Sparring with Femininity: An Urban Ethnography of Mixed Gender/Martial Arts Youth Programming

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Abstract

This critical ethnography explores how a group of female youth in a divided city centre negotiated a sport-for-development program centred upon the traditionally masculine pastime of mixed martial arts (MMA). The ethnographic setting was a youth centre in a historically working-class borough of central Montréal that provides free after-school programming for male and female youth aged 11-18years. My analysis extends upon the sport sociological and sport-for-development literatures by yielding four prominent themes: 1) 'countering the female frailty falsehood', in which I showed how the MMA participants challenged residual stereotypes of young girls as 'too soft' to participate in physically demanding feats such as MMA; 2) 'disrupting the disinterested label', in which I highlighted the passion and tenacity exhibited by female youth; 3) 'a mixed bag of mixed martial artists', in which I explore how youth conceived MMA as a vehicle for supporting a whole variety of innovative agendas that extend beyond the sport itself; and 4) the 'gendering of self-defence', in which the gendered realities (profiling and marginalization) experienced by many racialized youth in the area were reflected in the teachings of MMA. This thesis, thus, raises important questions about the role(s) this MMA program plays in the lives of female youth; the internal gender dynamics of sport-for-development programming; and about the tensions and contradictions embodied by a group of female martial artists with respect to their race and gendered identities.

Résumé

Cette ethnographie critique explore comment un groupe de jeunes femmes en milieu urbain a négocié sa place dans un programme de sport au service du développement axé autour d'un passe-temps traditionnellement masculin: les arts martiaux mixtes (MMA). Cette ethnographie s'est principalement déroulée dans un centre de jeunes situé dans un quartier central de Montréal, un quartier historiquement considéré à faible revenu. Le centre de jeunes offre une programmation parascolaire gratuite aux jeunes âgés de 11 à 18ans. Mon analyse s'accroît de la littérature des domaines de la sociologie du sport et du sport au service du développement, en élaborant sur quatre thèmes principaux: 1) La supposition fautive de la 'femme fragile', que j'ai défié en démontrant comment les participantes du programme d'arts martiaux mixtes ont résisté des stéréotypes résiduels qui jugent la jeune femme comme étant 'trop délicate' pour participer à des défis exigeants physiquement; 2) Le cliché de 'femme désintéressée', que j'ai dénoncé en illuminant la passion et la ténacité des jeunes femmes participant; 3) 'La multitude d'artistes d'arts martiaux', un thème à travers lequel j'ai aperçu comment les MMA pouvaient agir comme moteur pour inspirer et soutenir une grande variété d'idées novatrices au-delà du sport en soi; 4) Le 'facteur de genre dans les pratiques d'auto-défense', un thème qui discute comment les réalités vécues par les jeunes racisés/non-blanches dans le quartier (ex: le profilage et la marginalisation)—des réalités parfois associées au genre—sont reflétées dans la façon dont le programme enseigné. Or, cette thèse soulève d'importantes questions quant au rôle(s) qu'occupe ce programme MMA dans les vies des jeunes femmes. Les questions soulevées par cette thèse avancent notre réflexion sur les dynamiques de genre ancrées dans des programmes de sport au service du développement ainsi que sur les tensions évoquées par un groupe de jeunes femmes artistes martiaux mixtes en lien avec leur identité de genre et de leur identité raciale.

Contribution of Authors

Balazs, E. carried out the collection of data, writing of the thesis, and played the primary role in the preparation of the thesis. Dr. Jordan Koch introduced Emma Balazs to the research setting and assisted in the preparation, development, and editorial review of the thesis.

Chapter I was written entirely by Emma Balazs with editorial review provided by Dr. Jordan Koch. Chapter II was also written entirely by Emma Balazs with editorial review provided by Dr. Jordan Koch. The study's design and methodology were reviewed by committee members, Dr. Lee Shaefer and Dr. Gordon Bloom during the colloquium. Minor editorial changes were made based on their recommendations. Chapters III and IV were written entirely by Emma Balazs with editorial review provided by Dr. Jordan Koch. Dr. Jordan Koch also assisted with the interpretation and development of the results. Finally, Chapter V was written entirely by Emma Balazs with editorial review provided by Dr. Jordan Koch. An external review was conducted by Dr. Lindsay Duncan. Edits were taken into account and changes were made based on Dr. Lindsay Duncan's suggestions.

Introduction

"The female boxer … cannot be taken seriously. She is parody, she is cartoon, she is monstrous."

Joyce Carol Oates, 1987, p. 73

"There has been a tendency to locate the difficulty in catering for girls as a "problem" residing within the girl who is seen as having no interests, passive and unclubbable."

