*Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC* by Jennifer McClearen

Reviewed by Adrian Markle

In February 2013, Ronda Rousey strode into the cage at the Honda Center in Anaheim, California, to fight in the first women’s MMA bout in UFC history, headlining UFC 157 over former UFC champion Lyoto Machida and former Pride and Strikeforce champion Dan Henderson. After her win, Rousey headlined five more pay per views before her retirement, becoming the then highest paid and most popular fighter in the UFC. Since Rousey’s explosion in popularity, many other female fighters also gained significant visibility, with more than two dozen women headlining events since UFC 157. In the UFC, perhaps unexpectedly considering its reputation as aggressively hyper-masculine, female athletes appeared to be gaining parity with male athletes. Jennifer McClearen’s *Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC* analyses the realities of being a visible female UFC fighter, and the ways in which that appearance of equality might be misleading.

The introduction discusses some of the book’s central concepts: visibility; branded difference; and contract labor. The first chapter, “Developing a Millennial Sports Brand,” provides a history of the UFC and their brand development in the twenty-first century, including their digital and transmedia marketing; their desire for a global audience; and their marketing of the diversity of their competitors’ racial, gender, and sexual identities. The second chapter, “Affect and the Rousey Effect,” focuses on Rousey and her impact on the sport, especially with regards to the conceptual and practical effects of empowerment. The third chapter, “Gendering the American Dream,” discusses the UFC’s strategy of marketing “difference”; the story of the first female flyweight champion and the first Native American UFC champion Nicco Montaño (who was cut from the UFC roster during the writing of this review); the particular experience of lesbian athletes in the UFC; and the “cruel optimism” of the fighter’s dream. Chapter Four, “The Labor of Visibility on Social Media,” looks at social media engagement as labor; the relationship between social media engagement and real-life opportunity; and racial and gender inequalities of online engagement. And the fifth chapter, “The Fight for Labor Equity,” focuses on the UFC’s compensatory structure, the athletes’ attempts to unionize, and the organization’s response to those unionization efforts. There is also a coda, which is about the athlete’s love for their sport and for each other.

Each of these chapters is compelling and presents a detailed and interesting analysis of the way in which the visibility these athletes have does not always provide the advantages and security that might be expected. Increased visibility does not necessarily equate to increased pay, to increased job security, or even to increased popularity. High profile fighters can still struggle financially. Champions are still stripped of their titles for questionable reasons. Divisional mainstays are still seemingly let go for challenging the organization. While these issues are looked at primarily through the lens of gender, *Fighting Visibility* also includes significant analysis of experiences of race and sexuality, as well as an overall excellent articulation of contemporary sport branding and economics. Early on, McClearen uses the word “ambivalent” to describe her findings, which speaks to *Fighting Visibility*’s best qualities: its analysis is thorough and its interpretations are nuanced. It does not oversimplify. To that end, the book also sometimes reaches for examples beyond female mixed martial artists to great effect; anecdotes centering on male MMA fighters Cain Velasquez, Drakkar Close, and Kajan Johnson add much to our understanding of the sport’s issues, as does a section that discusses tennis legend Serena Williams.

That being said, there are a few exclusions that may have added value here: former Strikeforce champion Sarah Kaufman’s campaign for five-minute rounds, which directly affected the Carano-Cyborg fight; and the particularities of the UFC’s relationship with Invicta (arguably being the only organization they have ever cross promoted with, by virtue of allowing Cyborg to fight there while under UFC contract). There were also one or two areas where a claim may not have been quite justified—the differences in resources devoted to the *Revolution* and *Jessica Andrade Emerges (JAE)* promotional videos are initially framed as resulting from *Revolution* being about two conventionally attractive, straight, white, American women, and *JAE* being about a lesbian woman from Brazil, rather than the fact that the former video was made for a major championship fight and the latter for the promotional debut of a woman with (at that time) few notable wins. But these issues are not numerous or significant enough to detract from the overall quality of the book, which is excellent.

*Fighting Visibility* challenges the concept of visibility as inherently or wholly positive or valuable, and it illustrates how the marketing of diversity may undermine the very experiences it appears to endorse. And beyond that, McClearen provides us with an insightful and informed account of the experiences of female mixed martial artists in the UFC at a pivotal time in the development of their sport, its culture, and its perception.