

Converging Media and Divergent Bodies:
Articulations of Powerful Women in the Ultimate Fighting Championship

Jennifer R. McClearen

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Reading Committee:

Ralina Joseph, Chair

LeiLani Nishime

Susan Harewood

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Department of Communication

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Abstract

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Jennifer McClearen

Chair of the Supervisory Committee
Associate Professor Ralina Joseph
Department of Communication

Most television channels, websites, mobile applications, and video games dedicated to sports reveal a stark underrepresentation of female athletes even though girls and women avidly participate in athletics. Feminist scholars indicate that the paucity of media coverage of women in sports reflects a cultural disinterest in women's athletic bodies compared to men's—a discourse dependent on pervasive gendered notions about women's physical inferiority. The array of media platforms for consuming sports and sports-themed content collectively reaffirms athletics as a dominantly masculine domain. Curiously, media scholars who study difference argue that one of the cultural features of new media technologies is the ability to provide more diverse representations than ever before. Streaming sites, social media, blogs, and other digital and web-based programs provide the capacity to customize and easily distribute content for niche or previously ignored audiences—including minoritized groups. Scholars have yet to analyze how some media organizations leverage new media technologies to revise discourses of women's physical inferiority in transformative ways.

Converging Media and Divergent Bodies: Articulations of Powerful Women in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) examines how the mixed-martial arts promotion produces and circulates representations of female fighters throughout the mixed-martial arts

(MMA) promotional organization's transnational transmedia empire. The UFC media brand includes Pay-Per-View fights, promotional spots, television specials, a reality TV show, video games, documentary webisodes, and a subscription-based streaming website. The diversity of UFC content and platforms is indicative of the broader trend of converging media—a contemporary feature of media culture where audiences can consume, circulate, and produce media in multiple ways. Converging media allows a proliferation of media content generated from the top down or the bottom up and gives marginalized identities, such as women in sports, greater visibility. Weaving textual analysis with ethnographic methods, I argue that the UFC introduced female fighters in 2013 as an innovative sports media convergence strategy that imagines difference (including gender, race, sexuality, class, and nationality) as central to its brand identity. The UFC's approach is novel in sports media and is built on a burgeoning marketing ethos that believes increasing the type of representations available, via new media technologies, appeals to previously disregarded segments of the sports media market (i.e. women and/or fans of women's sports). The organization is transforming some of the longstanding cultural assumptions about women's sports and their fans by promoting female fighters and marketing to female fans. At the same time, difference becomes an ambivalent discourse that fluctuates between essentialism and homogeneity in a customizable marketing formula. The very notion of gendered difference, and difference more broadly, becomes flattened through market forces. *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies* resonates beyond the study of sport or media to theorize how cultural, technological, and economic forces influence revisions to our understandings of the gendered body in contemporary society.

Converging Media and Divergent Bodies is an interdisciplinary project that draws upon feminist studies, media studies, sports studies, and cultural studies to consider the UFC as a

cultural entity that operates within a contemporary social, political, and economic context. UFC media is complex in terms of form, including platform, genre, and content, and in terms of significance, such as cultural, social, and economic. I draw upon the cultural studies project to consider UFC media as impacted by various contemporary conditions. I recognize that the production, representation, and reception of female fighters operate in a particular context that includes technological innovation, changing rituals of consumption, neoliberal logics, burgeoning discourses of women's physicality, and the increasing visibility of difference. This particular context is important for forming my in-depth readings of specific articulations, or moments, of convergence. Thus, I combine semi-structured interviews with critical textual analysis to connect the broader context to my readings of UFC executives marketing across platforms, of images and color schemes framing women on specific platforms, and of UFC bloggers creating and circulating discourses of women's fighting as both producers and consumers. This interdisciplinary study illuminates the contested space of women's physical participation in converging media culture while simultaneously surfacing tremors in longstanding ideologies of the gendered body.

For Janet Duros McClearen
August 10, 1948 – July 27, 2012

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Introduction: Converging Media and Divergent Bodies

People often brighten with recognition when I disclose that I am writing a dissertation about women in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Their enthusiasm typically verbalizes into “Oh, you mean like Ronda Rousey?!” I find it unsurprising that Rousey’s name is synonymous with the UFC. She famously became the first woman to sign with the mixed-martial-arts (MMA) promotion and sports media empire in late 2012. The white, blond, charismatic, and hegemonically attractive Rousey was a *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* cover model and one of the UFC’s most visible and highest paid stars through 2016. The UFC and MMA media outlets have unanimously heralded Rousey as the impetus for the UFC’s creation of a women’s division for MMA, a sport that merges striking arts like karate with grappling arts like jiu jitsu. The organization’s president has repeatedly stated that Rousey singlehandedly changed his mind about developing a women’s division in the first place (Rousey and Ortiz, 2015; Martin, 2013). The UFC even rewarded Rousey with the first women’s championship title before she had ever finished her legendary armbar on MMA’s largest stage. Rousey’s superstardom has extended beyond MMA to include movie roles in *The Fast and the Furious 7* (2015), *Entourage* (2015), and *The Expendables 3* (2014). Her rags-to-riches story even became a bestselling memoir in 2015. For all her intrigue, for all her significance in bringing women’s MMA into the limelight, I want to be clear from the outset: I am *not* writing the Ronda Rousey story.

Rousey has been a significant factor in the growth of women’s MMA and the popularity of the UFC more broadly; yet, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) asserts, there’s a “danger in the single story” or in focusing on one narrative to the detriment of all others. As I write at length in this dissertation on the promotion of women in MMA, I examine Rousey; yet, I also

purposefully surface other narratives, experiences, and discourses that may be forgotten when feminist media and sports scholars examine this phenomenon some years from now. Consider a lesser-known story about the first women's bout in the UFC. The UFC signed Rousey to the promotion first, but Liz Carmouche was the first women to set foot in the Octagon¹ to face Rousey in March 2013. Liz Carmouche won this honor by galvanizing her *Twitter* and *Facebook* followers to inundate the UFC with requests to book her for the first women's fight. Carmouche affectionately calls her fans the "lizbos"—a combination of the words "Liz" and "lezbos" to proudly signal her out lesbian identity and her virtual relationship with a dedicated group of fans. In the end, the mixed-race, lesbian, masculine-presenting, and former U.S. marine became the first female fighter to set foot in the Octagon, crash through the UFC glass ceiling, signal a moment when difference became a desirable marketing strategy in the sport.

Carmouche's feat highlights a moment in contemporary media when difference of all varieties, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and numerous other facets of a multicultural society, have gained new exposure in legacy and new media. At the same time, Carmouche's engagement with her fans via social media demonstrates how an ever-expanding array of media platforms circulate diverse content at rapid rates. These two features of modern society—a highly networked system of media content and the increasing visibility of difference—have not occurred in a vacuum. As the capacity for new technologies to reach diverse and niche markets has increased, users now have a greater ability to locate and consume content that reflects their individual identities even if those identities are marginalized in broader society as evidenced by Carmouche's lizbos. Henry Jenkins (2006) describes this "media convergence" as a profound cultural shift characterized by a growing network of technologies,

¹ The Octagon is the large metal octagon-shaped cage that UFC fighters compete in. "The Octagon" is a registered trademark of the UFC while other MMA promotions usually call it a cage or a ring.

platforms, channels, and mediums to consume, remix, and produce media. He emphasizes that new technologies allow participants to engage a variety of media that was unavailable or difficult to locate before. Prior to new media technologies, media executives judged niche content—anything that falls outside the target white male 18-49 demographic—as too narrow a market to address (Gray, 2013). For example, new media technologies launched the Asian-American comedian, KevJuma, as a *YouTube* sensation when his “I Have to Deal with Stereotypes” video went viral. The web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, achieved popular and critical acclaim for its representation of Black women. All the while, networks and streaming services have increased programming featuring gendered, racial, and sexualized difference, such as ABC’s *Black-ish* and *Fresh Off the Boat*, Amazon Prime’s *Transparent*, and Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black*. New media technologies have facilitated a proliferation of media content generated from the top down or the bottom up and gives marginalized identities greater visibility. Streaming sites, social media, blogs, and other web-based digital programs provide the capacity to customize and easily distribute content that has long been underrepresented, such as women’s sports. As the UFC continually increases its promotion of women across these various channels, the media organization becomes a compelling site to examine how discourses about women’s sports are shifting.

My dissertation, *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies: Articulations of Powerful Women in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)*, offers a fresh lens by which to analyze the production of gendered difference in the contemporary media context by deemphasizing two established feminist critiques of sports media. Feminist media and sports scholars have long highlighted the underrepresentation of women in sports media and the hypersexualization of women in sports media and in marketing and advertising more broadly (Kane, 2013; Cooky,

Messner, and Hextrum, 2013; LaVoi, 2012). These critiques are prevalent in feminist scholarship because the underrepresentation and hypersexualization of female athletes remains persistent in sports media. Women's sports received only 1.3% of the coverage on ESPN's SportsCenter in 2009 (Cooky et al., 2013) or 3.6% of the ESPN Magazine covers (LaVoi, 2012). Kane and Maxwell (2011) and Cooky et al. (2013) argue that much of the underrepresentation of female athletes in the media stems from longstanding discourses about who watches sports (i.e., men) and what representations those demographics prefer to see (i.e., women as mothers or objects of desire instead of powerful athletes). Sports media scholars observe that the media typically emphasizes the heterosexuality and femininity of female athletes in ways that detract from their athleticism (Kane and Maxwell, 2013). Thus, scholarship on women's sporting bodies in the media often critiques the sexualization of the female body and deemphasizes how other representational practices and promotional strategies operate within the contemporary context. This project instead centers *divergent bodies*—sporting bodies that deviate from perceived hegemonically masculine and feminine norms that often dominate sports media culture and its corresponding academic literature.

Converging Media and Divergent Bodies brackets the underrepresentation and sexualization analyses to offer a case study in discourses of women's sports that highlight other promotional strategies that have popularized women's MMA. Digital media technologies facilitate new opportunities and challenges for women in media culture by facilitating discourses of women's athleticism and physical power across an ever-multiplying range of platforms and content. This project examines the cultural symbiosis among digital technologies and the celebration of women's physicality while still asking critical questions of the production of these types of representations: who is impacted in these shifting discourses and who is excluded, by

whom, for whom, and for what purpose? I illuminate the contested cultural space for women's sports in contemporary culture while simultaneously surfacing tremors in longstanding gender, racial, and sexual discourses of the divergent body.

Converging Media and Divergent Bodies specifically examines how the UFC has integrated female fighters into its numerous converging sports media ventures, including live events, reality TV, web series, and social media. I argue that the UFC introduced female fighters as an innovative marketing strategy that leverages converging media to imagine gender, racial, sexual, and national difference as desirable and lucrative. I examine the promotion of white women, lesbian women, women of color, and trans women² in order nuance how divergent bodies become central to the UFC's brand. The UFC's inclusion of female athletes is noteworthy in the sports media industry and is built on a burgeoning marketing discourse that believes increasing the type of representations available, via digital media, appeals to previously disregarded segments of the sports media market (i.e. women and/or fans of women's sports). As compelling as these shifts may be, I contend that the UFC flattens and commodifies difference as a neatly packaged marketing strategy that obscures the cultural, economic, and social discourses that create differences in the first place. It is these same discourses of gendered, racial, and sexual difference that regulate the participation of women in the UFC even as the promotion superficially celebrates difference. I draw upon the cultural studies project—a strategic combination of theories and methods that aim to describe, critique, and transform cultural practices (Grossberg *et al*, 1992; Kellner and Durham, 2012)—to consider the UFC as a cultural entity that operates within a contemporary social, political, and economic context. Technological

² Throughout this project, I use trans women as an open and inclusive term that includes a spectrum of trans identities (including those who undergo physical changes and those who have not; those who display normative genders and those that do not, etc.).

innovation, changing rituals of consumption, neoliberal logics, burgeoning discourses of women's physicality, and the increasing marketability of difference are just a few examples of contemporary context that form the backdrop for my research. I understand UFC media as impacted by these various contemporary conditions and that discourses of women's bodies are always operating in a particular cultural, economic, and political context. Consequently, this interdisciplinary project offers fodder for scholarly conversations in media and communication studies, American studies, cultural studies, sports studies, and feminist studies.

Converging Media

The rise of digital media technologies in the UFC occurs at a moment in contemporary culture when media is often described as “emerging,” “changing,” “shifting,” “evolving,” “transforming,” and other “-ing” words that signal a profound state of “becoming” something different than before. Henry Jenkins (2006) describes the ongoing technological changes as a profound cultural shift. He labels this shift as “convergence culture,” or a cultural process that is “defined through the layering, diversification, and interconnectivity of media” in increasingly participatory ways. Jenkins understands convergence culture as different from a “digital revolution” because “revolution” implies a complete displacement of legacy media. Rather, we are witnessing the integration of digital and legacy media as no longer discreet entities but intersecting mediums. Technology is changing rapidly and dispersing content at an unprecedented rate when compared to legacy media, such as film, broadcast television, radio, and print. Jenkins emphasizes the agency and engagement of spectators in this burgeoning media system as a type of media culture where those who were merely passive spectators in an old media system are now active participants in producing media content through social media. Convergence culture, in Jenkins' description, is not something that happens within a media

platform per se, but within the minds of users themselves as they actively navigate and produce media content. Thus, convergence culture leverages collective intelligence where individual users are empowered to manipulate and create content.

On the surface, convergence culture seems to make the relationship between the producer and consumer in the circuit of culture even more entangled. One of Jenkins' central tenants in *Convergence Culture* (2006) is that the proliferation of new media technologies allows for more participation on the part of the user, which democratizes media and lessens the power of media conglomerates as the central producers of media. New media technologies allow increased engagement with media and less passive reception. For example, a fan of the television show *Scandal* may watch the drama on-demand on her laptop computer while surfing her iPad for Olivia Pope's latest fashions in the show's shopping application. The fan can later write a fictional reimagining of the show's narrative on her blog that revises the central romantic relationship. The various converging media technologies available to the *Scandal* fan provide a more active user experience than even a few years past. Technologies are changing rapidly and dispersing content at an unprecedented rate when compared to "old" media. Jenkins underscores the agency and engagement of spectators in the new media system, such as the *Scandal* fan blogger, as "participatory culture"—a type of media environment where those who were merely passive spectators in the old media system are now active participants in producing content through social media. Convergence, in Jenkins' description, is not something that happens within a media platform, per se, but within the minds of users themselves as they actively navigate across media platforms and produce media content themselves. Thus, convergence culture leverages collective intelligence where individual users are more and more empowered to manipulate and create content.

Several scholars speaking from a cultural studies orientation to convergence culture question the optimism with which Jenkins approaches the shifting media environment (Andrews & Giardina, 2008; McRobbie, 2009; Turner, 2012). These scholars suggest that while rapid technological change is evident, the emancipation of the user and greater access to media as a democratic tool is not necessarily achieving the societal transformation for which Jenkins hopes. Agency and emancipation is a particular point of contention for many of these scholars. For example, Elizabeth Bird (2011) questions the agency of the “produser”—the hybrid producer and consumer—by arguing that just because new technologies for media creation exist, it does not mean that an internet-savvy average user is the new norm.³ She highlights social, political, and economic barriers that individuals face to accessing the technologies that would enable convergence culture. Catherine Driscoll and Melisa Gregg (2011) stress that fan labor and fan produced content financially benefit media industries and rarely the fans themselves. Collectively, these scholars suggest that gross inequalities still plague convergence culture and the playing field is far from leveled.

Jenkins (2014) later addressed some of the criticisms leveraged against “convergence culture” to acknowledge that his original insights may have been more optimistic than his current views of the democratic possibilities embedded in participatory media. Unlike Jenkins’ original conceptualization of convergence culture, the simple act of empowering consumers to produce media does not account for the power and specific contexts of culture that many cultural studies scholars describe. Power not only exists at the level of media executive producing content but also at the level of the individual participating in the social order. Power circulates through various contexts formed across production, consumption, identity, representation, and regulation.

³ Prosumer is more often used than produser, but they both suggest the blending of roles between consumers and producers, a process facilitated by social media and new media technologies.

Since power disperses unevenly in the contemporary media climate, I choose to describe the phenomenon as *converging media* in order to distance the conversation from Jenkins' original conception of convergence culture as a democratizing force that lends power to prosumers in unprecedented ways. Imagine that an individual media user appropriates a popular text that has been produced by certain individuals at a particular moment. That individual user transforms the text into a meme that draws upon racist discourses to make meaning. Each subsequent click that promotes that meme with a search engine algorithm collectively reproduces the racist discourse the meme promotes. As the meme circulates across *Twitter* and *Facebook* it encounters laughter, acceptance, hostility, rejection, and contestation as the struggle for meaning plays out in participatory culture. Perhaps at some point the meme becomes regulated by *Facebook's* code of conduct, perhaps it does not. So, users have the ability to adapt and transform content in unprecedented ways, but they often also contribute towards or negotiate social inequality while only occasionally reading and altering texts in oppositional ways.

Even as cultural studies scholars debate the potential for liberation within participatory culture, there is mounting evidence that converging media facilitates the representation of diverse identities across platforms and genres. Herman Gray (2013) theorizes that as the capacity for new technologies to reach diverse and niche markets has increased, users now have a greater ability to locate and consume content that reflects diverse identity categories and interests. For example, while the UFC may focus the bulk of its marketing efforts on promoting a few key stars like Ronda Rousey and Conor McGregor on talk shows or in hour-long broadcast specials, they also create short vignettes about lesser-known fighters that they circulate on social media and feature on Fight Pass. These short videos are fairly inexpensive to produce and easy to circulate within the UFC's social media universe. Gray theorizes that prior to the rise of convergence,

media executives may have judged niche content as too narrow a market to address.

Convergence allows a proliferation of media content generated from the top down or the bottom up and gives marginalized identities greater visibility. Gray (2013) explains that even though the features of convergence culture enable increased visibility of difference across a spectrum of media platforms and content, visibility does not mean that representations are liberating or that they highlight the struggles that remain for marginalized identities. For example, female fighters have a growing presence in UFC media, but this visibility does not necessarily translate to equity. Simply focusing on the growing number of female fighters does not adequately interrogate the cultural significance of women in MMA nor reveal precisely how the UFC depicts them.

The UFC's attention to difference, as examined in this dissertation, aligns with a contemporary trend in media culture to include diverse bodies onscreen at rapidly growing rates. Scholars have recently begun to examine the growing interest in representing, marketing, and branding diversity in popular media (Ouellette, 2016; Pham, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2013; Gray, 2013; Beltran, 2010). Herman Gray (2013) argues that scholars of difference in the media have to move beyond the analysis of content scarcity, i.e. the lack of diverse representations in the media. Instead, he contends that the contemporary era of television and new media is a moment of saturation and hypervisibility. Multiculturalism has become a key component of how brand identities become articulated. Difference constitutes market segments and knowledge about populations of audiences circulates in media organizations. Gray writes that

The capacity of American broadcast, cable, and digital media to reach precise demographic targets based on marketable “differences” and to tailor content based on those differences

articulates well to cultural discourses of market choice, public policies of privatization, and postracial social practices of diversity and multiculturalism (p. 783).

In other words, racial, sexual, gendered, and national difference all become customized iterations of a brand that desires to provide greater choice to a growing number of market segments (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Aronczyk, 2013). Digital technologies facilitate this choice because media organizations no longer have to rely on mass broadcast television as their sole form of storytelling, which was a hallmark of 20th century brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The UFC can customize their marketing and programming according to the variety of audiences that make up their viewership. UFC cameras can follow athletes the week before their fights to give the public a glimpse into a Black Muslim man's daily prayer ritual or a mother's relationship with her young daughter. These stories are relatively inexpensive to produce and are easily distributed on *YouTube* and circulated via *Facebook* or *Twitter*. An outcome of converging media is the increased representations of bodies that diverge from the perceived straight, white, middle class norm.

Divergent Bodies

The term "divergent bodies" takes on several interconnected meanings within this project. On the most surface level, divergent bodies in the UFC are female bodies since they are perpetually distinguished as different from male fighters. Weight classes bear the title of "women's" (i.e. women's bantamweight), commentators compare female fighters with one another more regularly than with men, and fans like to argue whether or not female fights are more exciting than male fights. The sex-segregation of the sport of MMA maintains distinctions between male and female bodies so that the primacy of a binary system of gender is maintained. The sport does little to challenge this system even as it more readily incorporates discourses of

women's physical power in their own right. Beyond this concise acknowledgement of the gender binary, "divergent bodies" more importantly speaks to two of the major intellectual interventions within this dissertation. First, I emphasize discourses that depart from stories about the sexualization or underrepresentation of female athletes. Second, I focus on bodies that diverge from the hegemonically feminine norm. Entire books could be written on the sexualization of hegemonically feminine fighters; however, that would simply bolster a narrative of female athletes that has been told before—a "single" story.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) poignantly describes power as "the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person." The incredible power that storytelling has to make a single idea definitive. As I examine the recent history of the UFC's foray into the women's divisions, I am mindful of Adichie's caution for storytellers in two primary ways. First, I am reluctant to emphasize narratives within feminist media studies that describe the sexualization of female athletes. This single story permeates discussions of female athletes in both scholarly and popular engagement on the topic of female bodies. In the scant scholarship on women in the UFC published thus far, the female body as object or even as subject/object has featured prominently (Weaving, 2015; Jennings, 2015; Weaving, 2013). As with Adichie, my reservations about the single story make no effort to discredit that particular tale on its own merits. Rather, I ponder what other stories may be told using feminist and cultural studies lenses to better understand how discourses of women's sports operate within the contemporary moment.

The second way I understand "divergent bodies" is an attention towards women who fall outside an assumed straight, white, cisgender norm. While the UFC has embraced the women's MMA divisions in compelling ways, the experiences of privileged female bodies become

hypervisible while divergent bodies, including women of color, lesbians, and trans women, are marginalized. Throughout this project I surface these stories of divergent bodies so that they become part of the counternarrative of women in combat sports. The centering of these women's stories is decidedly a political act that challenges the hegemony of whiteness, cis female bodies, and heterosexuality. A project on women in the UFC would be incomplete without an examination of intersecting discourses of difference that circulate around these women.

Discourses of gender, race, sexuality, class, nationality, ability, and the body flow through a variety of cultural sites, such as television, film, and new media, and knowledges; such as biology, kinesiology, and gender studies. Cultural logics of who is physically fit, who is capable of certain types of athleticism, who participates, and who watches are intrinsic to the cultural fabric of sports and entertainment media. Thus, bodily epistemologies are embedded rather than originating from any central location such as a singular media artifact or sports practice. These discourses also have a material impact on who participates and who benefits from that participation. Certain bodies are marked for participation early in life while others may be marginalized—a discursive process that impacts the body. Feminist theory and cultural studies have both demonstrated how the body can be socially constructed through discourse yet remain material at the same time.

The discursive construction of sex and gender have been taken up in a variety of feminist works on the body. For example, even though Foucault fails to theorize gender in his work, Sandra Bartky (1998) shows how the Foucauldian concept of docile bodies produces gendered bodies that are compelled to comply with the discursive norms of gender through dieting and fashion. Likewise, C.L. Cole (1993) shows how sports draw upon discourses of science and medicine, which media, educational, and governmental institutions sanction and distribute. These

discourses produce particular types of bodies—ones that are gendered, raced, classed, sexed, and determined otherwise fit and or able. Discourses of gender and sex adhere to “normalizing technologies” that classify, place within a hierarchy and produce particular identities.

Numerous scholars agree that feminist theory has long been caught up in the defining and contesting discursive constructions of sex and gender without attending to other identity categories or the nuances of lived experience (Anzaldúa, 2007; Christain, 1988; Collins, 2008; hooks, 2000; Moi, 1999; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983; Young, 2005). Materiality and intersectionality take into account the variety of other subjectivities and experiences that make up the category of women as well as the performance of femininity. Anne Balsamo (1996) maintains that it is impossible to separate the socially constructed body from the lived, material body because the body is always a “hybrid construction of materiality and discourse” (p. 12). Felly Nkweto Simmonds (1999) illustrates this concept by conveying that as a sociologist and a Black woman she can never divorce her body from her experience of being a Black woman in white discipline. She writes, “In this white world I am a fresh water fish that swims in sea water. I feel the weight of the water...on my body” (p. 51). Thus, she never navigates a world in which she works and lives only as an intellectual, but she also moves throughout her life as a material body who feels the interlocking structures of racism and sexism. Social and historical realities that define and make meaning of those bodies and are always present, operating, and impacting the diverging array of bodies that make up the category of woman (Young, 2005).

The nomenclature, “women in the UFC,” comprises a vast array of converging and diverging subjectivities, including, but not limited to, mother, ex-military, blue-collar worker, model, spokeswoman, lesbian, Olympian, Brazilian, Latina, and Caucasian. The fact that diverse representations of women are visible in UFC media is noteworthy and indicative of a converging

media climate that facilitates multiple images rather than a unified mass mediated one. These divergent bodies challenge dominant discourses of female athleticism, hetero-patriarchy, and white supremacy through multiple channels and screens. *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies* highlights the intersecting discourses of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality that inform how the UFC leverages femininities and difference to sell its media more broadly.

A Brief History of the UFC: From Human Cockfighting to Female Headliners

The UFC's origin story provides a curious backdrop to the eventual folding of difference into the brand and inclusion of women nearly 25 years later. The first event was held in 1993 as a tournament of champions to pit various martial artists against one another in a test of martial disciplines. As such, martial artists who specialized in punching or kicking might face competitors that were experts in wrestling or grappling. MMA fighters would later develop well-rounded skillsets included elements of striking, wrestling, and grappling. But the first UFC event, UFC 1 in 1993 was arranged around one central question: which martial art and artist would prove superior to all others when facing opponents with an unfamiliar fighting style? The contest among styles displayed some infamous results that continue to impact the reputation of MMA to this day. For example, the first fighters to enter the Octagon were a sumo wrestler, Teila Tuli, and a much smaller kickboxer, Gerard Gordeau. Despite being the smaller opponent, Gordeau won the fight with a kick to the head of his grounded opponent, a move now illegal in the UFC because of the risk of serious injury. UFC 1 and subsequent tournaments were "no holds barred" contests, which meant few rules other than no eye gouging or biting ("Brutal beginnings..." 2013). Part of the original vision of the UFC was to provide a forum for testing true fighting prowess and hypermasculine ferocity—a forum that would be hindered by too many rules preventing the men from using everything within their power to win. Thus, this origin story

drips with aggressive rhetoric, displays of violence, and a fascination with testing the limits of the male body. Women were originally excluded in this space because of patriarchal assumptions about the female body as inherently weak and fragile.

The UFC's early events brought in a particular type of fight fan: he was interested in the testing a fighter's will to overcome physical adversity and he could tolerate "no rules" (Fox Sports, 2013; Gentry, 2011). He was not a mainstream sports fan, but rather he was an extreme combat sport aficionado. The organization initially embraced the small crowd that gathered around it in the early years and were not overly concerned with appealing to a more mainstream sports fan. Throughout the 1990s WOW Productions and Semaphore Entertainment Group (SEG) governed the UFC live events and pay-per-view broadcasts respectively (Gentry, 2011). The UFC received initial success and generated a great deal of buzz within niche combat sport circles, but had difficulty bringing in new audiences, which in turn made it a difficult enterprise to maintain.

Early fandom around the UFC tapered a bit in the late 90s at the same time politicians began taking notice of MMA. John McCain famously called the sport "human cockfighting" and numerous other lawmakers voiced similar opposition to the level of violence displayed in the matches (Vahey, 2009). Cable channels no longer wanted to air the events with such controversy and the UFC lost a way to broadcast the fights nationally as a result. MMA moved underground to the internet during the sport's "dark ages" in the late 1990s and was maintained only by a small cohort of media savvy fans who were writing about the sport online. The niche community of fans circulated information via news sites, fan forums, and even a daily email list of information (Fighting Politics, 2009). Effectively, new media-savvy MMA bloggers and internet-based fans kept the UFC afloat during the dark ages of MMA.

These dark ages illustrate a moment of transition between a media culture almost exclusively dominated by legacy media and the emergence of digital media technologies. In the 90s, the sport had a dedicated niche audience but cable companies refused to broadcast the events. Cable channels were still relatively focused on large segments of audiences and streaming platforms were more than a decade away from ubiquity. Instead, being a MMA fan during MMA's dark ages required knowledge of burgeoning technologies to circulate information about MMA, including building websites to host forums and blog sites to circulate commentary and recaps of events. Casual fans were likely nonexistent because of the skills and labor required to locate and distribute information. As a result, the UFC fan demographic was predominantly young, white, educated, and male—characteristics that still constituted a large portion of UFC's core fan base today.

