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## Brock Lesnar is Going Down: A Performative Critique of a So-called Ultimate Fighter

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# **Brock Lesnar is Going Down: A Performative Critique of a So-called Ultimate Fighter**

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*In this paper, I take a no-holds-barred approach to cultural criticism, using performative writing as my primary combat style with which to kick Ultimate Fighting Champion Brock Lesnar's ass. Under the performative guise of a three-round fight, I offer a counter-hegemonic reading of Brock Lesnar's move from professional wrestling to Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). I argue that Lesnar's quest to become the Ultimate Fighting Champion parallels a crucial feature of hegemonic masculinity—the constant struggle to become a man—while demonstrating the process of formalization and informalization that continually shapes our understanding of what it is to be a man. The battle between the critic and the criticized dramatizes the contest over what it means to be a real man, a contest enacted in the culture of MMA and reflected in Brock Lesnar's career change.*

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## **The Pre-fight**

I don't really hate Brock Lesnar. "Hate" is, as they say, a really strong word, a totalizing word that doesn't always help in understanding how power works. From the outset of this project, however, I have had a distinct sense that I am out to get Lesnar, that I have strong desire to expose him as a representative of a version of masculinity that operates hegemonically, suppressing alternative expressions of masculinity and constraining the emergence of new masculinities, and, above all, the possibility for more intimate, loving relationships between men. I was looking for the smoking gun, the prime example of everything that is wrong with masculinity and men in our contemporary American culture. Yet, Lesnar has partially evaded my attack, resisted my submission hold, and refused to tap out. The multiple voices I use in this piece—the normative voice of a Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fan, the ironic voice of a queer, the critical voice of scholar, and the narrative voice of my childhood self—derive from an awareness of the contradictory impulses that propel this study. Although at times tongue-in-cheek, the antagonistic form this essay takes is also a reflexive move that owns up to the fact that culture and reality are inherently contested concepts, constituted in large part through conflict: the implicit or explicit praise and

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blame discernible in all cultural discourse (Greenblatt). In this essay I insist that we consider the ways in which criticism itself is a combat sport. The counter-hegemonic interpretations I perform of Brock Lesnar reveal the complexities of masculinity as shaped by MMA, its fans, and its fighters.

This fight takes place in three rounds. In the first round, I explain “why I hate” Brock Lesnar and why I must defeat him, with an exploration into the world of Mixed Martial Arts fan websites. In round two, Lesnar gains my respect as a formidable opponent as I examine his move from professional wrestling to MMA, arguing that his career can be seen as an ongoing effort to prove his manhood. In round three, Lesnar tries to teach me a lesson about compassionate restraint; I waver while considering the value of combat sport, and then finish him off with a blow to the entire sport of MMA. Along the way, I discuss the struggle to become a man that is dramatized in sport and enacted in men’s lives.

### ***The Method and Object of My Attack***

As sport scholarship, this paper is aligned with a critical cultural studies approach to sports described by Mary G. McDonald and Susan Birrell as grounded in “the use of particular sports celebrities and incidents as entries into understanding broader relations of power” (288)—in order to engage with constructions of sport, gender, sexuality, and ‘reality’ that have occurred around the cultural phenomenon that is Brock Lesnar. By focusing on Lesnar, I am able to maintain a level of textual coherence in my object of analysis, while at the same time I am allowed “relatively open vantage points from which to observe, critique, and intervene in the complex and contradictory interactions of the power lines of ability, age, race, class, nationality, gender, and sexuality” (McDonald and Birrell 295-96). A critical cultural approach is appropriate for this study because of its interdisciplinary commitment, its expanded notion of texts and reading, its complex theorizing of the operations and effects of power, and its production of counter-hegemonic understandings.

My primary method is performative writing because it is an evocative and aesthetic writing that seeks the metonymic representation of life as it comes to be known through my body as a living, breathing, performing, and feeling researcher. Della Pollock writes: “performative writing is an important, dangerous and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life” (75). Like mixed martial artists who crave the dangers of deregulated combat, performative writers seek the dangers of aesthetic excess in the writing up of our objects of study. As Ronald J. Pelias argues, “the poetic essay offers a more nuanced account in keeping with the spirit of the performative event” (xi). The aesthetic relationship between the form and content of performative writing is productive; good performative writing seeks to “exceed its determinations within structures of absence/presence in order to perform a social function” (Pollock 76). Here I seek

to not only tell about the world of MMA, but also to show its discourses in action, to dramatically put it into play as I contend with it. My use of performative writing also includes personal narratives constructed from my childhood memories as a competitive wrestler and a fan of professional wrestling. These narratives are weaved throughout the text in a productive manner that speaks to the larger story I am telling about masculinity, Brock Lesnar, and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

It is fitting that I am using a mixed methodology to discuss a major figure in the world of Mixed Martial Arts. As Toby Miller demonstrates in his introduction to the book *SportCult*, sports have become ubiquitous in contemporary life, enmeshed in the discourses of business, nationalism, the body, and the media in ways that require a diverse set of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to analysis (28-33). Similarly, Robert E. Rinehart states that the idea that “sport is central to western lives is axiomatic in contemporary American society” (14). Although the importance of sports in our lives is an obvious fact, its significance is not; rather, it must be constantly pursued in the ever-shifting contexts in which sports take place. Sports are imbued with the intricacies and dynamism of social life, and as such they require interpretations produced through critical interaction with the social world—a particularly messy kind of world. A critical cultural studies reading can reveal meanings and implications that may be overlooked by traditional social scientific studies that stress quantifiable data for the purposes of prediction in part because:

