CULTIVATING IDENTITY AND THE MUSIC OF ULTIMATE FIGHTING

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ABSTRACT

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In this project, I studied the music used in Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) events and connect it to greater themes and aspects of social study. By examining the events of the UFC and how music is used, I focussed primarily on three issues that create a multi-layered understanding of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighters and the cultivation of identity. First, I examined ideas of identity formation and cultivation. Since each fighter in UFC events enters his fight to a specific, and self-chosen, musical piece, different aspects of identity including race, political views, gender ideologies, and class are outwardly projected to fans and other fighters with the choice of entrance music. This type of musical representation of identity has been discussed (although not always in relation to sports) in works by past scholars (Kun, 2005; Hamera, 2005; Garrett, 2008; Burton, 2010; Mcleod, 2011). Second, after establishing a deeper sense of socio-cultural fighter identity through entrance music, this project examined ideas of nationalism within the UFC. Although traces of nationalism fall within the purview of entrance music and identity, the UFC aids in the nationalistic representations of their fighters by utilizing different tactics of marketing and fighter branding. Lastly, this project built upon the above-mentioned issues of identity and nationality to appropriately discuss aspects of how the UFC attempts to depict fighter character to create a “good vs. bad” marketable binary. Although the UFC and its fighters vehemently craft and cultivate a specific projection of who and what they are, the ultimate goal is to convince and sell these projections to UFC fans. And as a result, fights often mark a conflict of not only two fighters, but two contrasting identities as well. In
conclusion, it is my hope that the project I propose here will add to the canon of studies involving music and spectacle, and introduces to music scholarship a previously unexplored area within the greater field of Ethnomusicology.
To Wes, Erica, and Dad
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INTRODUCTION. WHAT IS CAGE FIGHTING AND WHO DOES IT

On December 30th, 2011, the MGM Grand Garden Arena played host to one of the most profitable sporting events of the year. Former Heavyweight Champion Brock Lesnar and opponent Alistair Overeem headlined a fight-card full of great fights. At roughly ten o’clock pm, the lights went out in the arena as Metallica’s cover of Bob Seeger’s “Turn the Page” began. Fans in the arena cheered and shouted with anticipation as Lars Ulrich’s drums and Kirk Hammet’s guitar built ominously towards a unison distorted guitar and bass riff accompanied by thumping drums. At fifty-five seconds into “Turn the Page,” Brock Lesnar emerged from the back stage area to the packed MGM Grand Garden Arena as the speakers blared James Hetfield belting out the first line of the chorus “Here I am, on the road again.” Standing six feet three inches tall, and weighing two hundred sixty four pounds, the former champion walked toward the ring without any high-fives from the crowd or even an acknowledgement of their presence. Eyes affixed on Overeem, already in the ring, Lesnar walked to the cage vehemently in search of redemption. After losing his Heavyweight title to fighter Cain Velasquez in 2010, Lesnar’s fight against Overeem would put the winner in the role of number one contender. For both Lesnar and Overeem, winning the fight on December 30th would be the only way each man would get a future chance to fight for the Heavyweight title. But, this fight was not boxing. It was not Muay Thai, or Karate, or Wrestling. This fight was between two men who are practitioners of Mixed Martial Arts.

Fast forward to February 4th, 2012 and a fight between Ultimate Fighter: Season 10 winner Roy “Big Country” Nelson and former Strikeforce heavyweight champion
Fabricio Werdum. To watch this fight, I sat with two friends at a local sports bar in Bowling Green, Ohio. Without a seat left free, waitresses served chicken wings to fight fans as Fabricio Werdum walked out to the upcoming fight to the eclectic melody and Portuguese lyrics of Michel Teló’s “Ai Se Eu Te Pego” (when I get my hands on you¹). Everyone in the bar was watching intently one of over twenty television screens as Werdum entered the cage and began to warm up with some plyometric leaps and stretches. As Werdum continued, the lights in the area went out, and those in attendance began to cheer; as did those in the bar. Red and blue lights filled the arena as Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” blared over the sound system to accompany the entrance of Roy “big country” Nelson, clad in a grey t-shirt with the slogan “built Roy tough” plastered brightly on the front. With his mullet hairstyle, full Charlie Daniels-esque beard, and protruding stomach, Roy Nelson was the obvious fan favorite for both the Bowling Green crowd, and those in attendance in Las Vegas. The cheers for Nelson’s entrance however, were just the beginning of an American patriotism that would persist through the entirety of the fight. In round one, Werdum shoved Nelson against the cage, peppered Nelson with some Muay Thai knees to the body, and had Nelson in some serious trouble. The Las Vegas crowd began chanting “country, country,” and Nelson began to more actively defend himself. With a well-placed counter-punch, Roy Nelson knocked Werdum backward and the sports bar erupted with cheers. “Kick his Brazilian ass Roy,” cheered one man. With more shots knocking Werdum into the cage, cheers started from the bar… “USA, USA, USA.” Roy Nelson would go on to lose the fight via decision, but his fight with Werdum represents a microcosm of Mixed Martial Arts fights

¹ Author’s Translation
as a whole. The end result of almost every fight in Mixed Martial Arts (henceforth to be called MMA) is the same; there is a winner and a loser, one person in violent conflict prevailing over the other. What this style of fighting, and indeed all manners of fighting, represents is a greater clash of identities. In the world of MMA, this clash of identities can and often does embody a highly public performative resolution to cultural conflict. Whether activists for illegal immigration are fighting outspoken Republicans, or American country boy patriots are fighting Brazilian nationalists, or even blacks are fighting whites, MMA fights often come to symbolize social conflicts in a greater cultural sphere. With this, fighters more often than not come to embody a representative culture through a perceived cultural identity. Different distinct identities exist within the confines of MMA fighting, and the cultivation of those identities can and do lead to greater cultural associations being made by American and international MMA fans.

MMA is the most profitable individual sport in the United States, and is second only to football as the most watched sport among males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Since 2002, the professional sport of MMA has been monopolized by a single fight-promotion company, The Ultimate Fighting Championship, or UFC. MMA is a competitive combat sport in which individual fighters must possess a certain mastery of martial arts (Judo, Jiu-Jitsu, Muay Thai, etc.) techniques in order to thrive and compete. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has been the most successful MMA fight promotion company in the global market since 2005. With contracted fighters numbering close to two hundred, the UFC openly claims to have “the best fighters in the world”

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fighting in their events. In addition, the UFC represents one of the most profitable sporting event promotion companies in the world, representing 90% of the professional fighting business market, broadcasting events in over 120 countries in 20 languages and recently signing a contract to show events on the FOX television network.\textsuperscript{4} With such growing prominence both in and out of the United States, the UFC has gone to great lengths to promote their company by “characterizing” their fighters. Individual fighters are “branded” by how they are depicted in \textit{UFC Magazine}, UFC websites, press conferences, and UFC live events. This branding comes through in the marketing of individual fighter traits such as nationalism, ethnicity, biographic information, and collegiate and Olympic accomplishments, international achievements in various martial arts, and their actions in previous fights. Yet, with all the efforts that the UFC makes towards branding a fighter to fit within a certain marketable mold, it is ultimately the individual fighters who have the most say in how they are perceived by fans of MMA and the UFC. This fighter-driven identity perception is heavily determined by one singular action: the walk to the ring and the accompanying song. Although this sequence may seem innocuous to fans and other fighters, the walk to the ring and ultimately the accompanying song gives deep insight into the symbolism presented by specific fighters as potential cultural representatives within the larger spectacle of UFC events.

\textbf{Literature Review}

In this thesis, the music used by fighters to enter UFC fights will be examined to answer questions and reveal aspects of identity. Although this idea of identity can become

very convoluted and vague depending on the field of study using the term, I use the term identity in a way that builds upon the rough definition outlined in the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* which states, “broadly speaking, identity refers to the overall character or personality of an individual or group.”5 In addition I am borrowing a concept put forward by Stuart Hall in the introduction to *Who Needs Identity* saying that the “concept of identity is…not essentialist, but strategic and political.”6 For my purposes in the following chapter, identity will be discussed as a vehicle used by individual fighters to express ideas regarding their sense of self and the cultures by which they associate. Using Hall’s ideas regarding the use of the term for political and strategic reasons, identity will be used as a referential term that draws upon the idea that identity is an outwardly expressed, negotiated understanding of the self -an idea touched upon by Simon Frith in his piece “Music and Identity.”7 Frith posits that identity can be seen as “a process…and, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics.”8 For the purposes of this work, his manner of discussing identity will be used in conjunction with the other definitions put forth by Hall and the entry in the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* as an idea that refers a process of negotiating and presenting self-representation.

By drawing on the theoretical and methodological framework of social scholars and music scholars, the primary function of this thesis is to discuss how music functions in the UFC as a vehicle for agency and self-expression. Although not all fighters in the

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7 Ibid. Pg. 108-127.
8 Ibid.
UFC choose to purposefully embody specific cultural, political, or ethnic groups, the music used by all fighters has the potential to be reflective of different ideologies associated with those ties. In this thesis, I will draw upon three separate case studies to demonstrate that within the UFC fighters that share national citizenship all identify with and musically reflect different sentimentalities regarding facts of national and cultural identity. The primary question attempted to answer in all of my case studies was how the musical choices of each fighter revealed aspects of individual identification. And, with these aspects revealed, what similarities reside between each fighter’s biographical narrative and the identity outwardly projected by their respective choices in entrance music. Since the UFC has grown to become such a popular national and international sport, another question of how fans and the UFC as a company came to perceive and discuss each fighter will also be discussed. To this end, it is the goal of this thesis to bring to ethnomusicological discussions of identity an approach that examines both fight culture and the negotiation of identity within a highly public sport.

In an effort to explore the culture and the music of the UFC in a way that would best benefit both ethnomusicological and other humanities studies, I drew upon the work of many social scholars as well as from first hand accounts from UFC fans and fighters. Because my research was so heavily involved in the identities of fighters, I used several fighter autobiographies and published interviews to discover what the fighters themselves had to say about the actions they took as being (or not being) reflective of who they are as people. In examining how fighters wrote about themselves within the UFC, I gained insight into how each deliberate action taken by individual fighters was/is a direct reflection of who those respective fighters are/were. Although the main two
autobiographies I drew upon for this thesis were BJ Penn’s *Why I Fight: The Belt is Just an Accessory* (2010) and Randy Couture’s *Becoming The Natural* (2009) and *The Last Round* (2011), the autobiographies by other fighters such as Matt Hughes, Brock Lesnar, Forrest Griffin, and Pat Militich also contributed to my general understanding of how identity in the UFC can be cultivated and represented through actions outside of the actual fights themselves. To bolster these accounts of fighting culture, I used the work of scholars whose studies have examined the relationship between music and sports. By looking at works like Kenneth McCleod’s 2011 book *We are the Champions: The Politics of Sports and Popular Music* Anthony Bateman and John Bale’s *Sporting Sounds: the Relationship between Sport and Music* from 2009, I framed my discussions of music in the UFC similarly to how music has been discussed in other sporting events. With these studies of music and sports, I also utilized the work of Greg Downey, whose article “Producing Pain: Techniques and Technologies in No-Holds-Barred Fighting” from 2007 gives excellent insight into how cage fighting has been discussed academically.

In addition to how fighters saw themselves, I felt it vital to this thesis to gain an understanding of how UFC fans discussed and perceived fighters, their music, and their identity based on actions taken outside of the ring. For this reason, part of my research was devoted to observing the discussions between fans regarding the three fighters in my case studies: Cain Velasquez, BJ Penn, and Randy Couture. To observe these fan discussions I relied on popular UFC and MMA websites and fan forums such as Sheerdog.com, mmafighting.com, bleacherreport.com, mmajunkie.com, youtube.com, and ufc.com. As an active fan of the UFC myself, I knew prior to my study that these
websites would provide more than enough fan discussion to suffice my interest in how fighters were perceived and talked about in UFC fan communities. In addition, I was also aware that with the growing prominence of both the UFC and connectivity of social media websites, the discussions of fans would both answer my basic questions on how fighter identity is perceived by fan communities, and would help guide my line of questioning as I research the reasons why fans perceived fighters and their respective identities differently.

In order to help frame what both fighters and fans had to say regarding the perception and formulation/cultivation of identity within the UFC, I relied heavily on works and theories regarding the formulation and negotiation of identity and its connection to political, ethnic, national, class, social cultures. Since each of my case studies reflected different facets of identity in the United States I drew upon different scholars for each study. In my study into Cain Velasquez and his ties to Mexican identity, I relied upon the work of scholars like Deborah Vargas and her discussions of border identity and the “accepted outsider”, Josh Kun and George Lipsitz and their respective theories regarding the fluid space of the Mexico-US border and the aspects of identification within that space, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez and her discussions of musical and cultural hybridity between Mexico and the United States. With their respective works on aspects of border identity, Chicano/a identity, musical reflections of Mexican-ness, and the politics of Mexican-American identity, their work greatly helped frame discussion in my first chapter.

Since my second chapter focuses more on the aspects of Hawaiian identity and the Hawaiian Renaissance, I drew upon scholarship regarding both. Since Native Hawaiian
identity (like any identity) is not easily defined, I relied upon several Hawaiian scholars to help solidify and generalize my discussions of Native Hawaiian-ness. In looking at Haunani-Kay Trask’s *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii* (1999), Rona Tamiko Haluani’s *In the Name of Hawaiians: Native Identities & Cultural Politics* (2002), Peggy Kai’s *The Story of A’lai: Our Hawaiian-Chinese Heritage* (1976), and John Chock Rosa’s “The Coming of Neo-Hawaiian American Race: Nationalism and Metaphors of the Melting Pot in Popular Accounts of Mixed-Race Individuals” (2001), I was able to formulate an understanding of the social, political, racial, and historical factors that helped shape impressions of Native Hawaiian identity. In addition to accounts of identity, I used the work of George Lewis, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Kim Alakupaa to discuss the social and civil rights movement of the Hawaiian Renaissance and how aspects of 1970s Hawaiian politics helped to both divide and unify groups of Native Hawaiians.

