

Cheer has risen to the top of these on-screen productions in the popular imagination in part because of its breakdown of the stereotypes that first solidified the genre—feminized whiteness, straightness, and the middle-class American dream. The show's stars are working-class white women who have struggled with abuse or mental illness and black, queer men. However, *Cheer*'s "fly-on-the-wall realness"(Chaney, "Welcome to TV's Cheer-Ocracy") is more complicated, and ethically compromised, than it first appears. The show's infidelity to the events it depicts prompted Aldama to

speak out about *Cheer*'s skewed depiction of injuries at Navarro (Wright), and one of the athletes, Jerry Harris, to defend Morrison by suggesting his own reaction shots in a classroom scene were edited manipulatively (Chaney, "Cheer's Jerry Harris"). The show's depiction of one of the lead's parents caused Greg Whitely to reveal that he felt he owed them an apology because of the lack of nuance in their representation, suggesting "It's a very cheap way to move a story forward" (Sandberg). Each of these public corrections and critiques demonstrate the show's supposedly stereotype-busting portrayal of cheerleading is complicated by reductionist, at times deceptive editing that often diminishes the people it represents to narrative props. And while it may be argued that many TV shows and movies simplify character depictions to propel the plot, *Cheer's* reductive depictions contradict the ostensible challenge to stereotypes the show is making, robbing women and working people of a complex portrayal even while ostensibly centering the perspective of marginalized cheerleaders.

Literature Review

This project attempts to fill a gap in the adoring literature *Cheer* has generated by deploying a range of theoretical frameworks to amplify the devices *Cheer* uses to undermine women cast members and rural, working-class spaces. To analyze the manipulative editing and framing the show deploys, I found myself continually returning to Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Leigh Ann Duck's *The Nation's Region*—two texts describing historically located cultural phenomena—to anchor my analysis of this highly contemporary docuseries. Jose Muñoz's theory of disidentification, outlined in *Disidentifications*, enabled me to

unpack the complex performance of identity rendered by Morrison. I have also referenced Bill Nichols and Lori Ouellette for their graceful analyses of documentary theory and reality TV.

Leigh Anne Duck's *The Nation's Region* analyses how modernist writers investigated the regionalization of racial segregation to the South during the 1930s, a cultural displacement of regressive social practices onto the region that enabled the larger, liberalizing nation to disavow apartheid as a specifically located anomaly. The trope suggested that social and cultural "traditionalism" situated the South in a temporally distinct period—progressing towards the liberal values sweeping the nation at a laggardly pace. Duck's argument is historically specific, but *Cheer* resurrects the trope of the backwards South in a move that displaces the systemic forces of inequality onto traditional rural cultural practices and values. The series uses formal narrative techniques—including deceptive confessional sequences, reductive "framing," and manipulative reaction shots—to cordon off the sexism exposed throughout the docuseries to rural Texas in ways that disproportionately implicate the powerful women the show follows.

Laura Mulvey's seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," uses psychoanalytic theory to discuss the sociological and psychological underpinnings of classic Hollywood cinema, suggesting, ultimately, that the apparatus of cinema must be exposed to destroy the patriarchal leaning of traditional narrative film. According to the theory outlined in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the structuring principle of Western society is phallocentrism. Mulvey uses the theory of fear of castration in this article to demonstrate how white cisgender women have at times been reduced to

symbolic, passive objects on screen. By using the fear of castration as her theoretical framework, Mulvey mobilizes a reductive, trans-exclusionary concept to undergird her analysis, grounding it in a universalizing cisgender and white subjectivity.[2] Muvley's analysis is thus useful to plot binary viewing relations facilitated by filmmakers and TV producers through technical framing and editing, but the restricted, biological theory she uses to underpin these dynamics does not take into account intersectional and trans spectator experience. I will use the term "cisgender" to illustrate the biological fallacies in her theory, but it is important to note that she did not make distinctions of this kind in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and that the viewing relations she outlines are not limited—as her language is limited—by normative constructions of gender. The theory suggests that early in childhood, cisgender boy children notice that their cisgender mother is penisless, which leads them to fear that they might lose their penis. To disavow that fear, cisgender, heterosexual boy children develop a fetishistic conceptualization of cisgender women—fearing what she signifies and desiring her. According to Mulvey, cisgender women, differentiated by their lack of penis, symbolize the other, the bearer of meaning on whom cisgender man may impose his fantasies and desires. In cinema, Mulvey theorizes white masculine spectators are granted scopophilic, voyeuristic pleasure in looking at the white woman actor—who is presented to them with optimal desirability or "to-be-looked-at-ness" according to patriarchal mores. They are also granted pleasure seeing their "male" counterpart on screen controlling the narrative and determining the cisgender woman character's

[2] However, as Jack Halberstam points out in "The Transgender Look," Mulvey was not "creating the gendered dynamics of looking, she was simply describing the remarkably restricted ways in which spectators can access pleasure" (Halberstam). Halberstam argues that she is describing how the narratives themselves do not conceive the ways "thoroughly scrambled gender relations might impact the dynamics of looking" (Halberstam).

significance. However, Mulvey suggests the woman's power—both in her desirability and the threat of castration she signifies—must be reduced on the screen or it becomes too overwhelming and threatens to break narrative plausibility. Thus, her depiction must either be broken up into close-up shots that merely focus on her attractiveness, or it must be extended into "moments of erotic contemplation." According to her theory, the voyeuristic pleasure the man spectator receives is heightened by the fact that the narrative, driven by the actions of the "male" protagonist, plays out in a hermetically sealed world which doesn't acknowledge the apparatus of cinema. To destroy the voyeuristic pleasure and passive, symbolic role women are reduced to in traditional Hollywood film, Mulvey suggests the apparatus of cinema—the cinematic mechanisms that enable the white "male" spectator to watch as a voyeur—be revealed, exposing the artifice behind the gaze and the patriarchal power relations it supports.

Cheer deploys editing, framing, and camera positioning that replicate the objectifying cinematic techniques Mulvey describes—reinforcing antiquated, toxic representations of women on screen as a means of situating Aldama, the most prominent woman represented in the show, as a purveyor of toxic beauty standards.

Although *Cheer* does replicate the objectifying framing techniques described above, I will argue *Cheer* also "crops" the complex performance of identity of several prominent Corsicana women through deceptive confessional sequences and editing that "frames" them as stereotypes. Mulvey suggests shots of a fragmented woman's body "destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen" (Mulvey 203). It reduces them to dehumanized, 2-D images of themselves. According

to Mulvey, classic Hollywood directors used this reductive representation of women to integrate them into the narrative without freezing the "flow of action in erotic contemplation" (203) because women are "erotic spectacles" that "tend to work against the development of the storyline" (203). In other words, their eroticism is too powerful a distraction from the narrative, and their power is therefore minimized through different story telling techniques, including cropping their body parts to give "flatness" to their visual presence. While Mulvey suggested that cropping women's bodies reduces their narrative-diverting erotic power, I will argue that in *Cheer*, the cropped reduction of the women's complex characters cuts away the political critique each woman is exposing, minimizing their power as subjects and thereby replicating a dated but still systemically problematic set of camera relations. *Cheer* also includes close-up shots of fragmented body parts, literally replicating classic patriarchal camera framing.

José Muñoz's *Disidentifications* analyzes the disidentificatory performances of queer-of-color artists reimagining and resisting the cultural roles available to them through a mocking performance of a torqued version of stereotype. Muñoz suggests minoritized subjects must "work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates" (Muñoz 6). He notes that identifying with an ideological construction of identity always means "simultaneously and partially counter-identifying," but for subjects who are outside dominant spheres of identity, identification is particularly fraught. Summarizing Muñoz's theory of disidentifications, Katariina Kyröla suggests "performers outside of white heteronormativity can knowingly take on, embody, twist, exceed and mock white dominant stereotypes of queers and people of color, but this disidentification is a strategy of survival and self-

definition, never mere repetition of dominant cultural tropes" (Kyröla 8). Muñoz analyzes how queer-of-color artists recycle oppressive constructs of identity as a means of critique—embodying and mocking cultural stereotypes to unsettle limiting ideologies of subjectivity. Professor Morrison uses disidentifactory strategies similar to those deployed by the marginalized artists Muñoz analyzes to render a critical performance of Red American, feminine rurality that mocks and critiques stereotypes about conservative rural women through embodiment. However, this disidenficatory performance is only evident in analysis of the scene that reads against the grain. *Cheer* simplifies the professor's complex mockery of stereotype through editing and framing that reduces her character to its stereotyped rudiments and uses racializing reaction shots to enhance cultural boundaries.

