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CONSIDERING MIXED MARTIAL ARTS AS A CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF
AMERICAN EMPIRE

By

REAGAN FLAHERTY

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Abstract

The combat sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) combines a number of diverse fighting styles including boxing, wrestling, jiu-jitsu, muay Thai and judo. In the past five years, MMA has morphed from a fringe sport into the popular culture lexicon. MMA is now an internationally recognized mainstream sport, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue annually. This rapid growth is due in large part to the efforts of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) – an American company whose name and events have become synonymous with MMA. Within a socio-political paradigm, the successful rise of MMA and the UFC in particular, offers an important point of comparison when considering select aspects of the American Empire. The popular culture status of MMA offers insights into how an emerging sport contributes to the creation of social meaning; and how semiotic displays of sport are able to represent the cultural systems within a given society. MMA is a popular culture text that symbolically represents notions of power, hegemony, identity and capitalism within the American Empire.

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Introduction

In the past five years the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has been steadily rising in popularity. MMA has now reached a level of recognition and popularity that suggests the sport has elevated itself into the popular culture realm. Becoming a popular culture entity has given MMA legitimacy as a mainstream sport – events are promoted regularly and often sold out, fighters are ‘recognized’ pop culture icons, and most importantly the sport receives mainstream media attention.

Within the discourse of cultural studies, popular culture is not the authentic culture of the people nor is it a commercialized and mass produced artefact. Rather it reflects the processes of struggle and contestation between cultural practices generated from below and imposed from the top down (Whannel 130). This suggests popular culture results from the interplay between various social groups and emerges as a text with articulated meaning and some degree of social relevancy. Further, “[p]opular culture has to address its audience – it has to relate to their real lived experience, their lives, in some meaningful way, precisely in order to become popular” (130). Therefore it stands to reason that popular culture is a cultural construct that is both a response to, and representation of, various social practices and institutions.

As a popular culture text MMA represents various ideas of power, hegemony, identity and capitalism. These same ideas can be applied to a discussion of the American Empire¹. The term *Empire* has long been used to represent the idea of widespread authority, dominion, rule and subjugation (Nearing 16). Empire refers to both political and economic power and includes these characteristics; power over conquered territory, subjugation of people to the empires’ rule,

¹ American Empire within this paper refers to the United States of America. The use of this term draws upon the many references between the Roman empire and America that have been made in scholarly and political circles. Such comparisons will be further addressed later in the paper.

existence of an imperial or ruling class and the exploitation of people and territory for the benefit of the ruling class (Nearing 16-17). Therefore, it is proposed, that MMA offers contemporary insights into how an emerging sport can be interpreted as a cultural representation of the current American Empire. As a popular culture text, MMA is a microcosm representing important aspects of the American Empire. I draw on critical theories addressing power, hegemony, masculinities and capitalist ideologies to show the parallels between the two. While both MMA and American Empire exist as independent entities, when brought together they offer further insights into the reading of a popular culture text (MMA), and illustrate how sport and governance can share a similar semiotic display. The articulation of MMA with American Empire produces a current and relevant socio-political reading that legitimates MMA as a popular culture text.

What is MMA

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a combat sport that combines numerous fighting styles and methods – not all of which are martial arts. Of the numerous fighting styles utilized the primary ones include wrestling, boxing, Muay Thai (a distinct style of kick boxing from Thailand), and jiu-jitsu (a Brazilian martial art that relies heavily on submission holds). These various fighting styles are used in numerous combinations during a fight, with the fighters using and defending with whatever method they can in order to achieve victory. Although MMA is a hybrid of styles from all over the world and fighters tend to specialize in particular forms, they must also be proficient in several disciplines in order to succeed in the sport. One-dimensional fighters are generally not successful MMA participants since their strategies can be easily predicted, and the lack of proficiency in several fighting styles will leave them unable to defend themselves against a multi-disciplinary opponent.

Equipment used by fighters is limited to small fingerless padded gloves (to protect the hands) and mouth guards. MMA fights are held either in a boxing ring or a caged ring, where a referee is present along with three judges at ringside. It is the visual of a caged ring that very much defines the symbolism or mythology of MMA. The sight of two fighters walking into the centre of an arena and fighting in a caged ring, with the explicit intent of submitting or knocking out an opponent, is a certainly an ominous spectacle. It is an event that borrows heavily from the ideals and visuals of the gladiator matches of ancient Rome. The aura of a present day sporting arena remains inspired by the architecture and social sphere of Rome's ancient coliseum – seating for thousands of people in a tiered fashion that allows those with greater socio-economic status to be closer to the action. Additionally, the spectacle of MMA is broadcast around the world, which further promotes the mythology of the sport. This is of particular importance since these broadcasts create further symbolism via fighter interviews, announcer commentaries, close-up camera angles and fight replays.

So important is the fighting ring to the identity of the sport that the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has trademarked the term “the octagon” to reference its fighting surface. This is an important consideration since the term “the octagon” (or “the cage” as it is also referred to) and the UFC (the leading MMA organization) are integral to the symbolism and coding of MMA. Indeed the UFC is largely responsible for promoting MMA and building it into a legitimate sport and popular culture text.

Creating and Coding a Cultural Text

From within cultural studies, the rise in popularity of MMA (from fringe to legitimacy) can be examined from a number of different perspectives. These range from literary theory to

identity politics and gender studies. When looked at together, these various theories provide further understanding of MMA as a sport and offer insight into how popular culture texts are created and consumed within the larger social sphere.

Semiotics uses the term *sign* to mark the unit of communication that has a physical form, but simultaneously stands for something other than itself; signs are recognized and read by users of the sign system (Turner 14). In other words, a sign offers meaning and familiarity to those who use and understand the system (note that understanding is not universal but culturally defined). Once the sign is established, a process of classification occurs that gives further meaning and context to a sign. This process is one of ascending complexity and cultural specificity (15).

Analysis of how meaning is created and processed fosters a deeper understanding of how cultural texts are not only constructed, but how they operate within the larger ideological discourse of western culture. Stuart Hall expressed the idea that although messages may be sent, their arrival is not guaranteed. There are determinants and conditions of existence that might affect and alter the encoding and decoding of messages (Hall in Turner 73). However, Hall also points out that the production and consumption of messages are over-determined by a variety of influences (73). In other words, while there is fluidity to the creation of social meaning, it is also a process that is fixed through, and operates within some defined parameters of a given society. This is an important consideration since this paper will address how MMA and its growing social presence operate within a number of existing social structures of American Empire.

The paradoxical nature of creating social meaning can be looked at within the larger idea of ideological complexes. Ideology has been described as an action-oriented system of beliefs

that motivates people to do certain things, the likes of which include; confirmation of a certain political viewpoint, to serve the interests of certain people, or perform a functional role in relation to the multitude of social, political, economic and legal institutions (“Law and Ideology” plato.stanford.edu). This notion addresses the functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, imposed by one group upon another. This relationship can be either subversive or dominant depending upon circumstance (Hodge and Kress 3). It is important to note that ideological complexes are not independent; they rely on regulating influences – the production and reception of meaning (4).

MMA is a popular cultural model for ideological complexes in a number of ways; it is a sport that is inherently violent, and its symbolism of two people fighting in a locked cage is considered counter to civilized displays of sport and society (western standards applied here). At the same time, MMA represents an idealized imagery of the male body, utilizes television as a means of branding and advertising the sport, and reinforces capitalist means of production, as demonstrated by the financial structure and success of the UFC. This financial success gives the UFC control of nearly 90% of the MMA industry and has given the organization an estimated value of over \$1 billion dollars (Miller in [Forbes.com](#)). MMA, led by the UFC, is brilliantly navigating the boundaries associated with the creation of social meaning. MMA, as a sport, challenges a number of prevailing social standards but does so in a manner that maximizes the ideals of capitalism and American identity.

MMA Athlete as Gladiator

Literary theorist Roland Barthes used the term “myth” to describe the cultural creation of meaning. This term addresses how signs interact with people and culture in order to create social

meaning or, as Barthes states, “to explain our world for us” (Turner 15). Barthes presents myths as a means of describing and deconstructing various social events and subjects; to supplement his analysis, Barthes leans heavily on historical influences and references. Further, ‘mythology’ is apt in denoting a process of creating national narratives – stories and representations that further explain how people live in relation to a broader collectivity (Whannel 171). As a literary and social critic Barthes wrote a number of essays that addressed the myths of sport. These essays, while addressing different sports, share a number of common interpretations – many of which apply to MMA.

In *The Tour de France as Epic*, Barthes interprets the near month long Tour de France bike race as classic Greek Epic. “The Tour thus possesses a veritable Homeric geography. As in the Odyssey, the race is here both a periplus of ordeals and a total exploration of the earth’s limits. Ulysses reached the ends of the Earth several times. The Tour, too, frequently grazes an inhuman world...” (Barthes 82). He goes on to describe the dynamics of the Tour as a battle and the riders as an army (84). Barthes concludes the essay by stating that the Tour is the best example of a total myth; it is a myth of expression and a myth of projection, simultaneously realistic and utopian (87). While this reading is then applied to the French people, his assertions of expression and projection are critical. Barthes is touching upon existing meanings (historical readings/references), but is also suggesting that modern social meaning is found in the event as well (myth of projection).

