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PERFORMING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY: THE RHETORICAL
SPECTACLE OF MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Allison Marie Mark
December 2013

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ABSTRACT

The influence of mixed martial arts on society is pervasive. Any values produced by the sport echo in the community, which crosses into the rest of society. It is because of this recursive interaction that social constructs such as hegemonic masculinity must be studied in the heart of the sport: the fighters. This masculinity is not merely about who-beats-whom in the arena, but also about dramatic performances before and after fights across media, such as social networks, television shows, and interviews. The first chapter of this project explains the sport of mixed martial arts and provides a theoretical foundation for a rhetorical analysis of hegemonic masculinity in the sport; in Chapter 2, we will explore how a fighter who has lost consecutive fights manages to maintain power and status through rhetorical performances of masculinity; and in Chapter 3, women challenge the masculine sphere of mixed martial arts by performing femininity and masculinity for power.

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CHAPTER ONE

GRAPPLING WITH THE OCTAGON: MIXED MARTIAL ARTS AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

My introduction into the competitive world of mixed martial arts occurred in the summer of 2006. It was the Ultimate Fighting Championship 61, an anticipated rematch between Tim Sylvia and Andre Arlovski. This was the "third chapter," friends told me, and whoever won earned the belt. These friends engaged in heated arguments, pitting rhetoric against rhetoric about who should win, about grapplers versus strikers, and even about which ring girl was the hottest. Arlovski's fans attacked Sylvia's new beer-belly, Sylvia's fans mocked Arlovski's loss from the first rematch, and I listened to these debates instead of watching the twenty-five minute brawl. I was fascinated by the sport, but not by the actual fight.

The arguments around me were as passionate as the fight, with friends landing verbal blows against the fighters and each other. My friends care enough about these events to memorize fighters' histories and strategies, to follow websites and television shows. Since that fight, I slowly became like my friends. As I write this in 2013, I

have not missed a single event; I now follow the websites dedicated to mixed martial arts (MMA) and tune in for the reality show, *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF). I've discovered that MMA is not merely about who-beats-whom in the arena, but also about the dramatic performances before and after fights. My Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr feed are filled with information about events and fighters, where smack-talk is delivered, rivalries brew, and careers are made. This drama makes me devote Saturdays to fight-nights, tune into my news feed for updates, and partake in heated arguments about which fighters are truly fighters, even if they lose. I am only one of the millions of fans MMA affects, making MMA a subject influencing values and priorities, and therefore a subject begging for analysis.

By analyzing the rhetoric of social institutions like sports, we can better understand its effects on social constructs. Social institutions shape and alter societal values and norms, such as gender. As Michael Messner says, "the institution of sport in the twentieth century has played a key role in the construction and stabilization of a male-dominant, heterosexist system of gender relations" (*Power 15*). The physicality of sport has altered the definition of "masculine" in relation to power and

domination, and "feminine" as passive or submissive; it is this notion of "masculinity" that should be studied in institutions like MMA because it is performed and reiterated until society views it as "normal."

"Masculine" and "feminine" describe genders, something the U.S. society usually categorizes as concomitant with our sex. It is assumed people are born with female genitals are feminine and, likewise, those born with male genitals are masculine, but this "is a social construct which serves particular purposes and institutions" (Sullivan 82). Throughout history, societies have assigned particular characteristics to masculinity (protector, hunter, dominator) and others to femininity (caregiver, nurturer, submissive), but "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler, "Imitation" 313). We attempt to imitate what we perceive as a gender trait, yet we mimic something that is not "real." As such, there are not concrete definitions for "masculine" or "feminine," so our imitations are usually imperfect. However, masculinity is considered the more powerful gender by most, and in MMA, the fighters attempt to perform hegemonic masculinity for the status and power they may earn.

The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* has been tackled by several disciplines, yet "masculine" is a social construct without an essential definition, and so the meaning varies. In Marxist theory, hegemony, the "dominating cultural influence and power," is maintained "not so much by violence or coercion . . . as by leadership that won the seemingly spontaneous consent of the masses" (Parker 218). The people believe they willingly consent, but they consent due to "persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media, and the organization of social institutions in ways that appear 'natural' 'ordinary' 'normal'" (Donaldson 655). Those with power maintain power through normalization, and the concept of *masculinity* has become normalized in society. Patricia Sexton suggests:

. . . [masculine norms] stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body. (qtd. in Donaldson 644)

If a male embodies these features of masculinity, society will view him as a "man's man," the epitome of what it means to "be a man."

Hegemonic masculinity, then, has been defined as "the common sense about breadwinning and manhood" (Donaldson 645), "for the subordination of women," (Donaldson 645), or the embodiment of the "most honored way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). These theories contribute to a general definition of masculinity, but my own working-definition emphasizes "Competitiveness, a combination of the calculative and combative" (Donaldson 645) and the "capacity to exert control or to resist being controlled" (Schrock and Schwalbe 280). Because MMA is a physical sport, competitiveness and domination are keys to victory, especially when most fighters seek to force their opponents to submit. This masculinity carries over to the media, where hegemonic masculinity reaches fans and influences social values around the world (the reason for Diaz's suspension). The fighters desire the power and status given to those who are masculine, and they perform to the construct of hegemonic masculinity in these public appearances. To appear as if they possess a "masculine self," fighters act as if they possess "the capacit[y] to

make things happen and to resist being dominated by others” (Shrock and Schwalbe 280). In the media, fighters will trash-talk to issue challenges to other fighters; in the Octagon, fighters use strategy and physical skill to control the fight and the opponent. It’s a performance both inside and outside of the arena, sometimes intentionally and sometimes involuntarily, and these performances determine how the community defines masculinity.

MMA’s hegemonic masculinity is not a static construct isolated from the rest of society, but is in a fluid, recursive interaction of production and consumption. Connell and Messerschmidt suggest the following framework to study hegemonic masculinity:

Gender should be looked at locally, globally, and regionally. Hegemonic masculinity at the regional level is symbolically represented through the interplay of specific local masculine practices that have regional significance, such as those constructed by feature film actors, professional athletes, and politicians. The exact content of these practices varies over time and across societies. Yet regional hegemonic masculinity shapes a society-wide sense of masculine reality

and, therefore, operates in the cultural domain as on-hand material to be actualized, altered, or challenged through practice in a range of different local circumstances. A regional hegemonic masculinity, then, provides a cultural framework that may be materialized in daily practices and interactions. (849-850)

If we see these terms as conceptual instead of geographical for MMA, the individual fighters and fans comprise the local, the community of MMA comprises the regional and includes fighters, fans, merchandising companies, promoters, and other such groups, and the largest context MMA interacts with comprises the global. The masculinity produced by the regional fighters, fans, and organizations is reiterated into hegemonic masculinity by the fans within the community.

Before we can enter the arena for a theoretical battle with MMA examples, we must understand the sport and how it functions. Picture two men in an arena, fighting for victory with limited rules and bodies for weapons: that is mixed martial arts. Most fights are allotted fifteen minutes (three five-minute rounds) and title fights twenty-five (five five-minute rounds), and those crucial minutes

are packed with attempted knockouts or submissions using various fighting styles, such as boxing, wrestling, Muay Thai, and judo. If the time ticks down without a submission, knockout, or technical knockout, the victory is left to the judges' subjective decisions.

MMA is called many things, like "no holds barred fighting," "extreme fighting," and "cage fighting." Another name is "pankration," a boxing and wrestling hybrid featured at the 33rd Olympiad in 648 B.C. (Buse 169). The excitement of individual combat made the sport "revered in ancient Greece and served as the climactic final event of the Olympics for centuries" (Buse 169), and today, it has made a comeback under the name of MMA. Currently, MMA is broken into different promotional companies, with the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) recognized as the most dominant company and the founder of contemporary MMA. In 1993, UFC held its first event in Denver with limited rules (Kim et al. 110), but now it is widely televised across Facebook, FOX, and pay-per-view. Here is how the UFC describes itself:

Originating from the full contact sport of Vale tudo in Brazil, the UFC was created in the United States in 1993 with minimal rules, and was

promoted as a competition to determine the most effective martial art for unarmed combat situations.

It wasn't long before the fighters realized that if they wanted to be competitive among the best, they needed to train in additional disciplines. UFC fighters began to morph into well-rounded, balanced fighters that could fight standing or on the floor. This blend of fighting styles and skills became known as mixed martial arts (MMA).

Today, the UFC is the premier organization in MMA and enforces the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts without exception. With more than 20 fights every year, the UFC hosts most of the top-ranked fighters in the world. Events are held not only in America, but in many countries all over the globe. (*The Official Website of the Ultimate Fighting Championship*)

The UFC desired a fair space for the fighters from different combat styles to compete, so they created what is called the "Octagon." Like the name suggests, the Octagon is shaped with eight sides, and each wall is a six-foot

tall chain-link fence. Although patented by the UFC, the design is used in all MMA organizations to regulate the sport. Since MMA's regulation, several smaller organizations have spread around the world, such as King of the Cage, Bellator Fighting Championships, and World Extreme Cagefighting. Pride Fighting Championships and Strikeforce, UFC's largest competitors, were purchased and absorbed over time by UFC's promotional company, Zuffa, LLC. With the largest selection of the best fighters around the globe, UFC dominates MMA, holding the most power and influence over the sport.