It moves not only within the disciplines traditionally identified as humanities and those identified as social science, but across the paradigmatic boundary between the humanities and the social sciences as well. When we recall that sport is a social realm whose primary subject—the body—is also constructed by the sciences, the appropriateness of a multi-interdisciplinary approach consistent with cultural studies becomes even more evident. (McDonald and Birrell 285)

### ***Grappling with Hegemonic Masculinity***

The story of Brock Lesnar is complex—from his early success in collegiate NCAA wrestling to his epic rise in the sports theatre of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), to his quest to prove himself to be the Ultimate Fighting Champion. His story can be told from a variety of angles revealing a variety of cultural understandings concerning the nature of bodies, gender, sexuality, and the human condition broadly conceived of as ‘reality.’ In my reading, I use an expanded notion of ‘text’ that includes the discourse available through media reports, fan websites and promotional videos, as well as nonverbal aspects of the sport (i.e., the movement of bodies, costuming, the appearance of blood, etc.). I have paid particular attention to sports

media news reports and interviews with Lesnar that feature discussions of his move from WWE to UFC specifically. I also examined MMA fan forum sites like *sherdog.com*, *fightforum.com*, and *ufc.com* in order to find out how MMA fans were discussing Lesnar's career change. While navigating this complex text, I interact with Brock Lesnar and MMA fans' rhetoric and performance, using them as buoy points that gather possibilities for "what is happening" along the way. As a reader, I am, as Michael Messner has written, "studying up," in both senses of the phrase. I am drawing from the work of other scholars in order to learn as much as I can, and I am aiming my critique at those in positions of power ("Studying Up" 231).

Critical sport scholars have confirmed that the modern culture of sports in the United States often supports a conservative, regressive agenda. For example, Messner has demonstrated that the institutionalization and mass dissemination of men's sports (i.e., football, basketball, and baseball) represent a reactionary backlash against advances in women's rights and the perceived "feminization" of American culture ("Sports" 199-201). Discursive formations of sports—verbal and nonverbal alike—are cultural phenomena, and as such reveal the larger political struggles of the culture in which they are performed.

Hegemonic masculinity, an idea introduced by R. W. Connell nearly three decades ago, is the central concept in much contemporary sport scholarship (Anderson, "Openly Gay;" Connell & Messerschmidt; Messner, "Men;" Pronger, "Arena"; Trujillo). R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt borrow from Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony as the complex operation of power whereby one group maintains its dominance over others to argue that hegemonic masculinity embodies "the currently most honored way of being a man . . . [requiring] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, in the process legitimizing the global<sup>1</sup> subordination of women to men" (832). Hegemonic masculinity is the organizing concept of my critique because it focuses on the multiple ways in which male domination over females and other males is made possible through discursive practices. Nick Trujillo, in his treatment of baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan, argues that masculinity is hegemonic when it supports a dominant ideology that sees manliness in terms of "physical force and control," "occupational achievement," "patriarchal" rule in the family and society, "frontiersmanship," and "heterosexuality" (291-92). In Nolan Ryan,

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1 Connell and Messerschmidt back away from the notion of a "global" hegemonic structure. They write, "While this was useful at the time in preventing the idea of multiple masculinities from collapsing into an array of competing lifestyles, it is now clearly inadequate to our understanding of relations among groups of men and forms of masculinity and of women's relations with dominant masculinities. For instance, dominance in gender relations involves an interplay of costs and benefits, challenges to hegemonic masculinity arise from the 'protest masculinities' of marginalized ethnic groups, and bourgeois women may appropriate aspects of hegemonic masculinity in constructing corporate or professional careers" (847).

the media found a representation of ideal masculinity: masculinity rooted in power and ambition that benefits the country, the economy, and the family. While I am impressed with Trujillo's work (and make use of his analysis), I worry, along with Michael Moller, that an understanding of hegemonic masculinity as an "idealized" form can have an unintended positivistic effect, working "as a theoretical and/or methodological mechanism with which to whittle down the diversity and complexity of human subjects until they can be understood in black and white terms as having a discernible place in the system of gender (267). Trujillo's analysis is useful because it identifies relatively stable formations of masculinity projected by the media in its telling of Nolan Ryan's story; at the same time, his analysis downplays ideal masculinity as contested, ignoring the nature of that contest as an important everyday feature of masculinity.

To avoid this, and to answer Connell and Messerschmidt's call, I attempt to rethink hegemonic masculinity in a manner that emphasizes dynamic "patterns of internal division and emotional conflict" (852). Thus, I engage my subject performatively, allowing myself to move in and around the complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes inherent in the operations of hegemonic masculinity. Whereas Trujillo's analysis focuses on the overall meaning of Ryan as the media frames him, my take on Lesnar focuses more on conflicting views, on the disciplining operations and effects of hegemonic masculinity. I offer a counter-hegemonic reading of Brock Lesnar and the MMA in the form of no-holds-barred scholarship. From the low blows of my own feelings to the sanctioned moves of empiricism, I will not hold back in this critique. Throughout the fight, I will show how Lesnar's career can be seen as a constant quest to prove his manhood, a crucial feature of hegemonic masculinity. This story reveals some of the processes that shape our understanding of what it is to be a good man. I now turn to a quick pre-fight introduction of Mixed Martial Arts and its main promoter in the U.S., the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

### *The Ultimate Fighting of Ultimate Men<sup>2</sup>*

Mixed Martial Arts as a distinct form of sport is oxymoronic, emerging from the intentional blurring of historically and culturally unique combat disciplines such as wrestling, judo, jujitsu, boxing, and kickboxing. MMA is a blurring of sports that reverses the trajectory of modern sports as progressively purified and perfected through codification, homogenization, and commodification. However, just as postmodernism's anti-realist commitment to the unconscious mixing of different styles, texts, and cultural codes can be paradoxically read as perhaps a more accurate

