Dancing on the 50-Yard Line:
A Feminist Perspective of Drill Team

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Abstract

This paper explores drill team, the group of girls who dance in football half time shows, from a feminist perspective. Drill teams thrive across Texas due to the popularity of football and have created a pocket in the male sports arena for females to dance, but for the male gaze. The dancing girls present themselves in traditional Southern Belle fashion, seeming to perpetuate what Naomi Wolf labels the beauty myth in her nonfictional work *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women.* However, my experience as the director of a drill team in a Title 1 high school in rural Texas led me to believe that drill team also provides the opportunity for adolescent girls to become empowered, reclaim their bodies, and strive for success. As a self proclaimed feminist I wondered how this paradox was possible, an art form that is seemingly chauvinistic in presentation but that guides young girls in a feminist direction. This paper presents historical and experiential research regarding drill team scrutinized in relation to feminist theory on societies limited perspective of female bodies.

While fine and performing art teachers continually struggle to maintain an existence in American public schools, dance education is alive and well in Texas. Dance educators have the popularity of football to thank for their ever growing presence in the public school system. Friday night lights is not just the name of a popular television show, it refers to the dominant football culture in Texas. Every Friday night from August to December communities flock to football fields not only to watch the local high schools compete, but to see marching bands and dancers perform during the twenty eight minute half time show. The half time show features each of the competing schools' drum lines, bands, drill teams, and color guards performing a fourteen minute extravaganza, hoping to be more sensational than the opposing team's performance. Color guard is the group that throw riffles and flags in the air while dancing contemporary numbers and drill team is comprised of dancers that are known for their high kicks and splits, having a similar aesthetic to the Rockettes. Although many drill teams have male members, they are more traditionally all female and known for their Southern Belle aesthetic of being pretty, prim, proper ladies. At first glance these ladies may seem to promote stereotypical female appearances and gender roles, but this paper explores how drill team, through its' extensive training and female bonding, has provided opportunities for numerous young women to become successful, independent, individuals.

The research behind this paper began with and is most rooted in my experience teaching drill team in a Title 1 school with a violent history and a growing population of young girls who struggle with self esteem, many of whom start having families in their teen years. I entered the world of drill team just three years ago with only a concert dance background. I had been exploring feminism in my own dance choreography for nearly twenty years but knew nothing

about Texas drill. I imagined it to be something like cheerleading, not realizing how talented these young dancers were and how much they performed on and off the field. I was surprised by the diversity of the girls that joined my team, varying drastically in size, ability and ethnic background. As I watched the group develop I noticed that the vast majority of girls who were drawn to the program were not Southern Belles, far from it. Many of their identities revolved around their beauty and sexuality. The drill team program was a vehicle for these particular girls to reclaim their bodies, connect with other girls, and become empowered in many aspects of their lives. I wondered how the drill team, which seemed routed in traditional female stereotypes, could have such an empowering affect on the team. Did the drill team hide behind it's Southern Belle structure to give the girls opportunities to become empowered and and strive for success? This paper explores the history and paradox of drill team from a feminist perspective. It celebrates a tradition that has created social and career opportunities for women across the country, particularly in Texas.

My inquiry into the feminist aspects of drill team began with my preconceptions of what it was and how those preconceptions drastically changed. I began to consider myself a feminist after taking a women's studies course at Washington University in the early nineties. I was exploring contact improvisation, yoga and release technique in the dance room and was quite the rebel. I shaved my head but no other part of my body, threw away my bra and was loud about my opinions regarding women and society. I had a cousin at the time who danced on a drill team in Pennsylvania. My cousin had always been involved in cheerleading, pageantry and baton twirling, so I pictured her team to be a combination of these styles. It did not fit into my perspective of dance as a way to express one's feminist opinions and so I disregarded it as an art

form at the time. Twenty years later, after completing my MFA in Dance, I was recruited for a full time dance teaching job in a Title 1 public school in rural Texas. The catch was that I would need to coach their struggling drill team. I jumped at the challenge with my preconceptions of what was to come. My perspective on drill team changed dramatically that first year as I struggled to create a successful team with award winning dance routines out of a group of girls who were well known for their twerking abilities. Although pageantry, twirling and cheerleading did have something to do with the drill aesthetic, those skills did not encompass all that drill was. I gained recognition for my approach of using dance as a vehicle for dancers to strive for emotional and academic success in and outside of the classroom. I watched dance become the catalyst for a developmental shift in the young ladies I work with. They have become a sisterhood within an extremely negative community. They support each other as many of them overcome situations of abuse and low self esteem to become successful. I have watched students go from C averages or failing to being on the honor role. Students with drug addiction surrounding them at home have made choices so that they can be the first in their families to graduate high school or go to college. Drill team, as with many sports, is a reason for my at risk students to stay in school, to keep their grades up, and to stay out of trouble. It was clear to me that this program was providing a greater opportunity for the students but I began to question how that had come to be. Was this a unique situation to my school or was there something about the structure of drill team that was facilitating this type of emotional connection and transformative opportunity?