In “The World of Wrestling”, Barthes looks at the spectacle of excess that is professional wrestling. His reading of pro-wrestling is an interesting one given that it is a scripted sport. In the essay Barthes touches upon notions of good and evil and sees the wrestler portraying a moral concept of justice (paragraph 9). For Barthes the wrestlers represent established ideals of good

and evil, and as he states, the wrestlers are meeting the expectations of the signs they represent (paragraph 14). Within this reading, a wrestling match then becomes symbolic of the battle between good and evil that is common to many cultures. Indeed within most sports, a similar battle takes place. While it may not be between good and evil, there are winners and losers. Winners are definitely good, losers are not inherently evil, but are relegated to a status where their accomplishments are all but forgotten. Extend this to sports where regional or national interests lay, and insinuations of good and evil are definitely displayed – often to a point that supplants winning and losing.

How then might Barthes' idea of myths be applied to MMA and the UFC? First, there is a historical symbolism attached, addressing ideals of classism, virtue, freedom and social value. In the same way that the Tour de France recalled the epic journeys of Homers' *Odyssey*, MMA is promoted as a sport of modern day gladiators recalling the Roman empire. Fighters are often described as gladiators, and the UFC begins every pay-per-view event (ppv) with an introduction that shows a Roman gladiator getting ready for battle. While the imagery is not necessarily historically accurate, the association is clear – these athletes represent and are to be admired for, their strength and courage to engage in battle with another person. Of course in Roman times the gladiators were slaves and were not able to make such decisions freely. Regardless, the MMA fighters of today and the gladiators of the past are engaged in a valorized activity most people are not capable of, or even willing to consider doing.

Idolizing the actions of the gladiator in distinction from others in society, the UFC actively promotes the myth of virtue attached to this type of competition in an effort to make the sport more appealing. In this sense, the meaning and cultural relevance of MMA manifests itself through the appealing yet unattainable nature of the sport. In ancient Rome, the gladiators may

have been slaves but their actions elevated them to a different status. Surprisingly it was the masses, whose values and expectations of fair contest, along with an underlying interest in virtue, elevated the gladiator beyond slave (Reid 39). The gladiator used skills and virtue in a manner not accessible to the masses, and in doing so, was able to redefine his social status. The gladiator then became a paradoxical figure who might have been a social outcast, but who also symbolized freedom, opportunity, and Roman values (40).

MMA fighters, while not slaves, do display many of the same ideals as the ancient gladiators. In ancient Rome, as in the octagon, the goal is to make your opponent submit (death for gladiators being the ultimate submission); the greater the speed and force of this submission, the greater the crowd response. But for all of the violence and posturing, there exists within MMA a sense of virtue similar to that in the gladiator matches of the Roman Empire. MMA fighters are generally very respectful of one another, both as people and as fighters. Fighters show respect for the various disciplines and recognize the potential dangers of the sport – a win by knockout or submission is not meant to punish the other fighter but is simply the nature of the sport. There is also recognition of some other cultural values related to the various fighting styles (referring to aspects of eastern philosophy and martial arts). Many of the fighters, particularly those with martial arts backgrounds will wear traditional karategi (karate uniform also known as *gi*) into the ring and bow before entering the octagon. Some will also bow to their opponents. It is common, but not required, for fighters to touch gloves before they fight as a sign of mutual respect. Such displays of respect correlate strongly with how MMA presents itself to the masses, which speaks to its emerging value as a social ideal and regulator within the American Empire. There is an obvious irony present when a combat sport that remains banned in

some places, promotes social values through the overt representation of fighters and their idealized abilities.

Returning to Barthes and myths, MMA must be looked at from within the discourse of power. Since MMA is a sport that demands physical domination over one's opponent, physical power is the primary means by which to encode and decode the sport. To this point, many societies see power as a determining aspect within the existing social structure and in relation to a person's status. This power dynamic does not necessarily have to be physical domination. Instead power can be expressed through classism, racism and state-sanctioned violence. Consider that within the paradigm of Empire, power is necessary with respect to domination over territory and subjugation of people. Therefore it is possible to posit that a sport like MMA that relies on physical power, offers a legitimate representation of the accepted social structure of a society – power dynamics that can be, but are not necessarily, physical in nature.

Barthes in his sports related essays consistently referenced the notion of spectacle and spectator. It is an important consideration since without 'involved' spectators; the value of a sport is diminished. For Barthes, the spectator and athlete are one – in sport the spectator is a participant, an actor (What is Sport 59). This analogy speaks to the aforementioned idea that the appeal of MMA fighters is in part due to the fact that they are engaged in an activity that is beyond the capacities of most people. Watching sports becomes a symbolic gesture that allows the spectator to reinvent their identity and engage (act out) their real desires. "Ultimately man knows certain forces, certain conflicts, joys and agonies: sport expresses them, liberates them, consumes them without ever letting anything be destroyed" (61).

This relationship between the sporting event and spectators is not limited to the symbolic. The (re)creation of social meaning via the spectacle is very much a reciprocal and proactive relationship. Just as the gladiators of ancient Rome were admired by the masses, MMA fighters are becoming popular culture icons. For spectators, MMA offers something new, an entertaining spectacle that combines athletic ability, personality, competition and an element of the subversive. To watch MMA is to challenge and break several standards of a civilized society; audiences aren't supposed to enjoy watching athletes knock each other out in various ways. MMA is sanctioned in 35 states and Washington D.C, and efforts are underway to bring the sport to those states – such as New York – where MMA events are banned because of lasting perceptions of being an extremely violent sport (Hauser in espn.com).

While MMA has a subversive aspect to its social meaning, the sport is branding itself in a number of socially acceptable ways. The intended result is to recreate (or recode) the social meaning of the sport. The physical ability and appeal of the athletes is of the highest calibre, there is an entertainment factor that is decidedly American in presentation, celebrity fans are used as a legitimizing force, and television is used effectively to promote the sport in a very controlled and positive manner. It is important to remember when looking at the success of the UFC and its promotion of MMA as a legitimate sport that less than ten years ago, this sport was on the verge of extinction in America. It had no mainstream media recognition, finding a venue for the events was problematic and MMA was under attack from politicians who equated it to human cockfighting. Today, MMA is arguably the fastest growing sport in North America and has become a paradoxical social text - it has legitimized the illegitimate (itself) via acceptable social means. This is an important point, since it reveals myths as decidedly open to reassessment and redefinition. When one considers that popular culture is constantly redefined

and reassessed in order to represent the needs of cultures and subcultures, the legitimizing efforts of the UFC are made all the more pertinent.

Culture of Sport as an Anthropological Reading

In the same way that popular culture is constantly redefined and reassessed, sport and its meanings (representations and interpretations) are open to negotiation and contest (MacClancy 4). Sport is a cultural product, but it also serves as a cultural representation; as such, it has the potential to say much about a society. For purposes of this discussion, a cultural interpretation framing the discourse of identity and masculinity will be addressed – specifically from the perspective of the spectator.

Identity is integral to sport and its spectators; it forms the basis of the relationship between the two and creates lasting presence within society. Every sport allows its fans to classify themselves within society, which in turn can further legitimize the sport (through popularity). Identity can also reflect feelings of nationalism and larger cultural representations. The presence and popularity of certain sports can offer insights into national sentiments. While MMA may present limited correlations with America (the UFC sees itself as a global entity), there are aspects of the American social space that are reflected in the sport. This places MMA within the discourse of American popular culture and provides some insights into how American culture operates from within.

The relationship between identity and the individual (spectator) is complex for a number of reasons. Identities are not fixed, or permanent, nor are they always the result of personal choice. Stuart Hall used the term ‘moveable feast’ to describe identity, which is a reference to identity being continuously altered and affected by the various cultural systems around us (Hall

in Horne 126). In addition, the influence of social relationships (shared practices, beliefs and lifestyles) on identity formation is important to acknowledge (127). Therefore it stands to reason that MMA, as an emerging sport, is tapping into the existing identities of its spectators (long-time fans and sports fans) while at the same time creating new identities for them to adopt (MMA and popular culture merge). As the identities of MMA and its fans change and/or become more relevant, there is a sense that the sport is growing in legitimacy and is increasingly representing a larger percentage of the population.

Since popular culture and its various subcultures represent the identities of the masses, a person might be said to represent the sum of all their identities. One of the most important reasons for the development and growth of various texts as popular culture is the need for people to express a communal identity. Sports can mark an existing social identity, but can also be the means by which to create a new one (MacClancy 3). The rise in popularity of MMA is clearly the result of the latter. Five years ago if one were to use the acronyms MMA or UFC most people would have no clue what they meant. However due to the promotion and branding of MMA by the UFC, the sport is now necessary content in the sports sections of North America's major papers and on sports news programs. For instance Rogers Sportsnet, a specialty sports channel in Canada, has a weekly program called *MMA Connected* - that features event highlights, fighter interviews and MMA updates (sportsnet.ca). Today, one doesn't have to be an MMA fan to have some familiarity with the terms. A quote in The National Post suggests just how familiar the sport is becoming; "For years when people talked about 'the big fight', they usually meant boxing. Now, more than not, they're referring to UFC" ("UFC at 100"). This is not to suggest that MMA is known to all people, but a sense of familiarity with a subject one has limited interest in suggests two things: that popular culture texts reflect the developing identities of the

masses, and that people express a willingness to be acquainted with various popular culture texts in order to foster a sense of belonging. The relationship between the two ideals is reciprocal and ongoing – at least as long as mass interest is sustained. Should interest falter, there is a risk that the popular culture text may lose its powers of social persuasion and interest.