These slanted representations are accomplished through a number of deceptive editing strategies. One such strategy hijacks filmed first person accounts from the characters to produce a story that seems to celebrate them but is ultimately at odds with their attempts to illustrate the complexity of their lived experience. According to Lori Ouellette, author of *Lifestyle TV*, "Confessionals and voiceovers guide interpretations of the events unfolding on screen, and promise to take TV viewers closer to the 'truth' behind the performance of the real" (Ouellette 10). However, confessional sequences in *Cheer* are intercut with montage shots deceptively arranged to tell a particular story about the interviewee and the footage their confessional has been grafted to, an editing technique not uncommon in reality TV and documentary filmmaking ("Confession Cam"). The confessional mode anchors these sequences, using the supposed realism and intimacy associated with the confessional to ostensibly shed light on the intercut

video, often a combination of archival footage or dated pictures, interviews with family members, and video of the cheerleaders practicing or trying on uniforms. Throughout these sequences, interviews divulging the Aldamas and the cheerleaders' intimate thoughts are parlayed into narration more representative of the beliefs of *Cheer*'s producers than of their interviewee's personal histories, resulting in an over-active documentary voice rendered through editing and framing. In *Introduction to Documentary,* Bill Nichols suggests the "voice of documentary conveys a sense of what the filmmakers social point of view is and how this point of view becomes manifest in the act of making the film" (Nichols 52). The words of the interviewees are intercut and overlaid with footage from their lives, nominally exemplifying the concepts outlined in their confessionals through scenes captured by the show. Examining footage of the Navarro team practicing, cheerleaders trying on uniforms, and the Aldama family's visit to a livestock expo in the context of highly personal first-person voice-over compilations illustrates that *Cheer* manipulates the supposed realism of these intimate histories to fit a simplified narrative that sweeps these characters into reductive categories and elides the systemic forces by which they are constrained.

The shots with which their confessionals are interspliced are not a natural outgrowth of their words. They deliberately frame the interviewee's assertions on three levels. Editing footage from their lives into confessional sequences contextualizes the topic they are discussing, framing the issue through footage that nominally widens the scope of their discussion and positions it within a larger picture. The composition of the shot, literally frames the subjects, underpinning the story's bias through the very mechanics of film (52). This style and strategy of intercutting, meanwhile, uses the

speech of the participants to frame the footage in a loosely criminological sense, falsely contriving the shots as evidence for a particular interpretation of a narrative more aligned with the producer's "social point of view" (52) than the interviewee's confessional. In *Cheer*, this narrative, while not endemic to—and often at odds with—the interviewee's assertions, retains an illusion of authenticity. The separate image track that *Cheer* juxtaposes with its sound footage from interviews is reductive, and consistently so. The program represents these non-synchronous video segments as illustrations of what its stars say. The visual tracks of these confessional sequences refigure what is actually perceptive intersectional commentary in reductive ways. The frame endorses a particular interpretation of their lives counter to the complex lived experience they are describing.

Chapter 1

Framing Sexism

Cheer frames itself within the context of stereotypes about cheerleading in the first episode as a challenge to reductive, sexist representations of cheerleaders in popular media. The show opens with a scene centering Morgan Simianer struggling through a series of basket tosses. Shots of Simianer in the gym are intercut with a confessional in which she professes: “there are a lot of stereotypes that go on with cheerleading, people think that we are dumb blonds, people think that we just do cheers like ‘go, team!’ and stuff like that. But we actually put our bodies in... a lot of pain” (“God Blessed Texas” 0:44-0:55). In this opening scene, the show contextually frames the episodes that follow within the series’ ostensible thesis: *Cheer* is here to break down the stereotype that cheerleaders are just attractive, dumb, white (“blonde”), women, who exist, in their original sexist raison d’etre, on the sidelines, and who aren’t competing in a real sport. However, the technical framing used to depict women in the show, deceptive confessional sequence, and mise-en-scene consistently negate the series’ ostensible challenge to gender stereotypes in representations of cheerleading. These formal techniques elide the women cast members shrewd navigation of rigid beauty standards and replicate toxic representations of women on screen.

The series’ use of manipulative editing to undercut Monica Aldama is exemplified by a particularly deceptively arranged confessional sequence in the fourth episode.[3] This sequence ostensibly highlights Aldama’s sexism, however the scene relies more on reductive shots of the cheerleader’s bodies and antiquated “male gaze” camera framing than it does her confessional to position her, despite her critique of

[3] There are similarly reductive confessional sequences centering Aldama throughout the show, most notably in the middle of episode 2 and the beginning of episode 3.

sexism, as an anti-feminist force. Such framing obscures Simianer's humorous rendition of toxic beauty standards and the survival technique she is demonstrating. Additionally, this sequence uses deceptive audio editing from Aldama's salon confessional to undermine her discussion of Simianer's success as an athlete by fallaciously connecting her technical advancement to her appearance. Editing of this kind displaces the importance of physical skill in cheerleading for physical appearance. Ultimately, the show's use of technical framing and editing to metaphorically and literally frame Aldama as a perpetrator of lookism and the "male gaze" reinvigorates the regressive, subject/object dichotomy outlined by Mulvey and replicates toxic and archaic representations of women on screen.

The scene begins with an establishing, low-angle shot of flag poles with the Texas, USA, and Corsicana flags flapping ("Hit Zero" 46:25-46:31), a signifier of local, state, and national pride repeated throughout the show. This image is followed by a shot of cheerleaders on the covers of *Cheerleader* and *Fly Girl* magazines (46:32-46:38), demonstrating the professionalization of the sport evidenced by a magazine industry dedicated to cheerleading, as well as illustrating the strict beauty standards cheerleading embodies through the quintessential representation of feminine aesthetic norms—the retouched image of a cover girl. Over this image, the sound of paper being shuffled and Aldama and Simianer's greetings come in. Aldama sighs a sing-song "hey" and Simianer responds, "Good morning, beautiful" (46:33-46:38) as the camera lingers on the cheerleading magazines, contextualizing the intimate, beauty-conscious greeting shared between the two women within the lookism of the sport signified by the magazine covers. We are then granted a shot that tracks from Aldama's phone to

Simianer's face as Aldama discusses possible costume choices with her (46:38-46:42), mimicking the interactive decision making shared between the two women. Aldama finally asks Simianer to try on the outfit, and the camera tracks Simianer's movements as she grabs the skirt and puts it on over her shorts, leveling the shot at her hips and fragmenting her body into axed components (46:52-46:58). A reverse shot of Aldama's happy, absorbed expression captures her leaned-back pose, one arm propping her head up, from under Simianer's blurred armpit as she watches Simianer adjusting the uniform (47:01-47:07), a hackneyed shot that positions Aldama as a spectator to Simianer's impromptu fashion show. Simianer puts up her hair and says "should have brushed my hair this morning, but it's fine" (47:00-47:03). With the camera is still trained on Aldama from under Simianer's armpit, Aldama responds, "did you just roll out of bed?"—"Yep," says Simianer, "I do that every morning" (47:04-47:08). Aldama laughs, her eyes gleaming as the two women share this playful flirtation. A shot of Simianer follows, spinning around with hand on hip in a new uniform, posing like a pageant girl at the end of her walk (47:10-47:15). The shot frames Simianer from just over Aldama's tawny head, positioning Aldama as the subjective spectator and Simianer as the object of her gaze as she facetiously models her uniform. In the background, Aldama continues to lightly chuckle, acknowledging the humor in Simianer's impression of the pageant-girl pose.

Simianer's mocking stance facetious adopts the mannerisms concomitant to rigid beauty standards in the pageant and cheer world, indicating that she is aware that the uniform is designed to fit the patriarchal criteria of normative beauty, what Mulvey dubs "optimal to-be-looked-at-ness" in the entertainment industry. By undertaking a

resistant reading, it is possible to read Simianer's jesting pose as a demonstration that she has not been hoodwinked into the objectifying position the camera framing situates her within. Her humorous pageant posture creates distance between herself and the aesthetic norms she is embodying by wearing the uniform. Her pose indicates she knows that she has to wear an outfit fitting patriarchal beauty standards to excel in the cheer world, but that she does so with agential humor and an experiential knowledge of the systems within which she exists.

