

# Go White, Indeed: Deconstructing the Explicit and Hidden Curricula of a University's Homecoming Day Parade

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## *Abstract*

In this article, I employ a critical reading of a social practice and tradition unique to American culture and schools: A large university's annual Homecoming Day Parade. Using my participant observations of the parade at Michigan State University, I employ critical cultural perspectives as well as critical curriculum perspectives as lenses through which to deconstruct the myths of school spirit and unity to explore the following questions: What are the tacit and hegemonic ideals embedded in this cultural expression? What is the hidden curriculum embedded in such cultural practices? Who is *actually* "included" in and by an event purporting to unite a community around a common purpose? Likewise, which constituents are ultimately "excluded" in this celebration? What does a critical reading of a university's homecoming day parade reveal about absence, inclusion, exclusion, gender objectification, and social-class inequities? What does a critical reading about this type of event reveal about anti/intellectualism? In this article, I challenge common assumptions which purport that homecoming day parades are innocuous displays of, and opportunities for, school spirit and collective belonging. Instead, my analyses support extant critical perspectives which maintain that such cultural events and social practices are laden with power, meaning, and the reification of both. In this, I discuss how there are tacit messages embedded in practices which ultimately serve to muffle diversity, promote conformity, and perpetuate antiquated gender roles and social class dominance.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I employ a critical reading of a social practice and tradition unique to American culture and schools: A large university's annual Homecoming Day Parade. Using my participant observations of the parade at Michigan State University, I employ critical cultural perspectives as well as critical curriculum perspectives as lenses through which to deconstruct the myths of school spirit and unity to explore the following questions: What are the tacit and hegemonic ideals embedded in this cultural expression? What is the hidden curriculum embedded in such cultural practices? Who is *actually* "included" in and by an event purporting to unite a community around a common purpose? Likewise, which constituents are ultimately "excluded" in this celebration? What does a critical reading of a university's homecoming day parade reveal about absence, inclusion, exclusion, gender objectification, and social-class inequities? What does a critical reading about this type of event reveal about anti/intellectualism? In this article, I challenge common assumptions which purport that homecoming day parades are innocuous displays of, and opportunities for, school spirit and collective belonging. Instead, my analyses support extant critical perspectives which maintain that such cultural events and social practices are laden with power, meaning, and the reification of both. In this, I discuss how there are tacit messages embedded in practices which ultimately serve to muffle diversity, promote conformity, and perpetuate antiquated gender roles and social class dominance. To understand the critical lenses through which these issues emerge is to understand how seemingly innocuous, fun, displays of school spirit indeed propagate dominant ideologies which "ultimately sanction the existing institutional arrangements which may cause... unnecessary stratification and inequality in the first place" (King, 1979, p. 60).

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE AND SPACE: AN OVERVIEW

In this analysis, I discuss several ways by which the homecoming day parade at Michigan State University (MSU), a large university of "Big Ten" status known for its sports programs, reveals how participants and non-participants construct—and are constructed by—the hidden curriculum of culturally sanctioned dominance, oppression, gender objectification, and social class inequities. According to Giroux (1988), "The hidden curriculum...refers to those unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of a given class" (p. 51). The very absence of those who choose not to partake in this cultural event is, perhaps, a response to the parade's hidden curriculum of social exclusion and/or resistance to hegemonic ideals. In this way, outliers are also shaping—and being shaped by—this highly structured cultural form.

While the precise origins of the very first official homecoming celebration are contested, it is linked to an American tradition that can be traced as far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Typically, homecoming day parades are annual occurrences during which alumni return to their alma mater to unite with current students over a variety of social and sporting events. Current iterations of Homecoming celebrations mirror much those past. Cramton (“The History of Homecoming,” n.d.) offers a helpful description of early homecoming day traditions:

early homecoming events all had similar characteristics: a football game served as a center point; the events included rallies, parades, speeches and dances; the events intended to unite alumni and students to create a stronger sense of school pride; and they were wildly successful. (para. 2)

Most descriptions of Homecoming traditions that I have encountered emphasize school spirit, fun, and unity as the main purposes of this celebration. Take, for example, the way by which the Student Development webpage at Appalachian State University describes homecoming event practices: “[Homecoming events are] designed to promote school spirit and to welcome the alumni back to campus. It’s usually the most festive event of the fall and a chance for clubs and organizations to band together to welcome and thank alumni for both “paving the way” and for their generosity in supporting their alma mater in multiple ways which benefit today’s students” (“Homecoming History, 2012, para. 1). Such descriptions beg important questions about the meaning of school spirit and unity, as well as calling for a deconstruction of the space/s in which these events occur.