Sport in general features physical acts that are sometimes violent but often competitive, especially mixed martial arts. In *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*, Michael Messner analyzes the effects of sport on male identities. He examines the history of sports and concludes, "the upper class appropriated existing sports and then shaped the structure, rules, values, and meanings of sport in ways that supported and furthered their own interests" (10). Even though sports are often created by the working class, they are manipulated and capitalized on by the upper class. The result: "the values and structure of sport have always been closely intertwined with dominant

social values, power relations, and conflicts between groups and between nations" (10). Those with power take a sport and alter it for an agenda separate from its original intention; the manipulation creates a sport inextricably bound to society, homogenizing values through repetition and fan perpetuation. In short, sports reflect social norms.

One facet of society MMA exemplifies is the gap between classes. Instead of participating in sports, those with power usually manipulate the power for their own agenda. Messner elaborates:

it is disproportionately males from lower socioeconomic and ethnic minority backgrounds who commit themselves to athletic careers, and who end up participating at the higher levels of aggressive, violent sports. Privileged men might, as Woody Guthrie once suggested, commit violence against others "with fountain pens," but with the exception of domestic violence against women and children, physical violence is rarely a part of the everyday lives of these men. (*Power* 169)

Typically, minority working-class individuals participate in sports as career or education opportunities. The

privileged work behind the scenes or enjoy the spectacle of events from the sidelines. It is reminiscent of ancient Rome's gladiator days:

[Modern athletes] are, in a very real sense, contemporary gladiators who are sacrificed in order that the elite may have a clear sense of where they stand in the pecking order of inter-male dominance. Their marginalization of men—signified by their engaging in the very violence that makes them such attractive spectacles—contributes to the construction of hegemonic masculinity. (Messner, "Bodies" 214-215).

The connection between MMA fighters and gladiators is undeniable, and the UFC played on the link for its introduction sequence for several years. Every time an event began, the UFC showed a man alone in a dark room, donning Roman gladiatorial armor of armguards, chest plate, helmet, and sword. Haunting music ends as the man marches out of the room in a bright light, presumably into the arena where the audience awaits the show.

Sports, like in the days of Roman gladiators, are usually performed by the lower class for the privileged spectators. There are several examples of lower class

performing for the upper class in MMA, but the Diaz brothers exemplify the use of sports for economic opportunity and, unfortunately, necessity for survival. Nick and Nate Diaz earned names for themselves in the UFC and other MMA organizations. Although successful now, the Diaz brothers entered the MMA community for an entirely different reason. In an interview, Nate Diaz admits the only reason he went to jiu-jitsu classes was for the food classmates would buy him afterward:

I didn't have any money. At home we didn't have shit. I was starving all day. So if I went to train I'd get something to eat. Sometimes I'd be sitting at home and it was like, well, if I go train with Nick I'll get something to eat afterwards. If I don't I'll just sit here and be hungry I was going for burritos and dinner, and hey, I wanted dinner every day. Before I knew it I was a blue belt. (qtd. in *MMAWeekly.com*)

For the Diaz brothers, fighting was never just an extracurricular activity, it was a necessity. They were the underprivileged, and the UFC was able to capitalize on their physical ability for economic gain, typical for many

fighters within the sport. The Diaz brothers reflect the gap between classes in our society, but they also break the norm: despite the need to participate in sports as a means for survival, they embraced it and turned it into a tool for success, and now own WAR MMA. Messner believes, "underprivileged and oppressed groups eventually learned to utilize sport for self-expression . . . as a means to attain status and mobility in an otherwise limited structure of opportunity" (*Power* 11). The Diaz brothers rose from living in hotels in Stockton to owning an MMA organization through masculine domination in the Octagon. Although the brothers utilized MMA for class mobility, many fighters are unable to find such success through fighting, consequently perpetuating the unbalanced relationship between the privileged and underprivileged.

The UFC is aware of its power over MMA and its overall effect on social values, and attempts to maintain a respectful organization by holding fighters to a professional standard in the media. When joining the UFC, fighters sign a contract explicitly prohibiting inappropriate behavior, such as:

Derogatory or offensive conduct, including
without limitation insulting language, symbols,

or actions about a person's ethnic background, heritage, color, race, national origin, age, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation. (*The Official Website of the Ultimate Fighting Championship*)

Fighters who break this clause in the contract may be issued fines, given temporary suspensions, or even released from the organization. For example, Pat Healy was stripped of his victory and \$130,000 bonus prize for his fight with Jim Miller when he tested positive for marijuana; half of the money was given to Bryan Caraway, another fighter at the same event (Perez). Nick Diaz, angry over Caraway's acceptance of the bonus, posted on *Twitter*, "I feel bad for pat Healy that they took a innocent mans money and I think the guy who took the money is the biggest Fag in the world [sic]" (Diaz). Within a few hours, the UFC publicly announced,

UFC lightweight Nate Diaz has received an immediate 90-day suspension and \$20,000 fine for violating the UFC's fighter code of conduct. The language used in his tweet was regrettable, offensive and inconsistent with the values and

culture of the organization, and will not be tolerated.

The money will be donated to charity. (*The Official Website of the Ultimate Fighting Championship*)

The UFC attempts to maintain a respectable and tolerant face for the public, and responds promptly and severely to fighters who jeopardize that reputation. Sports are social institutions, and the values they create and perpetuate influence the rest of society. What the UFC deems as "all right" or "inappropriate" can echo across the audiences' own ethics.

MMA's values reach several outlets to influence society, and social networking has become one of the largest methods for the UFC to impact its audience. To encourage fighters to connect with fans outside of the Octagon, the UFC offered cash bonuses to fighters through Twitter: "Twitter quarterly bonus award time! Fighters placed in 4 categories based on # of followers at beginning of the quarter. Prizes 5k each" (UFC). Interacting with fans through news updates, personal messages, trash-talk, and product giveaways, the fighters' Twitter accounts boomed in popularity. Fans now pay more attention to

fighters between events than ever before, which means the values of the fighters and the organizations have a stronger influence on the fans. As a whole, sport institutions recognize, incorporate, and manipulate social values for gain, and the UFC sees Twitter as a marketing tactic to promote its own values, such as hegemonic masculinity.

Studying hegemonic masculinity in MMA is relatively new because of the sports' recent emergence and popularity. As such, it requires an inter-disciplinary strategy to examine the public media of the organizations and the fans to discover how masculinity is created in relation to the sport. Sociologists Akihiko Hirose and Kay Kei-ho Pih have attempted something similar by examining actions in the arena only. In their pursuit of defining hegemonic and marginalized masculinity in MMA, they theorize a dichotomy of "men who strike" and "men who submit" respectively (Hirose and Pih 198). There are two types of fighters: strikers (who stand and fight) and grapplers (who take opponents to the ground for submissions). Grapplers are the marginalized masculinity because they are "using an 'unmanly' way of fighting" (Hirose and Pih 199); strikers are more violent and therefore more masculine (Hirose and

Pih 199). I find these conclusions troubling. If the concept of masculinity is truly based on domination and control, it would be logical to assume the person physically dominating another person is more powerful and therefore more masculine; a fighter who cannot grapple or defend against grappling would end up on his back, submitting to the other fighter's dominion and consequently be more emasculated. Hirose and Pih's theory may have been true at the time, but current fighters must be well-rounded in both striking and grappling or else they are severely handicapped in the ring. Anderson Silva, one of the most famous MMA fighters and the former Middleweight Champion for seven years, is described as a "dynamic striker" as well as "dangerous with submissions" by the UFC (*The Official Website of the Ultimate Fighting Championship*). Hirose and Pih's dichotomy does not allow for fighters who are both strikers and submitters, like Silva, who many say is a "true fighter" that embodies hegemonic masculinity as he submits or knockouts his opponents. Fans appreciate Silva's versatile skill, which suggests the difference between hegemonic and marginalized masculinity is not striker versus submitter. The MMA community views hegemonic masculinity as something else.

If MMA were simply a sport where two men challenge each other's masculinity through unarmed combat, then the heart of hegemonic masculinity would be violence. Personally, I enjoy an evenly-matched fight based on skill rather than a bloodbath, and it seems like spectators of the sport agree: a 2008 analysis of fan motivation put "violence" in fifth place (Kim et al. 114). For men, "sport interest" was first, "drama" in second, and "aesthetics" in third; for women, "drama" was first and "aesthetics" in second (Kim et al. 114). Because "drama" and "aesthetics" follow "sport interest" so closely, Kim et al. theorize:

MMA fans appreciate close fights and appreciate the beauty and strategy of the sport. This result suggests that MMA fans may prefer fights based on well-prepared strategies and trained fighters rather than simple bloody fights without any definite strategy. (116)

Fans enjoy the excitement of a good fight rather than the violence. We prefer a match that ends because of the fighters through either submission or knockout, not because the time runs out or a doctor halts the fight due to an injury. Fans favor the drama and excitement of a fight with aesthetic skill and technique; MMA's masculinity depends on

the fighters' ability to perform dramatically inside and outside the Octagon.