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2 Women are also mixed-martial artists and women's MMA would be a rich a site for investigation. However, for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to focus on Brock Lesnar and the behavior of men in the sport of MMA.

portrayal of the discontinuities and contradictions of social life (more realist than realism), MMA has gained a peculiar ontological purity in the act of mixing; in the breakdown of false categories; and in the revelation of a more primal, more chaotic essence. MMA threw out the old guard, those arbiters of sports whose rules, point systems, and weight classes produced specialized fighters (i.e., boxers, wrestlers, kickboxers, etc.) performing specialized activities. In turn, these more traditional combat sports are no longer seen as platonic forms but instead as highly stylized productions. Maarten Van Bottenburg and Joahn Heilbron explain that, “Among [MMA] practitioners . . . the criticism was that overly tight regulation forced fighting styles too far away from their origins: as exercises for *real* fighting” (267), thus MMA is treated as more “real” than the combat sports it blends because it produces fights that more closely resemble real fights.

Van Bottenburg and Heilbron write: “The formula for this new type of fighting contest was wonderfully simple. With the exception of biting and eye gouging, anything was permissible in the first few UFC [fights]: kicking and punching, even when the opponent is down and defenseless, chokes, hair pulling, locks and bars, elbow strikes, and head butts” (260). Yet even as this initial avant-garde gesture—this “informalization”—challenges the traditional rules and authorities, it has over time become more formalized. It has developed its own unique character as a sport along with more stringent rules and weight classes in order to minimize the risks of injuries and satisfy public officials and state regulations. MMA fighters often come to the sport trained in a specific combat discipline. Raúl Sánchez García and Dominic Malcom argue, “As MMA has become more established, however, its proponents have tended to become more well-rounded fighters, training in those areas in which they are weakest . . . leading to a hybridization of fighting styles” (40).

The precise origin of MMA, a global phenomenon that is both backyard and big business, is difficult to trace. However, it is clear that the sport took hold in the 1990s<sup>3</sup> and is now a firmly established sport with major leagues and smaller fight clubs all over the country. According to the magazine

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3 Van Bottenburg and Heilbron use the term “No Holds Barred” events (NHB) as a collective term for the different versions of the sport that have emerged “alongside” one another, such as the Brazilian articulation of *vale tudo* (“anything goes”) and the UFC (261). García and Malcolm dispute this, claiming that NHB is used to specifically reference the “connection between American MMA’s main organization (UFC) and its Brazilian roots,” not as a generic term for “unregulated fighting” (41). An exact etymology of the different terms for MMA (“absolute fighting, extreme fighting, cage fighting, world combat, free fight, warrior combat, pancrase, mixed fight, cage wars, millennium brawls, and ultimate combat” [Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 261]) is not necessary for my purposes. Here, I use MMA as synonymous with *ultimate fighting*, as an umbrella term for the activity across sites and organizations, while UFC refers specifically to the mass-mediated business of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. For fuller accounts of the formation of MMA and UFC, see the authors cited above.

*Advertising Age*, UFC began the re-regulation of MMA for a “deal that would catapult [UFC] out of smoky bars and into American living rooms,” and is now “beating up on boxing, drawing blood from professional wrestling and even gaining on NASCAR” (Brodesser-Akner). The UFC has gained popularity through the “spectacularization” of MMA, whereby attention is focused more on the broader story, “from fighting skills to the show and spectacle,” that borrows from the success of the WWE (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 277). UFC is a big business, attracting a range of sponsors competing for the attention of UFC’s large demographic market—the 18-49 year old male audience—shared by the likes of Burger King, Coors, and Budweiser. The UFC has apparel and equipment lines, a best-selling video game, and a reality television series on Spike TV.

Brock Lesnar deserves some credit for the continued success of UFC. His move from WWE professional wrestling (where he was one of its biggest stars, equally loved and hated) attracted much attention to the UFC. His most noted characteristic is his size: the visible manifestation of his power. What Roland Barthes writes of professional wrestlers is true of Lesnar: “The physique of the wrestler . . . constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight” (18). How we come to understand the meaning of Brock Lesnar and his success in sports and entertainment derives heavily from our orientation toward his body. Lesnar is 6'3", weighs around 265lbs, and is stacked like a V made of bricks, with broad muscular shoulders and a trim waist (“Brock Lesnar”). Commentators, reporters, and fans often note the awe of his spectacle, a huge mass of muscle that appears to move faster than it should. Even in his early career when he was a collegiate wrestler for the University of Minnesota his size and power were remarkable; commentators characterized his 1999 NCAA championship match as “power” (Lesnar) versus “experience” (Neal, defending NCAA champ), and claimed that Neal wanted to prove that although “everyone is impressed every time Lesnar takes his jersey off . . . just being big doesn’t mean you can win a heavyweight title” (“HW Brock Lesnar vs. Stephen Neal”).

This idea that Lesnar has only succeeded because of his size—that he lacks the intelligence and skill of a real fighter—has hung over his entire career, and even persists after he proved he could win the Ultimate Fighting Championship. In one sense his power obscures his skill and is treated as unearned, as not belonging, but rather given to him by some supernatural or unnatural (i.e., steroids, genetic mutation) force. In another sense, which takes deeper significance and becomes harder for Lesnar to shake since joining the “fake” wrestling of WWE, his size is treated as theatre: as a spectacle that garnered him undeserved attention and an easy ride to the top. Thus, his move to Mixed Martial Arts was not only good for business; it was also an opportunity for Lesnar to prove himself to be a “real” athlete, a “real” fighter, and a “real” man.

## Round 1

Here I peruse a dark side of MMA fan websites sites in order to find out “why I hate” Brock Lesnar, and further, why he deserves derision.