The link between nationalism and identity is well established, and sports, for example the Olympics, is certainly a part of that relationship. Many countries have so-called national sports that symbolically personify and represent the people of that country. It is not unheard of to have combat sports as national sports; Muay Thai (Thai kick boxing) is the national sport of Thailand, and Sumo wrestling in Japan has held national significance for centuries. In Turkey, wrestling is the national sport and contributes significantly to the national identity, even though it is not the most popular sport. The various cultural representations directly attributed to wrestling include: myths of national strength; moral codes relating to chivalric ideals of contest and display; importance of male strength; and social coding expressing notions of compromise, losing face and deceit (Stokes 22-24). Notice that Stokes uses the term *myths* to explain the importance of wrestling, suggesting a continuum between social signs, constructing social meaning and national identity.

As a sport in its infancy, MMA has only just achieved popular culture status, and is seeking further legitimacy within sports culture. In Turkey, wrestling has maintained a socio-cultural presence for centuries and is far more than a sport - it is an integral social text within Turkish culture. To suggest that MMA contributes to a national identity within America in a similar manner would be premature. However, there is a definite ability of sport to foster a sense of identity at the level of the nation-state, and superpowers like the United States have a history of associating national pride and sporting success (MacClancy 12). But what is interesting about

MMA is that it is not a sport well suited to external displays of nationalism, nor does it try to be. While there are UFC events that are promoted with nationalism and national pride at stake – the most recent season of *The Ultimate Fighter* reality show pitted fighters from the United States against those from Britain - these types of events are marketing strategies. MMA is an individual sport and audiences are attracted to the skill and persona of the fighters, meaning that national identity is often secondary to the physical abilities of the combatants. Audiences will still cheer for American fighters with chants of “USA USA” when the opponent is not American, but such displays are not foregone conclusions.

Another reason for a lack of externalized national identity within the UFC is that the company wants its brand of MMA to be a global sports phenomenon. Dana White, president of the UFC has said this about the sport and his organization: “I know people think I’m a ****ing lunatic when I say this, but I’m telling you: (mixed martial arts is) going to be the biggest sport in the world” (“UFC at 100” nationalpost.com). White also stated in 2008, that now is time to push for the UFC to become the global brand of MMA given the infrastructure that has been built in the United States (Fowlkes sportsillustrated.cnn.com). In a globalized world, where sovereignty is challenged by corporate power, MMA is an ideal model because it aspires to be a globalized sport being promoted by a company with global aspirations. The fact that MMA combines fighting styles from various cultures, features fighters from several countries, and actively promotes itself globally makes it a unique sport. Because of these multi-disciplinary characteristics, MMA as a hybrid sport has the potential to become a global sporting phenomenon. While the UFC may define itself in ways very much associated with American cultural promotion, the company is holding events in Canada and Europe, while using mass media to gain a presence in other parts of the world as well.

In discussing MMA and its interconnectivity to national identity, an absolute disconnect between the two is not insinuated. A global representation of American national identity is different from an internalized national identity. As an organization with expectations of making MMA a global sport, the UFC does not want to embrace American nationalism as it attempts to establish itself in other markets. On the other hand, within America, the UFC is very open to identifying itself with representations of American Empire in its quest for legitimacy. This sense of national identity from within will be explored in greater detail later on in this discussion.

Considerations of masculinity and its relationship to status and power are very much applicable to further understanding of the cultural meaning of MMA. The glorification of the fighters' masculinised bodies and the representation of power they exude, are a definite attraction for fans – to the point that such factors are an inherent aspect of the identities of both the sport and its fans. The masculinised bodies of the fighters can be considered to be at their peak just prior to a fight. Often described as 'toned', 'shredded' or 'cut', these bodies are lean, low in fat and might even be dehydrated. While this stark appearance is often an effort to make the restrictions of a particular weight-class, there is no denying the look and appeal of a fighter is enhanced by the extreme form their body has taken. The more lean and muscular the body of a fighter, the greater the power and athletic prowess they are assumed to have.

The two theoretical points most applicable to the spectacle and spectators of MMA are hegemonic masculinity and power. The former stems from ideological conditioning in the sense that particular ways of performing maleness are made to appear natural and normal, yet in fact sustain problematic relations of dominance within an assumed structure or order of gender (Pringle and Markula 473). Concepts of power here will be related to Michel Foucault and his premise that power is productive and omnipresent, since it is produced in all actions and

relationships between people (476). Important to this premise is the assertion that the body is always the site for the workings of power. In fact, Foucault argued that power is invested in, and transmitted by and through the body (476).

To consider the relationship between MMA and hegemonic masculinity presents a paradox within the cultural meaning of the sport. Conceptually, MMA is legitimized by the normalcy of athletic competition of a recognized sport and the rising popularity of the sport within popular culture. Yet, contra to cultural values of gender equality on the other hand, there is the dismissal of equality since the male performance of the sport trumps all other considerations. Male identity in such circumstances maintains its long held dominance in the production of cultural meanings and sport. This is a familiar circumstance for sports across a number of cultures; in Japan, a male-oriented warrior ethic exists in sports, demonstrating a hegemonic masculinity prevalent in Japanese sporting culture (Chapman 319). In Turkey, wrestling and its fetishization of the powerful male body is a reflection of an unambiguously chauvinist political programme (Stokes 29).

As the largest and most powerful promoter of MMA, the UFC does not sanction women's fighting. Other smaller organizations have and do promote women's MMA, but financial reward and public exposure is nowhere near that of male fighters. The only exception to this is American fighter Gina Carano, who is the face of women's MMA and amongst the most highly skilled as well. Her financial earnings and social status (which transcends MMA circles) put her in the same level as many top-level male fighters. So recognizable is Carano that she must be considered a popular culture icon. In fact Yahoo.com placed Carano number five in its top 10 list of most influential women of 2008 ("year in review 2008" yahoo.ca). What, then, does

Carano's status insinuate about the spectator and how identity is represented within both MMA and popular culture?

It would appear that on one level, MMA as a popular culture text challenges hegemonic masculinity of sports and society as a whole. Remembering the assertion that audiences cheer for the individual fighters, if MMA audiences (male and female) are willing to legitimize Carano and appreciate her skills in the same manner as male fighters; does this not legitimize the normalcy of her performance beyond the fact of her gender? If so there is an acceptance and assertion of equality by the audience, since it is the fighter and the performance that trumps the gender of the fighter.

The flipside of this perspective is rooted in long-standing perceptions of gender differences and issues of sexuality. "Sports, as embodied practices, are one of the arenas within which the social struggle for control of the physical body occurs. This is a conflict over what constitutes the differences and similarities between male and female bodies, the nature of their physique, what they are capable of, and what, or in what ways, they should be allowed to exercise." (MacClancy 15). Along with the gendered considerations of the physical capabilities of bodies, the fetishization and eroticism of the female body must also be considered. Certainly there are those spectators who support women's MMA because of the sexual display offered. As Burstyn suggests, sports along with pornography and fashion, are industries of spectacle and imagery; they sell bodies and the equipment to fashion them (36).

What is interesting about MMA is that it has not reached a comfortable and/or consistent position regarding women fighting. But when women do fight, they perform under the same rules and skills as men. The ultimate goal is the same: to defeat your opponent, preferably by

knock-out or submission, before the decision is left up to the judges. At the end of fights, fighters (male and female) are battered and bruised; often their faces are cut and swollen from being hit or kicked multiple times. Gone is the sexualized imagery associated with a physically fit body. In this manner, MMA is unique and does challenge the existing standards of gender differences not only in sport but within society as well. MMA as a popular culture text reflects a subversive nature and challenges the status quo. This is an important aspect of identity for both the spectacle of MMA and its spectators, because it points to the uniqueness of the sport and its meaning within American society. The identity attached to MMA is to relish the role of outsider and to inherently be willing to challenge the existing parameters of society.

Foucault's idea of power and its relationship to the body offers an important lens through which to interpret MMA, since conceptually the body and accompanying power dynamics are at the core of the sporting identity. Specifically, sport is a disciplinary practice that facilitates techniques of power via the production of athletic bodies (Pringle and Markula 478). In a sense, the athletic body becomes the ideal microcosm for Foucault's assertion that the body is a primary means of transmitting power. Competition, particularly in professional sports, demands that power (literally and theoretically) be exercised. In professional sports, competition takes place in a manner and space not accessible to most – that is, the professional arena where elite athletes with superior bodies perform. The standards created by top athletes in elite performance spaces create identity for the athletes, the sport and the spectators.

To further understand this premise, consider the following: “Sport is the approved dominant physical culture – ceremony in Foucault's sense – in our epoch, setting standards (‘emitting signs’) for beauty and performance” (Burstyn 32). To deconstruct this comment and apply it to MMA helps to define the sport and its popular culture status, and allows us to better

understand the appealing identity to which fans are drawn. Words like “dominant”, “physical” and “performance” are all appropriate descriptors of, and create meaning for, MMA and its spectacle. For the spectator/fan of MMA, terms like “beauty”, “performance” and “physical culture” address socio-cultural ideals (hence identities) of body appearance, a sense of belonging and competition. Within popular culture, words like “approved”, “ceremony” and “emitting signs” all speak to how text is encoded and decoded in a manner that consistently instills a sense of identity for those who chose to embrace its particular codes.