In my third chapter, I used Raymond Knapp’s *The American Musical and the Formulation of National Identity* (2005) as well as Andy Bennett’s *Remembering Woodstock* (2004) to discuss different aspects of American patriotism and nationalism in regards to “American” identity. In addition, I used the work of Robert Walser and Simon Frith and their respective discussions of popular and rock music to place how heavy metal music came to be seen in the UFC as a signifier of class, masculinity, and heteronormativity. I also used the work of Martin Daughtry and his article “Russia's New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity” as a means by which to frame my discussions of how Couture embodies nationality, but a nationality that is very specific in its outward portrayal of what it means to be both an athlete and an American.
Methodology and Framing

Since a partial goal of this thesis was to bring the topic of the UFC and fight culture more into not only the field of ethnomusicological study, but also other studies in the humanities as well, I looked a variety of methodological frameworks in order to conduct my ethnographic research. I included in my methodology a type of fieldwork known now as “virtual fieldwork.” In light of the way virtual fieldwork has evolved with the advent of technology, the underlying principal of studying and observing virtual communities played a large part in my own methodology and how I examined the discussions of UFC fans in online communities. Using examples of virtual fieldwork found in texts like Martin Daughtry’s “Russia's New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity” (2003), Tim Cooley, Katherine Meizel, and Nasir Syed’s chapter “Virtual Fieldwork: 3 Case Studies in Shadows in the Field (2008), and Christine Hines book Virtual Ethnography (2000), I will discuss UFC fan communities on the internet as fluid communities. In addition, I will be observing how these various fan communities consider and respond to discussions of fighter identity and the musical selections made by UFC fighters.

Since I have been a fan of the UFC prior to conducting research for this thesis, I also relied on a type of auto-ethnography to conduct my research. Although I was not actively engaged in eliciting information from fans or fighters regarding the questions I sought to answer in this work, by being a fan of the sport, my experience prior to conducting research allowed for an easier negotiation of what to look for, and where, when examining both the words of fighters and the online communities of fans. In my methodology, I was inspired by the work of Melanie Burnam and Michelle Kisliuk, and
their respective work regarding both the cultural insider perspective and the active role one takes in the ethnographic process. Since I came to this study as a fan of the UFC, I knew my scholarship would be shaped both from an academic approach as well as an insider perspective.

**Case Studies**

To best showcase how identity functions and is cultivated in the UFC, I chose to research three case studies to help introduce the function of music and projections of the self. In my first chapter, I examine former UFC Heavyweight Champion, Cain Velasquez and his formulation of a Mexican/Chicano persona. Since Velasquez is not a citizen of Mexico but was given the title “first Mexican Heavyweight Champion”\(^9\) by the UFC, it was the primary goal of my first chapter to identify how the music and iconography that became associated with Velasquez came to represent a connection with Mexico and Mexican identity. Since Velasquez grew up negotiating his own identity in relation to the US-Mexico border and the political turmoil of Arizona, his actions in the UFC came to reflect an identity that is an amalgamation of cultural, ethnic, political, and historical ideals codified in his own beliefs regarding Mexican pride.

In my second chapter, I address how Lightweight/Welterweight fighter BJ Penn uses his music and his actions outside his fights to unify and put forward an image of Native Hawaiian identity and Native Hawaiian pride grounded in the social politics of the Hawaiian Renaissance. Penn’s actions both musically and otherwise have come to be representative of Hawaii both in and out of the UFC. And, with his own outspoken

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\(^9\) UFC/Zuffa LLC, “UFC 121: Lesnar vs. Velasquez”. Originally aired on PPV on October 23\(^{rd}\), 2010.
negotiation of what he intended to be and symbolize for Hawaii, Penn’s identity is one that has been cultivated through very specific musical selections that speak to the social and political issues that he believes are felt by all Hawaiians and especially by Native Hawaiians. For Penn, his music acts not just as a vehicle to project out his own identity, but also a vehicle that he feels can promote true Native Hawaiian identity and social awareness.

In my final chapter, I examined UFC Hall of Famer Randy Couture. The oldest man to ever hold a UFC championship, Couture’s identity in the UFC has been cultivated through not only his use of music, but also his biographical narrative, his age, his athletic achievements, and his conflicts with the UFC as well. Earning the nickname of “Captain America” during his UFC tenure, Randy Couture represents the quintessential image of the “American” patriot. With this patriotic representation, his musical selections and the way in which he has been discussed by UFC fans and commentators help to ground Couture’s identity within an “all-American” narrative. In addition, Couture’s music has become a way by which fans and other fighters are able to understand aspects of Couture’s patriotism, nationalism, connection to past generations, embodiment of masculinity, and ties to the stereotypical narrative of American mythology. Despite more than 80% of the UFC’s contracted fighter being citizens of the United States¹⁰, Randy Couture, above all others, has come to be the fighter that has most represented the iconic image and sound of “America.”

CHAPTER I. WINNING FOR MEXICO AND FOR HISTORY

On October 23rd, 2010, then undefeated UFC heavyweight fighter Cain Velasquez fought and beat UFC heavyweight champion (at the time), Brock Lesnar, to become, what the UFC deemed, “the first Mexican Heavyweight Champion” in professional fighting history at UFC 121.\textsuperscript{11} Despite Velasquez’s “for all my Mexican fans and brothers” post-fight dedication in an interview with Joe Rogen, the label of “first Mexican Heavyweight Champion” manipulates the truth.\textsuperscript{12} Cain Velasquez beat Brock Lesnar, but Velasquez was not the \textit{first} Mexican Heavyweight fighting champion in professional fighting history. That title belongs to several other men, the first of which being Alfredo Zuany in 1959 when he claimed the Mexican Heavyweight Title.\textsuperscript{13} In addition, Velasquez has never been a citizen of Mexico and according to the \textit{UFC Encyclopedia}, no fighter in the UFC has ever been from Mexico or declared Mexico as their country of citizenship.\textsuperscript{14} Yet, Cain Velasquez became \textit{the} symbol for Mexican fighting and, as his chest tattoo exclaims, “brown pride.” With a series of well-placed punches, marketing techniques, and above all else, his use of entrance music, Velasquez marked himself as a Mexican representative in the UFC; and the UFC fostered (and at this writing, continues to foster) the identification of Cain Velasquez being quintessentially Mexican.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} UFC/Zuffa LLC, “UFC 121: Lesnar vs. Velasquez”. Originally aired on Pay Per View on October 23rd, 2010.
\item \textsuperscript{12} UFC/Zuffa LLC, “UFC 121: Lesnar vs. Velasquez”- Cain Velasquez post fight interview with Joe Rogan. Originally aired on Pay Per View on October 23rd, 2010.
\item \textsuperscript{13} “Alfredo Zuany”. \url{http://boxrec.com/list_bouts.php?human_id=10376&cat=boxer}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Thomas Gerbasi, \textit{UFC Encyclopedia}. (Indianapolis: DK/BradyGAMES a Division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2011). (The foreword to this book is by UFC president, Dana White)\end{itemize}
Born to a Mexican father and a mother from the United States, little has been published or broadcast regarding Velasquez’s pre-MMA life. But of the facts that are available, Velasquez’s father, Effrain, could be assumed to be the initial impetus for Velasquez’s expressed ties to Mexican patriotism and heritage-driven sentimentality. In an interview with the Latin Huffington Post, Cain Velasquez spoke of his Mexican heritage and his views on his sense of Mexican-ness. The interview went as follows:

Interviewer: You are a prominent member of the U.S. Latino community. How do you feel about that?

Velasquez: I am glad to be Latino. My father is from Sinaloa, Mexico, and my mother grew up in Fresno, Calif. I feel proud to be a person of Mexican descent and to carry the Mexican flag every time I fight.

Interviewer: You have one tattoo of the Virgin of Guadalupe and another that says ‘Brown Pride.’ Why?”

Velasquez: “The ‘Brown Pride’ tattoo expresses my sense of pride for being Mexican. It is also in honor of my father who came to the United States, and in recognition of the fact that we Mexicans are so hardworking. We take on challenges with a lot of heart. I did the tattoo of the Virgin of Guadalupe because my mother would always tell me that the Virgin protects me. In my everyday life and when I fight, she is at my side protecting me.15

In the Huffington Post interview, Velasquez revealed his thoughts about identity. Whether his comments were for show or came from a truthful place of sentimentality, they are telling of how Velasquez sees both himself and his Mexican-ness. With his “Brown Pride” tattoo, Velasquez openly links himself to the American Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 70s. The connotations of a phrase like “Brown Pride” are similar (if not the same) as those that come with mantras like “Red Pride” or even “Black

Power.” The phrase itself acts as a marker of both racial pride as well as ethnic connection. With his tattoo, Velasquez not only marks himself as a Hispanic individual within the UFC, but marks himself as a Hispanic man willing to tattoo himself as an indicator of what kind and how much pride he has in his own heritage.

In addition, with his other tattoo of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Velasquez linked himself with the sentimentality and meaning behind the image itself. Heavily used in the same political movement that fostered “Brown Pride,” the iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe acted (and for Velasquez, acts) as an indicator of Mestizo identity.16 With connections to Latino masculinity, ancient Incan and Mayan civilizations, and a deep connection to historical ethnic heritage, Mestizo identity in many ways acted as the social and political impetus for what would become later referred to a Chicano/a identity.17 For Velasquez, his use of the Virgin of Guadalupe and iconographic link to Mestizo identity helped to reinforce his identification within the UFC. In addition, by situating himself with a historically informed and connected Chicano identity, Velasquez was able to negotiate how to project a Mexican image while not being a citizen of Mexico.

**Before Brown Pride and the Mexican Title**

Cain Velasquez’s introduction to competitive fighting came in the form of high school and collegiate wrestling, first at Kofa High School in Yuma, Arizona, then at Iowa

