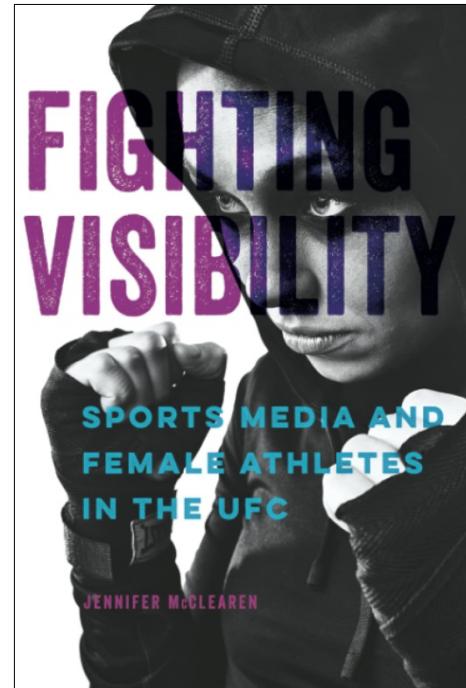


Jennifer McCrearen, **Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC**, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021, 233 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Evan Brody
University of Nevada

Discussions about, and mediations of, women’s and girl’s empowerment dominate popular culture, especially as they relate to athletics. These discourses and representational practices provide the entry point for Jennifer McCrearen’s ***Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC***, an inciteful and nuanced examination of the way media intersect with labor practices, economic flows, and lived experiences. Using critical media studies, feminist studies, and sports studies, the author traces the Ultimate Fighting Competition’s (UFC) promotion of female fighters across various temporal, geographical, and mediated planes such as live fights, reality TV shows, Web series, and social media. It also showcases how critical media studies engages with media artifacts in order to better understand how representation circulates, is felt, and translates into embodied realities and cultural practices.



Theoretically, McCrearen does not simply focus on representational politics but asks how the UFC brand benefits economically from the visualizing of female fighters and how the promise of visibility can work to exploit those it is meant to uplift. *Fighting Visibility* shifts the traditional conversation away from “visibility as an endpoint” and instead uses it as an entry point to a larger conversation about identity, economics, and labor. It is in this way that McCrearen aligns her work with other scholars within feminist, queer, and critical race studies in their pursuit to better understand the consequences of visibility, particularly as it relates to historically underrepresented populations. As McCrearen writes, female athletes, especially in mixed-martial arts (MMA), are no longer invisible, which necessitates a “reconfiguration of what visibility means and can do for female athletes” (p. 13). This movement away from a “politics of visibility,” and toward “economies of visibility” (pp. 12–15), allows McCrearen to focus on how market logics, organizational priorities, and social norms circulate in, and through, media artifacts. *Fighting Visibility* extends these ideas via McCrearen’s concept of “branded difference,” which, as a technique used by the UFC, “celebrates the presence and meaningful representation of diverse female fighters in the promotion while serving as a distraction that deflects attention from the ways visibility can hurt those same fighters” (p. 15). This approach allows McCrearen, via the lens of “hierarchies of visibility” (pp. 25–34), to further unpack how various intersectional identities are privileged and/or devalued. Additionally, while the book is firmly written from a critical/cultural perspective, McCrearen’s use of various qualitative methods, such as textual analyses, fieldwork, and interviews, adds additional depth to her analysis and demonstrates the breadth and promise of critical media studies research.

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While McClearen does call attention to the discourses of misogyny, heteronormativity, and racism that circulate through the UFC, importantly, McClearen's work is not meant as an outright dismissal of the UFC, or MMA, as she argues that these mediated spaces are simultaneously dis/empowering. It is this ability to see the visualizing of female athletes as both productive and regressive, and to highlight the nuances that accompany representations, that makes McClearen's work so inciteful. *Fighting Visibility* also brings a unique perspective to the topic, as McClearen has spent 14 years training in martial arts. This insider/outsider position, which is acknowledged and incorporated throughout the book, allows for a type of embodied knowledge that also gives the theorizing greater depth.