Inside the Octagon, a fighter creates drama through a physical performance, but in the media, fighters can heighten drama and excitement through performances of masculinity. A UFC event is never isolated from the community; what has been said in the media always plays a role in the drama of a fight. If there has been trash-talk prior to an event, clips replay to hype the fight, enhancing the excitement for the fans and emotional investment for the fighters. These dramatic moments are performances to meet the values of the community, resulting in the perpetuation of those values. Usually, the performances are conscious actions to construct an identity. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman defines performance as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (13). The UFC understandably relies on fan support. Tickets and pay-per-view sell when fans are excited and interested in fighters, and fighters encourage that fan interest in public appearances through performances of masculinity. In

performance, actors "tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" for approval (Goffman 23). For the community of MMA, the "accredited values" depend on hegemonic masculinity—control and domination. When fighters appear in the media, they purposefully construct an identity that seems in control and indomitable. MMA's hegemonic masculinity is visible in all facets of the sport, affecting fans and fighters across media such as the Internet and television.

The influence of MMA on society is pervasive. Whatever values are produced in the sport echoes in the community, which crosses into the rest of society; it is because of this recursive interaction that social constructs such as hegemonic masculinity must be studied in the heart of the sport: the fighters. As a fan, I become emotionally attached to the personas created by particular fighters. How they construct their identities outside of an event and how they perform inside of the Octagon affect my definition of masculinity, and I am not alone. MMA has millions of fans around the globe paying avid attention to fights and interviews, making each moment pivotal for understanding social values. One such moment is the focus of the next chapter, where we will see how even fighters who lose

consecutive matches can maintain powerful positions in MMA through rhetorical performances of hegemonic masculinity.

CHAPTER TWO

PERFORMING MASCULINE DOMINATION: THE RHETORIC OF THE "PEOPLE'S CHAMP"

When picturing a sport where men battle using only their bodies as weapons, it is easy to assume the sports' masculinity is based simply upon physical strength and prowess; even I, a long-time fan of MMA, made that assumption. I learned otherwise when I discovered Chael Sonnen, an alleged criminal and cheater, was a respected spokesperson for the largest MMA organization, the UFC. The first time I saw Sonnen was in a battle against Anderson Silva in UFC 117 for the middleweight belt. I knew little about him, but I wanted him to win, simply because I wanted Anderson "The Spider" Silva to lose. In his twelve fight win-streak, Silva not only stole the belt from one of my favorite fighters, Rich Franklin, but he also embarrassed another of my favorites, Forrest Griffin. For those reasons, I wanted vengeance, and Sonnen was my knight of retribution.

It was a fight night I will never forget. On August 7, 2010, I congregated with twenty friends and acquaintances around two TVs. The room was divided by fans: on one side,

a handful of us raged about Silva and craved his downfall; the majority of the party laughed on the other side, pointing out Sonnen's wrestling was defenseless against Silva's knees and kicks. One friend warned, "Sonnen may surprise you," but many of us assumed Sonnen would lose. I knew Silva would crush my hopes and turn that win-streak into thirteen when Bruce Buffer entered the Octagon and announced, "Iiiiiit's tiiiiime!" Yet when the bell rang and Sonnen took Silva down to the ground, the Silva fans yelled in outrage while I screamed in excitement. It was completely unexpected.

The majority of the five-round fight progressed with Silva on his back under Sonnen's wrestling. If it had come down to the judges' decision, Sonnen would have won. However, two minutes left in the fifth and final round, Silva locked in a triangle armbar and Sonnen tapped out. I was outraged. I still believed Sonnen dominated the fight and Silva simply lucked out, and after UFC 117, I became a Sonnen fan. I started researching Chael "The American Gangster" Sonnen, discovered he boasted a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of Oregon, competed in collegiate wrestling, and even attempted a career in politics (*The Official Website of the Ultimate Fighting*

Championship). Overall, despite his loss against Silva, I still believed he was my idealistic knight, a prime specimen of hegemonic masculinity. However, I began to learn the fighter's history and questioned how a man with such a shady reputation holds one of the most powerful positions in the UFC.

In fact, Sonnen's armor is so tarnished it is astounding he still holds a contract with the UFC, especially in light of his use of anabolic steroids. Sports, so deeply embedded with social concepts of gender and the masculine body, pressures athletes to forge their bodies into weapons, signs of power, danger, and masculinity. Before an event, fighters usually spend at least two months entrenched in hardcore training regimens, restricted with diets and isolated from family and friends. It is a grueling, exhausting time, and it is common for fighters to become injured during training, forcing a withdrawal from matches. One way for fighters to get an edge is to use drugs like anabolic steroids to boost the process. The UFC knows this; to stop such behavior, the organization administers drug tests before and after fights. In his drug test two weeks after UFC 117, Sonnen tested positive for anabolic steroids; as a result, he was

fined and suspended (*Sherdog*). I was disappointed in the fighter, but it was only the beginning. A few months after UFC 117, Sonnen's political career ended with more legal troubles. In 2010, Sonnen began to campaign for a position in the Oregon House of Representatives, but withdrew due to money laundering (*MMAWeekly.com*). I was ready to dislike Sonnen as strongly as I do Anderson Silva. Yet, despite his shady personal history, Chael Sonnen is still a popular fighter in the UFC. With three title fights in two years, a coaching gig on *The Ultimate Fighter*, and a hosting position on *UFC Tonight*, Sonnen has become a spokesperson for the largest MMA organization. I expected the fighter to be blacklisted instead of placed in the limelight, and was confused how a fighter with so many personal flaws and losses in the Octagon could still be given positions of power in the UFC. It was only during Sonnen's campaign for a rematch against Silva that I realized a fighter's true prowess can exist outside of the Octagon: Chael Sonnen is a master of rhetorically performing masculinity.

As discussed in Chapter 1, performances are conscious acts that "incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (Goffman 23). Sonnen, however, uses a balance of conscious performance and

unconscious performativity of masculinity to remain popular and therefore powerful in MMA. While Sonnen purposefully forefronts masculinity in his performances, his concept of masculinity is performative and involuntary. Judith Butler's theory of performativity is founded on Foucault's panopticon: "the body is trained, shaped, cultivated, and invested; it is an historically specific imaginary ideal" (*Bodies* 33). We acquire certain characteristics from society. For example, gender and sex are separate things; we are born with sex (male or female) but our gender (masculine or feminine) is taught to us after birth through iterability. Iterability is:

. . . a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraints. (Butler 95)

Societal norms influence our actions, desires, beliefs, and even emotions. The subconscious acquisition and repetition of those norms is performative, "the forced reiteration of

norms" (Butler 94). Similar to children breaking the rules, we have been disciplined to believe certain social ideologies, like women must be "feminine" and men must be "masculine." Because we habitually repeat the norms, "acts and gestures which are learned and repeated over time create the illusion of an innate and stable (gender) core" (Sullivan 82). We are not aware of the acts and gestures we unconsciously repeat, that makes others view us as one or another. Chael Sonnen has acquired MMA's hegemonic masculinity through iterability. He has been immersed in the MMA community for so long that he has acquired and performs MMA's masculinity; however, there are many instances where he consciously projects hegemonic masculinity for personal gain.

Sonnen's conscious performances occur rhetorically. In the words of Aristotle, "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the means of persuasion" (181). Speakers attempt to persuade the audience to their goals. The "means," Kenneth Burke theorizes, is through identification:

. . . a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the

audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests; and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. (1340)

Basically, we strategically frame topics in ways that the audience should agree with, so the audience will feel affiliated to us and therefore more likely to agree with our agenda.

In MMA, rhetorical performances of identification occur most often in the media. Fighters forefront their masculinity in what many linguists call *altercasting* and *recipient design*, the "mutual construction of identities, which is built through the reactions of listeners to the hearers and vice versa" (Van de Mierop 492). Similar to identification, the fighter will project or front a specific identity to gain social status and power. This identity is usually associated with hegemonic masculinity. MMA fans respect dominating and exciting fighters, and UFC President Dana White listens to the fans because it increases sales; if a fighter projects a dominating persona to the fans and the fans want to see that fighter in the Octagon, White will arrange it. Sonnen is accused of "talking his way into fights," allegedly earning multiple

title shots through the use of trash-talk. Because Sonnen provokes drama around a match-up, fans demand the fight, and White delivers it. Many believe this is how Sonnen earned his fights against Anderson Silva, despite his imperfect career.

When fighters desire those high-profile fights, they may pursue identification with fans while simultaneously counter-identifying with opponents. They build masculine identities and disassociate from the opponents. As John Josephs explains:

Identities are double-edged swords because, while functioning in a positive and productive way to give people a sense of belonging, they do so by defining "us" in opposition to a "them" that becomes all too easy to demonise. (262)

In MMA, fighters rhetorically construct an "us" versus "them." They "other" the opponents by constructing and deconstructing masculine identities, encouraging the fans to divide from the opponents. This division is a counterpart to identification:

. . . to begin with "identification" is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of division. As so, in the end, men

are brought to that most tragically ironic of all divisions, or conflicts, wherein millions of cooperative acts go into the preparation for one single destructive act. We refer to that ultimate disease of cooperation: war. (Burke 1326)

While not a "war" in the most common sense, the fighters attack opponents rhetorically, and the fighter's "army" is fans. The larger the army, the more exciting the battle and the more profitable the event. Sonnen, despite his losses, is a prime example of a fighter who uses identification in his performances of masculinity to retain a popular and powerful status in the MMA community.

One of the most notable instances of Sonnen's masculine performances occurred during his campaign for a rematch against Anderson Silva. Before I begin to unpack Sonnen's performance, however, I must note the medium of this project is limited: the way Sonnen speaks is difficult to mediate in text. His tone is usually arrogant, blunt, and commanding. The first time I heard him talk, I laughed, but the combination of his rhetoric and tone are persuasive; they force the audience to pay attention and respect his message, even if the audience is aware of

Sonnen's troublesome past and disapprove of his actions, like me.