Angela McRobbie, 1991, p. 42

Combat sports such as boxing have long been utilized in cities across the globe as corrective resource for modifying the behaviours of 'at risk' male youth (Dunning, 1986; Riess, 1991; Wacquant, 2004). Perhaps the most renowned combat gym, at least in a Canadian context, is the Cabbagetown Boxing Club and Youth Centre located just east of downtown Toronto, where the working-class male descendants of Irish immigrants that had fled the potato famine once honed their pugilistic skills (Brunt, 1987, p. 35). Yet, while sport studies scholars have widely critiqued sport-for-development initiatives as promoting individualized solutions to more fundamental structural issues (Coalter, 2010; Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Forde, 2014; Gruneau, 2015; Magee & Jeanes, 2013; Wilson & White, 2003), there exists little research that examines how participants—almost always a male, racialized, and working class population—experience such programming against the backdrop of structural violence and urban marginality (Wacquant, 2004). Moreover, the experiences of female youths within sport-for-development programming has been largely overlooked in the existing sport studies scholarship[1]—a critical oversight given the potentially divergent meanings that girls and young women[2] derive from sport and physical

[1] A few notable exceptions to this oversight include: (Forde, 2008; Hayhurst, 2013; Strandbu & Hegna, 2006).
[2] I acknowledge that sex and gender are separate concepts, however, in this paper, they are used synonymously unless otherwise noted. None of the participants expressed that their sense of gender identity did not correspond with their birth sex (Herrick & Duncan, 2018b).

cultural pursuits, as well as the ever-increasing number of girls and young women training and competing within traditionally male-dominated sporting pastimes such as boxing and other combat sports (Hargreaves, 1994; Kelly, 2011; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009; Theberge, 2003; Young, 1997).[3]

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain insight into the role(s) that sport-for-development programming—Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), specifically—play in the lives of predominately female youths from an increasingly divided urban centre in Montréal, Québec, Canada. My study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do female youth conceive of, and negotiate, a mixed-gender martial arts/sport-for-development program in an increasingly divided urban centre?
- What do the experiences of female youth reveal about the internal gender dynamics of sport-for-development programming as well as the broader context of urban poverty governance in Montréal?
- What types of tensions and contradictions are embodied by female youth with respect to their class, race, and gendered identities?

The primary mode of data collection for this study was critical ethnography—a qualitative research method that includes a combination of participant observation, focus groups/interviewing techniques, and textual analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). While the general objective of ethnographic research is to gain in-depth insight into a local community culture and/or institutional setting (Wolcott, 1995), critical ethnography is distinct in its approach in that the researcher also aims to advance the cause of social justice through their research by

[3] The literature surrounding mixed-gender martial arts is sparse and focused mainly on a narrow scope of contexts; i.e., amateur-to-elite level male athletes from middle-class backgrounds (Channon, 2013, 2014). My proposed research will expand this literature by considering the experiences of a culturally diverse group of beginners from low income/working class backgrounds.

exposing the underlying power relations within (or wielded against) said community/institutional setting (Madison, 2012). As D. Soyini Madison (2012) explained, "[t]he critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (p. 5).

It was with these specific intentions in mind that I initially became invested in a unique sport-for-development program that emerged in Spring 2018 in the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood of central Montréal, Québec. Côte-des-Neiges is one of the highest populated territories in Montréal with nearly 100,000 residents, a significant number of whom are new immigrants—approximately 83% of Côte-des-Neiges residents have at least one parent who was born outside of the country (Centraide, 2019a). Furthermore, just over half (54%) of Côte-des-Neiges residents are visible minorities, making it one of the most ethnically diverse and multicultural neighbourhoods in all of Canada (Deir, 2014). Finally, 46% of the population in Côte-des-Neiges is considered Allophone (55% in CDN's north sector), meaning that their first language is neither French nor English (Centraide, 2019a).

In recent years, many Côte-des-Neiges residents have experienced higher levels of poverty due to increased living costs paired with stagnant wages (Leloup et al., 2016). By way of example, roughly 41% of households in Côte-des-Neiges were considered low-income in 2014 (Ville de Montréal, 2014, p. 17), a matter made worse by a surge of gentrification in parts of the neighbourhood that is driving-up housing prices and leaving many stretched to find affordable places to live (Centraide, 2019a). A recent report found that Côte-des-Neiges had the second highest rate of working poor in the City of Montréal (approx. 18.9%), the majority of whom were single parents, immigrants, visible minorities, and young people (Leloup et al., 2016).

