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Paradise Under the Field House Lights: A Teacher-Researcher Study around Gender Constructions in the Public High School

By Carolyn Fortuna, Independent Scholar

The Thanksgiving Pep Rally: Setting and Context

As I escorted my students into the Fairfield High School (FHS), football-shaped field house, we jostled each other through the narrow dark metal doors and inhaled a maelstrom of bad breath, stale locker room sweat, and overzealous Light Blue from Dolce & Gabbana. The boom-boom-boom of bass speakers pummeled the crowd in a raucous, off-key greeting. Four FHS youth, dressed in oversized black plastic sunglasses, tight Nike mesh-lined shorts, and long sleeved FHS jerseys, hopped and strummed and pounded their guitars and drums with glee.

The 50' high field house ceiling was punctuated with harsh light bulbs in metal cages and a long network of interlaced metal. I turned left to observe the configuration of students, distinguished by class according to color, in the risers of bleachers. Students hollered to each other across the vacuum, teachers circulated and implored students to sit, and the din grew and took on a life of its own as the full population totals of 1490 FHS students and 120 faculty members found their places.

Fairfield is a northeastern suburban U.S. community, southwest of its state capital, with a population of 29,500. Its citizens are, on the whole, white, European-American, educated rail commuters with a median family household income of \$100,678. In the Fairfield youth community, a "normal" high school student lives in a \$390,900 home; is college-bound; is Catholic; plays sports or participates in music

and theater arts; commonly travels with family members outside the region; obtains a driver's license at age 16; has a Facebook page; and brings a cellphone to school. Thus, given these demographics, I call the participants in this teacher-researcher study "privileged" because they benefit from the dominant systems, structures, and institutions of U.S. society, especially as regards race, gender, and socioeconomic status. I call upon McIntosh' (1997) definition of privilege as "unearned advantages" and "conferred dominance" (p. 79) in this teacher-researcher study.

The event to which they and I were drawn was the annual Thanksgiving Pep Rally, a Fairfield narrative drawn from the ritual realm. Rituals are embedded and repeated practices and performances. Among the events for the afternoon were a parade of Fairfield fall athletes; an alto's resonant rendition of the National Anthem; a teacher-student volleyball game; a tug of war between junior and senior class designees; and, a jostling contest among the three male and one female class presidents, all of whom were ensconced within oversized and disproportionately weighted animal cartoon costumes.

The lithe, muscular, and all-female Junior Varsity and Varsity cheerleading squads also performed. They ran, stopped, and pirouetted. They leaped, catapulted, stood in tiers of three, of six, of twelve. They yelled in unison and strutted in synchronization to the background techno music. They smiled broadly and stood

erect after their spinning and high-flying dismounts.

Finally, about thirty senior males emerged from four quadrants of the field house onto the central matted stage. Many of these “Senior Boys,” as the group was known, were dressed in black sunglasses, long sleeved white t-shirts, glossy blue and white cheerleading jackets, very tight tights, and short skirts.

The Senior Boys ran to various positions on the enormous mat. A robust hip-hop song filled the field house. They posed with hands on hips and began to prance. They leaned forward and shook their chests. Clawing each other as they mounted into a haphazard tier, the Boys grimaced: their faces were masks that were drawn with contempt. Their snarls glistened with an intensity that decried any aesthetic beauty within linked human forms.

The audience howled in undulating waves of laughter and consent.

From the outer edges of the mats, the Senior Boys thrust themselves toward each other in a series of hip undulations, chest shakes, somersaults, cartwheels, tummy rubs, butt squeezes, and lifts - and the lifts occurred without proper support, spotting, or dismounts. The crowd roared; the air thickened. The Senior Boys grabbed each others’ butts and sprang into impromptu hugs. Some Senior Boys pulled their shirts off in a tug and swung them around their heads.

Quickly, as the performance ended, the Senior Boys shook off the façades and proceeded to smack, push, slap, and hip-check each other as they took final bows to their adoring crowd.

The Role of a Teacher-Researcher

I am a teacher-researcher. Like many teachers, I design lesson plans, implement constructivist learning events in the classroom, and grade projects and papers. But I am also a qualitative researcher. I decided to remain in the classroom after obtaining my Ph. D. in education so that I could impact students in ways that I feel are beyond the reach of an administrator. My most

important data collection device has always been my low-tech teacher journal. A teacher journal allows me to create an account of classroom life where dialogic discourse, offhand remarks, lesson outlines, administrative sessions, and student social conversations become a permanent, written record. I am interested in the ways that my students and the students in the high school in which I teach react to the cultural contexts of their learning and lives.