Regardless of Sonnen's history, Sonnen strategically builds and authoritative identity from the first line: "If you don't know, you should know" (STACKVids). Speaking directly to the audience, Sonnen commands recognition for who he is: "My name is Chael Sonnen, UFC Middleweight Champion, best of all time, and before time was even created" (STACKVids). This second excerpt is a deliberate mix of lies and exaggeration. He was only the Middleweight Champion of World Extreme Cagefighting (WEC), an organization disbanded in 2010, and his attempt at the UFC Middleweight Champion, Anderson Silva, was a failure. The hyperbole is Sonnen's attempt to maintain authority and to align with the identity of a champion, a "strategic communicative work that permits [him] to interactionally foreground or suppress specific identities" (Kroskrity 112). He specifically foregrounds the identity of authority (a UFC champion) and withholds the actual identity (the defeated). Such work can intimidate his opponents, while simultaneously gaining approval from the audience by masking characteristics of which the MMA community may disapprove. Because Sonnen performs the identity of

"victor" instead of "loser," his authoritative and masculine power is strengthened in the MMA community. He is able to invoke audience response - disbelief or awe, depending on the knowledge of the audience - to convince the audience of his standards for the community and other fighters. Sonnen's lies are moves to make the audience value his words, and he continues these rhetorical tactics when he pushes the audience to identify with him more personally.

After Sonnen claims authority in the interview, he crafts his words to urge the audience to identify with his performance. He prompts the audience to connect with him as a fan: "I was a fan of the UFC. I was a fan from '93 when it started, to, you know, all through high school, college. I knew that's what I wanted to go do" (STACKVids). Sonnen knows the audience consists mostly of fans - why else would they listen to him speak? - so he decisively adds to his performance as a fighter the identity of a fan. It is a union of two theories. One is *altercasting*: "Altercasting is defined as projecting an identity, to be assumed by other(s) with whom one is in interaction, which is congruent with one's own goals" (Deutschberger and Weinstein 454). Basically, altercasting is when a speaker

forefronts his identity and simultaneously forefronts the audience's identity for the sake of an agenda. If the audience feels as if they share an identity with the speaker, it allows for the second theory, Kenneth Burke's *consubstantiality* and *identification*:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so.

Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is "substantially one" with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (Burke 1325)

The more the audience identifies with Sonnen as he speaks, the more likely they are to agree with him, view him as a dominating and masculine fighter, and further his agenda: a rematch for the title of UFC Middleweight Champion. He purposefully projects his identity as a dedicated fan and

his identity as a fighter in his performance, even employing the discourse marker *you know*, "a strategic device used by the speaker to involve the addressee in the joint construction of a representation" (Jucker and Smith 197). Because Sonnen projects his identity as a fan, the audience will find something relatable with the fighter, as well as something admirable. Through altercasting and appeals of identification, Sonnen bridges the divide between himself and the audience. They are not separate from the speech, but are affiliated with it and its purposes.

Sonnen's agenda becomes clearer as the interview continues. After he performs his authority and appeals to the audience for identification, Sonnen reflects on MMA:

We were still in the nineties. We were still trying to figure out what it took to be a complete fighter. You know, what the best styles were. There was no gyms at the time that did everything, you know, you had to bounce around and try to figure out how to put it together on your own. So it was a totally different thing back then. (STACKVids)

Sonnen emphasizes the differences between the sport when it originated and its current status. Originally, fighters were forced to learn different techniques at dedicated gyms, seeking out those styles at separate locations if they wanted to become a well-rounded MMA competitor. Today, it is easy to find gyms dedicated to teaching MMA, mixing techniques from Brazilian jiu-jitsu to Greco-Roman wrestling in one location. It is true current fighters have it slightly easier to train, but the most notable discursive feature in this excerpt is that Sonnen "speak[s] for the group by using we" (Johnstone 132). The collective *we* suggests that Sonnen is a member of the group; he has the authority to speak *for* them. Because hegemonic masculinity has developed over time from the founding fighters, Sonnen persuades the audience to view him as one of the original fighters, someone with the masculinity so favored in MMA. Moreover, the way he used altercasting and identification earlier in the interview bridged Sonnen with his audience, so this *we* includes the audience, as well. They may feel as if they are also members of this *we* - who created and popularized MMA's masculinity - and therefore more inclined to accept his agenda, a rematch against Anderson Silva.

As Sonnen continues constructing an ideology about "true fighters" and masculinity in his performance, he simultaneously constructs the identity of the audience and the identity of the others he believes are not truly fighters. *Othering*, however, is a consequence of identity construction:

Identities are double-edged swords because, while functioning in a positive and productive way to give people a sense of belonging, they do so by defining "us" in opposition to a "them" that becomes all too easy to demonise. (Josephs 262)

It seems as if Sonnen wants to demonize the other fighters, or at least attack their masculinity:

It was a totally different deal in the nineties. You know, you fought for other reasons back then, and a lot of the fighters today take that for granted, you know. You end up with these little prima donnas and they're holding out for contracts, or, you know, they won't fight cause their knee hurts or - you know, we didn't even talk about that stuff in the nineties. You didn't. You never thought, "Oh, my knee hurts, I'm not gonna go to work today." You know, this

is a ridiculous concept to me. I would never do those things. (STACKVids)

Sonnen intentionally designs a dichotomy: the fighters of the nineties and the fighters of today. Earlier, he had already partially established what a "nineties fighter" consists of when he performed his identity earlier and now uses that identity to distinguish against fighters not of that era: he frames the identity of current fighters as "different," even labeling them "prima donnas," a blatant emasculation. Because he employs the discourse marker *you know* five times in just this passage, Sonnen involves the audience in the same construction of us versus them. Moreover, Sonnen emphasizes the demonization by playing on shared social beliefs about work and responsibility: "Oh, my knee hurts, I'm not going to go to work today." Linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs argues identity constructs are mediated and accepted based partially on "whether the speaker and other interlocutors share economic, political, or other social histories and conventions that associate those acts and stance with the particular social identity a speaker is trying to project" (290). The direct comparison to "work" and a fighter is tactical, because in our society we are taught to go to

work, to be dependable; we share that convention. More important, society often considers the masculine identity as the "breadwinner," the one who goes to work and makes the money for the household. Sonnen deliberately manipulates the social convention to force the audience to view the *others* as unreliable, irresponsible, effeminate. We are divided from the "prima donnas" because they reject our social norms and ethical values.

Sonnen continues to play on social conventions in the interview to pit the audience against his opponents. The next segment shifts from pitting the audience against the *others* to reaffirming his notions of what these "nineties fighters" represent:

You know, in the nineties, guys were fighting in their garage. They were fighting for honor, they were fighting for respect, they were fighting because they were fighters, you know. And now today you hear these guys talking about their "game plans" and their, you know, their "career," and their - I don't even know what this stuff means. (STACKVids)

As a society, we obviously hold notions of "honor" and "respect" as positive masculine traits; because Sonnen

states the "nineties fighters" also sought these qualities, he builds their sense of masculine character for the audience. He implies those who seek honor and respect are honorable and respectable, and those who talk about "game plans" and "careers" - the "prima donnas" - are dishonorable, unrespectable, unmanly. These insults juxtapose what I consider the thesis of Sonnen's speech: "they were fighting because they were fighters." Essentially, Sonnen argues fighters fight; it is the definition of who they are. They don't let a minor injury interfere with an event, and they don't reject matches for the sake of a career. Fighters who embody MMA's masculinity have the work ethics and honor to accept any fight, because it is who they are.

Sonnen deliberately constructs the interview to challenge the identity of the *others* as masculine fighters, and continues his construction of the *others* as emasculate through discursive tactics. His next strategy is through the use of a rhetorical question:

. . . the value of [rhetorical questions] lie in their capacity to serve a dual role; by strengthening assertions and mitigating potential threats to face, they enable people to win an

argument (short term), while not jeopardizing a relationship (long term). (Frank 738)

When a speaker uses a rhetorical question, he tactically reinforces the central argument through logic and reasoning; because it is framed as a question, the argument seems more polite and non-threatening, which maintains relationships between speakers and those who may disagree. Sonnen uses a rhetorical question to address and challenge the fighters he holds issue with, the *others* he purposefully divides fans from: "Do you want a fight or night?" (STACKVids). The rhetorical question restates the thesis of Sonnen's speech: "they were fighting because they were fighters." With the rhetorical question, he is able to argue against the *others*, the "prima donnas," yet sustain a positive relationship with the audience who may be fans of the "prima donnas." It questions the motivation of those fighters by implying logical reasoning: fighters fight; if they do not want to fight, then they are not fighters.