MMA might have faded into obscurity if two Las Vegas entrepreneurs had not decided to purchase and develop the organization. Casino owners Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta and their childhood friend Dana White formed the company Zuffa to buy the UFC in 2001 (Fighting Politics, 2009). The three men bought the organization with the goal of making the sport more palatable to a wider (read: more profitable) audience. In their first four years, Zuffa spent millions of dollars in targeted ad campaigns in *Playboy*, *Maxim*, and *Stuff* magazines. They also acquired Carmen Electra as their spokeswoman all in an effort to appeal to their target 13-34 male demographic (Gentry, 2011). The UFC's reputation for unfiltered brutality had severely damaged the UFC's ability to enter the mainstream, try as they might to gain a new fan base outside their dedicated number of followers. The brutality of "no rules" also impaired the UFC's ability to extend its fan base.

Zuffa lost 44 million dollars in the first four years of owning the UFC and came extremely close to selling the company. Dana White and the Fertitta brothers began testing other strategies for engaging their fan base because of their inability to appeal to mainstream audiences through traditional channels (such as simply airing their fights on TV). For starters, the organization embraced internet-based fandom early on because social media was an avenue for free promotion when the UFC was failing to get traction in mainstream media. Dana White proudly described the organization's early adoption of social media in 2014, "We're different from all other leagues. We embraced social media. Our fighters would tweet in between rounds if they could. We would let them do whatever they want with social media. And it's been very successful for us (White quoted in Cooper, 2014). White is signaling the early trepidation that many sports media organizations felt towards social media (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2014). Media organizations broadly feared social media as something that would be out of the control of a carefully crafted brand. On the contrary, the UFC saw social media as an opportunity to leverage their internet-savvy fan base.

UFC media is a particularly interesting space to study the impacts of converging media because the organization has been so dependent on new media technologies to survive. When mainstream legacy media shunned the sport, the UFC worked creatively through social media and bloggers to spread their brand and connect their fighters with fans. Compared to more mainstream sports leagues like the NFL or NBA, which evolved alongside broadcast television and later cable televisions, the UFC is more a millennial rather than a baby boomer. The organization has been dependent on innovations with technology to bypass mainstream channels and promote themselves through new media. The rise of women's MMA has occurred within this particular converging media environment.

Women's MMA evolved in the shadows alongside the UFC and other men's promotions beginning in the 1990s. While rumors of women's fights in Japanese promotions date back to the mid-90s, the first documented women's MMA fights took place in December 2000 with the Japanese ReMix World Cup tournament that featured 12 female fighters from around the world (Headrick, 2014; Green and Svinth, 2010). Japanese women's MMA continued with organizations such as Smackgirl, U-Top, and AX (Headrick, 2014). The success of Japanese women's MMA events later influenced U.S. based promotions to include more women on their rosters.

Although other organizations in the U.S. dabbled in promoting women's fights, Jeff Osborne's promotion, Hook-n-Shoot, has been recognized as one of the first serious attempt at women's MMA in the U.S. in the early 2000s (Green and Svinth, 2010). Osborne was a UFC commentator and former professional wrestler who sponsored his first women's fight in 2001. Loretta Hunt (2012) of *Sports Illustrated* notes that later that year Osborne noticed his wife and daughter watching a DVD copy of a Japanese all-women's promotion called Remix. He was fascinated by his 5-year-old daughter's interest in watching women fight and believed powerful female fighters could be role models for her. Osborne began planning the first all women's card in the U.S, which he called "Revolution." He met a lot of challenges promoting the card because sponsors believed no one would watch a women's only event. The stigma against women's fighting proved strong. Revolution only received local NBC and Fox affiliate attention and Hook-n-Shoot ended up losing \$8,800 on the event. Despite the financial flop, Osborne said, "Sometimes it's better to make history than money. This was that kind of show. It's one of my greatest achievements" (Osborne quoted in Hunt, 2012).

Julie Kedzie, a pioneer of women's MMA in the U.S., remembers her experience in Hook-n-Shoot in the mid-2000s as really positive compared to other promotions. She recalls Osborne as taking women's fighting seriously and avoiding the objectification strategy so many promotions at the time defaulted to. In an interview with Josh Rosenblatt (2013) about the history of women's MMA, Kedzie compares Hook-n-Shoot to other promotions:

But I will say that some of the other shows that I fought weren't so good. I've had people pinch my ass on the way to the cage. Sometimes the male fighters were really supportive and sometimes they were horrible. I had one guy say, "I'm going to fuck you in your mouth." Just horrible, horrible things said to me. People not paying you much, people disrespecting you, being moved in a card over and over again so that you're the last fight of the night and no one is there to watch. All sorts of things have happened like that to me, but I think that the struggle has helped me appreciate what I'm doing more. It makes me more in love with what I'm doing. Now that things are easier, I look at some of the female fighters who haven't had to deal with this because there's definitely more acceptance.

Kedzie clearly outlines the misogyny early women's MMA faced in U.S. promotions. Sponsors and promoters believed women's fights would not sell and the massive crowd exodus when women's fights were scheduled last on a card seemed to prove these assumptions. Jeff Dudek, another women's MMA promoter at the time, discusses the challenges of promoting women's MMA in the mid 2000s. He says,

I was shocked by the resistance I got. People called it a gimmick or a freak show or said it would be boring because women were fighting. Venues wouldn't book us... Out of 10

phone calls, I'd get two to consider it and the other eight would hang up on me (Dudek quoted in Hunt, 2012).

The sexism against female fighters seemed almost impenetrable. Combine assumptions about the banality of women's fights with the harassment Kedzie describes and MMA remained a sex-segregated space that was hostile to female athletes and fans alike.

Tides began to turn in the late 2000s when promotions like Fatal Femme successfully produced women's cards and EliteXC and Bellator Fighting Championships featured women alongside men's bouts. (Hunt, 2012; Headrick, 2014). EliteXC aired the first women's fight on a major cable television network in 2007 when Gina Carano defeated Julie Kedzie on *Showtime* ("Gina Carano vs. Julie Kedzie...", 2007). Carano became the "face of women's MMA" for several years when the impressive fighter and hegemonically feminine fitness model sustained a successful fighting record and posed for magazines like *Maxim*. Carano also fought for Strikeforce, which was the most visible promotion to include female fighters prior to the UFC.

At the height of her popularity, Carano fought Cris "Cyborg" Justino⁴ in 2009 for the Strikeforce women's featherweight (145lbs) championship title. The fight was significant for a few reasons. First, it was the first time a major television network featured a women's bout as the headlining event. The *Showtime* fight between Carano and Justino inaugurated the Strikeforce women's featherweight championship. Secondly, the press leading up to the event proved that women's MMA had an uphill battle. The fight was billed as "beauty versus the beast" referencing Carano's femininity and Justino's more "masculine" appearance. Justino knocked Carano out in the first round of the fight, which led to questions about her gender identity and use of steroids in the court of popular opinion. It was evident that to be the "face of women's

⁴ In 2009, Justino was married and went by the last name Santos. I will refer to her as Justino throughout this manuscript.

MMA,” fighters had to conform to narrowly defined feminine ideals. Carano left MMA and went on to star in action films like *Haywire* (2011), *The Fast in the Furious 6* (2013), and *Deadpool* (2016) while Justino has had to petition repeatedly to be included in the UFC, which she finally achieved in 2015.

Zuffa bought Strikeforce in 2011 and acquired a roster of female fighters including Carano, Justino, Sarah Kauffman, and Miesha Tate. Several fighters expressed concern for the women’s division after the UFC had so adamantly refused to include female fighters on the roster. Miesha Tate noted her apprehension. She said, "I just don't know what's going to happen. Now we're all under Zuffa, and the one man who's the big voice there can't appreciate women's fighting” (Tate quoted in Fowlkes, 2011). The “big voice” who “can’t appreciate women’s fighting” referred to UFC president Dana White who had adamantly voiced resistance to women’s MMA for many years.

Later in 2011 up-and-coming fighter Ronda Rousey made an impressive debut in Strikeforce and went on to beat Miesha Tate for the women’s bantamweight (135lbs) championship title in 2012. Dana White took notice of Rousey and famously changed his mind about including women in the UFC. He describes his decision to give women’s MMA a chance based on Rousey’s impressive rise. He says,

[Ronda] has the whole package...I've never been interested in women's MMA. First there weren't enough girls to create an entire women's division. When I talk about a superstar or standout, people talk about Gina Carano and talk about all these others. I'm telling you: this girl, she's nasty. She might be beautiful on the outside, she's a Diaz brother on the inside. She's a real fighter and she's very talented. She has the credentials, the pedigree,

everything. And she has the 'it' factor. I think she's going to be a big superstar (White quoted in Thomas, 2012).

Notice White's insistence that the "whole package" included being "beautiful on the outside" and an impressive fighter like scrappy UFC fighters and brothers Nick and Nate Diaz on the inside. For women's MMA to take off, Rousey needed to have stellar fighting skills and the star power to back it up.⁵

Currently in 2017 the UFC has three women's divisions: strawweight (115lbs), bantamweight (135lbs), and featherweight (145lbs) compared to the eight men's divisions. The UFC has featured numerous women's headlining fights on *Fox Sports 1* and on pay-per-view. During an interview on the podcast the Fight Life, Dana White said he 100% agreed that women's MMA had become as popular if not more popular than men's MMA. He also says,

It's tough to find a sport where the women are financially taken care of the way that the men are and that's definitely the case here. In this business, it's all about who's the attraction, who sells pay-per-views, and who puts bodies in the arena... One of these things that happens in sports like the WNBA or women's golf—"they hit from shorter tees"—or "they don't hit as hard at tennis," and all this stuff. Nobody says that about fights! Fights are fights, man. And when you have two women who are technically sound, and they're putting on an absolute war, it's fun...these girls who fight in the UFC would murder 90% of the men walking around in the streets ("Dana White on Conor..., 2016).

⁵ I have assured readers that this dissertation is not "the Ronda Rousey story," but I would be remiss to exclude her significance from a project on women in the UFC. Dana White would not have taken a chance on a non-hegemonically attractive fighter like Cris "Cyborg" Justino and Gina Carano would have had to beat Santos to be seriously considered for the UFC. Rousey's "whole package" broke the threshold so it is now possible for many other women to be included in the organization. Although Rousey's stardom has dimmed following losses in 2015 and 2016, she remains important to the legacy of women's MMA even as I maintain that hers is not the only story to be told.

White identifies the ways that promoters have changed their views on women's MMA over the last five years. They no longer assume that women's fights cannot sell pay-per-views or that female fighters cannot put on an impressive show. However, it remains clear that being an attraction, being able to sell pay-per-views, and being able to fill arenas is still paramount in the fight business.

This brief history of the UFC and women's MMA reveals a slice of the cultural, social, economic, and technological shifts that have taken place over the last twenty-five years. The UFC's decision to reverse its stance on including women did not occur in a vacuum but has been influenced by a myriad of factors that cannot be isolated to singularities. I draw upon the cultural studies project to address this density and demonstrate the relationship among the multiple reasons why women now have become a popular feature of a sport once called "human cockfighting."

Methodology: A Multiperceptual Approach

I position *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies* squarely within the fundamental exigencies of cultural studies, rather than suggesting substantial revisions to cultural studies theories and methodologies for the sake of addressing the "newness" of converging media. In doing so, this work suggests a path for researching the complexities of converging media as an object of study. Namely, cultural studies methodologies are attentive to the circulation of power within culture and the specificity of context, which both necessitate a *multiperceptual approach* to research—a methodology attentive to the multiplicity of factors that contribute to a cultural phenomenon (Kellner and Durham, 2012). These attentions may be leveraged to explain, critique, and transform the cultural context of converging media in the 21st century and more specifically, the subject of this dissertation: the rise of women in the UFC.

The notion of power within media culture is understood somewhat differently in Jenkins' work than from the cultural studies project. Jenkins (2006) is careful not to exclude the power of media industries in his discussion of convergence culture. He notes that even while he describes new media technologies that allow for unprecedented user engagement, media concentration and conglomeration shift industry power into the hands of the few. Thus, convergence is simultaneously a "top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process" (p. 18). He places great faith in the power of consumers to affect change using "us" vs. "them" divisions for consumers and media industries respectively. Yet, he never questions the power embedded within consumers as collective groups themselves. Many cultural studies scholars reject such clear divisions between "the media" and "the audience" or in the case of Jenkins' conception of convergence culture, media producers, and the user/consumer. Grossberg et al. view media industries, audiences, and content as all circulating within a cultural system where different forms of power struggle over cultural influence, economic clout, and political positioning in a variety of ways. They describe media industries, texts, and audiences as sites of struggle with some groups having influence and some seeking to rectify inequalities. Unlike Jenkins, they reject the notion of power only operating at the media industry level and investigate power as it operates discursively throughout various levels of culture. Power resides in language and hierarchies of knowledge; thus, discourse determines what is true or false within any given knowledge framework or way of speaking (Foucault, 1979). Stuart Hall (1997) summarizes that discourse "governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about," which means that discourse also limits other ways of knowing, seeing, doing, or describing something. Discourse analysis illuminates the production and reiteration of particular types of institutions and their human subjects in a circuit of culture.

Stuart Hall and other cultural studies scholars provide insight into understanding how discourse circulates within culture and how it may be contested across various media sites of production and consumption (Hall, 2001; Du Gay et al., 1997). Hall's encoding/decoding model is important because he introduces a non-linear communication process to media theory. Hall asserts that a) one communication event can be encoded in multiple ways, b) there is more than one possible reading for any given text, and c) understanding the message can be hindered by other filters. The encoding/decoding model provides a way to understand how audiences negotiate power embedded in media texts; however, the model viewed the encoding and decoding process as relatively autonomous. As a result, early British Cultural Studies scholarship emphasized the analysis of encoded texts in order to identify the ways dominant ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality operated and later championed how these texts could be read subversively (Caldwell, 2009). When cultural studies scholars began to examine the production of media texts to a greater extent, they found the encoding/decoding model too simplistic to explain the ways that culture and power operate (Du Gay *et al.*, 1997). The media industry could no longer be viewed as a monolithic entity bent on distributing dominant ideologies to the masses. Scholars have more recently advocated for viewing the circulation of culture and power through a circuit of culture model.

In *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, Du Gay *et al.* (1997) suggest a more compressive look at how one may understand any particular cultural phenomenon as encompassed by a circuit of five interrelated cultural elements: *production* (who are the producers, writers, marketers, etc.), *consumption* (who is it sold to and how do they buy it?), *regulation* (what are the laws, approval chains, certifications, etc.), *identity* (who are the people at the production, reception, and regulatory stages?), and *representation* (what does it signify and

how is it structured?). Du Gay *et al.* see each of these elements as possessing power and being interrelated within a particular *context*, which means that these elements join together and form a temporary link among these elements that is formed under certain conditions. Du Gay *et al.* (1997) note that understanding the ways in which these elements are joined together in context is essential because none of the elements exist in isolation and each is connected and dependent upon the next in some way. Thus, no one element can be studied in isolation because our understanding of that element would be incomplete without the relationships to the context as a whole. My dissertation follows Du Gay *et al.* by examining various cultural artifacts—UFC media along with other media— within their corresponding contemporary context.

The second contribution that cultural studies methodologies may make to the contemporary study of converging media is an attention to context. The term itself stems from the Latin roots *con*, which means together, and *texere*, which is to weave. Context, in the cultural studies sense, may best be understood as the weaving together of various forces and exigencies to create the particular situations in which media cultures and artifacts are created, consumed, and transformed (as stated within Du Gay *et al.*'s circuit of culture). Context is a wide-reaching concept that urges scholars to attend to the vast array of social, political, and economic forces that intertwine throughout cultural artifacts and locations (Ang, 2012; Grossberg *et al.*, 1992; Storey, 1996). For example, Herman Gray's (2013) analysis of the contemporary visibility of difference in popular media demonstrates a methodology attentive to context. He argues that media culture is currently defined by "the alignment of several interlocking histories including new technological capacities for representation, the intensification and proliferation of difference, the spread of market logic to all aspects of social life, and the reinvention of government" (p. 771). Here, Gray identifies how disparate sectors of

social, political, and economic life intertwine to produce a contemporary media climate that promotes the unprecedented hypervisibility of difference. He illuminates a growing trend, which corresponds with technological developments, that encourages self-surveillance and the celebration of difference. He further notes that these elements exist amongst rampant individualization supported by neoliberal ideology. Gray's project illustrates the weaving together of cultural locations, forms, and structures produced within converging media. Each element of Gray's argument merges distinct aspects of society as interdependent and interrelated. Each element reinforces one another to produce a particular media context.

Attention to context could also be a useful way to examine the growing popularity of transmedia storytelling, a hallmark of media convergence. Transmedia storytelling is a narrative technique that extends fictional storylines across multiple media platforms (TV, film, games, websites, video games, etc.). In transmedia storytelling, each medium engages a portion of a larger narrative that cannot be contained in a single medium alone. As such, to have the complete experience of the story, consumers must glean information from various sources to have the full picture. An attention to context within transmedia storytelling would be concerned with the various elements that contribute both to the overall structure of the narrative dispersed throughout media platforms, such as economic influences on the industry and audiences' tastes and expectations. However, a contextual analysis takes into account the way generic conventions and professional codes inform each platform's articulation of the story. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2001) note that media texts adhere to particular generic conventions that impact the ways that stories can be told. Drama, comedy, romance, action-adventure, documentary, and reality TV each have particular formulas that influence and limit storytelling according to generic boundaries. Furthermore, industry workers who develop content for these various genres

and platforms operate within a trade with its own logics, rules, politics, and conventions. John Thornton Caldwell (2009) draws attention to the ways that various levels of media production operate through industry logics and “deep texts.” Industry logics include the assumptions writers and producers make about their audiences as well as standards to which their work is to be held. “Deep texts” refers to the correspondence that circulates within particular trades that establish rituals of that profession. Taken as a whole, genre and trade conventions each contribute to the context in which a transmedia story may be written, distributed, and engaged.

Cultural studies is concerned with mapping and transforming the ways that culture and power are contextualized in an ongoing set of interrelationships. Therefore, the complexities of converging media—i.e. the blurring lines between production and consumption around a particular media text by a given group of consumers—are one such context common to contemporary media culture. Unlike Jenkins’ conceptualization of convergence culture, the simple act of empowering consumers to produce media does not account for the power and specific contexts of culture that cultural studies scholars describe or that I illuminate throughout this project. My analysis of participatory culture demonstrates that fans and audiences interpret and circulate media using similar discourses as UFC media producers.

Choosing methods to study amorphous configurations of culture, power, and context are not met without challenges for the cultural studies scholar. In fact, even arriving at a precise definition of what constitutes cultural studies methods is fraught with complexity—a complexity drawn from numerous scholarly discussions around the scope and essence of cultural studies itself. Grossberg et al. (1992) assert that cultural studies research is by definition pluralistic. They define cultural studies as beyond a discipline that adheres to traditional bounded methods; rather, they see it as a political project that aims to understand the way power operates within

culture and to use the knowledge gained to intervene. As a result, the political project must leverage theory and method from “whatever fields are necessary to produce the knowledge required” (p. 2) in order to produce the innovation the project aspires to create. Grossberg et al. reject the rigidity of disciplines and assert “cultural studies needs to remain open to unexpected, unimagined, and even uninvited possibilities” (p. 3). For example, transmedia storytelling is typically viewed as stemming from a central authorship (producers and writers) that bring various media platforms together to articulate different aspects of a narrative world (Evans, 2011). These previous articulations of transmedia storytelling could be leveraged in a variety of ways in a cultural studies framework. Interviews with writers and producers might shed light on the industry logics, trade conventions, and economic constraints that inform decisions to distribute certain aspects of stories through particular platforms. However, as Christy Dena (2009) argues, fan-created content is also important to the transmedia story because fans tend to adhere to essential aspects of the storyworld that hold the overall narrative together. A text analysis of the interaction between industry and fan-produced content demonstrates the way particular discourses circulate in media culture. This approach may simultaneously acknowledge the power of fans to creatively adapt and transform content but also show how dominant discourses still impact fan produced content.

Grossberg et al. (1992) contend that in cultural studies, “the choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context” (p. 2). In this view, a variety of methods might illuminate how power operates in various aspects of converging media. Kellner and Durham (2012) call this a “multiperceptual approach,” which is a strategic combination of theories and methods to further the project of cultural studies. Although these perspectives (theoretically and methodologically) are diverse; each show how “media and

cultural texts are rooted in a particular system of political economy such as capitalism, or in the dominant media and cultural forms of a particular social order based on relations of domination and subordination in the areas of gender, race, and class” (p. 3). Each theory and method has particular “ways of seeing” that illuminate some things and leave others obscure. By crossing traditional disciplinary boundaries, the transdisciplinarity of cultural studies attempts to avoid the splintering of knowledge about media and society along disciplinary lines. The ultimate goal of cultural studies methodology is to critique domination and subordination within races, classes, sexualities, genders, etc.; however, the tools of political economic analysis, social theory, and cultural criticism are malleable according to the specific phenomenon and context being studied. Kellner and Durham (2012) stress that this multiplicity of perspectives allow for a rich array of complexity that can begin to assess the relationship between social relations, economics, signs, symbols, and other cultural interactions with media.

Kellner and Durham caution that even though cultural studies research is pluralistic and creative it should still be systematic and critical to avoid some of the critiques Paul Smith addresses of “laissez-faire” methods. These arguments align with Ien Ang's (2012) discussion of empirical research in cultural studies. She advocates for an adoption of the social science methods of interviews, focus groups, etc. when studying audiences. She also advances “the adoption of a self-reflexive perspective, one that is, first, conscious of the social and the discursive nature of any research practice, and, second, takes seriously the Foucauldian reminder that the production of knowledge is always bound up in a network of power relations” (P. 146). In Ang’s analysis, a cultural studies project should both reveal one’s own stake in the research and acknowledge the power inherent to the position of researcher. Ang demonstrates how cultural studies may adopt the methods of empirical research while remaining focused on context

and the role of the researcher and their power dynamics within that research. Ang and Amanda Lotz (2000) both stress the importance of putting one's subjectivity at the forefront of the research in order to better situate the position of the researcher in the interpretation presented. While Ang was speaking of audience research in cultural studies in particular, her assertions around subjectivity can be applied to a variety of methods for studying converging media. Amanda Lotz argues that subjectivity should be announced very early and thoroughly in any research project in order to orient the research's audience to the ways that the researcher will read the evidence s/he puts forth. A researcher cannot divorce herself from her perspectives and this is precisely why her subjectivity should be articulated at length when discussing her methodology.

A multiperceptual approach to the study of converging media adopts methods to investigate the context that creates, sustains, and regulates discourse while remaining attentive to researcher's subjectivity in the process. It is this methodological framework that informs the methods and strategies for interpretation that I employ throughout *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies*. Specifically, I analyze interviews with UFC staff and MMA bloggers/journalists that I conducted, primary texts such as UFC Pay-Per-View fights, webisodes, and social media, and secondary texts such as popular MMA media websites. My analysis begins with the premise that discourses about women in the UFC are socially constructed according to dominant power structures and flow throughout a circuit of culture. In order to analyze discourse in this way, I surface what assumptions discourses make, what hierarchies of knowledge they support, and what subjectivities they marginalize. Furthermore, I explicitly articulate my subjectivities and personal stakes within the production of knowledge I undertake within this work.

My own standpoint in reading discourses of women in the UFC is central to the interpretations I advance. I am a feminist media scholar, a martial artist, and a women's self-defense instructor whose research agenda examines representations of women's physical power in popular media. During graduate school, I became a UFC spectator when a new circle of martial arts friends introduced me to the sport. I had previously assumed that UFC fights were more of a contest of hypermasculine posturing than a legitimate sport. The more matches I watched, the more I realized that even if masculine strength and power was a constant feature of the broadcasts, much of the emphasis of commentators and fans focused on the skill and athleticism of the organization's diverse fighters from around the world. I was again skeptical when the UFC introduced women because I feared the fan base might reject their inclusion or that the UFC might overemphasize the female fighters' sexuality. To my surprise, I have witnessed the explosion of women's MMA since the Rousey and Carmouche fight in 2013. The UFC has recruited, booked, and broadcast numerous women's bouts alongside its men's fights thereby facilitating a swiftly growing interest in women's professional fighting. I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge that the success of the women's divisions excites me as a feminist committed to challenging discourses of women's physical ineptness and as a martial artist.

I watch UFC media curiously and ambivalently; I am excited by the level of exposure female fighters have received for their martial skill, but am dubious of what their inclusion in the sport means for my feminist values, such as racial justice and anti-capitalism. My ambivalence surfaces throughout this project as I grapple with discourses of gender, race, and sexuality and with inclusion/exclusion more broadly. My readings of UFC and MMA texts and the interviews I conducted are all examined through these particular lenses: the respect of women's athletic and martial talent and physical power, the recognition that discourses of gender, race, and sexuality

foster the inclusion and exclusion of particular bodies within media culture, and the understanding that discourses circulates within context in media culture. Each method I have adopted within the dissertation is interpreted through these lenses.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with five UFC staff, three UFC contracted employees, and five MMA bloggers/journalists between July 2015 and April 2016. The majority of the interviews were approximately an hour long and conducted over Skype and by phone. Each UFC-affiliated individual was either a member of the marketing and public relations team or a producer, writer, or director. Prior to these interviews, I explained to each individual that I was primarily interested in learning about the decision-making process to include women into the UFC and hearing how s/he understood the cultural significance of women in UFC media.⁶ My questions pertained to the recent history of including women in the UFC, why is women's MMA becoming so popular, what strategies the UFC used to market, promote, or tell stories about female fighters, as well as how the organization used digital media technologies. With these interviews, I was primarily concerned with the production discourses the organization used to market and promote women's MMA and how these engaged various discourses about women's bodies and sports. For the interviews with MMA bloggers/journalists, I asked similar questions about the rise of women's MMA and its cultural significance in order to understand how discourses about the UFC circulated outside the promotional machine. These individuals worked for MMA news sites such as the *Bleacher Report*, *MMA Junkie*, and *Womensmma.com*.⁷

⁶ See the sample recruitment email in Appendix A and list of interview questions in Appendix B.

⁷ A shortcoming of this project is the relative absence of the voices of UFC female fighters. Much of my original interest in this project revolved around the decision making process for a sports organization to include women and I prioritized interviews with UFC staff initially. However, as I work to develop my dissertation into a book, I plan to include more perspectives from female fighters to enrich the analysis. Just recently I interviewed Fallon Fox and a female UFC fighter, and had conversations with two other female MMA fighters. An interesting theme that arose from these conversations was the pressure to self-promote on social media. One fighter noted that she felt she had to promote herself in order to gain more recognition with the UFC and schedule fights. However, by exposing herself across social media, she also faced negative comments from followers about her appearance and skill as a fighter.

I analyze hundreds of UFC and MMA texts to surface the dominant discourses circulating about women's MMA, digital media, marketing, and diversity with a special focus on texts produced since 2001, when the company Zuffa bought the UFC and eventually introduced female fighters 12 years later. These texts include primary sources such as pay-per-view fights, fights on *Fox Sports 1*, webisodes, the UFC subscription-based platform *UFC Fight Pass*, and social media posts as well as *The Ultimate Fighter* reality TV show, which is currently co-produced with *Fox Sports 1*. I also collected and catalogued approximately 50 secondary-sourced interviews with UFC executives and marketing professionals and employees and more than 150 articles on blogs such as *Sherdog*, *MMA Fighting*, *MMA Weekly*, etc. and on more mainstream publications such as *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, and *The Huffington Post*.

I weave together textual analysis of a variety of types of media with interviews and secondary-sourced MMA commentary by journalists, fans, and bloggers throughout each chapter of *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies*. I build my arguments using these multiple sources to evaluate how and why particular discourses circulate. The chapters are largely organized around particular events, such as the introduction of a UFC reality TV show, the burst of feminist rhetoric in UFC marketing campaigns over several months, and the coming-out experience of a trans fighter. These are moments when discourses shift or become more visible through UFC media representation or MMA commentary and moments that interlocutors designate as important in some way. All the while, my subjectivities as a feminist and martial artist inform the

She describes the labor of self-promotion as also containing a great deal of emotional labor. Stories such as this fighter's might further enrich and nuance *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies* as it evolves into a book manuscript.

readings I produce and work together ambivalently to challenge, nuance, and celebrate women in combat sports.