The social hub of my ethnography was Maison des Jeunes (MDJ) de la Côte-des-Neiges—a non-profit organization that provides free/drop-in afterschool programming for both male and female youth aged 11-18years. MDJ is situated in the recently renamed Martin Luther King Jr. Park in the heart of Côte-des-Neiges' north sector.[4] The area is home to a high number of new immigrants and members of visible minorities, and roughly twice as many families with children compared to the south sector of the neighbourhood (Centraide, 2019a). Women, meanwhile, make-up roughly 52% of the total population in Côte-des-Neiges (Corporation de Développement Communautaire de Côte-des-Neiges, 2017), a high percentage of whom are youth under the age of 18years old. However, the vast majority of subsidized and cost-free sport and recreation programming within Côte-des-Neiges is oriented toward male youth who, incidentally, comprise the primary participants within such programs—a sociological trend that is consistent with many other publicly subsidized sport and recreation programs in low-income communities across Canada (Holt et al., 2015; Koch et al., 2015; Wilson & White, 2003).

I first began hanging out at MDJ shortly after my arrival in Montréal in Fall 2018. My MA advisor (Dr. Jordan Koch) introduced me to a staff member, Adam, at MDJ who had recently started and developed an MMA program that included Brazilian jiu-jitsu, kickboxing, and self-defence training—three combat sports in which I had zero formal training yet was eager to learn. The MMA program was aligned with MDJ's broader mission to offer low-income youth a safe and productive gathering point in the afterschool hours, and thus appealed to my previous training and work experience as a home visitor in the social service field in the United States. I spent countless hours over the previous two years volunteering at the youth centre, helping to organize various leisure activities and events with other staff members, and also

[4] The park's name was changed from Kent Park to Martin Luther King Jr. Park in 2019 to celebrate the racialized demographic who reside in the area and Montréal as a whole (Laframboise, 2019).

learning/instructing the fundamentals of MMA alongside a core group of youth who regularly attended the program. While male youth were the primary attendees of MMA sessions, I gradually built rapport with a tightknit group of female participants who also attended the program on a regular basis and were among the most passionate and dedicated of martial artists (even calling out the boys on occasion for their lack of intensity and commitment to rigorous training). My research, thus, sheds light upon the experiences of these developing martial artists, while paying particular attention to the voices of an often-overlooked female population within both sport-for-development scholarship and programming—a population that challenged lingering stereotypes of teenage girls as 'passive', 'submissive', and 'unwilling' to train or fight (McRobbie, 1991). Instead, my ethnography revealed the strength, confidence, and ambition expressed by these young women. It also revealed the joy and sense of humour with which they participated in MMA.

My analysis yielded four higher-order themes: 1) 'countering the female frailty myth', in which I show how the MMA participants challenged residual stereotypes of young girls as 'too soft' to participate in physically demanding sports such as boxing and MMA; 2) 'disrupting the disinterested label', in which I highlight the passion and tenacity exhibited by female youth in the MMA program; 3) a 'mixed bag of mixed martial artists', in which I explore how youth conceived MMA as a vehicle for supporting a whole variety of innovative agendas that extended well-beyond the sport itself; and 4) the 'gendering of self-defence', in which the gendered realities (profiling and marginalization) experienced by many racialized/non-white youths in the area were reflected in the teachings of MMA—a matter that I also interpret with special sensitivity to recent and ongoing protests over systemic racism and police brutality against Black communities in downtown Montréal incited by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Chapter I:
Literature Review

This thesis expands upon the growing body of literature devoted to the study of sport-for-development, which is itself situated at the interstices of sport history, sport sociology, and sport psychology literatures. As noted in the introduction, sport and physical cultural pursuits such as boxing have long been utilized in cities around the world as 'corrective' resources aimed at modifying the behaviours of 'at risk' youth (Brunt, 1987; Bustad & Andrews, 2017; Clift, 2014; Dunning, 1986; Hartmann, 2001, 2003; Reiss, 1991; Wacquant, 2004). However, there exists little research that examines how participants themselves experience such programming against a backdrop of structural violence and urban marginality (Hartman, 2016; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012; Holt et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2018; Scherer et al., 2016). Of significance, too, is that the experiences of young women have been largely overlooked within the scholarship on sport-for-development—a critical oversight given the potentially divergent meanings that young women derive from such programming, as well as the ever-increasing numbers of girls and young women participating in traditionally masculine sporting pastimes such as boxing and MMA (Hargreaves, 1994; Kelly, 2011; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009; Theberge, 2003; Young, 1997).

This chapter is divided into four sections. Section one provides a brief overview of the history of women in sport beginning in the 1800s. My purpose here is to locate my thesis within the broader sport studies literature, while also demonstrating certain gender ideologies and stereotypes that still persist—and are also regularly challenged—within today's sporting settings. Section two, next, introduces the history and sociological literatures surrounding women in combat sport. I show that, while male boxers, martial artists, and other combat sport specialists have long been revered for their pugilistic prowess (Hargreaves, 1997), women have continually

been cast into the shadows of the fight scene. Section three introduces the limited history of women in combat sport on the professional stage, and in organizations such as the UFC or in international competitions such as the Olympic Games. This section focuses on the relationship of girls and young women to professional/elite combat sport in which they are still generally relegated to the sidelines (literally so, in the case of ring girls). Section four builds on this argument by exploring the rather limited role(s) assigned to female participants within the sport-for-development literature, especially within combat sport-for-development programs.