Considerations of Empire, Capitalism and MMA

To accurately draw comparisons between MMA and the American Empire within a popular culture framework, it is necessary to define empire as it is applied to America within this discussion. Two issues in particular are of interest; is the term Empire still relevant? Is the America of today an Empire? Both of these questions will be looked at from within a socio-political discourse and applied to MMA as a popular culture text.

From a historical perspective, empire has traditionally been associated with imperial power and its territorial expanse. But within a larger socio-political discourse, empire has a more holistic meaning that addresses past and present realities. The premise of empire has changed, having been renegotiated and redefined in response to the unfolding (post)modern world. Changing perceptions of Empire are not new; liberal ideologies and the rise of nation states has diminished traditional concepts of imperial power. Consider the following:

“Liberal theorists and historians of empire generally trace the complex process in which expanding imperial power systems led ultimately to nation-states, democracy and market economies. For Marxist and postmodern theorists, the formal aspects of empire remain unimportant compared to the broader workings of modes of production and particularly, the global power of capitalism. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri use the word “empire” to describe

the workings of contemporary capitalism and its myriad forms of power.”
(Pomper abstract).

Certainly, the global power of contemporary capitalism has forced us to reconsider historic perceptions of empire. However, the growth of capitalist means of production should not be seen as existing independently. Other considerations within empire (soft powers) are important contributing factors to contemporary capitalism. Cultural imperialism and its ability to alter perceptions of identity through subjectivities and subjugation, plays an integral part of the success of capitalism within Empire.

The manner in which the UFC operates exemplifies this multi-dimensional structure that ensures the success of contemporary capitalism. MMA as has been mentioned is a globalized sport that has been defined by cultural styles from around the world, that features fighters from several countries, and that holds events outside of America. Yet the manner in which all of this is accomplished is very much modelled after American standards and applications of capitalism². Take, for instance, the use of media as a medium to promote and legitimize the UFC and MMA within both sports and popular culture realms. Also, the UFC has purchased competing organizations (both nationally and internationally) in order to eliminate competition and allow the company access to the best fighters in the world. Until it was bought out by the UFC in March of 2007, Japan based *Pride Fighting Championship* (Pride) was the largest competitor to

² The following points are used to define capitalism; but each point could be used to reference select aspects of the UFC and its business model from a socio-cultural perspective (American centric). The basic characteristics are: (1) private ownership of the means of production, (2) a social class structure of private owners and free wage-earners, which is organized to facilitate expanding accumulation of profit by private owners; and (3) the production of commodities for sale. Conditioning elements are: (a) a certain division of labor; (b) institutional arrangements to insure a dependable supply of wage labor; (c) a degree of social productivity sufficient to permit sustained investment; (d) commercial organization of the market—including banks—whose scope is adequate to the productivity of the community; (e) a political process whereby economic power can become translated into governmental policy; (f) a legal structure that is protective of private property; and (g) a certain toleration—at the least—of new ways of making a living (Weinberg, “Introduction” www.allshookdown.com/newhistory/CH01.htm)

the UFC, and had a number of the sport's most skilled fighters under contract; the UFC acquired all Pride assets (contracts, video library and trademarks) in the deal ("UFC acquires Pride" reviewjournal.com). These types of buyout tactics are deliberate and common practices within contemporary capitalism since they remove competition while adding assets. They also reflect cultural imperialism since events are performed, promoted and exported with a style based upon an American model of sports as entertainment. Indeed at the time of purchase UFC president Dana White alluded that Pride would follow all the American fighting rules and that if the rules established in New Jersey and Nevada were not followed by everyone (internationally) then the promoting organization would not be promoting MMA but rather a different sport (reviewjournal.com).

This operational model used by the UFC is a solid example of the Americanization of sport, a term that simultaneously embodies notions of corporate sport and cultural hegemony (Maguire 33). This is an effective comparison and one that some sport theorists refer to as a dominant theme in global sports development (124). However this theory is not without legitimate opposition. As Maguire counters, the Americanization of sport is a very narrow view that is stuck in a crude form of cultural imperialism. Instead Maguire chooses to look at the broad cultural process going on that addresses a variety of cultural flow lines (124). This premise holds merit; the sporting world has capitalized upon these so-called cultural flow lines. In North America, the professional leagues of hockey, baseball and basketball are stacked with players from numerous countries. The UFC is no different. Elite MMA fighters come from Japan, South Korea, Canada, Britain, the United States and Brazil. Further, the sport of MMA is inherently multi-cultural, having adopted numerous combat styles into its skill set.

However, MMA as promoted by the UFC remains, almost proudly so, highly Americanized. The UFC promotes and acts like a MMA empire by publically promoting itself as the best and most relevant MMA organization, by demanding and maintaining an almost absolute control over its fighters (via contractual obligations), by withholding revelations of business dealing and finance, and by using the media to create and foster an identity that seems protected from criticism. In various interviews, Dana White has refused to discuss financial information like the Pride purchase price, fighter payouts via ppv bonuses, or the ppv financials as well (reviewjournal.com and sportsillustrated.cnn.com). On its website history page the UFC mentions that it has restructured MMA into a highly organized and controlled combat sport; and that after the UFC brand was launched, MMA popularity in Brazil and Japan increased (“history” ufc.com). Finally, the UFC because it is the producer and rights holder of its ppv broadcasts is able to maintain quality control over the entire event. They decide who will fight, how much to pay and how to present the event.

These techniques are not unlike those exhibited by empires, which impose cultural imperialism as a means of maintaining dominance and suppressing rebellion. To this point, consider that communicative production and the construction of imperial legitimation are interconnected and not separable (Hardt and Negri 34). Empire, and/or more postmodern interpretations of the imperial machine, are self-serving centres of ideological dominance. This dominance has an inherent need to produce and reproduce narratives in order to validate and celebrate power (34).

America as Empire

To answer the question of whether America is an empire, three perspectives are considered: America and its willingness to embrace the symbolism of the Roman Empire, the notion of American exceptionalism, and the internalized notion that America as superpower has an inherent right to do what it does. Within each of these points, a degree of cultural meaning and political will is found. This not only helps to support the premise of America as empire, but further locates MMA within a larger socio-political discourse that can be applied to popular culture.

The link between America and the Roman Empire has been referenced by America itself for an extended period. Cullen Murphy in his book *Are We Rome? The Fall Of An Empire And The Fate Of America* seeks to deconstruct and explain the link between the two and it is his assertions that form the basis of this discussion. There is reference to American popular culture and the national identity being saturated with ideals of the Roman Empire (Murphy 6). But more importantly, Murphy captures the two as mirror images of each other within their respective epochs. “Rome and America are the most powerful actors in their worlds, by many orders of magnitude. Their power includes both military might and the “soft power” of language, culture, commerce, technology and ideas” (14). This is an important reference because it captures the multi-faceted complexity that is empire. Considerations and acknowledgement of soft powers address the necessity of seeing empire as a complete hegemonic force, whereby various disciplined networks work together to create the identity of empire.

To further his argument, Murphy presents six parallels between America and Rome. They are: the way America sees itself, military power and the social/cultural problems related to it;

privatization/corruption; how the outside world is viewed; the questions of borders; and the complexity parallel – the built in problem of managing the Empire (18-20). Of the six parallels, there are two that are applicable to this discussion - how the outside world is viewed and the complexity parallel. The latter is important because it embraces soft powers and their capacity to challenge the empire from within. An empire that fails to control its population through various forms of cultural hegemony will be unable to stop any prolonged subversive movement, since the minds of the masses will have ‘reconsidered’ their position. As a sporting empire the UFC has done exactly this as it transforms MMA into a popular culture text. MMA has reached necessary levels of acknowledgment and support to place it within popular culture. The challenge now is to sustain the popular culture identity and take it to a level where it can sustain any challenges to its brand and business model.

The concept of empire and how it views the outside world is an important premise because it says as much about internal perceptions as it does about the external perceptions it addresses. Directly related to this premise is the idea of American exceptionalism. This term represents “the belief that the United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; a nation that is not only unique but also superior.” (Pope 93) This term originated in the 19th century, and is clearly indicative of the assumption of an imperial identity and desire for a lasting imperial legacy. More recently, there seems to have been a shift in discourse that considers transnationality and the need to place American history within the larger perspective of world history (Pope 94). While more detailed consideration of this debate extends beyond this paper, I would suggest that while a shift in perspective may have occurred within academic discourse, this same shift has not occurred in either American popular culture or sporting culture.

In suggesting a lasting American exceptionalism, I do not wish to insinuate a sense of exclusion. Clearly within the globalized world there have been many reconfigurations of existing ideas and new perspectives that have taken precedent. However such shifts do not necessarily have the capacity to remove or alter desired perceptions of identity. There is evidence to suggest that inherent to the identity of the American empire is a lasting sense of entitlement and superiority. In an attempt to address this, consider the following points from the perspective of the industry of sport, and more specifically the UFC and its brand of MMA.