### *Brock Lesnar is a Threat to My Sexuality*

I’m queer. I’m not a mixed martial artist, but I understand the desire for more than one style. I understand the desire to be free of artificial constraints, the rules that keep things dull and predictable. I can fall in love with men and women. I enjoy sex with men and women. I’m queer, and yet, when I see MMA, gay sex is not what I see.<sup>4</sup> Though I might catch the glimmer of a sweaty, cut, nearly naked man on the TV over my shoulder at a bar, if my gaze is held it is hardly long until this object to be desired becomes an object to be feared as he displays his brute force using his fists on another man’s face, marking his territory with another man’s blood. In MMA, I see every cruise gone wrong, every pass interfered, and the possibility for broken bones blamed on “gay panic.” It’s a not-so-subtle reminder to stick to my own arena of play, where all the players agree on the game.

It’s hard for me not to see MMA as a warning. The ultra-violent spectacle of man-on-man combat is just a reminder. Homophobia and anti-gay sentiments go hand in hand with the most masculine, most aggressive sports. They are part of what makes these sports masculine in the first place. This fact is well documented (Anderson, “Openly Gay” and “In the Game;” Curry; Pronger, “Arena”), and an obvious one to anyone who has spent any time around male athletics. As Anderson writes, homophobia “presents itself in the form of resistance against the intrusion of a gay subculture within sports and serves as a way of maintaining the rigidity of orthodox masculinity and patriarchy. Sports not only reject homosexuality but they also venerate hyperheterosexuality” (“Openly Gay” 861). The processes by which these structures take hold are numerous and complex and are enacted across multiple localized contexts. Yet the message is clear as day. Sports are no place for gay people. Instead, we remain invisible, kept on the sidelines, like tackling dummies for an endless practice game of “smear the queer.”

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Jack was one of my best friends when I was a kid, despite the fact that he would sometimes hit me. His temper was only matched by his intense imagination, his ability to make believe for long stretches of time, adding delicious details to our play with micro-machines, the slip and slide, or whatever new contraption his mother brought home that week. He was an only child—a big kid. When we would play at my house, if he threw a fit my brother and I would berate him with words, call him a baby, call him

4 Here, I am referencing the common critique that MMA’s ultra-violence fails to hide its obvious homoeroticism as argued, for example, in Russell Thaddeus’s article “Is Ultimate Fighting Gay?”

an animal. When we'd play at his house, things would go smoother, until something would set him off.

I had only seen his father, a large man with dark hair and dark eyes, in pictures. He was shot and killed while at his job as a security guard before I met Jack, when Jack was just a toddler. This was the original sin (or at least that's how I came to use it as a way to explain what was happening). I used it to explain his hyper-activity, his inability to be still (he would rub his chin raw during the night by moving his head back and forth). I used it to explain why he'd yell at his mother.

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Dear Brock,

When you gloat in the immediate aftermath of your victory over Frank Mir that you may celebrate by "getting on top of my wife," you commit symbolic violence, establishing your dominance over your wife and women in general. When you respond to a woman who says her "friend Shawn thinks you're kinda cute," by saying for all to hear, including a reporter, "I don't like gays. Write that down in your little notebook. I don't like gays," you draw a line in the sand between us. When you unleash a "curse-laden outburst," about "gays" that ESPN.com won't print because it "might make even John Rocker blush,"<sup>5</sup> you declare yourself my enemy.

Sincerely,  
Joe Hassert

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We are playing whiffle ball in Jack's backyard, just the two of us and some imaginary runners, and although we agreed that the doghouse was a homerun and the pool was an out, I swear that one bounced just before the gravel (which was only a single). Jack wanted the double and when I refused to pitch to him and called him dumb, he took a swing at me with a large red whiffle ball bat. He smacked me right across my bare belly. There was a loud slap (he was a power hitter) and I hunched over, crying. Jack, realizing what he did, put his hand on my back saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" over and over again. I brushed him off and ran home crying. There was no permanent damage (it wasn't a *real* bat, after all), and it was mostly the sting and the sound that scared me. Still, I had a big fat horizontal red welt on my stomach.

Later that afternoon Jack called to see if I wanted to wrestle with his new WWF "fighter pillows." He had two, an Ultimate Warrior (my favorite wrestler because he shook the ropes like a maniac before matches) and Hulk Hogan (his favorite). His toys would always bring me back quicker than I intended, and a few minutes later we were jumping off of his bed, delivering flying elbow drops to the plush likenesses of Hulk and Warrior.

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5 From Drehs, "Grappling with His Future."

We then switched to one of our favorite games, pretending his other pillows, the real pillows, were our girlfriends (I called mine Crystal). Tired from all that jumping around, we would take our girlfriends on “dates,” building the tension before “humping” them by laying on top of them and grinding them with our pelvises in his bed.

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The fight I’m picking with Lesnar is personal. My involvement in the masculine culture of sports definitely correlates with the length of time it has taken me to accept my desires as part of who I am. I regularly participated in sexist and homophobic conversations and situations, and I used my athleticism as what Anderson calls “masculinity insurance” (“Openly Gay” 865), insuring that my friends saw me as straight and even proving it to myself—proving that although I have these feelings, and although I did those things when I was a kid—those aren’t *real* feelings, we were *only* playing, I’m not *really* queer.

Whether he intended to or not, Brock Lesnar has a starring role in the mythology of gender and sexuality played out in the world of sport. His performances of masculinity and the discourse that surrounds him have major effects on people’s perceptions of reality, and as such he is certainly deserving of some critical combat.