While researching the experiences of adolescent girls in public schools throughout America, I realized that the need for programs that reached out to the female population and help

build self esteem was not unique to my school. The American Association of University Women conducted a survey in 1990 that poled nearly 3,000 school children between fourth and tenth grade in twelve locations nationwide, asking questions about self esteem and student aspirations. They found that self-esteem in girls was dropping at an alarming rate in the pre adolescent through adolescent years. The survey posits that this drop in self esteem is caused by the marginalization of women in popular culture and the approach to teaching girls in the average classroom. Journalist, Peggy Orenstein was inspired by this survey to visit two middle schools with completely different demographics to observe and interview a group of eighth grade girls about their educational experiences and self esteem over a period of several months. She found alarming evidence that girls' self esteem was suffering in the classroom due to their educational interactions. She warns that "without a strong sense of self, girls will enter adulthood at a deficit: they will be less able to fulfill their potential, less willing to take on challenges, less willing to defy tradition in their career choices, which means sacrificing economic equity."[1] There is a need for a new approach to female directed learning in public education if we are to engage the female population so that they will strive for equanimity and success in their careers. For this reason, many programs and private schools have emerged to engage schoolgirls since the publication of Ms. Orenstein's book. As a public school teacher in the arts, I am fortunate that I do not teach a core subject and am able to focus on the whole child without being confined to learning that is focussed on standardized test achievement. When I meet my students for the first time, I tell them that I have two responsibilities as a dance educator. My first job is to teach them the fine art of dance including the history, various styles, how to perform, and how to critically analyze

[1] Orenstein, Peggy. "Introduction." *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-esteem, and the Confidence Gap*. New York: Doubleday, 1994. Xxxii. Print.

dance. My second job is to advocate for my students. I believe in guiding them in their academic lives as much as necessary to help them achieve more in school. Academic success is a requirement for dancers to perform in any drill team event, according to the University Interscholastic League. Although I may have the approach of being more intensely involved in student academics, any drill team dancer in any school will have to strive to achieve higher grades in order to stay on a team. It would seem universally true that the average adolescent female student struggles with self esteem and that involvement in various teams including drill give adolescent girls the opportunity to build self esteem and set higher academic standards for themselves.

One difference between team sports and drill, however, is that drill team has a Southern Belle aesthetic. A large group of congenial girls are all meant to look exactly alike in short skirted uniforms with full makeup and perfectly coiffed hair as they perform on the field. The girls also sit in the football stands during the games, always conducting themselves like southern ladies while executing simple stand routines from time to time as the band plays. Ms. Orenstein states that "girls bodies have become the battleground for their conflicts."[2] She goes on to describe how young girls are pressured to have the perfect body and become sexualized at an inappropriately young age. Young girls being overly focussed on their appearance and being hyper sexualized is problematic for me as a drill team director. At first glance the drill team is a group of pretty girls who gain respect based on their feminine appearance and grace. Many drill teams have student dancers who all appear alike; the same in size, shape and color. This cannot be said of my drill team, however. My girls vary in size from youth large to adult triple extra

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[2] Orenstein, Peggy. "Preface." *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-esteem, and the Confidence Gap*. New York: Doubleday, 1994. Xii. Print.

large. The team is almost equal parts African American and Mexican American. In feminist writer Naomi Wolf's critically acclaimed non fiction book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women,* she posits that women progressively struggle emotionally due to the extreme confines of society's perspective of beauty, though they have gained social recognition and power through the feminist movement. Ms. Wolf describes Victorian inventions like needlework that "served a double function- that is, though they were encouraged as a means to expend female energy and intelligence in harmless ways, women often used them to express genuine creativity and passion."[3] Perhaps drill team is masked in a Southern Belle tradition externally, seeming to focus on appearance, yet providing an internal opportunity for girls to express themselves within that safe shelter. Perhaps it provides a physical structure that any girl can replicate through makeup, hair and clothing so that any girls regardless of size, shape or color can feel beautiful. The Southern Belle aesthetic, makeup, hair and attitude, may allow this group of girls to ban together in a society that sees their beauty rather than the feminist solidarity that lies within it.