Outline of the Dissertation

Converging Media and Divergent Bodies examines the promotion and representation of women in the UFC in order to understand how articulations of powerful women's bodies are shifting in the contemporary media climate. Each chapter of this project investigates the cultural impacts of converging media with the concurrent discourses of divergent bodies. Chapter One establishes the cultural, economic, and technological impetus for the UFC's growing efforts to market difference across its transnational, transmedia empire. More specifically, I examine the UFC's *The Ultimate Fighter* reality television show as a strategic form of transmedia marketing—a particular media production logic within media convergence—to promote diverse fighters and attract fans from a variety of domestic and international demographics. While the UFC has used other forms of transmedia marketing to fold difference into its brand, *The Ultimate Fighter* is an exemplary case study in the development of the sports media organization's "we are all fighters," i.e. "we are all different," brand. I demonstrate that it is these logics that have shifted protracted stigmas against women's sports to understand female athletes as a lucrative endeavor for a sports media organization. Yet, by conceiving of each athlete and fan as different, the UFC evacuates gendered difference of its politicized meanings and instead flattens it into a formula for generating more revenue.

While Chapter One broadly theorizes the UFC's strategic deployment of difference, Chapter Two studies the representation of female fighters to illustrate how the UFC draws upon pseudo-feminist themes, such as "strong is the new skinny" and "fight like a girl," to market female fighters across digital media and television. The inclusion of women in the UFC has

occurred amidst the rise of what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015) describes as “popular feminism,” which includes an investment in increasing the self-confidence of girls and women via consumerism and individualism. The UFC’s marketing and branding efforts emphasize imagery and rhetoric supporting girl’s and women’s strength, fitness, and martial talent through its multiple media platforms and content. They simultaneously position some of their fighters as empowered heroines who challenge and contradict the disenfranchising effects of postfeminist body discipline. This brand ethos imagines itself as rebelling against protracted notions of white femininity as physically weak and fragile and instead celebrating self-discipline and individual empowerment through health and fitness. However, representations of “empowered” female fighters still essentialize who can and should be empowered. White middle-class women and girls become the de facto subject of empowerment, while women and girls from other races and classes are symbolically annihilated. Thus, the UFC’s discourse of difference vacillates from the homogeneous, i.e. “we are all fighters,” to the essentialized, i.e. “women’s empowerment” as actually meaning the empowerment of middle and upper-class white women and girls.

Difference is an ambivalent discourse within the UFC that fluctuates between a homogeneous understanding of the concept and an essentialized version. The UFC constructs difference as something individual and singular and something that can appeal to other individuals who are also all “different” in some way. By crafting each fighter’s story as overcoming an obstacle, the fighter may belong to a diverse UFC brand built upon individualism and the American dream—something that UFC fighters have access to regardless of their nationality, gender, or sexuality. Chapter Three examines how the UFC normalizes LGBT and national difference as part of the tapestry that is the UFC’s “we are all fighters” brand. The UFC

folds LGBT identities into a discourse of homonationalism that promotes normative difference but clearly defines and rejects non-normativity in the process.

The distinctions between normativity and non-normativity in the UFC reveal that who can be included in the “we are all fighters” brand is still policed. Chapter Four contours the limits of inclusivity discourses by focusing on the coming out experience of Fallon Fox, professional MMA’s first openly transgender male-to-female (MTF) fighter. The interplay between arguments for transgender acceptance and assumptions of fixed sexual difference circulating in converging MMA blogs, radio shows, and in sports and entertainment magazines, maintains barriers for Fox’s participation in the sport. I argue that regardless of the various debates for or against Fox’s inclusion in women’s professional MMA, both sides reaffirm a patriarchal, cisgender, cissexual system of power by exaggerating “biologically” sanctioned male physical dominance and “innate” female physical lack. This final chapter adds to the previous ones by examining the boundaries for women’s bodies in the UFC and by examining how consumers engage with, augment, and circulate discourses to support hegemony with the sport. The case of Fallon Fox illustrates how heteronormative cis-male bodies remain the benchmark of physical power in MMA even as contemporary discourses of difference and popular feminism produce images that may partially contest dominant ideologies of the body.

Shifts in the cultural discourses of women’s physical power are a particularly important topic of study under Donald Trump’s presidency. In 2016 the American people elected a president who has openly objectified, harassed, and disparaged women’s bodies throughout his career. The democratic election of a misogynist publicly sanctions his behaviors against women and further ignores the intersecting sexism, ableism, racism, and xenophobia couched in his rhetoric and actions (see Levin, 2017). In the months since his election, I have seen an increase

in the number of women seeking my self-defense courses. These women cite increased fear for their safety as the reason they are seeking out specialized training. Trump has emboldened other men to publicly and brazenly treat women as the president does. On my own “progressive” campus in a “liberal” state a group of men violently ripped off the hijab of a female student determining that her body and her choices were not her own. Other individuals wrote homophobic and sexist comments on posters advertising gender, women, and sexuality courses and activities. Hate crimes against women and other minoritized people have been on the rise since the election (“U.S. Hate Crimes...,” 2017). The women now seeking out my self-defense courses perceive their bodies to be under greater threat than in recent years.

I have hope despite the gloomy state of affairs under a Trump administration. After all, his election did not create racism, sexism, and xenophobia in this country; his election merely illuminated ideologies that have been bubbling below the surface for years. The concurrent existence of the image of the powerful female UFC fighter reminds me that the fight for sovereignty over and power within women’s bodies rages on. Powerful female fighters can be a visual metaphor to assure us that just as one patriarchal domain can be smashed, so can others.

Chapter 1: We Are All Fighters

The UFC's 200th Pay-Per-View event produced an intriguing spectacle of difference on MMA's largest stage. To begin with, the July 2016 headlining fight was a contest between two women—an impressive feat considering the women's divisions were only three years old and had previously been considered “an experiment” instead of a highly visible feature of the sport. UFC 200 also presented the fight promotion's first self-declared “LGBT champion” when the Brazilian and out lesbian fighter Amanda Nunes ousted the American Miesha Tate for the championship belt. UFC merchandize echoed similar sentiments supporting the LGBTQ community at UFC 200. Fans could buy the ‘we are all fighters’ t-shirts that repeated the phrase in rainbow colors to show support for victims of the Pulse nightclub shootings earlier in the summer. Fighters were spotted wearing these shirts prior to 200 and affirming their support for the LGBT community. This seemingly wholehearted embrace of women, including women of color, and LGBT identities in the UFC is a stark contrast from MMA's reputation from earlier years. The UFC had long battled its characterization as a hypermasculine, bloodthirsty display of violence and moral decay. With UFC 200, the sports media empire put difference, or a brand ethos of ‘we are all different’ on parade in ways that fans watching UFC 1 in 1993 might never have imagined.

UFC 200 took place at a pivotal moment in the organization's history. Zuffa—the company that owned the MMA powerhouse since 2001—sold the UFC to the talent agency WME-IMG and a group of investors for \$4 billion dollars, the largest sale of a sports league in history (Rovell and Okamoto, 2016). A significant portion of the organization's financial success has been linked to the UFC's transnational transmedia empire (Douban, 2016). In addition to the

sporting spectacles broadcast on Pay-Per-View and the *Fox Sports 1* network, the UFC empire includes web-based and television pre-fight promotional spots, television specials, video games, documentary style webisodes, an interactive subscription-based digital platform, and a reality TV show called *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF). Each of these media ventures offers some insight into the production logics operationalized to fold difference into the sports brand; however, a closer examination of *The Ultimate Fighter* reality show provides a rich history of the collusion between digital media and difference that has facilitated the “we are all fighters,” i.e. “we are all different,” sentiment at UFC 200 and throughout the UFC brand.

The Ultimate Fighter is currently co-produced by the UFC and *Fox Sports 1*. Each season includes a cast of MMA contestants vying for the title of *The Ultimate Fighter* and a contract with the UFC. The show features the familiar refrains of reality TV: competition, house sharing, personality clashes, celebrity, and charisma with an MMA spin, such as training montages, elimination fights, and current UFC fighters as coaches. When the show first aired on *Spike TV* in 2005, the UFC spent 10 million dollars in filming and airtime to broadcast it (Miller, 2008). UFC executives believed that the reality TV format would give them an opportunity to educate viewers on MMA, introduce new fighters, and hold its first competition on a TV network (since other UFC events to this point had aired exclusively on Pay-Per-View). Effectively, the UFC employed *transmedia marketing* strategies to bring new audiences and exposure to the sport.

Transmedia marketing is a product of converging media and participatory culture—a contemporary media climate where information and entertainment flow seamlessly across devices while media producers and platform developers encourage a culture of liking, sharing, revising, and making digital media. Marketers have adapted to this climate by developing strategies that cross one media genre or platform to another in order to engage consumers and

audiences in multiple media ventures (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013). Transmedia marketing transports “a story-world or message into a customer's everyday life through the use of multiple media platforms” (Branch quoted in Carmody, 2016). The vast array of platforms and genres that comprise the world of digital media each have specific conventions and practices that marketers must understand in order to use effectively. For example, marketing with a 140-character word limit on *Twitter* requires a different approach to marketing without fixed word limits on *Facebook*. Since digital transmedia marketing has only evolved in the latter half of the past decade, scholars have yet to scrutinize how this production practice functions or how logics of difference become operationalized.

This chapter traces the development of *The Ultimate Fighter* reality television show to establish how difference has become key to the organization’s brand identity and transmedia marketing.⁸ While the UFC has used other methods of transmedia marketing to promote imagery of diverse athletes, *The Ultimate Fighter* was one of the organization’s first efforts to market difference. I interrogate how the UFC folds difference (with a focus on gendered, racial, and national difference) into the brand through the reality television show. I argue that *The Ultimate Fighter* deploys a transmedia marketing strategy wherein difference is an ambivalent discourse that fluctuates between essentialized and homogenized in a customizable formula. The UFC appeals to difference in order to draw new demographics and grow its viewership through audience identification with diverse fighters. This convergence of difference and transmedia marketing has facilitated the splintering of a glass ceiling within sports media culture; never before have women been more visible in combat sports than women in the UFC. In the process, the very notion of gendered difference, and difference more broadly, becomes flattened through market forces.

⁸ A version of this chapter has been accepted to the *International Journal of Communication*.

Transmedia Marketing and the Proliferation of Difference

Sports media culture is comprised of an ever-multiplying and ever-transforming compendium of technologies, practices, and platforms that converge and diverge in the daily lives of producers and consumers. Media convergence, a broad term for identifying how digital media technologies and cultural practices intersect and engage with one another (Jenkins, 2006), yields numerous avenues for people to consume and even produce sports media. Hutchins and Rowe (2012) argue that there has been a “parallel readjustment of the sport media industries and cultures” as the broader media environment has been altered with the increased use of personal computers and mobile devices along with the growing popularity of social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Snapchat*, and *YouTube* (p. 5). Digital media technologies have facilitated shifts in creative practices of media production across professions and media industries. One such example is the deployment of “a set of creative media practices” that media, advertising, and marketing professionals use to integrate digital and legacy media called transmedia (Jenkins, 2011). In its most simplistic definition, transmedia means “across media, ” but signifies how concepts, stories, brands, ideas flow across various platforms and genres in both predetermined and organic ways (Jenkins, 2011). Numerous scholars have examined transmedia storytelling—a narrative technique that expands a fictional universe across multiple platforms and texts, such as Marvel comic books, films, television shows, video games, events, and experiences (Jenkins, 2006; Gillan, 2010; Jenkins, 2011; Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013; Evans, 2011). Yet, as Henry Jenkins (2011) asserts, transmedia can be understood through multiple creative professions so that “we might also think about transmedia branding, transmedia performance, transmedia ritual, transmedia play, transmedia activism, and transmedia spectacle, as other logics.” Depending on

the specific type of creative job and media content, each profession may understand transmedia in distinctive ways. Transmedia marketing is one such creative profession ripe for consideration.

The multiple platforms and texts that individuals access from numerous devices have necessitated a shift in marketing practices across a variety of sectors to accommodate consumer behavior. Jennifer Gillan (2010) describes transmedia marketing as “the extension of the promotion of one story over multiple platforms, with each adding some new content, while conforming to the rules of the story world, and with each becoming a space in which the other franchise elements can be promoted” (p. 100). Gillan understands transmedia marketing as distinctive from storytelling. Transmedia storytelling seeks to extend a narrative across various platforms and texts while transmedia marketing promotes various other franchise elements. Note also that she uses the term “story world,” which suggests a fictional, narrative-driven space that much of Gillan, Jenkins, and Evan’s work considers. Transmedia marketing takes its cue from transmedia storytelling in that stories and/or brands strategically flow across platforms and texts, but those stories and brands also extend into nonfictional media and develop organically rather than just strategically.

Transmedia marketing practices simultaneously operate within a broader system of converging media where difference is an increasingly central representational practice (Ouellette, 2016; Pham, 2015; Beltran, 2010). Users now have a greater ability to locate and consume content that reflects diverse identity categories and interests and the growth of customizable media for diverse audiences aligns with neoliberal market logics (Gray, 2013). Difference becomes an individualized trait that each person possesses in some form or fashion. Media organizations, brands, and programming provide multiple choices that diverse individuals may select from. For example, Laurie Ouellette (2016) argues that contemporary lifestyle TV is built

upon this logic of customization in order to reach particular taste groups. She explains, “the term lifestyle also refers to the fragmentation of the mass market (and the TV audience) into increasingly specialized consumer niches defined on the basis of demographics (age, income, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, education) as well as “psychographics” (values, attitudes, interests, beliefs, behavior)” (p. 4). Sports media has adopted a similar proclivity for customization. Victoria E. Johnson (2009) observes that mobile applications affiliated with sports television “directly appeal to the individual viewer with strategies that emphasize ‘a la carte’ information addressed to individual fan passions on a “micro”-scale, in everyday use” (p. 128). Gone are the days that the airwaves are dominated by an imagined audience comprised of a singular desirable demographic. Instead, viewers may select from a broad array of programming according to the consumer niche they fall within. The task of media organizations, then, is to either spin their content to reach additional demographics or to introduce content specifically for niche groups. Either way, the brand becomes imbued with difference as a key strategy for reaching more consumers and generating more profit.

These flourishing representations of diverse genders, races, sexualities, and nationalities in entertainment media give pause to critically consider what difference actually means in the contemporary era. Ralina Joseph (2016) observes that scholars now use the term ‘difference’ to mean race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and other marginalized identity categories; yet, she contends that there has been little interrogation into the precise definition of the term. Joseph argues while difference in a popular sense means a deviation from some perceived norm that often signifies marginalized identities, a politicized understanding of difference should be inseparable from equity. Difference, as a concept employed by critical scholars, should attend to structural inequities. The term’s predecessors, such as tolerance, multiculturalism, and diversity,

have each been evacuated of this politicized meaning over time in order to tout ideas of inclusion as values but avoid any real efforts to change structural barriers to equity (Joseph, 2016). Thus, popular deployments of difference focus on individualized difference, i.e. we are all different, while structural inequalities levied against minoritized groups remain opaque. Gray (2013) further explains that even though the features of converging media enable increased recognition of difference, visibility does not mean that representations are liberating or that they acknowledge or work to ameliorate the struggles of marginalized identities in society.

The growing prominence of difference in contemporary media and the practice of transmedia marketing in sports and other forms of entertainment media create cause for analyzing the cultural shifts that this phenomenon creates. The aforementioned scholarly works on the proliferation of difference across new media platforms provide a useful meta-narrative for understanding the production of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality in contemporary media culture. There has been less scholarly attention to the specific ways that sport media production has shifted within a climate that is saturated with media platforms and content (Hutchins and Rowe, 2012) or that feature difference more prominently. This case study on the UFC's transmedia marketing practices creates an opportunity to examine how the media powerhouse understands and deploys difference through the creative practice of transmedia marketing and sets the stage for the promotion of female fighters throughout its other transmedia ventures. Furthermore, this chapter initiates a critical conversation threaded throughout the remainder of *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies* about marketing practices that promote a 'we are all fighters' ethos, yet, that firmly attach themselves to normative difference and eschew nonnormativity.

The TUF Formula: A Transmedia Love Story

To understand how difference has become key to the UFC brand identity, one must first understand how the organization's transmedia projects, in this case *The Ultimate Fighter*, have become central to their marketing endeavors. The first season of *The Ultimate Fighter* began as both a strategy to gain more exposure and a huge gamble for Zuffa, the organization that owned the UFC from 2001-2016. MMA's reputation as a hypermasculine blood sport had plagued its ability to cater to cable television since sponsors and networks had been reluctant to affiliate themselves with the UFC (Gentry, 2011). Zuffa spent 44 million trying to keep the UFC afloat in the four years after buying the organization in 2001 for two million dollars. The Fertittas—the casino moguls who bought the organization—were growing weary of the financial drain (Miller, 2008). Zuffa began to brainstorm innovative ways to entice more fans to the sport out of dire necessity. *The Ultimate Fighter* reality TV show was one such idea—a transmedia project that bridged live sports television with reality TV in order to market the former through the latter.

The UFC case study illustrates a central difference between legacy and transmedia marketing: the blurring of lines between what constitutes entertainment media and what comprises the marketing of entertainment media, which creates an environment where one media product can always market another media product.⁹ With the collapsed delineation between entertainment and marketing, media scholars have argued that media professions have blended elements of marketing, branding, and storytelling in transmedia projects (Jenkins, 2006; Gillan, 2010). Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) contend that transmedia production encourages “not only an increased collaboration across these [professional] roles, but, in some cases, a blurring of the distinctions between these roles” (p. 7). Similarly, Anne Zeiser (2015), a transmedia producer

⁹ For example, if a mobile application is released in advance of the latest iteration of a movie franchise, is the goal of the application to entertain or to generate buzz for the film? In transmedia marketing, the answer is both (Zeiser, 2015).

for the film industry, advises transmedia marketers to embrace the hybridity of their professional roles. She says, “In this new media and entertainment world order, that makes you both *a media maker* and a *media marketer*. And to connect audiences with your media projects in this content-saturated world, you must provide multiple media on-ramps” (p. xvi, emphasis in the original). In the case of *The Ultimate Fighter*, the reality television show is a media text in its own right, but is deployed to market live UFC events.

UFC president Dana White convinced the Fertittas to try TUF as a last ditch effort to revive the UFC and propel MMA into the mainstream in 2005 (Gentry, 2011). The newly rebranded *Spike TV* network, with the accompanying tag line “television for men,” was eagerly seeking inexpensive sports programming to add to its lineup. White proposed TUF as a transmedia project that could leverage the strengths of the reality television genre to appeal to *Spike*’s target demographics, educate audiences on the sport, and draw in new fans—a mutually beneficial endeavor for both *Spike* and the UFC. Chris Kartzmark,¹⁰ Senior VP for Production and Programming at the UFC, called *The Ultimate Fighter* a “Trojan horse” that allowed the promotion to “ride the wave of popularity of reality programming and introduce people to mixed-martial-arts at the same time.” The basic premise of TUF included a roster of unsigned fighters competing on a weekly basis for a chance to debut in a live UFC event and win a contract with the organization. Athletes were distributed between two teams and coached by UFC veterans who would also fight at the end of the season. After 13 weeks and \$10 million dollars in production costs, the final contenders fought for the title of *Ultimate Fighter* while two veteran fighters headlined the first live UFC event to air on a television network. The finale and the entire first season of *The Ultimate Fighter* immediately proved the TUF formula was a profitable

¹⁰ Interviewed by author

marketing strategy. Fans traversed platforms and genres from *The Ultimate Fighter*, to the live finale, to Pay-Per-View, which remains the UFC's primary source of revenue (Fox Sports, 2013). Before the first season of TUF, the largest number of Pay-Per-View buys was UFC 40 at 150,000 buys. The first Pay-Per-View contest after TUF aired was 280,000 buys (Gentry, 2011). Dana White and other executives have repeatedly attributed *The Ultimate Fighter* as the reason the company survived the mid-2000s (Torres, 2016).

The Ultimate Fighter has remained an important strategy for generating hype for the UFC for 23 seasons and counting. I argue in this section that the main reason for this success has been the UFC's ability to create a transmedia synergy between the reality television genre and live MMA events. A typical TUF episode might feature confessionals with up-and-coming fighters discussing the life obstacles they have faced in pursuing their dreams like one might see on *American Idol*, interpersonal conflicts between the show's stars like *The Real Housewives*, drunken arguments over house territory like *The Real World*, discussions of strategy and competition like *Survivor*, or shouting matches, wall punching, and other brands of scuffle à la *Jersey Shore*. Rich Bergeron (2010) of *The Bleacher Report* asserts that the rigid training, fighting, and filming schedule creates a particularly effective recipe for drama on TUF. On a typical season fighters are sequestered from their friends and families for 12-weeks as they cope with injuries, cut weight repeatedly in a short span of time, and live with their opponents, whom they befriend or revile over the season. This contrived environment ensures that tensions will run high and that frustration will materialize over the course of two months and produce ample raw footage to develop into a narrative.

The raw footage that producers collect over a season can also be turned into underdog stories or even stories of 'normal' people pursuing their dreams. Chris Kartzmark notes that

when *The Ultimate Fighter* first started MMA was still dealing with a reputation for excessive brutality and aggression. He says the show allowed the UFC to demonstrate that the athletes were not fighting because of “unresolved anger they were trying to work through, they were fighting because it was their dream.” Kartzmark continues that *The Ultimate Fighter* allowed the UFC to show audiences that fighters “were normal people with wives, kids, mothers, and dads...and that they were really likeable.” By both humanizing the athletes and generating intrigue around them, *The Ultimate Fighter* formula allowed the UFC to tell an array of stories about its athletes in order to draw audiences to the brand (Torres, 2016).

The Ultimate Fighter formula has proved to be a successful transmedia marketing venture for the UFC because of the creative links between reality TV and fight promotion. Reality television is a paradoxical genre, but one that particularly lends itself to creating drama around a combat sport. Producers and creatives establish ‘reality’ as representations of the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic;’ yet, much of the work of creating an entertaining episode, story arc, or season relies on manufacturing drama or intrigue, editing countless hours of footage to create a concise 20-45 minute story, and putting ‘real’ people in contrived situations. Reality television then becomes “rigidly framed representations of reality” that are purposefully unrealistic and extreme that viewers understand as inherently unreal (Nishime, 2014, p. 123). The knowledge and awareness that the drama onscreen is unreal is central to the genre. Or, as Mark Andrejevic (2009) writes, “contemporary image culture teaches both the inevitability of contrivance and, paradoxically, the need to penetrate it not just out of casual curiosity but in order to avoid the risk of being seen to be a dupe who is taken in by the lure of the image” (p. 233). Thus, reality TV is a pleasurable gaze behind the scenes coupled with the pleasure of knowing one is not being duped into believing the stories are fully organic. From a creative standpoint, producers and editors function

as they would on “a scripted show, with the difference that the raw material creating the fiction of the [reality television] series is footage of real people doing real things: the magic happens in the editing room, through the decisions of producers and TV workers” (Dubrofsky and Hardy, 2008, p. 375). The paradox unfolds on the production end as a negotiation between the scenarios created by the producers and the subsequent manufacturing of a narrative through the raw footage collected.

The genre of reality television—the knowing unreal—shares an affinity with fight promotion and creates a logical transmedia partner for MMA fights. Fight promotion is steeped in underdog narratives, life obstacles overcome, conflict, and charisma, much like reality television. Doug Hartling,¹¹ former VP of Sales and Marketing at the UFC, described the marketing of athletes and their fights as similar to that of daytime dramas. He says that audiences enjoy following the drama: “these people are together, these two are fighting, or these two are plotting against one another. Nothing in the UFC is scripted, but sometimes you get a certain level of tension because it’s human nature. You put enough people in a room together and sooner or later they will clash.” For this reason, the UFC purposely arranges fights between athletes that have already demonstrated some sort of conflict between them. Conflict can be understated, such as ‘a clash of nations’ to show the national pride associated with fighters of two distinct nationalities or explicit, such as two fighters who have engaged in verbal sparring matches in front of the cameras previously. Dave Sholler,¹² Senior VP of Marketing and Public Relations at the UFC, says, “one of the secrets to the fight business is, if there's legitimate bad blood between two fighters, the fight usually sells pretty well.” Consequently, fighters who can perform ‘bad blood’ have a greater chance for being selected for high-profile matches. Like reality TV,

¹¹ Interviewed by author

¹² Interviewed by author

promoters place ‘real’ people into contrived but unscripted settings and reward them with airtime for exaggeration and drama. Like reality TV, audiences understand fight promotion to be a game of exaggeration and manufactured conflict. This is what makes reality television different from human-interest documentaries such as HBO’s *Hard Knocks* or ESPN’s *College Gameday*.

Reality television exaggerates conflict to sell fights using the reality television format.

A key element of *The Ultimate Fighter* formula is the conflict between coaches of the show, which effectively establishes an impetus for an eventual meeting in the ring. ‘Bad blood’ between coaches or contestants generates weekly verbal sparring matches reminiscent of the theatrics that might unfold between two rival bachelors on *The Bachelorette* or two roommates on *The Real World*. The difference between the TUF version of bad blood and *The Bachelorette*’s brand of animosity is that the two individuals will resolve the tension between them via a sanctioned professional fight at the end of the season. Doug Hartling describes the friction between TUF coaches as ‘organic.’ He says that the rivalry between two coaches surfaces naturally when you place them in close quarters competing against one another for several months. He describes a typical season of TUF:

[The coaches] are swapping words with one another and their athletes are competing against each other in a very tense environment. That dynamic sets up a very big confrontation in the Octagon that’s easy to market...you have to let it simmer a little, and develop organically, which we did. Otherwise you find yourself in a contrived situation like the WWE where you’re writing the script. In a real sport, the stories write themselves. Then the question is from a marketing standpoint, how do we tell these stories?

Both Sholler and Hartling describe how the UFC stokes the fires of conflict to sell fights. The reality show became a key method of storytelling targeting new and old fans alike. The UFC's ability to drive traffic to network television events or Pay-Per-View through reality programming has been lucrative ("TUF finale launches UFC," 2013).

The Ultimate Fighter formula illustrates the tenuous line between media content and media marketing in an age of converging media. TUF is a competition show that adheres to the reality genre and boasts its own entertainment value. Audiences become familiar with the athletes, find fighters to root for and against, and learn more about the sport itself through the show. *The Ultimate Fighter* has generated enough revenue on its own to have lasted over a decade and spanned two TV networks: *Spike* and now *Fox Sports 1*. Then again, the show could not operate on its own outside the context of the UFC as a mass-produced sporting spectacle. The season finale of the show always occurs on live television and features championship bouts between finalists and their coaches. Star performers of the season secure contracts and fans continue to follow their favorites long after the season finishes. Therefore, while *The Ultimate Fighter* is certainly media content in its own right, the UFC employs the show as a form of transmedia marketing. The UFC can enhance or manufacture drama among the athletes that unfolds during the live fights on Pay-Per-View by strategically leveraging the strengths of the reality TV genre. As Jenkins (2006) argues, transmedia projects are the most effective when genres are used to do what they do best. In this case, conflict sells fights.

Working Difference into the TUF Formula

The UFC likes to repeat the refrain that *The Ultimate Fighter* formula— using the reality show to promote the sport— saved the UFC because the reality show marketed the sport to new audiences. This initial success meant that the TUF formula remained relatively intact for the first

several years after season one (Bergeron, 2010). There were some minor changes from season to season, such as the inclusion of multiple weight classes, eliminated fighters leaving the house after a loss or staying on for the season, the return of wild card fighters, and so on. The basic structure of utilizing TUF to introduce fans to a new cohort of fighters and to develop drama among them remained constant, with some interesting revisions developing in the late 2000s when difference became part and parcel to the transmedia marketing formula.

Difference as a transmedia marketing strategy first appeared with season 10, *The Ultimate Fighter: The Heavyweights* (2009). The UFC cast two Black coaches—Rampage Jackson and Rashad Evans—and added a Black street fighter named Kimbo Slice to the TUF roster. True to TUF formula, Jackson and Evans were top heavyweight contenders and bombastic rivals who would meet in the ring at the end of the season. With the casting of these two men, the UFC ensured the reality show could portray enough ‘bad blood’ to hype their upcoming fight. The UFC introduced another popular character into the mix for that season. They cast a Bahamian-American street fighter named Kimbo Slice (née Kevin Ferguson) to the show’s roster. Slice was at the height of his popularity on *YouTube* as a street brawler. In 2003, Slice’s friend uploaded an online video of his fight against a neighborhood agitator. The video received two million hits overnight (Le Batard, 2016) and swiftly propelled Slice into the business of social media celebrity. The UFC took notice of Kimbo’s viral fame and offered him a spot on the season as a result (Smith, 2009).