At the heart of Sonnen's interview is one underlying theme: fighters are defined by their willingness to fight. It is reinforced time and time again through repetition of the word "fight." Repetition, according to Penelope Brown, is a powerful tactic: "Repeating something calls

attention to the prior thing, brings it into the now, claims its relevance; repetition is therefore crucial in establishing discourse coherence" (Brown 224). Sonnen repeats the word even more:

The Octagon is the same size. Whether it's a title fight, an undercard fight, Saturday fight, Wednesday fight, it's the same size with the same rules, you know. When the guy with the dreadlocks says, "Get it on," go get it on. (STACKVids)

Now, I have shown thirteen instances of "fight." The repetition moves his premise that fighters fight into the immediate present, emphasizing the importance of the claim. It should not matter what day the fight occurs on, a fighter should always be willing to step into the Octagon and fight when Herb Dean - the referee with the dreadlocks - orders, "Get it on." The phrase, "Get it on," is synonymous with a directive, "Fight!" Moreover, a change from recurring repetition can capture the audience's attention, strengthening the call to action. The structure of the speech implies a direct order for these fighters not just to fight, but to stop warping the ideology behind MMA, and to affiliate with Sonnen's performance of a fighter's

identity that, through altercasting and identification, the audience may agree with.

Sonnen believes he acts for the greater good of MMA, dubbing himself "The People's Champ" (Bryant). Sonnen wants to bring drama and excitement to fights, the underlying foundation of masculinity in MMA as established in Chapter 1. Through his performance, Sonnen rhetorically constructs a shared concept of what a "true fighter" is - someone who has the honor and respect to fight - instead of the fighters who back out for the sake of higher-paying contracts, career worries, or minor injuries. Before I had heard this interview, I disliked the fighter; I categorized him as a criminal and a fraud. After the interview, I admired him again; Sonnen pushes for a call-to-action for other fighters to meet his MMA ideologies. He seeks exciting events for the fans, and he continues to make fans like myself interested and invested in each event for the sake of the community. Because we are interested in his fights, we fans keep our attention on MMA.

Sonnen's strong ideologies about MMA and "true fighters" echo the foundations for MMA's hegemonic masculinity, but the interview was purely talk; after this interview, he lost his rematch against Anderson Silva. The

second defeat once again challenged his masculine identity, and Sonnen risked losing his fan base - and his contract in the UFC - once more. To regain respectable status, Sonnen embodied his MMA ideologies of "true fighters" by accepting a match with short notice and limited training. Since the founding of the organization, the UFC has dealt with injuries and fighter replacements quickly and gracefully. They had never been forced to cancel an event - the pool of dedicated fighters is vast enough to replace anyone at any time - until UFC 151: Jon Jones vs. Dan Henderson in September 2012. Sonnen attempt to save the event, but the Light Heavyweight Champion refused to accept his challenge.

UFC 151 was supposed to be an exciting event. Former Pride Middleweight Champion, Strikeforce Light Heavyweight Champion, and oldest fighter in the UFC, Dan "Hendo" Henderson is a respected wrestler and MMA competitor. His opponent, Jon "Bones" Jones, is the UFC Light Heavyweight Champion and the youngest fighter in the UFC to win a championship title. However, a combination of unfortunate events and "career choices" left the fans disappointed. At a press conference eight days before UFC 151, UFC President Dana White announced Henderson was injured and was forced

to withdraw from the bout. The worst news, however, occurred when White attempted to save the event:

Chael Sonnen stepped up and accepted the fight with Jon Jones last night. As of 8pm last night, we thought we had a fight fans would love to see. Then at about 9pm the one thing I never thought would happen in a million years happened. Jon Jones said, "I won't fight Chael Sonnen on eight days' notice." That has never happened in the history of the UFC, a guy who is a champion, and a guy who is supposed to be one of the best fighters in the world, pound-for-pound, refuses a fight.

. . . [Sonnen] said that not only would he face Jones in eight days, he'd jump in a plane to Vegas and fight him that night if he was asked to Jones's trainer, Greg Jackson, told Jon that taking the fight with Chael would be the biggest mistake of his life. That's what he told Jon Jones . . .

When you are a champion, much less one of the guys who is supposed to be one of the best pound-for-pound fighters in the world, you are supposed

to step up. Jon Jones is a guy a lot of fans don't like, and I don't think this is going to make him any more popular. (qtd. in *The Official Website of the Ultimate Fighting Championship*)

It was one of the largest disappointments in UFC history: the UFC Light Heavyweight Champion refused the fight against Sonnen, the man who lost both fights for the UFC Middleweight title. Even though Sonnen's interview occurred nearly nine months before the cancellation, this is a prime example of the type of fighters Sonnen *others*. Sonnen is not a "prima donna," but a masculine fighter who wants to fight, and will do so on just a week's notice. Jones, however, did not want the risk, and became the effeminate "prima donna" with his rejection of Sonnen. His refusal led to the first UFC cancellation, and the MMA community was furious: not only did fighters lose job opportunities, but the sponsors and organizations behind the planning lost any money invested in the event.

Of course, Dana White capitalized on the emotional reaction. Instead of brushing off the fight between Sonnen and Jones, White pitted Jones and Sonnen opposite each other in *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF) TV show, concluding in a bout between the coaches. As discussed in Chapter 1,

MMA's masculinity requires the ability to enhance the drama and excitement around an event, and this match-up held potential to deliver both. Sonnen, aware of the ideologies behind MMA and hoping to regain his masculine and powerful status in the community, was able to heighten the drama more via Twitter. Despite more than 330,000 followers, Sonnen does not follow anyone on Twitter, and his biography on the page is just another facet of his identity performance: "Godfather of integrity; dual masters in dominance and modesty; once outboxed Hemingway" (Sonnen). Obviously, if the audience has any knowledge about Sonnen, these claims are laughable. His integrity is tainted by the money laundering and steroids; he can dominate in the ring - sometimes - but his modesty is nonexistent; and the Hemingway reference is a nod at his book, *The Voice of Reason: A V.I.P. Pass to Enlightenment*. While his Twitter biography and Tweets reestablish Sonnen's masculine identity, he also uses Twitter to challenge and emasculate other fighters' identities through trash-talk, another facet of MMA's masculinity.

In the Octagon, a fighter needs to focus on strategy and react to attacks. The mind is just as important as the body. Sonnen knows this, so he starts a rhetorical attack

weeks - sometimes months - before a brawl that enhance his threatening masculine persona and weakens the opponent's confidence. One prime example began the month before Sonnen fought Jones. It was after filming TUF, where Team Sonnen decimated Team Jones, and both were immersed in training for the upcoming bout. Sonnen began to post on Twitter a countdown to the fight, starting with, "30 - the days left until the fall of your champion and the rise of the DARKSIDE" (Sonnen). Every day until the day before the fight, Sonnen kept posting, creatively drawing on historical events and MMA history. A few notable posts are, "29 - the year AD in which King Dionysius died and was succeeded by Spartacus. 29 days and I too take what is rightfully mine" (Sonnen) and "26 - the day in 1560 in which Nostradamus predicted Chael P Sonnen would be the greatest to have ever done it. He was right" (Sonnen). Sonnen mixes creative tales with the appeal of famous historical figures like Spartacus and Nostradamus to entertain his audience and build his image as a masculine threat against "prima donna" Jon Jones. In his comparison to Spartacus, he invokes the legendary gladiator who revolted against Rome, and suggests the champion, Jones, will be usurped by Sonnen. In the second Tweet, he suggests

Nostradamus, known for his prophecies in *Les Propheties*, foresaw Sonnen's victory; the Light Heavyweight Championship belt is Sonnen's destiny. These types of Tweets not only entertain the audience and increase the drama before the event, but they build an image of a threatening, masculine opponent. In Sonnen's reasoning, fans should support him because he embodies the idealistic masculine figure for MMA.

Sonnen purposefully draws on the values of the MMA community to craft an image of a confident and capable opponent. In one Tweet, he writes, "20 - Years ago Royce Gracie made the UFC real. Chael Sonnen made it cool" (Sonnen). Royce Gracie is considered the pioneer of modern MMA, one of the honorable, respectable, and masculine original fighters from the nineties. Before him, fighters usually used boxing or wrestling in the arena, and Gracie is acknowledged as the first to bring jiu-jitsu into the sport. Dana White once said, "He is the Godfather. He is the man who started it all and we all bow down and kiss the ring of Royce Gracie . . . He kick-started the entire sport of Mixed Martial Arts" (qtd. in *The Official Website of the Ultimate Fighting Championship*). Because he references the first UFC Hall of Famer, Sonnen places himself in the same

reputable category, as well as someone who makes the UFC socially relevant and exciting. Most of the Tweets are construction of his identity independent from the audience and Jones, but it's a mind game: Sonnen wants fans emotionally invested in the fight. Many fans were aware of Sonnen's losses against Silva and viewed him the weaker, and therefore more effeminate, fighter, yet his discursive strategies rebuilt his identity as masculine and threatening. The drama made the fight sell.

Fans want exciting, dramatic fights and, despite his losses in the Octagon, Sonnen knows how to deliver. It may be easy to assume that hegemonic masculinity in mixed martial arts is simply a physical act in the Octagon, yet Sonnen is a prime example of the various battlegrounds where masculinity is challenged and established. He recognizes fights are more than just brawls in the arena; they occur in Tweets, interviews, news sites, and more, and Sonnen wages war in every medium he can access to attack his opponents' masculine identities. Using rhetoric, Sonnen performs hegemonic masculinity, as a fighter who has control and remains in control - even if he lost against Jon Jones and both fights against Anderson Silva. As a fan, Sonnen's rhetorical moves persuade me; I adore him, want

him to win, and crave Silva's downfall. In the summer of 2013, both of my desires came true.