The drill team at my high school offers girls an opportunity to feel successful and connected with one another, but I wondered whether those opportunities were historically a byproduct of drill team or merely the result of my personal teaching philosophy and mission. I decided to inquire about the world's first drill team, the Kilgore Rangerettes. The Rangerettes were created at Kilgore College in 1940 by Ms. Gussie Nell Davis five years after the community college was founded. Dean Masters, the first Dean of the College, asked Ms. Davis to be the director of a new dance team that would perform during the half time shows at the

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[3]Wolf, Naomi. "The Beauty Myth." *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women.* New York: W. Morrow, 1991. 15. Print.

school's football games. Ms. Davis had gained recognition for the work she had done with the Flaming Flashes, the pep squad at Greenville High School. Dean Masters was determined to create a half time show with dancing girls that would keep people in their seats at the Kilgore College football games during half time, a time when fans typically snuck under the bleachers to drink alcohol. He was inspired by his experience as a college student when he and his friends would watch the girls gather for church service on Sundays in their white dresses. "The idea that an attractive group of girls will always attract a following lingered with him."[4] He wanted this new dance group to be different from the pep squads where girls yelled from their seats, which he found unladylike. Naomi Wolf states that "the beauty myth tells a story: The quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it."[5] Dean Masters seems to have banked on this idea. Having pretty girls on the field dancing would distract the boys at the games, keeping them in attendance and out of trouble. Ms. Davis was often quoted as saying that "beauty knows no pain."[6] Girls flock to Kilgore for Rangerette tryouts every year striving for this beauty, physically pushing themselves to their limits to attain it through dance. Perhaps drill team simply perpetuates this beauty myth.

Contrarily it was also well known that the Kilgore Rangerettes were not all classic beauties and that Ms. Davis' focus was on bringing her girls' inner beauty and strength out. Ms.

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[4] Knox, Donna M. *Kilgore Rangerettes: 1940-1990.* Kilgore, Tex.: Kilgore College, 1990. 10. Print.

[5] Wolf, Naomi. "The Beauty Myth." *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women.* New York: W. Morrow, 1991. 12. Print.

[6] Deen, Martha Hale. "Gussie Nell Said..." *Remembering Gussie Nell: Soaring Tributes and Remembrances*. Kilgore, TX: Rangerettes Forever, Kilgore College, 2006. 42. Print.

Davis would say "show me how beautiful you are. Show it from the inside."[7] She was devoted to teaching her students much more than how to dance. She taught them etiquette, to look people in the eyes, to have self discipline and to find precision in their dancing. Her students have gone on to find careers in public education, academia, television and politics, all acquiring skills thought their training that helped them to achieve their individual accomplishments. In a letter nominating Ms. Davis for her 1990 induction in the Texas Women's Hall of Fame, Dr. Peggy C. Coghlan says "her training taught us the true meaning of 'self worth' and gave us the confidence needed in our adult lives as we moved from college into the 'real world'" through "an opportunity for young ladies to acceptably express themselves through dance."[8] I teach similar life skills to my students, focussing on positive communication. I teach them to present themselves with dignity and respect. In my classroom we discuss strategies for talking with teachers to gain respect and how to advocate for themselves while modeling themselves as positive citizens. I hold them accountable for their representation at all times. Teachers know that if there is a behavioral problem with one of my girls, I will address it immediately and the behavior will improve. Drill team is the catalyst for these girls to represent themselves positively, with poise, at all times possible as it was the catalyst for Dr. Coghlan and her peers.

Dean Masters other intention in starting the drill program at Kilgore College was to recruit more women at the school at a time when women were more likely to settle down, become housewives, and start a family. Bringing more women into the college meant providing more opportunities for these women to be trained in careers or to continue on to four year

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Deen, Martha Hale. "Remembering Gussie Nell" *Remembering Gussie Nell: Soaring Tributes and Remembrances*. Kilgore, TX: Rangerettes Forever, Kilgore College, 2006. 15. Print.

colleges and become professionals. What better role model than Gussie Nell Davis who gave up having a family to devote her life to the girls that she trained? Ms. Davis was an outstanding woman who graduated high school at the age of fifteen. She went against her parents wishes to pursue a degree in physical education and went on to earn her Masters from the University of Southern California by the time she was twenty years old. Although she had been given many marriage proposals, she always said she needed to devote "just one more year" to her girls. Ms. Davis was a career woman before the feminist movement had fully taken flight and one of the most powerful women in Texas for decades. One might consider Ms. Davis as an early feminist whose success was made possible through the creation of the drill team tradition which was considered appropriate for women at the time because it emphasized their more traditional behavior and appearance.

