

Give Me An F: Radical Cheerleading and Feminist Performance

Radical Cheerleading is a feminist performance and protest—a kind of intervention in political demonstration ('serious') and a subversion of cheerleading ('anti-feminist'). By taking pieces of political protest and sport cheerleading—anarchist "cheers" and choreographed dance—Radical Cheerleading creates unexpected political strategies and bodily acts. The first Radical Cheerbook, published as an independent zine in 1997, introduces Radical Cheerleading as "activism with pom-poms and middle fingers extended. It's screaming fuck capitalism while doing a split." The first Radical Cheerleading squad formed in 1996 when the Floridian sisters Cara, Aimee and Colleen Jennings infused junior-high cheerleading skills with anarchist politics. Cheerleading brought a renewed feminist excitement to boring, male-dominated demonstrations. In 1997 the sisters began publishing Cheerbooks and performing publicly, and soon Radical Cheerleading squads formed across the United States and in a few international cities.

I joined a Radical Cheerleading squad in 1999, and while I learned to choreograph dance routines, write cheers, and even build a pyramid, I also experienced the squad as cultivating a queer sensibility and a feminist ethics. As my friend and sister cheerleader Mary Xmas says, "Cheerleading is not just a way to do something. It's a community. It's a place in the world you can fit into and feel like you're mirrored on all sides. It's a safe space to feel feminine and badass." Archiving Radical Cheerleading as a feminist practice, community, and affect is a passionate imperative for me. Through documentation of informal Radical Cheerleading archives—zines, photographs and cheers—and through interviews with Mary Xmas, I am tracing the history of the movement and creating an archive. Like Ann Cvetkovich,

I was driven by the compulsion to document that is, so frequently, I think engendered by the ephemerality of queer communities and counterpublics; alongside the fierce conviction of how meaningful and palpable these alternative lifeworlds can be lies the fear that they will remain invisible or lost (2003: 436).

In documenting the Radical Cheerleading movement, I have worked with primary documents, photographs, videos, websites, personal testimony and correspondence, and finally decided to present these findings as an interview. I am hoping to portray the depth of the connection I feel to the subject, as well as the 'informant,' and to create a compelling adventure for the reader.

Jeanne: I'd like to talk about processes of archiving, and how and why we document Radical Cheerleading. I imagine our documentation as an act of intimate archiving because as Radical Cheerleaders we possess a kind of investment and hope in RC and in its uses and reception. Unlike auto-ethnography, our political project takes the collective spirit of Radical Cheerleading as a directive, by generating a document together.

Mary: Absolutely. Revolutionary movements and feminist projects can disappear after a while. If it's not in the mass media—and actually, we have been written up in *Newsweek* and lots of big magazines—but that doesn't count, it's not real. When you see the pictures that I have and the cheerbooks, that's when you get the real impression. If this stuff never goes anywhere it never turns into a website or a book. It just disappears and that is so sad.

Jeanne: You are in possession of an incredible archive—in these filing cabinets you're storing photographs, flyers and press—and there're many people who are inadvertently preserving radical cheerleading through personal archives. Positive or negative, it's difficult to access this kind of archive; finding you and these filing cabinets is different than visiting the New York Public Library, and of course your archive isn't financially supported or understood as valuable. Aside from community archiving, the mainstream press has documented Radical Cheerleading.

Mary: That's a false archive. There's a history that's set down, that's accessible, that doesn't really represent what it is. I want to fight to match that history with the one we have that is real and that does reflect what Radical Cheerleading is.

Jeanne: That's why I'm doing this, because I have the access and opportunity.

Mary: And your project will be another part of our archive, something to eventually be in a book or a magazine. It's different when a Radical Cheerleading is writing about us.

Jeanne: I also like that the collective spirit of Radical Cheerleading values all our voices. If we write zines or academic articles, or make documentaries, take photographs—no one form of expression isn't privileged.

Mary: Wow, there are so many times I wish I had had a camera. My photographs are really incomplete.

Jeanne: What's missing?