Sometimes those cultural contexts are embedded in my social justice praxis, in which I try to inspire equity for all through deconstruction of dominant systems, structures, and institutions in society with my students. At other times, I frame my research around the contexts of the upper-middle class youth culture that swirls and pulses each day in the hallways and public areas of FHS. And, of course, the extent of my pedagogical reach and of the Fairfield youths’ public presentation of selves is necessarily guided and limited by our public school administration and institutional rules and regulations around public education.

I taught for nine years at the middle level in Fairfield before transferring to the high school. I felt much like a freshman in that first year as I witnessed many rituals with which I had little to no familiarity. As an initial outsider, I was unaccustomed to these expected habits and traditions. College essays and SAT prep, spirit week, theatrical parodies of students and faculty, class ring sales, administrative lock-down drug searches with dogs, a lunchroom of students divided by invisible lines according to grade level - each had a “we’ve always done it this way,” ritualized construction.

Ritualized performances in the public school reinforce expectations of behavior. Think: Round-robin reading. Bell schedules. Age-based classrooms. Homework. Authority, based in texts and teachers. I consider educational practices to be rituals for two reasons. First, rituals are ceremonial practices with precedents in customs and culture. Second, symbolic power is embedded in rituals. U.S. public schools utilize rituals because order is perceived as a problem in public education - schools are

connected to multiple groups with different interests. To assuage diverse constituents, policy makers and administrators, in part, ground their policies in rituals to establish and preserve continuity across grade levels and school years.

One ritual that I have always found difficult to wrap my head around at FHS has been the Senior Boys Dance component of the Thanksgiving Pep Rally. Weren't some of the students who were its core participants also exposed to social justice philosophy in my classroom? Hadn't we examined the mythology of the American Dream in our dramatization of Wilder's *Our Town*? Weren't social class structures the students' most lively area of inquiry in *Wuthering Heights*? Hadn't we attempted to transcend Conrad's lovely prose in *Heart of Darkness* to uncover its insidious racism? Didn't we assume critical distance from Nora's child-like behaviors in *A Doll's House* to identity and examine patriarchal structures in society?

Why, then, after the illuminations from our collaborations, were so many of my students participating in or enraptured by the Senior Boys Dance? That question is the foundation for the teacher-research I present in this paper. I carried my journal into the field house, pulled up a piece of parquet floor, and scribbled with my rolling writer.

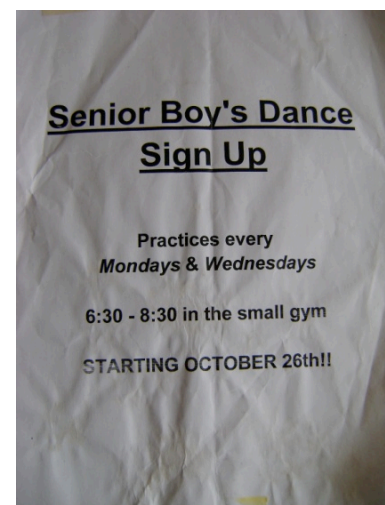
What's Gender Got to Do with It?

In a way that makes clear the links between popular culture rituals and spectacle, the Thanksgiving Pep Rally was complete only after the final performance of the Senior Boys' Dance. Spectacles are public sphere dramatic displays of culture, so, when the ritual of the Senior Boys Dance drew out males from a mélange of high status male varsity sports teams, it was a way of performing history and reproducing cultural traditions. The Senior Boys Dance was a lampoon text: a dance-cheerleading-performance space composition narrated before the assembled FHS community. The Senior Boys Dance overtly mimicked the varsity female cheerleaders in an appropriation of their attire and deportment. The satire reinforced the condition of being male by denigrating the condition of being female. The spectacle was a text that not only



spoke to Enlightenment ideology, in which females are slower and weaker than males, but it also rejected the contested space of cheerleader as athlete equivalent to male athlete.