I have always constructed organized sports—and acts of unchecked athleticism and fanaticism that seem so part and parcel to sports culture—as a peculiar enterprise. An inner-city youth by upbringing, it seems that I, along with likeminded peers, have always had the choice between partaking in our schools’ sports culture—if in fact there happened to be one—or not. Had we chosen not to, as was most often the case, our choices were not synonymous with having committed social suicide or some sort of egregious act of cultural nonconformity. Nor did we feel compelled to lament over a particular loss to another team, or other such “upsets” so germane to competitive sports. To the contrary, for us, life went on sans any identifiable social or personal repercussions. Largely unaware of the implicit and explicit messages embedded in this “cultural form,” or “those [negotiated and agreed upon] symbols and social practices that express culture” (McLaren, 2009, p. 66), we thought very little of our disengagement from what we believed was mindless, nonsensical idolatry.

Now a researcher, teacher educator, and graduate student attending a large state university in which our numerous athletics programs are inter/nationally renowned, I’ve come to understand that my deliberate disengagement from this form of cultural expression was not quite so meaningless, nor was it quite so deliberate. The “choice” to disengage from this—and any—dominant form of cultural

expression might instead be thought of as a *non-choice*, insomuch as it inspires the following possibilities: To what extent do organized, maniacal expressions of sports and athlete worship structure and perhaps even *demand* the absence of working-class, inner-city youth? In other words, in what ways are such choices really not choices at all?

Important to this analysis is to note that culture and cultural expressions do not emerge accidentally; they are not coincidences; they do not simply “happen” to people. Instead, they require active participation, non-participation, and meaningful interpretation. As Hall (1997) points out, cultural meanings are not only ‘in the head’. They organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects” (p. 2-3). In many ways, these effects are not equitable or egalitarian in practice, despite what they purport to represent in theory. Take, for example, Foley’s (1990) deconstruction of high school football rituals in one Texas town, a study upon which I predominantly draw:

American society prides itself on promoting social equality, but one of our major popular or leisure cultural practices, sports, does not always promote this ideal....The local sports scene was an important school activity that also staged the prominence of selected families and their children (p. 61).

In foregrounding the prominence of selected populations, cultural expressions, by design, background the absence of others. In this, power and meaning in culture are ubiquitous and require collective consent and acquiescence. My reference to consensual acquiescence, here, is more commonly known in critical cultural studies as the process of hegemony, or the “struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression” (McLaren, p. 67) and is a concept I revisit in depth, below.

Homogeneity of Identity and Purpose: 75,000 seats, one heart<sup>1</sup>

On the banks of the Red Cedar,  
 There’s a school that’s known to all;  
     Its specialty is winning,  
 And those Spartans play good ball;  
     Spartan teams are never beaten,  
     All through the game they fight;  
     Fight for the only colors:  
     Green and White.

MSU is indeed a unique institution of higher education. A large institution of prestigious Research I status, it receives millions of dollars in research and other grant monies across academic departments. It boasts a large undergraduate

population (in excess of 35,000) to which it offers more than 150 fields of study (Burnsed, 2011). The MSU community is also home to an increasingly international student population which contributes significantly to the University's academic and athletic revenue generation as well as the local economy ("MSU Plans for Record Number of International Students," 2010). The University is becoming increasingly well known for its growing study abroad programs; as of 2010, MSU boasts more than 270 international programs in 60 countries ("MSU facts," n.d.). Its faculty is also held in high regard; of nearly 5,000 faculty members, "Ninety-four percent...have Ph.D.'s or equivalent degrees" (Burnsed, 2011). Finally, MSU's athletic reputation is also not to be understated: The University enjoys a superior reputation for winning sports teams, particularly football and basketball. In the 2008-2009 academic year, the University enjoyed more than 73 million dollars in intercollegiate sports revenue.