Some MMA analysts argued that the inclusion of Slice, Evans, and Jackson was a tactical move to build the UFC’s African-American audiences (Wilcox, 2010). The UFC had been unsuccessful at bringing African-Americans and Latinos—a significant portion of boxing’s audience—to the burgeoning combat sport. However, Dave Sholler recalls that the season

developed more ‘organically’ than strategically in terms of targeting African-American audiences, which is characteristic of the participatory nature of transmedia marketing. Marketing campaigns develop both organically from following the likes, shares, and affinities of target audiences and/or through strategically top-down campaigns. The UFC did not intend for season 10 to become the *Black* season. Sholler asserts that they booked Jackson and Evans as the coaches for season 10 because both men were at the top of the heavyweight division and had genuine animosity towards one another. Kimbo Slice happened to also be a heavyweight with an appealing *YouTube* fan base. Sholler remembers the UFC seeking to cater to Slice’s established audience online without much investigation into the precise racial demographics of his *YouTube* audience. He says that during production the UFC began to realize the potential for developing an African-American demographic that season.

The UFC leveraged the *YouTube* stardom of Kimbo Slice to bring audiences from the social media platform to TUF, and to live events, which is a patterned flow typical of transmedia marketing. Transmedia marketing differentiates itself from legacy media marketing via the former’s symbiosis with participatory culture—a media environment where users easily circulate and create content using digital media technologies. Participatory culture has encouraged marketers to employ a variety of digital media platforms that will ensure that clients, audiences, and users participate in content creation and circulation. Transmedia marketers must also remain aware of trends in participatory culture in order to link a brand to viral trends. Consider, for example, the “Chewbacca Mom,” Candice Payne, who filmed herself wearing a toy mask of a *Star Wars* character while laughing uncontrollably. The *Facebook* video Payne originally posted was seen more than 105 million times in four days (NPR, 2016). Within a week Payne was on *Good Morning America*, which airs on the *ABC* network, which is owned by *Disney*, which owns

the *Star Wars* franchise. *Disney* also invited Payne and her family to *Disney's Hollywood Studios* at the *Walt Disney World Resort* and posted on their blog about her trip (Fickley-Baker, 2016).

Payne's story demonstrates that media organizations and other companies remain attentive to the pulse of viral media in order to direct the economy of likes and shares in their favor. Transmedia marketers must remain aware of trends within participatory culture or within particular target demographics in order to look for opportunities to capitalize on that fame. Likewise, the UFC's attention to the viral celebrity of Kimbo Slice reveals the organization's desire to profit from trends in participatory culture.

When they cast season 10 the UFC had a thriving internet fan base, knew the specific platforms that fight fans frequented, and kept a pulse on fight trends such as Slice's street brawls (Cooper, 2014). The UFC's digital media acumen had developed out of necessity during the organization's "dark ages." Several accounts of the UFC's history argue that the exchange of information on the web kept the organization afloat between the late 1990s and 2001. (Gentry, 2011; Cooper, 2014). During the dark ages, cable channels refused to air live events and the UFC lost the ability to broadcast the fights nationally. MMA moved to the internet underground and survived only through a small cohort of media savvy fans who were writing about the sport online. Steve Dawson (2016) argues that there was a natural affinity between the UFC and internet-based communities of that time period. He says, "back in the beginning of the new millennium, the internet was a different place from the crowded commercial market it is today. There was a wild-west feel of lawlessness to many of the dark corners of the early web, and disturbing underground content would often appear in such places." This niche community circulated information via news sites, fan forums, and a daily email list of information. These fan efforts proved to be enough to keep the organization on life support until the Zuffa years began

in 2001 (Gentry, 2011). In other words, the participatory culture of fight fandom kept the UFC afloat during the dark ages of MMA.

A similarity existed between the often-maligned audiences of MMA and the fans of street brawling on *YouTube*, so the introduction of Kimbo Slice on TUF in 2009 made sense for the fan base and desired demographics alike. Yet, there were some important differences that the UFC was able to breach during season 10. The UFC's internet-based fans and Slice's *YouTube* fans certainly shared interests, but not all fight fans on the internet are the same. The UFC has not always been made up of a diverse set of multicultural fight fans that today's audience data would suggest.¹³ Consider, for example, that the UFC survived its dark ages due to a squadron of tech savvy fans who were predominantly middle-class white men in the U.S. (Gentry, 2011). Fans who began watching the UFC in the early 90s likely fall squarely into a straight, white, male demographic. Dave Sholler says that in the late 2000s Zuffa began to consider expanding its desired audiences. The UFC saw Slice as a compelling addition to TUF 10 because his fan base had similar interests to MMA (Wilcox, 2010). Kimbo Slice fans in 2009 boasted a high percentage of African-American and Latino boxing fans, so he carried the promise of introducing new fans to the sport. African-American and Latino boxing fans had originated as television audiences and then migrated to the internet with the proliferation of digital media platforms. While a white tech-savvy audience saved the UFC during the dark ages, African-American and Latino audiences promised to be lucrative markets for expansion. In the end, the UFC perceived the casting of Slice as an effective strategy for marketing the sport to Slice's millions of *YouTube* followers, including Slice's numerous African Americans and Latino fans (Wilcox, 2010). *The*

¹³ According to the UFC website, the "UFC produces more than 40 live events annually and is the largest Pay-Per-View event provider in the world, broadcast in over 129 countries and territories, to nearly 800 million TV households worldwide, in 28 different languages" ("The UFC," n/d).

Ultimate Fighter Season 10 doubled the previous premiere numbers to 4.1 million viewers (Pugmire, 2009) although it is unclear if they indeed drew the desired new markets.¹⁴

The UFC now believed that it could lure audiences from diverse demographics using the TUF formula. Increasing ethnic diversity by appealing to Black and Latino fight fans remained a priority, while expanding to an international market became even more central to the UFC's organizational mission and to subsequent seasons of *The Ultimate Fighter* (Wilcox, 2010). The UFC created the first international version of *The Ultimate Fighter* in 2012 with *The Ultimate Fighter: Brazil*. It was the first season that was filmed outside of Las Vegas and the first to be in a language other than English. They have since aired adaptations of the show in China and Europe as well as *Latin America vs. Mexico* and *USA vs. Europe* seasons broadcast transnationally.¹⁵ The UFC believed that more fighter diversity would lead to an increase in overall audience size and revenue and each international version of the show attempted to diversify both the ethnic and national makeup of the UFC.

TUF 18: Gendered Difference and the Homogeneity of the TUF Formula

The UFC now had an effective transmedia marketing formula for introducing new prospects and engaging new audience demographics. Once female fighters were included in the organization, a new season of TUF featuring women quickly followed suit. *The Ultimate Fighter: Team Rousey vs. Team Tate* debuted on *Fox Sports 1* in September 2013 as the 18th season of the show. The first episode was titled 'History in the Making' as it featured female coaches—Rousey and Tate—and female contestants for the first time. The show had a co-ed roster of 135-pound fighters although the fights themselves remained sex-segregated. Similar to previous seasons, TUF 18 emphasized the personal stories of the fighters, the relationships

¹⁴ The UFC carefully guards its market analysis and declined my requests for this data.

¹⁵ I discuss the international versions of TUF in a bit more detail in chapter three.

among the cast, as well as amplified controversies that surfaced over the season. Women fit well into the UFC's well-oiled TUF formula that later spawned an all-women's season (2014) and another co-ed season (2016).

The first TUF season to include women followed previous integrations of the TUF formula and reveals the UFC's attempts to homogenize gendered difference. "We are all fighters" now included women. True to the TUF formula, the Rousey –Tate season's attention remained predominantly upon the animosity between the two coaches. They argued, criticized one another, ignored each other, and vigorously competed against each other. Episode three clearly illustrates some of the animosity depicted on the show. In this episode, the two women begin bantering back and forth at a bar and Tate asks Rousey to "please move away from my boyfriend," who is also Tate's trainer. Rousey replies, "I don't think anyone with half a brain would desire a man like that." Tate then questions Rousey's striking ability while Rousey calls her trainer to vouch for her skills. The two trainers begin arguing about a Tweet sent by Tate's trainer that said he wanted to "knock Ronda's teeth down her throat." The show featured several interactions like this between Tate, Rousey, and their coaches, but Rousey was depicted as the more belligerent of the two during the season (Mowatt, 2013). She also more frequently discussed her antagonism towards her rival during interviews. Fans began to favor Tate over Rousey as the season unfolded and expressed disapproval of Rousey's behavior (Samano, 2013). Rousey, in turn, was outspoken about her villainous representation on the show after the season wrapped. She insisted that the producers edited the show for dramatic effect and cast her in a negative light. She said, "they needed a villain and they made me fit that role..." confirming that the producers purposefully provoked her in certain scenes to cause a dramatic reaction (Mowatt, 2013).

It is difficult to argue with Rousey since the UFC has been explicit in its use of the TUF formula as a method of transmedia fight promotion. The formula worked to build publicity for the Rousey – Tate fight just as it had in other seasons. Many viewers were familiar with the personas the fighter's employed as well as TUF's depiction of both women. Thus, the live event cannot be understood as an isolated instance of meaning making, but within the context of the reality show. For example, after Rousey defeated Tate in TUF's end-of-season live bout on *Fox Sports 1*, Tate offered a handshake and Rousey refused. The crowd disapproved of Rousey's gesture and subsequently booed her when she was announced the winner of the fight and the undefeated champion of her division. The tensions highlighted in *The Ultimate Fighter* spilled over into the fight and the crowd reacted to Rousey's bad girl persona with a vengeance. Conversely, Tate's popularity had only grown during season 18 and provided contrast to Rousey's bellicosity that was more appealing to fans (Mowatt, 2013).

The UFC had effectively marketed the conflict between Rousey and Tate on TUF to augment the meaning of their fight in the live event. One might argue that gendered discourses against women's aggressiveness and unsportsmanlike conduct fueled the fans' distaste for Rousey's behavior at the TUF 18 finale. However, from a fight promotion standpoint, the UFC emphasized the quarrel between the two women in ways that had previously with male coaches. The animosity and stare downs between Rousey and Tate echoed Jackson – Evan's as well as numerous other coach pairings in previous seasons (Bergeron, 2010). Thus, the primary strategy of season 18 was to plant female bodies into the proven successful TUF formula for featuring difference. Rousey became the villain and Tate the hero of that transmedia story about female fighters. The UFC inserted gendered difference into its TUF formula almost effortlessly.

Dave Sholler stresses that part of the reason the UFC has been so successful at integrating women into the sport is the organization's efforts to market them as they would male fighters. He says,

The marketing efforts we put forth to promote a major women's fight are the same we would do for a major male fight. I think being transparent in that process has allowed not only our casual, hardcore, and fringe fans to all realize that [female fighters are] a very real and long term piece of our business. I think promoting women's fights accordingly has been a big reason why it's been an instant success.

At first glance, Sholler's assertion suggests that the UFC has indeed heeded a long-standing call from female athletes to treat them as equal to their male counterparts. Equal exposure and treatment in sports media promises an avenue for women to thrive as professional athletes and shun the stigma of women's athletics being uninteresting or incomparable with men's sports. As a fan of women's MMA, I too am excited by the possibilities that this approach to marketing women as equals might provide. The growth of women's MMA has been an exciting phenomenon to observe and it is evident that the UFC's approaches to promoting women have been central to the growth of the sport. However, as a feminist scholar, I wonder what the cookie-cutter approach to marketing difference in a formula actually does to discourses of difference in the process.

The first season featuring female fighters on TUF demonstrates how the UFC sometimes understands difference as having homogenous qualities. Rousey and Tate presented the UFC audience something new in that they represented a shift in the gender politics of the organization; however, their treatment in the show as "the same" also works to represent difference as a quality of *all* human beings. This discourse understands each individual is different in some

way, so the TUF formula works by inserting particular demographic niches into a formula that works regardless of the particular nuances any given gendered, racial, or national group may possess. The reality-show format has been successful at introducing a whole array of fighters to the organization, but then again, difference loses its essence as deviating from a mythical norm when it is a moniker that can be applied to all.

TUF 20: Essentialized Gendered Difference and the TUF Formula

The homogenizing efforts of the “we are all fighters” ethos in the TUF formula can be juxtaposed with the essentialization of sexual difference in *The Ultimate Fighter: A Champion Will Be Crowned* (2014). Season 20 was the “first” all female season and the “first” season that would crown a division champion at the end. The UFC used the season to populate its brand-new strawweight (115 pounds) division—one of two weight classes for women in the UFC. The season itself featured the familiar reality show refrains the UFC had established in previous seasons, but the UFC also had the opportunity to market female fighters without male counterparts. The season’s promotional materials—including video and still images—initially suggests that the promotion’s strategy for marketing women centered on appealing to a heteronormative male gaze indicative of so much of sports media.

The TUF 20 commercial on *Fox Sports 1* reveals a different marketing ethos than previous iterations of the show. The ad opens with a full-length black and white image of fighter Felice Herrig in a short, skin-tight dress as her blond hair flutters in the wind. The camera then flashes to similar images of women in hyperfeminine clothing and makeup. Each image is a combination of black, white, red, and grey. The voiceover to these images begins “beauty may be skin deep...” The voice then says “but strength comes right from the heart.” As soon as the latter phrase is uttered, Rose Namajunas opens her mouth to snarl and reveal a blood red mouth

guard with the words “The Ultimate Fighter” written across it. Glass breaks to reveal a woman’s frame with a dark drawn hoodie and images of women punching, kicking, and fiercely screaming follow suit. The promotional package for the season features similarly black, white, and red imagery with juxtaposing rhetoric “heart-breaker” contrasted with “jaw-breaker” or “easy on the eyes” coupled with “hard on the face.” The hashtag #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength corresponded with the season to emphasize that these women embody both traits. These representations of female athletes in tight hyperfeminine clothing provides a singular, narrowly defined image of women in sports. They present the female body as object rather than active subject thereby amplifying their sexual difference. The commercial suggests that the marketing of TUF 20 fluctuates away from difference as something *we all* possess and returns to the essentialized sexual difference indicative of sports media.

MMA media outlets and scholars have chastised the overt sexualization of *The Ultimate Fighter*’s first all female cast (Jones, 2014, Jennings, 2015). Sydney Jones, editor and chief of *womensmma.com*, highlights the ongoing problem of emphasizing the hyperfemininity and sex appeal of female athletes. She says the representation of female fighters in the season’s promo suggests, “Even if they’re highly accomplished in their field, what’s truly important is that their sex appeal remain intact” (Jones, 2014). L.A. Jennings (2015) further argues that TUF 20 promotions primarily cater to a male gaze. She writes, “The purpose of TUF 20’s media campaign was to present the female fighters as existing in two liminal spaces, as sex objects and athletes, with each role, as it were, functioning metonymically as feminine and masculine” (p. 80). She posits that the UFC and Fox are reluctant to allow women to stand on their own as athletes without the emphasis on their desirability. These critiques of the TUF 20 commercial

represent a longstanding body of popular and academic literature analyzing the sexualization of female athletes in sports media.¹⁶

Rather than repeating analyses of essentialized sexual difference, I posit here that there is more to this promotional campaign when considering the transmedia marketing of TUF 20. The UFC simultaneously sought to draw an essentialized female gaze by engaging with a particular social media trend in participatory culture; they created an *Instagram* and *Twitter* campaign that corresponded with the premiere of TUF 20. The “Ultimate Fighter Beauty in Strength Contest” invited participants to share “their best photos of #TUFstrength or #TUFbeauty” on *Instagram* or *Twitter*. The transmedia marketing campaign promised that the grand prizewinners would receive tickets to the TUF season finale. One might argue that attention towards “beauty” demonstrates the persistent yoking of female athletes to their sexual desirability in ways that male athletes rarely are. However, the participatory nature of the campaign also reveals a concerted effort on the part of *Fox Sports 1* and the UFC to engage female fans through transmedia. A scan through the submissions to the #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength” promotion reveals an array of images of primarily women engaged in fitness or athletic activities. Many are clad in a similar fashion to the female fighters in the TUF promo, with lipstick and boxing gloves. There are also numerous other pictures of makeup-less women in the gym, little girls in UFC gear, or grandmothers walking for breast cancer awareness. The relatively fewer men in the entries predominantly reveal gym selfies or men with their daughters. If TUF 20 was primarily meant for a male gaze, then what can be made of the participation of so many women in the #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength campaign?

The #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength contest leverages *affective economies* to engage feelings of empowerment and inspiration, in particular, in the transmedia marketing campaign

¹⁶ See Kane 2013 for examples.

for TUF 20. “Affective economies” are marketing practices that seek “to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 62). In this case, the UFC is attaching itself to social media practices that generate particular feelings within an essentialized female gaze. *Instagram* as a platform is known for circulating images promoting real women as fitness inspiration, a phenomenon called “fitspiration” or “fitspo”. #fitspiration and #fitspo are hashtags used on a variety of social media sites, but *Instagram* seems to be the champion of these types of images because of the confluence of photographs and hashtags on this particular site (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015). Users upload either images of themselves working out or images of their physiques post-work out and healthy eating and tag #fitspo or #fitspiration to connect with other users. The ‘feeling’ associated with the hashtag is one of body positivity, inspiration, and appreciation for hard work. These images often flaunt muscle tone and low body fat percentages as the focus of inspiration for other women. This is a key point because fitspiration is a female gaze in particular. It is a disciplinary gaze since it aims to produce an attractive and desirable body; however, the trend is produced and promoted by women on a participatory platform. Fitspiration is meant as an empowered antidote to “thinspiration”—the concurrent phenomenon of women posting incredibly thin images of themselves with auspiciously more emphasis on eating less than eating ‘healthy’ (Banet-Weiser, 2015). Hodler and Lucas-Carr (2016) explain, “Whereas thinspiration encourages unhealthy dieting, fitspiration motivates women to adopt fitness practices as a matter of individual responsibility to produce an attractive and, therefore, healthier body” (p. 444). The hegemony of beauty remains intact as fitspiration only changes the rhetoric of what counts as attractive from “thin” to “fit,” from “skinny” to “strong,” and from

“eating less” to “eating healthy.” Yet, participants in fitspo emphasize the trend as one promoting feelings of empowerment and body positivity for women.

Images of muscular women working out are a growing occurrence within *Instagram*'s participatory culture and seem a logical cultural milieu for drawing the participation of women in the UFC brand. Transmedia marketers rely on affective economies to attach their brands to the feelings and affinities that bubble within participatory culture. To introduce transmedia engagement that emphasizes the beauty and strength of female athletes in a combat sport aligns with what female users are already doing on *Instagram*. To ask users to upload photos of themselves performing beauty and strength is an act of fitspiration that adheres to similar discourses on a familiar platform. The UFC integrated women in the brand by appealing to the feelings of inspiration and empowerment in order to promote their reality show and the UFC more broadly. The archive of the #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength hashtags on *Instagram* and *Twitter* reveals images of women in their everyday lives with concurrent images of the female contestants on TUF 20, as the hashtag was used throughout the season by the contestants, by the UFC, and by Fox. One might argue that the TUF 20 commercial panders to a longstanding trend in sports media that emphasizes the sexuality of female athletes for a male gaze; however, the transmedia marketing of TUF 20 through the #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength contest also engages women's participation through affective economies.

On one hand, efforts to incorporate female athletes and fans into the UFC are important considering women have long been excluded from the sport. On the other hand, the explicit sexualization of female athletes and the earnest concentration on appearance reveals the UFC still retains vestiges of legacy media's treatment of female athletes and fans. These essentialized discourses of difference make these fighters distinct from their male counterparts and the focus

on #TUFbeauty in the UFC's transmedia engagement reveals that the organization still essentializes the desires of its female fans. Difference can be narrowed to a few identifiable traits and or demographic desires. Just as Jennings positions the TUF 20 media campaign as representing a duality between masculine and feminine, the TUF formula positions female fighters as both different and the same from male fighters. They are similar because all UFC fighters and fans possess difference in some fashion and all face obstacles, as emphasized through the TUF formula. Women are distinctive within the formula because their sexual difference can be emphasized to appeal to a heteronormative masculine gaze and the desire for beauty and fitness can appeal to an essentialized feminine gaze, which reveals the ambivalence in the TUF formula as it grapples with difference.

The Transmedia Marketing of Difference

The Ultimate Fighter, along with the transmedia platforms and texts circulating around the show, understands difference ambivalently somewhere between essentialized and homogenized. On one hand, female fighters can be reduced to their sexual difference and status of object within the male gaze or an essentialized feminine gaze. Yet, on the other hand, women can be inserted into the TUF formula like any other identity group because difference is something all individuals possess: a process that increases the visibility of women in the sport.

Dave Sholler summarizes the UFC's understanding of difference in this way:

I firmly believe we like to be fans of people who've come from where we come from, who've walked in our shoes, and who've seen our experiences. I grew up in south Jersey, which is a huge Philadelphia sports market... There's a player named Mike Trout who grew up one city away from me in south Jersey and now plays for the Los Angeles Angels. I'm a Phillies fan, but I root for the Angels because of Mike Trout the south

Jersey guy. He went to the same schools as me, got his hair cut at the same place as me, and ate at the same restaurants as me. He's my guy. I have to think that when an Asian fighter from Japan is competing in UFC 198, there are many fans in Japan rooting for that fighter. In Brazil, when Cris Cyborg makes her walk into the Octagon this weekend in her hometown of Curitiba for her first fight in the UFC, there's going to be 45,000 fans from that region watching her as she carries the flag. We root for people who come from where we come from, that have overcome the obstacles that maybe we've overcome...in order to become a truly global sport, we have to have ambassadors that are different races and colors and who speak different languages, who come from different backgrounds, and who are gay or straight. Whatever you may be, the UFC is a representation of who we are as a society.

This articulation of difference in the UFC draws upon the premise that 'we are all fighters.' Sholler illustrates this by centering his own experiences as a white man growing up in south Jersey and his connection to an athlete of a similar background. He acknowledges an individualistic vantage point that differs from other perspectives. Sholler then applies this awareness to the multitude of UFC fans and argues that audiences want to see fighters who look like them represented in the UFC mediasphere. The 'we are all different' or 'we are all fighters' motto centers audiences as both a niche group with specific cultural affinities or differences as well as a part of a more homogenized global community of fight fans. 'We' all have faced hurdles even as those hurdles are customized to appear as diverse experiences. 'We' all seek fighters who look like us and come from the places 'we' have. If 'we' can all be different, then this logic of production actually functions to make difference read as sameness. Difference carries a sameness that is devoid of the cultural, political, economic, geographic specificities that

make the white man from the Bronx and the lesbian fighter from the favela actually different. Difference becomes a homogenous aspect of human nature—we all seek people who are like us to root for in sports. The world is diverse, so the product must reflect that diversity and sell identification in affective economies. As Sara Ahmed (2004) asserts, affective economies work to “align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (p. 119). The UFC understands difference as facilitating feelings of belonging and identification, which means that each fan wants to feel as if they belong because there is a fighter that represents them.

The TUF formula has established difference as a bonafide strategy for opening new audience demographics and diversifying the UFC to include women and other marginalized identities. The process was organic and facilitated by the pulse of participatory culture, but later developed into an explicit and even top-down component of the formula in subsequent seasons of the reality show and of the UFC more broadly. Still, inserting difference *du jour* into a reality television show format that makes difference formulaic, flat, and mired to the idea that everyone possesses it is problematic. Gender, race, sexuality, and/or nationality become customizable features that may be plug and played according to the particular niche group the UFC may be seeking to attract through affective economies. Difference becomes slavish and devoid of its uniqueness or particular historical context because difference includes *all*. The cultural, political, economic, or geographic specificities that make the white man from Jersey and the lesbian fighter from the favela actually distinctive are obscured. ‘If ‘we’ can all be different, then this logic of production actually functions to make difference homogenous. The global socio-economic conditions that have created the Brazilian favelas or the farming regions of Iowa remain vague. Difference is one element that can be inserted or removed from a particular season

of TUF to manipulate the formula according to the audience demographics desired. ‘We all are fighters,’ and thus difference itself, becomes evacuated of politicized meaning and sold in affective economies.

The remaining chapters each nuance how gendered difference—as it intersects with race, sexuality, and nationality—takes meaning and shape within UFC media. I surface the ambivalence between “we are all fighters” and gendered difference as an essentialized and marketable commodity. These chapters articulate which differences become desirable and normalized and which remain on the periphery, how the UFC’s various platforms and content construct discourses of differences, and how people outside the organization adopt and manipulate these discourses.

Chapter 2: Popular Feminism and Women's Physical Empowerment in the UFC

A curious ripple pulsed through American popular culture when Ronda Rousey declared, “I’m not a do-nothing-bitch” (sic). The UFC superstar was speaking candidly to a production crew filming an episode of the web series *UFC Embedded*. It was summer 2015 and the crew had been following Rousey the week leading up to her fight in Rio de Janeiro. Rousey slouched comfortably in sweats on her hotel room bed as she described the type of woman her mother “taught her to not be.” A *do-nothing-bitch*, or DNB, was a woman whose sole purpose was to attract wealthy men who could provide for them. Rousey expressed her blunt disdain for women who craft their bodies simply to attract “millionaires” and declared that her fighter’s body was “built for another purpose.” Rousey’s DNB monologue spread across the internet almost immediately through UFC and other MMA media and reached popular culture more broadly. Beyoncé sampled audio of portions of Rousey’s DNB speech before performing her song *Diva* at her *Made in American* concert. Tina Fey approached Rousey about starring in a film project called *Do Nothing Bitches* where Rousey would play a fitness camp instructor for women with wealthy husbands (Damon, 2016). Rousey’s fiery DNB rhetoric struck a cord in popular culture and the UFC promotional team developed a curiosity around the cultural resonance of her words.

In this chapter, I examine the ways the UFC has incorporated Rousey’s DNB ethos and discourses of girls and women’s ‘empowerment’ throughout their transmedia MMA brand. The UFC has long battled a reputation of hypermasculine brutality, so their recent interest in promoting ‘empowered’ female fighters is noteworthy. To the UFC’s surprise, the popularity of women’s divisions has exploded, partially fuelled by Rousey’s mainstream star power (Fagan, 2015). Rousey’s unapologetically ‘not-a-DNB’ persona and winning record secured her access to

nationally syndicated talk shows and movie deals at a level UFC fighters had never seen. As a result, the UFC has tried to capitalize on this moment of cultural resonance and promote the women's division as a revolution for women and women's sport. I argue they do so by denouncing postfeminist sensibilities of women's bodies, characterized as the *do-nothing-bitch*, and instead promote a popular feminist sensibility, which celebrates the muscularity and athleticism of women such as Rousey. While postfeminism has often promoted thin, highly stylized feminine bodies through disciplining exercise and dietary regimes, popular feminism has tended to challenge disenfranchising images of model-thin women.¹⁷

There is an ideologically uneven embrace of women's empowerment within UFC media. As such, I offer this analysis of UFC media as a means to understand how various feminist sensibilities grapple over gendered difference and the image of the physically strong and powerful woman and to what ends. As other feminist scholars have suggested, my analysis of popular feminism is less about proving that postfeminism has been displaced in generational waves and more about examining the ideological struggle around women's bodies, empowerment, and equity as they operate in contemporary discourse (Gill, 2016; Toffoletti, 2016). Any given individual might utter anti-feminist discourse in one breath while claiming feminism in another. Likewise, any given media producer or media organization might demonstrate similar ambivalence through their various texts. The analysis of the UFC's representation of its female fighters is comparably dense. Discourses of postfeminism, popular feminism, anti-feminism, misogyny, racism, and cissexism all circulate under the umbrella of UFC media. For example, the organization still employs slender models as "Octagon Girls" clad

¹⁷ A version of this chapter, '*Don't be a Do-Nothing B#tch*': *Popular Feminism and Women's Physical Empowerment in the UFC*, is forthcoming in *New Sporting Femininities: Embodied Politics in Postfeminist Times* (2017) edited by Kim Toffoletti, Holly Thorpe, and Jessica Francombe-Webb and published by Palgrave Macmillan.

in bikinis to walk around the edges of the large metal cage, e.g. Octagon, to announce each round of a fight. The presence of the Octagon Girls does not refute the simultaneous presence of empowerment discourse; yet, it does expose the ambivalence of UFC media. Critiques of the sexualization of female fighters in the UFC have currency, but I purposefully subjugate discussions of sexualization in order to surface other representational and discursive meanings. Instead, I examine a specific discourse, e.g. popular feminist notions of empowerment, to demonstrate marketing campaigns that step outside sports media's reliance on sexuality as a key marketing strategy. Despite any novelty that may be associated with promoting women's physical power over sex appeal, these representations remain a vehicle for maintaining hegemonic femininity and whiteness.