While Aldama's exhaled chuckle shows she is sharing this moment of laughter and validating Simianer's lived experience, the physical framing of the shot positions Aldama as the purveyor of the "male gaze" Simianer is facetiously posing for by replicating mass media masculinist aesthetics. Aldama's presence in front of Simianer is captured through an over-the-shoulder over-the-head shot that renders Aldama the viewing subject of the shot, the bearer of the gaze according to the antiquated patriarchal cinematic mechanics outlined by Muvley. Through technical framing, editing, and narrative, Mulvey asserts that classic Hollywood cinema centralizes the perspective of the white, cisgender, "male" director, protagonist, and spectator, positioning "male" characters as the subjective, active drivers of the narrative. Cisgender white women, in contrast, become passive objects who are made up with optimal "to-be-looked-at-ness," the bearer of meaning on whom men may impose their fantasies. By positioning Simianer as the object of Aldama's gaze through an over-the-head shot while Simianer sarcastically postures in a parody of feminine "to-be-looked-at-ness," the show replicates the cinematic, white "male gaze" which objectifies cisgender white "female" characters by framing them as the object of the gaze. Instead,

the show could have framed and edited the scene to highlight how this humorous exchange is horizontal, a moment in which each woman is in-on-the-joke and validates the other's experience of beauty standards within the world in which they are operating. Simianer is using the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the uniform as fodder for a satirical embodiment of pageant mannerisms that enables each woman to affirm the other's experience of aesthetic norms by sharing a laugh based on shared experience. This moment is facilitated by a bilateral relationship, and Simianer's knowing stance indicates that she is not credulously being subjected to Aldama's objectifying gaze. The shared look between the two women is illustrative of the therapeutic effects of social support systems within systems of inequality. By framing Aldama as the bearer of the "male gaze," the show technically and metaphorically frames her as a perpetrator of objectifying beauty standards, eliding the social power of the look and laugh Aldama and Simianer are sharing and replicating patriarchal editing and filming techniques.

Figure 1. Simianer poses in front of Aldama in the Navarro uniform

Later in the scene, *Cheer* intercuts shots from a confessional with Aldama in a nail salon with footage that chops up the cheerleader's bodies, using the confessional sequence to falsely frame Aldama's words as sexist through a reductive illustration of her assertions. Aldama says, "so I am really proud of her. . . some people just stand out based on the look that they have" (47:22-47:28). As Aldama speaks, the sequence is cut from her interview in the nail salon to a shot of the dressing room where Aldama, Simianer, and other cheerleaders are laughing and smiling. Aldama's interview from her confessional is edited over this switch in location, extrapolating about the impact of appearance in cheerleading. She says, "You can already tell from the minute you see them they would be a great person to represent your program, a great ambassador" (47:29-47:33). The editors match, "represent your program" to a shot of a close-up

image of one of the flyer's chests and midriff with "Navarro" spelled out across their breasts.

This combination of visual and auditory footage falsely frames Aldama's assertions about the impact of normative beauty standards in cheerleading, instead implicating the show in toxic, patriarchal depictions of women through a highly reductive, cropped image of a body coded feminine by the gendered binarism of the uniform. Rather than describing her own reductive views about the importance of looks in cheer, Aldama is identifying how appearance operates in the cheer world. One cheerleader points out that "most people don't spend two to three hours getting ready to play their sport" ("Full Out" 33:04-33:08); however, in *Cheer*, appearance, as Aldama suggests at a later point, ". . . it could possibly improve the score" (48:19-48:21). Thus, her assertion that she can tell based on appearance whether someone will be a "great ambassador" is a statement of fact rather than an indicator of her personal views.[4] The show uses the deceptive confessional mode to metaphorically frame Aldama's words as indicative of an objectifying ethos by matching her description of how beauty standards operate in the cheer world with an axed shot of the Navarro-labeled chest of an unidentifiable cheerleader. This interchangeable image of the headless cheerleader (who should contextually be Simianer, but whose hair is shorter and blonder than Simianer's) relies once again on a dismembering aesthetic technique of the "male gaze" which, according to Mulvey, "flattens the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative"(203), reducing the woman's disruptive erotic power on the screen to that of a "cut-out or icon." The image becomes 2-D, flattening the woman's character by slicing up her body

[4] Aldama repeats this description of how beauty standards operate in cheerleading in episode 2.

on screen until she is nothing but an image—without the allure and humanity of a subjective character. The sound editor's decision to graft Aldama's words to a cropped shot of a light-skinned cheerleader's chest, visually and metaphorically frames Aldama's description of beauty standards as indicative of her own sexist and potentially racist prejudice against non-white, non-normative bodies. In all actuality, the shot described above replicates an antiquated framing technique associated with the "male gaze," fragmenting a nameless cheerleader's body and perpetrating toxic

representations of women in media.

Figure 2. Close-up shot of a Navarro cheerleader's chest

The show edits different segments of audio from Aldama's nail salon confessional over dressing room footage to metaphorically frame Aldama's assessment of her athletes as indicative of her investment in looks. An oppositional reading demonstrates that deceptive editing in this confessional sequence actually redoubles toxic representations of women in the show itself by bending Aldama's discussion of Simianer's advance as an athlete into one about her normatively attractive looks,

manipulating the sequence to overemphasize Simianer's appearance and shortchange her skill and effort. Aldama's confessional is intercut with footage of Aldama with Simianer and other flyers in the fitting room at Navarro, connecting Aldama's high-femme personal appearance—signaled through her beauty salon interview—to beauty standards in cheerleading. Aldama says "I am very proud of Morgan. I think she has definitely gained a lot of confidence, and she has exceeded my expectations of what she could do too, so I am really proud of her… some people just stand out based on the look they have" (47:19-47:28). These words from Aldama's confessional are edited over a shot of her and Simianer in the Navarro dressing room, which tracks from Aldama to Simianer as she laughs in her uniform. While Aldama's sentence ends with "I am really proud of her," and the background sound of the salon fades out entirely before she begins "some people just stand out based on the look they have," the show edits these two sentences together sequentially. By doing so, and emphasizing a sequential logic by playing them over the same continuous shot of Aldama and Simianer in the fitting room, the show creates continuity in the voice-over—presenting Aldama's appraisal of Simianer's appearance and her technical advancement as one continuous thought rather than distinct moments within the same interview. Such editing metaphorically frames Aldama as over-invested in her cheerleader's appearance, reasserts toxic beauty standards as more important than skill level, and devalues Simianer's advancement as an athlete.

Lexi Brumback's Teddy Bear

Cheer's use of infantilizing mise-en-scene metaphorically frames Lexi Brumback as babyish, reinforcing the power dynamics between women subjects and *Cheer*'s makers through a classic sexist tool that works to diminish Brumback's own nuanced class critique of cheer. During one of Brumback's confessionals, she sits for her interview on a pink fuzzy blanket with a pink, purple and white teddy bear propped in her lap and the camera holds on a wide frame that enables her stuffed animal to be seen while she speaks—emphasizing the teddy bear's childishness. Audio from her interview in this confessional is edited over footage of her drawing. This visual is followed by a shot of a colored-pencil sketch of Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* falling down the rabbit hole—creating a sequence of childish signifiers to emphasize Brumback's interest in hobbies and objects normally associated with younger people. The awkward, affected placement of the teddy bear was highlighted in Benito Skinner's parodic reimagination of the *Cheer* trailer. In the final seconds of Skinner's hilarious and biting parody, in which he impersonates Aldama, Gabi Butler, and Brumback, the Brumback character says apprehensively, "How much longer are you going to make me hold this teddy bear?" (Skinner 2:53-2:58). Skinner is humorously highlighting the constructed nature of the mise-en-scene in this confessional. He is suggesting it is unlikely that Brumback, a hard-boiled athlete who was known for picking physical fights before she joined Navarro, would independently decide to cradle a stuffed animal during an intimate interview. Whether or not the teddy bear was placed in Brumback's lap by the producers, combining shots of her drawing and camera framing that highlights the teddy bear work to represent her as childish, a classic patriarchal

technique used to undermine grown women. Jill Filipovic, surveying the diminutive titles used to belittle women such as Democratic Representative Pramila Jayapal, Elizabeth Warren, and Sarah Huckabee Sanders, says “When we want to take women down a peg, or undersell their influence, we treat them like little girls” (Filipovic). In the professional world, Filipovic says babying labels are an attempt to remind women that their power is not really theirs, but a gift from a man—“the dad you can run home and cry to, the real men who do know what they’re talking about, the father who ‘lets’ you work for the president, the daddy who listens to your cries for paid parental leave”(Filipovic). In *Cheer*, the infantilizing metaphorical framing of Brumback’s confessional works to remind viewers that she only has a voice because the series is granting her one. Critically, in the confessional in which Brumback holds the teddy bear, she makes critiques about the internal power struggles within the Navarro team and the financial barriers to cheerleading she had to overcome to become a cheerleader. The infantilizing coding of Brumback during this confessional belittles the autonomy of Brumback’s voice during these moments of social commentary, using a conspicuous prop to metaphorically frame her as childish and minimize her message.