MSU's geographical location is also significant in terms of racial and socio-economic demographics. Situated in East Lansing, Michigan, the University is less than five miles from Lansing, the state capitol. The city of Lansing is predominantly populated by African American communities, and is less than 1.5 hours from Dearborn, Michigan, which contains a large and growing Arab population. MSU is also a comparable distance from Detroit, Michigan, the state's largest city, also comprising a predominantly Black population. One would expect the University's student body to reflect these data; however, as of the fall of 2011, MSU students were 70.5% White, with the next highest-subgroup of International students at 11.4% percent, followed by Black students at 6.7% and Hispanic students at 3.1%.<sup>2</sup>

MSU's demographic and geographical data set the stage for perplexing displays of "school spirit" and "unity" perpetuated in and by the parade. An analysis of cultural expressions such as a university's Homecoming Day Parade reveal the extent to which such events are laden with social and political meaning, and is not without its merits: As McLaren (2009) reminds us, "we need to recognize how cultural questions help us understand who has power and how it is reproduced and manifested in the social relations that link schooling to the wider social order" (p. 65). To borrow from King (1979), "Can we not afford to understand these things?" (p. 60)<sup>3</sup> and is an attempt to which I now turn.

### *Language and Symbolic Practices: The Reproduction of Gender and Middle-Class Stereotypes*

"The seeming volatility that you approach some of these things with, I think, sometimes surprises me. It couldn't be all that bad. From my point of few it was really fun, it was good, it was a positive"

(A Michigan State University alumnus responds to my interpretation/ analyses of the homecoming day parade).

Employing data from my participant observations of MSU's homecoming day parade, I begin with a description of the parade's spectators: Smiling children are accompanied by their smiling families; many young girls attend the parade in costumes closely emulating cheerleaders' uniforms, complete with green and white pompoms, ready to cheer their Spartan heroes to victory; many young boys proudly display foam Spartan headpieces and matching swords, their gear suggesting that they are fully prepared to "destroy the enemy" on command. Their structured participation in this event is clearly gendered; there are not any deviations from what might be thought of as traditional gender roles. Their participation symbolizes a willing socialization into normative conceptions of gender, roles, and the reproduction of both, sanctioned by the adults chaperoning the youths' attendance. On the surface, the homecoming day parade indeed appears "fun" and "good" (see quote at the outset of this section); perhaps it is "a positive," but, in my interpretation, only for those best positioned to enjoy it.

Even the family pets are loyal Spartan fans. Some are wearing green State jerseys especially designed for dogs; others are less fanatical, modestly donning green and white collars and leashes. This is an event that seems to colonize all generations, identities, and aspects within middle-class family life, from the family dog, to toddler, to parent, to grandparent. Oddly, the presence of undergraduate students, a population exceeding 35,000,<sup>4</sup> is strikingly thin; while those in attendance are the epitome of "school spirit," donned in Spartan gear and other such green and white paraphernalia, University students appear sparsely sprinkled among the families and older generations who have turned out, comparatively speaking, in droves. It is a curious dynamic, given who the University purports to serve as both students and paying customers. Important to note is that, with the exception of a few clusters of diverse populations (e.g. Asian and African American students), the vast majority of spectators are White.

Indeed the imagery thus far described is not unique in form or function, nor is it innocuously contributing to a "positive" atmosphere of "fun" and "good." In Hall's words (1997),

[T]urning up at football matches with banners and slogans, with faces and bodies painted in certain colours or inscribed with certain symbols, can also be thought of as 'like a language' – insofar as it is a symbolic practice which gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture, or identification with one's local community. It is part of the language of national identity, a discourse of national belongingness" (p. 5).

The symbols comprising the homecoming day spectacle indeed unite to form a common "language." Visual and verbal language of "*Go Green! Go White!*", pompoms, foam swords, and other such symbols suggest a degree of togetherness, school spirit, and an "identification with one's local community" (p. 5).