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17 Ibid.
Central Community College, and later Arizona State University.\(^{18}\) His first fight in the UFC took place on April 19\(^{th}\), 2008 with a fight against opponent Brad Morris at UFC 83 *Serra vs. St. Pierre 2*.\(^{19}\) This first fight is critical to understanding Velasquez’s use of entrance music because it is the only UFC fight in which Cain Velasquez does not musically identify himself as a Latino and/or Mexican with the use of Spanish lyrics, popular Mexican Latino song forms,\(^{20}\) or more traditional Mexican Mariachi band instrumentation. Instead, Velasquez used “Fuel the Fire” by Anvil, a song from a Canadian metal band with English lyrics, as his entrance music. The lyrics of this song reveal no overt connections to Mexican heritage or the Spanish language but do fall in line with identifying Velasquez as a fighter:

```
Fight
Stand up and fight
Fight for your right
Kill

(...)

The whip starts to crack
Revenge
Oh, sweet revenge
Time to avenge

Fuel for the fire
Fuel for the fire
Boiling blood and fire
Gasoline to a flame
I'm just a live wire”\(^{21}\)
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\(^{20}\) Such forms include Reggaeton, Ranchera, or Son to name a few. Further reading can be found in Daniel Edward Sheehy’s *Mariachi Music in America* (2006).

In addition, his first fight signifies the “pseudo-start” of Cain Velasquez’s perceived identity and branding. Since the music used by Velasquez sounded similar to a majority of entrance songs used by other fighters who also walk out to heavy metal music, he was able to conform to a pre-conceived fan-based stereotype of what fighters should use. This musical usage also tied into the widely held belief that aggressive music symbolically represents the character of the fighter as an individual, which, to UFC outsiders, has proved to be a typical idea—which will be discussed in the conclusion of this thesis. As the final preliminary fight before the start of the UFC 83 main fight card, this was also the only fight in which Velasquez, the UFC commentators, and the iconography associated with Velasquez in his ritualistic pre-fight introduction did not use or discuss Mexico or Velasquez’s Latino-ness in any way. In fact, the only direct allusion to Velasquez having any ties to a country other than the United States is after the fight when Velasquez opened his mouth to display his red, white, and green mouthpiece, symbolic of the Mexican flag. To the larger UFC audience, Cain Velasquez was able to keep his perceived and self-composed UFC identity vacant and without direct allusions to Mexico. In addition, since Velasquez was not going out of his way to create a Mexican tie, his perceived identification was not second-guessed by fans, who did not seem to attribute anything other than assumed American-ness to Velasquez. During and after the fight with Morris, UFC commentator Mike Goldberg praised Velasquez for his “American” accomplishments calling Velasquez (correctly) an “all-American wrestler” (in terms of his collegiate accomplishment of earning the label) and “a student out of the

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22 See conclusion
23 “Velasquez vs. Morris” http://www.tapoutlive.com/media/98/Velasquez_vs_Morris/
American Kickboxing Academy.”

Although these comments are not out of place at the time of Velasquez’s victory, the fight with Morris was the only instance in which the aspects of Velasquez’s Mexican-ness were not addressed by commentators.

Although the musical selection for his entrance to his first fight was not significant in defining Velasquez’s Mexican identity as part of the UFC culture, it did allow audience members in attendance and other fighters to view him and his perceived identity as “common” and not that of a Mexican fighting in the UFC. An article from 2008 on MMAjunkie.com by Dann Stupp entitled “Brad Morris vs. Cain Velasquez added to UFC 83” and the fan responses to it reflect opinions of excitement about Velasquez not as a new Mexican fighter, but as a new heavyweight fighter in the division. Of the over thirty comments fans left as a response to Stupp’s article, none of them make any suggestion or hint to any aspect of Cain Velasquez’s Mexican identity.

### Spanish in the UFC and the UFC in Spanish

After his initial exposure to the culture and fans of the UFC, Velasquez musically branded himself in his second and third UFC fights when he entered to “Reggaeton Latino” by Don Omar. This Spanish-language song is performed by a prominent Puerto Rican artist not widely known throughout the United States but very popular in Puerto Rico, Central America, and the Southeastern United States. It is with “Reggaeton

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25 Velasquez vs. Morris” http://www.tapoutlive.com/media/98/Velasquez_vs_Morris/
27 Ibid.
Latino” that Cain Velasquez began to strategically draw in fans and gain both financial and popular acclaim. In the words of business culture observer and social scientist Simon Down, Velasquez began to “craft an entrepreneurial self-identity.”

Although Velasquez did not fabricate, or craft as Down implies, a more “Latino” part of his identity, in the UFC, his shift into using music more popular amongst Spanish-speaking audiences proved to be advantageous. In a way, Velasquez became the “entrepreneur” behind the business of how to sell his own identity. By linking himself with Spanish-speaking fans and using a genre of music that became popular in Latino communities by way of Panama, Velasquez began to cultivate an identity in the UFC that spoke to his own socio-political beliefs and connection to Latino culture.

In addition, in the post-fight interview after his third fight, Velasquez continually lifted up his right hand in view of the camera to show a Mexican flag draped around it; coupled with his attire of a t-shirt and shorts with only red, white, and green colors over a black base, Velasquez began to lay the groundwork for his later perceived Mexica/Latino identity. Although Simon Down’s theories of entrepreneurial self-identity focus on the social constructs of law and business firms for the purposes of attaining financial power and cultural authority, with his musical choices, Cain Velasquez created a perceived identity that he recognized had the potential for financial gain and popularity amongst Mexican/Latino/Chicano-

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30 Ibid.


32 Ibid.

identifying fans. His conscious musical choices help to explain his “shift” in perceptual identity from American/conventional to Mexican.

“Reggaeton Latino” was not the first integration of Latin American-ness into the culture of the UFC, yet for Cain Velasquez, its use became a “testing of the waters” with regard to how he would be perceived by the Latino/Chicano UFC fan base of which he was not widely known to be a representative. His situation contrasts with that of some other fighters in the UFC who identify themselves as Latin/Mexican. Generally speaking, these other fighters and the perception of their identities within UFC fan communities reflects an almost universal understanding that came to be understood by what they look like and where they are from. In addition, the ideas expressed in fan blogs and MMA websites reflect ideas of nationalism that seem to be birthed out of stereotypical ideas that are not that dissimilar from ideas of exoticism and the understanding of “ethnic” individuals based on American projections of those respective ethnicities. These ideas are evident in the comments from fans used in this chapter, but are prevalent on other forum websites as well.

Velasquez used “Reggaeton Latino” to musically branded himself as a Latino despite his more “American” cultural assimilation. By siding with a more Latino-identifying community, Velasquez placed himself in the role of the Latino/Mexican, and thus purposefully positioned his UFC identity to be perceived differently by the UFC fan-base. In Velasquez’s fight against Denis Stojnic in April of 2008, commentator Mike Goldberg said at four minutes nine seconds in the first round that “he [Cain Velasquez] is
very proud of his warrior spirit as a Mexican fighter.”

The connections made by Golberg speak to Velasquez’s efforts to promote his Mexican-ness. Through music, imagery, and Velasquez’s biographical upbringing, cultural understanding, and experience with both Mexican and “American” identifying communities, Velasquez began to “wave the banner” of Mexican-ness in the UFC.

This topic of Cain Velasquez’s shifting in identity is one of contention amongst UFC fans, one that is very polarizing and exposes different mindsets in the fan community of the UFC. On a fan forum on the website mmmtko.com, comments on a Cain Velasquez highlight video shed light on this polarization. One user commented on the video posted:

what bugs the sh** [sic] out of me is he’s born in the USA lives his whole life in the USA and waves a Mexican flag and a bunch of other Mexicans living here and of course other retards as well think this is just great myself. I will just keep wishing he gets smashed every fight he has”

In response to this, several posters disagreed, expressing ideas that convey a sense of multiculturalism amongst fans, and empathy for Cain Velasquez’s attempt to mark himself in accordance with certain allusions to Mexican Pride. One response to the previous post (which I found to be representative of several user opinions) was from the user ‘tapoutking’ who posted:

@sunwood: the reason is not that your[sic] proud of Mexico itself but its culture I know Mexico is crappy but the way you were raised gives you another view at life itself nothing is handed down and you work your ass off for everything and your parents show you respect not like here in the us

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and give you morals like to never give up its not programmed in your head\textsuperscript{36}

In agreement with this line of thinking, set forth by ‘tapoutking’ was another post by ‘fedor tapped like a badass’ who added a different cultural perspective by stating:

I was born in the USA, but that does not stop me from celebrating my Irish heritage. Germans have Octoberfest here; Italians have Columbus day; Puerto Ricans have their annual day of molestation in New York; so who gives a shit if Cain has a brown pride tattoo on his chest?!\textsuperscript{37}

Discussions in fan communities reflect how the awareness of a fighter’s national citizenship acts as an indicator of how that fighter is perceived by fans. Contention between fans arose from actions taken by Velasquez that supported the Mexican-ness of his identity while ignoring his connection to perceived “American” identity. This notion speaks to the national ties made by fan regarding how fighters represent themselves and where they are from. For Velasquez, detractors arose partly out of his acknowledgement of Mexico being primary in his identity and American being secondary if not non-existent. Although more work needs to be done on the political issues at play with this type of fan, nationality-based perception, for this chapter, I will be exploring this issue only in regards to the cultivated identity of Cain Velasquez in the UFC.

**The Manifestation of Velasquez’s Mexican-ness**

Growing up in the diverse and heavily Latino-identifying city of Yuma, Arizona cultivated a personal identity for Velazquez grown out of both an “American” and


“Mexican” experience. It is from this personal experience that Velasquez is able to negotiate the sub-culture of the UFC and actively cultivate a Latino identity. This negotiation however, has been one identified by fans as being potentially outside the purview of normativity. The identity cultivated by Velasquez since his third fight has prompted fan communities to discuss aspects of American identity through multiple lenses. These communities have been divided between recognizing American identity as fluid, versus recognizing American identity as something inherent. Several scholars have examined this dichotomy with the mantra of “whose America” (Kun, 2005; Knapp, 2004; Hamera, 2001). By placing Velasquez in the category of an American impersonating a Mexican, some fans (like sunwood and others) craft their perception of Velasquez’s “American-ness” as something he has consciously turned away from; and, in effect, their opinions of his anti-American patriotism reflects a recognized shift in Velasquez’s perceived identity from American to Mexican. Although this shift is a conscious one, Velasquez’s identity has sparked conversations regarding not only perceptions of American identity, but politics, racism, intellect, and nationalism amongst fans.

In her 1987 book, Women and Music in a Cross-Cultural Perspective, Ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff discusses the performances of women that are outside of the inherent “norm” of social acceptance as a means of changing the gender ideology of a culture by way of deception. She presents a model of identity duality that applies not only to females in different musical performance contexts, but also to Cain Velasquez’s identity in the UFC. Cain had, like the females subjects in Koskoff’s discussion, an identity that was outside of his control and was determined by social, cultural, and

ideological perceptions amongst UFC fans and other fighters in his first two fights. This is apparent when examining Velasquez’s post-fight interviews and commentary from his fights against Morris and Stojnic, where there was no indication of his Mexican identity outside of his mouthpiece and, in the Stojnic fight, his flag-wrapped glove. Similarly to the women subjects of Koskoff’s study, Cain Velasquez created an alternate identity that was not separate from a pre-existing one, but as a vehicle to change the social, cultural, and ideological factors that the first was able to draw from. Velasquez has allowed for an identity duality -a duality that has been the subject of much contention amongst fans and journalists who have labeled Velasquez’s persona as both Mexican and an American.

With this, Velasquez is able to embody in the UFC an identification that directly reflects the duality of representation and identity that occurs in communities along the US-Mexico Border. His multiplicity of experiences speaks to the term “border identity” as discussed in texts such as George Lipsitz’s Dangerous Crossroads (1997) and Josh Kun’s Audiotopia (2005). Border identity reflects a manner by which individuals living in the communities in and around the US-Mexico border negotiate a multiplicity of cultural experiences fostered in both Mexican and American experiences. The connections between both Mexican culture and “American” culture are negotiated in tangent and both contribute to not a Mexican or American identity, but a more experiential Mexican-American border identity. With Velasquez, this negotiation is not wholly based on assimilation into day-to day life, but into the culture of the UFC. And, since Velasquez is given the choice on how he will musically and visually be perceived, his negotiation


between both Mexican and American culture can be facilitated, shaped, and formulated around what Velasquez himself decides to put forth.

In addition, the UFC commentators, as UFC representatives, have labeled Velasquez as he has entered different fights as “the proud Mexican,” a “two time All American,” a fighter “proud of his Mexican heritage” and “the American.” It would be fair to assess Velasquez as a figure that symbolizes various aspects of Mexican-ness, but my research has not yet revealed (from Velasquez himself) a publicly articulated intention behind his cultivation of a more Mexican identity as opposed to his presumed “American” one. Although in interviews, Velasquez has expressed his appreciation for being acknowledged by the Latino UFC fan community as a symbol of Mexican fighting, his outspoken appreciated has never been against American patriotism. His lack of commentary regarding an appreciation for “American” fans however, has allowed fans to speculate on Velasquez’s anti-American ideologies, especially after Velasquez’s fourth fight.

Politics, Mexico, and Characterization

After his third fight in the UFC, Cain Velasquez (who was still undefeated) began to be viewed not only in a more “Mexican” light, but also as a top contender for the UFC Heavyweight Title. With this recognition of skill, came the emergence of a more overtly nationalistic Cain Velasquez. For his fourth fight (and every fight since) Velasquez used

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40 UFC 121: Lesnar vs. Velasquez, Zuffa LLC, October 23, 2010
“Los Mandados” by Vicente Fernandez to both enter and exit the arena. Although his previous two musical selections revealed much about Cain Velasquez’s shift into a “non-American” identity, with “Los Mandados” he introduced an entirely new type of Mexican pride and Mexican identity into the UFC. A ranchera with instrumentation of trumpets, guitars, vihuela, and Spanish-language male vocals, the sound of “Los Mandados” follows the stereotypical idea of how Mexican music would sound. This sonic representation of Mexico, factors into the negotiated understanding of Velasquez’s identity by UFC fans. By drawing on this stereotypical understanding of the “sound” of Mexican culture, UFC fans were/are able to link Velasquez to a broader idea of Mexico and Mexican culture. When pulling up youtube.com videos of Velasquez’s entrances to “Los Mandados,” comments left by fans demonstrate this connection: “this makes me want to eat Mexican food,” “Viva la Mexico,” and “enter the true Mexican champion.”

From this perceivably “Mexican” sound, it is with “Los Mandados” that Cain Velasquez went from a Latino-identifying American who fought American opponents, to a Mexican pseudo-hero who battled against anti-Mexican sentiments in the United States. Translated, the lyrics of “Los Mandados” are highly political and fraught with social messages that could reinforce Velasquez’s projected ideology and connection to Mexican culture and border identity:

I swam across the Rio Grande
Without making a fuss
The border patrol threw me back out
And I landed in Nogales
I entered by another border crossing

And then I was thrown out to Juarez

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Here I headed to Tamaulipas
And sneaked through Laredo

I disguised myself as a White boy
And dyed my hair blonde
But since I didn't speak English
Once again I was thrown out
The border patrol has caught me
Say 300 times

They haven't tamed me
They can't get the best of me
The beatings I took
Were later paid back to their countrymen”  