Looking past *Cheer’s* subversion of the autonomy of Brumback’s voice, Brumback describes the remarkable agency she demonstrated through her ascendance in the *Cheer* world despite being from a different financial background than most cheerleaders. “Cheer is generally a sport for really wealthy people” (“God Blessed Texas” 31:47-31:49), Brumback says. “Most of these big name gyms, they charge a lot, a lot of money for monthly tuition or competitions and uniforms.” She concludes “I’ve been in cheer for 12 years and I’ve never paid a single dime. I’ve always just had that

tumbling that they just want you to go to the gym" (31:50-32:16). Here, Brumback is asserting that her high skill level granted her a level of autonomy that enabled her to subvert serious financial barriers to cheerleading. In this confessional, the show tempers Brumback's avowal of her own remarkable independence through infantilizing metaphorical framing, using a sexist device to undermine the sovereignty of Brumback's voice at this critical moment of social criticism.

Figure 3: Infantilizing mise-en-scene

Figure 4: Benito Skinner jokes about Brumback's teddy bear

Conclusion

In the first moments of the opening episode, *Cheer* contextually frames itself as an antidote to clichéd depictions of cheerleaders. However, the show's metaphorical and technical framing undermines the women cast members commentary about their lived

experience of toxic beauty standards and economic hardship. The moment of humorous exchange shared between Aldama and Simianer—in which they reveal a survival mechanism within corrupt, patriarchal aesthetic norms—is obscured by technical framing that positions Aldama as a purveyor of the "male gaze." Additionally, the editorial decision to interpolate a discussion of toxic standards of appearance into Aldama's appraisal of Simianer's development as an athlete undermines this young woman's physical ability and overemphasizes the importance of her looks in her career.

Although Simianer's size and whiteness likely did influence her ascendance in the cheer world—she fits cissexist, white beauty standards—crafting a micro-narrative between Aldama and Simianer about the "male gaze" and reducing the influence of beauty standards in cheer to a single coach-athlete relationship, the show down-scales the issue to the point of sociological irrelevance, and undermines Simianer's ability. *Cheer* diminishes Brumback by metaphorically framing her as childish, reminding viewers that she only has the voice to make astute social commentary because the show has granted her a platform. Through reductive technical and metaphorical framing, *Cheer* implicates itself in the stereotyped depictions of cheerleaders the show ostensibly sets out to subvert, undermining women cast members' nuanced elucidation of their lived experiences.

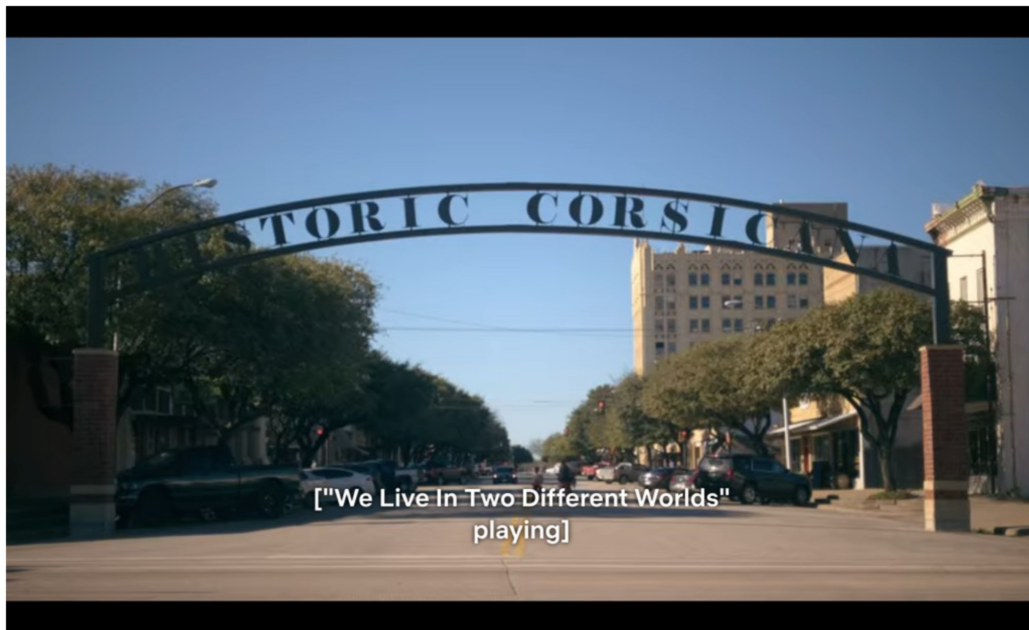
Chapter 2

“We Live in Two Different Worlds:” Classism and Sexism in *Cheer*

Cheer does expose the systemic marginalization of cheerleading as a femininized sport at certain moments in the show. However, these depictions of the most outstanding elements of gendered oppression in cheer are limited, and do not translate to a pervasive critique of gender-inequality and the systemic forces perpetrating toxic beauty standards. Rather, they support a restricted representation of feminized marginalization that displaces the forces of gendered oppression onto Corsicana as a backwards town filled with working class people who are ignorant about the cheerleading sensation in their community. This depiction ultimately reveals more about the show’s own prejudice against rural southern spaces than it illustrates systemic misogyny. Where Leigh Anne Duck used literary analysis to illustrate how modernist writers in the 1930s pushed back against the displacement of countrywide racism and racial segregation onto the South by various of their peers, I will argue *Cheer* replicates the trope of the backwards south to locate sexism in cheerleading and the professional world at large in rural working-class spaces by characterizing Corsicana as backdated and mobilizing classist representations. This interpretation is particularly apparent in the latter half of the first episode, but provides a foundational reading that colors the entire series.

To illustrate the formal techniques *Cheer* uses to displace systemic sexism onto Corsicana, I will first describe the show's nominal exposure of the most salient aspects of cheerleading's feminized marginalization. In a confessional sequence in episode 1--intercut with shots of the Navarro cheerleaders practicing, archival footage, as well as interviews with townspeople, businesspeople in the cheer world, and a talking head—*Cheer* highlights sexism in how the sport is percieved. Talking head Natalie Adams, author of *Cheerleader!: An American Icon*, describes how the historical sexualization of cheerleaders went hand in hand with their leadership roles. Adams asserts, "Many people put cheerleaders in the same category as beauty pageant contestants and playboy bunnies. Traditionally, they were to be pretty and popular, pleasant, high-character" (45:03-45:11). This clip from her interview is edited by the sound designers over archival footage of cheerleaders from the middle of the twentieth century. The shot that follows captures a medium-close up of a line of Navarro cheerleaders kicking their legs into the air in slow motion, suggesting continuity between the traditional social position of cheerleaders and the contemporary Navarro team. The voice of Hayden Crawford, the marketing chief of Collin Street Bakery, is edited over this visual track, "They're good, wholesome folks. We love how they represent Corsicana when they go out and they're seen publicly"(45:15-45:20). Crawford's assertions about the "wholesomeness" of the Navarro cheerleaders parallels Adam's description of traditional cheerleaders as "high-character" and "pleasant," suggesting a parallelism between how cheerleaders are perceived in the middle of the 20th century and 2019. Adam's voice cuts in over this shot, concluding, "And so cheerleaders came to represent this idea of local patriotism" (45:22-45:25). Cutting the audio to begin Adam's assertion about local patriotism with

“and,” a conjunction, creates an ideological connection between the importance of appearance in cheerleading—identified in the interviews directly proceeding—and the local patriotism the cheerleaders embody in their cowboy boots. Audio from Crawford’s interview cuts back in over a third shot of cheerleaders kicking in the cancan line, a shot framed over Aldama’s shoulder as she watches them cancan, legs split in the air.[5] He



says, “They help out the schools and help out whatever. They’re a great bunch of gals” (45:31-45:34). The next shot is of Crawford interviewing in the bakery as he continues, “we uh—we get to meet—” he holds up a hand and smiles sheepishly, correcting himself—“I shouldn’t say ‘gals.’ There’s guys too” (45:35-45:38). He chuckles.