First, the politico-cultural nation state has been replaced by the corporate culture nation – a process referred to as corporate nationalism (Pope 105). There is no doubt that many of the major sports leagues in North America have adopted a sense of corporate nationalism as they promote their brand. This is particularly true with both the National Football League and National Basketball Association, both of which regularly hold matches outside of America and use mass media to promote themselves internationally. This is a path that the UFC is actively pursuing, having held three events outside of America in the first five months of 2009. The second premise challenges the idea of the corporate culture nation and addresses how globalized sport is inclined to invigorate national cultures (and national discourses) as opposed to allowing sports to become cosmopolitan partners in a new world system (105).

These two points simultaneously represent a continuum and contradiction of sport from within a politico-cultural lens. On the one hand, globalized sport (including MMA) is a prototype of the corporate culture nation whereby the sport and the corporate brand supersede any legacy of the nation and its identity. The UFC, in growing the sport of MMA and building its own brand, does not rely on nationalist sentiments to attract spectators and grow their fan base. Rather the UFC markets itself directly to the fans using whatever strategies are deemed most

effective. Certainly at times, this does require some actions that pander to regional and national interests. However, these are business decisions made in the interest of generating money by attracting the highest number of fans possible. For instance, events in Europe generally feature more European-based fighters than do American events - a clear acknowledgement of fan familiarity and allegiance. The UFC has also held matches on American military bases, where they are quick to promote those fighters with past military experience.

Another important point to consider regarding the UFC and its unique identity as a corporate culture nation is that as a corporate sports body, the organization actually challenges the power of governments in order to promote events and grow its particular brand of MMA. In New York, arguably the most prominent state where MMA is banned, the UFC has been lobbying for years to change existing legislation. What is interesting to note is that this lobbying involves making political donations to both the Republican and Democratic parties, and that even the bureaucrats acknowledge that money is the driving force behind the lobbying efforts (Hauser espn.com). The issue is not limited to the United States, regulatory issues abound in Canada as well. Ongoing concerns over the violent nature of the sport have meant some events (both planned and pending) have needed negotiations with city officials and various regulatory bodies in order to proceed. A UFC event scheduled for Montreal in April 2009 needed extra negotiations at the last minute to address the enforcement of rules regarding striking and throwing of opponents – rules which had largely been ignored in previous events (“UFC to meet...” thespec.com). An MMA event has been planned for Vancouver BC in June 2010 in spite of the fact that the sport (at time of this writing) is effectively banned in the city (“UFC pencils in...” cbc.ca and “Vancouver maintains ban...” nationalpost.com).

At the same time, because sport is a medium through which spectators create a sense of identity, there is a definite alignment with national cultures. Corporate or brand loyalty, as much as it may influence identity, arguably exists in a temporary state. There are no lasting assurances that people will remain loyal to the product, nor are there any guarantees that a corporate image and/or product will remain fixed. The nation, on the other hand, is a permanent fixture and has lasting influence and control over people. From birth, one of the identities significant to most people derives from their national culture. In this sense, the legacy of American exceptionalism is part of the American identity, and is encoded in a number of networks including sport and popular culture.

The UFC, although it challenges governing powers in order to grow its business, also relies on various signs that are relevant to American popular culture and reflect the ideals of the American state. The presence of the American military as a main sponsor at some events and during some television broadcasts is a case in point. The American military (hence government) recognizes the growing relevancy the UFC holds within popular culture, particularly amongst young men. The military uses this knowledge to create advertising and to sponsor UFC events with the hope of attracting the coveted young male demographic. There have also been a couple of televised UFC events in primetime that have held specific military themes. The most recent, *UFC Fight For The Troops*, held in Fayetteville North Carolina in December 2008, was a fundraiser for a Hospital centre for American soldiers suffering from traumatic head injuries. Not only was this a fundraiser with a military theme, but many of the fighters in the cards that night were ex-military members themselves – a status that was actively promoted (“Josh Koscheck and ...” ufc.com). Ultimately this link between the UFC and the American military extends back to

issues of Empire because not only is military might promoted but so is the internal representation that the military is an integral part of the empire.

Biopower and Sport

Foucault's idea of biopower places control of the body within the disciplinary and regulating powers of the state. This control is manifested in a power over both the body and life – or as Foucault clarifies, the body and the population (253). “The normalizing society is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation intersect along an orthogonal articulation” (Foucault 253). As presented by Foucault, biopower is a political force that can be useful in understanding assertions of an empire needing to manage the population. Within this framework, it seems logical to suggest that the American Empire exemplifies biopower and that sport is one network by which this demonstrated.

To better understand the connection between biopower and sport it is necessary to consider what drives the production of biopower. Foucault alluded to the disciplines of the body and regulation of the population as foundations in the organization of power over life (279). But there must also be consideration of the interconnectivity of the various social networks which can create social meaning that can then become a means of regulating power (Delueze and Guattari in Hardt and Negri 28). Under this premise, the network of sports is an inherent part of the larger social sphere, and can therefore be considered a point of production and a point of control for biopower.

MMA, within the American empire, can be used to illustrate the relationship between sports and the production of biopower in a number of ways. The spectacle of an MMA event reinforces the need for social interactions and represents a form of identity for spectators. People

are social beings, and spectator events that promote a collective identity enable disciplinary and regulatory powers to maintain control and dominance over the population. Subsequently, the spectacle facilitates the social production and control inherent in biopower because collective identity insinuates homogeneity. A collective desire for sameness is much easier to control than acts of subversion and independence.

The gladiator matches of the Roman Empire demonstrate this point. There has been speculation that violent matches grew in popularity because of a degeneration of taste, itself a sign of declining social standards that were a response to the high living standards of the Roman gentry (Reid 42). The spectacle of the gladiator match had become a microcosm for certain social issues of the day. For an empire like Rome, the sporting spectacle became a regulatory tool in the effective management of the population because spectators had the freedom to express themselves in a manner that might otherwise have been unacceptable.

It was as if the sporting event served as a controlled and controlling sphere. From within the controlled sphere, power was exercised because spectators had what they needed – an escape from daily activities, and a sense of self-control and choice, albeit within a highly regulated environment. Control is still maintained, but under the auspices of a sanctioned popular culture sporting event that spectators are willing participants in. Essentially, the populations self-regulate and express themselves while at the same time conceding to the controlling biopower. This concession recognizes that biopower is internalized by the population in keeping with the needs, rules and regulations of the controlling system (Burstyn 32).

Commodification of the Body

The body has been described as the most striking symbol and material core of sporting activity (Horne 4). For MMA, this is particularly poignant since the sport is built around the representation, classification and performance of idealized bodies. The commodification of the body plays a significant role in MMA and in its representation of American empire. Two points in particular allow for a better understanding of the importance of body commodification: the significance of sport as a capitalist means of production within consumer culture; and the link between commodification of the body and control measures that mirror existing social dynamics.

Commodification of the body is represented simultaneously on two levels of sport. First, there is the notion of sports (and the sporting industry as a whole) being organized under market principles in seeking the pursuit of capital accumulation (Sage 107). This is a process that may be described as an external commodification, since it places sports within the larger social sphere. The second level is a more internalized form of commodification that is represented by the practices and objectives associated with the individual sports. This is not to suggest that internal commodification is removed from social influences and practices. Certainly, professional sports are quick to model the capitalist organizational structure that is authoritarian, hierarchical and rational (109). However, individual sports do organize and market themselves as they see fit.

The UFC has created a popular culture text by using idealized body imagery as the focal point for all means of external and internal commodification, including marketing the fighters in a manner that captures the physical capabilities of their bodies. This is a technique common to all sports since part of the appeal in watching professionals is seeing a skill level displayed that is

inaccessible to most casual participants and/or spectators. In this sense, external commodification creates a value for both the body and the spectacle, by marketing the idealized and inaccessible body to the masses.

From the perspective of internal commodification, MMA uses the body as point of control that fosters an extreme representation of the traditional capitalist model. Fighters are employed on a contractual basis; employment is entirely dependent upon performance and in some cases, loyalty to the organization. Contracts that are guaranteed and/or several years in duration, as found in other sports, are virtually nonexistent in the UFC. Within MMA, and the UFC in particular, there is great disparity between revenues generated and salaries paid. While top athletes can easily earn six figures (combination of salary and bonuses) for each fight, these figures pale in comparison to the millions of dollars in revenue generated per event; through gate attendance and more importantly, pay-per-view purchases.

Fighter payouts (contracts and bonuses) for UFC 100 in July 2009 ranged from a high of \$400,000 (2 fighters) to a low of \$7,000 (one fighter). In total there were eleven fights at UFC 100; only eight fighters earned \$100,000 or more, while eight earned \$20,000 or less; the remaining six fighters earned between \$21,000 and \$99,000 (“Lesnar, St.Pierre...” sherdog.com). Fighter payouts represent only what is publically disclosed via the sanctioning body – in this case the Nevada State Athletic Commission. Other earnings negotiated between the UFC and its fighters are not disclosed (“Lesnar, St.Pierre...”). But to put things in perspective the gate revenue for that event was \$5,101,740.00 – a figure that does not represent any of the ppv revenue (“Nevada’s Top MMA Gates” boxing.nv.gov). As previously mentioned, the UFC does not disclose ppv numbers, but given the popularity of the sport and the cost of

purchasing a ppv event, the revenue generated is potentially tens of millions of dollars for the one event.