Although “Los Mandados” does not chronicle Cain Velasquez’s own life, nor does it directly relate to the struggles his father faced during his own pursuit of US citizenship, it lyrically symbolizes a dim view of American border authorities and brings to the UFC culture/fan-base a type of Mexican pride in “dealing” with the US Border Patrol with a sense of honor. The lyrics of “Los Mandados” also reflect aspects of the border as a transitional stage between being a Mexican and becoming an American. In addition, the lyrical sentimentality of “Los Mandados” reflects Velasquez’s own socio-political beliefs which were revealed more openly in a 2010 conference call between the LA Times, Velasquez, and Brock Lesnar. In the interview, a reporter for the LA Times asked Velasquez to both explain his entrance song and to comment on the laws in Arizona regarding immigration. Velasquez responded to the questions by fist explaining his opposition to immigration laws stating “I’m against [the laws], definitely…. Both my

parents came into the U.S. from Mexico.” Velasquez empathized with Mexican immigrants in the explanation of his entrance song, stating “It's a story about a man crossing the border and all the hardships....”\textsuperscript{47} Referred to by music critics and scholars as the “anthem for illegal immigration”\textsuperscript{48} since the 1960s, “Los Mandados” and its use by Cain Velasquez as a personal and public identifier transformed his UFC image further than did “Reggaeton Latino.” In addition, it shifted his marketing image from UFC fighter to Mexican fighting hero and illegal immigration activist.\textsuperscript{49} This activism spread with Velasquez after he won the Heavyweight title against Brock Lesnar at \textit{UFC 121} in October 2010. In several interviews with Velasquez by both Spanish and English publications including \textit{UFC Magazine}, \textit{Fighter}, and MMAJunkie.com, Velasquez has openly discussed his distaste for American politics and policies that regulate immigration and “look down on” Latinos as “lesser peoples” within the broader society of American culture. In addition, in a press conference hosted by the UFC two weeks after his fight with Brock Lesnar, Velasquez was reluctant to answer questions asked by non-Spanish-speaking reporters. Velasquez however, was able to assert his activism and political beliefs regarding border relations by cultivating an identity and persona in the UFC as a representative of Mexican-American culture, and as an athlete to be admired.


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid
In her 1998 article “The Sports Hero Meets Mediated Celebrityhood.” social scientist Leah R. Vande Berg discusses the development of sports heroes both by individual actions as well as cultural representations. She states:

Modern sports heroes… are models of athletic competence and of social value who are admired for their outstanding and skillful athletic performance, dependability, honesty, and character

Cain Velasquez perfectly exemplifies these qualities of sports hero. Since he proved his social worth to Mexican and American audiences with his three previous UFC fights, he was able to use a culturally significant song, like “Los Mandados,” without question by the community with which he was aspiring to represent and identify. Had Velasquez begun his UFC career without the framework of “proud Mexican,” it is difficult to say if his role as “national hero” inside of the Mexican UFC fan community would be perceived and marketed in the same manner. In addition, the dual identity that Velasquez was able to sustain in both his personal life and in the UFC enabled him to be viewed as an “accepted-outsider” by UFC fans -a concept Deborah Vargas (2003) used in her discussion of the multi-faceted aspects of Mexican-American singer Selena. Vargas and Vande Berg both discuss aspects of identity acceptance through both recognition of “worth” by insular and broader cultural communities. Velasquez, echoing aspects of identity in Vargas’s discussion of Selena, received acceptance by the Latino/Chicano fan community he began to recognize more and more. It is from this dual appreciation, acceptance, and recognition whereby the accepted-outsider identity of Velasquez becomes

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apparent. The musical choices made by Velasquez to develop his role as Mexican
sporting hero symbolize an identity maturation of both the perceived and the created, and
evoke a “rite of passage” into the growing global culture of UFC fans in Latin America
and Mexico.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{How to Sell Mexico to UFC Fans}

Despite some controversial issues associated with Velasquez’s beliefs and his
musical selection of “Los Mandados,” the American-based UFC used the newly self-
branded Cain Velasquez to expand its marketing to more Latino-heavy communities both
in the US and in Mexico. According to international business market theorist Dr. Marin
Marinov (2005):

Research on consumer characteristics, including national identity, has
shown that Mexicans score relatively highly on national heritage, cultural
homogeneity, and belief systems, whereas consumer ethnocentrism is
somewhat above average… This has made Mexicans an attractive target
for the producers of domestic and foreign (mostly US) branded goods\textsuperscript{53}

Although Marinov’s study reflects a kind of lumping together of Mexican cultural groups,
his analysis does give insight into the generalized opinions business market strategists,
including those who work for the UFC, may have in regards to selling products and ideas
to a broader Mexican culture. In addition, there is a direct connection between what
Marinov says attracts Mexican consumers to products, and the marketing tactics used by
both Velasquez and the UFC to perpetuate Velasquez’s (saleable) identity in Mexican

\textsuperscript{52} S.C. Michealson, “The UFC, Cain Velasquez and the Problem with Racial Marketing,”
\url{http://www.watchkalibrun.com/2010/10/26/1773763/the-ufc-cain-velasquez-and-the-problem-with-racial-

\textsuperscript{53} Marin Marinov, \textit{Marketing in the Emerging Markets of Latin America}, (New York. Pellgrave
Macmillan, 2005).
audiences. In addition, his research ties directly into Simon Down’s (2006) theories on entrepreneurial identity crafting. If Cain Velasquez were able to establish himself as a Mexican sporting icon, he could be sold to Mexican and Latino-identifying culture more easily as both an individual and as a representative for the UFC. Velasquez assimilated himself into the Mexican national identity with “Los Mandados” and as a result opened up the Mexican/Latino market to UFC marketing and merchandising in the form of clothing, posters, press conferences, action figures, in-Spanish event broadcasts, UFC magazine, and ultimately more exposure to a broader UFC fan base. With his establishment of a specific national, ethnic, and racial identity, and his newly acquired Heavyweight title, Velasquez and the UFC have been able to infiltrate and expose his adoptive Mexican and Mexican-American fan-base to a wider range of marketing and ultimately, UFC cultural consumption.

Although the ultimate perception of a UFC fighter’s identity lies with the interpretations of UFC fans, fighters like Cain Velasquez guide fans toward perceiving them and their constructed identities in specific ways (nationalistic, racial, ethno-centric, and otherwise). It is with their entrance music that individual fighters (not the UFC) determine the perceived identity of what and who they are, where they come from, with which culture they identify, and in the end, how they want to be branded in the sport of Mixed Martial Arts.

In addition, by creating an identity duality of insider and outsider (depending on fan and fighter perspective), fighters like Velasquez automatically create a dynamic that

shapes their encounters with the opponents they face. With the use of music to create cultural and national association, fighters, as well as the UFC as a company, are able to take advantage of social, political, and national rivalries that may not exist between fighters by buying into and marketing fighter-cultivated identities. By individual fighters’ use of music and other cultural/national demarcations however, the existence of competition amongst different demographic groups can be exploited and marginalized by marketing and business strategies. For fighters however, the cultivation of ethnic, racial, and/or nationalistic identity creates a warranted level of risk by becoming, for fans, representative of specific cultural groups. Although this risk can prove to be beneficial in terms of financial gain, popularity, and cultural representation, several fighters have followed a model similar to one formulated by Velasquez to less prosperous ends (Eddie Sanchez, Mark Munoz, Roger Huerta, Efrain Escudero, Joey Beltran).

By perpetuating the insider vs. outsider struggle in the perceptions of both crafted and cultivated identity, some fighters are, with their music, strengthening the UFC as a global company while simultaneously separating themselves from the standard and accepted represented cultures in the minds of UFC fans as well as other fighters. As a result, fans glimpse another culture through the American lens of the UFC, and a mediated form of cultural assimilation is able to influence the thinking of UFC fans through exposure to fighters like Cain Velasquez who identify with and represent an underrepresented cultural and ethnic group in the UFC.
CHAPTER II. BJ PENN

While I was born in Hawaii, my roots do not run as deep as the original Hawaiians. After fighting [Georges] St. Pierre, I started to question who I was, but even more, to wonder what I could do for Hawaii.

In the world of MMA, perhaps no other UFC fighter has desired to represent his community and heritage as overtly as Jay Dee, or as he is better known by fans and other fighters BJ Penn. While Penn has, as the above suggests, questioned his connectivity with Hawaii and what I will hereby refer to as Hawaiian-ness, his use of music has reinforced his take on Hawaiian identity and Hawaiian politics. Although Penn mentions his entrance music only twice in his 2010 autobiography, Why I Fight: The Belt is Just an Accessory, the thread of Hawaiian identification and Penn’s personal connection to Hawaiian-ness is common throughout the entirety of the text. Unlike most other fighters in the UFC, Penn’s entrance music is not fast paced, nor heavily percussive, nor does the recording utilize electrified instrumentation. Instead, Penn’s walk to the ring is accompanied by the song “Hawaii ‘78” by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole which has been described by fans as “just so powerful!” (user bettydaw1970), “what an entrance song should be. Something that doesn't inspire rage or violence But a calming resolve that will put the fighter at peace of mind” (user eagledynasty81), and “so relaxing and so positive” (user KBtheWAYtoBE). In addition, although Penn’s entrance song often changes, his frequent use of songs by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole composed during the Hawaiian

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56 “MMA Entrance Theme – BJ Penn #2.” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfrzjsxALFM.
Renaissance (placed by George Lewis between roughly the mid 1960s and 1980s) in many ways unifies the message Penn is attempting to convey regarding the social, political, and misunderstood identifications of Hawaii and Hawaiians. Primarily built upon ideologies surrounding Hawaiian national sovereignty, the mis-use of Hawaiian lands for commercialization, and the political power wielded by Native Hawaiians at the time, the Hawaiian Renaissance and the music it cultivated helped to later inspire Penn’s musical and political decisions within the UFC.

In this chapter, I will trace the career and musical choices made by BJ Penn. In addition to this, I will demonstrate how the political and social history of Hawaii has influenced Penn’s own beliefs regarding Hawaiian identity and the cultural divisions and perceptions of Hawaii. By examining both Penn’s biography and Hawaii’s tumultuous social history, I will attempt to show how Penn’s music brings to the UFC a representation of Hawaii that in many ways goes against the conventional perceptions of the Hawaiian “aloha spirit.”

**The Hawaii of Divide and of Romance**

In order to best frame a discussion of Penn as a person and fighter, it is important to examine where Penn and his family came from, both politically and culturally. Penn’s father was born and grew up in the large city of Hilo, Hawaii. Home to more than a third of Hawaii’s total population, the native Hawaiians who inhabit the city of Hilo have had a tumultuous history with missionaries, politicians, and encroaching tourists turned

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residents. Hawaiian historian Peggy Kai addresses social and cultural issues in her self-published 1976 work, *The Story of A'lai: Our Hawaiian-Chinese Heritage*. Discussing the relationships between Native Hawaiians and East Asian Hawaiian immigrants opposing the colonial occupation and commercialization of Hilo Bay, Kai alludes to the historical reasons for Natives’ opposition in Hilo having to do with the increase of trade practices in the 1830s and 1840s.

With the influx of trade between East Asian countries, and Western North and South America(s), the island chain of Hawaii has been used as a trade port since the late eighteenth century. In addition, with trade came the inclusion of belief systems and both European and Asian attempts at religious conversion of Hawaiian Natives. Although religious and faith-based beliefs affected the social and political climate of the newly “colonized” Hawaii, hostility between Native Hawaiians and traders were not explicitly violent in nature, but divisive, with port cities becoming populated by settling traders, and inland villages becoming more densely populated by Native Hawaiian peoples. Contrary to this division between settlers and Natives however, was and still is the city of Hilo, which had an advantageous location for the trade and whaling practices of both settlers and Natives respectively. Theories by scholars such as George Lewis (1991), Charles Hiroshi Garrett (2010), Haunani Kay Trask (1999), and J. Kehaulani Kauanui (1993; 2004), and others have examined the interaction between Native Hawaiians and

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60 Rona Tamiko Halualani, *In the Name of Hawaiians Native Identities & Cultural Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
colonialist settlers as an aspect of what has led to stereotypical ideologies associated with Hawaiian identity. With interactions between Natives and colonial settlers increasing with United States’ passage of the 1898 Newlands Act, which declared Hawaii a U.S. territory, continental colonialism began to encroach on Native Hawaiian cultural practices. In addition, the building of military bases and increased involvement in WWII after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the political attention paid to Hawaii gave way to an increase in continental perception of Hawaii as an essentialized tropical paradise inhabited by peaceful and welcoming native peoples.\textsuperscript{62} It is against the backdrop of these various continental impressions and colonization of Hawaii that the US claimed Hawaii as a state in 1959.\textsuperscript{63}

In his 2008 work \textit{Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century}, musicologist Charles Hiroshi Garrett the essentialized impression of both Hawaiian and Native Hawaiians that, in his opinion, gave way to songs composed during the prominence of vaudeville and the early years of Tin Pan Alley.\textsuperscript{64} The subjects in popular songs like Sunny Cunha’s “My Honolulu Hula Girl” and Abel Baer and L. Wolfe Gilbert’s “‘Hello, Aloha (how are you?)’” used Hawaiian and Hawaiian musical instruments such as the ukulele, and slide guitar as well as rhythmic and melodic motifs to give the impression of an “authentic” Hawaiian sound. In addition, the texts of these vaudevillian songs would both depict Hawaiians (women in particular) as promiscuous,


\textsuperscript{62} Haunani-Kay Trask, \textit{From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii}, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 1999).

exotic, and primitive in comparison to those in the continental US (and audience).\textsuperscript{65}

These songs and impressions were, and in many ways still are, linked with initial reactions of sociologists, anthropologists, missionaries, and colonizers when studying Hawaii prior to and shortly after statehood. Historically, the studies of Hawaii by early twentieth century scholars often have the distinct tinge of exoticism from a colonial perspective. In her 2002 book, \textit{In The Name of Hawaiians: Native Identities & Cultural Politics}, communications scholar Rona Tamiko Halualani frames this type of manner of understanding Hawaii through generalizations. According to Halualani, “the historical imaginary is a multi-vocal, multi-invested collection of flashes of memory that call forth particular myths, fantasies, and hegemonic beliefs over others.”\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, in Halualani and other scholars’ discussions of continental responses and understandings of Hawaiian’s and their identity, it is through the romanticized and colonialized view of Hawaiians that both scholarship and popular culture proliferated.

The image of the Hawaiian became musically and lyrically marked by components such as the slide guitar, ukulele, hula dancing, grass skirts, coconut tops, and leis.\textsuperscript{67} Although some aspects of perceived Hawaiian identity, as they are exaggerated in vaudevillian songs of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, may have at their core some connection with and to traditional Hawaiian culture (as reported by anthropologists and Native Hawaiians themselves who emigrated to the US), the manner in which the perceived identity of 


\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Rona Tamiko Halualani, \textit{In the Name of Hawaiians Native Identities & Cultural Politics}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Native Hawaiians became stereotyped influenced how politicians and non-native Hawaiian residents perceived Native Hawaiian peoples. Given the way in which Hawaiians were represented as “other,” both in entertainment and in scholarship of the time, there was difficulty in pinning down how Hawaiians came to represent aspects of conventional perceptions of race in the US outside of the essentialism of stereotyped exotic impressions. In his article 2004 “The Coming of the Neo-Hawaiian American Race:’ Nationalism and Metaphors of the Melting Pot in Popular Accounts of Mixed-Race Individuals,” social scholar John Chock Rosa discusses the romanticized perception of Hawaii and Hawaiians as an intersection of both culture and race. Rosa supports his discussion by using a quote from P.F. Hooper that states, “since the early decades of the twentieth century, politicians, community leaders, missionaries, social scientists, and others have consistently touted the islands as a racial paradise.”