Upon closer inspection, however, this “language” does move beyond descriptors of innocuous, “fun,” and “positive”; it functions as more than “a discourse of national belongingness,” however incontrovertible a concept that might seem. The homecoming day parade imagery discussed herein, while signifying a particular “language,” embodies a “cultural form,” which McLaren (2009) defines as follows:

Cultural forms are those symbols and social practices that express culture, such as those found in music, dress, food, religion, dance, and education, which have developed from the efforts of groups to shape their lives out of their surrounding material and political environment (p. 66).

In this, cultural forms are not accidental, innocent, or random, abstracted in isolation from the broader structure:

Cultural forms don’t exist apart from sets of structural underpinnings which are related to the means of economic production, the mobilization of desire, the construction of social values, asymmetries of power/knowledge, configurations of ideologies, and relations of class, race, and gender” (ibid, p. 66).

Those who turn out for the parade, as well as the parade itself, serve to support and express the “structural underpinnings” to which they relate; the effect, though, is discursive—and certainly not fundamentally innocuous—in nature. That is, the structural underpinnings supporting the parade would cease to function without the support of those so culturally and economically invested in its power, meaning, and outcomes. In the context of this analysis, we think of the parade, its constituents, as well as its absentees, as discursively reifying the norms and values of the dominant culture, or those whose “social practices and representations... affirm the central values, interests, and concerns of the social class in control of the material and symbolic wealth of society” (McLaren, p. 65).

The displays of “school spirit” and local support I describe above embody much more than heartfelt enthusiasm for one’s home team. As Foley’s (1990) ethnographic account of local team support for school sports reveals,

[e]nthusiastically supporting “the team” [means] supporting your town and your way of life. Adults, especially the local Chamber of Commerce types, articulated this view even more than the students. Community sports was the patriotic, neighborly thing to do. Many kids in school felt deep loyalties to support their team. Others...used these community events to express their disgust for the game and the players, hence for “*respectable, mainstream society*” (p. 29).

While Foley focuses on the high school context in his study, the same sentiments apply. His insights, in some ways, allow us to better understand the oddly sparse undergraduate and ethnic presence. That is, given the White, middle-class “way of life” the parade seems to embody, it is perhaps reasonable that the spectators

would comprise homogenous “Chamber of Commerce types” (p. 29), or those most likely to reflect these particular values. In these ways, the symbols comprising the homecoming day spectacle, when deconstructed, move beyond myths of “togetherness,” “school spirit,” and “national belongingness,” to encompass the reification of normative conceptions of White, “respectable mainstream society” (p. 29).

*Pretty Girl/Strong Boy: Hegemonic Femininity and Masculinity*

These highly prized females became...dangerous, status-confirming creatures that were easier to “relate to” in rhetorical performances than in real life (Foley, p. 33).

Hegemony is a struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression (McLaren, p. 67).

The homecoming day parade—as I interpret it in this particular context—is laden with power and meaning, and a peculiar “language” reifying both. As Hall (1997) points out, elements of language, whether in “sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes— are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they are but what they do, their function” (p. 5). The young girls emulating their college-age, cheerleading counterparts are first in line to be de/legitimated by the messages promulgated in and by the parade. Beautiful, limber, svelte —and in some cases, seemingly underweight, predominantly White cheerleaders slathered in cosmetics, ribbons, and donning revealing clothing are the first of the spectacles to parade down the Avenue. Naturally, all eyes are on them as they embody and transmit commonly accepted expectations for school spirit, beauty, sexuality, subservience, nakedness, popularity, and everything else young women are supposed to be, want, and do, all on display for fe/male consumption. They are indeed “highly prized females” (Foley, p. 33), the “ideal” embodiment and epitome of coveted femininity and attraction. As I keep an eye on one small child in particular, beaming, sporting a green and white cheerleading costume, I wonder how she will grow to navigate, negotiate, shape, and/or resist the messages imposed upon her, unapologetically, by the parade, the cheerleaders, and her willing adult chaperones: Presumably, her consenting, unquestioning parents.