How, then, does commodification of the body relate to theoretical considerations of the American empire? To start, the overwhelming presence of a consumer culture in America and its hegemonic influence must be acknowledged. “Social relations of sport and leisure have become grounded in relations of capital domination, with individuals cast in the role of consumers by businesses that shape them to promote their own interests” (Sage 108). To a degree, this perspective reiterates the premise of a corporate nationalism, where the national identity of consumers has been manipulated to include some semblance of brand loyalty. From this perspective, brand loyalty is equated with nationalist sentiments and serves as a reaffirmation of the corporate nation. But can this perspective have legitimate meaning within the American empire if, as already mentioned, brand loyalty is potentially temporary?

It certainly can, particularly if one considers that while brand loyalty is potentially fleeting, consumer culture is inherent to the social structure of the American empire. The consumer culture of America is well acquainted with the commodification of the body, and sports are simply one access point for this. The UFC, like American football (NFL), has tapped into already existing consumer representations of power and masculinity, resulting in a commodified body familiar to most in society – particularly sports fans. Further to this point consider that “No matter how ‘good’ a sport might be, if it does not fit within the social and cultural values and meanings, or habitus of someone, it will not be acceptable” (Horne 122).

Expanding upon the theoretical relationship between MMA and American empire, commodification of the body can be considered within a dominant ideology or cultural

hegemony. In particular, two aspects of hegemony stand out; that hegemony is a process of social relations, common to modern capitalist societies (Sage 16), and that hegemonic ideology is a normalizing, self-assuring means of controlling the population. “Ideology, according to the hegemonic model, persuades the general public to consider their society and its norms and values to be natural, good, and just, concealing the inherent system of domination” (19). Regarding the former, and as has already been alluded to, the commodification of the body is an established and accepted social process within American empire. The manner in which MMA exhibits commodified bodies borrows heavily from existing sporting models such as boxing and professional wrestling where power, persona and body come together to create an idealized perception of the body that is appealing to society. It is important to acknowledge that this idealized perception of the body extends beyond sports and includes other aspects of the social fabric of America, including pornography, the film and television industry, advertising and the nutrition industry. Therefore, commodification of the body is a highly developed social process indicative of the hegemonic ideals deemed important to society, and not necessarily by those in society. “Many collectively experienced and consumed popular culture forms are far from a matter of individual choice” (Horne 128).

The idea that social processes and norms can be forced upon the population reiterates the paradox that is MMA. This paradox presents commodification of the body as both an affirmation of already accepted social ideals, and as a point of rebellion since MMA as a form of sanctioned violence challenges some perceived social standards. As an emerging popular culture text, MMA has become popular because the UFC has marketed the legitimacy of the sport using methods of self-validation and promotion. These self-affirming methods (primarily the mass media) are the same points of production used by those in power to create norms and to

reiterate desired values. At the same time, MMA as a form of sanctioned violence is a direct challenge to the ideals of a civilized state. Violence is sanctioned and legitimized by MMA and society through the imagery of power and the commodification of the body; both processes represent the critical normalizing standards that inform the hegemonic ideology of American Empire.

MMA and American Empire: A Reciprocal Relationship?

The goal of this discussion was to present a reading of MMA as a popular culture text and to then draw a correlation between the American Empire and MMA. Remembering that popular culture results from the interplay of cultural practices, and that various cultural standards of power, identity and hegemony are represented by both MMA and American Empire; it is possible to infer that there is a reciprocal relationship between the American Empire and MMA. More specifically the two entities serve as reciprocal legitimizing mediums for each other.

In putting forth this premise, there is an immediate paradox that must be acknowledged, given that MMA challenges many existing socio-cultural standards and representations within the American social scape. The most obvious of these challenges is that MMA is a sport of sanctioned violence, and is readily promoted as such. As has been mentioned, this does not correspond with existing standards of a civilized society. Indeed crucial to all empires is the sense that they set the tone of 'civilisational standards' and that what they do is for the good of all (Cox 5). Civilising standards refers to internal and external parameters of empire, since the term implicitly applies a sense of power and control over all people within the boundaries of an empire. Ironically this power and control (re: civilising standards) is often represented through the implied need for more police and military presence. In this sense civilising standards are then

the products of a representation of sanctioned violence since they are imposed standards by the forces that legitimate all civil standards. Within this framework MMA is then in the unique position of challenging and representing ideals within the Empire – a position that is not unheard of within sport.

While MMA challenges Empire, this subversion is countered with two considerations; that open challenges to the power of Empire serve as a healthy release for people in society, and that because the American Empire is at war in Iraq, cultural representations relating to war, are more acceptable. The former speaks to the point that subversive activity may well be a normalizing factor within any power dynamic. To forbid all forms of subversion is to take away the identity of (some) people over whom control is intended. Yet as Michael Cox points out, all empires set rules for those who live within the imperium and will punish and reward equally those who obey and disobey the rules (5). This assertion is then challenged with the point that one of the struggles within sport is the nature of behaviour at sporting events (Whannel 132). Indeed varying degrees of social unrest and criminal activity do occur at sporting events. From mild transgressions like ticket scalping, to more serious actions such as organized fights between soccer hooligans, sporting events are a place of subversion (actual or intended). This dichotomy captures the essence of popular culture as a point of struggle between cultural practices and those affected by them - a verifiable politic of popular culture if you will.

The assertion that representations of war are more acceptable when the Empire is at war is reasonable with respect to MMA. As a popular culture text, MMA represents a definite articulation with both American Empire and war, whether it is symbolic, metaphoric or realistic. “Sports metaphors within a society reveal much about social values, mores, and worldview” (Carter 417). From this perspective, the idea that a society at war is more accommodating

towards expressions of violence is logical. While the popularity of MMA is by no means a direct result of the military endeavours of the American Empire, there is enough evidence to suggest that more consideration of this point is warranted. This is especially pertinent given that the American military is aware that the largest demographic of MMA fans is the same core group that it depends upon for recruitment (a point previously mentioned).

Concluding Remarks

The perception and meaning of MMA, as with other sports, exists beyond the singular notion of a sporting event as an entertaining spectacle. As a popular culture text, MMA is a controversial but legitimate sport that offers insights into how various cultural standards and practices interact to create further meaning and relevance within American society. In addressing various issues such as the semiotic process, identity, masculinity, power, hegemony and commodification of the body, a greater understanding of the cultural presence of MMA is possible. In turn, these same theoretical points can be applied to the American Empire with the intention of drawing correlations between MMA and the American Empire.

The comparisons made between MMA and American Empire are not intended to offer absolute conclusions. Rather the purposes of this discussion regarding MMA and American Empire are based upon the desire to initiate a more comprehensive cultural reading of MMA as a legitimate popular culture text; to illustrate the importance of sport in the creation of social meaning; and to offer insights into how an individual sport has the potential to articulate facets of the culture of which it is a part. MMA has not yet reached its pinnacle within popular culture, so there remains significant opportunity to further explore its relevancy as a sport and popular culture text; within both the American Empire and the globalized world.

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Appendix 1 - Literature Review

Establishing the Social Significance of Mixed Martial Arts in Relation to American Empire: A Literature Review

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a multi-disciplinary combat sport that combines the disciplines of boxing, wrestling, kick-boxing, muay-thai, jiu-jitsu, and judo. MMA is a controversial sport due to its violent physical nature – the goal is to submit your opponent or knock them out. A referee is used to officiate, and three judges score the matches, which is how matches that go the full distance are judged. However victory is preferred via either knock-out or submission since this takes the decision away from the judges and puts responsibility on the fighters alone.

MMA has experienced a huge growth in popularity over the past five years. What was once a fringe sport in the United States now generates tens of millions of dollars per event (gate and pay-per-view revenue). MMA is a mainstream sport within the popular culture lexicon. Clothing lines, DVD sales, a reality television show and a newly released video game offer further evidence that MMA has been accepted as a legitimate sport. Credit for this rise in popularity from fringe to mainstream sport can be largely attributed to the efforts of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) - a Las Vegas based promotion that is widely seen as the most successful MMA organization in the world. Numerous companies stage MMA events in North America and around the world; however the UFC is the largest, richest and most powerful.

Due to its rapid rise within popular culture, MMA is a new and relevant channel by which to offer critical discourse. As a popular culture text, MMA offers perspectives on critical theories addressing power, hegemony, masculinities and capitalist ideologies. Further, these theories allow MMA to be interpreted as a microcosm of the American Empire. As a popular culture text MMA can be deconstructed in a manner that represents select ideals of the American Empire and its culture.

Since MMA has experienced such a rapid ascent into popular culture there is limited theoretical literature that is specific to the sport. In an attempt to reference and draw comparisons between MMA and the American Empire, several articles on similarly physical sports such as wrestling, rugby, and karate have been applied in an effort to generate discussion regarding the influence of sports in culture. Sports are an integral aspect of virtually every culture, and yet how cultures read and interpret individual sports varies greatly. It is my assertion that the UFC brand of MMA reflects several politico-cultural ideals of the American Empire. As such, this literature review will address materials that might represent a sense of the social significance of MMA within popular culture, as well as notions of the American Empire. The intent of this approach is to merge both subjects and offer a cultural studies based discussion, acknowledging the legitimate presence of MMA within American Empire.

A Cultural Reading of MMA

Since the main premise of this project is to interpret MMA as a cultural text that reflects American Empire, it is necessary to define cultural text, and how MMA and American Empire might be placed within this paradigm. Graeme Turner's book *British Cultural Studies* offers a brief overview of textual analysis that suggests the text is the object or site of one's analysis (16). It is further suggested (Turner quoting Richard Johnson) that texts should be seen as relating directly to the subjective or cultural forms which it addresses and/or emanates from (17).