Figure 5: Backdating establishing shot of the “Historic Corsicana” sign

[5] The framing of the shot over which Crawford’s assertion that the cheerleaders are a “great bunch of gals” is edited by the sound designers if revealing. The technical framing of this shot fallaciously positions Aldama as the bearer of the “male gaze,” and interpolates her into Crawford’s belittling description of the cheerleaders. This directorial decision is yet another example of how the show leverages “male gaze” camera framing to depict Aldama as an objectifying viewer. Such framing ultimately implicates the show itself in reductive depictions of women.

Figure 6: Backdating establishing shot of masculine stature holding out a football

Crawford’s misnomer, aside from its gendered assumptions about the sex of the cheerleaders, labels the women on the team as “gals,” a colloquial term for girls. This misrepresentation suggests the women on the Navarro team are not adults, which as college-age students, they certainly are. As discussed above, mislabeling adults as children—a disjuncture between signifier and signified—is a means of dissociating the rights of adulthood from a group of people. Historically, the racial slander of “boy” or “girl” was used against black adults during three hundred years of slavery and Jim Crow. By categorizing the cheerleaders as “gals,” Crawford playfully defines the cheerleaders out of adulthood and its corresponding rights. Thus, the cheerleaders’ feminization—represented by Crawford ’s misrepresentation of the cheerleaders as entirely femme—is associated with their marginalization as a group of adult athletes.

Figure 7: A shot of Navarro cheerleaders practicing the cancan in cowboy boots framed from over Monica Aldama's shoulder

The series highlights such marginalization through editing and song choice in this sequence, even as it displaces it onto Corsicana and Aldama. As described above, the show intercuts Adams' interview with shots of the Navarro team practicing in 2019, vintage footage from the middle of the 20th century, and Crawford's interview. The 1950s bop "We Live in Two Different Worlds" encases the entire scene in a dated soundtrack that harkens back to the era in which Adams asserts "the all-American girl knew her place was on the sidelines." By creating an auditive connection between vintage footage of cheerleaders from the middle of the 20th century and the Navarro team in 2019, the show suggests an unpleasant continuity between the marginalized position of cheerleaders historically and the sexism the Navarro cheer team faces in the present day.

While this sequence does amplify sexism in cheerleading, the storytelling techniques used by the makers of *Cheer*—including soundtrack, editing, and establishing shots—ultimately reveal more about the show's use of classism to displace such marginalization onto working class spaces by heightening class distinctions and characterizing Corsicana as regressive, than the sociological forces behind sexism in cheerleading. At the beginning of the sequence described above, an establishing shot of a wrought-iron sign over a downtown street declares "Historic Corsicana"(44:02)—positing the scene that follows in a historical logic that backdates the town. Another establishing shot captures a bronze statue of Jim Acree, a football coach who led the Corsicana high-school football team to victory at the state championships in 1963 (McGathey). The statue sports a vintage outfit and a buzzcut and holds out a football (44:04). This establishing shot illustrates the contrast between the historical celebration of football emblemized by a dated monument and the unawareness of Corsicana residents to the phenomenal success of their cheerleading team. While the town has statues dedicated to the historical importance of football in the region, a masculine sport, the locals are unable to say anything substantive about the outstanding cheerleading team in contemporary Corsicana. Thus, these historicizing establishing shots frame the townspeople's interviews within a previous, socially regressive time period in which masculine sports such as football predominated and cheerleaders were literally sidelined. An establishing shot outside a beige stucco building with a discolored façade and a sign reading "Tattoo" over the entrance and two black, mud-splattered pickups (44:20), situates the interview that follows within a working-class milieu in which economic hardship has caused the residents to fall back on the upkeep

of the building. While one tattoo clerk speaks, the camera cuts to a close-up of a rifle another clerk is polishing that is so big it extends from one end of the counter on which it is propped to the other (44:27), emphasizing the rural, gun-owning Red American context in which the clerk reveals his ignorance about the Navarro cheer team. In one of the rare moments in which the interviewers' voices are not edited out of the show, the camera lingers on the only three, heavyset and heavily tattooed white men in the deserted tattoo parlor—all wearing black t-shirts and baseball hats—with a massive rifle resting on the counter in front of them, while a feminine voice from off screen informs them that the Navarro team is one of the best collegiate cheer teams in the country (46:19-46:24). One of the men mutters that they didn't know that the team was so successful. The filmmaker's decision to hold the shot during this interaction, in which the three men are being lectured at while looking distinctly uncomfortable and revealing their lack of knowledge about the team, invites the audience to examine the class and cultural markers such as dress, their non-normative bodies, and the giant gun on the counter, as part and parcel to their ignorance about cheer. A white middle-aged woman in a cramped antique shop with bleach-blond hair and a denim top responds to the interviewer's question about what she knows about the Navarro cheer team by saying, "That is a really hard question to answer" (44:11-44:14) After this clip, the song "We Live in Two Different Worlds" surges in volume in the background, emphasizing the titular lyrics. Another white, bleach-blond, middle-aged interviewee with bright pink lipstick and penciled eyebrows says "You hear about the bulldogs but—" a third interviewee interjects, "that's about it. . . you really don't hear very much about 'em" (44:32-44:39).

The show contrasts these interviews to an interview with Rebel Athletic founder Karen Noseff Aldridge. Aldridge says ". . .Oh my god, this is a legitimate sport, and nothing like what most of America still thinks cheerleading is" (44:56-45:00). Her interview is set in a large room with wooden floors, a chandelier, and one colorful wall covered baseboard to ceiling in a Rebel Athletic advertisement showing young models sporting the brand's cheerleading gear. The Rialto Bridge is inexplicably photoshopped in the background of this advertisement in a nod to high European culture. This background contrasts jarringly to the establishing shot of the tattoo parlor and the more cramped spaces in which the other interviewees speak. Unlike the clerks and townspeople whose interviews precede hers, Aldridge speaks while a name tag with her title appears below her on the screen. The show's decision to give her a tag marks her as deserving of a name and recognition based on her coded class position and creates a comparison between her and the unpolished working people whose interviews are filmed to accentuate their lack of sophistication about cheerleading. The townspeople who don't know about Navarro's success are identified as "male 1," "male 2," and "female"—a biologic reductivism that strips away their personhood based on their class position.[6]

Highlighting class distinctions between Aldridge and the townspeople who are interviewed by failing to grant them titles and names, and using establishing shots as well as a dated soundtrack to metaphorically and technically frame Corsicana as temporally backwards, this sequence fallaciously displaces the gender-inequality behind cheerleading's systemic marginalization onto working-class, rural Corsicana—a

[6] While reinforcing the gender binary by granting them fallaciously biological gender identifiers.

depiction that is undergirded by a prejudiced conceptualization of white working-class spaces as regressive. The lingering shot of the three working class white men being schooled by the interviewer from off camera invites judgement about their unsophisticated lack of knowledge about cheerleading. The classist labeling schema dehumanizes those townspeople who don't recognize the Navarro team's significance and suggests the systemic sidelining of cheerleading as a feminized sport—which this sequence is nominally highlighting—is exemplified by Corsicana's white working-class ignoramuses.[7] The backdated logic of the 1950s song, in which the lyrics signal a disjuncture between "two different worlds"—a line which is emphasized by a surge in volume at the beginning of the sequence—operates on several levels. It creates continuity not only between the historical marginalization of cheerleaders and Navarro's contemporary sidelining but also between establishing shots of Corsicana that anchor the sequence in an explicitly "historic" moment and the marginalization of the diverse Navarro team within a largely white and working class town. Such auditory backdating metaphorically frames the white, blue-collar townspeople as immobilized in a social and economically regressive moment—a classic element of "white trash" tropes.[8] "We Live in Two Different Worlds" undergirds the show's depiction of class distinctions between the unpolished rural working people the show invites judgement on and the cheerleading world in which Aldridge has created a highly successful business (which she advertises for using symbols of high-culture such as the Rialto

[7]

[8] Dina Smith's essay "Cultural Studies' Misfit: White Trash Studies," notes that "white trash" is a concept that indulges nostalgic constructions of white working poor people as obsolete. She suggests this trope is a recycled concept utilized in different historical contexts and as undying as the Velveeta cheese "white trash" people consume in Ernest Mickler's *White Trash Cooking*. The term has been enshrined by cultural products as a signifier of a group of white working poor who refused to obey the changing demands of late capitalism.