A third fight between Silva and Sonnen was impossible, I knew, so I was forced to place my hopes on Chris Weidman in July 2013. Many fighters were asked to predict the fight between Silva and Weidman, Sonnen included:

Weidman is a younger version of me - and a better version when it comes to aspects like top game. I took Anderson down repeatedly, and while I punched him all night, I don't have the submissions Weidman has. Weidman is going to have the same success I had with a ground attack . . . The seven-year reign is over. (qtd. in Buffington)

Sonnen was, to a point, right. In the first round, Weidman controlled Silva through his wrestling, and I expected something similar for the second round. However, Weidman pulled off the unexpected: a solid left hook slammed into Silva's jaw and the champion fell to the floor. Before the referee could call the fight, I jumped and hollered so loudly I lost my voice for days. I was ecstatic while my friends sat, shocked, as it was announced that Silva's

sixteen win-streak was over. My vengeance was finally delivered, even if it wasn't by Sonnen.

Sonnen, however, regained his masculine status in the Octagon in August 2013 against former UFC Light Heavyweight Champion, Maurício "Shogun" Rua. For the entirety of the first round, Shogun was defenseless on his back under Sonnen's domination. Sonnen controlled the fight, and when Shogun attempted to stand up, Sonnen locked in a difficult guillotine chokehold and forced the former champion into submission. Until that moment, Sonnen's masculine identity in the Octagon had been challenged, with only his rhetorical masculinity intact; yet the fighter proved his control, domination, and respectability through a dramatic and exciting event I will always remember. In that moment, Sonnen's rhetorical masculinity merged with his physical masculinity into a demonstration of MMA's hegemonic masculinity as a whole. To be an ultimate champion, fighters need both physical and rhetorical masculinity, especially female fighters. Women, usually sidelined as "ring girls" in bikinis, face a new dilemma as they attempt to break into the masculine sphere of MMA, as we will see in the following section.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BEAUTY IS THE BEAST: PERFORMING GENDER

DISIDENTIFICATION IN MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

Sports are typically considered a man's domain, organized and played by men for men. While female athletes have established their ground in team sports, such as basketball, individual sports have been more difficult to enter. The physical combat and violent nature of mixed martial arts (MMA) supposedly makes it a masculine territory, "too dangerous" for women; however, it was female fighters like Ronda Rousey who caught my attention and turned me into a true fan in March 2012. It was a bout for the Bantamweight Championship title in Strikeforce, the only televised organization which offered women's divisions. I was surrounded by male friends, and they repeatedly claimed the women were "hot" and "badass," so I didn't quite know what to expect. In fact, my first glimpse of the fighters was in a commercial, and I was surprised - not by the women's prowess as fighters, but by their performance of gender.

As a genre, the event commercials have certain characteristics. Usually, there is rowdy music, dramatic

lighting, career highlights, and aggressive stand-offs. The Rousey vs. Tate commercial, however, twists the genre. The music, Eddie Kramer's "My Fallen Angel," is bass-heavy; the fighters wear tight mini-dresses and high-heels; their hair is long, loose, and curled; and the setting is glitzy, like a posh mansion. The catchphrase, "It's not just looks that can kill," turns the commercial into the expected genre: career highlights and a face-off between challenger Ronda "Rowdy" Rousey and champion Miesha "Cupcake" Tate. In thirty seconds, the sexualized women become masculine warriors, and the transformation echoes in the song lyrics: "Everyone knows how this story goes, good girl gone bad but that ain't nothin' wrong" (Strikeforce: Tate vs. Rousey). They have broken society's gender expectations and become the "bad" girls, the warriors in purple sports bras, but it's all right.

After the commercial, I didn't know what to expect from Tate and Rousey. I imagined two extremes: a dull match of tentative punches and take-downs, or a sexy battle more suitable for mud-wrestling. Thankfully, both of my ideas were wrong. Within the first minute of the first round, Rousey locked her legs and arms around Tate's arm and pulled back for an armbar. I tensed, waiting for Tate to

tap-out, but even as her elbow contorted until it looked broken, Tate refused to tap. She managed to escape - for a few more minutes. At four minutes and twenty-seven seconds into the fight, Rousey finagled another armbar. This time, she showed no mercy, and Tate admitted defeat. In short, it was four-and-a-half minutes of exhilaration. Not only did I clap and shout, but so did my male friends. The fight was as exciting, if not more so, than the best male fights I have ever seen, yet my mind kept returning to that commercial. Why were the women so sexualized when it was obvious they were beasts in the cage, just as skilled as the male fighters? And were my friends clapping and shouting for the same reasons as me?

I have been a fan long enough to hear a lot of trash-talk about female fighters, such as "wannabes," "manly," and "ugly." It is as if female fighters are judged for their gender conformity instead of their skill, yet the Tate vs. Rousey commercial resists those misconceptions by highlighting Tate and Rousey's beauty and prowess. The fact it was a main event of a card - following one other female fight and seven male fights - gives the women respect in the sport, showing that they are warriors instead of "wannabes." Not only did they fight on live TV, but they

headlined, outranking the men. Despite my excitement, however, I was dismayed at the depiction of the fighters as sexual objects. Like the eye-candy girls, the fighters had agreed to wear feminine markers, promoting the match-up as if it were a sexy catfight, and I realized that if a woman wants to be successful in a male world, she must conform to the expectations of the culture. The women in MMA, especially Rousey, demonstrate the struggle for women's equality in a male-dominated world.

Female fighters around the world have had little recognition for their blood, sweat, and fights. Very few organizations were willing to host their events, and the first time a female match-up was aired on television occurred in 2006 because of Strikeforce (Snowden, "The Death"). Despite that small step up for recognition, UFC President Dana White refused to allow women in the largest MMA organization (Hollywoodtv), until Rousey. Rousey did not let White's declaration stop her, and even responded, "This guy is going to love me and there's nothing he can do about it" (qtd. in Wilcox). She was right. After making Rousey the first woman signed by the UFC, White remarked:

What changed me and what I think changed a lot of people about women's MMA was Tate vs. Rousey.

That was a fight worthy of a men's fight: two incredibly talented women who are very well-rounded, and it doesn't hurt when they're beautiful too. ("All Access")

The heart of White's statement is true: many people, like me, did not notice WMMA until Tate vs. Rousey. In the fight itself, the women were dramatic and exciting, revealing determination and skill in the arena. In the commercial, I saw two fighters who embraced their femininity and performed sexualized versions of themselves, masking their masculine aspects for the community's approval.

The world female fighters strive to enter is dominated by social constructs of gender, particularly of masculinity. As discussed in the first two chapters, mixed martial arts perpetuates hegemonic masculinity, which features the "capacity to exert control or to resist being controlled" (Schrock and Schwalbe 280) and "Competitiveness, a combination of the calculative and combative" (Donaldson 645) in a way which appears "'natural' 'ordinary' 'normal'" (Donaldson 655). Those with power maintain power through normalization, and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) holds the most power in MMA today. Obviously, female fighters challenge these

"essential" characteristics of "manliness" when they enter MMA. They force their way into a male-dominated arena and attempt to dominate and resist domination from other women through calculated and combative athletic prowess, strength, and competence; they also flaunt these characteristics in interviews with demonstration of their ego. Female fighters can adhere to society's gender ideologies while simultaneously resisting the binaries inherent in masculine/feminine because they embody features of both.

Athletic females are in a paradox, balancing femininity and masculinity to gain acceptance in the male sphere of sports. Like the female rugby players described by Aimar who wear bows in their hair as a way of "doing girl" (Aimar et al. 327). Miesha Tate sports pigtail braids, a pink and purple sports bra, and a matching skort (skirt/shorts combo). Even though her skill as a fighter is undeniable, she looks like a cheerleader. It is Tate's method of balancing the heteronormative expectations of her sex with her "abnormal" identity as a fighter. However, Rousey does not seem to practice "doing girl" in a fight—she wears black sports bra and shorts, hair tightly pulled back in a bun—perhaps due to her ability to "do girl"

outside the events. Outside the Octagon, her strong media presence in television and social networks provides ample opportunities for Rousey to embrace the performance of sexualized femininity; these performances reconcile the purely masculine figure she presents during an event where she embraces hegemonic masculinity, physically dominating other women and resisting their domination. However, these are simply markers of femininity, based on society's constructed definition of the term.

The way female fighters must balance the social construction of "feminine" and "masculine" is complex because gender is nonessential. Judith Butler argues,

gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait . . . the illusion of inner depth. ("Imitation" 317)

The stylization of clothing and makeup Rousey and Tate don in the commercial produces a feminine quality to the women. It is similar to drag, which "enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed" (Butler, "Imitation" 312). Society will view certain traits and mark the body as a gender. Because they wear the heels, long

hair, and mini-dresses, Rousey and Tate are viewed as feminine despite their obvious masculine qualities. They embody features of the dominant ideologies about gender to make the minority group more accepted, much like José Muñoz's disidentification.

In the pool of fighters in MMA, men are the majority and women are the minority, and hegemonic masculinity remains the controlling ideology behind the sport. However, female fighter Ronda Rousey brought women to the public's attention through her performances of objectified femininity to gain power within the dominant culture, while simultaneously performing characteristics of masculinity to maintain that power. The combination of both displays Muñoz's concept of *disidentification*:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a

step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

Disidentification can be a mode of power. Female fighters use aspects of the dominant culture's ideology and combine it with aspects of a minority culture's ideology. It challenges hegemony through subversion: the dominant culture will be more willing to accept the performance, even if the dominant culture is being changed. Rousey uses disidentification to embody aspects of femininity to challenge the norms of the male-dominated sport, making the community more accepting of the minority female fighters.