The Senior Boys drew upon what Connell (1987) calls "hegemonic masculinity" to reproduce patriarchal power and prestige in two ways. First, the Senior Boys performed cheerleading as a trivialized activity in which female cheerleaders were "precisely what American society expects from a delightful little girl" (Bennett, 1990, p. 5): enthusiasm, curiosity, and friendliness. Second, with their burlesque renditions, the Senior Boys characterized the female cheerleaders as "sexually promiscuous" (Grindstaff & West, 2006, p. 504), in keeping with dominant discourses around female athletes' "feminine beauty and objectified status as particular kinds of commodities" (Banet-Weiser, 2003, p. 112). Taken together, the cheerleader-as-child and woman-as-sexual-object depictions rendered "the codes by which gendered identities and practices are constructed particularly visible" (Grindstaff and West, 2006, p. 514) to the culturally curious and eager student body.



The Senior Boys' epistemologies drew from their patriarchal acculturation, in which they learned that behavioral sex differences spring from the differential social roles inhabited by females and males (Eagly, Wood, & Dickman, 2000). Part of the reason why the Senior Boys were able to diminish their female peers through ritualized spectacle is due to a dominant patriarchal discourse around which female sports have been situated in the United States. Female sports have commonly been classified as individual activities that emphasize aesthetics, are pleasing to watch, involve accuracy but not strength, and do not involve bodily contact. Acceptable sports for men involve bodily contact, strength, aggression, and face-to-face competition.

Thus, the Senior Boys' representations of female cheerleaders as the *Other* was culturally transmitted and reproduced. Because males in western society are propelled to exhibit masculine gender role agentic qualities and females are expected to exhibit feminine gender role communal qualities (Wood & Eagly, 2002), the Senior Boys Dance was a way to do and display gender as power through sports.

Socio-Historic Contexts of the Female

Indeed, it was not only the Senior Boys who designed the Dance. In the days preceding the performance, several Varsity Cheerleaders had assisted the Senior Boys to master (pun intended) a limited repertoire of acrobatics, rhythmic moves, and dance steps. Through supporting the Senior Boys in their performance of female behavior and identity, the Varsity Cheerleaders, with expertise accredited through several national championships, fell victim to a dominant patriarchal pattern of subjugation. Freire (1992) calls this an "oppressive reality" that "absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge" consciousness (p. 36). Cheerleading is a space where adolescent females "do" gender in the service of producing particular social arrangements. The Varsity Cheerleaders' rational decisions were bonded to socio-historical contexts in which females are nurturers and selfless beings. As part of a cultural group with power, the all-male Senior Boys troupe assumed that they

could learn and perform culturally-designated female stunts with a scant few practices, and the Varsity Cheerleaders confirmed those beliefs, as the females had rarely imagined what hooks (2000, p. x) calls a "vision of mutuality" within their socially constructed roles as females in the U.S.

Over the past decade, female sports and female sports participation have reached a higher level of visibility and acceptability than ever before in mainstream U.S. society. However, there is little evidence suggesting that male perceptions of female athletes have changed. Senior males whom I surveyed for this study expressed an overwhelming enthusiasm for the Dance as a way to mimic "the Varsity Cheerleaders in a positive way."

Part of this inertia is derived from pervasive media messages around females and athletics. Harrison and Lynch (2005) note how "commentators continue to describe female athletes in terms of nonathletic characteristics, such as personality, background, looks, and appearance, whereas male athletes are most commonly described in terms of their physicality and athleticism" (p. 229). By extension, the Senior Boys depicted male competitions and activities in general as better and superior than female competitions and activities due to the larger social contexts of patriarchal privilege that continue to separate and limit females from the same opportunities that males experiences. The Varsity Cheerleaders conferred their comprehension of and permission to perpetuate patriarchal power through their contributions to the Senior Boys Dance.

Gender-Bending or Identity Work of Dominance?

In this new millennium, it might be easy to dismiss the Senior Boys' Dance as little more than a transitory gender-bending experience. Opportunities to try on other identities can infuse individuals with fresh definitions of our essential selves. For many people, gender-bending in the public sphere can be a liberating, educational, or validating experience, or all three. Gender-bending is boundary work and, as the Senior Boys matched their doing of gender in cheerleading with their gendered identities and beliefs (Grindstaff & West, 2006), they had the

capacity to play out, among other choices, the histories of institutionalized misogyny or progressive liberation.