After investigating the phenomena of drill and the superficial appearance that provides the opportunity for young women to explore their inner beauty, I wanted to look deeper into the physical training behind drill team and how that training might create solidarity among its' members. In his book *Keeping Together in Time Dance and Drill in Human History,* historian and author William McNeill posits that there is a muscular bonding that occurs when people move together in time for long periods. He describes a variety of situations where groups have historically kept time together to move through tasks more efficiently and in a way that made those tasks easier to bare. He describes slave labor, working in the fields and navigating boats across oceans as examples. Mr. McNeill hypothesizes that "repetitive work became far easier to do when done together rhythmically, simply by virtue of the neurological and emotional

responses to rhythmical movement that are built into human nervous systems."[9] Mr. McNeill seems to be saying that not only is there the potential to ease the work load through rhythmic play but there is an actual emotional bonding that happens as a neurological and emotional response to the rhythms explored through movements. He even goes so far to say that these rhythms "may provoke echoes of the fetal condition when a major and perhaps principal external stimulus to the developing brain was the mother's heartbeat."[10] This quote calls to mind a tradition that I have established with my own girls. We stand in a circle before each game holding hands with our eyes closed. I tell the girls to squeeze the hand to their right after they feel their left hand squeezed. Together we create a rhythm of pulses that flows from one hand to the next resembling a heartbeat moving around the circle. I remind the girls that this pulse is the heartbeat of our group. If Mr. McNeill is correct in his hypothesis, then the precision of drill team and the simple fact that they march as well as dance together in perfect time would create an emotional bond throughout the group because of the shared rhythmic exploration.

Mr. McNeill says that "human dancing, too, may relieve tension and impress or challenge others, but its distinctive capability of enhancing group solidarity probably depends on keeping time together for a prolonged period of time, thus translating individual discharge of anxiety into collective catharsis."[11] The potential for dancing to create a bond within a group because of the anxiety it releases can be seen clearly in my drill team classroom. The drill team girls train for

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[9] McNeill, William Hardy. "Small Communities." *Keeping Together in Time Dance and Drill in Human History.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995. 51. Print.

[10] McNeill, William Hardy. "Muscular Bonding." *Keeping Together in Time Dance and Drill in Human History.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995. 7. Print.

[11] McNeill, William Hardy. "Human Evolution." *Keeping Together in Time Dance and Drill in Human History.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995. 17. Print.

hours on end each day, saying that no matter what is going on in their lives they can come together in the dance room and dance it out. This is no small statement from my girls who are often coming from physically and emotionally abusive situations at home and with partners. They bond together in these moments by proximity and without words. Mr. McNeill describes how even in military drill there is an equalizing of the field that happens when military move together in time. There is no awareness of past or future, or of each person as an individual. One of the biggest paradoxes in drill is that it strips the students of their individual identity but then gives them the opportunity for solidarity. This solidarity in turn gives them the strength to express themselves as individuals. This opportunity comes from hours of arduous working together through physical explorations of music and rhythm.

The paradox of drill team from a feminist perspective is that it provides opportunities for female empowerment that are imbedded or perhaps obscured in a tradition that values a restrictive view of feminine beauty. Drill team does create opportunities for young women to freely express themselves and claim ownership of their bodies, but by capitalizing on the male gaze. The history of drill team is easily tied to feminism if we consider the mother of the art form, Gussie Nell Davis, and her many successful disciples as female leaders who are now respected as professionals. Ms. Davis' legacy is one of success, independence, strength and inner beauty. Although ephemeral beauty is a strong part of the ephemeral performances of drill team, the more lasting impact on its' dancers is one of strength, self esteem and community. Although the audience sees what they perceive as beautiful on the outside, the dancers are more likely projecting their true inner beauty and confidence. The audience is unaware of the hours of grueling training that goes into the preparation of each performance, the connection that the

dancers make with one another, and the emotional transformation that occurs as these dancers connect with their bodies. This training bonds the dancers to one another, creating a sisterhood that has the potential to carry the struggling adolescent female to a higher academic and social emotional plane.

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