Rosa takes Hooper’s idea even further by commenting:

More specifically, Hawaii stands out from other places in the United States as a geographic and symbolic site where ‘East meets West’—a meeting ground where international relations can be brokered between Asian nation-states and European and American powers.

The generalized view of Native Hawaiians as non-normative was furthered by musical representations of Hawaii, and paved the way for Native Hawaiians to be perceived as “lesser” peoples. Hawaiian identification became codified through caricaturized representations (grass skirted hula girls, surfing barely-clothed natives, uncivilized

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peoples, etc.), placing Hawaiians not individual people, but exotic fetish objects. With aspects of Hawaiian identity becoming singular in the American consciousness via musical and dramatic representations, aspects of American-ness and Whiteness became central as the “standard” against which representations of Hawaii seemed to be contrasted. According to ethnomusicologist George Lewis, it is from conflicts such as those historically prominent in Hilo, and the Native Hawaiian desire for socio-political equality from which the political movement known as the Hawaiian Renaissance had its impetus. Lewis, in his 1991 article “Storm Blowing from Paradise: Social Protest and Oppositional Ideology in Popular Hawaiian Music,” also comments on the musical shift that occurred in Hawaii as a response to historical inequalities and the perceived loss of the native Hawaiian identity.70 This identity, and the conflicts associated with it, has been part of Hawaiian history since before statehood in 1959. In this regard, Hawaiian-ness became a demarcation of difference to consumers and audiences in continental America who viewed depictions of Hawaiian identity in music and theatre.

Although scholarship of Whiteness within the discourse of race and ethnicity studies has undergone somewhat recent changes with works by prominent scholars such as Mark Bauman (2011), Mary Brewer (2005), and Gwendolyn Foster (2003), understanding prominent theories regarding whiteness and normalcy help to frame perceptions of Hawaiians and contextualize the political environment of Hawaii from which BJ Penn grew up.

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In her summation of sociologist Ruth Frankenberg’s works on whiteness, leisure studies scholar Mary G. McDonald identified three different ways in which American perceptions of race came to be perceived as “not white.” In her 2009 article, “Dialogues on Whiteness, Leisure and (Anti)Racism,” McDonald identifies these three ways under the respective section headings “White as Power and Color Evasiveness,” “Whiteness as Normative,” and “Whiteness as Intersectionality.” I am aware of the potential issues that may arise from presenting Frankenberg’s collected theories and discussions of whiteness through the filter of McDonald’s interpretative lens, but when discussing whiteness and normativity with regard to Penn and his view of Hawaii, McDonald’s summations of Frankenberg allows those discussions to become codified. McDonald discusses the formulation of cultural divisions through perceptions and strategically essentialized understandings of race:

Recognizing the powerful universalizing and normalizing pull of whiteness additionally suggests the constant need for reflection, dialogue, and (re)theorizing…. Given the problems attached to analysis of whiteness one step toward more reflective dialogue is to publicly scrutinize the histories, conditions and institutional arrangements under which scholars currently work.

In the UFC and in Hawaii, BJ Penn demonstrates that “white” does not equate with “normalcy.” His continuation of socio-political ideologies associated with the Hawaiian Renaissance acts to challenge conventions of difference between white colonizers and native Hawaiians. McDonald’s discussion of whiteness becomes increasingly important

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72 McDonald, Mary G. "Dialogues on Whiteness, Leisure and (Anti)Racism." *Journal Of Leisure Research* 41, no. 1 (2009 1st Quarter 2009): 5-21
73 Ibid. 18
when discussing Hawaii and the divisions of power between Native Hawaiians and non-native residents. Since Hawaii began to be viewed as an advantageous location both for military and trade purposes, the opinions and voices of the Native Hawaiian residents have been silenced and overshadowed by “white” colonial politics and the perception of Natives as non-normative because of the color of their skin and perceptions of ethnicity/culture.

The recognition of this division of power became prevalent in the 1970s with a Native Hawaiian civil rights movement that came to be known as the Hawaiian Renaissance. It is from this socio-political movement whereby BJ Penn draws both his choices of entrance music and, I would argue, his ideologies about how to be a strong Hawaiian representative. As George Lewis describes:

The values and ideology of native Hawaiians… are to a great extent reactive and oppositional to those of the dominant, mainland American Culture. As such, they were linked, in the 1970s, to social reality and actions by the new music…the re-emerging Hawaiian sense of pride, ha’ aheo, [which] was intimately intertwined with the emerging struggle for Hawaiian rights in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

It is from this ideological mindset that Penn drew inspiration. His musical selections reflect his social, political, and ideological upbringing in Hilo during the time of social protest and outcry for Hawaiian civil rights.

**BJ Penn and His Hawaii**

In his autobiography, BJ Penn writes, “While I was born in Hawaii, my roots do not run as deep as the original Hawaiians. After fighting [Georges] St. Pierre, I started to question who I was, but even more, to wonder what I could do for Hawaii.” This
statement reveals Penn’s sense of connection to heritage, but also, shows his own questioning of how he could represent Hawaii as a “semi-original” Hawaiian. Although Penn has come to represent Hawaii and Hawaiian identity within the UFC, he has been quick not to discount the entirety of his heritage and his awareness and ideas regarding levels of Hawaiian “native authenticity.”

Born to parents of not only Hawaiian, but Korean (maternal) and Irish (paternal) descent, BJ Penn is the youngest of five children. Although Penn’s given name is Jay Dee Penn, as the youngest child, he earned and in public goes by the moniker BJ, which stands for Baby Jay. Born in December of 1978, BJ Penn’s mother is a third generation Korean-Hawaiian, while his father can trace his heritage to Native Hawaiian as well as Irish roots. This familial upbringing caused Penn to struggle with his identity in his teenage years. Penn acknowledges this struggle when he describes the scrutiny he received regarding his identity from when he went to high school. This struggle is intrinsic to understanding what Penn would become as a fighter in the UFC, because Penn attributed his affinity and desire to start martial arts training as a reaction to scrutiny he faced during his teenage years. This would become integral to how Penn would act in the UFC, and how he would go on to use his accomplishments in martial arts to shape his image to Hawaiians as that of a culture-bearer, an action that will become increasingly important in the later sections of this chapter.

In addition to peer recognition of the duality of Penn’s identity, was the contrasting political and social views that shaped how Penn saw himself, his parents, and
the divided social rights of Hawaiians and Koreans. In Haunani-Kay Trask’s 1999 *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii*, the Hawaiian social scholar addresses that colonial expansion into Hawaii came from both the geographical East with the US, and with tourism and trade from the nations of Eastern Asia. With this in mind, I would also bring attention to the work of other scholars who address the social relations between Korean immigrants and Native Hawaiians such as Wayne Patterson whose works “Upward Social Mobility of Koreans in Hawaii” (1979) and *The Isle: first-generation Korean immigrants in Hawaii, 1903-1973* (2000) respectively give insight into the possible reasons of Penn’s personal struggle with social and personal identification.

With these personal and social negotiations, Penn found a strong connection to the social, musical, and political changes that occurred in the wake of the Hawaiian Renaissance. Since Penn’s father, Jay Dee, actively participated in the social protests of the Hawaiian Renaissance, BJ Penn was immersed in the social climate of the movement. It is from this immersion that Penn became familiar with and related to what Lewis calls “the traditional sounding music” of Hawaii. The relation to the music and social climate eventually would lead to Penn’s use of the song “Hawaii ‘78” in his entrances to UFC fights. With very overt statements regarding the social and political effects of commercialism and colonialism in Hawaii, the lyrics of “Hawaii ‘78” helped Penn to

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musically mark himself in many UFC fights starting with his first fight at UFC 31 on May 4th, 2001.79

Written originally by David Kawika Crowley and then later changed and popularized by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole and the Makaha Sons, “Hawaii ‘78” has come to represent BJ Penn and to a larger extent, Hawaii, in both the UFC and the culture of MMA. Searching youtube.com for “Hawaii ‘78” will yield more than three dozen results, more than half of which have user comments pertaining to Penn.80 This fan-made connection between Penn and “Hawaii ‘78” is significant due to the content and perceived message in both versions of “Hawaii ‘78” which contain two different respective choruses:

Lyrics of “Hawaii ‘78” as popularized by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole

Ua mau, ke ea o ka ‘aina, i ka pono, o Hawai’i
Ua mau, ke ea o ka ‘aina, i ka pono, o Hawai’i

If just for a day our king and queen
Would visit all these islands and saw everything
How would they ’bout the changing of our land
Could you just imagine if they were around
And saw highways on their sacred grounds
How would they feel if they ’bout this modern city life

Tears would come from each other’s eyes as
They would stop to realize
That our people are in great, great danger now

How would they feel
Would their smiles be content
Rather then cry
Cry for the gods, cry for the people

80 http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Hawaii+%2778&oq=Hawaii+%2778&aq=f&aqi=g5gC5&aqi=&gs_l=youtube.3..0j0i33i3.1026l1940l138001313101101167121640j1j0i1j8-11310.
Cry for the lands that were taken away
And in it you’ll find Hawaii

Could you just imagine if they came back
And saw traffic lights and railroad tracks
How would they feel about this modern city life
Tears would come from each other’s eyes as
They would stop to realize
That our land is in great, great danger now

All of the fighting that the king had done
To conquer all these islands
Now there’s condominiums
How would he feel if saw Hawaii now

How would he feel
Would his smiles be content
Rather then cry
Cry for the gods, cry for the people
Cry for the lands that were taken away
And in it you’ll find Hawaii

Crowley’s original chorus from 1976:

How would they feel
Would they smile, be content,
Or just cry
Cry for the Gods, cry for the people,
Cry for the land that was taken all away
And then bid goodbye, Hawaii

Israel Kamakawiwo'ole’s chorus from 1978:

How would they feel
Would their smiles be content
Rather then cry
Cry for the gods, cry for the people
Cry for the lands that were taken away
And in it you’ll find Hawaii

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82 Author’s Transcript
Although Crowley remains the author of the song’s lyrics, the perceived sound of “Hawaii ’78” is the sound of Israel Kamakawiwo'ole, who supposedly added the opening phrase of “Ua mau, ke ea o ka ‘aina, i ka pono, o Hawaii’s” to Crowley’s original. This phrase translates in English as “the life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness.”

Although this addition, and difference in chorus changes, at least for Crowley, some of the intent of the song, “Hawaii ‘78” and the social messages contained in its lyrics, fully come to embody BJ Penn within the sport of MMA and the UFC. In addition, that music and lyrical text of “Hawaii ‘78” came to signify Penn’s ideology and depiction of what he represented in a “significant way.”

Musically, Israel Kamakawiwo'ole’s version of “Hawaii ‘78” adheres to some typical sound ideas and commonalities Lewis qualifies as “traditional.” Following a harmonic progression of A-F-G-A in a moderate 4/4, with the instrumentation of finger picked ukulele, Hawaiian Pahu drums, and Kamakawiwo'ole’s reverb-laden voice, “Hawaii ‘78” evokes not a given era, genre, or movement, but Hawaii. Musically, the sound of “Hawaii ‘78” orients the listener firmly in Hawaii. The use of Hawaiian drums in conjunctions with the sound of the strummed ukulele acts as an auditory cue that the music is Hawaiia. Similarly, the lyrical text points to a specific nationalistic aspect of Hawaiian identity and history. As a whole, both the sound and lyrics of “Hawaii ‘78” put forth a “traditional” sounding Hawaiian song from a Native Hawaiian performer.

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84 http://www.hawaiiseventyeight.com/
Although the musical sound of “Hawaii ‘78” does not directly conjure up aspects of Hawaiian social politics, it allows for Penn to position himself within the ideological framework of the Hawaiian Renaissance. With lyrical imagery that points out and reacts against commercialization prevalent in the Hawaiian Renaissance, “Hawaii ‘78” ties Penn to a specific type of Native Hawaiian identity.

The lyrical identification to which Penn musically links himself culturally and socially is an embodiment of the Hawaiian Renaissance and post-Hawaiian Renaissance era of which Penn is a product. In addition, the lyrical allusions to industrialization and commercialism negatively effecting the land and the environment connects Penn to an ideology and political movement popular in the Hawaiian Renaissance regarding Hawaii sovereignty, the preservation of Hawaiian lands, and the consequences of colonial/commercial land use. Penn, with the lyrics of “Hawaii ’78,” situates himself in the UFC and in Hawaii as an individual who is aware of and holds true to the socio-political goals of the Hawaiian Renaissance; and in doing so, Penn is able to be perceived as an individual acting as a “flag-bearer” for the causes of Native Hawaiian identity and political beliefs.

In addition to “Hawaii ‘78,” Penn has used other songs by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole in order to further his specific representation of Hawaiian-ness. Most notably at UFC 101 (August 8th, 2009), Penn used the introduction to “Hawaii ’78,” but then followed this introduction with the song “E Ala E” to accompany his entrance. The integration of “E Ala E” is significant to Penn’s self-imposed identification because lyrically, “E Ala E” suggests that Native Hawaiians are rendered invisible by colonial othering through romanticized and idealized imaginations of Hawaiian-ness. In addition, the sound of “E
ala E” is very similar to that of “Hawaii ’78.” In a moderately felt 4/4, with strummed ukulele playing a progression in the verses of Am-F-C-F and C-G7 in the chorus as well as Pahu drums marking the third and fourth beat of each measure underneath Kamakawiwo’ole’s voice, “E ala E” blends very well with the sound of “Hawaii ’78.” In addition to its auditory similarities, the lyrics of “E ala E” further situates Penn and his outwardly projected identification firmly in the belief and ideologies prevalent in the Hawaiian Renaissance.

We, the voices behind the face,
Of the Hawaiian nation, the Hawaiian race
Rise for justice the day has come
For all our people to stand as one,
E Ala E, `eā, `eā, `eā, `eā,
E Ala E, `eā, `eā, `eā,

We, the voices behind the face,
Of the Hawaiian nation, the Hawaiian race
Rise for justice the day has come
For all our people to stand as one,
E Ala E, `eā, `eā, `eā, `eā,
E Ala E, `eā, `eā, `eā,

E Ala E, `eā, `eā, `eā, `eā,
E Ala E, `eā, `eā, `eā,
E huli i ka ho`i i ka pâkini alamihi
Gone are the days of the alamihi ways
E kiko i ka piko o ka mana o ka po`e
The power of the people is the piko
`O ka piko ke aloha o ka ʻāina, o ka ʻāina

We the warriors born to live
On what the land and sea can give
Defend our birthright to be free
Give our children liberty,

E Ala E, `eā, `eā, `eā, `eā,
E Ala E, `eā, `eā, `eā,
E huli i ka ho`i i ka pâkini alamihi
Gone are the days of the alamihi* ways
E kiko i ka piko o ka mana o ka po`e
The power of the people is the piko*
'O ka piko ke aloha o ka 'āina, o ka 'āina

E Ala E, 'eâ, 'eâ, 'eâ, 'eâ,
E Ala E, 'eâ, 'eâ, 'eâ,
E huli i ka ho'i i ka pâkini alamihi
Gone are the days of the alamihi ways
E kiko i ka piko o ka mana o ka po'e
The power of the people is the piko
'O ka piko ke aloha o ka 'āina, o ka 'āina

We the warriors born to live
On what the land and sea can give
Defend our birthright to be free
Give our children liberty,

E Ala E, 'eâ, 'eâ, 'eâ, E Ala E (repeated into a fadeout)87 88

The chorus of “E Ala E” repeatedly states, “We are the voices behind the faces of the Hawaiian Nation.” The implication of this text insinuates a historically unknown presence of the Hawaiian voice; a suggested historic invisibility that has been ignored, but at the same time shaped Hawaii as a whole. In addition, the repeated “E ala E” phrase, which translates into English as “you turn”89 lyrically suggests an evolving Native Hawaiian ethnic connection. By repeating “you turn” Kamakawiwo'ole, and by association BJ Penn, evokes sentimentality that Native Hawaiian’s have been placed in a role of complacency that has been reluctantly acknowledged and accepted. By incorporating “E Ala E” in conjunction with “Hawaii ’78,” Penn is placing himself as not only a representative of Native Hawaiian identity, but also as part of a greater whole of marginalized and silenced Native Hawaiians. This depiction of Hawaiian identity in many ways goes against