Turner also mentions that literary theory and semiotic analysis contribute to the notion of text and textual analysis (15-16). This is an important framework from which to begin analysis of MMA since semiotics takes the idea of text and blends it within a larger discussion that includes discourse and message. In *Social Semiotics* authors Hodge and Kress suggest that text and message (text being the structure of message) signify social relationships at the moment of

production and reproduction; discourse is the point where meaning is then constructed (6). Perhaps it is worth considering that MMA is a sport at point of production but that in looking at it as a microcosm of American Empire it is being reproduced? Does this in turn change its meaning?

To further explore the cultural significance of MMA and its relationship to American Empire consider the following: “Social semiotics treats all semiotic acts and processes as social acts and processes” (Hodges and Kress 122). The authors go on to mention that within the social process, various definitions of social participation, relations, and structures can be addressed in relation to solidarity or power (122). Indeed the correlation between MMA and American Empire is supported by looking at both subjects as social processes that have the potential to intersect. In turn, the interconnectivity of social acts produces cultural meaning.

Since MMA is a popular culture text, establishing what popular culture represents is warranted. For purposes of this project, popular culture is referring to those events, texts, people and institutions that hold a recognized position within a society. This recognition remains somewhat unqualified and difficult to measure, but it is not unrealistic to correlate it (but not exclusively) to a visible presence within mass and social media formats. In other words the various forms of media become the overriding medium by which semiotic acts are carried and interpreted.

Other significant theoretical considerations of popular culture include; popular culture as the area of negotiation between the dominant and working classes (Bennet quoted in Tester 15). MMA is definitely negotiating its place within American society, and is doing so by challenging and applying various tenets of power. The second point to consider is made by cultural theorist

Stuart Hall in a reference to cultural production, postmodernism and articulation; that theories exist as an open horizon that combine established concepts with those that are new forms of cultural practices. People then have the capacity to reposition themselves differently (Grossberg 138). Indeed MMA is still creating its identity and defining its position within popular culture. At the same time, the notion of American Empire is being challenged and reinterpreted. Any sort of finite reading of both concepts as they relate to each other is not possible given the broad discourses under which these entities exist.

Moving beyond social semiotics and interpretations of popular culture, it is pertinent to consider literary theory as a means of further understanding how MMA and American Empire might be related to one another. Several sports related essays by French literary theorist Roland Barthes offer insights into how MMA and American Empire might correspond. Barthes reads sporting events in correlation to the society and culture where they are carried out. The social meanings of these events are referred to as mythologies (not to be applied exclusively to sports). Using sports in tandem with other social stories and texts, allows Barthes to provide a more comprehensive reading of society. Whether one agrees with him is not the point, rather the comprehensive and holistic manner in which he attempts to understand socio-cultural meaning is.

What is Sport by Roland Barthes features text written to accompany a film by Canadian filmmaker Hubert Aquin. In the book Barthes examines five sports, each of which is considered a national sport in their respective home countries. Barthes' considers sport integral to the social fabric of a nation. "What is a national sport? It is a sport that rises out of the substance of a nation, out of its soil and climate" (Barthes 45-47). MMA while very much a globalized sport has entered the popular culture vernacular during a period when America is engaged in two

significant military campaigns, and is experiencing challenges to its economic and military superiority. Is fair to suggest that MMA as a popular culture text, maybe a by-product of war?

Sport as interpreted by Barthes, is also a spectacle, a theatre of combat, and a modern epic. Barthes believes sports are a place where the spectator is more than a voyeur, they are a participant as well (59). These assertions are common to other sport essays by Barthes. Both *Mythologies* and *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* feature important interpretations of professional wrestling and the Tour de France bicycle race, respectively.

From *Mythologies*, the essay “The World of Wrestling” addresses the spectacle of professional wrestling in 1960’s France. While his reading of professional wrestling does not relate directly to MMA, there are worthwhile points to consider. Barthes refers to wrestling as the spectacle of excess (paragraph 1) and posits that wrestling is a pure imagery that portrays a moral concept of justice (paragraph 9). Of course professional wrestling is a contrived sport whereby the actions and outcomes are largely predetermined, thereby making its textual analysis metaphoric in nature. For instance, Barthes mentions the battle between good and evil, which of course is a strong myth in many societies. While MMA is not a battle between good and evil it is very real in its actions and outcomes. The moral imagery it presents includes; hard work equals success; power is victory; lack of compromise; and the historic appeal of facing the inherent dangers of physical combat. Each of these images can be related to historical and current myths and images relating to Empire.

Returning to Barthes’ spectacle of excess, both wrestling and MMA are excessive presentations of performance, as are the bodies of the athletes. The many excesses of MMA include; the sanctioned physical violence between competitors; the commodification of the body

and its issues relating to power, money and masculinity; and finally the excesses of the spectators, add to the spectacle.

In *The Tour de France as Epic* from *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* Barthes describes the race as being a periplus of geography and a complete exploration of the earth's limits; similar to Homer's *Odyssey* (82). MMA in the (post)modern American Empire may not be a geographic epic, but similar imagery and symbolism reflecting combat and personal sacrifice are obvious references to historic ideals and myths of ancient Rome. The arena's used to stage MMA events, the language used to describe fighters personas, and the zeal of the audience can be compared to the gladiator competitions of the Roman Empire. Indeed the gladiators of the past are referenced by the UFC in both visual and verbal descriptions of its fighters in the Octagon.

While this link between MMA fighter and gladiator offers an easy historical reference, it is a comparison that is not entirely accurate. There is some debate as to whether or not gladiators were athletes at all. In the essay "*Was the Roman Gladiator an Athlete?*" Heather Reid challenges the traditional view of gladiator as servant and entertainer and in doing so addresses issues of spectacle, the virtue of sport, and the philosophy of Roman Stoicism. Reid's essay questions the societal role and position of gladiators, from within a social paradigm of what the masses expected in comparison to the intent and ideals of the gladiator competitions (as presented by the ruling class). The gladiator is presented as a paradoxical figure who although lacking in social status and freedom, symbolized freedom, opportunity and old-fashioned Roman values (Reid 40).

A similar interpretation of MMA fighters and competitions can be made from within the paradigm of capitalist modes of production and American Empire. Although note the reversal of roles between gladiator and MMA fighter. Today's MMA fighter has social status and monetary reward via a sport that challenges the moral code (implied) of the American Empire and so-called civilized society. MMA has entered into the popular culture lexicon as a sport that is banned in several American states (at time of writing), and where athletes gain social status, recognition and monetary reward through sanctioned physical violence. Further discussion of this paradox could lead to a better understanding and placing of MMA within popular culture.

While Barthes places sports and their cultural significance within the paradigm of mythologies and stories of a culture, a more anthropological reading should not be ignored. Numerous cultures use combat sports as a means of cultural expression and representation. While American culture is not overt in its representation of combat sports, MMA does represent a particular vision of the American identity. This new identity is arguably part of the process whereby sports is a means of creating a new social identity – another network offering multiple identities that can exist simultaneously, seasonally or consecutively (MacClancy 3). The correlation of expression and representation contributes significantly to cultural identity. This is especially true when applied to gender politics and masculinities.

Both identity and gender is well addressed in politico-cultural literature. Although none of the articles selected for this discussion apply directly to American society, they do represent the significant presence of sport within culture, which in turn offers insights and points of comparison for MMA in America. In his essay *'Strong as a Turk': Power, Performance and Representation in Turkish Wrestling*, Martin Stokes looks at how wrestling while not the most popular sport in Turkey, remains a significant symbol of national strength, represents a moral

code of contest and display, and is a repository of subversive knowledge (22). Wrestling in Turkey also represents the fetishisation of the male body which correlates to the chauvinist political programme in Turkey (29). Social class and its representation from within is also addressed – many in Turkey see wrestling as very traditional and backwardly rural in nature (27). How similar ideas and readings of MMA apply to the American Empire is worth further consideration.

In applying discourses of identity and masculinities to MMA and the American Empire, it becomes necessary to explore the construction of identity and how this plays out within a given paradigm. As mentioned in Carrington's *Merely Identity: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Sport*, the construction of identities is a given, but what is important to address is the difference that various kinds of constructions make (51). Carrington goes on to mention Stuart Hall and his idea of constitutive representation as opposed to the reflective constitution of social and political life (51). Indeed, is MMA as an emerging cultural text simply reflecting the existing standards of identity and masculinity within America? Or is MMA, because of its emergence as mainstream sport, able to create a unique reading of cultural identity and the body within American society?

Ossu! Sporting Masculinities in a Japanese karate dōjō by Kris Chapman explores the masculine hegemony that exists within Japanese karate dōjō (training centre). Chapman addresses whether this inequality is inherent or contingent on cultural constructs of masculinity in Japan. While much of the discussion is based on participant observation in a dōjō, Chapman does acknowledge MMA fighting, its media presence and the absence of women from televised fighting representations (325). The same issue exists in America, where women do train and participate in MMA events, however the UFC at this time does not have any women in its roster

nor does it promote women's fights. Given such circumstance, the idea of inequality being inherent or contingent is worth further exploration.

