

***We Are the Champions: The Politics of Sports and Popular Music.*** By Ken McLeod. Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. 257 pp. ISBN 978-1-409-40864-2. \$89.95.

Cultural studies explores connections between areas that have previously not been considered together. This interdisciplinarity is a strength, but it can also become a weakness when the overlap between two distinct fields is forced. Then, cultural studies can fall into the familiar academic trap of seeming to invent objects of study for the sake of “making work,” rather than investigating actual and obvious phenomena. One way of avoiding this risk is to look at popular cultural practices to see how they may reflect on each other. Because popular cultural practices are obvious to us, the applicability of such research is immediately clear, and we can easily see the benefit of teasing out its ramifications. For instance, given a few minutes’ reflection, one could come up with interesting ways in which music and sports interact. In this respect, the subject of Ken McLeod’s *We Are the Champions* seems almost a given, and the only question is why it did not occur to anyone to write about this topic before. But probing deeper, it becomes clear that McLeod does not rely on a simple mapping of sports to music. Instead he follows his own interests (particularly, gender identity) into an array of connections between the two subjects. This makes for a different book than might have been written, one which is full of concepts and applications that are perhaps not immediately obvious.

McLeod is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, although the Canadian context is not particularly important to this book. His research has primarily focused on the intersection of various forms of music and popular culture (e.g., science fiction and rock music) as well as constructions of gender. *We Are the Champions* investigates concepts of masculinity and femininity as they have developed throughout the history of sport and music. McLeod does well to cover the ways in which these concepts arose over time, as well as the way musical and athletic practices both determine and are determined by gender constructions in wider society. This notion of “mutual determination” is important in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which McLeod applies, for instance, to the construction of feminine identity at the intersection of fitness videos, music videos, and other images of the female body. But McLeod does not apply Bourdieu’s theory everywhere, and the discussion of other kinds of overlap between music and culture (particularly, the role of audiences) would have benefited from a more thoroughgoing application of Bourdieu’s field theory.

The construction of gender identity, however, is not restricted to women, and McLeod is very strong on the ways in which masculinity is always being contested in both sports – which seems obvious – and music – which is less so. McLeod also keeps the structural exclusion of women from both areas constantly in mind as he discusses the homosociality of sports and music. Indeed, one of the important elements of the book is the excluded “other.” McLeod recognizes that many of the notions and values of both sports and music are meaningful only in respect of their opposites. This concentration of binary pairs is especially significant to the discussion of male identity in the African-American context. In many ways, popular culture has come out of the practices of the black community (jazz, rock) or has been adopted by the black community as a means of social advancement (boxing, basketball, football). McLeod draws insightful connections between boxing and jazz in addressing the relationship between aggression, improvisation, and the notion of black manhood. Even here, however, unresolved (and unresolvable) tensions persist. While

violent and aggressive forms of African-American masculinity are seen as a way to get ahead in the world, McLeod also suggests that this is simply an illusion.

This brings me to perhaps the most significant criticism of the book. McLeod takes what could be called a politically liberal attitude towards notions of power. While he appropriately applies the theories of power of musicologists like Susan McClary and Suzanne Cusick, and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, to constructions of gender identity, he seems unable to recognize the all-encompassing structures of power that determine how people fit into the world of sports and music, as well as the behaviours and practices that are allowed with participation. McLeod's liberalism does not allow him to see that the black male's application of aggression and violence to athletic and musical skill does enable black men to get ahead in the world. The dynamics of gendered and racialized power create structures of which musicians and athletes are a part, and a wider application of power theory (Bourdieu's certainly, but probably also Foucault's) would have tempered some of what I consider to be McLeod's naivety in this regard.

Such an application would also have been welcome in the groundbreaking analysis of the idea that performance enhancement has changed from fairly straightforward practices, such as steroid use and lip-synching, to the application of other, more radical, performance-enhancing technologies. Although McLeod links these developments with notions of "trans-" or "post-humanism," he also sees them as being driven solely by economic or financial concerns (i.e., profit). Again, an application of, for example, Foucault's concept of biopower would probably have made this discussion more engaging.

This is not to say, however, that the book fails as a result. Indeed, *We Are the Champions* provides a significant contribution to the study of sports and music, with a wide range of analysis underpinned by rigorous theoretical and broad empirical research. Not only is it a worthy volume in the Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, it also makes an important contribution to the cultural history of sports. It would be a valuable addition to any library's collection, whether in sports, physical education, or other subject areas of a cross-disciplinary nature dealing with cultural history and gender studies.

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