Chapter 1 begins by tracing the transition of the UFC from its early alternative and "outcast" days to its current position as a global sports media powerhouse (especially in relation to its usage of media platforms and promotional content). Though this chapter does the work of introducing the reader to the UFC as an organization, it also positions the company, and sport, as a cultural artifact whose rise, and contours, cannot be disarticulated from the emergence of social media and the millennial generation. Deeming the company a "millennial sports media brand," McClearen deftly displays how its use of "millennial brand strategies form the impetus for the promotion's development of branded difference" (p. 37), as it is through the diverse and global digital branding and marketing strategies that the UFC is able to both promote a diverse roster of athletes and reach a diverse audience. This chapter additionally serves as a deeper meditation on McClearen's concept of "branded difference," which is woven throughout the book. Using the company's "We Are All Fighters" campaign, which began as a response to the Pulse nightclub massacre, McClearen demonstrates how the UFC adroitly deployed their brand maxim "to speak both to marginalized identities as well as those who are more privileged within society" in order to make all fans feel included while simultaneously ignoring inequalities that disproportionality impact historically marginalized communities (p. 52).

Chapter 2 extends the conversation of the UFC as a cultural moment to think about how the brand relates to representational politics and women and girls, specifically. This chapter engages with the affective power of the UFC, particularly in relation to its branding and marketing of female fighters. Here again McClearen demonstrates her ability to move beyond a simple discussion of representation by examining the "visceral forces" often circulating around and through cultural artifacts and media texts "that connect social bodies to one another" (p. 58). While affect is an often-misunderstood concept, McClearen explains it in thoughtful and in-depth ways to "interrogate what representation mattering *feels* like," to further unpack how sports companies utilize affect in relation to marketing and branding, and to position how the UFC's promotion of Ronda Rousey allowed the company to "ride the popular feminist wave," resulting in economic gains for the company, if not for its female fighters (p. 59).

In chapter 3 McClearen extends the focus on affect by further questioning how discourses of female empowerment are inculcated in narratives about the American dream and "unbridled potential" (p. 85). Though ideals and myths related to the American dream are common both within sports and critical sports studies, McClearen interestingly uses this association to examine how discourses affect, and normalize, precarious labor practices. As McClearen notes, the American dream discourse convinces us that, within the UFC, "anything is possible for women," even though the company "currently maintains a structure that severely limits its capacity to deliver on those promises" (p. 82).

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of labor, but “examines the labor of visibility that female UFC fighters perform on social media platforms” (p. 106). Using interviews with female UFC fighters, McClearen argues that the aspirational labor associated with online visibility often goes unnoticed and uncompensated, especially when framed within the UFC’s argument that fighters must be accessible and visible to fans on social media in order to eventually receive material rewards. This chapter, which continues the book’s commitment to untangling hierarchies of visibility, allows McClearen to explore how athletic labor that centers normative identities also dictates economic rewards.

Chapter 5 further discusses athletes and labor, though it moves from a more theoretical and mediated engagement to one that centers the “work” being done by female MMA fighters to improve their working conditions. Here McClearen leans on cultural studies as mode of critique that calls attention to power differentials, and how power is constructed and experienced, to demonstrate how “raising awareness and galvanizing support through making social justice causes visible holds potential for challenging the power structures discussed” previously in the book (p. 158). Like chapter 1, this section is both analytical and informative, as McClearen unpacks many of the misconceptions average consumers have regarding how MMA fighters are employed, compensated, and cared for by the organization they promote.

Though written for an academic audience, McClearen’s work is no doubt also relevant to a more general reader interested in MMA, women’s sports, and/or athletic labor. Her writing is clear and thoughtful and demonstrates both a deft ability to work with and extend complicated media and cultural theory and a deep knowledge of and passion for MMA. Furthermore, the coda for the book makes explicit the complicated process of writing about a violent sport such as MMA, that also brings its fighters, and McClearen, happiness. What is perhaps less explicit in this chapter is how McClearen treats the sport with a type of thoughtfulness that asks the reader to move past the violence between fighters and instead see the ways in which fighters gain community, commonality, and respect from one another, while navigating the violence perpetuated by “neoliberal business practices that place organizational growth and accumulation of wealth above human interests” (pp. 164–165).

Overall, McClearen’s book is an excellent example of how the nascent field of critical sport media studies can thoughtfully and productively explore sports culture in ways that embrace, rather than gloss over, the contradictions and ambivalences that accompany modern representations of (female) athletes. As McClearen writes, “analysts and fans of women’s sports must now grapple with what happens to sportswomen when they become celebrated *and* exploited in sports media (p. 34), and as such, *Fighting Visibility* has positioned itself as a foundational text that impressively “digs below the surface of the image to ask who benefits from representing sportswomen and who is harmed by sports media labor practices in late capitalism” (p. 4).