Popular feminist revisions to white femininity as a physical tour-de-force fail to supplant the supremacy of white feminine bodies in marketing and advertising. The strong, white feminine body becomes the representation of gendered difference with the most currency thereby homogenizing the category of female fighter in some of the UFC's more mainstream marketing. Gendered difference equals white women by default in many instances. This chapter further provides contrast for discussions of how the UFC promotes other intersections of gendered difference such as the women of color, lesbians, and trans women who I discuss in subsequent chapters.

The Discursive Nuances of Feminisms

Popular feminism's stated chief concern is empowering women and girls believed to be experiencing a 'crisis of confidence' (Banet-Weiser, 2015a). Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, "The current demand for visibility for girls and women is created in part because girls are seen as in crisis: this most recent 'girl crisis' finds purchase in education, self-esteem programs,

confidence, and leadership” (p. 56). Banet-Weiser illustrates a range of programs across media and popular culture promoting confidence and leadership for girls. Brands and products advertising empowerment become a primary solution to the crisis of confidence. As a result, a neoliberal feminist subject is desirable—one who is aware of gender inequality but finds individual solutions through participation in brand cultures. Popular feminism revises postfeminism by centering gender inequality as contributor to the crisis; nevertheless, the focus on individualized solutions fail to offer structural critiques, challenge the hegemony of whiteness, or provide solutions outside the neoliberal marketplace.

Banet-Weiser (2015b) further argues that there is little visible difference between the muscular bodies championed by popular feminism and the comparably thin bodies presented in postfeminist texts. She evidences her claims by showing social media images of women’s bodies tagged with the hashtag #thinspiration compared with the hashtag #fitspiration and noting the body mass differences among this genres of photos to be negligible. While I agree that both postfeminism and popular feminism position female bodies as subject/objects, both enact Foucauldian notions of discipline, and both emphasize consumption as a means to empowerment. I want to posit here that there is greater nuance between popular feminist and postfeminist discourses of women’s bodies than Banet-Weiser initially suggests.

This discursive nuance surfaces neither in the tendency for women’s bodies to be sexualized nor in the imperative for women’s bodies to be physically desirable. Instead, it materializes around women’s capacity for athleticism and physical competence. Postfeminist media culture celebrates a cult of exercise, eating disorders, and diets to produce an idealized white feminine body that may not necessarily lend itself to athletic prowess (Gill 2007b; Fox-Kales 2011; Bordo 2003). Instead, cinematic and televisual images of a gendered ideal produce a

disciplinary discourse that encourages men to “bulk up” and women to “slim down.” The contrast between the two becomes evident when considering action films. An actor in an action role attempts to add muscle to his frame through eating more protein and weightlifting while an actress tries to slenderize her body by eating less calories and doing cardio exercise. While both are forms of body discipline, the latter ensures a physically smaller human being. I have argued elsewhere that this particular brand of postfeminist body discipline renders the physically powerful action heroine suspect because the actress’s slender body becomes unbelievable in the physical action she performs (McClearen, 2015b). Likewise, if female athletes adhere to postfeminist body discipline through strict diets, then their physical abilities may suffer from lack of nutrition. Professional and collegiate athletes must condition their bodies for performance, which often results in calorie intake and body mass indexes that are much larger and more functional than the slender postfeminist ideal in much of mainstream media.

Numerous feminist media scholars have addressed body discipline within postfeminist media culture (McRobbie, 2008; Projansky, 2001; Tasker and Negra, 2007); however, another of Gill’s sensibilities goes somewhat understudied in subsequent literature on women’s bodies and postfeminism. Gill (2007a) asserts that postfeminist media culture rigidly defines a fixed sexual difference between male and female bodies. She says “a key feature of the postfeminist sensibility has been the resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference across all media from newspapers to advertising, talk shows and popular fiction” (158).” Gill identifies the tendency for popular culture to assert the gender binary in ways that second-wave feminism has rejected. In this logic, differences between girls and boys or men and women on the field of play are a result of the biological inferiority of the female body in athletic pursuits and not based on gendered conditioning. I have argued that this particular postfeminist sensibility allows for girls

and women's empowerment in some arenas, such as at work and in school, but clearly positions equity in women's sport or physical practices as unimaginable and impossible to achieve (McClearen, 2015a; McClearen, 2015b). Instead, "postfeminist sensibilities affirm a binary sex system and champion 'natural' differences between male and female bodies, perpetuating inequalities based on assumed limits of women's physical capabilities" (McClearen, 2015b, 158).

Postfeminist ideals of the feminine body are also classed and racialized discourses. Middle and upper-classed white femininity has long been characterized in media culture as physically powerless and in need of patriarchal assistance and protection. The pressure for white women to be thin supports their representation as fainting or collapsing when faced with danger or the need to physically assert themselves, such as the classic trope of the white heroine requiring rescue by a knight in shining armor. Black women by contrast, are more often stereotyped as masculine or as having superhuman physical abilities that do not necessitate the same level of protection (Schultz, 2005). Consider, for example, how Sojourner Truth emphasized nearly 130 years ago in her "Ain't I a Woman" speech that white women needed help in and out of carriages because of their vulnerability whereas she managed the same task quite competently. Truth (2011) also notes that she can "eat like a man" because she physically labors at the same level men do. Truth was not afforded the dainty appetite of privileged white women and highlights the construction of middle and upper-class white femininity as weak and in need of physical assistance compared with Black femininity's subjugation as a working-class laborer (McClearen, 2015a). The trope of the frail white woman found currency until second wave feminism began revising the narrative of feminine physical inferiority. The cult of thinness in postfeminist sensibilities is a method of limiting white women's physicality even as it

simultaneously elevates them above women of color.

The following discussion demonstrates how popular feminism contests the body discipline and notions of fixed sexual difference circulating in postfeminist media and offers revisions to white femininity in particular. The UFC's engagement with notions of women's empowerment illustrates that while popular feminism may fail to categorically reject the disciplining of women's bodies or the neoliberal imperative to purchase empowerment, popular feminist sensibilities locate physical power and agency within white womanhood. I specifically focus on two key pieces of UFC media that demonstrate the organization's engagement with girls and women's empowerment. I analyze the *UFC Embedded* episode featuring Rousey's DNB monologue and then examine the promotional video created for Rousey's fight against Holly Holm in November 2015. These particular media texts are significant because they both gained quite a bit of traction across a variety of social and web-based media as well as on television between summer and autumn 2015.

Ronda Rousey: "Femininely Badass as F#ck"

UFC Embedded is a UFC produced web series that follows athletes the week prior to their fights as they train, interview with the press, discuss their strategies, and relax with friends, training teams, and family. The show gives audiences insight into the fighters' lives and personal reflections prior to a big event. However, athletes are neither filming themselves nor recounting unprompted reflections without producer intervention. *Embedded* is generally shot with multiple cameras with largely a fly-on-the-wall documentary style. Each episode offers interviews with the athletes disclosing their thoughts leading up to the fight. UFC producers edit *Embedded* into five 5-10 minute segments they host on *YouTube* and circulate on other social media platforms. *UFC 190 Embedded* episode two (July 2015) follows five fighters, but it is Ronda Rousey's

scene in the episode that illustrates the conflicting feminist discourses at play in contemporary media.

Rousey's scene in episode two opens with an establishing shot of the Sheraton Rio Hotel and Resort in Rio de Janeiro and quickly splices a montage of Rousey training in the hotel fitness center with her coaches. Rousey wears grey sweats and headphones as she exercises on the elliptical, stretches, and works boxing combinations with her coach. As the scene plays out, Rousey's voice launches into a poignant articulation of the star's thoughts on femininity and toughness. She says,

I have this one term for the kind of woman my mother raised me to not be, and I call it a do-nothing-bitch. A DNB. The kind of chick that just tries to be pretty and to be taken care of by someone else. That's why I think it's hilarious if people say my body looks masculine or something like that. Listen, just because my body was developed for a purpose other than f#cking millionaires doesn't mean it's masculine. I think it's femininely badass as f#ck because there's not a single muscle on my body that isn't for a purpose because I'm not a do-nothing-bitch. It's not very eloquently said, but it's to the point. Maybe that's just what I am. I'm not that eloquent, but I'm to the point.

As she suggests, Rousey is not eloquent. Her words are brash and even incendiary as she indicts women who exclusively condition their bodies to be attractive to men. She highlights the passivity traditionally associated with hegemonic femininity by saying that DNBs simply want to be "taken care of by somebody else." DNBs construct their bodies to be attractive, but attractiveness is without purpose according to Rousey. Instead she views her own athletic build as a result of training with a purpose in her sport and claims that muscularity is "femininely

badass as f#ck.” The UFC superstar questions the very definition of white femininity as passive and frail by asserting that a muscular body does not preclude femininity.

One of the UFC’s most popular *Embedded* episodes was almost left on the cutting room floor because of its potential for controversy, according to Chris Kartzmark, Senior Vice President of Production and Programming at the UFC.¹⁸ *UFC 190 Embedded*, episode 2 featured several fighters on the main card in Rio, but the reason Kartzmark notes that the 8-minute episode became popular was Ronda Rousey’s minute and a half monologue at the end. Kartzmark, a producer of UFC *Embedded*, says that the DNB monologue was almost excluded from the final cut even though the production team thought the sentiment was powerful. He said, “I hadn’t really thought of [strong women’s bodies] that way. It’s not the opposite of feminine, it’s a feminine body that’s also badass and doesn’t need help taking care of herself.” Even though Kartzmark and his team thought the message was potentially appealing for some viewers, Rousey’s tone and language were so unvarnished that they feared it might damage her image. They approached Dana White, the UFC’s president, about the footage and he and the team collectively decided to include it “because the presentation might not be to everyone’s tastes” but “that’s Ronda.”

Rousey’s DNB rhetoric was not to ‘everyone’s tastes.’ Some feminist sports writers, such as the editor and chief of *womensmma.com*, Sydnie Jones (2015), found Rousey’s diatribe to be anti-feminist because it posits individual behavior as an answer to a systemic problem. Jones follows the natural conclusion of Rousey’s characterization of DNBs:

Why are [DNBs] so easy to hate? Because they don’t do enough. Because they’re parasitic and money-hungry and vain. Because they’re not enough. This is the typical refrain. But it’s a simplistic perception that overlooks the reality: the women

¹⁸ Interviewed by author

Rousey has termed DNBs are still operating within the same system of oppression that has specified a woman's value: beauty/sex appeal and reproductive abilities. Rousey is blaming the symptoms for the disease, just one more voice telling women they're not good enough to be taken seriously unless they meet a given set of qualifiers.

Jones is identifying a distinction between feminism as a coalitional political project united against structural inequities and the individualism emblematic of popular feminism. A coalitional feminism views the pressures on women's bodies to be desirable as part of a broader system of oppression against women. Jones marks discursive and structural inequality as the problem, whereas "not-a-DNB" suggests individual responses as an answer to injustice. If women act differently and treat their bodies distinctly from the DNB, then those efforts produce gender equality.

Rousey's DNB monologue specifically rejects disciplining discourses that pressure women to conform to the thin and idealized white postfeminist body. "Not-A-DNB" is a rallying cry against postfeminist body discipline and firmly places agency and power within women's bodies. McRobbie (2008) underscores postfeminism's insistence that white women remain slight and physically incompetent in order to be desirable. She says women "must retain a visible fragility and the displaying of a kind of conventional feminine vulnerability will ensure she remains desirable to men" (p. 79) On the contrary, Rousey defines her body as "built for another purpose" than being pleasing to the male gaze. Her muscularity and athleticism is not solely designed to attract men but is meant to be "badass as f#ck." This sensibility shuns notions that women are naturally inferior as athletes to men, à la postfeminism, and instead posits the female body as capable of impressive feats of physicality. In popular feminism, physical fitness for athleticism's sake becomes viable and challenges the insistence that muscularity in white women

is unfeminine. Postfeminist body discipline, then, becomes a culprit in the crisis of confidence. Model thinness and photo-shopped magazines present one image of femininity—an idealized thin *white* body—while Rousey’s not-a-DNB message prescribes an individualized solution to this crisis of confidence through purchase into the UFC brand.¹⁹

“Every Revolution Starts with a Fight”

The UFC observed the viral success of Rousey’s DNB message and began considering women’s physical empowerment as a potential marketing story for the organization. Fabiola Rangel, a former member of the UFC marketing staff, noted in our interview that the organization realized in late summer 2015 that Rousey was more popular with women than with men. The promotion subsequently began analyzing why this might be occurring in order to leverage it in their messaging.²⁰ Other UFC staffers, such Kartzmark and Doug Hartling, former Director of Marketing, concurred with Rangel and noted that young girls were flocking to Rousey’s U.S. and international public appearances in surprising numbers. Hartling, Kartzmark, and Rangel each confirmed in their interviews with me that the UFC was eager to capitalize on Rousey’s growing popularity as a role model for women and girls.

A few months after Rousey’s *UFC Embedded* episode, the UFC outsourced the promotional video for Rousey’s next fight against Holly Holm to a L.A.-based production company *Digital Domain*. *Digital Domain* producer, Neil Huxley, remembers a sense of excitement around creating that particular promo because the production company had the opportunity to tell a new story for MMA. He says, “You don’t normally see these stories about

¹⁹ Rousey capitalized on the DNB speech’s popularity, filed for a DNB trademark, and sold t-shirts for charity with the phrase “Don’t Be a DNB” emblazed across the front. She donated 20% of the proceeds from sales of 57,000 shirts to the Didi Hirsch charity, an organization dedicated to supporting people with mental health issues including body image (“Ronda Rousey’s ‘No DNBs’ apparel.”)

²⁰ I asked Kartzmark why they thought this message of women’s empowerment and Ronda’s persona was so popular with women. He said they had not reached any conclusions but were interested in developing promotional media around the rise of women’s MMA and determining why it had become so popular so quickly.

women. Look at the [UFC] promos we have seen over the years...it's usually heavy metal music and two guys shouting at each other face to face...The fact that we got to tell a story about two fighters was great. The fact that it was women was even better because you are not used to seeing things like this." Huxley highlights that the production team purposefully sought to create a promotional spot that departed from MMA's status quo.

The *'Revolution' UFC 193 Rousey vs. Holm* promo is a two minute and 44 second narrative and follows the two women from their first experience with martial arts to their meeting in the Octagon for the fight. The short video can be divided as a three-act structure: act one establishes the women's childhood introductions to martial arts, act two introduces the barriers and challenges to being women in the sport, and act three shows the women excelling in their sport and preparing for the fight between them. Since the purpose of the narrative is to market the Rousey- Holm fight, the promo ends in a cliffhanger that shows the two women standing across from each other in the Octagon waiting for the referee to begin the fight. True to the promotional genre, this last part of the story is unwritten at the end of the spot and meant to encourage audiences to buy the Pay-Per-View and witness the resolution of the narrative.

The promo begins by introducing an actor playing an 11-year-old Rousey donning pigtails and peering through a window front as she watches students at Judo practice. Young Ronda's eyes glisten wide as she peers at the judoka through the window. The narrative then flashes to establish a 16-year-old Holm's first experience punching a heavy bag at a gym. In a show of contrast between the girls, Holly ensures the gym is empty before she begins clumsily hitting the bag and smiling sheepishly to herself. Ronda embraces martial arts with alacrity while Holly comes along a bit more timidly. At the same time, we witness a young Rousey's first

experiences playing Judo with her mother on the couch and practicing her arm bar technique with a teddy bear whose arm she rips off in the process.

The beginning of the promo establishes a degree of similarity between both young girls as well as some of their differences. Both girls are young, white, and blond and we see both stories beginning within the training gym. Rousey's mother becomes central to the story since she is a Judo champion and Rousey's key trainer in her younger years. Rousey begins the sport with excitement and lack of fear. Her gender bending is evident in the first act in which we see her sisters playing with dolls while she unabashedly tears the arm of her teddy bear. Holm, on the other hand, is more timid in her origin story. She does not want others to see her practicing on the heavy bags at first and begins more quietly than Rousey. However, the promo clearly evidences both girls defiance of hegemonic gender roles. Rousey does so unapologetically while Holm must ease herself into punching with confidence and without fear of ridicule. The first few scenes clearly establish the contrast between gendered norms and these two women's ascent in combat sport. They also establish that this particular narrative concerns two blond, white women.

Gendered barriers for white middle-class women become a key feature of how Holm and Rousey have faced obstacles in the sport. One early scene shows Holly's trainer fitting her boxing gloves to her hands as two men stare and smirk to each other as they pass the only woman in the gym. She is not welcome there. Holly does not register the men's reactions to her presence in the gym. Instead, she glances up towards the ceiling and breathes an anticipatory gulp of air. The scene shifts to establish a small church where we find Holly sitting in a pew with her head bowed and hands clasped reverently in front of her. Her lightly colored clothing, skin, and face suggest the angelic purity often associated with white femininity. She lifts her head and the camera zooms in on her pale face framed by her light yellow hair and displays the shadows

of a blackened eye. Even though Holly appears indifferent to her bruised face, a man and a woman in the congregation look disapprovingly at her while whispering to one another. The contrast between the reverent young girl and the defiant fighter becomes the emphasis within the scene. In a quick transition, a teenage Rousey appears on the playground kneeling over the top of a boy as she bends his arm into submission. We see a close up of her face as she screams at the boy through bloodied lips. A teenage boy and girl stand over Rousey and her playground opponent smiling and laughing at Rousey's display of anger and the boy's discomfort in her submission hold. Rousey then sits quietly in the principle's office as her mother and the principle discuss the event on the playground. The camera switches to an extreme close up of her downtrodden face.

Rousey's playground brawl and Holm's experience with ridicule by men and churchgoers underscore the gendered barriers that have impacted both women as they have progressed in the sport—barriers racialized for white women in particular. Passivity and reverence in church form a sharp contrast to schoolyard fighting, black eyes, and bloodied lips since the former is expected of white femininity and the latter is reserved for masculine identities in hegemonic constructions of gender. By contrast, Black femininity is more readily constructed as physically confrontational while Black masculinity is often represented as excessively so (Mask, 2009). Latina bodies are often represented as hardened through life on the streets (Beltran, 2004). Thus, white femininity, in particular, is often represented as not naturally inclined to physical confrontation. Rousey's scene might not read explicitly as gendered, since fighting is generally scorned at school settings for all children, but the producers emphasized that they took that scene from Rousey's memoir. In Rousey's book, she describes the way she was more harshly punished for fighting than her male peers because of her gender.

The promo never shows Holm registering gender barriers and instead we see her as introspective and preparing to train or to fight through contemplation. She seems nonplused by the level of ridicule she receives from those around her. Teenage Rousey, on the other hand, forefronts gender discrimination by standing up for herself when a playground bully threatens her. Her mother fiercely defends Ronda's right to fight back even though the principle relies on gendered scripts of passivity to rule her behavior as inappropriate. The camera zooms in on extreme close-ups of both girls to demonstrate their vulnerability in facing gender roles in martial arts. In fact, racialized gender dynamics in the gym, in church, and on the playground serve as the obstacles that propel the action. For a moment in the promo, it is unclear if our heroines will overcome the gendered challenges they face to succeeding in their sport. The producers wanted to show both the differences in the two women's stories and demonstrate the barriers both women faced in competing in the first place.

The next few scenes shift in tone to demonstrate the women now succeeding at their sport and preparing for their fight against one another. There is a shot of Holm with her hand raised in the ring and a large championship belt attached to her waist and to Rousey standing on a podium raising her Olympic metal. These women have endured the challenges they faced early in their careers to excel. We next see Rousey jumping rope in the same darkened gym. A training montage ensues, as the music reaches its climax. Rousey demonstrates spectacular judo throws while Holm rapidly fires punches and kicks at her training partner. The camera zooms in for close ups of each woman's determined faces as sweat pours from them in the preparation for their fight. The last scene of the promo shows both women standing opposite one another as they wait for the referee to signal the beginning of the fight. He then drops his hand to signal the start.

At the same time, the words “Every revolution starts with a fight” and the fight date and time flashes to remind the audience when the story of this impending fight will conclude.

The Rousey – Holm promo both resolves the narrative of these two women and baits the audience to witness how their story unfolds in the Octagon. Both women have faced discrimination in the gym and in society more broadly. In fact, discrimination is the inciting incident and the key battle both women must endure to reach the climax of the story where we find out if our heroines will win, i.e. remain in the sport through adversity. Huxley notes that *Digital Domain* specifically wanted to tell a story of outcasts overcoming discrimination. He says, “That was an interesting angle for me....even though they were treated as outcasts, it never stopped them from doing what they wanted to do...what they loved doing.” Huxley confirms that the intended emotional register of the promo establishes both women as heroines inspired to compete in a man’s space, and succeeding against adversity along the way.

The promo illustrates some key ideological tensions present among postfeminist and popular feminist sensibilities. Postfeminism asserts that the women’s rights movement of the 60s and 70s succeeded in eradicating discrimination, so feminism is no longer necessary (Gill, 2007a; Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2008). On the contrary, popular feminism sees feminism as something individuals can employ to combat disenfranchisement and places a particular emphasis on physicality as a means to boost confidence. The promo shows Holm and Rousey persevering and winning matches justifying their success through their fortitude. The popular feminist message of the promo then is that confidence, individual resilience, and determination wins in the end. No matter the injustice that women might endure in a combat sport dominated by men, they must remain steadfast and individually determined to overcome. Neither postfeminism nor popular feminism view coalitional politics as a solution to institutionalized

sexism. Rather, they both position consumption and participation in particular brands as a means to physical empowerment.

There is a further tension evidenced by the way Holm and Rousey's physical power is represented in the promo. Postfeminism tends to treat inequalities in the gym as a natural consequence of sexual difference and to view male and female bodies in biologically ridged terms while simultaneously promoting essentialized and disciplined femininity. Popular feminism, on the other hand, recognizes these inequalities of the body as unnatural, undesirable, and damaging for women. The promo importantly takes women out of the boardroom and the classroom where postfeminism has concentrated its empowerment rhetoric (McClearen, 2015b) and introduces the training gym as a location for women's empowerment. The UFC offers its brand as a solution to the crisis of confidence that postfeminism has created around the disenfranchised white feminine body. Rousey and Holm embody physical power and are positioned as role models for overcoming obstacles to equality on the playing field. Young girls can attach the Rousey brand to their bodies and dress like her for Halloween. Adult women can challenge the postfeminist assertion that women's physicality is purely decorative by donning an "Don't Be a DNB" t-shirt and training kickboxing at their local UFC gym.²¹ Thus, a key site of popular feminist discourse becomes the confidence that girls and women feel within their own bodies. Unlike postfeminism, fitness and athleticism is not simply a means to define the body in hegemonically feminine terms; rather, they are a means of embodied empowerment that *some* women—but not *all* women— may access through sport and fitness brands.

Who's Revolution Is It Anyway?

The Rousey – Holm promotional trailer ends with a simple declaration: "Every Revolution Begins with a Fight." The images of gendered obstacles, trials, and tests that have

²¹ UFC Gyms are franchised mixed-martial arts and fitness facilities located across the United States.

flashed before the viewer suggest a new beginning for women in combat sports. Women like Rousey and Holm have ushered in swift change to a sport dominated by hypermasculinity. The revolution is characterized by discourses of women and girl's physical empowerment and presents a compelling challenge to the historical constructions of straight middle-class white femininity. At the same time, these discourses maintain whiteness as key beneficiary of this ideological labor. The revolution interpellates white women almost exclusively by representing blond, normatively attractive white women front and center. The transmedia marketing campaign around UFC 193 and the promotional trailer's release further evidences this trend.

Shortly after the UFC released the Rousey – Holm trailer, the UFC's marketing team initiated a social media hashtag campaign called #rouseyrevolution to “recognize the fighting skills and talents of [Rousey's] young female fans around the world” (#rouseyrevolution JJ, 2015). The campaign encouraged fans to post videos that depicted the #rouseyrevolution and promised to post the best videos to the UFC's social media sites. Participants in the campaign submitted videos of women and girls in sport and fitness activities and striking power poses to illustrate their participation in the #rouseyrevolution. A few identifiable trends materialized when the UFC posted a series of fan videos featuring the hashtag on their social media sites. Each featured video portrayed a young girl excelling in a martial sport such as boxing, wrestling, karate, or the like. For example, #rouseyrevolution – Evnika portrays Evnika outdoors in large boxing gloves practicing a hand speed drill against a pile of cedar branches, #rouseyrevolution – JJ shows JJ at a martial arts tournament demonstrating kicking and punching techniques, and #rouseyrevolution –Sage depicts Sage dominating a boy in a wrestling match. Each video portrays an impressive array of martial arts that form the basics of MMA. Each proudly

proclaims the young athletes as “amazing girls with incredible Rousey-like skills.” Each of the featured athletes is a young, blond, white girl.

The #rouseyrevolution interpellates white women into affective economies that circulate feelings of inspiration, empowerment, and identification with white female fighters. As I argued in the first chapter, the UFC draws upon participatory culture to circulate its brand within affective economies that connect with feelings of women’s empowerment and inspiration characteristic of popular feminism. The #fitspiration trend in participatory culture acknowledges that women often lack confidence in their bodies and provides visual inspiration and an “I can do it” ethos for participants. It is important to note the cultural participation required for empowerment hashtags like #fitspiration and #rouseyrevolution. As Sara Ahmed (2004) argues, emotions are not merely psychological but work to join and circulate bodies and signs together and “create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds” (, p. 117). In hashtag empowerment, bodies and feelings become conjoined with the sign of the female fighter through affective circulation and connection. These economies work to join #fitspiration, #tufstrength, or #rouseyrevolution hashtag participants together through the sign of the physically strong white woman. The UFC circulates these same discourses to hail a particular type of user, blond white women and girls, and affectively link them with the brand.

If #rouseyrevolution exclusively interpellates blond white girls, what happens to Othered bodies in the process? Sara Ahmed (2004) argues that affective economies work to designate what lies outside the boundaries of connected bodies and feelings. Muscular athletic builds in the #rouseyrevolution may represent empowerment for white women; however, the revolution Rousey represents has yet to be extended to Black or Latina athletes. Black femininity is more readily constructed as physically confrontational while Black masculinity is often represented as

excessively so (Mask, 2009). These representational trends establish Black bodies as always already possessing physical power. Pseudo-scientific discourses claim that Black athletes have evolved as genetically superior athletes because, as Black Olympic sprinter Michael Johnson claims, “slavery has benefited descendants like me — I believe there is a superior athletic gene in us” (Bass, 2012). In this way, Black athletes are characterized as having naturally superior athleticism while their work ethic and determination is downplayed through racist stereotypes of innate Black laziness. In a similar fashion, Mary Beltran (2004) argues that Latina bodies are often represented as naturally hardened through life on the streets. Latinas may possess a physical toughness because hard lives require a callousing not expected in middle and upper-class white women. Latinx individuals also face classist and racist stereotyping of domestic and manual labor, which are generalizations that lend themselves a discourse of possessing a natural proclivity for physicality. These racist logics serve as justifications for certain parameters placed upon which bodies are spawning feelings of inspiration in popular feminist discourses in the #rouseyrevolution. Black and Latina bodies are already assumed to possess greater degrees of physical fortitude, so why would they need to be empowered through popular feminism or belong within the affective economies the UFC deploys?

Compare, for example, the embrace of Rousey’s body with the rejection of Serena Williams’ muscularity. Williams’ tennis career has also been one of dominance; yet, racist and sexist discourses of Black female athletes continue to plague her (Anyangwe, 2015; Schultz, 2005). Williams continually faces scrutiny about her physique being masculine or superhuman, such as when the Russian Tennis Federation president joked about the ‘Williams’ brothers’ or when public personalities have suggested Serena can only build her frame through performance enhancing drugs (Zidan, 2015). Fellow tennis player Caroline Wozniacki once even stuffed her

uniform with towels and pranced across the court to mimic Serena's curvy frame in a fashion that bore resemblance to historic representations of the Black female body such as the "Hottentot Venus" (Little, 2012).²² The popular feminist reclamation of muscularity in women does not read Williams' body as "femininely badass as f#ck" as it does Rousey's. Tina Fey (2016) declares Rousey a role model for mothers and daughters. She says, "Imagine if we could teach our daughters to value their bodies for what they can do, not for how others think they look." Why can't *Serena* teach us that? Both Rousey and Williams have also been noted for their hubris; yet, Rousey becomes "confident" and Williams becomes the Sapphire, or angry Black woman, stereotype. Perhaps Claudia Rankine (2015) characterizes Williams best: "she won't be forced into stillness; she won't accept those racist projections onto her body without speaking back; she won't go gently into the white light of victory." For all intents and purposes, Williams should have every silence to represent a physically empowered heroine in popular feminist discourse. Yet, Rousey becomes "revolutionary" for women's body confidence and Williams continues to earn less in sponsorships than tennis stars far less skilled than she (Rankine, 2015).