The cheerleaders do their part to manufacture myths of beauty and school spirit; we see the fruits of their labor manifest in the younger generations’—and their parents’/guardians’—willing participation in these social practices, rituals, and representations. We also see the hegemonic ideals reified in what the cheerleaders *do not* represent: There is not any observable degree of physical diversity among them, whether in race, ethnicity, body type, or age. Indeed, the very *idea*



of a cheerleader is likely to conjure imagery of curvaceous, scantily clad, even “perfect” young White women; a brief Google-image search of the term “cheerleader” supports this form of ideological hegemony. They embody a “natural” expectation of what it means to a cheerleader, “against which all individuals are expected to live their lives” (McLaren, p. 68), and is the essence of the hegemonic ideal.

What also warrants further exploration, here, is the masculine hegemonic ideal. The male cheerleaders on whom the women rely for physical support provide more than that. They, too, are young and embody normative expectations for male “attractiveness”: Homogeneously clean-cut, tall, and muscular, they make it seem “okay,” even permissible, for men to be cheerleaders (a historically female role), for as long as their role is such that their female counterparts rely on them for strength. It is within this very dynamic, though, that we might read another kind of reified male role: Given the men’s job of literally boosting, lifting, and supporting the choreography such that the women successfully remain upright in the air, the nakedness of the female cheerleaders inherently provides the men with unfettered access to a view of, and a grip on, the entire female body. This observation is not to suggest that the men take advantage of their free-range access. It is to merely comment on—and offer an interpretation of—the degree to which they possess access to the female body, unquestioned and free to make use of it for public consumption. Perhaps this is the very “privilege” or expectation inherent to their position that indeed makes it “acceptable” to be a male cheerleader. I do wonder what their role might “look like,” and what perceptions of their role might be, had such untethered access *not* been an integral part of their purpose.

In this, the role of the male cheerleader is distant enough from that of the females’ such that we could never feasibly accuse the men of assuming a predominantly female role. Their masculinity is reinforced not only in the expectation for strength and support, but also in the easy access to their female counterparts who double as objects to be manipulated.

#### A Parade for Winners: Economic Dominance

Go right through for MSU,  
 Watch the points keep growing.  
 Spartan teams are bound to win,  
 They’re fighting with a vim.  
 Rah! Rah! Rah!  
 See their team is weakening,  
 We’re going to win this game.

The cheerleaders’ deeply stereotypical and hegemonic charades are followed by displays and representations in which middleclass values and culture are less

explicitly visible, but certainly present, their meaning also powerfully defined in and by what they *do not* represent. Elaborately decorated floats and gratuitously displayed Rolls Royces (why not 1980s' Buicks, or some other more modest vehicle?) advertise for local businesses or champion local politicians. The vehicles are immaculately maintained and anything but modest. Accordingly, they are driven by middle-aged White men and cart powerful White business, political, or University figures. There is not a single indicator or sign of the University as an academically top ranked institution of Research I status, nor is there any indication of its diverse student body, relative to other institutions. What, in addition to binaries, does such homecoming day imagery expose by virtue of what it ignores?

According to King (1979), "schools...play a rather large part in distributing the kinds of normative and dispositional elements required to make [social class inequalities] seem natural. They teach a hidden curriculum that seems uniquely suited to maintain the ideological hegemony of the most powerful classes in this society" (p. 43). The homogenous Whiteness and symbols of economic and political power and racial dominance (e.g. immaculately maintained cars, local politicians and business people, and overabundance of White participants) in and around the parade embody a curious binary. While Michigan State University is certainly not an anomaly in its approach to celebrating athletics, there are several qualities distinct to MSU that *could* set it apart from many others. For one, and as I've briefly mention above, MSU is a highly ranked Research I institution, internationally renowned for its prolific faculty and rigorous academic offerings. Additionally, the institution achieved record breaking international student enrollments, up 12% from two years prior thereby breaking its own record and surpassing that of competing universities ("MSU plans for record number of international students," 2010). The article also mentions MSU's impressive commitment to providing study-abroad opportunities for American students, thereby "lead[ing] the nation in study abroad participation among public universities in the U.S., with 2,969 MSU students studying abroad" (p. 1). The imagery presented in and by the parade, in both form and function, masks and ignores these notable commitments.