Brock Lesnar, you have been named.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Brock Lesnar is a Freak of Nature***

*“I want to fight Lesnar. I hate who he is as a person. I want to break his neck in the ring. I want him to be the first person that [sic.] dies due to Octagon-related injuries. That’s what’s going through my mind.”—Frank Mir, former UFC Champion in an interview on The Mark Madden Show WDX, February 2010 (Smith).*

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Brock Lesnar is a freak of nature.<sup>7</sup> Just look at him—that’s all you need to do. Just look. Just look at his big ol’ head. He’s a beast. He’s freaking freak. He’s a freak of nature. He’s a hairless gorilla with a sex toy tattooed on his chest. I hate Brock Lesnar; he’s a freak.

6 For more on *naming* see Pelias, “Naming Men: The Business of Performing Manly,” (“Writing Performance” 11-20).

7 The following insults in “Brock Lesnar is a Freak of Nature” were gathered on MMA fan web forums, MMA blogs, and the comments sections of stories and video about Lesnar. Most of these were found after a Google search using the terms, “I hate Brock Lesnar.” These include *sherdog.com*, *fightforum.com*, *ufc.com*, and *youtube.com*. I tried to use the exact wording, but took poetic license in the assembling of these comments into a single voice. I hope the heteroglossia of the writing process remains available to the reader.

Wanna know why the UFC brought this beast from professional wrestling into MMA? Because people love a freak show. Freak shows sell tickets. I hate Brock Lesnar. He's fat and has no skill! Lesnar is a disgrace to fighting. He's just the biggest dude in the game, which is the only reason why he's winning.

Anyone with a triple digit IQ and any common sense hates Brock. That's right. If you like a stupid brute, then it's probably because you *are* a stupid brute. You are just like Brock, and you only love him because of when he was in that fake ass WWE. Dumbass. He doesn't deserve a shot at the title. It's just 'cause of people like you, who'd rather see a freak show than a fighter with real skills that he gets to skip to the front of the line.

Brock Lesnar SUCKS: poor attitude, no heart, sickly, and needs to get smacked up like a girl. The beast can't even control himself. What he did after beating Mir was low class. Flipping off the crowd? C'mon, he won't even shake Frank Mir's hand. Low class. He's bringing that WWE crap into MMA. He needs to work on his MMA skill set and act less like a WWE meathead. I'm not really looking for a post fight entertainer. That's what the hot ring girls are for. I hate Brock Lesnar.

Brock Lestard.

Brock Lesnar sucks. To win, he just laid on the other dude. Nice masturbation punches, idiot. You heard me. When he was laying on top of Mir, and using the hammer punch, it looked like he was jerking off. He's just a big gay bully. He fights little tiny guys. Wow. He weighs 50lbs more and just beats them up. Wow. Brock Lesnar sucks, and he's gay.

Oh, and did I mention he has a dick on his chest. Sure, he says it's a sword, but just look at it! It clearly looks like a big ol' boner running up his chest, aimed square at his mouth. HA! LOL!!!!

Brock Lesnar is gay! For real, he is. I saw it on youtube. You can go right now and watch it. Just type in "Brock Lesnar is gay!" (That's the title of the video) and you'll see the proof. He kisses a dude on the lips, and before you say it was just part of his WWE villain act, that moment was unscripted, he just did it all on his own. Just look.

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If you go looking for villains, you will find them. When I look through these again and say them out loud, I start to empathize with Lesnar. It's not a far step from "freak of nature" to "faggot." When I think of the ways in which his body is fetishized, turned into freak show, feared and hated, I pity him. Perhaps pity is the scholar's best weapon.

## Round 2

In Round 2, Lesnar gains my respect as a formidable opponent as I examine his move from WWE to UFC and "get real" with him in a fake interview.

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*“I acted very unprofessionally after the fight... There was a lot of emotion in this bout, [but] I love this company [UFC], and I love to fight. I went into the entertainment business for a little while, and I guess there’s still a little bit of it in me.”—Lesnar apologizing for his crass behavior after his championship knockout of Mir and after being scolded by UFC president Dana White (“Lesnar Apologizes”).*

*“I would like to apologize to Brock Lesnar and his family, the UFC and the UFC fans for my stupid remarks. I respect Brock, all the other fighters, and the sport of mixed martial arts. I’m sorry that I stepped out of line.” —Frank Mir apologizing for hoping Lesnar would die in a UFC match (“UFC Statement”).*

*“I’m very sorry that I said Brock Lesnar looked like a giant dong with another dong tattooed on it. It reflected poorly upon me and my profession.” —Joe Hassert, following an imagined meeting with the chair of his department.*

### **“Keeping it Real” with a Fake Interview: Lesnar v. Hassert**

JH: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Brock—especially after what I said. May I call you Brock?

BL: That’s fine. I’m glad to be here.

JH: Okay, great. Well, in this section, I’d like to talk to you about how your career can be seen as a series of tests to your manhood, whereby because of your size and its signification of beastly power, you must constantly prove you are smart, skilled, and well, a “real” fighter. This struggle is a crucial feature of hegemonic masculinity, and your story reveals the process of formalization and informalization of our understanding of what it is to be a good man. You don’t have to talk directly about any of that, but I think it would be helpful if you talked a little about your move from WWE to UFC.

BL: Yeah, I don’t know about all that, but I agree that I’ve had to prove myself, although I don’t really care what the critics think. When I made the move into WWE after winning in college wrestling and the Olympics, it was good money, but to me, joining that soap opera was kind of a disgrace. But the idea of training for another four years for the Olympics and pretty much starving didn’t sound good either.<sup>8</sup> After a few years in WWE, I was at a crossroad; I just didn’t like my job.<sup>9</sup> It’s a traveling fucking circus. At first I enjoyed it, but I wasn’t born to be a pro-wrestler. You spread yourself thin; you end up bitter.<sup>10</sup> I was at the top of my game in wrestling, I was a

8 From Glader, “WWE Pins Its Hopes on ‘Real’ Wrestlers.”

9 From Sylvia, “‘Q & A’ with Brock Lesnar.”

10 From Wertheim, “Rattling The Cage.”

three-time champion, but I decided to take a shot at pro football.<sup>11</sup> I had a pretty good coin in my pocket. What was stopping me? A set of nuts. You either nut up or you don't. So I did.<sup>12</sup> Now I set my own schedule, I have my own training facilities.<sup>13</sup> You know what I like about MMA? We can talk all we want, but then the fight comes, and this shit is for real.<sup>14</sup> That's how I prove myself.