88 [http://www.lyricsmania.com/e_ala_e_lyrics_israel_kamakawiwoole.html](http://www.lyricsmania.com/e_ala_e_lyrics_israel_kamakawiwoole.html)
89 Author’s Translation
conventional ideas of Hawaiian complacency linked to the perceived colonial impressions of the “Aloha spirit.” In her article "On the Other Side of Aloha" (1993), Hawaiian political scholar J. Kehaulani Kauanui, discusses aspects of this “Aloha spirit” in conjunction with romanticized ideas that came in the wake of continental colonialism and how this mythology of Native Hawaiians and their “spirit” has become a colonial tool used to silence and disenfranchise Native Hawaiians. She states:

In tourist mythology, Hawai‘i is as near to paradise on earth as you can get and still be in America. The official interpretation of aloha is that everyone is welcome (especially tourists with money to spend), and that everybody on the islands gets along fine. Aloha sells Hawai‘i, and the Hawai‘i Visitor's Bureau sells aloha…. In addition, the political and economic leaders of the State of Hawai‘i are adept at using the tradition of aloha. Set against the historical fact that the United States forcibly and illegally dispossessed the original inhabitants of the Hawaiian Islands of their land and language and that most descendants live in disenfranchised poverty, Native Hawaiians could perhaps be forgiven if the aloha spirit is starting to feel a little forced.90

With ideas of who Native Hawaiians are being historically and politically shaped by colonial tourists and politicians, the complacency and invisibility of the Hawaiian voice and face as discussed in “E ala E” reflects an outspoken, yet under heard, Native Hawaiian voice and movement towards National sovereignty. By musically siding himself with this specific type of politically, socially, and culturally aware Native Hawaiian identification, Penn brings into the UFC an activism that, through his UFC exposure, becomes more and more visible by both Hawaiians and continental UFC fans. Penn helps to clarify his position and purpose for choosing his walkout songs by stating:

After going over it many times in my head, I decided to change my entrance song for my next fight against [Jens] Pulver. This was something I’d experimented with when I fought [Matt] Hughes the second time, walking out to a song called “Hawaii ’78,” which is the year of my birth. Against Pulver, I also came out to that song, but added another titled “E ala E,” also Hawaiian, and sung by an artist named Israel Kamakawiwo’ole. Both of these songs are rather mellow and seem to contrast with the mood surrounding fight, but they have profound meanings that serve a motivational purpose; they are songs about the Hawaiian people.

In addition to the music, I took another, more drastic step, deciding to print the words Hawaiian Unity on the front of the shirt I would wear as I walked out against Pulver. It was not a decision I came to lightly, and I came to it only after a lost of discussion with my parents, especially my mother, who was concerned making a statement like this would reflect negatively on me…. I wanted to be someone Hawaiians could be proud of, and look upon as one of their own. More worth it than just throwing another sponsor across my chest, or coming out to heavy-metal music. It was the least I could do.91

In this discussion of how Penn came to decision to become more overtly Hawaiian, he reveals both an awareness of how to present Hawaiian identity musically with an artist such as Israel Kamakawiwo’ole and politically charged decrees like Hawaiian Unity. Penn actively and knowingly formulates a Hawaiian identification that directly reflects both the Hawaiian Renaissance as well as his own socio-political beliefs.

Penn was exposed to martial arts in high school and began taking classes in boxing and Jiu-Jitsu while in and after high school. In 1997, Penn began competing in grappling competitions in both Hawaii and California at the age of 17. While a student of renowned Brazilian Jiu Jitsu practitioner, Ralph Gracie, Penn completed his training in Jiu-Jitsu after only three years and competed in tournaments throughout the US and

Brazil. Penn’s greatest feat in amateur fighting however came in 2000 at the Brazilian
Jiu-Jitsu World Championships in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil when he became the first
American to win the tournament at the black-belt level. At age 20, Penn became, and still
remains, the most highly decorated Jiu-Jitsu practitioner in the United States.92

His integration to professional fighting came in May of 2001, at UFC 31 where he
fought and beat opponent Joey Gilbert. With this first UFC fight, Penn was introduced to
the fans of the UFC both through his music as well as his amateur fighting pedigree.
Since Penn was so young, and had achieved so much, he received the nickname of “The
Prodigy.”93 With this recognition of age and prowess, however, came backlash from fans
and other fighters who found his actions and demeanor in his early fights to be both
disrespectful and immature. Despite this reception, Penn overtly attempted to validate
both himself and the perceived identities of native Hawaiians by using his entrance music
as a tool to achieve this goal.

Generally, “Hawaii ‘78” sounded nothing like the music used for entrances in the
UFC, which were more often than not songs that fell under the umbrella of rap or metal
music. By using “Hawaii ‘78” as his identity marker within the UFC, Penn knowingly set
himself apart from other fighters and, made himself appear to fans as a representative not
of “America,” but of Hawaii. By using a song that has such strong ties to the Hawaiian
Renaissance and that embodies, as Lewis calls it “the traditional sound,”94 Penn became
the Hawaiian tinge in the UFC for fans, despite their lack of awareness of the message of

92 “Biography” http://www.ufc.com/fighter/BJ-Penn (Quote from Penn)
93 Jay Dee “BJ” Penn, Why I Fight: The Belt is Just an Accessory, (New York: William Marrow/ Harper
Collins publishers, 2010).
“Hawaii ’78.” This integration of Hawaiian-ness into the UFC carries on with Penn even at the time of this work. Although other fighters in the UFC are from different parts of the Hawaiian Islands, most notably middleweights Kendal Grove and Chris Leben, Penn is the only fighter whose actions both in the UFC and in non-UFC public events, such as in magazine/television interviews and in fan expositions, are directly concerned with Native Hawaiian identity and its perception. In his pursuit of doing something for Hawaii mentioned in his autobiography (in the quote that opens this chapter), there is also an awareness of social issues that Penn sees in the culture of Hawaii. Penn has expressed his views of Hawaiian-ness and the problematic ways in which social politics have fragmented perceptions of Native Hawaiian-ness stating:

Over 70 percent of the prison population of Hawaii is native Hawaiian, who represent less than 30 percent of the people. No Hawaiian people are represented on television in a significant way, and it is equally rare to see a musician, actor, or celebrity representing the state. Hawaiians rarely see their own kind becoming famous...

Despite the legitimacy of Penn’s claims in terms of numerical statistics, his vocalized sentiments regarding both how Hawaiians are represented in a non-“significant way” and how he sees Hawaiian representatives in the public media gives insight into how Penn’s use of “Hawaii ’78” acts as a vehicle, at least for Penn, for him to be able to present himself as the ideal representative of “significant” aspects of Hawaiian identity and the Native Hawaiian.

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The Hawaiian Hints in the Products of the UFC

On Valentine’s Day 2012, video game company THQ, along with the UFC and its parent production company Zuffa LLC released the video game UFC Undisputed 3. As both a fan and researcher, I bought and played the game knowing, after playing the two preceding games, that commentary within the game play itself often characterized and represented fighters in a specific way. While playing with BJ Penn’s simulated character, I noticed that, for the first time in the franchise of UFC video games, fighters had individual entrances that were accompanied by music. Upon playing with Penn’s character more, a trend started to emerge: the music used in the game was not the music used in the actual UFC, but instead was a generalized auditory representation of how the UFC identifies each respective fighter. In the case of Penn, his virtual simulated entrance was accompanied by an instrumental sample of generic “Hawaiian” music. Slide guitar, ukulele, and strummed acoustic guitar play out Penn’s virtual character, while commentary from the recorded voices of UFC commentators Mike Goldberg and Joe Rogan discuss how talented and athletically gifted BJ Penn is as a fighter. Although this video game is not attempting to be anything other than entertaining for UFC and video game fans, the decision by both the UFC and THQ to release the game with the inclusion of entrance music provides insight into how fighters in the UFC are both tied to their music, and how that music comes to represent an understanding of fighters’ respective racial, ethnic, and social identities. By tying Penn virtually and actually to a perceptively Hawaiian sound, fans and players are able to negotiate how to identify Penn in actual fights outside of the virtual reality created by THQ. It is from this whereby fans can come
to understand a fighter based on the representative sound that accompanies the virtual entrances in the game.97

In addition to how he is depicted in the 2012 UFC video game, Penn’s sponsors, primarily RVCA clothing company, promote his Hawaiian-ness as a means of selling items associated with Penn himself. After his fight with Jens Pulver in 2007, where Penn wore his Hawaiian Unity shirt (discussed earlier), RVCA began marketing BJ Penn related clothing by placing the slogan “team Hawaii” or “team Aloha” on BJ Penn t-shirts, hoodies, shorts, hats, and even sandals.98 With this marketing on Penn’s identity via a tie to “team Hawaii”/“team Aloha” RVCA forcibly made all things BJ Penn automatically Hawaiian by association. With his own musical selections, personal and sponsor branding, UFC classification, and “legitimized” connection to Native Hawaiian identity, Penn (with some help from RVCA, THQ, and the UFC) has cultivated and sold to fans the ideal Hawaiian identity. For all intents and purposes, Penn was, and still remains at the time of this writing, the singular embodiment of Hawaiian nationalism, the Hawaiian Renaissance, and the “true” and influential idea of Hawaiian identity both in and out of the UFC.

97 Zuffa/THQ/Yukes. UFC Undisputed 3. 2012
CHAPTER III. BEGINNING THE AMERICAN NARRATIVE

In 2011 Randy Couture retired (again) from the UFC as not only the oldest man to ever hold a title in the organization, but also as a UFC Hall of Fame inductee, former UFC Heavyweight and Light Heavyweight Champion, and the “last of a dying breed” of UFC pioneers. At the age of 48, Couture had been fighting in the UFC for fourteen years after fighting fellow Light Heavyweight fighter Lyoto Machida at UFC 129 on April 30th, 2011.

Although Couture lost his last fight, and many other fights throughout his career, the narrative that came to be associated with Couture, via his musical selections and actual biography, allowed for fans of the UFC to recognize him as a nationalistic self-made success story and a symbol of American patriotism.

In his 2008 autobiography, Becoming the Natural: My Life In and Out of the Cage, Randy Couture begins discussing his early childhood by saying “my father, Ed, left when I was three.” Although this preface does not relate to Couture’s actions within his UFC fights, it helps to lay the groundwork for how Couture perceives himself to have been fighting from childhood. Couture articulates this outlook when he states “you could say I was a fighter from the opening bell.” By prefacing his biography with these types of statements, Couture is able to place himself within a specific model of the American patriotism.

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100 Randy Couture, Becoming the Natural: My Life In and Out of the Cage, (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2008), 6.
101 Ibid. pg. 7-8.
blue-collar narrative. He positions himself on the side of the underprivileged, single
parent, working-class family. The oldest of three children, Randy Couture grew up in the
small town of Edmonds, Washington in the Pacific Northwest.\textsuperscript{102} Although Couture was
born in 1963\textsuperscript{103}, his historical proximity to the political and social turmoil of the Vietnam
War, the American Civil Rights Movement, and the “hippie” generation were not
movements that Couture would discuss as directly influential to his early life. Couture’s
biographical narrative, however, followed in the wake of a changing social and political
consciousness manifested through the shifting social climate of the 1960s. So despite
whether Couture was aware of it or not, his identity as an American (which would
become so significant later in his fighting career) directly referenced the cultivation of a
newly formed American identity and narrative which related to the revolutionary changes
of the 1960s.

Although Couture’s life follows its own individual trajectory, for the purposes of
this chapter, his actions, and the public perceptions of those actions, will all be examined
as elements contributing to a greater “American” individual narrative. With his athletic
prowess, and upbringing in a blue-collar, single parent home, Couture’s life story reflects
what musicologist Raymond Knapp has called the “American Mythology.” In his 2006
how George M. Cohan’s musicals informed and codified a perceived idea of the
nationalistic American Narrative.\textsuperscript{104} Knapp speaks to these connotations of “American-

\textsuperscript{102} Randy Couture, \textit{Becoming the Natural: My Life In and Out of the Cage}, (New York: Simon Spotlight
Entertainment, 2008).
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Raymond Knapp, \textit{The American Musical and the Formulation of National Identity}, (Princeton:
ness” with discussions of Cohan’s musicals *Little Johnny Jones*, and *Yankee Doodle Dandee*. In addition, in a chapter deemed “Whose (who’s) America,” Knapp discusses the musical *The Cradle Will Rock* as an allegory for “America.” The setting of Steeltown and its residents, Knapp posits, reflects an American culture comprised of the struggling blue-collar being oppressed by the authoritative, oppressive, industrialized government. The characters of *The Cradle Will Rock* symbolize a microcosm of the turn-of-the-century narrative of laborers during the industrial revolutions, and the struggle to earn a respectable place in industrialized society. Couture’s life, beginning with childhood, and continuing in high school, and later his stint in the US Army, directly relate to the themes prominent in musicals pointed out by Knapp as being definitively reflective of “American-ness.” In addition, the biography of Couture follows what Knapp and others have alluded to as the “American narrative.” This narrative, according to A. Carl Brendahl (1989) has been informed by American literature shaping the perceived American identity with works that speak to Western conquest, coming of age, and patriotism in America. Similar to Knapp, Brendahl addresses the importance of American authors like Mark Twain and Thornton Wilder informing and reinforcing an American-ness reflected in the lives of “everyday” American people. With Couture, his biographical narrative reflects what has become “American” throughout American literature. In many ways, Randy Couture embodies the literary characters of American

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106 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
In his teenage years, Couture began training in Greco Roman Wrestling at Lynnwood High School. In his senior year, Couture earned national recognition when in 1981 he became the Class 3A state high school champion. After graduating high school, Randy Couture joined the US Army in 1982. During his six-year tenure with the Army (1982-1988), Couture competed in several armed forces wrestling and boxing tournaments. By the time Couture left the Army in 1988, he had earned armed service recognition as four-time All Army Team Member, Armed Forces free-style wrestling champion, two-time USAEUR (U.S. Army Europe) Greco-Roman and Freestyle wrestling champion, and as a two-time U.S. Olympic team qualifier. In addition to his athletic accomplishments in high school and the U.S. Army, Randy Couture continued to wrestle during his four years spent at Oklahoma State University. But it is with the titles Couture earned in his collegiate wrestling career that his eventual UFC identity became more unified. From his sophomore to senior year at OSU, Couture was an NCAA Division 1 All-American. This title of ‘All-American’ is awarded both by members of the national media and by members of the NCAA to the top eight finishers at the National Championship Tournament. This title of ‘All-American becomes increasingly important in the UFC as an indicator of nationality, athletic prowess, and collegiate

110 Ibid.
background. With Couture, this moniker becomes the way in which he was introduced to and discussed in early UFC events beginning in 1997.

The biographical and athletic accomplishments of Randy Couture from his career in amateur wrestling (from high school, the Army, and College) all contribute to an American-ness that would become heavily influential to how he was perceived later in the UFC. This link between athletic achievement and nationalistic embodiment had been discussed in several texts including Mcleod (2011), Bateman and Bale (2009), Burton (2011), and even fellow UFC Hall-of-Famer Matt Hughes (2009). This literature examines an integral aspect of an athlete’s ability to carry the metaphorical torch of both nationalism and patriotism. In her article “Sports Hero Meets Mediated Celebrityhood,” Leah Vande Berg posits that heroes are formed by a media-culture in which they have proven value as athletes.112 With Couture’s athletic accomplishments representing the United States both nationally and internationally, his growth into a “sports hero” has been mediated through a type of athletic patriotism- a patriotism that enabled him to enter the UFC with an “American” identification.

**Early UFC and the Introduction of ‘The Natural’**

In 1997, Randy Couture took a brief hiatus from competitive wrestling to fight in the still very young fighting promotion known at the time as the Ultimate Fighting Championship.113 In this fight at UFC 13, commentators characterized Couture as an “All-American wrestler” who had had success in the Army and college. Although Couture and his opponent, Tony Hemle were both, by nationality, from the United States,