Bridge). The backdated, classist significance of the song suggests the loudest aspects of cheerleading's sexist marginalization, which Adam's discusses in this sequence, are contained within the regressive, podunk time capsule of Corsicana. Similarly, the historicizing establishing shots—the "Historic Corsicana" sign and the masculine monument to football's history in the town—contextually frame the townspeople's ignorance about cheerleading in a backdated logic. Where *Cheer* could have contextually framed Adam's discussion of sexism in cheerleading by widening the show's scope to look at systemic examples of contemporary marginalization in cheer—for example, analyzing the NCAA's decision not to categorize cheerleading as a sport—it chooses to contextually frame a systemic discussion of cheerleading's marginalized position within a classist representation of rural working people reinforced through backdating establishing shots and an elitist labeling strategy.

By comparing this foundational sequence in *Cheer* to the story-telling techniques deployed by a 1982 TV program titled "Town Hall—You Gotta Have a Gun," about a Coquitlam, a small town in Oregon that passed a law in the early 1980s mandating gun ownership, *Cheer*'s use of editing and soundtrack to displace the systemic sexism surrounding cheerleading onto a derogatory construction of a rural white working-class space, pejoratively undermined as backward, becomes particularly clear. The program edits the Beatle's "Happiness is a Warm Gun" over a brief establishing sequence intercutting interviews with pro-gun city councilors to shots of the tiny, working-class town and close up of a gun being fondled by a person in blue jeans. Although The Beatles were still selling millions of records a year in the early eighties, by 1982, the band had been broken up for over a decade. In fact, most of their

songs hit their peak in the mid-late 1960s, when the band was still touring together and producing music ("The Beatles"). The sound of The Beatles would strike 1980s listeners as representative of the 1960s. Thus, the use of "Happiness is a Warm Gun" as a soundtrack to this 1980s television program encases the town in a nostalgic auditive track, positioning Coquitlam in a bygone cultural era that backdates the town's social and cultural attachment to firearms. The visual footage over which the soundtrack is laid reinforce this representation. An establishing shot captures the "Entering Coquitlam" sign, framing a two-way road strewn with brown pine needles and a loaded down white pickup, before zooming in on the sign. Under "Entering Coquitlam," the sign reads: "Population 850." The shot holds for several seconds, giving the viewer time to register the smallness of this rural space ("Town Hall: You Gotta Have a Gun" 1:00-1:03). A second establishing shot captures a side street that disappears into the woods two blocks down, with a gleaming 1960s Dodge pickup parked on the corner (1:03-1:09)—depicting the town as so rural its roads blend with the surrounding wilderness and the streets are dominated by pickup trucks, emblems of manual labor. A clip from an interview with a white city council person follows. The councilor says "I wonder how the people in this world—in the United States—think we got our rights. It wasn't with a switch, it was with a gun" (1:10-1:19). This clip contextually frames the previous shots of rural, working America within the ideology of Second-Amendment conservativism and a stumbling interview. The councilor's slippage between "the world" and "the United States" demonstrates the universalizing logic of insularity and a deep romanization of the past. He uses the American Revolutionary War as an example to justify gun ownership—a period during which slavery defined the United States

economy—suggesting he is stuck in the past and is resistant to social and cultural progress. By intercutting the opening shots with this interview in the introduction, the limited, backdated perspective of the council person contextually frames the geography of the entire town and the working-class people who live there. While the nostalgic Beatles soundtrack pejoratively frames the townspeople's attachment to firearms as culturally and socially backdated, the visual footage and interviews in the intro depict the working class town as backwards and highly parochial. This characterization contributes to the force of the outliers who speak later in the town hall, including a lawyer from the American Civil Liberties Union, who represents urban social progress.

Although *Cheer* has been much more widely distributed, its comparative visual and auditory montage scene backdates the perspective of the townspeople who are interviewed through a dated soundtrack and strategic editing similar to that of the 1982 TV program, displacing the systemic, sexist forces behind cheerleading's marginalization onto a reductive representation of a rural, working-class space rather than investigating the societal forces behind the sport's sidelining. *Cheer*'s analysis of the society-wide marginalization of cheerleading uses similar editing and narrative techniques—suturing a dated soundtrack to contemporary visual footage and dehumanizing interviews with locals—to displace systemic indifference to cheerleading onto backwards Corsicana using a classist construction of the town.

Displacing Systemic Sexism onto Red America

The show's critique of cheerleading's sexist marginalization is further displaced onto Corsicana in the opening episode by deceptively intercutting confessional sequences with Aldama family footage at a livestock expo to characterize the town and the Aldama family's value system as backwards. Such editing locates the supposed death of Aldama's feministic career ambitions in traditional rural cultural practices and a dated temporal period rather than systemic anti-woman practices in the professional world.

Figure 8: Monica Aldama and her children at the Navarro livestock expo

The livestock expo scene opens with an establishing shot of red, blue and white banner with "Navarro County Youth Expo" spelled across it on a chain-link fence ("God Blessed Texas" 39:09). This shot is coded in the colors of the American flag,

situating the expo program within the context of conservative patriotism. Aldama and her family sit in the bleachers. The sound designers edit her voice from a confessional over a shot of her snapping pictures of her niece leading a giant steer across the wood-chip strewn floor, “You know, it’s kind of a small, conservative Texas town” (44:11-44:14), Aldama says. Audio from her interview continues over footage from the livestock expo, connecting her life story to Corsicana’s agricultural practices, “I grew up here, I got married to my high school sweetheart” (44:20-44:23). The show cuts to her confessional as she says “I thought I was going to be the CEO of some big company in New York, on Wall Street” (41:02-41:05). This career goal is inherently feminist considering only two to four women made the Fortune 500 annual list from 1990-1995, the period just before Aldama had her first child and switched careers (“Historical List of Women CEOs”). Chris Aldama tells his side of the story in his own confessional. The sound designers edit audio from his interview over old, low-quality pictures of the Aldamas as young adults, locating the heteronormative and socially conservative story the Aldamas are telling in a moment decades earlier that is historicized by the grainy photo quality. Chris says, “She wanted to work in a high-rise in New York and be a business woman” (41:11-41:17). As he speaks, the camera hovers on a picture of the couple standing in front of a silver car with beers in hand, Aldama in a formal blazer and white button-up—indicating her career goals—and Chris in a denim shirt and jeans, eyes red from the glare of the flash. The quality of the shot—blurred and grainy—backdates the story he is telling to a previous era. A shot from Chris’s confessional follows this picture, a medium-close up in which he sits casually in a domestic space, “But you know, family being a priority,” he says, “that kind of shifted things, a little

bit" (41:17-41:20). The show cuts to a close-up of his face as he finishes his thought. The next shot tracks the Aldama family from behind as they walk through the livestock expo—anchoring the family-first traditionalism that "changed" Aldama's plans for the future in this rural agricultural space. Audio from Aldama's confessional is cut over the tracking shot. She says, "As we had children, we wanted them to be raised by their grandparents, their aunts and uncles, their cousins" (41:21-41:27). A shot of Aldama and her children posing in front of a steer localizes the family values that cut short her business career in the traditional cultural practices of Corsicana.

Figure 9: Monica Aldama and Chris Aldama in an old photograph

In this confessional sequence about Aldama's supposedly foiled feministic career ambitions, the show relies on old photographs and footage from a livestock program that peaked in participation in the 1970s (Rosenberg 217) to characterize Aldama's family values as backward, reductively illustrating her story through images of a bygone temporal moment and cultural practices that have receded from popular view. The show could have cut their interviews with any number of family footage, including shots of the Aldama family home life, or dinner with the cousins and grandparents Aldama mentions. They could have illustrated the masculinist nature of Wall Street—where women rarely hold the highest professional positions—by including footage from inside the banking institutions Aldama wanted to join, shots of a professional space dominated by men. They might have discussed the challenge of maintaining a career in one of the most competitive fields during maternity leave or the difficulty of getting a promotion while pregnant (Van Syckle). Instead, by intercutting the Aldamas' confessionals with footage from the livestock expo—a program that had its heyday fifty years previously—and grainy images of Aldama and Chris from past decades, the show locates the destruction of Aldama's short-lived feminist business career in backdated traditional values, reductively displacing the systemic forces of gender inequality onto this small rural town.