### ***From Beast to Man***

Lesnar's evolution from wrestler to professional wrestler, and then finally to ultimate fighter, can be understood in relation to the evolution of UFC through the allegory of recapitulation theory (the biological hypothesis, now debunked, "whereby 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny'" and the growth of each human, from fetus to adult, follows the same stages of evolutionary development as the human species, from single cell to civilized human (Angelides 33). García and Malcolm describe the development of MMA as featuring a "quest for excitement" through the constant manipulation of a "tension balance" between creating exciting experiences (those that mimic "real" life and real fighting) and controlling risks to athletes and participants (50). Thus, the move from the "dull" experience of a highly codified sport to the raw spectacle of early MMA events, and then to the UFC, is an oscillation between "formalization" and "informalization" indicative of the "initial stages of a sportization process" of MMA, a type of civilizing process (García and Malcolm 42). To finish the allegorical connection, then, we can say that Lesnar's story mirrors this process. First he is a wrestler, part of a discipline incapable of generating enough excitement to offer Lesnar the kind of success he desires, so he moves into professional wrestling.<sup>15</sup> As a pro-wrestler, he pushes the bounds of acceptable behavior by playing the villain, breaking the rules, and blurring the line between beast and man. Next, Lesnar tries to get back into "real" sports by trying out for (and failing to make) an NFL football team. Lastly, he becomes an ultimate fighter and has the opportunity to prove himself to be a fully developed man—a civilized man in a regime of hegemonic masculinity enacted through the UFC.

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When my step-dad (he was the 119# weight class Illinois high school state champion wrestler in 1975) heard about a wrestling team for kids in the next town over, he thought my older brother and I might enjoy it, that it

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11 Before trying MMA, Lesnar tried out for a pro-football team. He did not make the cut.

12 From Drehs, "Grappling with His Future."

13 From Testa, "Brock Lesnar Interview."

14 From Wertheim, "Rattling The Cage."

15 The allegory gets a little fuzzy here as the excitement generated by professional wrestling and early MMA are clearly different, involving different levels of risk (though Lesnar did sustain many injuries in professional wrestling).

was something he could teach us. I asked Jack if he wanted to join the team and his mom consented, so we started training with the Grapplers in the dank wrestling room in the basement of Central High School. We didn't wrestle much together because Jack was bigger than me—not fat, (although I would sometimes call him fat), but big. I was a real skinny kid with a big mouth. I got better faster than he did (my dad would coach me and my brother in the living room; Jack's mother knew very little about wrestling, and his dad never got the chance to teach him). There were only a few kids on the team his age that were also his size. I would get embarrassed when he still “kicked-out” instead of “bridging” when trying to avoid getting pinned.<sup>16</sup> I would cringe when he would say he had a “fight” instead of a “match.” I started to avoid him—in fact the entire team ostracized him—when he threw fits after losing, not just crying like most of us boys, but instead throwing his head gear and cursing, turning his fury on his mother as she tried to calm him down. As the wrestling season went on Jack and I gradually stopped being friends. His toys were no longer enough to bring me around, and I didn't want my new friends to think Jack was my best friend.

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The insult assembly in the previous section, “Brock Lesnar is a Freak of Nature,” looks only at an ideological extreme present on MMA websites and blogs, and it would be fair to say that some commentators did not view their comments as “real,” or as having any bearing in the “real” world of face-to-face interaction. Although there was clearly widespread disdain expressed toward Lesnar, most of his critics were behaving reasonably, by which I mean they provided reasoned (though not necessarily rational) accounts for why they believe what they do. For example one person writes in a forum, “I don't hate him, but I hate the fact that he was parachuted into a title fight with THREE UFC fights under his belt. This is disgraceful, but not his fault.” Of course, many of these critics still take pot shots at his size and intelligence. Another person in an MMA discussion forum writes, “I don't hate him, but . . . he's not a mixed martial artist. He's just this big brute wrestler who went through a short course in MMA and won the belt.” Even those who provide a reason as to why they do not like him (i.e., he doesn't deserve to win) sometimes connect his “unnatural” size and his “stunted” intelligence (“brute”) with his failure to be a real fighter.

As Scott Eveslage and Kevin Delaney point out in their study of the trash talking amongst high school basketball players at Hardwick High, taking a “narrow view” (zeroing in on the most shocking aspects of talk) can obscure our understanding of the larger function of such talk and the group activity that precedes and follows it. Some of the harshest criticism of MMA is from such a narrow view. My focus is on the most extreme discourse, in

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16 This is a move that works in “fake” wrestling, but not in “real” wrestling. I had also made this mistake when I first starting wrestling.

which many of the authors are taking a hateful stance against their object of critique, and this ignores the fact that many of the most profane critics were “banned” by site administrators (for comments that I have borrowed here or for other comments made in other forum topics). Sometimes forum participants rebuked the homophobic comments about Lesnar, although the policing often featured a homophobic logic that immediately foreclosed the possibility that there is anything queer about MMA. If you see it as gay, it’s probably because you are gay. If you see Lesnar’s sword tattoo as a penis, it’s probably because you like penises. It’s pop-psychoanalysis with just enough truth to keep some commentators from using sexuality as criteria for evaluation (and as a means to punish those who do) by calling their insistence on seeing the homoerotic in MMA as “gay” in and of itself.