Mary: The Taco Bell protest in Auburn, Alabama in the Summer of 2001. It was totally amazing. There was a Radical Cheerleading workshop at the Southern Girls Convention on a college campus in Auburn. There were fifty Radical Cheerleaders. Afterwards somebody called attention to the crowd and said she was going to stage an action at the Taco Bell down the street. It was about the tomato farmers that Taco Bell subcontracts not being paid livable wages. Despite inflation their wages haven't changed significantly since the 1970s. It was the first time I was at an action that didn't just have Radical Cheerleaders, but was organized entirely by Radical Cheerleaders. There were folks from the community of Auburn, college-aged people, younger women, working on an incredible labor action. That was maybe the most fun thing in my life. The whole action was done in a Radical Cheerleading style: we stormed through the Taco Bell and climbed on the registers, the table tops, the counter, and we were stopping and clapping just making rhythms and shouting chants. Fifty cheerleaders took over the Taco Bell and handed out literature. It really took people by surprise. I always want to see people shocked by so-called sweet young ladies, all-American teenage girls having something really intelligent to say, something that is going to change things. It was in this racist, conservative environment and we were getting weird looks for just walking down the street in Auburn, Alabama, because half of us are trans or just don't look normative gender-wise. I felt so proud of to be a part of "this side"—the lefties and anarchists. I live for that moment. It's one of those moments you don't care if you live the rest of your life because in that moment you are satisfied.

Jeanne: I reminded right now of why oral history is so important.

Mary: Especially for Radical Cheerleaders. A lot of time you can't photograph what you're doing, it's illegal.

Jeanne: Radical Cheerleading is unique as a demonstration of politics and performance. Radical Cheerleading engages political action through the cooptation of cheerleading as a feminist performance strategy, and still I'm struggling with how to define Radical Cheerleading. Is Radical Cheerleading performance art? Protest?

Mary: It needs a word like...conglomeration.

Jeanne: Hybrid!

Mary: Yes, it's a hybrid medium. It's a form of media. It's not just a way to do something. It's a community. It's a place in the world you can fit into and feel like you're mirrored on all sides. It's a safe space to feel feminine and badass. To explore gender, and to not have to feel feminine to be a part of a crew of women.

Jeanne: It's hard to describe something that references our affective lives. It's actually been difficult for me to describe Radical Cheerleading to my classmates, and to explain why I feel so passionately about archiving.

Mary: That makes total sense to me. Like recently I got a ride from a friend of a friend, this guy who knew about my doing Radical Cheerleading, and he asked me about it. But I could tell from his tone of voice that he was disdainful. I couldn't really talk about it, and I didn't want to try to describe Radical Cheerleading to him or do a cheer to show him because really it's a community thing. If I want to describe it, well I really want someone to see

it in the context of the community and a squad of cheerleaders. Only then will someone see that it's a grouping of different feminists with different gender expressions and that it can be so freeing to be together. It's about the support we give each other more than the actions we're doing. It's about feminist backup. When someone sees it, they understand immediately. It's so effective visually.

Jeanne: As queers and as feminists invested in non-normative spaces and identities, we know personally the problematics of archiving subculture and its practices—cooptation, negative press, lost momentum, infighting, and even the destruction of communities. Radical Cheerleading is a democratizing performance protest—performed at public demonstrations, and consciously accessible in its zines, websites, and affordable do-it-yourself style—but in what ways has documenting RC been destructive to the survival of the movement?

Mary: The big heyday of press attention was in 2001, and that was when we were in *Ms. Magazine*, *Spin*, *Bust*, *The New York Times*, *Venus Zine* – every month it seemed like a new magazine article would appear. It was exciting, but it also created problems. One thing that came out of it was that we were offered a book deal with Soft Skull Press. We decided not to do it. One of the difficult things that all these media options brought up was the question of why we would want media attention. What were we hoping to get out of it? And because if we're a group that's aligned with certain radical politics then the groups we work with should probably be aligned with those politics too. So every time media opportunities came up we had to ask ourselves, is this magazine or publishing company radical, do we support what they do? So we ended up not doing a book because at the time the information we had was that Soft Skull wasn't the company we wanted to

work with. But it was frustrating because we ended up doing media with magazines that are fucked up. *Spin* is not radical nor is it feminist; it's corporate. But we did it because it's term, and because the article was written by Sarah Jacobson [feminist filmmaker]. Anyway, it was frustrating and it still is frustrating that we didn't put out the book because we had an opportunity to document our own culture. It's hard to ask all these questions about every move you want to make as a group because you can end up not making any moves at all. So last year when Aimee [Jennings] moved from Florida to New York we talked about making the book and then finding a publisher. But we don't get paid very much for what we do, and you have to work a lot to make a book, and it hasn't ended up happening. It's frustrating because it's much easier to do temporary media, media that isn't self-constructed. It's easier to have someone else do it who already has the money or is going to get paid to write an article. Being able to document your own movement is all about economics.