Drawing on Fairclough's (2003) work around textuality, I contend that the Senior Boys Dance offered mediation, or a "movement of meaning - from one social practice to another, from one event to another, from one text to another" (p. 30). In this Thanksgiving Pep Rally context, the Senior Boys' Dance was a performance that spoke to the many texts of what it means to be a youth in the U.S. Much more than mere gender-bending, the Dance was a semiotic reality, or a means for youth to perceive their identities as juxtaposed among signs of youth culture. Eco (1976) argues that, through conventionality, iconic representation appears to be more true than real experience. As a recontextualization, or a message that extracted text, signs, or meaning from one context and molded it into another context, the Dance became a *mélange* of many youth texts. The Senior Boys Dance drew upon youth cultural texts such as teen films, magazine covers, sports narratives, video game representations, and popular music in that it defined a particular, patriarchal definition of youth identity. The Dance was one text within a network of many youth texts that transmitted gendered ways of being.

Youth identity is not a static self, but, rather, a multifaceted and dynamic representation; youth identity is fluid, pliable, and variable. Youth position themselves and are positioned in relation to varied social practices. Identity as performed through the Senior Boys Dance was a "signifier of the self" (Ezzell, 2009). As they watched, the audience observed the boundary work of the Senior Boys. Attribution theory proposes that individuals attribute their behaviors and others' behaviors to internal or external causes. Because humans look to models for same-sex behaviors when situations are "ambiguous or confusing" (Harrison & Lynch, 2005, p. 228), high school students in the audience had an opportunity, through ritual, to learn and accommodate the culturally-approved gender politics of athletics and contemporary western life. The Senior Boys Dance was a strong message about gender identity, indeed.

Schools as Institutions of Reproduction of Patriarchy

Youth activities like the Senior Boys Dance might be interpreted as youth rebellion in resistance to prevailing power relations. Because of its ritualized socio-historical contexts, however, I argue that the Dance represented informed and deliberate action. The Senior Boys Dance at the Thanksgiving Pep Rally was an event that depicted patriarchal ways of knowing the world. As Lorber (1994) argues, people do not simply import their gendered selves into neutral institutions; rather, institutions are themselves gendered. Schools are institutions and, because the FHS administration approved the performance beforehand, the Senior Boys Dance contributed "to the reproduction of the structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 487) in a transference of cultural capital.

On one hand, most FHS authority figures were caring adults who sought only the best for the student population they supervised. But, even as they created and implemented policies to assure a safe and secure school learning climate - such as strict tolerance policies, anti-bullying programs, and outreach initiatives like Friends of Rachel - FHS authority figures also attempted to mold youths' worldviews. Ubiquitous messages represented the Fairfield community's predominantly upper middle class, privileged lives as "normal." This is the work of hegemony and, according to Fairclough, "[s]eeking hegemony is a matter of seeking to universalize particular meanings in the service of achieving and maintaining dominance, and this is ideological work" (2003, p. 58). Authoritarian recontextualizations around gender glossed over the rarified world of privilege and the reproduction of dominant ideologies in Fairfield society. Texts like the Senior Boys Dance advanced definitions of "normal" and "privileged" and soothed the Fairfield upper middle class community constituency.

Authoritarian endorsements of social constructions of gender transcend U.S. high school campuses. As a solidarity device, depictions of sports and athletes work in U.S. society in conjunction with a variety of other solidarity supplies - fast food consumption, alcohol advertising, and sports merchandising, for

example - to bind people together. With local cable television video and numerous private cameras rolling, the Senior Boys taught the audience a hegemonic text and pathway for socially acceptable gender behavior in the ritual, media, and social realms of U.S. society.

Reflections

I use this data to fix attention on the relationship among the public and popular youth social domains and the social construction of gender. Humans are sociocultural beings, and our dependence on others provides us with “physical and cognitive tools” for survival (Wortham, 2006, p. 15). As a ritual, the Senior Boys’ Dance performance remained faithful to socialized and trivialized texts around the female gender. Power differentials were manifested in the recursive practice of the Senior Boys Dance and power differentials oriented, constructed, and facilitated the gestalt of student body glee over the Seniors Boys’ Dance performance.

Male athletes’ social positions were highly prized and provided all FHS males with power over the less prized positions of females. Privileged male students moved in worlds where the dynamics of conscious and unconscious oppression went unnoticed. Male power, gender inequity, and female disadvantage are institutional features at FHS. The FHS school authorities’ institutional policies and practices allocate privilege and advantages to males and subordination and disadvantages to females.