Conclusion

Cheer nominally exposes the most obvious elements of misogyny in the cheer world in the foundational sequences described above from the first episode. An oppositional reading of these sequences reveal the formal techniques *Cheer* uses to

backdate Corsicana and displace systemic sexism onto rural, working class spaces. The show deploys a classist name and title schema and codes the town as backdated in a disdainful depiction of blue-collar Corsicana that suggests rural, white poor people are stuck in a temporally backwards social and economic position undergirded by their lack of sophistication about the diverse world of cheerleading.

The show uses backdating establishing shots, an anachronistic soundtrack, and photos taken decades previously to contextually frame Adam's analysis of sexism in cheer and Aldama's family history within a regressive portrayal of Corsicana as an insulated rural white small town.

Chapter 3

Disidentifying in the Classroom

A seemingly minor classroom scene centering on a woman professor provides a critical case study in the series' use of editing and framing—in the technical and metaphorical sense—to depict a stereotyped conceptualization of conservative rural culture undergirded by a reductive representation of a woman. Although Professor Morrison is not a prominent character in the series, her role in this scene has become infamous across the internet because of *Cheer*'s depiction of her outlandish embodiment of stereotypes about Texans. The show crops the mockery in her embodiment of Texas culture through deceptive editing that obscures the complexity of her performance, diminishing her character in a reductive depiction of feminine personhood similar to that of the literal cropped images which Mulvey describes—using the apparatus of TV to reduce her to a cut-out stereotype. Reading against the grain of the show, I will argue Morrison navigates the complex site of identity she occupies by embodying an offensive concept of womanhood and an essentialist second amendment Americanism while also mocking this identity in a performance of disidentification similar to that described by José Esteban Muñoz in *Disidentifications*. Muñoz suggests that minoritized subjects must "work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates" (Muñoz 6). Through a pejorative self-identification with derogatory representations of women and rural white, conservative gun culture, Morrison disidentifies with gendered slurs and stereotypes through a complex performance of feminine marginality steeped in mockery. *Cheer*'s disparaging representation of Morrison is reinforced by failing to introduce her in the show with a name and title. This classroom scene provides a pivotal example of *Cheer's* use of

formal storytelling techniques—including manipulative editing of reaction shots and technical and metaphorical framing—to reductively represent women and stereotyped Red American culture.

A shot of a student walking through a Navarro hallway establishes the setting of the scene ("God Blessed Texas" 44:11), before the camera cuts to a projector hanging from the ceiling, and then the screen at the front of a classroom (44:14). Projected onto the screen is a map of the United States demarcating Texas in red, while grouping the Pacific Northwest and rocky mountains into one area titled "boring," the Midwest, "flat" and "crap," the South, "awful," New England, "yankees," and California "hideous"—a map so outrageous it can only be understood as humorous. Morrison says, "This is kind of an overarching, quick look at Texans" (44:15-44:22) The camera zooms in on the image of the map while she continues, "Because I know I've got some basketball and cheerleaders in here" (44:23-44:25). Morrison gesticulates at the front of the classroom as she says, "Sometimes you guys are like, not from Texas, not even close to Texas" (44:25-44:27). By displaying the map in her classroom, she is modeling stereotypes about Texans as fanatic state patriots, zealots with a disturbed perspective on the rest of the country. But given her contextual knowledge about the presence of out-of-state students, her display of the map is also a mockery of the typecasting surrounding Texas. However, the show cuts from her standing at the front of the classroom next to the map, to Harris and a group of cheerleaders making private jokes with one another (44:30-44:33). Such editing uses their moment of shared mirth as a reaction shot to Morrison's presentation of the outrageous map. The secretive nature of the joke they are sharing, silently mouthed across the desk, indicates that they are

laughing about something they don’t want to share with Morrison. Because the sequence edits her presentation of the map before this reaction shot, the secretive humor the cheerleaders are sharing appears to be about her. The fourth cheerleader’s direct eye contact with the camera invites the audience in on the joke that through editing, the show has suggested is about Morrison. This reaction shot suggests the appropriate response among spectators to her map is one of derision, metaphorically framing her disidentificatory display of the map as a credulous representation of her beliefs.

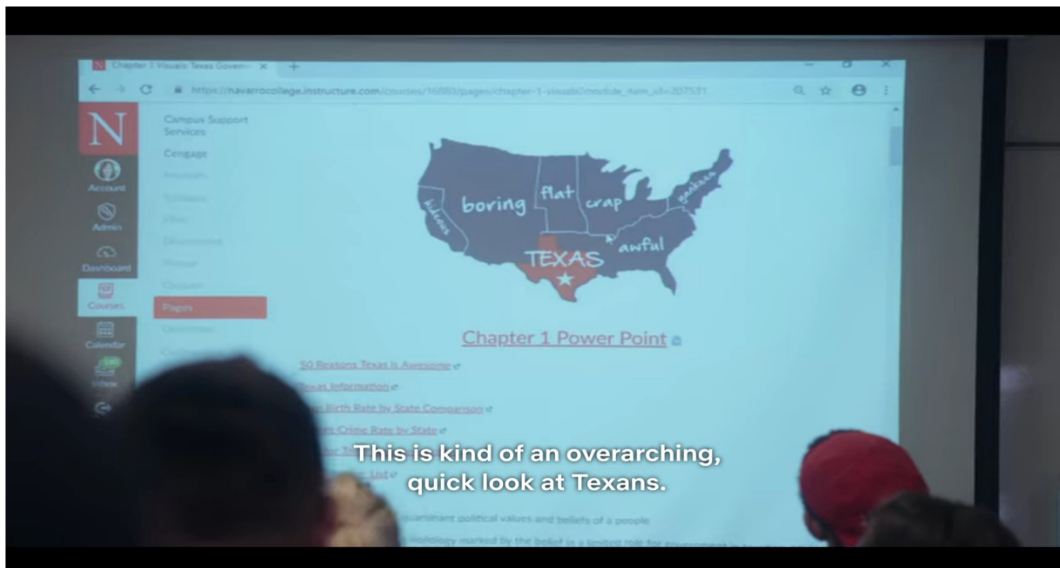


Figure 10: Satirical map of the United States

As the scene progresses, her continuous jokes reinforce that she is both embodying some of the stereotyped Texas identity traits she describes, while also mocking them, and that the show, rather than acknowledging the complexity of her performance, uses editing and framing to reduce her character to its stereotyped rudiments. As the scene proceeds, she describes Trump’s “invention” of the “space force” (37:52), and then discusses “Tex-Mex.” The camera captures the unimpressed expression of a black student as she sets up a joke, saying “Tex-Mex, it’s the best ever.

It is not real Mexican food.” Here she pauses for comic effect, and the shot of the displeased looking black student is followed by a shot of her at the front of the classroom as she concludes, “It’s a way better version of Mexican food” (38:02-38:08). This assertion voices local pride while indexing racism and entitlement offset by her cheek-in-tongue delivery. She chuckles to herself and a shot of another student of color staring at the front of the classroom with a blank expression follows, suggesting her crack is racially offensive and that the student is an outsider to the Texas culture Morrison is describing. She moves on. “Alright, most other states do not require you to take their state government, but Texas makes you do Texas government and US government” (38:12-38:17). As she speaks, the camera cuts to a row of bored-looking students and then to Harris who has a quizzical and humorous expression. Someone in the class says “Ah, no” (38:18). She responds “So we like ourselves a whole lot around here” (38:18-38:20). Moments later the camera focuses on her as she says, “Tell me what you think Texans kind of believe politically” (38:30-38:32). Someone calls out, “The right to bear arms” (38:33). She responds, “The right to bear arms, hell yeah. I’m the biggest gun-totin’ broad you ever did see” (38:34-38:36). As she speaks, the camera cuts to a student the audience comes to know as James Thomas scribbling in his notepad—a reactionless reaction shot demonstrating a credulous reading of her lecture without recognition of the humor in her outrageous self-identification. The next shot captures her from the side at the front of the class, a massive American flag behind her on the wall indicating the outsized patriotism associated with gun culture and suggesting the producers’ blue political perspective. She professes, “I am packing heat almost all of the time” (38:37-38:40). She concludes this stand-out intro to Texas

politics by saying, “Texas is overwhelmingly a conservative state. They generally support traditional values and lifestyles. So a lot of them are kind of looking at that a man and a woman is the traditional definition of marriage and you should get up and go to church on Sundays, and you have the house with the 2.5 children, and a white picket fence” (38:49-39:06). As she lectures, the camera focuses on Harris’s face concentrating in a frown.