Within any discussion of identity and masculinities, issues of power undoubtedly arise. Within this project, MMA and power is considered from the perspective of cultural representation and from a more socio-political lens. Certainly the body is a literal representation of power in MMA, as it is for any combat sport. But what does this mean within the larger discussion of sport and culture? The article *No Pain Is Sane After All: A Foucauldian Analysis of Masculinities and Men's Experiences in Rugby* suggests that sports do not unambiguously produce dominant conceptions of masculinities (Pringle and Markula 451). While this conclusion is offered in tandem with a team sport such as rugby, its premise is certainly open to further exploration particularly in a sport such as MMA. As a combat sport, the imagery and meaning of MMA is inherently linked to a number of previously existing representations that are clearly supportive of the dominance of masculinities.

Considering the American Empire Through MMA

Using the term Empire in relation to 21st century America is a potential contentious position given how meaning and theoretical perspectives have changed over the years. While these renegotiations are important to acknowledge, they remain outside of the scope of this discussion. Conceptually Empire will be interpreted as a cultural construct that considers historical interpretations, imperial legacies, and nationalist sentiments (self-perceptions), and more recent considerations of corporate imperialism.

Steven Pope in *Rethinking Sport, Empire, and American Exceptionalism* insinuates that using an imperial framework is an excellent reference point for constructing new perspectives

on American sports history (108). Although MMA as a recognized sport has a relatively short history, it seeks to grow and expand (brand itself) in order to create a global sporting identity. This is done in a manner that evokes imperial methods and attitudes – using particularly American-centric measures. Pope references the idea of a new American neoimperialism, with a focus on financial hegemony as a newer, softer means of Empire (101). More specific is a reference to international sport being used to express the values of American style capitalism, democracy and imperialism (Pope quoting Keys 103). The UFC does promote MMA in a way that exemplifies American style capitalism, and uses established soft powers to increase the popularity and recognition of MMA and the UFC brand around the world.

There exists a prominent socio-cultural relationship between the Roman Empire and the United States. In his book *Are We Rome? The Fall of An Empire And The Fate of America* Callum Murphy addresses the relationship between America and the Roman Empire and how it is consistently promoted. “Rome and America are the most powerful actors in their worlds, by any order of magnitude. Their power includes both military might and the ‘soft power’ of language, culture, commerce, technology and ideas” (Murphy 14). To further support such ideas, Murphy addresses six parallels between Rome and America: the way both see themselves, military power, privatization/corruption, how the outside world is viewed, the questions of borders and the complexity parallel - built-in problems of managing an Empire (18-20). These parallels are important since they can be explored applied in greater detail to theoretical discussions of biopower, hegemony, capitalist means of production, and globalization.

MMA relies upon the body to represent and define its existence. A victorious body represents the most power, receives the most accolades (socially and financially) and becomes the identity of the sport. This representation of the body is easily moved into larger discourses of

power and society. In *The Rites of Men*, Varda Burstyn borrowing from Foucault, draws a link between the body and the political field (32). Burstyn extends the connection to describe sport as a very direct form of biopower (32). Foucault used the term biopower as a means of illustrating the sovereign power of the state over the people by controlling the body. In *'Society Must Be Defended'* biopower is presented as a power that has control of the body and life. This sovereign power is both disciplinary and regulatory in nature (Foucault 253-54).

The power-based relationship between dominant and subordinate groups and how MMA might represent this relationship can be considered within a discussion of hegemony. *Power and Ideology in American Sport: A Critical Perspective* by George Sage presents hegemony as ideological domination (19); and considers sport to be an important site whereby dominant ideology can be constructed and maintained (26). Within his discussions, Sage goes on to draw comparisons between dominant ideology and spectator sports, and the link between hegemony and capitalist ideologies (27-28).

MMA as a popular culture text relates to Sage's idea of sport serving as a vehicle for promoting the values and meanings of the dominant group (28). However MMA is a paradox; while it represents ideals of power and identity, it has had to create and develop its own legitimacy as a mainstream sport. In doing so, MMA actually challenges the controlling parameters within the American empire. This is an important consideration when looking at the production of a popular culture text.

Sports are both social regulators and significant points of cultural meaning. However as MMA moves into the mainstream, it renegotiates the traditional dynamics and ideologies between dominant and subordinate groups. As a sport, MMA controls the body, whereas the

state controls the audience. But at the same time, the UFC and its representations of the body, display the same power dynamics as the state – UFC controls the product and the bodies, both socially and monetarily. Who then has ultimate control – the state or the sport? Can a sport both challenge and represent the underlying intentions of the Empire?

Consideration of this question demands that MMA and the American empire be looked at from a perspective of capitalist production and globalization. Specifically, sovereign power must be re-considered with respect to its ability to control the masses, especially during this period of what many are calling post-modern capitalism (Hardt and Negri 344). Hardt and Negri in *Empire* mention that imperial control operates via three global and absolute means: the bomb, money and ether (345). The bomb reiterates the notion of biopower, money is the imperial arbiter and ether, although vague, addresses the importance of communication systems within culture. The UFC brand of MMA uses money and ether to facilitate and secure the move into the popular culture lexicon. As a sport MMA is using the same means to achieve success as imperial powers use to maintain control. It may even be suggested that the UFC is emulating a post-modern Empire (American or otherwise).

That money is the imperial arbiter is a fact not lost on the promoters of MMA or its fighters. Money is the precipice of all things MMA, and this is displayed in a number of ways. Commodification of the body is a necessary part of being an MMA fighter – logical since the body is the means by which success and value is achieved. In all professional sports, athletes are labourers with a sole dependence upon the capabilities and performance of their own bodies. The following quote was made in reference to baseball players but it speaks to athletes' dependence upon the body. "The privilege and status of professional athletes, even in the lower levels of the profession, in the towns where they work is offset by the recognition that they are labourers with

no job security whatsoever.” (Carter 415). This point as referenced in *On the Need for an Anthropological Approach to Sport* by Thomas Carter, offers further evidence that capitalist practices are the primary organizing principle of sport (416)

Since the term *ether* is rather vague, it is best to focus upon its concern with systems of communication. To assert that MMA has entered the realm of popular culture largely as a result of successes in communicating the product is valid. Essential to the communication of the product are ideas of spectatorism and the use of television (media) to promote a product. In *Revisioning Sport Spectatorism*, Dennis Hamphill addresses both ideas separately but also draws a correlation between the mediation of television and the repositioning of spectator bodies (55). This is an important consideration given the reliance on television that the UFC has in order to legitimize MMA and promoted the brand.

This promotional link between spectators and television is addressed by Gary Whannel in *Culture, Politics and Sport blowing the whistle revisited*. “Television does not simply relay sport to us. It presents a particular view of sport framed by its own selection of shots and the addition of its own commentary. It is a particular view, inviting us to look at events in a particular way” (Whannel 73). To apply this reasoning towards the UFC and their promotion of MMA is very fitting. Whether it is the reality show *The Ultimate Fighter* or the monthly pay-per-view events, the UFC has ultimate creative control over the product. The audience is being given a very well developed presentation of MMA. In other words MMA is a popular culture text in large part due to the control exerted by the promotional (manipulative?) powers of television. This manner of control mirrors the efforts of Empire to control populations by regulating and disciplinary measures.

The effective promotion and communication of the MMA/UFC brand is indicative of the globalized world. My interpretation of globalization is perhaps best described by the term glocalization – which creates a link between the local and global. In the book *Global Sport: Identities, Societies, Civilizations* author Joseph Maguire states a similar perceptive, “In the sports world, as elsewhere, there is an ongoing cultural contest, of sameness, difference, selective elimination, selective emulation and commingling” (8). This seems a very realistic assessment of not only sports, but the interplay of various cultures around the world. Indeed throughout the book Maguire favours ideas of polyculturalism, multicausal analysis and global diversity. The author wants to move beyond crude forms of cultural imperialism and Americanization, and address a more broad cultural process (124). Maguire speaks to “the growing network of interdependencies that involve economic, political, cultural and technological dimensions” (129).

But while Maguire’s worldview is well suited to the current socio-political climate; it challenges many of the interpretations of American empire that have been presented thus far. Indeed the cultural branding of MMA and the willingness of America to compare itself to the Roman Empire are two points that focus upon America and not the globalized world. Such inconsistencies present an interesting challenge, since MMA is very much a multi-cultural sport that wants a global sporting identity. In contrast, how the UFC structures itself and promotes MMA is from within a social scape very much rooted in Empire and cultural imperialism. How this paradox plays out within a glocal popular culture will be very interesting to follow as MMA grows.

Concluding Remarks

The rise of MMA into the popular culture realm has provided opportunity for a sport-based cultural reading that offers as much insight into American society as it does into MMA.

The literature reviewed within does not address MMA specifically, nor does it connect sports to society in a one dimensional way. Rather the literature accessed, presents the current epoch as an era where meaning and understanding of individual entities is best illustrated through their interconnectivity to multiple signs and theories. MMA is a hybrid sport well suited to the transnational world of the 21st century; its corporate branding and commodification of the body ensure this. At the same time, MMA has significant socio-historical relevancy to the modern American empire. Theoretical considerations of social meaning, identity, power, and capitalism all have validity when applied to MMA. However the intention with this which these literatures are considered is meant to provide unique insights into how MMA as a popular culture text, can relate to perspectives of American Empire.

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