Jeanne: The latest article on Radical Cheerleading came out in *Glamour*, right?

Mary: Yeah, it's *British Glamour*, the May or June issue. It's on newsstands right now. I can't remember who's on the cover.

Jeanne: You were interviewed by *Glamour*, weren't you?

Mary: Yeah. This woman, Liz Scarf, had interviewed me and she had a lot of questions and I wrote her back via email really long answers. Really intimate stuff, basic facts and historical stuff about Radical Cheerleading. I was so annoyed because she didn't use anything I said. I mean, we don't need to do media. It's self-propagating. And there's nothing in it for us.

We don't get paid. I hate when I take time to talk to big media sources and they don't use it; the articles are always the same. I tried really hard to get her to talk about fashion, but she didn't address it at all. It is just a basic article so similar to all the other ones that introduces Radical Cheerleading as a concept and then follows a squad for a day to see what they do. It doesn't delve into the deeper issues or make any connections between the rest of the movement and the history of revolutionary activism. This kind of reporting doesn't make young women want to do something, get involved in something like Radical Cheerleading. It doesn't talk about the cheer "Shoot the Rapist" and what it means to be a rape survivor, and how activism is an important part of survival. Oh, and the craziest part is that they air brushed out all the girls' armpit hair! I know these girls and they have big bushy armpits. I mean, what can you really say about it?

Jeanne: So offensive!

Mary: It's weird to me because if you're talking shit about one of their advertisers, they can't print that. Like if we're talking about burning Tampax to the ground and Tampax advertises in *Glamour*, I can understand that. But why can't they print pictures of women with body hair? Is someone going to take advertising money away if they do that? Is some company going to stop advertising in the magazine? I mean it's just irrational. It's just an enforcement of the beauty standard. It has to be that way and there is no question. Fuck, I'm going to get all fired up by the end of this conversation!

Jeanne: Radical Cheerleading opened up my experience of activism—by physicalizing politics, incorporating multi-issue politics of gender and sexuality, race, class and labor, and ability, and by creating non-normative

communities. With the understanding that 'safety' is often a condition of sameness, Radical Cheerleading squads have created communities out of a politics of 'difference.' How has Radical Cheerleading figured in your experience of activism, and in your relationship to feminist utopias?

Mary: Men are a dominant presence in activism, as in everything, and the squatter and anarchist scenes I have always been a part of are incredibly macho. I started craving a feminist crew, and I wanted to start a feminist gang so I organized the first Radical Cheerleading squad in New York City. Feminism is something people need in their lives, they crave it, and when given the opportunity they take it. It's that instantaneous. I need it now and I can have it now. Instant backup. You have your fucking squad and everyone is badass, you know?

Jeanne: I began cheering in 1999, my first year in college. I already belonged to four or five activist groups, and I attended meetings almost daily. When I joined the Radical Cheerleading squad I experienced a coalescing of activism on and through my body: the squad espoused the divergent political values I usually encountered in issue-specific meetings for the transgender committee, peer sexuality educators, united for anti-racist action, and SAFE. The emotional stress of being an activist had accumulated in my body, and through cheering I began to physicalize my politics and relieve tension. Radical Cheerleading became the most joyful way to express my activism in all its articulations.

Mary: I had the same experience. Radical Cheerleading brought together different sides of myself that couldn't be reconciled. It reconciled the really feminist needs and desires and expressions that I have, and my experiences, the way I totally look at the world through feminist eyes. I

can't ever change that. I like it, and it's the most important thing in the world to me; the interpretation changes, but feminism is always a constant. The other part of me is in really girly experiences that I've had. Like I've sold my looks through modeling and sex work and just been really femme-y a lot and used it in relationships. I have lived my life as a really girly person most of the time. It's hard to identify with the really girly parts of myself and not be filled with guilt in a feminist way. In my personal life it comes up everyday—can I handle wearing fishnets and getting harassed? Radical Cheerleading, like being a femme queer person, is about a decision to put yourself out there as who you are, with your short skirt or whatever and still feel like there's no excuse for getting harassed or getting sexually assaulted. Like saying, "You have to respect me and not be violent towards me." That I can have a sexuality and I can perform with it, work off of it, do whatever and still be able to be considered a strong and intelligent person, and still be safe.

Jeanne: I'm so glad, because I believe Radical Cheerleading is more than performance art and protest; as a practice it reflects a queer sensibility and feminist ethics.