Rousey was not the first female fighter to catch MMA's attention; she was just the first female fighter signed by the UFC. Before Rousey, there were several notable female fighters in MMA. Some of the women were able to use disidentification for the benefit of women's mixed martial arts (WMMA), while others could not. Gina "Conviction" Carano and Christiane "Cyborg" Justino are two popular fighters who engaged in a public rivalry until Cyborg defeated Carano in 2009 for the first women's belt in

Strikeforce history. Carano's popularity came from her combination of beauty and skill. She was titled the "Face of Women's MMA" and fans recognize that "Rousey might not have gotten the opportunity had Gina Carano not broken through first" (Doyle). Using disidentification, Carano's blend of attractiveness and talent broke WMMA into Strikeforce: the first sanctioned women's bout in a televised event occurred in 2006 when Carano fought Elaina Maxwell (Snowden, "The Death"). It was a hit. Sarah Kaufman, another female fighter from Strikeforce, comments, "Those looks of Gina got people watching. But from there, the casual fan began to appreciate the women's fights more and more" (qtd. in Snowden, "The Death"). Like Rousey, Carano used her identity as the minority female fighter to break into a dominantly male majority. Carano's performances as both sexually desirable female and talented fighter created a home for female fighters in the second largest MMA promotion—but her defeat against Cyborg is possibly the reason the UFC did not welcome WMMA with open arms.

Whereas Carano and Rousey project their "female" and "fighter" identities in public to challenge the norms of MMA, Cyborg's performances can be read as more masculine

than feminine. For example, tattoos are considered masculine traits, and Cyborg flaunts hers during fights. When she mounts opponents, the camera shows a dragon twisting from nape to waist, and when her elbows slam down into opponents' faces, they see "Cris Cyborg" and "Jesus Cristo" before blacking out. One female fighter comments, "She looks like a man, sounds like a man and fights like a man and she has the muscles and strength of a man" (qtd. in Snowden, "Bombshell"). Carano experienced that strength firsthand before the referee stopped the onslaught of punches one second before the first round ended. After that match, Carano never again entered the arena, but Cyborg continued to dominate her opponents - at least until 2011, when Cyborg tested positive for steroids (Mrosko). She was stripped of her Strikeforce Featherweight Championship title and suspended for one year (Mrosko). The steroid stigma still remains although Cyborg has returned to fighting for Invicta Fighting Championships, an all-female organization.

Cyborg's rejection of femininity and acceptance of masculinity possibly tainted UFC's perspective of women's MMA. In research about female athletes in general, sociologist Giovanna Follo argues, "These women are

continually required to perform femininity for the price of their acceptance and perhaps tolerance within these sports" (711). The MMA community sees Cyborg's muscular physique, tattoos, and steroids as symbols of masculinity. While the "female athletes who perform femininity correctly accrue power and privilege, female athletes perceived as masculine are labeled as social deviants, and they experience discrimination" (Aimar et al. 316). Because she's perceived as masculine instead of feminine, Cyborg was not viewed as a reason to start the women's division; she is categorized as not the norm of female fighters, and the one woman they would have viewed as a feminine athlete, Carano, was no longer a prized fighter. WMMA needed a new skilled fighter with the ability to perform objectified femininity alongside masculinity to challenge hegemonic values in MMA.

WMMA found a woman who performs femininity and masculinity to catch the UFC's attention in Rousey. The daughter of the first American to medal at the World Judo Championships, Rousey knows how to fight and has an Olympic medal in judo to prove it (*The Official Website for Ronda Rousey*). Her first professional MMA fight in 2011 ended it what is now known as her signature armbar and, by the time she faced Miesha Tate, Rousey's four fights all ended

within a minute by submission via armbar. Rousey's judo makes her indomitable in fights, the one who takes down and dominates - an exemplification of MMA's hegemonic masculinity - but her voluntary performances of sexualized femininity alleviated WMMA into the public eye of the MMA community.

Many were shocked that within the first year of her professional career in MMA, with only four professional fights in the featherweight division (145 pounds), Rousey was given a shot at the bantamweight title (135 pounds) against Miesha Tate. It was assumed the next title bout would be a rematch between Tate and Sarah Kaufman. Even if it may seem unfair considering many other fighters were passed over for the fight, Rousey purposefully sought to use disidentification to make space for WMMA in the world of MMA, and it was successful. When she campaigned for the title shot against Tate, Rousey stated:

Sarah Kaufman kind of gives boring interviews, she's not a supermodel and the way she fights, she doesn't finish matches in extraordinary fashion . . . It's just kind of being realistic. I'm sorry that I have to say things bluntly and offend some people. I just want there to be a

highly marketable, exciting women's title fight, and I want to be part of that because I feel like I could do a really good job, and [Tate] could, too. I think the two of us could do a better job of that than [Tate] and Sarah Kaufman . . . It'll be great for women's MMA. It'll be the first highly anticipated fight in women's MMA for a long time . . . We need to capitalize on the opportunity while we still have it. (qtd. in *MMAfighting.com*)

Rousey knew she could draw publicity and attention better than Kaufman because of her ability to perform sexualized femininity. Recognizing the marketability, she purposefully pushed the sexual appeal of Tate vs. Rousey to the media, even stating, "Just make the two hot girls fight. Who wouldn't want to see that?" (*MMAInterviews*). In these examples, Rousey uses disidentification to "tactically and simultaneously [work] on, with, and against a cultural form" (Muñoz 12). She consciously and strategically chooses to disidentify with the dominant and minority communities to promote WMMA. Rousey's balancing act of masculinity and femininity supports Follo's suggestion for female fighters' success in the sport:

The female martial artist does not want to be too masculinized and needs to point out that she is still feminine. This is the only way that gendered society will accept or even allow women to enter male dominated spaces. (714)

Rousey recognizes what is needed and uses her femininity to metaphorically armbar the male-dominated MMA community to her objective: getting women in the arena.

Rousey's disidentification made the UFC welcome female fighters into the largest MMA organization in the world, and she continues to perform sexualized femininity in commercials to promote her events, especially if her opponents lack the ability. For the Rousey vs. Kaufman bout in Strikeforce, Rousey's sexual desirability was enhanced while Kaufman's was overlooked. To the upbeat Phenomena song, "Yeah Yeah Yeahs," the camera alludes to sex with undone zippers, cleavage, and vinyl bodysuits. With wing blowing back her wavy golden hair, Rousey appears the tough badass chick in a black bodysuit and aviator sunglasses. The majority of the half-minute commercial is focused on Rousey; the brief glimpses of Kaufman are either close-up, such as a hand raising a zipper, or distant, like posed in front of bright lights that blurs the outline of her white

bodysuit. It seems as if the commercial attempts to sexualize her, but focuses on Rousey's femme fatale persona instead. Even the stylization of their long hair, a feminine symbol, emphasizes Rousey's sexual desirability over Kaufman's: Rousey's hair flows in a breeze and Kaufman's is pulled tightly back in a bun. If anything, the commercial's objectification of Kaufman is cursory, without as much meticulous planning as Rousey's. Whereas Miesha Tate was willing and capable to perform sexualized femininity for the Rousey vs. Tate commercial, Kaufman is either unable or unwilling to embody a complete performance. Because of this, Rousey's female body becomes the focus of the advertisement.

The most troubling aspect of the commercial is the tagline, "Form does not always follow function" (Rousey vs. Kaufman). The concept of function shaping the form of an object is commonplace in product design, and the commercial draws on women's "function" in sexual reproduction as the reason for their desirable form. Although the commercial is attempting to feature that the women are fighters, its construction of gender roles is problematic. It stereotypes women as nurturers and caregivers and, although stating that these women do not follow their "function," that

Kaufman and Rousey are just exceptions to the norm, a rare break from the "always." Furthermore, the commercial emphasizes their sexual "form" repeatedly, following Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.

(62)

Clad in vinyl bodysuits, with close-ups of zippers and exposed skin, the women's bodies are displayed to the male gaze as passive visual objects. Only after their desirable form is clarified to the audience does the commercial move to highlights of previous fights and an intimidating face-

off. Because the majority of the thirty-second commercial stresses Kaufman and Rousey's sexual form first, they are viewed as women who happen to be fighters instead of fighters who happen to be women. It is as if their gender is more important than their skill in the arena. Rousey and Kaufman are unquestionably talented fighters, and the fight proved exciting - well, all fifty-four seconds. Once again, Rousey claimed victory with a first-round armbar. She proved she has the talent as a fighter to earn respect for WMMA, and she has the ability to use her femininity to empower the community.

The UFC capitalized on Rousey's disidentification for the first female UFC fight against Liz Carmouche in February 2013, and they take a slightly different approach than the previous commercials. Instead of one single commercial for the event, each fighter is showcased in her own thirty-second advertisement, emphasizing individual strengths: Rousey's as a femme fatale and Carmouche's as the first lesbian fighter in the UFC. However, while Rousey's advertisement blatantly uses her sexuality to popularize her skill as a fighter, it also deconstructs the binary of "beauty" and "beast," a reflection of "feminine" and "masculine," under the tagline, "Beauty is a beast."