The Rousey Revolution and the anti-DNB discourses emanating from the UFC are discourses specifically aimed at contesting postfeminism and refining white femininity to include strength and power. The UFC and Rousey herself are branding themselves as the antidote to the construction of white womanhood as weak and frail because physical vulnerability has long been a hallmark of white femininity—and of middle and upper-classed white femininity in particular. Even amidst the rise of powerful women in media, the trope of the frail white woman, or what Rousey would call the DNB, has remained throughout postfeminist media culture. Popular

²² Saartje Baartman, or the Hottentot Venus, was an African woman paraded around European freak show attractions in the 1800s so white onlookers could gawk at her voluptuous, Othered body. Baartman's representation often serves as a historical precedent for discussions of the representation of Black women's bodies in the media (Little, 2012).

feminism may revise what is possible for white women's bodies, but the revolution is not intersectional. There may be cracks in the long standing assumption about women's physicality and women's combat sport; however, those cracks still exclude a vast array of women that comprise the constellation of women's MMA.

The powerful white female body becomes the most visible representation of gendered difference in the UFC thereby essentializing the category of empowered female fighter in the popular imagination. This narrow representation ensures popular feminist discourses of physical empowerment flow through women who look like Ronda Rousey but not through women who look like Serena Williams. Rousey can be an icon for women's bodies as having agency and force, but Williams' physicality remains contested as discourses of her gender intersect with her race. Nevertheless, the UFC still produces media about women of color, lesbians, and other identities who are not the most visible women within the sport even as they may exclude them from popular feminist discourses of feminine power. The next chapter examines the way the UFC incorporates lesbian fighters of color into their brand through homonationalist discourse, or an incorporation of sexual difference as exemplary of democracy ethics and citizenship. The regulating nature of homonationalism serves to further demonstrate the ambivalent dance the UFC promotional machine orchestrates between the similarities and differences among its fighters and fans. Within a homonationalist discourse, other differences beyond white feminine power surface across the constellation of UFC media.

Chapter 3: Lesbian Fighters and the Homonationalist UFC Nation

“Fighters are at the heart of everything UFC does; they're a symbol of how we fight every day to overcome challenges large and small and are designed to make a meaningful impact in communities where UFC events are held. It takes courage to step into the Octagon, and it takes courage to stand for your convictions. Our pride gives us strength, and our determination makes us lionhearted. 100% of UFC proceeds from the We Are All Fighters Shirt will go to LGBTQ organizations and initiatives.”

Online Description of the ‘We Are All Fighters’ T-shirt (n/d)

The UFC’s incorporation of LGBTQ identities into their brand begins with the premise that all individuals face hurdles in life. The online description of their rainbow colored “We Are All Fighters” t-shirt declares that fighters are “a symbol of how we fight every day to overcome challenges large and small.” UFC merchandizing very clearly asserts that fighters are symbols for human beings who face challenges and strive to overcome them. It then continues by proclaiming that “it takes courage to stand for your convictions” but, “our pride gives us strength, and our determination makes us lionhearted.” The word pride has a two-fold meaning for the shirt. Pride for hard work and determination and pride as a word associated with the LGBTQ community. The t-shirt is explicitly designed to express solidarity with the LGBTQ community and proceeds are routed to LGBTQ organizations in the Las Vegas community, where the UFC is headquartered. The use of “we” and “our” extends beyond LGBTQ identities to interpellate individuals into the affective economies of the brand: “we” are fight fans because their fight is “our” fight.

This chapter probes how far the UFC expands the “we are all fighters” discourse across national borders and to LGBTQ identities. Throughout the organization’s various media products and platforms, the UFC constructs difference as something individual and singular that can appeal to other individuals who are also all “different” in some way. For the UFC, difference can

mean race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, or nationality and since each person possesses these identities, “we are *all* different.” If each fighter is different and faces their own barriers, the fighter and the fan may belong to a diverse UFC brand built upon individualism and the American dream—something that UFC fighters and fans have access to regardless of their differences. In this chapter, I argue that the UFC folds normative²³ lesbian identities of diverse nationalities into narratives of overcoming obstacles and achieving the American dream through the UFC’s branded homonationalism—the active incorporation of normative gay and lesbian identities as rightful subjects of the nation and brand. As with each of the other chapters in this dissertation, the UFC’s deployment of difference in branding, merchandizing, and marketing ambivalently fluctuates between homogenizing discourse, “we are *all* fighters,” and a strategic emphasis on difference, in this case lesbian fighters from around the world as overcoming particular obstacles to fight for their American dream.

I begin the chapter by describing the international scope of the UFC and providing examples of how the signs and symbols of national identity become literally and figuratively written on fighter’s bodies. This foundational discussion of how the UFC conceives of national identity springboards into the analysis of the manner by which the UFC incorporates lesbian identities into a discourse of branded homonationalism. Finally, I explore how the UFC uses mass and digital media platforms to create hierarchies of difference even as the brand insists everyone is the same.

International Expansion and Linguistic Diversity

²³ I designate “normative” lesbian identities as those individuals who favor monogamous same-sex relationships. Although each letter in LGBTQ tends to be rhetorically grouped together, not all letters in the queer alphabet are created equal. I will illustrate this by specifically discussing the exclusion of a trans woman from the UFC in the next chapter.

Early in their tenure with the UFC, Zuffa assumed that with some legwork, they could expand to different linguistic audiences both in the U.S. and internationally. At first, this meant simply broadcasting events and commentary abroad. Zuffa brokered deals as early as 2002 to broadcast UFC events and other MMA media content in Brazil and Japan (Hedges, 2002). Currently UFC programming is broadcast in over 120 countries in 28 different languages. It describes itself as the “largest Pay-Per-View event provider in the world”...reaching “nearly 800 million TV households worldwide” (“Discover the UFC”, n/d). In 2015 alone, the organization held live events in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Seoul, Monterey, Melbourne, Saskatoon, Glasgow, Krakow, Stockholm, Berlin, and numerous other cities worldwide. In 2013, an estimated 40% of the organization’s revenue came from countries outside the U.S. The UFC has partnerships with Televisa Networks to deliver content to 20 Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and with TV Globo to deliver its programs in Brazil (Snell, 2013).

Dave Sholler maintains that Dana White and the Fertitta brothers always envisioned the UFC as a global sport. White has said on numerous occasions that fighting is just something that people “get” around the world. He argues,

The reality is nothing in this country is bigger than the NFL...I don't care if you just watch one football game all season, everybody watches the Super Bowl. It's huge. The NFL is spending billions of dollars to break into other countries, but it's never going to happen. Nobody cares about the NFL in other countries. They don't understand the rules, and they don't get it. But I can get two guys, I put them in the Octagon and they can use any martial art they want, it transcends all cultural barriers, all language barriers because

it's fighting. At the end of the day, I don't care what color you are or what language you speak, we're all human beings and fighting is in our DNA (Willis, 2008).²⁴

White asserts fighting to be a universal language and thus the reason the organization has so vehemently sought international audiences. In his mind, fighting becomes a homogenizing force to bring global and linguistically diverse audiences together. Both Dave Sholler and Doug Hartling echoed these sentiments about the global nature of fighting in my conversations with each of them.

In the late 2010s, Zuffa began adapting its content for specific linguistic and national audiences. For example, the UFC adopted its TUF transmedia marketing formula for numerous countries beginning with Brazil in 2012. The Brazilian production company Floresta produced the season and it aired both on the Brazilian channel Globo and on the U.S.-based Fuel TV (Morgan, 2011). *The Ultimate Fighter* export to Brazil made sense because of the popularity of the sport in the country. The UFC used the same TUF formula they had created for U.S. audiences: seasoned UFC fighters as coaches, two teams consisting of multiple prospects, and a vehicle for Brazilian audiences to become acquainted with new potential talent and more familiar with the coaches. The UFC declared the first international version of TUF to be a successful venture for them in terms of partner media organizations and ratings. The pilot episode reportedly reached 12 million Brazilian viewers (Martin, 2012) and the UFC now knew their formula for gaining publicity for UFC fighters could be replicated for markets outside the U.S. The UFC has since produced Chinese, Latin American, and European adaptations of the TUF formula.

²⁴ White said this in 2008, which was four years prior to signing the first female fighter. One wonders how he might alter his rhetoric now that the UFC also promotes women. Is fighting also in women's DNA?

In the late 2000s and early 2010s the UFC also began developing media in languages other than English as well as ways to specifically speak to diverse domestic and international audiences (Snell, 2013). In 2011, the UFC launched UFClatino.com, a web presence specifically dedicated to Latino UFC fans in the United States, which was separate from the Latin American version of the site and boasted content in English and Spanish. Dana White said of the launch,

The UFC has become a really popular sport with Hispanic fans based in the U.S.... We've seen the fan base grow and grow, so we're excited to launch UFCLatino.com as a way to continue to serve Hispanic fans. We're fortunate to have great Hispanic champions such as Cain Velasquez and Dominick Cruz and we want our fans to have access and feel connected to our athletes ("Introducing UFClatino.com," 2011).

White describes the organization's desire to build connections with U.S. based Spanish speaking fans through identification with "Hispanic champions." He wants them to "feel connected to our athletes." Although the UFC later folded the Latin American and Latino site into UFCespanol.com, the organization still maintains Twitter and *Facebook* handles dedicated to content targeting their various Spanish-speaking demographics. The UFC's desire to maintain connections between Spanish speaking athletes and fans remains strong. In order to do so, the organization continues to amplify the nationalities of its fighters through signs, symbols, and discourses of national difference.

The Spectacle of National Identity in the UFC

The UFC becomes a particularly interesting cultural space to examine difference because sports are dependent on difference to signify. Joseph (2016) says that "difference is gaged as neither neutral nor objective" and thus it is always "represented as oppositional." Sports competitions are inherently not neutral and function by positioning opposing sides against one

another even as they sometimes bring nations together to compete. As David Rowe (2003) argues, sport is “so deeply dependent on the production of difference that it repudiates the possibility of comprehensive globalization while seeming to foreshadow its inevitable establishment” (p. 282). Large sporting spectacles like the Olympics or the World Cup bring nations together for a period of competition but they also solidify national difference by positioning nations against one another. While the UFC may circulate the globe and bring together people of multiple nationalities through its globalizing efforts, national difference remains a key strategy for understanding and framing competitions between competitors.

A fighter’s nationality is an essential component in the stories the UFC tells about an athlete or about a particular contest between two fighters. Nationality features prominently in posters promoting fights, in webisodes leading up to contests, and in the performances and rituals at UFC events. Fighters drape themselves in their countries’ flags when they enter the arena before a fight and when they triumph in the Octagon. Promotional posters spatter national colors throughout images of the fighters. Commentators label fighters as “the American,” or “the Russian,” and often describe fights as “Japan vs. Mexico” or “USA vs. Poland” even though MMA is not a team sport. Rowe (2003) highlights that sport is fundamentally structured with an “us vs. them” competitive rhetoric that particularly suits discourses of national difference. The UFC always has an instantly compelling narrative to tell about conflict between national identities, such as “the Irishman is battling the Brazilian.” The UFC relies on narratives of conflict in order to promote particular bouts. Chapter one discusses how the organization amplifies personal conflict or “bad blood” through *The Ultimate Fighter*. Nation vs. nation becomes another story of conflict the organization can sell to promote particular bouts.

Consider the poster advertising the UFC 175 event in 2014 featuring contests between Lyoto Machida and Chris Weidman and Ronda Rousey and Alexis Davis. All four fighters face the camera squarely with their heads and torsos visible. Each fighter is divided in half by a corresponding image of their opponent. Each fighter's body is painted with their national flag—American and Brazilian for Weidman and Machida respectively and American and Canadian for Rousey and Davis. These fierce and brightly colored bodies resemble Scottish or Native American war paint as the poster creates a relatable conflict of nationalities for the athletes' impending meetings in the Octagon. Each fighter's nationality is visible and thriving within the image. Each fighter carries the weight of their country into the fight since their national identity would become irrelevant if they shared a homeland. Instead, nationality becomes a shortcut for describing a conflict between each fighter without needing any other justification for their eventual meeting in the Octagon.

The UFC 175 poster depicts one of many of the UFC's marketing and branding efforts to tie fighters to specific national discourses. According to my interview with Doug Hartling, former Vice President of Marketing for the UFC, the UFC views itself as a storytelling organization. They build each major fight by telling the stories of individual fighters and emphasizing their national roots. The emphasis on national identity becomes just another facet of difference—an attempt to create individualized narratives of diverse fighters overcoming adversity to enter the ring in the first place. For example, a UFC 194 promotional video declared that Jose Aldo fought his way out of a Favela to become a Brazilian national hero. *The Ultimate Fighter* introduced contestant Randa Markos as an Iraqi refugee who now must overcome her father's distaste for her profession. Fighting becomes a metaphor the overcoming hardship and the stories the UFC tells about individual fighters often frame their personal lives as extensions

of the fight that takes place in the ring. These tales of adversity demonstrate the challenges each contender has overcome. The trials of any given fighter are predicated on national narratives of difference and adversity that become resolved when that fighter proves themselves in the Octagon. Regardless of their nationality, UFC fighters each have an equal chance of achieving their American dream by winning in the UFC. The UFC is a brand that acknowledges national identities, sexualities, genders, and class backgrounds as part of the makeup of its fighters. This individualization of the fighters is a marketing strategy that is meant to appeal to the variety of demographic markets and makes difference hypervisible, desirable, and commodifiable.

The UFC understands that its fans have affective responses to representations of fighters who look and speak like them and circulates national identification within affective economies. Doug Hartling, former VP of Marketing at the UFC, tells the story of the moment when he realized the UFC had effectively tapped into the “Mexican market.” One of his employees watched a Pay-Per-View fight featuring Cain Velasquez with her Mexican-American family. He noted that her family was not their “typical market” but they had something to connect to when they saw a fighter sporting the Mexican flag and a Virgin of Guadeloupe tattoo. He said “even abuela came running into the room when she heard ‘Los Mandados’”—a traditional Mexican folksong—accompany the fighter into the arena. Hartling’s affect in describing the moment with abuela carried an emotional tinge with it. He delighted in the fact that the organization was able to make even abuela feel connected with the brand and proud of her compatriot. Hartling used the story as one example of the UFC’s efforts to expand its brand into Spanish-speaking households in the U.S. and abroad. Velasquez became tagged as the UFC’s “first Mexican champion,” while Joanna Jedrzejczyk became the “first Polish champion,” and Connor McGregor became the “first Irish champion.” Each athlete represents a slice of the UFC’s

narratives of nationality that attempts to attract audiences who may identify through national and linguistic difference.

Branded Homonationalism

National identity is an ever-present feature in UFC marketing and event broadcasts; yet, there is also a compelling discourse circulating at the intersections of nationality, sexuality, and the American dream. Jaspir Puar (2007) calls this discourse “homonationalism,” which is an incorporation of normative gays and lesbians into the nation-state as citizens rather than outliers thereby demonstrating the state as progressive and tolerant. Puar (2013) surmises,

...homonationalism is the concomitant rise in the legal, consumer and representative recognition of LGBTQ subjects and the curtailing of welfare provisions, immigrant rights and the expansion of state power to engage in surveillance, detention and deportation.

The narrative of progress for gay rights is thus built on the backs of racialised and sexualised others, for whom such progress was either once achieved but is now backsliding or has yet to arrive.

Here, Puar notes the incorporation of LGBTQ subjects into social, political, and economic structures as symbols of modernization and progress. Homonationalist narratives work to normalize certain sexual identities, namely monogamous gay and lesbian relationships, while suppressing Othered sexual identities and racialized subjects. Drawing on Puar’s work, Phil Hubbard and Eleanor Wilkinson (2015) examine the London Olympics and the efforts to brand the city as inclusive of LGBTQ identities. They argue that the London “Olympics represented a moment when particular ideas of sexual cosmopolitanism were deployed to regulate, order and normalize the variegated sexual landscapes of a world city” (p. 598). The inclusion of gay and lesbian identities has become a marketing strategy that positions the brand as tolerant, inclusive,

and cosmopolitan. In this vein, the UFC incorporates and normalizes lesbian fighters as part of the tapestry that is the UFC brand.

Consider the UFC media surrounding Liz Carmouche before her historic fight against Ronda Rousey in 2013. The UFC had signed Rousey in late 2012 based on her impressive record in lower MMA promotions and star potential. The UFC later selected Carmouche as her first opponent. In *Countdown to UFC 157: Rousey vs. Carmouche* (2013), a 45 minute documentary preview of the upcoming fight card headlined by the two women, the narrator begins the story of the first women's fight in the UFC with this declaration: "Ronda Rousey launches the women's bantamweight division against marine Liz Carmouche." The emphasis placed on Rousey as "launching" the women's division coincides with the narrative the UFC prefers to spin about the beginnings of women in the organization. Dana White has said on numerous occasions that Rousey was the reason he changed his mind on including women and all of my interviews with UFC staff and MMA journalist have supported this narrative. Rousey's ability to play to a hegemonically feminine ideal with a touch of belligerence has been marketing gold for the UFC. This acknowledged, the selection of Carmouche to fight Rousey and the UFC's efforts to market the "out lesbian" and "the former marine" bare some scrutiny.

These two identity markers, marine and lesbian, signal the UFC's efforts to brand nationality and sexual identity through a homonationalist discourse. In *Countdown to UFC 157*, the narrator begins Carmouche's story by describing how she grew up on a military base in Okinawa, became a Marine, and served three tours in Iraq. Establishing Carmouche's military background first speaks to the relationship among support for the U.S. military, U.S. nationalism, and sports. Butterworth and Moskal (2009) argue, "Americans are implicated in a structural relationship between government, the military, and entertainment industries to the extent that it

has become functionally impossible to live outside the rhetorical production of war” (p.413). Sports are one such entertainment industry wherein military celebrations and nationalism become features of the spectacle, as Mia Fischer (2014) discusses in her article on the NFL’s commemoration of 9/11. Carmouche’s military service becomes a central narrative about her in the introduction to the UFC’s first female fighters. *Countdown to UFC 157* establishes Carmouche’s national identity and patriotism first and foremost before telling the rest of her story.

The remainder of Carmouche’s narrative in *Countdown to UFC 157* describes her introduction to MMA and her coming out story. The episode first explains Carmouche’s entry into martial arts, which occurred during her last tour of duty in Iraq. After discussing her discovery of MMA and first few MMA fights, the episode then explains Carmouche’s “personal discovery” about her lesbian identity. Carmouche says, “It took me a long time to realize that I was a lesbian. I didn’t actually come out till I was 22.” She then says that she began MMA after leaving the Marine Corps and that the sport helped her “come into her own” and “come out.” The episode then shifts to an interview with one of her coaches and discussions of her family – all who already “knew” she was a lesbian when she first verbalized her identity to them. The episode also features an interview with Carmouche’s girlfriend and teammate who describes meeting Liz for the first time.

Countdown to UFC 157 reveals how the UFC marketed the first women’s fight as significant not only because it was the first time the organization had featured women but also because it was the first time the organization had featured an out member of the LGBTQ community. Talk show host Larry King (2013) interviewed Carmouche and Dana White just prior to UFC 157 and asked the fighter about her military service, the military’s *Don’t Ask Don’t*

Tell policy that discouraged out servicemen and women, and Carmouche's lesbian identity. In the interview, Carmouche embraces the significance of her ability to be out in sports—a cultural institution that has long festered homophobia and encouraged closeted athletes. Larry King then asks Dana White about the UFC's response to Liz as the organization's first out fighter. White says,

We could care less. People have been asking me this question for a long time. What are you going to do if one of your athletes comes out and says they're gay? I could care less. Look at the way we responded when she came out. We've embraced it. We've reached out to the gay community about this fight (White quoted in King, 2013).

White had been criticized only a few years earlier when he used a derogatory slang term associated with gay men. He later apologized for the term and has subsequently been vocal that he would support gay athletes in the sport even though none of his male fighters have ever been out (Buzinski, 2012). His "I could care less" remark suggests he prefers to regard sexuality as a personal choice and not something that would interfere with the UFC as a business. He even explicitly discusses reaching "out to the gay community about the fight," which alludes the UFC's efforts to market Carmouche with gay and lesbian fans.

Liz Carmouche's marketability as a fighter in both *Countdown to UFC 157* and the interview with Larry King strays from the dominant paradigm for promoting women in sports: sexual desirability, compulsory heterosexuality, and hegemonic femininity. It is also different from the popular feminist discourse of empowerment surrounding Ronda Rousey. Carmouche is queer, of Lebanese and Irish decent, and more masculine-presenting than Rousey, so she represents an entirely different discourse than the more famous fighter. She's an American patriot and proud out lesbian whose bravery extends from the battlefield, to the social sphere, to

the Octagon. She is an American hero—a narrative that the UFC can spin as significant and groundbreaking for its viewership and can deploy to entice new LGBTQ fans to the sport. The brand can emphasize a homonationalist narrative that draws upon American patriotism to incorporate normative gay and lesbian identities. As Puar (2007; 2013). and Hubbard and Wilkinson (2015) contend, brands appropriate homonationalist discourse in order to position themselves as modern, progressive, and cosmopolitan. Much of Zuffa's work since purchasing the UFC in 2001 had been to rebrand the reputation of the organization as more sophisticated and less of a brute sport in order to draw fans outside of their niche base. Their ability to include an out lesbian on their roster further establishes them as progressive and allows them to market to LGBTQ fans.

Both nationalism and homonationalism simultaneously preserve the nation state as a site of belonging and of exclusion. Particular identities, in this case nationality combined with normative gay and lesbian subjectivities, belong to the nation while others remain excluded. Puar (2007; Puar, 2013; and Fischer (2014) highlight the portrayal of Arab and Muslim identities as outside the boundaries of homonationalist inclusion. Arab and Muslim peoples are portrayed as repressive towards diverse sexualities and thus antithetical to the progressive ideologies of the nation. Carmouche's story in the UFC could be read as one of heroism and inclusion because she is an out lesbian and former marine who liberated the Iraqi people from an authoritarian regime. She belongs to the UFC nation while her image is constructed to be oppositional to those who do not.

The UFC adoption of homonationalism extends beyond its portrayals of Liz Carmouche or other American fighters. The UFC instead positions itself as the epitome of a fighter's "American" dream regardless of their nationality. Connor McGregor's Irish nationality, meager

roots, and masculinity are all stories the organization tells about him. McGregor may search for his American dream within the UFC even though he holds an Irish passport. Borders dissolve so the transnational sports media empire can offer opportunity for athletes worldwide while simultaneously drawing in new audiences who identify with those diverse athletes. Those fighters are often framed as overcoming adversity to participate in the UFC's American dream and lesbian fighters allow the UFC to integrate them into a homonationalist narrative.

Consider the Brazilian and out-lesbian fighter, Jessica Andrade, for example. Andrade's main page on the UFC site lists her fighting stats, her nationality and hometown, her bio, and her professional MMA record ("Jessica Andrade," n/d). Included on the page are images and links to UFC videos that include Andrade, such as pre-fight weigh-ins, fight summaries and highlights, previews of match-ups, and other vignettes about her in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. One of the most interesting bits of media content is a video called *Jessica Andrade Emerges* that includes the tagline "spend a view minutes with Jessica Andrade in her native Brazil as she takes you through a typical day and tells you the unique story of how she broke into MMA." The three-minute video introduces Andrade prior to her first fight in the UFC in 2013. In Portuguese with English subtitles, Andrade explains how she works by day and rides the bus across town to train jiu jitsu at night. As she speaks, images of her neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro flash across the screen. The viewer witnesses people on motorbikes navigating Rio, a roughly patched roof decorated with a colorful array of laundry drying on a clothesline, and Andrade taking down the laundry while sporting a backwards facing baseball hat and *Combate* t-shirt.²⁵ Andrade does not live in a favela, but the images depicted suggest Andrade is of a lower class to an American eye. Just thirty seconds into the video Andrade says,

²⁵ *Combate* is a combat sports channel that features much of Brazil's UFC content through the UFC's partnership with the media conglomerate *Grupo Globo*.

Ever since I was a kid, I knew I was different. I liked to play ball, play with action heroes and toy cars. I even had a little girlfriend when I was ten. My mom didn't know about this, but now she will!

The initial personal history shifts in the remainder of the video as she discusses her strategies for her UFC debut against Liz Carmouche.

Nationality, gender, class, and sexuality all feature prominently in the first 30-40 seconds of *Jessica Andrade Emerges*. In fact, the tagline declares that the video will be about her “unique” story. The fact that she began training Brazilian jiu jitsu before transitioning to MMA is not unique because many fighters specialize in one art before taking up MMA. The fact that she is a woman is no longer a unique story for UFC fans. The fact that she is preparing for an upcoming fight by watching video of her opponent is a common strategy for fighters. Andrade's uniqueness stems from her gender non-conformity, her national identity that is tied to a class identity, and her sexuality. Each of these aspects of her identity contributes to the individual story of difference that the UFC seeks to tell and to sell. Andrade's Brazilian ethnicity, race, and class are visually front and center to the story, but her lesbian identity becomes part of the narrative as well. By crafting each of these fighters' stories as overcoming an obstacle, the fighter belongs to a homonationalist UFC brand built upon individualism and the American dream—something that UFC fighters have access to regardless of their nationality, gender, or sexuality.

The UFC's version of the American dream presumes that anyone, be they gay, straight, black, white, Brazilian, or American, can work hard enough to achieve their goals in the UFC. The ideological function of the American dream discourse is to equate hard work with success and failure with lack of effort. By reducing economic and social mobility to such a simple

equation, the American dream “symbolically erases real issues of social inequality, class struggle, profit-motive, and others that may provide barriers toward success” (Ott and Mack, 2014, p. 148). In the UFC imaginary, obstacles can only be overcome through individual hard work. A fighter’s triumph in the Octagon symbolizes these efforts without regard to any persisting inequalities, struggles, or barriers. Failing to achieve the American dream logically stems from failing to work hard. The popular feminist discourses of empowerment surrounding Ronda Rousey or Holly Holm share some similarities with the myth of the American dream. Both discourses position the individual fighter as responsible for social mobility and goal achievement. Because “we are all fighters,” all individuals face obstacles even though these discourses understand barriers as varying according to the differences each individual possesses whether you are Holly Holm or Jessica Andrade.

Hierarchies of Difference

The UFC’s homogenizing discourse of “we are all fighters” extends to lesbians of various nationalities through branded homonationalism. Yet, this does not mean that masculine-presenting lesbian fighters from Brazil receive equal representation and sponsorship compared to their hegemonically feminine American counterparts. One approach is to examine the investment the UFC makes in producing particular representations and how they circulate certain images of women. The UFC draws upon its arsenal of new and legacy media platforms to circulate stories about its fighters and events. There is a discernable distinction between athletes they describe as appealing to a “mass” audience and fighters that draw niche audiences. For example, each interview with UFC staff to date has described Ronda Rousey as a highly marketable star with her combination of talent, controversy, charisma, and appealing physical appearance. Rousey’s fights have all taken place on Pay-Per-View, which are more lucrative than airing them on the

organization's other means of broadcast, such as *Fight Pass* or *Fox Sports 1*. Rousey's image circulates prominently in the UFC's *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* pages, on *Fight Pass*, and in its commercials and documentaries. Nevertheless, Rousey also has broken into mainstream legacy media with covers in *Sports Illustrated* and the magazine's swimsuit issue, guest appearances on the *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* and the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and roles in films such as *Fast and the Furious 7*, *Entourage*, and the *Expendables 3*. Fabiola Rangel, a former marketing director at the UFC, says that Rousey's appearance certainly helps her appeal in the mainstream market, whether or not "that is a good or bad thing." Rangel connects to a point that feminist sports scholars have long lamented—that women have to be hegemonically feminine and attractive to be appealing to a mainstream media market (Kane and Maxwell, 2011). Even as the UFC maintains hegemonic femininity in mainstream media, their new media platforms reveal much more diversity among the stories the UFC tells about gender, nation, sexuality, class, and other facets of difference.