Given MSU's geographical positioning and distinct intellectual reputation, punctuated by a leading commitment to diversity and international consciousness, one might expect to encounter very different homecoming day parade "language," symbols, and participation. Instead, the homecoming day parade, as I experience and interpret it, breathes life into a hidden curriculum implicitly embodying what it means to display school spirit and "belong." Given our institutional rankings and commitments, the parade raises a hint of irony, here. That is, in the context of a University-wide promise to "advance knowledge and transform lives,"<sup>5</sup> students receive a hidden curriculum in what school spirit and belonging mean, and for whom: American middle-class White socialites, their families, and those best

represented in and by the language, imagery, and performances. Such curriculum should not remain unexplored, for, in King's words, "the tacit teaching of social and economic norms and expectations to students in schools, is not as 'hidden' or mindless as many educators believe" (p. 44). Nor is understanding the power, meaning, and outcomes underlying an event's hidden curriculum something to be taken lightly; according to Giroux (1988), "An extensive amount of research suggests that what students learn in school is shaped more by the hidden curriculum, the underlying pattern of social relationships in both the classroom and the larger school, than by the formal curriculum" (p. 51). Did our intellectual, racial, and ethnic "subgroups," then, learn the language of exclusion by virtue of what the parade tacitly represents?

Perspectives in critical cultural studies and critical curriculum theories would thus maintain that the very presence of absence speaks to an insidious attempt to reproduce and maintain racial, cultural, and socioeconomic lines, thereby reifying the culture of power. What, then, do we make of seemingly genuine attempts to embrace the very diversity that hegemonic ideals, presence of absence, and hidden curriculum I describe above work so hard to undermine? On occasion, an "outlier" of a float and/or performance parades down the Avenue. This imagery is slightly different from that which precedes it; at times, they advertise University subcultures in the name of "diversity," such as clubs specifically—and in the case of this particular parade, a bit ironically—for women's empowerment, or those targeting particular ethnic groups. It is clear, though, that these forms of honorable mention only occur within parameters previously defined by the dominant class/culture. Indeed, "[t]he ability of individuals to express their culture is related to the power which certain groups are able to wield in the social order" (McClaren, 2009, p. 65).

For example, intellectually and culturally subordinate groups march by, subdued, carrying innocuous—even ambiguous—signs advertising their purpose. The groups more geared toward the arts—for instance, Mexican-style dancing—it seems, are permitted to advertise so long as they do not disrupt the University's "fight song," the ethos of militant opponent-crushing permeating the air, and myths of school spirit, masculinity, femininity, and upper-class American Whiteness, with their Spanish guitars, technicolor costumes, Native language, and culture. Such displays provide only superficial relief from the homogenous sea of White and wealth, but frankly, serve as nothing more than entertainment for the dominant culture standing idly by, subconsciously guarding their uncontested cultural space. This very display provides a hidden curriculum of its own, easily sending this particular crowd the message that "being" Mexican is reduced to ponchos, sombreros, and other stereotypical forms of traditional Mexican wear. Such a tightly controlled space does not permit for deeper understandings or engagement, doing the very notion of diversity a gross disservice—perhaps even

injustice—in the shadow of hegemonic ideals. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that any non-dominant cultural group may have a political or economic agenda that might challenge the status quo. The parade is utterly devoid of any hint of political, ethnic, or gendered controversy.

In this, even the very notion of “art” and “culture” are tightly controlled and dictated, as racial and ethnic groups representing the nearby city of Lansing are, for the most part, nowhere to be found, either in the parade or amongst the spectators. The inclusion of the float attempting to celebrate Mexican culture in particular was peculiarly positioned toward the end of the parade. This positionality is reminiscent of Foley’s description of the Mexican high-school football players who are last to march onto their field, *behind* their White counterparts. It is also emblematic of a more sinister description in Foley’s piece, in which he also notices how

[a]ll the Mexicano players quietly seated themselves at the back of the bus. Then all the Anglo players brashly seated themselves in the front of the bus with the coaching staff. At first I was taken aback by this event, which seemed to be a sign dripping with Anglo racial dominance (p. 34).