Indeed, the ardent MMA fan values the display, not of an ability to produce the most dazzling insult, but rather, of a highly technical understanding of fighting. MMA’s mixing of styles has led to new combinations of variables, which have led to debates over the smartest strategy: whether Lesnar should fight Mir standing up using his superior reach to “bang,” or whether he should take him down and potentially open himself to Mir’s debilitating submission holds. The MMA forum is a battleground in which participants can prove themselves to be true MMA fans through the display of knowledge and reasoning about MMA. Similarly, Van Bottenburg and Heilbron argue that those closest to MMA identify more with “the fighters and their specific abilities” than with the spectacle of violence (274). Further, for fighters, “because the potential range of techniques [they may face] is greater . . . their degree of calculation and planning is quite marked” (García and Malcolm 49). An ultimate fighter is not simply strong, he doesn’t simply hit hard and take punches; rather, he is smart, skilled, and strategic. The ultimate fighter is more brain than body, though his knowledge is embodied and performed during fights. The Ultimate Fighter is scientific and rational. In the octagon he performs his argument with cool calculation, not unbridled passion. From this point of view, the Ultimate Fighter and the cultural critic are playing a similar game.

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García and Malcolm’s argument that MMA is undergoing an informalization process occurring within a larger civilizing process rests on the mounting empirical evidence that MMA is in fact less violent *in effect* than boxing (a more socially acceptable sport). Boxing doesn’t allow for less damaging moves like those found in wrestling (holds and bars), requiring that boxers use blunt force to knock out opponents (i.e., bounce the brain off the inside of the skull), likely causing long-term damage (47). Most MMA matches end in a submission hold that forces one fighter to “tap out,” rather than in a punch that impairs the fighter’s cognitive ability to the point that a third party must call an end to the match. A study by Ngai, Levy, and Hsu

shows that over a five-year period injury rates for MMA fighters were similar to those of other combat sports. Further, the “comparison with death rates in other sports reveals the relatively ‘safe’ character of MMA” (García and Malcolm 48).

Whereas boxing utilizes theatrics to minimize the perception of violence (plush gloves reduce the incidents of cutting and lessen the visibility of blood), MMA “spectacularizes” violence (blows to the softer parts of the body are *felt* differently by an audience; more blood appears from minor injuries) (García and Malcolm 53). In this way, the violence in MMA seems more *real* than it really is. By getting rid of the old rules that separated fighting styles, MMA frees up the possibilities for contact between fighters and allows for the use of submission holds. It is an informalization that shifts regulatory responsibility for restraint onto each individual fighter. “In this respect MMA rewarded the personality traits which Elias [a major social theorist of civilizing processes] identified as becoming more prevalent as part of longer-term civilizing processes, namely forethought and self-conscious reflection” (García and Malcolm 50). When applying a submission hold, a fighter makes a threat of violence that is ultimately restrained; the fighter must take care not to cause actual injury.

### Round 3

I finish off this paper with the culmination of my fake one-on-one interview with Lesnar, only this time composed entirely from imagination. We pick up just as the conversation gets heated, before ultimately coming to a head. This battle between the critic and the criticized dramatizes the contest over what it means to be a *real* man, a contest enacted in the culture of MMA and reflected in the history of Brock Lesnar. Further, it takes this contest to its extreme and proposes that the MMA is in fact *too* constrained by the artificial rules of a false paradigm to ever produce accurate knowledge about the meaning of men.

### *The Final Blow*

JH: (*Shifting in his chair.*) I know we agreed, in exchange for your forgiveness for the “dong” joke I made, I wouldn’t ask you about the homophobic comments a reporter heard you make, but...

BL: But you’d like to bring it up anyway? I said I was sorry if I offended anyone, so let’s just drop it. I had a feeling you were out to get me. Are you trying to make me out to be monster? I played the monster for a while. Now I’m just trying to look out for my family and focus on my career. I don’t want all that controversy anymore.

JH: But don’t you think your behavior and your chosen sport help to create a more violent atmosphere in a culture that is already obsessed with violence? Don’t you think that you and the MMA are playing on the anxieties of young men who are already worried about their place in the world because,

god forbid, white men may actually have to compete on equal footing with minorities, women, and even gay people?

BL: Wow! You feel better getting that out? It's a nice theory, but you can't prove it. You can't look into the hearts and minds of MMA fans from behind your little computer. The MMA is getting more diverse everyday. And besides, just like those studies you were talking about earlier, MMA teaches greater self-discipline and control, and shifts responsibility to each individual. I feel it has not only made me a well-rounded fighter, but it has also made me a more well-rounded person.

JH: (*mumbling*) Well-rounded, my ass.

BL: Huh?

JH: I *said*, my ass you are well-rounded.

BL: (*Getting angry*) Oh that's real smart. I thought you were some sort of academic. I can't believe Dana<sup>17</sup> is making me do an interview with you. What do you know anyway? You're living in a padded room up in some ivory tower full of sixties leftovers.

JH: (*Also angry now*) Oh. Don't. Go. There.