Several months have passed since the Thanksgiving Pep Rally. A fierce winter of biweekly snowstorms has begun to give way to the arrival of red spring sheen on our New England deciduous trees. The season of renewal is upon us. Recognizing that the passage of time infuses us with opportunities to assume critical distance, I asked four classes of seniors in my sports and popular culture English class elective, both male and female, to share their impressions of the Senior Boys Dance. I wondered if they would compare the spectacle of the Dance to the identities of the cherished females in their lives and revisit their original enthusiasm in a new context of social justice awareness. I was curious as to their comprehension of their own privilege or the ways that individuals with varying status in society

negotiated and positioned themselves in order to gain voice.

Throughout talks that I had with my students around the Senior Boys Dance, it became clear that the Senior Boys Dance is a ritual that will continue at FHS. No one wanted to see it deleted from future Thanksgiving Pep Rallies. Indeed, few students had heard others - including faculty members - critique the Dance. Whether female or male, the students were uncertain about how much the Senior Boys Dance was a performance of gender-bending. Very few students, moreover, felt that there should be a Senior Girls Dance in which the females would wear football uniforms and mimic the football players. The females who confirmed that they had participated in a substantial way in previous Senior Boys Dances, however, were torn as to whether the Senior Boys Dance mimics the cheerleaders in a positive way. Most of the females who did not participate in the Dance acknowledged that our school offers more privileges to males than females. Males held conflicting views as to whether our school offers males or females more privileges.

Reproducing ritualized structures of patriarchy for the student body prior to a five-day recess took precedence over dialogicality about the body as material representation of identity. FHS seemed to be an institution that was “internally consistent, conflict-free, fixed, and unchanging” (Martin, 2004, p. 1253), yet roiling waves of patriarchal power, gender inequalities, privilege, and disadvantage were its contradictory institutional beacons. It was evident that it would be quite an endeavor for females athletes like cheerleaders to attempt to cross the borderlands of dominant constructions of gender. It was easier for females - whether athletes or not - to identify with or be silent about the dominant patriarchal messages.

Adults at FHS had the capacity to challenge the cultural imprints and educational practices that had served to define dominant heteronormative masculinity, but most had not. The data in this paper exemplifies how public schools as institutions reinforce gender constructions in what Haraway calls “[m]oves in a fully textualized and coded world” (1988, p. 577). Until U.S. institutions embrace an existentialist philosophy in which an

awareness of and commitment to what we are all doing and how we are all living becomes pervasive, ritualized practices like the Senior Boys Dance will continue to reinforce dominant social constructions of gender .

Possible Steps Toward New Understandings of Gender and Equality for All

Challenges like these confront me as a teacher and researcher. A pattern exists at FHS where school authority figures focus on consumerism, middle class behaviors, and success in annual yearly progress on standardized tests. In doing so, they perpetuate visions of “normal” and “privileged” without addressing or valuing a plethora of other ways of being.

I assert that students can become hope-filled when they are able to read and recontextualize their worlds in meaningful ways through critical literacy pedagogy and a foundation of multimodal, multiliterate, and transcultural learning experiences. I am also aware that my positioning as a social justice educator often sets me apart from my colleagues in what might be categorized as an Outsider status. If I were to succumb to dominant power in public education, however, I would lose my essential joie de vivre as a teacher and as a guide to youth toward a world that might and should be. I continue to be committed to social justice pedagogy and its inherent goal of equity for all. I acquiesce to the struggle voluntarily, readily, and warily.

I acknowledge that the hope and positive consequences of my praxis are indirect, probably delayed, and largely invisible. Yet, I perceive some sparks of resistance and rising up of youth as signs of revelation. Can I, as a public school social justice educator, reach all students or eliminate individualism as a mechanism to wield power and to suppress others? No, that would be an unrealistic goal that would, in all likelihood, push me toward burn out and early retirement. Rather, I view social justice pedagogy as a rising wave of positive action; a path along the way but not the destination; a temporary, partial, and sometimes flawed series of achievements; and, more than anything, hope in the

journey toward a paradise of an equitable world for all.

In the same way that Solnit (2004) argues that an activist “seeks to democratize the world, to share power, to protect difference and complexity” (p. 18), I feel that to educate is to illuminate youth about possibilities for knowing their worlds in new, breathtaking, complex, and confounding ways. When I ask students to interrogate their literacy and life practices against a backdrop of dominant ideologies of U.S. society, youth have to reconcile school authority, their own privilege, a mandated curriculum, and critical pedagogy contexts to shape the meaning and quality of their learning experiences. Such learning experiences can be fluid, dissonant, or sometimes epiphany-sparked processes.

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