Jessica Andrade Emerges demonstrates the ways that the UFC employs social media to weave narratives of difference that they might not for Pay-Per-View or broadcast television. The Andrade video is created specifically for streaming media. The video is short, as short videos are easy to share and circulate on a variety of social media platforms. The UFC posted Andrade's vignette to *YouTube* in addition to hosting it on the UFC's main website and *Fight Pass*. A digital trace on *Facebook* and *Twitter* reveals that numerous individuals and handles dedicated to MMA reposted the *YouTube* video shortly after the UFC first uploaded it. The UFC leverages the free labor that fans and prosumers, such as bloggers, perform to promote Andrade's difference. Effectively, the UFC deals in niche media to generate buzz around fighters who embody difference in ways that the organization's mainstream efforts may still hedge. However, the scale

to which difference becomes visible is still a question to consider. *Jessica Andrade Emerges* has only received 24,000 hits on *YouTube* since 2013 while the Rousey vs. Holm promotional trailer was featured on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and replicated on numerous *YouTube* sites to reach millions of viewers.

It remains to be seen how much niche media breaks out of its narrow reach to make difference broadly visible. More labor is required on the part of the fan to find and circulate content such as *Jessica Andrade Emerges*. Casual fans may only see UFC Pay-Per-View broadcasts or Ronda Rousey's interview on late night television and never engage with the UFC's *YouTube* channel or seek out content in Portuguese. While converging media offers avenues possibilities for difference to become visible, there is a clear hierarchy in the content the UFC produces for a mass audience vs. niche audiences.

Normative Difference and the Boundaries of Inclusion

The marketing and branding of difference in the UFC uses an individualizing logic that everyone is different and that every audience member wants to connect with a fighter they identify with nationally and culturally. Ralina Joseph (2016) argues that if a concept of difference focuses on the individual rather than a community, then difference becomes volitional rather than a product of structural inequalities. Difference then loses its attachment to marginalized identities and becomes coopted by privileged identities. For example, if we declare an American, straight, white, middle-class male UFC fighter as part of the "we are all fighters" brand just as the Brazilian, lesbian, native, lower class female UFC fighter, then her challenges to achieving the UFC American dream become equated to his. MMA gyms, promotions, sponsors, and the UFC itself are all absolved of the responsibility for some of these obstacles. A female fighter should demand that her gym give her equal training to male fighters. A masculine-

presenting lesbian should seek out sponsors even though she does not possess “the look” that usually sells. A trans fighter should work harder to educate the UFC on transgender policies of other sports organizations to persuade the promotion to include her. Joseph (2016) argues that a concept of difference must be conjoined with equity and the impact of inequity on particular communities. She argues,

If we read race as difference with equity, as constituted in #blacklivesmatter, we see it as ascribed, not volitional, as community, not individual, as historical and structural, not whitewashed, and even as embodied, not interchangeable. Difference when conjoined with equity is about access, power, and change.

In Joseph’s definition, responsibility for social mobility and success at one’s endeavors becomes detached from the individual and placed upon the social structures that perpetuate inequalities. The differences between the Brazilian lesbian fighter and the American straight male fighter are no longer the domain of individuals, but are marked by pervasive social inequalities that privilege his UFC dream over hers. The distinctions between the UFC’s “we are all fighters” definition of difference and Joseph’s reveal the ways that celebrations of difference in the UFC obscure the structural inequalities that persist in fight promotion.

I remain skeptical of a homonationalist project that is characterized by a struggle over difference even as I acknowledge the possibilities for difference within converging media. There is a degree of opportunity for those who have long been marginalized in sports media or popular media more broadly. At the same time, gender and sexuality become folded into discourses of branded homonationalism that assumes equal access for all in the UFC nation. The UFC has constructed a hierarchy for its mass-produced and niche content that favors whiteness, hegemonic femininity, and gender conformity, while discourses in the MMA media sphere

further discourage difference perceived as threatening to the superiority of white masculinity. For example, MMA social media sites and the MMA blogosphere frequently feature heated discussions surrounding the potential participation of the American Fallon Fox and the Brazilian Cris “Cyborg” Justino in the UFC. These women of color are professional MMA fighters in other promotional organizations, but they are frequently debated as potential initiates into the UFC. Fox is a transgender male-to-female fighter and the masculine-presenting Justino was once suspended from MMA for using performance-enhancing drugs. By contrast, Andrade’s gendered, sexual, and national difference has become normative and folded into a homonationalist discourse. Fighters around the globe may access the UFC’s version of the American Dream while Fox and Justino remain outliers. The MMA blogosphere—as discussed in Chapter 4—enforces this marginalization thereby making non-UFC produced media part of the exclusionary mechanism. The distinctions between normative and non-normative difference in the UFC reveal that the celebration of diverse representations of fighters contributes to the continued obscurity of non-normative difference.

Chapter 4: On the Exclusionary Discourses of Sexism and Cissexism

Dude Looks Like a Lady bellowed throughout the arena as Fallon Fox waited to enter the ring for her professional MMA fight in the Championship Fighting Alliance (CFA) against Allana Jones. Jones chose the Aerosmith song to accompany her walkout before the fight as a particularly poignant stab at her opponent. Fox had gained notoriety a few months earlier in March 2013 after being forced out of the closet as a trans woman²⁶ in a sex-segregated combat sport. A reporter seeking to sensationalize her story ambushed her for the exclusive, but Fox curtailed the involuntary outing by contacting Cyd Zeigler (2013) of *Outsports* to write her story instead. Despite coming out on her own terms, she no longer possessed anonymity and reluctantly became professional MMA's first openly trans athlete. As a result of the revelation, Fox's MMA licensing organizations subjected her to medical review to verify that she met the medical requirements to fight as a trans woman. Even though she received the medical clearance to fight Jones, she endured transphobic jeers and epithets throughout the fight and since. Fox went on to win her match against Jones; yet, her victory was bittersweet. She endured a relentless battle for the right to participate in women's MMA in the court of popular opinion, including individuals affiliated with the UFC. Heated debates about the fairness and morality of a 'former man' competing against women in UFC affiliated and other sports media ensures a challenging road for Fox to continue competing.²⁷

Fallon Fox's fight for inclusion came at a time in U.S. cultural politics when trans people were experiencing increased visibility in the media and laws around transgender rights had been

²⁶ Inclusive terminology around trans people is complex and ever changing. For a discussion, see Serano (2007).

²⁷ A version of this chapter, *The Paradox of Fallon's Fight: The Interlocking Discourses of Sexism and Cissexism in Mixed-Martial Arts Fighting*, was published in *New Formations: A Journal of Culture, Theory, and Politics*, vol. 86; No. 86. p. 74-88 in 2015.

gained momentum. President Barak Obama signed legislation against hate crimes based on gender identity, encouraged the application of Title IX to transgender students, and removed barriers for trans people to update their official government documents (“Without fanfare,” 2014; Yan, 2013). A new California law now allows students to choose bathrooms and sports teams based on their gender identity (Yan, 2013). In each case, these laws seek to protect the individual’s right to identify as a gender other than the one they were assigned a birth. Cultural visibility has also increased and trans male-to-female (MTF) activists and fictional characters, in particular, have achieved increased visibility within U.S. media. For example, Laverne Cox graced a 2014 cover of Time magazine as both a transgender activist and popular character on Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black*. Concurrently, Janet Mock has been featured on numerous television news programs after her memoir, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More*, became a New York Times Bestseller. In the sports world, former Olympic champion Caitlyn Jenner received the *Arthur Ashe Award for Courage* at the 2015 ESPY Awards after publically coming out as transgender. These women have become icons of the trans movement within the U.S. and advocate for the individual’s right to express one’s gender identity in a variety of fashions and without fear of violence or retaliation (Steinmetz, 2014). The discourses of transgender acceptance have entered a mainstream conversation and taken root in progressive politics and popular culture even though trans rights are now simultaneously under attack at the state level.²⁸

The increasing visibility of trans people in the media and the legal measures to ensure their inclusion in society is certainly noteworthy; however, Fox’s struggles in the MMA community demonstrates a key area of concern for trans inclusion. In this chapter, I scrutinize

²⁸ Several state legislators have drafted laws preventing trans people from entering the bathrooms of the genders they identify with (“Understanding transgender access ...,” 2017).

the discourses surrounding Fallon Fox's participation in MMA by both her supporters and opponents. More specifically, I examine the interplay between notions of gender identity, individual trans rights, and fixed sexual difference in MMA blogs, radio shows, and in sports and entertainment magazines that comment on Fox.²⁹ On one hand, naysayers object to Fox's participation in MMA under the auspice of protecting cis women from the presumed immutable advantages of being born male. On the other, proponents for Fox's right to fight employ sexist understandings of female physicality to advocate on her behalf. In the end, both positions are concerned with maintaining what are considered "normal sex differences and excluding what are outside the normative boundaries. Both positions reaffirm a patriarchal, cisgender, cissexual system of power through sexist assumptions of "biologically" sanctioned male physical dominance and "innate" female physical lack. The interlocking discourses of cissexism and sexism create a double bind, or a no-win situation, for trans women in combat sports; trans MTF athletes encounter cissexism on one front and sexism on the other.

Both sexism and cissexism "manifest in our gendered attitudes and actions, including our assumptions about what are considered 'normal' (legitimate) embodiment, activity, and modes of being/belonging" (Johnson, 2013). Sexism privileges masculine identities above feminine ones while cissexism exalts gender-normativity. Sex-segregation in sport relies on embedded notions of gender-normativity to assert that there are immutable advantages offered cis male bodies and corresponding disadvantages for cis female bodies. Testosterone levels, muscle mass, and bone structure are the main "advantages" afforded men that female athletes lack. The normative

²⁹ It is important to acknowledge that popular MMA blogs and articles written by sports journalists certainly bare some differences in format, content, and research. An MMA blogger may not be subject to the style guides, editing, or research protocols that a sports journalist writing for a major magazine might. Discourses emanating from either type of source may be tempered by the particular constraints of the format or the decision-makers who decide what is published and what is not. Regardless, my aim here is to survey the popular content circulating in the MMA community in order to analyze the way Fox's right to fight is discursively constructed regardless of genre.

(large, muscular, and testosterone driven) male body presents a threat to the normative (small, frailer, and testosterone lacking) female body. As such, sex-segregation ensures that women may freely participate in sports without fear of unfair competition against stronger, faster men. The sex-segregation of sport operates on the premise that “separate-but-equal” ensures fairness for normative women’s bodies who cannot compete with men. This sexist sport system ignores any bodies that may operate outside of normative categories, exaggerates the differences between men and women, and polices the boundaries of sport to make it difficult for cis or trans women to transgress.

Several scholars have dissected the ways that trans athletes complicate a discussion of fairness within a binary, two-sex system of sports (Fausto Sterling, 2000; Dworkin and Cooky, 2012; Tolvhed, 2013). The system relies on the idea that bodies are inherently given advantages or disadvantages at birth and to physically transition to another sex means to gain or lose those advantages. One of the ways that cissexism manifests most clearly in sport is requiring that a trans woman be medically cleared as having mitigated the advantages formerly afforded her body—mainly sex reassignment surgery and hormone therapy to block the production of testosterone. Trans inclusion in sport is only possible for those who have selected physical alteration that adheres to medically sanctioned categories of male and female. If they do not meet these criteria, trans individuals who identify as a gender or sex other than the one assigned at birth are excluded from most professional sports. Thus, as sexism maintains the notion of female inferiority, cissexism regulates what trans bodies may count as sufficiently “inferior.” Cissexism and sexism are intrinsically linked to and supported by one another.

This chapter’s focus on MMA media largely independent of the UFC explicates discourses of exclusion that circulate in the UFC and in the MMA community more broadly.

Since the UFC is the largest and most visible MMA organization, MMA media fixate on the UFC's reaction to Fox even though she is not a UFC athlete. The UFC acts as an opinion leader in MMA and UFC fighters, staff, and contractors are frequently interviewed about MMA issues outside of the organization. UFC executives and fighters have voiced both support for Fox's participation in MMA and fervent opposition in a manner that mirrors the MMA and sports blogs and news articles that I examine. This chapter focuses on the discursive barriers that persist in sex-segregated sports that prevent certain women from participating in the UFC. Even though these discourses persist outside of the UFC, it is important to note the UFC's participation in these logics of sex-segregation to prevent certain women from joining the organization.

The Cultural Politics of Trans Athletes

Sport is a discursive construction that draws upon scientific and medical regimes of truth, which are governed by regulatory institutions. These discourses produce particular types of bodies—ones that are gendered, raced, classed, sexed, and determined otherwise fit and or able—and adhere to normalizing technologies that classify identities within a hierarchy (Cole, 1993). Transgender participation in sport is historically linked to scientific and medical surveillance that attempts to contain the threat of Othered bodies. For example, sport institutions such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Association of Boxing Commissions (ABC) (the latter regulates MMA in the US) maintain a sex-segregated system by using a discourse of “fairness” for cis women. The forgone conclusion of female physical disadvantage overlooks the range of bodies that make up the category of “female” as well as the range that makes up “male” even as feminist and queer scholars have long challenged the gender binary (Fausto Sterling, 2000, Grosz, 1994; Bulter, 2011; Dowling, 2000). Dee Amy Chinn (2012) notes that the attempted regulation of “unfair competitive advantage” means “all individuals are

required to be either men or women within a framework that considers these terms mutually exclusive.” Thus, the maintenance of sex-segregated competition requires persistent regulation, by way of sex verification testing and trans athlete policies, to ensure athletes fit into one category or the other (Skyes, 2006). The IOC began allowing trans athletes to compete in the 2004 Olympics if the individual had undergone sexual reassignment surgery and hormone replacement therapy to regulate their bodies within “acceptable” ranges for their identified genders (“Transsexual athletes OK...,” 2004). In 2012, just a year before Fox came out, ABC’s medical committee recommended that transgender MMA athletes would be evaluated under criteria based on the IOC’s policies. As a result, the Florida Boxing Commission, which maintains Fox’s fighting license, determined that since Fox both underwent surgery and currently takes hormones, she has medically negated any male “advantages” that her body previously held (Hunt, 2013).

Much of the discourse of fairness in sex-segregated competition is associated with the production of testosterone in the male body and the particular advantage of the hormone in competition. Yet, physiology could positively affect physical performance in a variety of ways that are not used as evidence in the same manner that testosterone or other “male” physical characteristics are. Successful sprint athletes may have more fast-twitch muscle fibers than the average person; yet, an excess of these fibers are not viewed as an advantage. Basketball players are much taller than the average person, but height is not singled out as an advantage that prevents fair play with shorter athletes. Additionally, certain gene mutations even increase the body's “oxygen-carrying capacity” and improve cardiovascular endurance for some athletes; yet, there is not a separate sporting category for such mutants (Tucker and Collins, 2010). Discourses around sex-segregation give much greater significance to testosterone than to other “biological”

factors that may create a predisposition for athletic advantages by assuming that a) testosterone always produces good athletic skills and b) athletic skills are not significantly influenced by any other genetic factors. The assumption of the immutable advantage of the male body supersedes other factors in athletic performance such as non-sex based genetics or gender conditioning.

Sport is especially prone to discourses of biological difference because it is a social space that draws upon biology-based criteria for determining gender.³⁰ Other spaces, such as federal and state measures to prohibit housing and employment discrimination, use identity-based criteria (Westbrook and Schilt, 2014). In fact, “gender-integrated spaces are more likely to use identity-based criteria, while gender-segregated spaces...are more likely to use biology-based criteria” for determining gender (p. 32). For example, preventing housing discrimination against trans people does not require that those individuals undergo sex reassignment surgery; rather, one may self-identify as trans without any additional stipulations. Since sport is decidedly sex-segregated, biology-based criteria for determining gender place more stringent regulations on who may participate in male and female sports. Additionally, Westbrook and Schilt (2014) argue that when “men’s” and “women’s” spaces are segregated, they ‘are not policed equally—making access to women’s spaces central to the debates over transgender rights” (p. 32). Westbrook and Schilt contend that preserving the safety of sex-segregated spaces becomes a key discourse for the regulation of trans MTF bodies and offer explanations as to why transgender inclusion is beginning to make strides in some spheres but not others.

³⁰ The National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) policy on trans athletes is more inclusive than the IOC’s or the ABC’s. The NCAA requires testosterone suppression for MTF athletes but does not require sex reassignment surgery. The NCAA also allows for a “mixed team” classification if the trans athlete is not taking hormones or has not been taking them for at least a year. The mixed-team concept allows for identity-based inclusion but still regulates what biologically counts as male and female for the sake of “fairness.” For example, a male team with a FTM athlete could compete in an NCAA championship but a female team with a MTF athlete would be ineligible. (Griffin and Carroll, 2011).

Fallon's fight for inclusion in MMA represents the limits of trans rights within a sex-segregated combat sport even amidst a cultural moment where identity-based criteria for determining gender are becoming more mainstream. In the following discussion, I examine the positions for and against Fox's right to fight as a woman and demonstrate that each side of the debate relies on beliefs in the fixity of sex and the value of protecting "weaker" cis women to make their cases. Trans inclusion in combat sports becomes particularly difficult because sexist presumptions of the inferiority of women's bodies enable cissexist claims of threat. Furthermore, discourses of exclusion do not simply flow from a top-down, monolithic entity of "the media," or in this case, the UFC as a media organization. Instead, fans, bloggers, and journalists each produce media that circulates and maintains these discourses.

"He (sic) Can Attack Your Daughter"

MMA fighters, personalities, bloggers, and journalists reacted to the news that Fallon Fox is trans with a range of controversial responses that draw on conflicting discourses of gender identity and sex differences. The central argument against Fox's inclusion in MMA is the concern that male biological superiority presents unfair advantages or hazards for female fighters. Consider, for example, a Fox News online contributor's initial reaction to the news that Fallon Fox was a trans woman:

Let me paint you a picture: your daughter is playing a contact sport. Say, football or hockey. She's gone from being your little girl to becoming a beautiful young woman. Opposite her on the field (or ice), is somebody who once was a man, until he decided that he didn't feel like being one anymore. This person can now legally, physically attack your daughter (Crowder, 2013).

Crowder's loaded assertions that a MTF fighter "can now legally, physically attack your daughter" highlights particular anxieties surrounding MTF bodies in a sport where punching, kicking, and choking one's opponent is fundamental. By asking the reader to consider his or her own "little girl" facing someone who "was once a man" and who can now "attack your daughter," Crowder evokes a patriarchal discourse of protection and concern for the safety of the infantilized female body. The belief in inherent male physical dominance, or that being male is an immutable category presumed stronger, faster than female bodies, leads to panic that some remnants of maleness pose a threat of bodily harm against cis women. In contrast, the presumed advantages of a MTF track and field athlete might surface debates about the fairness of that athletes' participation in races against cis women; however, the body of the transgender sprint athlete would never make physical contact with any other women during the race. Concerns of "unfair advantages" may still impact conversations around Fox's inclusion; however a MTF athlete's participation in MMA illuminates gender and sex panics concerning the safety of cis women.

One of the most contentious statements by a MMA personality came from an Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) fighter shortly after Fox came out. The UFC is the largest promotional organization for MMA and has built an unrivaled media empire on its Pay-Per-View fights, its reality TV show, its other MMA media ventures, and its fighters. Consequently, the UFC, its athletes, and other affiliates are opinion leaders within the MMA community. Even though Fox has never been formally associated with the UFC, many UFC personalities commented on Fox in the months her story broke. Matt Mitrione, a former NFL football player turned UFC fighter, controversially called Fox "a lying, sick, sociopathic, disgusting freak" who lied about his (sic) gender identity in order to "to beat up women" (quoted in MMA Fighting

Newswire, 2013). Mitrione's comments illustrate the apprehension that a trans woman is really a man seeking to inflict violence against women. As Westbrook and Schilt (2014) argue, much of the panic around trans MTF women is predicated on a fear of masquerading males entering feminine spaces to do harm to cis women's bodies. Mitrione affirms the panic around trans women entering into intimate contact with cis women and reacted with verbal violence against Fox. In Mitrione's logic, a MTF fighter is simply a degenerate man with a pathological appetite for violence against women.

The UFC responded to Mitrione's transphobic rant by temporarily suspending him for a breach of the UFC's code of conduct. In a statement issued by the organization, the UFC affirmed that it "is a friend and ally of the LGBT community, and expects and requires all 450 of its athletes to treat others with dignity and respect" ("Zuffa Statement...", 2013). The UFC clearly expressed its intolerance for Mitrione's transphobic remarks; however, the organization's objections to his comments center on his depiction of Fox as a "freak" or as "sick." They do not address his general concern that Fox had physical advantages or posed a physical threat to female fighters. The UFC disregarded remarks that featured assertions of "male" physical advantages or physical threat to cis women.

Joe Rogan (2013), a UFC commentator, also voiced suspicion of Fox using only slightly tamer language than Mitrione. In his weekly podcast, Rogan asserted that some men might "choose" to become women in order to sadistically injure female bodies. He proposed that allowing Fox to fight other women would lead to an abuse of power by other "crazy" MTF athletes who want "to beat the fuck out of chicks." He then continues, "There's a lot of suicidal fucks out there. There's a lot of people that are like on the edge anyway." Even though Rogan uses language that is slightly less loaded than Mitrione's "sociopath" or "freak," the words

“suicidal” and “on the edge” still suggest that Fox is psychologically unstable. These two examples of a UFC personality labeling a trans athlete as perverted beg the question: why would the UFC fail to reprimand Rogan’s transphobic remarks while punishing Mitrione’s?

Interestingly enough, even as Rogan’s choice of words in the podcast drips with cissexism, he provisionally supports Fox’s right to self-identify as a woman. Rogan (2013) affirms that he is not a “prejudice person” but he supports “100%, anyone’s right to be transgender.” He objects to Fox’s participation in MMA on the grounds of fairness or danger for cisgender fighters but not on identity-based gender criteria. He says,

You can’t fight women. That’s fucking crazy. I don’t know why she thinks that she’s going to be able to do that. If you want to be a woman in the bedroom and you know you want to play house and all of that other shit and you feel like you have, your body is really a woman’s body trapped inside a man’s frame and so you got a operation, that’s all good in the hood. But you can’t fight chicks. Get the fuck out of here. You’re out of your mind. You need to fight men, you know? Period. You need to fight men your size because you’re a man. You’re a man without a dick (Rogan, 2013).

Rogan delineates between gender and sex in his description of Fox. In his eyes, Fox can “play house” or “be a woman in the bedroom.” He also acknowledges that Fox may feel as if she is “trapped inside a man’s frame.” Because Rogan affirms gender-based criteria for Fox to identify as a woman, his proclamation that Fox was a “man without a dick,” “crazy,” or “out of her mind” generated little criticism compared to Mitrione’s comments.

The UFC ignored Rogan’s other claims about the sexed-based advantages of maleness and his distasteful use of language. If we contextualize these events within the broader discourse in popular culture about trans rights, it is clear that the UFC pardoned Rogan because he

simultaneously couched his rant in affirmative language supporting identity-based gender determination. The UFC's contradictory reactions to Mitrione and Rogan's rhetoric around Fox demonstrate the organization's nod to progressive LGBT politics and attempts to present itself as an inclusive organization in its statement sanctioning Mitrione. The move aligns the organization with political and social policies advocating for fair and respectful treatment of those who identify with a gender other than their birth sex. This is especially noteworthy for a sports organization that John McCain once called the broker of "human cockfighting." Despite its reputation for hypermasculine displays of physical power, the UFC demonstrates a slightly more progressive social politics accepting of nonnormative gendered and sexual identities—a nod to broader discussions of trans legal rights and the increasing number of trans representations in popular culture. Nevertheless, it is evident that the safety and protection of cis women's bodies is an acceptable biology-based discourse for debating the inclusion of trans MTF athletes in the UFC. As an opinion leader in the sport, Rogan affirmed Fox's right to identify as a woman but disputed her biological maleness as something that could be altered. The UFC failed to address this as a problematic position because the fixity of sex is rhetorically undebatable. The UFC's contradictory treatments of Rogan and Mitrione demonstrate a clear differentiation between accepting trans as a gendered identity category and refusing to question the fixity of male biological superiority.

Some women in the UFC and other fight organizations similarly expressed "safety concerns" for the contenders Fox might face in the ring. Miesha Tate, a UFC fighter, said she would only take a fight with Fox if the medical community could prove Fox was "100% female." Tate also couches her statements in trans-inclusivity by saying, "I have nothing against transgender people. You should live your life however you want. It's about fighter safety. I

wouldn't feel comfortable getting in with someone who is a woman but developed as a man. I just don't think it would be safe" (quoted in Okamoto, 2013). For Tate, there is a clear gesture towards accepting Fox's gender identity, but believes there are sexed limits when it comes to the safety of cis women. Peggy Morgan, who competes in the Championship Fighting Alliance along with Fox, issued a statement on her management's website declaring that she would not take a fight with Fox. Morgan said,

As an athlete and a woman, I am frustrated by the way the situation has played out and by the fact that many people seem more concerned with preserving Fallon's feelings than with protecting the physical safety of me and the other female competitors in the tournament (quoted in Palmquist, 2013).

In a similar fashion to Tate, Morgan speaks specifically to the discourse of identity-based gender determination and says that "preserving Fallon's feelings" was overshadowing concerns of "physical safety" of cis women. She considers it important to protect Fox's rights as a trans woman, but not at the expense of the bodies of cis women. Morgan and Tate highlight the limits of identity-based gender determination by citing biology-based safety concerns for women who may fight against Fox.

The concern for cis women's safety in a fight against Fox reveals a particular brand of cissexism, which draws upon patriarchal notions of protection and the sanctity of the cissexual body. However, these concerns coincide with a more progressive impulse to verify Fox's right to identify as a woman. The examples of people opposing Fox include proclamations of anti-prejudice attitudes based on an affirmation of identity-based difference. Fox's opponents uphold the progressive cultural and political value of protecting trans identities. Nonetheless, popular understandings of biological difference become the centerpiece of concern and the safety of cis

women in a combat sport and serve as justification for transgender exclusion. Sexist beliefs about the biological inferiority of women and the innate advantages of male athletes are unquestionable and unrevisable. Female weakness is the central justification for maintaining sports segregation and preventing MTF athletes' participation in MMA even amidst growing visibility and greater rights for trans people elsewhere.

It is important to consider how a patriarchal discourse calling for the protection of cis women is racialized. When framing trans women as a threat to cis women, the latter are often coded as white. The two most popular women in MMA today are Ronda Rousey and Miesha Tate—two hegemonically feminine white women.³¹ Rousey and Tate are the faces of women's MMA even though there is an array of racial identities in the sport. Rousey and Tate symbolize the bodies in need of patriarchal protection from the devious Other because they are central to the conception of women's MMA as a sport. Peter Glick and Susan Fiske (1996) describe the discourse of women's protection as "benevolent sexism," which they define as relegating women to subservient roles under the seemingly positive guise of "protection, idealization, and affection." The conceptualization of women as weak and in need of male protection maintains women's subordination to and dependence on men. Middle and upper-classed white women, in particular, have a long history of a precarious yet privileged position as bodies needing the protection of white patriarchal figures.³² A myth of feminine weakness is embedded in a culture of elevating middle and upper-classed white women to a status of needing protection while devaluing Black femininity along raced and classed lines. Kristin Anderson (2014) notes that contemporary sports media culture tends to emphasize the femininity of white women athletes

³¹ I think that Rousey certainly complicates hegemonic femininity with her fierce persona and bellicosity in the ring; yet, when outside the fighting arena, she typically dons hyperfeminine attire and strikes a Hollywood pose for the camera.

³² See chapter two for a longer discussion of the construction of middle and upper-class white femininity.

while ambivalently fluctuating between promoting and disparaging Black women athletes, such as Serena Williams, as masculine. She writes “Black womanhood has not been tied in the same way as white womanhood to activities and attributes defined as distinctive and different from masculine attributes.” Anderson demonstrates that the racialization of weakness and protection for white women does not translate to Black women. MMA media emphasize the femininity of Rousey and Tate, which allows benevolent sexism to position them as frailer and more susceptible to injury than their male counterparts or Black women. As a result of the racialization of protection, the MMA community (coded as white men) must intervene in Fox’s case to protect cis female fighters (coded as white). So, if benevolent sexism is invoked primarily for white cis women, then how is the trans threat racialized?