Why, then, were our racial and ethnic subgroups relegated to the end of the parade? What would have been the reaction of the onlookers had the Mexican-culture float been the first to parade down the Avenue? What would have been their reaction had there been modest vehicles carting and advertising our more academic figures and intellectual goals, particularly those related to our international commitments? I suspect such an event would be considered “dull,” maybe even antithetical to the purposes of the parade. As King points out, “One hypothesis that should not be dismissed too readily is that, in fact, *schools do work*. In an odd way, they may succeed in reproducing a population that is roughly equivalent to the economic and social stratification in society” (p. 58, italics added). Given the parade’s commitment to reifying racial and social class inequities, I would have to agree. Indeed, the schooling and curriculum here works: The dominant culture “win[s] this game” (MSU fight-song).

#### Fight! Fight!: Militarism and Dominance

Being a part of the band was an important way of establishing one’s loyalty to school and community (Foley, p. 30).

Fight! Fight! Rah! Team, Fight!  
Victory for MSU.

The displays of Whiteness, prominence, power, and success, are punctuated by larger, perhaps even phallic symbols of masculinity, militarism, and dominance. In this, ominously sized trucks continue along this path of divisive American politics and capitalism (advertising an array of stores, financial and local services, and

political power-players) and maleness (proudly displaying the football team, and other traditionally male-dominated sports). The trucks themselves remind me of war-time arsenal, hovering threateningly over anyone/thing who dare display a counter-hegemonic agenda/ideal. The parade, in every sense, reifies age-old male and female stereotypes, anti-intellectualism, a militaristic, “kill’em” ethos, and exclusion of “others” by virtue of age, race, and social class.

The function of the marching-band also actively contributes to the militaristic, “destroy the enemy” ethos. The band-members are uniformed, parading down the Avenue in regimented, near perfect lockstep, at times positioning their musical instruments as one might a weapon. When they are not using their instruments to contribute to yet another round of MSU’s fight song, their facial expressions are angry and frozen, contributing to the militaristic theatrics. Clearly, the “crush’em” ethos behind the song lyrics— “*Fight! Fight! Rah! Team fight!*”— permeates the bands’ very choreography and being, buttressing the imperialistic, even violent spectacle of “us against them.” Their identical uniforms are slightly more formal than that which might be observed at a military boot-camp drill. *Fight, fight, fight for victory* indeed.

Foley keenly describes how marching bands function to contribute to a great deal more than school spirit: “The marching band was also a major symbolic expression of the community’s unity and its future generation of good citizens and leaders” (p. 31). Given the parade’s participants—both within, and around its perimeter—we might presume that marching band members function to reflect hegemonic ideals of nationalism and a particular form of homogeneity: The unity of, and conformity to, American, White, middle-class values. In this, the presence, prominence, and importance of the marching band members serve to reify particular social class divisions:

The band was filled with students *who tended to come from more affluent families and have better academic records...* Band members were generally the students with “school spirit” who were proud to promote loyalty to the school and community. As one local city councilperson was fond of saying, “Band kids are the best kids in this town” (p. 31, italics added).

Recall that Foley’s study focuses on the high school context in a small town in Texas. His analyses, though, might help to better explain how various aspects of an event as seemingly innocuous as a university’s homecoming day parade is related directly to “the means of economic production, the mobilization of desire, the construction of social values, asymmetries of power/knowledge, configurations of ideologies, and relations of class, race, and gender” (McLaren, p. 66), and is indeed a “victory” for militaristic, male-dominated middle-class values.

Recall my described lack of familiarity with—and voluntary disengagement from—this organized sports ritual as an inner-city youth. The language, I find, is every bit “foreign” to my critical sensibilities; I am thus probably a bit predisposed

to finding this cultural form peculiar and problematic. I recognize that this might be constructed as a very real limitation within the lenses through which I explore the above issues. However, as Biesta (2004) argues, “If it wants to be an effective critique, it has to find a way to be critical and self-critical *at the very same time*” (p. 32, italics in original). I thus construct my historical disengagement from, and deconstruction of, such cultural forms as both a weakness and a strength.