BL: I just did, *professor*. Or what are you exactly? A teaching assistant? How's that feel? I mean come on, what do you know about the *real* world anyway? I bet you wouldn't last a second in the real world. I know you wouldn't last a second in the Octagon.<sup>18</sup>

JH: Well, I did wrestle through middle school, and I've played soccer since I was four. I've been doing yoga with these DVDs like almost everyday while writing this paper. But you are probably right, *Brock*, I wouldn't last a second in the Octagon. I think you'd have to be pretty stupid to get into the Octagon. I mean what kind of moron spends his days beating up on people and getting beat up on in fights that aren't really real *really*. You are living in a fantasy world, too, walking around pretending that MMA is actually a useful set of skills for the real world. Ha! It's laughable, man. The only people for whom MMA is profitable are those lucky ones like you who get a shot at the circus that is the UFC. Unless of course the opposite is also true and the MMA and the UFC *are*, in fact, supporting a culture of militarism, helping to make future soldiers, mercenaries, police officers, bouncers, and other arms of the law. So which is it? Is it real or not, Brock? (*Silence*) What? No response?

BL: (*Stands up*) You want to see who's the real man?

JH: Are you stepping to me?

BL: Yeah, I'm stepping to you.

JH: You know what, Brock? I got an idea: why don't you blow me? (*The record that had been playing scratches. Lesnar realizes the situation's seriousness and appears to be frightened and unprepared by Hassert's unorthodox interviewing techniques*)

<sup>17</sup> Dana White is president of UFC.

<sup>18</sup> UFC fights take place in an octagonal cage.

That's right I said it — blow me. I'm a critical scholar who claims to be a profeminist<sup>19</sup> and I am deploying that tired old insult that seeks to place you in a feminine, submissive role, a swift simultaneous dismissal of women and gay men. Only I mean it in the most profeminist way possible. So, blow me, Brock. For real—blow me. Or not me even. Go ahead and blow whomever you want. You really want to be well rounded? Then go blow somebody, for god sakes. I'm telling you, there are a whole range of moves and holds that you and your MMA buddies have not even come close to mastering. I don't hate you—I pity you. You think winning a fight will make you a man? Fighting in this violence-saturated culture isn't going to produce the truth about your manhood. It will only tell you lies about yourself and other men. The knowledge produced through MMA is inferior to that produced through giving a blowjob. You need to mix your arts a little more if you want to be the ultimate champion. You think you are a *real* man? I think your body is a battlefield for other people's wars. You are territorialized and constrained. Check out this quote I got right here in my pocket. It's from critical sports sociologist Brian Pronger in his discussion of how men's experience of desire can be constrained by the fear of being penetrated, and as a result men are often closed to the feminist possibilities of their own desire: "The erotic event of being willingly, indeed joyfully, penetrated orally or anally, deterritorializes the bodies of bundles-of-desire-penises<sup>20</sup> and literally opens the gates to the freedom of demasculinized desire" ("On Your Knees" 76). You think MMA is undergoing a civilizing process driven by a quest for excitement? Well I got a civilizing process for you. You think you show constraint and self-control when you apply a submission hold? Well I got a submission hold I'd like to show you. If you want to know your own power and your own humanity, then I say, "on your knees, Brock." What's it going to be?

### **The Decision**

*"This is the honor that remains in defeat in sports: the loser at least tried to preserve his space. In fellatio there can be no such pretence; a mouth, after all, has teeth that can do considerable damage to a phallic 'invader.' But with fellatio one caresses the insinuating presence of another man, voluptuously welcoming him into one's space, by cushioning one's teeth with one's lips" ("On Your Knees" 75-76).*

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19 I use "profeminist" as a way to align myself with feminist goals of gender and sexual liberation without an epistemological claim to the knowledge derived from experiencing life as woman. For more on this see Tom Digby's edited book *Men Doing Feminism*.

20 This is Pronger's working definition for men in his essay "On Your Knees."

I quit wrestling just before high school; right about the same time I quit hanging around with Jack. I was making new friends, and I didn't want to be associated with him anymore. I thought I was too smart for him. His temper scared me, and honestly I was embarrassed when he didn't get along very well with my other friends. Reading about Brock Lesnar—how people talk about his body and his wild behavior—brought back memories of when Jack and I were best friends.

I have seen Jack a few times in the years since high school graduation. Turns out we now have mutual friends. On one occasion we reminisced a little about the past (it's been almost 20 years since we wrestled together!), and I brought up the story of the big red whiffle ball bat and my subsequent big red welt. I laughed as I told it but a part of me really wanted him know that I remembered how rough he used to be with me. He laughed along with me, but then got quiet. With a smile, he said he thought I was exaggerating a bit. It was, after all, just a whiffle ball bat. I nodded, thinking: *maybe...* *But it still hurt. And it still scared me.* He then reminded me how mean I could be to him—how my older brother and I would team up on him. It was a light conversation, and we were smiling and laughing. Nevertheless there was a whole lot more going on inside me than I was willing to let on. *Was I really that mean to him? I know I would make fun of him, and I know have a sharp tongue, but that's how I defended myself. What really happened to our friendship?*

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I don't like MMA, I don't like Brock Lesnar, and I don't think I should feel bad about either of those facts—but I do. A lot of people receive joy from watching MMA. I have friends who say so. And a lot of MMA fighters speak about the sport with deep passion. Many say that participating in MMA has improved their lives and made them better people. And I want to take seriously the claim that it requires self-control, restraint, and perhaps even a little compassion to apply a submission hold without causing *real* injury. I want to believe that Brock Lesnar is sorry for his sexist and homophobic comments, and that MMA and UFC do more good than harm. But I have trouble seeing it that way. Perhaps when our culture expresses as much excitement at the deregulation of erotic touch between GLBTQ people as we do at the deregulation of violent touch between so-called ultimate fighters my feelings will change. Maybe then I'll see it differently. Until then, the cultural critic in me will argue that hegemonic masculinity is a game no one can win—not even the biggest and strongest men in the ring. The queer in me will continue to pity men who would rather fight other men than fuck them. And the child in me will try to reach out to the child in you, grasping for a time before our bodies were disciplined, a time before we were pushed into the ring and told to fight.

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