There is a persistent rape mythology surrounding trans bodies that frames them as seeking to deceptively enter women’s spaces to violate and injure unprotected, female bodies (Bettcher, 2007, p. 57). Mitrione and Rogan both aptly demonstrated this particular brand of transphobia, but its roots are deeper than the contemporary moment. Feminist scholar Janice Raymond (1979) once suggested that transsexual MTFs seek to “rape’ women’s bodies through appropriation or by deceptively entering the unprotected, sex-segregated spaces where cis women reside. This mythology of deception and threat bares an important resemblance to the long history of representing black men as the Othered threat to white women. White patriarchy has historically coded black men as rapists, using this myth “as a tool to justify the lynching and imprisonment of black men” (Angela Davis quoted in Bettcher, 2007). One way to rationalize the subjugation of the Black man is to portray him as threatening the innocence of the fragile white woman. Consider, for example, the fact that white supremacist Dylann Roof reportedly proclaimed “you rape our women, and you're taking over our country...you have to go,” before

shooting and killing nine Black churchgoers in South Carolina in 2015 (Ortiz and Bruton, 2015). Lisa Wade (2015) called Roof “the modern equivalent of the white [lynch] mob” as he drew upon benevolent sexism to justify the need to protect white women from a mythical Black rapist. Talia Bettcher (2007) argues that there is a correlation between depiction of trans women as deceivers and rapists and “particular history of lynching and where rape and accusations of rape continue to be used as instruments of racialized subordination” (p. 57). The Black body, the trans body, and the Black trans body all become suspect when considering the safety of white cis women who are conceived as physically inferior to their white male protectors. As a mixed-race, Black, trans woman, Fallon Fox’s perceived threat to cis women may bring cissexist responses to the discursive surface; however, her race certainly codes her in the racist mythology of the threat of the Black male body. The discourses that vehemently object to her participation in MMA on the grounds of cis women’s protection also conjure the threat of Black men.

But She Lacks “Male Chemical Mojo”

Fallon Fox has found allies and supporters in the MMA community, in sports media, in the trans community, and elsewhere. Liz Carmouche, an out lesbian UFC fighter, adamantly supported Fox when the story of her gender identity first surfaced. Carmouche says, “There may be, understandably, some concerns that she will be stronger than other girls, but our sport is regulated by state athletic commissions who are extremely thorough in terms of fighter safety and medical screening” (quoted in McQuade, 2013). Carmouche explains a standard defense of Fox that circulates in mainstream sports media: medical clearance means Fox has sufficiently proven that she is no stronger than the average female MMA fighter. Fox notes that while some fighters like Carmouche came to her defense, she has received more support in mainstream media than in MMA media outlets in the year since she came out (“Transgender equality

hangout,” 2014). Sports bloggers and journalists who advocate for Fox’s right to fight as a woman emphasize the emotional experience and “science” of transitioning in order to justify her participation in the sport. Liberal media outlets, such as *the New York Times*, *the Huffington Post*, and others discussed below, attempt to reconcile conflicting biology-based and identity-based criteria for determining gender that Westbrook and Schilt (2014) outline.

Several journalists describe Fox’s personal experience of transitioning and subsequent coming out through logics of privacy and individual choice (see Hunt, 2013; Hass, 2014; Bishop, 2013). These writers conceptualize gender identity as a category that can only be determined by the individual, which bares resemblance to the ways Fox’s opponents characterize her right to her gender identity. Cyd Zeigler (2013), who preemptively broke Fox’s story, writes that “due to circumstances beyond her control, she’s being forced out of the closet well before she was ready.” His emphasis on her reluctance to self-disclose her birth sex assumes gender identification should remain unavailable for public consumption. His description of Fox being “forced out of the closet” indicates that someone violated a personal and private aspect of her identity. Each of these articles uses the forced outing and the painful story of Fox’s transition to humanize her and show the challenges she has faced in becoming who she is today. The highly personal tone of these articles stresses the individualized experience of transitioning and disclosing one’s identity.

The same journalists who express support for Fox’s inclusion in women’s MMA also highlight the limits of nonnormative gender identities within sports; a sporting commission’s medical experts must have knowledge of the trans athletes’ medical history in order to approve athletic participation. In his discussion of the state surveillance of trans bodies, Toby Beauchamp (2013) has observed that trans status can only be concealed if one simultaneously yields to “full

disclosure to the medico-legal system, which keeps on public record all steps taken towards transition” (p. 51). One’s gender identity can remain private to the general public, but medical and legal authorities have the right to regulate the transition process. In Fox’s case, the medical branches of the sport licensing authorities determine if she meets the requirements of being a trans MTF athlete. Sports writers supporting Fox underscore Fox’s medical stamp of approval in order to justify her right to fight as a woman. For example, Loretta Hunt (2013) of *Sports Illustrated* expresses distaste for Fox’s forced outing and states, “In a perfect world, Fallon would not have been obligated to reveal her transsexuality *beyond the state athletic commissions that license her*” (emphasis added). Hunt emphasizes that the disclosure of ones’ gender identity to the broader public is a choice and not an obligation; yet, she simultaneously confirms that an athletic regulating body has the right to determine gender legally. Greg Bishop and Nancy Hass also discuss Fox’s public outing as a violation of privacy while assuring readers that medical experts had examined with Fox’s case and sanctioned her to fight.

Even as they cite medical experts that agree that Fox meets the criteria for fighting as a woman, most of the journalists covering Fox’s story seek to assuage concerns that Fox’s MMA performance thus far was unexceptional compared to other female MMA fighters. After describing Fox’s win over Erica Newsome by knockout in the 39th second of the fight, Zeigler uses examples of cis women who also displayed impressive finishes in their matches. He describes how Megumi Fuji famously established her 22-0 record by winning in the first or second rounds and cites Ronda Rousey’s impressive rise in the UFC. Zeigler uses this evidence to emphasize that Fox’s ability to knock Newsome out early in the fight is within the capacity of cis female fighters. Zeigler emphasizes Fox’s unexceptionally as a central piece of his argument

for her inclusion in the women's division. Following this logic, trans women competing with cis women in athletic competitions must prove that they are unexceptional athletes.

Hass focuses on the role of testosterone in athletic ability and discusses the effects of hormone therapy on MTF athletes as proof for inclusion. She remarks that the regimen of hormones that Fox takes presents a particular irony for the athlete. The regular promotion of estrogen and suppression of testosterone in Fox's body means, "some of her female opponents would have more *male chemical mojo* pumping through their veins" (emphasis added). Notice Hass's insistence on labeling testosterone as "male chemical mojo" despite the fact that she concurrently acknowledges cis female fighters as naturally possessing more testosterone than Fox. Testosterone and estrogen are neatly divided into a sex binary despite the fact that men and women typically possess ranges of both hormones. The use of the word "mojo" to describe testosterone signifies virility and sexual energy—a particular power that men can conjure in sports through their uniquely afforded genetic bounty. Hass assures readers that because of medical intervention Fox no longer has access to the natural mojo that males do. Hass subordinates other reasons Fox may have lost the fight such as conditioning, age, or technique. In this logic, the winner of the fight becomes the person with more mojo, not the more conditioned fighter, the younger fighter, or the more refined striker. Hass uses a one-dimensional focus on testosterone to prove her case for Fox's inclusion.

Articles that advocate for Fox describe the pain and challenges of her personal transition and endeavor to reconcile public concerns about whether or not Fox has successfully become a woman. They attempt to describe the experience of gender identity and transition as personal and individual while simultaneously attempting to sanction scientific discourses of sexual reassignment and hormone therapy as biological proof that Fox does not possess male athletic

“advantages.” These journalists reveal the conflicts between an identity-based determination of gender with a biology-based one. They attempt to describe Fox in terms of her lack of exceptional “male” abilities to prove that she can fairly fight in MMA as a woman, which is in keeping with her identification of self. Hass, Zeigler and others evidence Fox’s athletic record as boasting nothing more impressive than other successful female MMA fighters and that her medical clearance is proof that she no longer possesses male athletic advantages. By affording testosterone a preeminent place in the determination of athletic ability and by signifying it as a uniquely male hormone, the discourses of biology depend on proving that Fox can fairly fight women because she lacks the one-dimensional element that gives athletes their advantage: male chemical mojo. These arguments depend on proving that Fox is just as subordinate to male bodies as any other woman while disregarding any other factors that may contribute to Fox’s athletic successes or failures, such as training habits, determination, psychological wellbeing, other genetic factors, etc. Essentially, fixed sexual difference can be altered through medical intervention; but the only way to prove that the intervention has worked is to demonstrate that Fox is now physically mediocre and accordingly eligible for the women’s division.

Fox’s supporters use the sexist avowal of female inferiority to prove Fox is equally substandard and thereby deserving of inclusion in a sex-segregated space. Sara Ahmed (2012) refers to this brand of discrimination as “critical sexism,” a perspective where those who adopt critical vantage points fail to see the sexism embedded in their “self-assumed criticality.” Fox’s supporters in more progressive media institutions rely on a sexist characterization of female athletes as substandard to speak against the cissexism that challenges Fox’s right to fight as a woman. In fact, their primary arguments hinge on the science of weakness and unexceptionally of female athletes to prove their case for Fox. The result is that Fox endures cissexism from those

who oppose her participation in women's MMA and sexism from those who support her inclusion. How can an effort to use sexism to oppose trans exclusion in sports possibly achieve social justice and inclusion? How can a MTF trans athlete ever excel in a sport where she constantly must prove her weakness in order to remain included?

“Beating Biology”

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby-trapped (Frye, 2000).

Speaking with Fox after her loss to Ashlee Evans-Smith in 2014, Nancy Hass (2014) surmises that the defeat may have been predicated on the ironic lack of testosterone in Fox's body due to hormone therapy. Still, Hass predicts that Fox's loss will assuage other competitors' fear of fighting her and improve her chances of booking her next fight. Fox concurs, “I guess this means that people will realize that I'm just a woman after all. I'm female. I'm human. Sometimes I dominate and sometimes I'm dominated.” Hass ponders whether Fox now realizes that she cannot “beat” biology—a logic that oversimplifies the diversity and complexity of the human body and disregards the mental, emotional, and physical labor that prepares each fighter for a match. Hass' discussion of the loss poignantly illustrates the paradox of Fallon's fight: if she beats a challenger through punching, kicking, or submitting her, she is rewarded with a win but must contend with critics who scrutinize her body's presumed biological “advantages” and safety concerns for other athletes. If she loses a fight, she must struggle with the disappointment of defeat while reaffirming her advocates' insistence that she is unexceptional among women and nonthreatening. The more Fox succeeds at proving her femaleness, the more she fails at demonstrating her athleticism.

Marylin Frye (2000) argues that oppression creates situations that fix particular identities within a double bind— “situations in which options are reduced to a very few, and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation” (p. 11). The reliance on sexist scientific discourse of female athletic abilities in Fox’s case guarantees that she will be paradoxically penalized for winning or losing. The interlocking oppressions of sexism and cissexism ensure that Fox remains locked within the double bind and points to the limits of using identity-based or biology-based criteria for determining gender in a combat sport. Most of Fox’s allies *and* opponents acknowledge she has a right to self-identify her gender in private spaces and in public arenas that are sex-integrated. However, in the sex-segregated arena of combat sports, Fox’s opponents employ sexism and cissexism to argue that her body is a threat to cis female bodies. This threat supports the patriarchal discourse of protection that seeks to prevent a deviant male body from inflicting harm on a vulnerable female body, yet, never questions the dominant binary of male/power and female/powerless. Fox’s allies counter anxieties about violence against women by citing evidence that trans women no longer possesses the male physical characteristics that make one threatening. The positions for and against Fox’s participation in MMA fail to recognize the myriad of other factors that contribute to an athlete’s success, such as training, conditioning, non-sex related genetics, psychological fortitude and determination, etc. Instead, they support a sexist sports system that values male bodies above female ones. Sexism ensures that the power to be a physical threat resides solely within the male body and re-enforces the necessity of biology-based criteria in determining gender in MMA and combat sports writ large. Furthermore, this chapter’s departure from focusing primarily on UFC produced media explains how the sex-segregated cultural system of sport works to exclude certain bodies through

discourses emanating from various locations in society and not simply sports media organizations.

The UFC's "we are all fighters" ethos only extends to divergent bodies that fall within normative understandings of sexual difference. The organization may be willing to alter the scripts of femininity and physical power to be inclusive of cisgender women, but the interlocking discourses of sexism and cissexism work to ensure transgender bodies remain outside the boundaries of acceptable difference. This same rigid formulation of sex-segregation also works to ensure the hegemony of masculinity. As women gain more exposure in sports media, a cultural space overwhelmingly dominated by male athletes, spectators, media commentators, and owners, sex-segregation works to maintain the preeminence of masculinity. Sports organizations can continue to employ the discourses of "fair play" and "safety" to remain "separate-but-equal" sporting spaces divided into ridged binary categories of men and women. The questions that still loom large in my mind are how can combat or other sports begin to trouble the sporting binary? What will happen to the notions of male supremacy as women become more and more prominent in the sport?

Conclusion: The Personal Is Political

The mirror over the bathroom vanity my parents' house tells a story. This story ebbs and flows as a personal and political undercurrent in *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies*. As an adolescent and teenager, I spent more hours than I'd like to admit studying my face and body through the small rectangular mirror's reflection. I would direct my gaze to my eyes and face and over the tops of my tiny shoulders. My frame was slight, so my arms and narrow shoulders bared little shape. The reflection I saw in the mirror told the story of who I was: a small, slight little girl whose demeanor in the world reflected these same characteristics. My image reflected the women I saw in the media and all around me. The sheer mass of small, thin, arms dangling lifelessly throughout media culture seemed to reinforce the idea that my reflection was normal or desirable. When I went away to college, I took that same reflection with me as an ingrained sense of fragility. I even remember articulating this embodied weakness to a college friend once: "The challenge of being a woman in the world is knowing that any man could attack me if he wished and there is nothing I could do about it." I would return home frequently from college and gaze in that same mirror to reassure myself that I was still me. I *was* still me in spite of the freshman 15 and in spite of the identity shifts that naturally occur when one leaves home for the first time. My small, undefined shoulders remained in spite of the few extra pounds distributed in the rest of my body. After college and over the next several years, I could always come back to that same reflection anytime I needed to return to the essence of who I was.

One day in 2007 I returned to the mirror and I almost didn't recognize myself. I stared almost in disbelief as I ran my eyes across the tops of my shoulders and arms. Tears of joy and relief ran down my face as a realization sunk in: the reflection I now saw was a forever-altered version of myself. My shoulders now had shape and were wider, stronger, and more muscular

than I had ever imagined they could be. I had begun practicing martial arts in the year just prior to this. I feel deeply in love with karate and aikido and started to experience my body in entirely new ways. I trained, on average, for four hours a day and five days a week for the sheer adoration of it. The practice didn't make me feel empowered; it made me feel liberated. I was free from a diminutive self-concept, from fear of violence, and from clinging to the old reflection in the mirror. I had been transformed from the inside out and now realized the mirror did not tell me who I was. Instead, I told the mirror.

Images of powerful women like Cris Cyborg, Joanna Jedrzejczyk, Ronda Rousey, and Liz Carmouche were not reflections I grew up with. They are reflections I grew into. My decision to write a dissertation about the promotion of women in the UFC stems from personal experiences rewriting the cultural scripts that trained my childhood body to believe in her fragility. This project flows from an appreciation for martial arts and the joy I feel in watching women succeed in historically masculine domains. I watched the first fight between Ronda Rousey and Liz Carmouche with elation as a budding UFC fan. I cried when I first saw the Rousey vs. Holm promotional video and identified with the adversity they had overcome in martial arts gyms. These affective responses to the UFC's promotion of its female athletes inform the way I frame and intellectualize this project.

Love for something does not shield it from a critical eye or the desire to reform it. In much of this dissertation I have expressed ambivalence for the production, representation, and reception of women in the UFC. I probe the logics of production and critique the narrow representations as a feminist media scholar as well as an act of love. I situate the affective economies of powerful women within an underling critique of a market economy while I simultaneously shed tears of joy when I identify with female fighters. I explain how converging

media and transmedia marketing facilitate the circulation of diverse images of female fighters even as I show how these images facilitate a narrow understanding of women. I demonstrate how lesbian fighters are included in the sport even though their image is used to bolster homonationalism.

I address the project with ambivalence to demonstrate a lesson I teach my students in media studies classes. After we analyze the complexities of a media text, my students often want me to tell them whether that text is fundamentally good or bad. They expect the sum of our critique to yield a simple answer to the rightness or wrongness of a thing, but I rarely give them that satisfaction. I emphasize that oftentimes texts cannot be labeled as good or bad, but they inherently do have consequences. There is nothing categorically wrong with the “we are all fighters” sentiment of including *all*; however, it serves to flatten difference into sameness as a consequence. Articulations of powerful women in the UFC cannot be neatly divided into categories of just or unjust, but I address the opportunities and consequences embedded within these articulations.

In this project, I show how the incorporation of women in the UFC began once the organization realized that increasing the diversity of its fighters could correspondingly increase its audience demographics and overall audience size. Converging media and divergent bodies become an interrelated feature of the contemporary media system. The sheer number of genres, platforms, and applications means that media organizations can distribute a variety of representations across multiple channels. They can create representations that appeal to niche audiences rather singular representations for an imagined mass audience. This means the Polish fan can search *YouTube* to find more UFC and fan produced content about her favorite Polish

female fighter. This means the queer fan can buy a UFC rainbow-colored t-shirt while he tweets his support of lesbian fighter Amanda Nunes.

A theme articulated across multiple chapters in *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies* examines how affective economies facilitate identification with difference through participatory culture. I have been particularly attuned to these affective economies because I am a target demographic: a woman and fight fan who finds pleasure in watching powerful female athletes excel in the sport. Transmedia marketing as a media profession seeks to draw the participation of fans in their brands through engagement with underlying feelings and emotions that the brand evokes, like my feelings of identification with female MMA fighters. In the UFC's transmedia marketing, they attempt to draw the participation of diverse fans in order to grow their viewership through brand attachment. Chapter three retells the powerful story one UFC executive remembers when a Mexican-American grandmother identifies with a UFC fighter through the Mexican music associated with him and the tattooed symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe on his body. The Mexican-American grandmother identifies with the fighter who looks like her, speaks like her, and listens to the same music as her. By branding this fighter as part of the UFC nation, grandma is also included. Chapters two and three describe the UFC's attempts to incorporate female fans through feelings of empowerment and inspiration in the hashtags #tUFbeauty, #TUFstrength, and #rouseyrevolution. Each of these examples show how the UFC understands difference as a key avenue for increasing their fan base and overall revenue.

One of the central aims of this project is to articulate what happens to difference as its packaged and produced across platforms and genres of sports media. I begin by drawing upon Ralina Joseph's (2016) definition of difference as "the very expression of minoritized identity,"

which is politicized to be inseparable from a notion of equity. Joseph describes difference as a word “without an anchor” that has a “fluid, de-centered nature.” Thus, difference is positioned as oppositional against something perceived as holding some imagined fundamental essence.

Through each chapter I show how the UFC promotes a concept of difference that detaches itself from minoritized identities or politicized movements and instead treats difference as something everyone possesses. Everyone is different from one another, i.e. we are all fighters and have obstacles in life we must surmount. Gender discrimination or homophobia in the MMA gym is just another obstacle to success that a fighter must overcome. The UFC shirks responsibility for structural inequality and instead places the onus on the individual to push past any barriers constructed for their identities. For example, I examine the UFC’s transmedia marketing of the reality TV show *The Ultimate Fighter* to trace how the organization developed difference as a part of its brand identity in chapter one. I demonstrate how the UFC first used the reality show as a formula that could promote racially diverse fighters, international fighters, and then female fighters. I argue that the UFC understands difference through a “we are all fighters,” or “we are all different,” discourse that seeks to grow its viewership through audience identification with gendered, racial, national, or other difference. This discourse ambivalently fluctuates between an understanding of difference as homogenous, because difference is something all human beings possess, and difference as essentialized.

The “we are all fighters” ethos works to formulate difference as a homogenizing force to integrate diverse fans into the brand. Difference is not attached to minoritized identities only; rather, a straight white man can also be different. The notion that we are *all fighters* demonstrates a basic storytelling approach the UFC employs. Symbolically, fighting represents the will and determination to overcome challenges in life. Ronda Rousey and Holly Holm faced

discrimination as the only women in their MMA gyms and these women's individual work ensured they succeeded in their goals of becoming UFC fighters. Their fight for success against adversity is symbolic of the American dream in the UFC's narrative of them. Interestingly, the UFC as a transnational media organization extends the opportunity for the American dream outside of U.S. nationalities. As I discuss in chapter three, hardworking Irish, Brazilian, and Japanese fighters each equally have the opportunity to join the ranks of the most prestigious MMA organization in the world. The UFC further uses a homonationalist discourse to incorporate lesbian fighters from outside the U.S. into the brand. Branded homonationalism works to normalize lesbians as part the tapestry of the UFC nation and position the organization as a mainstream and progressive media organization. Yet, by homogenizing difference as a fundamental characteristic of all human beings, the "we are all fighters" ethos also works to obscure structural inequalities that are levied against certain identities.

Even as the UFC positions difference as something anyone can possess, the representations the organization produces often fluctuate away from a homogenizing concept of difference to represent identities according to essentialized discourses of gender, race, sexuality, class, and nationality. In chapter one, I analyze the first all women's season of *The Ultimate Fighter* reality television show and demonstrate how the show works to deliver an essentialized version of the female fighter as hegemonically feminine yet tough. The second chapter on popular feminism in UFC promotional materials also shows how representations of the "empowered" female athlete skew towards middle and upper-class white women. Discourses of women's empowerment remain attached to the image of the now powerful white woman even though women of color, lesbians, and masculine-presenting women are included in the UFC's mass and digital media empire. Women who do not fit the hegemonically feminine mold may be

included, but they do not represent feminine physical power in the same way. Liz Carmouche can be represented as an American hero through homonationalist discourse, but Ronda Rousey can signify the conjoining of white femininity with physical power. Chapter four, conversely, shows the limits of women's physical empowerment by discussing the challenges a trans woman faces in MMA. Essentialized understandings of sexual difference position testosterone as the key contributor for assumed male superiority in athletics. The preeminence of testosterone disregards other factors—be they sex differences or other genetic or environmental factors—that contribute to diversity in athletic ability. Even though we are all different in the UFC imaginary, our differences can still work to support hegemony or be simplistically reduced for neat packaging in a marketing formula.

The visibility of gendered difference in the UFC has certainly grown over the past five years and the fact that diverse women are included in the UFC's marketing and promotion is an important one because women are so often underrepresented in sports. This acknowledged, a closer examination of the hierarchies of difference within the organization reveals that not all women are given equal exposure. In chapters two and three, I examine how the UFC differentiates the promotion of the empowered heteronormative white women from the lesbian, masculine-presenting Latina. The Rousey vs. Holm promotional trailer was nearly three minutes long and was filmed by the production studio that made the trailer for the film *Avatar*. They even hired actors to play a young Rousey and a young Holm. The spot circulated widely on *YouTube*, was featured on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and was nominated for a 2016 *Sports Emmy Award* (The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 2016). In contrast, the *Jessica Andrade Emerges* video was a documentary style of storytelling rather than a theatrical representation of two fighters. *Combate* and the UFC produced the short introduction to Andrade. Based on the

production value of the two videos alone, it is evident that the UFC intended the Rousey vs. Holm trailer for mass circulation while the *Jessica Andrade Emerges* video was just another spot included on the UFC's network of social and digital media. Andrade's story was available for those fans who might seek out information about her, but not necessarily for mass circulation. The UFC claims "we are all fighters", but it is evident that not all fights (or fighters) are created equal.

The last chapter of *Converging Media and Divergent Bodies* outlines how particular gendered bodies become excluded from the notion that we are all fighters. For this chapter, I look beyond UFC produced media to consider how bloggers and journalist also work to maintain exclusionary discourses. The maintenance of sex-segregation becomes even more necessary in a sport founded on hypermasculinity as the images of powerful women become more prominent. Fallon Fox, professional MMA's first openly transgender fighter, endured transphobic vitriol from UFC and MMA personalities when she came out as trans. This emphatic exclusion of her from organizations like the UFC show that even though the organization is willing to include power as an attribute of female fighters, they will not allow masculinity's preeminence to be questioned. Trans bodies muddle the waters of sex-segregation and present challenges to biological notions of male superiority in athletics.

Martial arts are a particularly interesting sporting space for discussions of sex-segregation because even though competitions remain divided by gender, training is often co-ed. I do not compete in martial arts, but my training gym has always been a co-ed environment. I work with men and women of all shapes and sizes in the grappling art of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, which I started training a few years ago. One of the hallmarks of jiu jitsu, as opposed to striking arts, is that a smaller and more skilled grappler can win against a more powerful opponent. Even though this is

a fundamental tenant of the sport, an interesting phenomenon occurs when new men and new women enter the training space. Men typically arrive with an inflated sense of self-confidence as to what they should be able to accomplish when training with a more experienced woman. Women, on the contrary, typically need specific coaching in self-belief before they understand their bodies as capable against smaller and less experienced men. The gendered scripts that maintain these discourses are alive and well within society and the co-ed jiu jitsu gym can become a space for resistance. On average, the longer men train in the gym with women, the more they tend to respect their physical abilities. The longer women train, the more they come to realize their potential.

In summer 2015, I went to the UFC fan expo during International Fight Week, a weeklong celebration of the organization and its fighters. The expo featured panels with UFC fighters, autograph signings, UFC merchandize, and various martial arts tournaments for all ages. The jiu jitsu tournaments caught my eye in particular and I spent several hours watching various matches. Children's jiu jitsu competitions are not sex-segregated so girls were competing with boys throughout the day. I remember watching one young girl of nine or ten with lightning speed and flexible limbs submit each of her male opponents with beautiful ease. She held her head high and grinned with delight each time the referee raised her hand for the win. In contrast, each of the boys was downtrodden and a couple even shed tears. I grinned a knowing smile at the little girl and felt pity that the young boys still grew up in a world where losing to a girl was so devastating.

The equalizing space of the prepubescent jiu jitsu tournament made me contemplate the mirror that the young jiu jitsu phenom was growing up with. What did she see when she looked in the mirror each day? What had the media representations she'd watched dance across the

screens of her life reflected in her? Feminist media scholars have long repeated the refrain that media representation matters. Watching Serena Williams win her 23rd grand slam matters. Watching the Women's National Soccer Team win the World Cup tournament with a record-breaking audience for U.S. soccer matters. Watching Amanda Nunes become the first Brazilian and out lesbian UFC champion matters. These representations matter because they make women aware of possibilities that have been closed to women's bodies for so long and because contemporary media culture is often far more willing to represent girls and women as intellectual equals to men than their physical equals. Media culture has lagged in its ability to recognize women's physicality or suggest that some sports may even permit a more equalized playing field for all genders. Still, as I remember the jiu jitsu phenom, I smile with the realization that their mirror reflects a world of possibilities.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email Example

Below is an example of a recruitment email I sent to Dave Sholler at the UFC after being introduced virtually by Doug Hartling.

Hi Dave:

Thanks so much for your willingness to chat with me about women in the UFC for my PhD research. I'm a media studies scholar, so I'm looking at how the UFC markets and promotes its female fighters across the variety of media platforms and content the UFC produces. I think that the UFC is at the forefront of a really important shift for women in sports media and I am documenting and examining that phenomenon. Right now I'm working on this for my dissertation, but I plan to turn it into a book after graduation next year.

Could we set up a time to chat in the next few weeks so I can ask you a few questions pertaining to my research? 45 minutes to an hour would be great, but I could do it in 30 if that's all the time you can spare. I would record the conversation for my notes, but would be happy to share the transcripts for your approval/edits. M/W/F is generally better for me.

Thanks in advance! I look forward to speaking with you.

Best,
Jennifer

Jennifer McClearen

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Communication, UW Seattle
PIP Fellow, School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, UW Bothell
CPS Fellow, Simpson Center for the Humanities, UW Seattle
Email: jmcclear@uw.edu
Web: jennifermcclearen.com

Appendix B

Sample Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working for the UFC and in what capacity?
2. What has been the biggest surprise since the UFC began the women's divisions?
3. Think back to when Ronda Rousey and Liz Carmouche were first signed with the UFC. What stands out to you about marketing that fight in particular?
4. Why do you think more mainstream media has now just taken more notice of the UFC and the women's divisions?
5. How much of the UFC's growing mainstream appeal is attributed to Rousey or your women's divisions more generally?
6. Do you have other specific examples of how Rousey or other women have given you increased visibility in mainstream media?
7. How do you think the UFC compares to other sports organizations who have female athletes? Do you see yourselves as innovative in women's sports?
8. The number of female fans seems to be growing. What do you attribute that to?
9. What do you do as an organization, if anything, to try to attract female fans?
10. From your perspective, what have been the benefits of including *The Ultimate Fighter* in the array of media that the UFC produces?
11. How well would you say the UFC has done in marketing women's MMA?
12. How has the marketing division changed while you have been working here?
13. Who are other people in the organization that might be willing to speak with me?