The reaction shots the show edits in this scene have been criticized by Harris, indicating a disjuncture between his experience in the classroom and the show’s representation of Morrison that suggests a lack of trust between the show’s producers and the subjects they are filming. By editing Morrison’s assertion that many Texans believe “a man and a woman is the traditional definition of marriage,” to an extended medium close-up of Harris’s concerned-looking expression, the show creates synchronicity between her lecture and a shot of Harris in class, encouraging viewers to empathize with his apparently offended reaction. Several other black masculine cheerleaders are captured in reaction shots in this scene as well. By metaphorically framing her lecture through displeased-looking reaction shots of black students, the show suggests the students don’t come from the same rural culture Morrison is describing, but from urban, metropolitan areas. Creating this distinction typecasts the black students as urban dwellers—problematically suggesting blackness is monolithic and heightening the racial distinction between the predominantly white, unsophisticated township and the students of color the show is suggesting are skeptical outsiders. However, in interviews, Harris asserted that the show “just caught my face at a weird point, and I was just trying to listen to what (the teacher) was talking about. I think what

she was saying was just lined up to where my face looked the way it did. The teacher is amazing. I love her" (Chaney "*Cheer*'s Jerry Harris"). When pressed further about this scene, Harris said, "She was just describing how (Texas) was different back then, and you guys didn't see the part where she was comparing it to the way it is now" Here, Harris is suggesting the show metaphorically framed Morrison's description of Texas history as a portrayal of contemporary social mores, reaffirming *Cheer*'s backdated construction of Corsicana. Harris is also suggesting there was a disjuncture between "what she was saying" and "where my face looked the way it did"—demonstrating that from his perspective, the show edited her words to line up with his expression "at a weird point." Acknowledging that the show's editing positions Morrison as a white, insensitive right-winger, he jumps to defend her by pointing out how much he appreciated her as a teacher. Harris's positive assessment of Morrison is reinforced by her Dale Parnell Faculty Distinction Recognition for excellence in 2020 ("Dale P. Parnell 2020"). According to Harris, the show edited this moment to de-contextualize his reactions and Morrison's lecture points, putting into question the reaction shots throughout the scene.

The disjuncture Harris identifies becomes particularly transparent when analyzing the disidentifications Morrison is making by extending the reading against the grain of the scene. During the same sequence, Morrison proclaims, "I am the biggest gun-totin' broad you ever did see" (38:34-38:36). Morrison's avowal is operating on several levels. She is identifying with a gendered slur—"broad"—which is derogatory and misogynistic. "Gun-totin'" is a colloquialism typically associated with carrying a gun "for criminal purposes" ("Gun-totin'"), however, it has also been strongly

associated with the brand “Gun-Tot’N Mamas” or GMT—a line of concealed carry handbags explicitly “inspired and developed BY WOMEN FOR WOMEN” (emphasis original) (“GMT Original Official Site”). GMT brands itself as pro-women and pro-protection, offering an “empowerment” sale, and blogs about domestic violence (and its negative effects on business). The gun-totin’ addendum to her self-identification is playfully incriminating and conservatively feminist, playing off the criminological connotations of the phrase as well as the feminized cultural association of the brand name. The contrasting pro-women and anti-women language marks her superlative self-identification as contradictory—both embodying and mocking stereotypes surrounding women gun-owners in a hyperbolic performance of disidentification. This language enables her to criticize masculinist pro-gun narratives while suggesting the feminist reasons for women to own guns—empowerment and protection against abuse. She is satirizing pro-Texas, pro-gun state identity to out-of-state students to distance herself from this identity, while modeling a disidentificatory means of embodying gun culture as a woman to students who identify with her performance. However, the show eliminates the satire in this satirized self-description through editing. Although a light chuckle from a student accompanies her statement—and her delivery is so buoyant it is difficult not to imagine her smiling while saying it—the sound editors chose to edit this outlandish proclamation over a shot of Thomas with a serious expression engrossed in his notes. Such editing suggests through example that the student body has taken her identification with a gendered slur at face-value. By crafting the audio and visual footage to undercut the humor of the moment, this editorial decision reduces her multi-pronged performance to a 2-D identification with stereotype. Only by reading against

the editing is it possible to deconstruct her hyperbolic self-identification and discussion of Texas culture as a disidentificatory mockery of the tropes she is operating within.

Figure 11: James Thomas taking notes while Professor Amanda Morrison speaks

Figure 12: Professor Amanda Morrison lecturing in front of an American flag

The show smothers her disidentificatory language even further by framing her from the side at the front of the class in the next shot, placing her claim to "packing heat" against the backdrop of the American flag, suggesting a metaphoric parallel between her self-identification and the patriotic ideology associated with the NRA, an uncritical pro-Americanism only possible through a disregard for American brutality—400 years characterized by slavery, Jim Crow, and redlining, as well as economic inequality, disastrous immigration policies, and colonialism. Her red nail polish blends with the stripes on the flag, creating a visual connection that emphasizes the ideological association the show is making. By framing her and her students against the flag, small figures dwarfed by the massive banner, the show contextualizes her tongue-in-cheek gun-ownership within a homogenized version of the stereotypical rabid patriotism of

white gun culture without acknowledging the disidentification evident in the pejorative self-identification she makes moments earlier. Such literal and metaphorical framing reduces her disidentificatory performance to the most rudimentary signifier of stereotypical rurality and gun culture: the American flag.[9]

Conclusion

Cheer crops Morrison's multilayered performance of Red American culture and reductive womanhood to highlight only the most stereotyped elements of her character. Editing and framing slice away her disidentificatory embodiment of derisive clichés, which enable her to satirize masculinist gun-culture while embodying a disidentified model of feminine gun ownership. Asynchronous reaction shots and editing in this scene have been criticized by Harris, demonstrating the producers' deceptive rearrangement of the scene. Editing Morrison's pejorative self-identification to a flat reaction shot of Thomas and framing her against the American flag undercuts the satire in her lecture, reducing her character to a sexist cut-out of the stereotypes about gun-ownership and women that she is challenging.

[9] Similar contextual framing of Corsicana residents as right wing using shots of the American flag are evident throughout the show.

Conclusion

Cheer positions itself as an antidote to sexualized, misogynistic depictions of cheerleaders perpetrated by popular culture and has been applauded for its nominal progressivism. This project attempts to fill a gap in the glowing reviews and think-pieces the show has generated by analyzing the less than anodyne devices *Cheer* deploys to undermine women characters and working people. *Cheer* uses a plurality of framing methods—metaphorical, contextual, and technical—to crop the complex identities of women characters and depict them as human props. The series deploys sweeping, classist depictions of Corsicana residents as a foil to the feminized world of cheer. These portrayals revive the trope of the backwards south to backdate the small town as a rural, regressive space. By mobilizing such representations of working-class people and relatively powerful women to forefront the most salient aspects of sexism surrounding cheerleading, the show ultimately replicates misogyny in screen culture.

I have pulled from a variety of theoretical frameworks to deconstruct *Cheer's* multifarious but recycled sexist devices and to revivify the nuanced performances of certain women characters. Reductive depictions of complex identities perpetuate limiting definitions of subjectivity, leading to alienation among demographic groups and acting as a fallacious explanation for systemic oppression. Reading against the grain and breaking down deceptive storytelling techniques is a viewing strategy that enables spectators to perceive an increased range of experience on screen, and lend depth to their understanding of others.

By reading in this way, it is possible to identify Monica Aldama's prognostic analysis of the impact of toxic body culture in the cheer world, Morgan Simianer's complex performance of her lived experience of patriarchal beauty standards, Lexi Brumback's critique of economic inequality, and Amanda Morrison's disidentificatory dismissal of Red American culture and reductive femininity.

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