The famous fairytale of "Beauty and the Beast" resists the normative gender dynamics in the genre. Traditionally, fairytales consist of a damsel in some type of distress who is saved by a charming prince. Instead, "Beauty and the Beast" stars a prince cursed to live in the form of a beast, until he is saved by the beautiful heroine. In the commercial, Rousey is purposefully constructed as both the feminine "Beauty" and the masculine "Beast."

Rousey's UFC 157 advertisement begins with the sultry instrumental of James Brown's "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World," a reflection of the current state of the UFC organization, to stress Rousey as the "Beauty" in the male world. Quick images flash across the screen of lipstick applied to open lips, eye shadow brushed over closed eyes, and a silver chandelier earring framed by wavy hair. Makeup, jewelry, and long hair are recognized symbols of femininity. Moreover, the way these icons are portrayed signify stereotyped femininity. The makeup is visibly applied to Rousey; she passively submits to these items, performing as the submissive female to the heteronormative expectations. However, she breaks away from a static portrayal of femininity when her combat boot steps forward, Brown sings, "It's a man's world," and the boot morphs into

a stiletto and tattooed ankle. She must passively submit to the expectations of her sex in this "man's world," but the anklet tattoo depicts the rebellious side of Rousey, the heart of a fighter that cannot be erased although it may be hidden.

Rousey's commercial is a blatant statement that even though she can be a sexual object, she still embodies masculine traits; she is both the Beauty and the Beast. To Rousey, femininity is like drag: to mask her masculine characteristics, she consciously performs acts and gestures associated with femininity to "create the illusion of an innate and stable (gender) core" (Sullivan 82). Similar to female athletes in other sports, Rousey "learn[ed] what behaviors and appearances are privileged, and femininity is 'performed' to gain social acceptance and status" (Aimar et al. 316). In this "man's world," she holds the highest status as Bantamweight Champion and earns WMMA acceptance into a male arena through her disidentification of masculine and feminine, through her deconstruction of the binary between feminine and masculine. She can be the beauty in the burgundy gown or the beast who, as the commercial progresses, is shown on top of Miesha Tate's body, performing masculine domination over Tate's

submission. Her disidentification with female and male allows both male and female to identify with her, and the result is powerful and visible in the leaps forward for women's MMA since Rousey's emergence in the sport. Because Rousey has accomplished these feats, the rest of the female fighters, like Carmouche, are no longer required to meet the same expectations.

The commercial for Rousey's opponent, Carmouche, steps away from the performance of sexualized femininity. Liz "Girl-Rilla" Carmouche, an ex-Marine, is "the first openly gay athlete in the UFC" (Carmouche), and the commercial forefronts her identity as a fighter more so than her sex appeal. It shows Carmouche sparring in workout clothes, with her voice proclaiming, "My name is Liz Carmouche. I am a daughter. I am a sister. My name is Liz Carmouche, and I am a UFC fighter" (UFC 157). Instead of using markers of enhanced femininity, the commercial establishes her sex with descriptors never before connected to UFC fighters: "daughter" instead of "son" and "sister" instead of "brother." It breaks the audience's previous definition of UFC fighters while reaffirming her identity as a UFC fighter. Moreover, the promotion did not need to objectify Carmouche for three reasons: because Rousey already

established her sexualized performance, Carmouche does not need to; because she openly states her sexuality, she breaks away from the heteronormative expectations of the audience; and because Carmouche is the first known gay UFC fighter, the UFC reached new demographics. Her fans, called "Lizbos" (Carmouche), made their voices heard across websites like *GLAAD*, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. It seemed like, for the first time, everyone was paying attention to WMMA.

The media buzzed about UFC 157, a night of firsts - the first female UFC fighters, first female UFC fight, first known gay UFC fighter - but many wondered if the fight would live up to the hype. When the night arrived, I sat on the edge of my seat, hands shaking with excitement but stomach knotted with fear, when Carmouche climbed Rousey's back, legs wrapped around her waist and arm looped tightly around Rousey's neck for a rear naked chokehold. Rousey stayed calm and collected for those long seconds before escaping, yet I - alongside six guys - shouted at the TV. It was emotional, dramatic, and my heart was still pounding when Rousey locked in the armbar with eleven seconds left in the first round. In short, it was amazing, and proved that women do belong in the UFC.

The UFC and the entire community of MMA seem to recognize female fighters are equal to men in the Octagon. In 2013, the UFC established another first: "For the first time in UFC history, *The Ultimate Fighter* will not only feature a female coach, but also a cast that includes both men and women" (*Bleacher Report*). Male and female fighters live and train together in the reality show for a chance to win a UFC contract. The coaches are, of course, Ronda Rousey and Miesha Tate. It was Tate vs. Rousey which caught Dana White's attention in the beginning, and now they will show the world once more why WMMA is something to get excited about.

I was excited every time I turned on the TV to watch the newest episode of *The Ultimate Fighter*, but I feared I would witness more women forced to wear gender markers of pink and purple in every episode. Instead, I was thankful to witness the team colors of blue and green, and the women wearing loose clothing instead of miniature shorts and sports bras, but I know it has been a difficult path for the women to earn that equality. In the words of ten-year veteran Shayna Baszler:

I wish there was some way I could like Vulcan
mind-meld to you the road, the long road it's

been for us. The fights we've put on, the epic battles you've missed, just because it wasn't on the UFC. ("Ladies First")

It has been a long road and a battle on all fronts for female fighters to earn recognition by the UFC, but now they are here. Because fighters like Rousey can disidentify and balance the paradox of performing both feminine and masculine identities, female fighters can shed the traditional gender restrictions and enter the Octagon on equal footing with the majority. Now women are in the Octagon, and they won't leave without a fight.

Conclusion

On October 9, 2013, the UFC and affiliated pages bombarded by news feed about that night's *The Ultimate Fighter* episode, a match-up between female fighters Jessamyn Duke and Raquel Pennington. There were quotations from male fighters in the house, such as, "That fight is going to represent women's MMA and put it on the map" ("UFC: Ultimate Fighting Championship"), and, "People who still aren't a fan of female fighters should watch that fight and see that, man, women can throw down" ("The Ultimate Fighter"). They were right; the fighters put on a

three-round show that kept me on the edge of my seat. It was a back-and-forth battle between lanky Duke and compact Pennington, and I was unable to call the victor, which turned out to be Pennington. After that fight, I doubted anyone questioned women's place in MMA and the UFC.

When I first witnessed the Sylvia and Arlovski fight (from Chapter 1), I saw a "man's" sport. It was violent and aggressive, and women were placed on the sidelines in bikinis instead of in the Octagon, yet my easy acceptance of MMA as a "man's world" was troublesome. Sports are social institutions, molding our social values like gender, and the UFC's rejection of female fighters influenced every fan to think just like me. We viewed hegemonic masculinity, a naturalized dominating and combative performance, as something only men could accomplish. It was only when I branched outside of the largest MMA organization's hold that I witnessed amazing female fighters like Ronda Rousey and Miesha Tate, and I realized how troubling UFC's rejection truly was. The female fighters were forced to perform femininity to break into the ring, and it was unfair: these women can "throw down," just like the men, and often better than the men.

It is not only the women that are forced to perform socially constructed gender roles, however. I began to notice the performances of male fighters and how they fabricated their own masculinities inside and outside of the Octagon. In particular, Chael Sonnen caught my eye; even though he lost consecutive fights, he was still put on a pedestal of power in the UFC. Every MMA talk show and website is littered with his witty hyperboles, and he is still considered a "man's man," an example of hegemonic masculinity. It is those hyperboles, though, that create his masculine persona. He wields rhetoric like a knight with a sword, hacking criticisms and doubts by appealing to his audience with Burkean identification. Sonnen realized masculinity is more than just a singular act in the Octagon, but a repetitive performance in the media. Rousey recognized this same fact, and that is how she became the start of the women's division in the UFC.

Although the first time I recognized Rousey was because of her enhanced femininity, it was her performances of masculinity which made me a fan of women's MMA. She uses the same techniques as Sonnen to construct and maintain a masculine and dominating persona in the Octagon and in interviews, yet she embraces her femininity to force the

UFC to pay attention. It is an obvious example of Muñoz's disidentification: she manages to perform the majority values - that women are "feminine" - to break down the barrier for minority fighters who are unable to perform similarly. She opened the door, and now women have their own division in the UFC. Through her disidentification, Rousey changed the "man's" world of MMA; before her, women wore purple and pink in the Octagon, yet *The Ultimate Fighter* reveals even that gender marker is disappearing. None of the women don purple or pink, suggesting that, at this moment, women are bridging the gap between masculine and feminine in MMA. They are no longer required to perform enhanced femininity for acceptance, because they have earned it.

The women of MMA are challenging the social constructs of masculine and feminine, which is the reason I began this project. Because sports are social institutions, affecting the values of the rest of society, the change brought by these women will reverberate into our own daily lives. Michael Messner states, "The divide between men and women in sport is much wider, much more fundamental and sharply defined, than the divide between men of different nationalities, social classes, and races" (*Power* 13).

Masculine/feminine has always been a binary, yet the definition of these terms is always in flux. However, as women like these female fighters battle for their right to belong in the "man's world" of MMA, the gap will narrow every day, so much so that by the time these words are read, my definition of MMA's hegemonic masculinity will have probably changed, and that is all right. It is my hope that one day the idea of female MMA fighters will be as natural as the notion of male MMA fighters, because they are more than *female* fighters, they are *fighters*, just like the men: people who fight and perform for the fans.

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