And as I study this foreign culture before me, one particular float catches my eye. Recall that the very tradition behind homecoming events is to honor alumni for “paving the way” for current students (presumably in the form of financial support and other such endowments). In this, I was not terrifically surprised to see MSU’s alumni marching band occupying a float. And given several aspects of the parade’s representational system (Hall, 1997) and language I discuss thus far, I was certainly not surprised by the float’s overwhelmingly White, male participation. These men appeared to be in their fifties and older, and in many respects, this float was not much different from any other in terms of its signified maleness, Whiteness, militarism, and middle-to-upper-class-ness. My expectations for their presence soon became natural, even as a homecoming day parade lay-person. This particular display, though, raises an interesting question: If this parade is a space in which we welcome and celebrate alumni, an event in which alumni are invited to actively partake...where were the alumnae cheerleaders? Indeed, their absence perpetrates “an image in which the values and beliefs of the dominant class appear so correct that to reject them would be unnatural, a violation of common sense” (McClaren, p. 69). That is, it would be ridiculous, a sheer violation of common sense and expectations to observe middle-aged women dancing suggestively and provocatively in uniforms seemingly fit for the physiques of small children. Nor would it appear any more normal or appropriate to witness male alumni cheerleaders physically supporting their middle-aged, female counterparts. Such acts are reserved, in theory, for their opposites: The young and the sexual.

## CONCLUSION: CAN WE NOT AFFORD TO ANALYZE THESE THINGS?

The symbols, or language, I describe above are part and parcel to a broader discourse, and beg the following questions: What are the tacit and hegemonic ideals embedded in the “language” of this cultural event? What does it mean to have “school spirit”? What is the hidden curriculum embedded in such cultural practices? Who is *actually* “included” in and by an event purporting to unite a community around a common purpose? Likewise, which constituents are ultimately “excluded” in this celebration? What does a critical reading of a university’s homecoming day parade reveal about absence, acceptance, exclusion, and gender and social-class inequities? What does a critical reading about this type of event

reveal about anti/intellectualism? The importance of the analysis of such events cannot be overstated; indeed, the homecoming day parade brings into sharp focus the ways by which “men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege” (McLaren, p. 61). Such events are breeding-grounds for an analysis of hegemonic structures which reveal the “cultural encasement of meanings, a prison-house of language and ideas, that is ‘freely’ entered into by both dominators and dominated” (p. 67).

Given the hegemonic centered-ness of middle-class White power, and gender and socioeconomic divisions I deconstruct above, I considered constructing a new “center” to close this piece; one which violates the abovementioned cultural norms and sensibilities. However, this too is not without its dangers. That is, proposing the idea of a centered “Other” undermines the very concept and power of deconstruction; it is to merely privilege another language. This is not an unproblematic prospect. Borrowing from Derrida’s deconstruction theory, Biesta points out that “[t]o acknowledge that there is no safe place to stand on, that there is no absolute beginning, no simple point of departure, is not a weakness of deconstruction but rather its strength” (p. 32). In this, constructing a new center requires a possibility we cannot yet imagine: “deconstruction becomes visible in those situations in which what makes something possible makes it at the very same time impossible; where, in other words, what is a condition of possibility is at the very same time a condition of impossibility” (p. 34).

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 These words are on a sign prominently displayed in the campus bookstore.
- 2 These ethnic comparisons were retrieved from MSU’s office of the registrar, and can be found here: [http://reports.esp.msu.edu/ReportServer/Pages/ReportViewer.aspx?%2fROReports2005%2fUE-ComparisonEthnicOrigin&term\\_seq\\_id=1114](http://reports.esp.msu.edu/ReportServer/Pages/ReportViewer.aspx?%2fROReports2005%2fUE-ComparisonEthnicOrigin&term_seq_id=1114)
- 3 King asks this question of the relationship between ideology and school knowledge as it relates to the “larger social collectivity of which we are all a part” (p. 60). While used in different context, King’s sentiments resonate in the context of my analysis.
- 4 Michigan State University’s most recent demographical data, from which I draw, can be found here: [http://www.reg.msu.edu/reportserver/?/ROReports/UE-ComparisonStudentEnrollments&term\\_seq\\_id=1104](http://www.reg.msu.edu/reportserver/?/ROReports/UE-ComparisonStudentEnrollments&term_seq_id=1104)
- 5 The University mission statement (2008) can be digested in full, here: <http://president.msu.edu/mission/>