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Couture was the fighter to be classified by commentators as having a biography linked with an aspect of the American national narrative and athleticism such as “All-American.”\footnote{114} This title and descriptor by which Couture was described by commentators not only speaks to Couture’s athletic abilities in college, but also acts as a marker of national identity and his level of “American-ness.” With commentators calling him an “All-American,” they reinforce Couture’s UFC identification as both an athlete and as an embodiment of pure-American-ness. The qualifier of “All-American” insinuates that Couture is the quintessential depiction of America, both as an athlete and as a person.

Despite Couture’s suggested links to American identification however, the UFC at the time was not under the control of its current parent company, Zuffa LLC, but the now non-existent SEG Sports.\footnote{115} Because of this SEG Sports control, musically all fighters, including Couture, in the UFC from events UFC 1 through UFC 29 entered fights to the same entrance music. Although my research has indicated that SEG founder Robert Meyrowitz and SEG’s production designer Peter Berkowitz had both acted as artistic directors for early UFC events, I have not yet been able to attribute the common UFC entrance song, for events 1-29, to any single composer.\footnote{116} Moreover, since the early UFC events were all designed to be shown on Pay Per View and later released on video, the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[114] Randy Couture, \textit{Becoming the Natural: My Life In and Out of the Cage}, (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2008).
\item[115] “Origins of the Ultimate Fighting Championship UFC. \url{http://www.sportspool.com/MMA/ufc_origins.php}. Accessed April 7, 2012. A similar history of the UFC can also be found in the article “UFC History” posted on \url{http://www.completeartialarts.com/whoswho/ufc/ufchistory.htm}. Although both of these histories of the UFC come from non-scholarly sources, they can both be verified by examining the productions of the UFC from UFC 1 to UFC 100. The histories presented on these websites can be pieced together from the viewing of these events and have been used here as a more concise representation of the history of the UFC.
\end{footnotes}
financial hardships faced by SEG and the UFC in the 1990s would not suggest that SEG had the capital to purchase rights to popular songs, or original compositions by a well-known composer. To summarize, the entrance music used for UFC events 1-29 did not characterize any specific fighter, style, or country, but acted as a passing and non-consequential soundtrack for fighter entrances.

With the absence of specific musical characterization, fans identified fighters like Couture by the actions they took in their respective fights, and how they were discussed by UFC commentators. By his fourth fight in the UFC, Randy Couture had become the third Heavyweight Champion in UFC with a win over Maurice Smith at UFC Japan on Dec. 21st, 1997. Eleven days later, Couture was stripped of the title due to a dispute over his contract, and would not return to fight in the UFC for nearly three years when he fought and beat then-Heavyweight Champion, Kevin Randelman. With this win, Couture became the UFC Heavyweight champion while the UFC as a company was being sold from SEG Sports to Zuffa LLC, a change that reflected not only a change in production staff and UFC executives, but a change in UFC rules, weight classes, fighter contracts, and more to the point of this chapter, musical usage.

The New UFC and the Music of Randy Couture

With the purchase of the UFC by Zuffa in 2000, music that accompanied fighter

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116 From research into the musical decisions and composition of the early UFC events under production of SEG, all artistic and musical direction has been attributed to Berkowitz and Meyrowitz as of this current writing.

117 Randy Couture, Becoming the Natural: My Life In and Out of the Cage, (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2008).

entrances went from non-descript background sound to fighter-chosen songs. However, with music licensing still having financial ramifications, initial Zuffa-produced UFC events, including UFC 31, did not show fighter entrances as part of either the Pay Per View event, or the distributed video recording. And, although Randy Couture fought at several UFC events in the early part of the twenty-first century, the most musically overt marker of his identity did not come until 2005 when he fought opponent Mike Van Arsdale at UFC 54. Couture’s entrance music at this event is imperative to understanding the role and characterization taken up by Couture in the UFC. Couture entered the fight with Arsdale to the live 1969 recording of Jimi Hendrix’s version of the “Star Spangled Banner” from Woodstock. Although Couture was not the first fighter to use popular music from the rock genre as his respective entrance music, the selection of the song reveals much about Couture’s specifically cultivated and self-imposed identification. As Sheila Whiteley (2004) writes of the American national anthem and Hendrix’s version of it:

> The melody, then, brings with it a history of patriotic fervor. Those at Woodstock may well have been unaware of this, but never the less immediately felt its status and sentiment. Certainly for Americans, it is the most familiar of all songs, on which speaks of ‘the land of the free,’ and ‘the home of the brave.’

In her continued discussion of the piece, Whiteley also addresses the implication of both the Vietnam war, the American Civil Rights Movement, and the questioning of who, at

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120 “UFC 54,” Zuffa LLC, Originally broadcast on Pay Per View on August 20, 2005.

the time, was and was not considered patriotic or American. With Randy Couture’s use of Jimi Hendrix’s “Start Spangled Banner” however, predominantly white, middle-class, 18-35 year-old fans would not as easily draw connections between Couture and the socio-political issues and struggles of the 1960s and early 70s. Rather, there would be more of a connection made between what Whiteley discusses about patriotic familiarity, status and sentimentality. This is not to infer that Couture’s choice to use the piece was not informed by the culture of the Woodstock era, but to say that for fans, Randy Couture entering a fight to Jimi Hendrix’s version of the “Star Spangled Banner” is less of a political/socially conscious move than it is an aesthetic one that accompanies his cultivated identity with both rock music and the national anthem.

Following the manner in which fans and commentators referenced Couture as an “Captain America” and an “All-American,” the use of any version of the American national anthem positioned Couture musically as a direct representative of America as a whole. In an online question and answer resource, a fan asked why “Couture was referred to as Captain America;” and the responses from other fans help to negotiate how fans of the UFC have understood Couture’s American-ness. One fan answered that Couture was called Captain America because:

He was in the Army. His service in the military and the fact that he always carried an American flag to the ring. Every chance that he had to thank the troops on television he would. The name was given to him simply out of his love for his country.

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In addition to this answer, another Couture fan commented on the ideology of American-ness that has become associated with Couture with the advent of age and his biographical ties to the perceptively conventional “American” identity stating “Because he is the complete stereotype of an "American": heart, will power, and his ability to overcome age.”

Although other fighting organizations with other fighters have used national anthems as entrance music, Randy Couture was the first fighter in the UFC to musically brand himself with using a national anthem as entrance music.

In addition to using the American national anthem as entrance music, Couture’s choice of using Jimi Hendrix’s version of the national anthem reflected a very specific type of American identity cultivated in the post-Woodstock era when Couture grew up. By using this song as his entrance music, Randy Couture linked himself to American nationalism, 1960s rock and roll music, the culture of the Woodstock generation, and the stereotypes associated with all three. Since audiences of the UFC in 2005 were in many ways detached from the era in which Couture grew up – by being born primarily in the 1980s and later- the perceived American identity of the 1960s and 1970s became reflected in individuals like Couture who grew up in what came to be seen (by fans) as the Woodstock era. With this connection, Couture did not mark himself as a representative of the counter-culture of the 1960s/70s, but as an individual who was around when it happened and thus, to fans, was a part of the culture by proximity. The

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126 Competing fight promotions such as RINGS, K-1, Dream, and PRIDE have had fighters enter to national anthems, primarily fighters from Russia and Eastern Europe. Although this topic deserves far more investigation in terms of what these musical choices mean in terms of representation, for the purposes of this chapter and discussion of Couture, having any national anthem in the UFC, with Hendrix’s “Star Spangled Banner,” is a first and must be discussed in that regard.
music he used as well as his projected biographical narrative did not depict a direct tie to specific political or lifestyle ideologies, but a more ethereal link to the stereotypical perception of who an “American” was in the 1960s/70s. The connection between Couture and the era of the 1970s was so strong in fact that after Couture announced his retirement following his loss to Lyoto Machida (2011) MMA fans and journalists began to talk about the inability of some fighters to adjust to the new way of fighting. In a post on MMAtorch.com, contributor Frank Hyden addressed this inability by stating:

I actually think that's the main reason why Randy has decided to retire, he knows that he can't compete at the level he used to be able to…. It's time for the next chapter in his life. Randy has earned all the respect he's been given, and then some…. Athletes keep getting better over time. Even an average NFL team today could beat most every great NFL team from the 70's. It's why you can't compare eras, it's not right. Athletes today are bigger, faster, and stronger than they've ever been. Breakthroughs in science and technology allow athletes to do things never thought possible before.  

Although Hyden does not directly state that Couture is seen as the pinnacle embodiment of the 1970s, by discussing his retirement in conjunction with an NFL team from the 1970s, Hyden is alluding to Couture being symbolic of a 1970s athlete and persona. For Hyden, Couture’s athletic ability and fighting style is linked with the athleticism of the 1970s. Coupled with music that came from around the same era, the tie made by fans between Randy Couture and the era of the Woodstock generation is not in opposition with how Couture models himself.

In addition, by using a distorted and heavily improvised version of the “Star Spangled Banner,” Couture was able to musically convey to fans his perceived roughness.

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and/or realness. Since Hendrix’s version does not use an orchestra, or a traditional arrangement of the piece, or a metronomic pulse, nor does it follow the exact melodic line of the “more traditional” version of “Star Spangled Banner,” it is not a stretch to link the auditory non-typical/brash sound of the song with Couture’s biographical narrative. By using the brashness of Hendrix, Couture was able to reinforce his own biographical narrative of facing adversity, growing up as he says “always fighting,” and going against conventional expectations.\(^{129}\) Despite the possible connectivity between the sound of the song and Couture’s biographical narrative, the image and cultural associations fans had between Couture and the narrative of the “self-made man” defying the odds were codified and reinforced with the use of Jimi Hendrix’s cover of the Star Spangled Banner.

Following his use of the Jimi Hendrix version of the US national anthem, Couture changed his entrance music for every event up to his retirement with the exception of one song: Aerosmith’s “Back in the Saddle.”\(^ {130}\) Before going into “Back in the Saddle” however, I feel it is important to discuss the song choices made by Couture as pieces that help to further cultivate his identity. Since his 2005 fight with Arsdale, Couture has entered his fights to hard rock music from the 1970s and 80s including songs by AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, Red Rider, Ted Nugent, and Aerosmith.\(^ {131}\) Although when taken individually, these bands (and artists) can be said to be representative of multiple


\(^{129}\) Randy Couture, Becoming the Natural: My Life In and Out of the Cage, (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2008).

\(^{130}\) This comes from reviewing UFC events 54 through 129 and the music used by Couture in each respective event.

\(^{131}\) This comes from reviewing UFC events 54 through 129 and the music used by Couture in each respective event.
nationalities – Britain, Canada, and the United States—collectively they all represent a sound and era that help to forge aspects of Couture’s UFC identity. In the fourth chapter of his 1993 book *Running With the Devil*, musicologist Robert Walser addresses the “forging of masculinity” through heavy metal music. Walser notes that heavy metal music helps to act as an expressive vehicle by which heavy metal fans can relate to both one another and the subjects in/of the songs themselves. From heavy metal music, Walser infers, heteronormative male bonding occurs beyond – or perhaps outside of – the potential of being perceived as something other than masculine and heteronormative. Although the focus of this chapter has been primarily on nationalistic and patriotic aspects of Couture’s identification both in and out of the UFC, his musical choices also reflects issues of heteronormativity, masculinity, gender idealism, and convention to his greater depiction of “American-ness.”

Since the primary audience of the UFC has been, and (at this current time) continues to be young, white, heterosexual, English-speaking, “masculine” males, what Walser puts forth about heavy metal music is both embodied by Randy Couture and experienced in the UFC as a whole. Despite Couture not using the same song repeatedly from one event to another since 2005, a song that Couture has used at multiple events has been Aerosmith’s “Back in the Saddle.” Although Couture uses other heavy metal songs to enter his fights to, perhaps no other song speaks to his age, nationality, and masculinity better than “Back in the Saddle.” Originally released on Aerosmith’s *Rocks* album from

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133 Ibid.
134 This comes from reviewing UFC events 54 through 129 and the music used by Couture in each respective event.
1976\textsuperscript{135}, the song opens with a pulsating repetition of percussive eighth notes played behind a distorted guitar picking an ominous riff of descending half steps. After four times through this opening riff, Steven Tyler’s voice screams out an aggressive “I’m back” to musically take the song into a fast-paced gallop. In both fights where Couture uses “Back in the Saddle,” it is with this scream that Couture enters the arena from the back stage area; a type of music cue that reflects his actual career at the time. Since his fight before Sylvia resulted in a loss, and his fight with Lesnar had come after a considerable absence from the UFC\textsuperscript{136}, the declaration of “I’m back!” directly reflects back to fans an image of Randy Couture as a fighter and a person returning to MMA. The “never say die” attitude and the sentimentality of being “born a fighter” Couture mentions in his autobiography are linked to the initial declamation of the song. In addition, the lyrics of “Back in the Saddle” feed into Couture’s American-ness by giving a distinctly Western United States narrative -a narrative that speaks to the independence of Western settlers, the ruggedness of self-reliance, and the conquering/exploration of American territory.

I'm back  
I'm back in the saddle again  
I'm back  
I'm back in the saddle again

Ridin' into town alone  
By the light of the moon  
I'm looking for ole' Sukie Jones  
She crazy horse saloon  
Barkeep gimme a drink  
That's when she caught my eye  
She turned to give me a wink

\textsuperscript{136} He did not compete in the UFC from August 2007 to November 2008
That'd make a grown man cry

I'm back in the saddle again
I'm back
I'm back in the saddle again
I'm back

Umm...come easy, go easy
Alright 'til the rising sun
I'm calling all the shots tonight
I'm like a loaded gun
Peelin' off my boots and chaps
I'm saddle sore
Four bits gets you time in the racks
I scream for more

Fools' gold out of their mines
The girls are soaking wet
No tongue's drier than mine
I'll come when I get back

I'm back in the saddle again
I'm back
I'm back in the saddle again
I'm riding, I'm loading up my pistol
I'm riding, I really got a fistful
I'm riding, I'm shining up my saddle
I'm riding, this snake is gonna rattle

I'm back in the saddle again
I'm back
I'm back in the saddle again
I'm back

Ridin' high
Ridin' high
Ridin' high already\textsuperscript{137}

With lyrical imagery of boots, chaps, saloons, mining, horse riding, etc., “Back in the Saddle” is a heavy metal version of an American cowboy song. In addition, the narrative calls upon stereotypical aspects of the American West such as mining gold, cowboys
“riding into town,” and being like a “loaded gun.” To borrow from Raymond Knapp, this connection between the cowboys of the West and American-ness helped to shape the American perception of the United States.\(^{138}\) Knapp posits that musicals like \textit{Oklahoma!}, \textit{The Music Man}, and \textit{Guys and Dolls} have all reinforced the national patriotic romanticism of the American West by retelling stories of small towns facing struggle (economic, communal, romantic) and how their “survivor” and “self-reliance” helps the problem get solved.\(^{139}\) Although the plots of these musicals differ, the general romanticism to which I am referring has to do with the communal aspects of the plots of these respective musicals. Similarly, the settings of these musicals all rely on the unsettled and unspoiled perception of Western American towns as frontier-like.