Mary: It's a sensibility, like femme, it is more than just expression with a feminine twist. It's more than just girly-ness and more than just feminism. It's trying to reclaim everything that's been taken away from you. Radical Cheerleading is like saying fuck what everybody has said to me, I'm going to take the good in everything I've been taught and fuck the rest. It's fun to have long hair and pigtails but I don't have to shave. It's about the best parts of being a woman, for me. I don't think I could be sane without Radical Cheerleading. It's one of the only thing that makes you feel okay to be girly and also makes you feel like you can defend yourself.

Jeanne: Radical Cheerleading politics manifest in live demonstrations, zines, do-it-yourself style and community building, but politics are perhaps most visible in the writing and language of cheers.

Mary: The thing about an effective cheer, and most are effective, is that there's still an element of creativity and the creative process involved. So some cheers are stronger than others, like how some squads are really physical while others don't dress up or use outfits or anything. What's so strong about the cheers is that they're written in a language that everyone can understand.

Jeanne: The cheers trouble normative gender roles and women's passivity; for example, the cheer "Shoot the Rapist" exploits women's profanity and violence.

Mary: A lot of people react to the violence in "Shoot the Rapist."

Jeanne: Actually, when I initially presented my work on Radical Cheerleading for a class on feminist ethnography, the professor described the cheer as "pretty violent stuff."

Mary: So she judged the content of the cheer. That doesn't seem fair.

Jeanne: I'm reminded of your experience protesting Taco Bell in Auburn, Alabama – you said that you like the way Radical Cheerleading challenges mainstream notions of "sweet young women" and "all-American girls." In fact, young women can and do defy normative femininity by taking control of their own safety.

Mary: "Shoot the Rapist" is a little goofy, I mean it's a cheer so it's only a theoretical statement. But it's also a serious statement, that rape is violent. As a rape survivor, my experience of rape was very violent. You could turn the violence of rape around by responding with violence. You could take care of it. You could stop someone from raping you with a gun. I know a lot of women who would prefer to shoot someone than be raped. It's your choice to make. The statement the cheer makes is that rape needs to be taken more seriously as a violent act, not as the woman's fault or as a sexual act or as something that women can't stop. I feel so empowered by that cheer. I have to do it over and over and over again, because of what happened to me, because a lot of people don't understand. But some people do understand and back me up and understand the violence and the feelings of revenge. I know if you had to shoot someone or get raped, I know what the choice would be. It's all true what the cheer says, but hello! It's also just a cheer. We absorb so much violence against women in our culture, but we can't understand violence against men. It's more uncommon. There should be more violence against men. Can you put that in your paper? Can you title the paper "More violence against men, please?"

Jeanne: I would, but I wouldn't want anyone to think that you're joking. Let's talk about the Radical Cheerleader convergence at the Pro-Choice March for Women's Lives in Washington, D.C.

Mary: I went down with another New York City cheerleader, a woman who works with the Paper Tiger [TV collective], and we brought video cameras and equipment to shoot a documentary. We met up at Bluestockings [feminist bookstore] to talk about what we wanted the video to look like, and whose work we were inspired by. We wanted the video to be

interactive, and we wanted to have adventures and be in the camera because we're a part of it too. The march was organized by Planned Parenthood and NOW and NARAL, and it was huge, but within that the D.C. Radical Cheerleaders had organized a smaller march that was called the "Radical Cheer and Noise Block." Through email they invited people to participate in a march that was more anarchist in style, was illegal, and was all about cheering. So when I got there I was surprised by how many of us there were. It was totally separate, a few blocks away from the main march, and well over one thousand people participated. We eventually joined up with the main march and the crowd response was overwhelmingly positive. I've never seen so many Radical Cheerleaders visible and out in the streets. I saw cheerleaders from California, Seattle, Boston, Florida, Texas, Philadelphia, and New York. We ran up and down the crowd shooting video footage, doing interviews and talking to people about their involvement in cheering, what they thought about it. We really tried to get the basics. I was trying to keep track of all the friends that I never see except once a year at some protest. It is so easy for us to make our own media sometimes. I was also simultaneously keeping a diary of the day for a Polish cheer zine that is coming out by the Warsaw squad. We're here, and all we need to do is record it.

In August 2004 the New York City Radical Cheerleaders completed "Don't Let the System Get You Down—Cheer Up," a video documentary of the Radical Cheerbloc at the March for Women's Lives. The video screened just in time to celebrate and inspire the hundreds of Radical Cheerleaders who converged in New York to protest the Republican National Convention. You can see moves against the RNC in a video public service announcement online at www.nycradicalcheerleaders.org.

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