In addition to the lyrical connection to American national ideas/ideals, Couture’s use of a song which proclaims “I’m back in the saddle again” implies that he has done this before; it is not new to him because he has been in the sport long enough. The music helps to contribute to perceptions of Couture that place him as “classic” or “old school.”\(^{140}\) With his musical usage of Aerosmith, Randy Couture reinforces aspects of his experience in the sport (age), his connections to American national patriotism, and his identification in the UFC. Couture has been able to singularize the “American” identity in the UFC and create a model by which he embodies the perceived ideal of where an American comes from, what an American does, and how to do it successfully.

\(^{137}\) “Back in The Saddle” \url{http://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/aerosmith/back_in_the_saddle.html}
\(^{139}\) Ibid. Pg. 103-139
\(^{140}\) Notions used to describe Couture’s fighting style during his UFC career. In addition, the musical genre of heavy metal of the 1970s and 80s (which Couture enters to)
CONCLUSIONS. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE UFC

The sport of MMA owes most of its success to the relentless business model and marketing of the UFC. At the time of this writing, the UFC broadcasts between two and five events every month, and has done so since the winter of 2010. With a stable of contracted fighters that often changes, the UFC promotes itself and the events it hosts by characterizing fighters and selling aspects of fighter identity. Although not all the fighters in the UFC have specific identities linked to ethnic, national, or heritage-based characterization, often times fighters whose identities can be tied to those concepts are marketed to those respective communities. Indeed, Cain Velasquez, BJ Penn, Randy Couture and others are presented to fans, in many ways, through the filter of UFC marketing. The characterization of fighters, however, is not developed through spontaneous pseudo-type-casting but with the usage of music, iconography, and biographical information chosen by the fighters themselves.

Different from both professional wrestling and the Olympics, the use of musical entrances in the UFC are, currently and since UFC 30, controlled by the athletes competing. Although scholars such as Greg Downy (2007), Kenneth Mcleod (2011), and Anthony Bateman and John Bale (2009) have discussed the use of music in sports and competitive combat, their discussions reflect a system whereby the music that accompanies athletic competition is not always representative of the athletes themselves. In the world of professional wrestling, characterization of athletes is directly a result of the image driven persona put forth by the marketing teams and/or organizers of specific
athletic events; the tattooed and pierced athlete plays the “punk,” the frump hairy athlete plays the “misfit,” the blond-haired, blue-eyed athlete plays the “all-American everyman,” and the short Hispanic athlete plays the “luchadore.”

Although similar connections could be discussed regarding projections of image informing the development of character in the UFC, in the UFC these characterizations would have to come initially from actions of the fighter propagating character and image. In addition, although the UFC has a role in shaping and marketing fighters, the impetus for the characterizations of UFC is a direct result of fighter-made decision and not the larger UFC company as it is with professional wrestling.

To make a different comparison, the Olympics has used music in a similar manner as the UFC as a means of connecting athletes with their respective nationalities; winning Olympic athletes do not hear a musical piece of their choosing if they are presented with a gold medal, but instead are awarded this honor with the national anthem of their respective country playing as they stand upon the podium. The anthems used in The Olympics act as a demarcation of nationality more than individual identity for participating athletes. Despite the fact that most of the fighters in the UFC are citizens of the United States, the music used by fighters such as Velasquez and Penn is linked less to patriotic sentimentalities than they are to ethnic, racial, and political traditions and

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141 Evidence of this can be seen in the increase in event frequency found in event schedule from both 2011 and 2012. This schedule can be found on http://www.ufc.com

142 These characterizations are in reference to WWE fighters CM Punk, John Cena, and Ray Mysterio who are all on the WWE roster between 2005-2012 as representatives of archetypical characters prevalent in current professional wrestling.


ideologies. It is this aspect of the UFC that separates it from the Olympics, where athletic individualism and personal identity comes after the implicit identification of athletes as national representatives. Ergo, whereas in the UFC fighters like Velasquez can be American citizens but promote a Mexican nationalism, in the Olympics representation is musically linked with national identity that is a product of citizenship. In both professional wrestling and the Olympics, the use of music is a result of a predetermined understanding of who athletes are and what they represent by those entities outside of the athletes themselves.

**Shifts in Meaning**

Taking into consideration the theories involving changes of perception that can occur when music is presented in different contexts, the work of Thomas Turino (1999, 2008) can give new insight into the musical study of the UFC as a location of potential change in musical meaning. Using an understanding of semiotics and interpretation presented throughout Turino’s work “Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music” as a model, the understanding of music in the UFC can be understood as a negotiation of signs and meanings by both fighters and fans. In the UFC however, both music and fighter act as negotiable signs; both are capable of multiple perceptions, understandings, cultural meanings, and changing implications. In addition, the change in meaning that accompanies the usage of music also accompanies the fighter who uses it allowing for multiple perceptions of both the same fighter and the same piece of music to occur; a process referred to by Turino as “semantic
snowballing.” Music in the UFC then, can be understood not just as a demarcation and vehicle for fighter identity and agency, but also as a nebulous object that itself changes meaning and representation depending on what fighter is using a given piece and how it is being used. Both music and fighter function in a symbiosis of meaning and negotiation of perceived purpose.

Both UFC fighters and their respective entrance music are coded in perceived meanings. For the fighter, as is apparent with individuals like Couture, the biographical information that accompanies fighters helps to shape how fighters are understood by both fans and UFC commentators. The characterization and impressions of those fighters was understood through a negotiation of non-musical signs such as iconography, biographical information, previous athletic accomplishments, and physical bodily differences. Due to this lack of musically-filtered meaning, the fighters in the early stages of the UFC had little if any control or oversight over how they were being presented, perceived, and understood, and what they were seen to be representing. With the addition of fighter-chosen music, the implications of who fighters are and what they represent became coupled with ideas associated with the musical selections. Both fighter and music change the significance because of the usage and presence of one another. For example, “Hawaii ’78” alone has cultural meaning linked with its history, performers, socio-cultural connections, and location of origin- all meanings that could be similarly linked with BJ Penn himself. It is when Penn used “Hawaii ’78,” however, that the song and Penn

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became linked, and changed the manner in which both were perceived by UFC fans as well as “Hawaii ‘78” connoisseurs.

In starting to research the UFC and its most popular fighters, it was my original intention to find out why the UFC was marketing the 2010 fight between Cain Velasquez vs. Brock Lesnar as a fight between an American champion and a Mexican underdog. From being a fan of the UFC years prior to this fight, I had known that Cain Velasquez was not a citizen of Mexico; in fact, according to the *UFC Encyclopedia* no fighter in the UFC has ever claimed Mexico as their country of citizenship. Yet, as much as Cain Velasquez’s national citizenship was apparent in the comments, graphics, interviews, and fights of previous UFC events, both Spanish and English speaking UFC fans participated in the narrative of referring to Cain Velasquez as Mexican. Although Velasquez has ties to Mexico and Mexican heritage, when presenting Velasquez as the “first Mexican Heavyweight Champion,” implications of national citizenship are prevalent. In researching Velasquez more, the manner in which he used music to help foster the character/persona/identity he wanted to cultivate in the UFC was not new. The method by which UFC fighters used music to help shape their perceived identity extends, for the UFC, back to UFC 30 when Zuffa LLC purchased the UFC and entrance music began to be chosen by the fighters themselves. Although it could be argued that all UFC fighters since UFC 30 help cultivate their identity through musical use, with the popularity of Velasquez, Penn, and Couture, music has become a way in which fans link entrance music with cultural/ethnic/political ideologies.

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Although the UFC makes a conscious effort to distance itself from the world of professional wrestling, the characterization of fighters that comes with the use of entrance music directly connects to the use of music in the WWE/F. Like Hulk Hogan entering his fights to “I am a Real American,” BJ Penn entering to “Hawaii ‘78” and Velasquez entering to “Los Mandados” musically informs fans of the persona that accompanies the song. Although in the world of professional wrestling, musical selections act as tools to help reinforce dramatic, hero vs. villain story lines, the linkage made by fans between music and fighter character is shared with the UFC and its fans. Velasquez, Penn, and Couture represent a microcosm for how musical sound helps to codify and shape perceived identity. They give to fans a musical association by which their respective fighter identities can be understood and negotiated. In addition, with the entrance music of Velasquez, Penn, and Couture, each man decides how to characterize himself. The music acts as a demarcation of who each man is, what he believes, where he comes from, with what groups he identifies, and what he believes himself to represent. In the UFC, music can be understood as the most effective tool by which individual fighters choose to identify themselves and shape how they come to be understood by fans.

**Blood Sport, Identity, and Ethnomusicology**

In my research into this project, it was my intention to introduce to ethnomusicological research a field of study that has not been discussed. Although there have been anthropologists writing on the subject of extreme fighting, most noteworthy being Greg Downy, scholarly investigation into the UFC is, in ethnomusicology, currently non-existent. Because Mixed Martial Arts is controversial in the U.S., but gaining
popularity at an exponential rate, I feel that any study into the fighter and fan culture of MMA would be advantageous. In 1999, Sen. John McCain referred to the UFC and MMA as “human cockfighting.” In addition, currently, Connecticut, Vermont, and New York all have bans on MMA events causing the UFC to file a lawsuit with the state of New York over the ban prohibiting the UFC hosting events at Madison Square Garden.

The depiction of the modern UFC/MMA fighter is a depiction of a modern gladiator. Until recently (UFC 143: Feb. 12, 2012), the opening to each UFC Pay Per View event featured a vignette of a crouching man in stereotypical Roman gladiator garb putting on armor, picking up a sword and shield and preparing for a presumably upcoming fight. These actions are additionally accompanied to by a musical soundtrack that sounds distinctly similar to “O Fortuna” from Carl Orff’s 1935/6 piece Carmina Burana. Known as “Optimus Bellum Domitor,” the music that had accompanied the gladiator, pre-event, sequence has been credited to the UFC as the artist behind the piece. Composed by Las Vegas musician Michael E Sak, “Optimus Bellum Domitor” and its use by the UFC musically links the fighters of the UFC and the gladiators of ancient Rome was clear with the aid of visual and musical iconography. In

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151 “ufc gladiator,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1L9g3k1eANc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1L9g3k1eANc). Accessed April 26, 2012.

addition, the music of “Optimus Bellum Domitor” and video of the preparing gladiator transitioned directly into the heavy metal song “Face the Pain” by the American band Stemm and a video montage of moments from UFC fights.154 This transition acts as a mediated audio/visual progression of gladiatorial fighting to MMA fighting.

The UFC, in their opening vignette, made the very bold yet believable claim that fighters in the UFC were the modern day versions of gladiators; the embodiment and continuation of a long tradition of fighting. Coincidentally enough, the new UFC opening video, which depicts the evolution of fighting style in the UFC itself, is accompanied by an original piece composed by Hans Zimmer, a man whose career arguably took off after his Oscar Nominated film score of the movie *Gladiator* in 2000.155 Although Zimmer’s music is different than “Optimus Bellum Domitor,” there is still a carry over of the *Carmina Burana* sound- a bleed-over that continues to tie UFC fighters to Roman gladiators. This connection persists not only in the music, but also in the visualization that depicts fighting as an evolving activity beginning with Roman-esque fighting and concluding with current MMA styles. Not only does the UFC connect its fighters to ancient Roman ones, it attempts to create a narrative that places UFC fighters as the supposed long-lost progeny of Roman gladiators.

Fighters marking their individual identity do so via music. The music of fighters in the UFC is a direct reflection of who fighters are as individuals, not necessarily as fighter. This divide between fighter and person speaks to a consciousness among UFC

fighters regarding how they want to be perceived by fans—not as violent brutes, or modern-day gladiators, but as athletes whose personas extend far beyond what they do for a living. Music helps to allow UFC fighters to become individual and, more humanized. Unlike the slaves who were forced to fight in Roman gladiatorial competition, UFC fighters are people and viewed by fans as such. It is the music, and the identity cultivated by it that allows, within perceived blood sport, aspects of humanity, individuality, and pride.

For Velasquez, music became a way to connect himself with an ethnic and political community that has been under-represented in the UFC. With bringing music into the UFC that, in many ways, embodies Mexican identity, Velasquez has been able to mark himself and be perceived as Mexican. Although his United States citizenship has yielded many detractors, with the aid of music and iconography, his identification both in and out of the UFC has come to represent Mexico. In addition, because of Velasquez’s athletic achievements and popularity amongst UFC fans, the UFC has been able to open up its organization to more Spanish speaking fans that may, like Velasquez, identify themselves as Mexican.

In the case of BJ Penn, the use of music has served both as a platform for ethnic pride and for socio-political activism. His music has brought into the UFC an image of Hawaii and Native Hawaiian people that is in line with historical stereotypes of who Hawaiians should be. He has purposefully distanced himself and what he represents from the romanticized perceptions of Hawaiians prominent throughout the twentieth century. With his music, BJ Penn has allowed for fans of the UFC to think about Native

Hawaiians in a way that strengthens Native Hawaiian identity, and reflects a social consciousness prominent in the Hawaiian Renaissance. In many ways, with his musical choices in the UFC, BJ Penn has become a type of poster-boy for a more truthful representation of Hawaiian identity.

For Randy Couture, his music directly reflects both how he sees himself and how he wants others to see him within the context of American-ness. In addition, because of his age and experience in the sport, Couture’s musical selections represent something perceived to be traditional or from experience. His music selections speak to Couture’s own biographical narrative as well as his career in the UFC; and since Couture has come to be seen by UFC fans and commentators as this “Captain America” incarnate, his music acts as a vehicle to represent the United States. American identity is not singular or easily defined, but being cast in the light of American hero and patriot, Randy Couture is the pinnacle embodiment of American-ness in the UFC. In addition, with the aid of his heavy metal/classic rock music, Couture has been able to not only embody America in the UFC, but set the bar for how future fighters wanting to portray the same American-ness would be judged by UFC fans.

Velasquez, Penn, and Couture represent a microcosm of how identity in the UFC can be and is cultivated through the use of music. Although each man chooses music that reflects different nuanced facets of an ultimately greater American identity, their choices to enter to a specific song speaks to how powerful the music in the UFC can be in facilitating the shaping of identity. Despite the fact that each man has purposefully cultivated an identity in the UFC that is distinct and individually representative, the
vehicle by which identity in the UFC is understood by fans and the fighters themselves has been and continues to remain music.
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