1.1. Women, Sport, and the Myth of Feminine Frailty

A significant body of scholarship has shown that women and young girls have long struggled to legitimize their participation in sport and physical activity (Fink, 2015; Gems & Pfister, 2014; Halbert, 1997; Hall, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994; McGannon et al., 2019; Pirinen, 1997; Scraton et al., 1999; Theberge, 2003; Tjønndal, 2019; Quinney, 2016). Colin Howell (2001) noted that, during the 19th century, team sports such as rugby, cricket, and soccer were used to promote white, middle- and upper-class masculinities and values throughout the British empire. Participation in socially sanctioned physical activities was believed to build character among male youth vis-à-vis the reproduction of masculine virtues that could facilitate the transition from boyhood into manhood. Social reformers saw in sport and physical activity a potentially useful training ground to develop physicality, power, and strength among a population of boys who it was feared had grown ‘soft’ within a societal context critiqued for being ‘effeminate’ in character due to industrialization (Howell, 2001). Women, on the other hand, had the moral obligation to remain passive in their behaviours and gentle in their physiques

so as to align their personal goals and embodied development with the virtues of becoming a 'good wife' and mother (Hall, 1999; Hargreaves, 1986; Theberge, 1987).

Patricia Vertinsky (1990) argued in her seminal text *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the late Nineteenth Century* that a primary justification for excluding women and girls from most sports and physical activities was due to the myth of 'feminine frailty', which was itself rooted in primitive medical understandings of the female body as inherently fragile. Researchers and physicians argued that exposing women to rigorous physical activity would risk compromising their ability to bear children and to breastfeed, thus compromising the *raison d'etre* of femininity—a *raison d'etre* that needed protection by the virtuous male doctors and exclusively male medical researchers (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Hall, 1999; Vertinsky, 1990). It was further believed that women ought to preserve their energy for pregnancy and childbirth, rather than exhaust themselves unnecessarily through potentially damaging exercise regimens (Vertinsky, 1990). Of course, as Jennifer Hargreaves (1997) pointed out, one could also justify the exclusion of boys and young men from physical training on similar 'reproductive' grounds, yet, fears about male reproductive health and capabilities were never presented publicly nor would they have been taken seriously.

It was not until the bicycle was re-introduced with a modern design at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Celebration that women began to gain momentum in their ability to push back against the restrictive gender norms associated with their involvement in sport and physical activity (Strange, 2002). The new mass produced 'safety bicycles' enabled women to travel more freely throughout the city, to exercise regularly and publicly, and to enjoy time outdoors beyond the surveillance of the male dominated household (Strange, 2002; Winkworth, 1989). The modern bicycle's smooth-riding design features also helped women to challenge the

longstanding view that riding bikes would compromise their reproductive health (Hall, 1999). Of course, most medical experts still encouraged women to avoid participation in rigorous physical activity; instead, they urged women to pursue exercise through engagement in typical household chores such as cleaning and washing dishes with the window cracked in order to get adequate fresh air for the day (Vertinsky, 1990). If it was a nice summer day, for example, women were advised to lay in the hammock rather than go for a walk as a means to conserve energy for pregnancy and childbirth (Lenskyj, 1986; Vertinsky, 1990). For these reasons, among others, the bodies of girls and young women often remained hidden away indoors within private dwellings, while men continued to rule the public domain (Hall, 1999; Wamsley, 1999). Physicians slowly began to change their views of feminine frailty amidst wider social pressures—as well as medical evidence that pointed to the contrary—most of which emanated from the chorus of women who had grown frustrated by their relegation to the social margins (Hall, 2016; Vertinsky, 1990). By the turn of the 20th century, some doctors even recommended engagement in light physical activity as a health benefit for women (Vertinsky, 1994; Wamsley, 1999).

Of additional significance is that physically and mentally 'suitable' physical education classes were introduced to schoolgirls around the end of the 19th century. Sheila Scraton (2017) argued that an unintended yet important consequence of allowing schoolgirls to take part in physical education classes was that they experienced an increased sense of independence that also helped to generate a corresponding shift in the societal view of the female body as inherently fragile (Scraton, 2017); however, the sorts of physical activities in which schoolgirls were allowed to engage were comparatively limited to those enjoyed by most boys and young men (Hall, 1999). Schoolgirls were again taught to pursue physical activities that would cultivate the 'ideal' feminine physique and disposition, such as dance and gymnastics exercises, whereas

boys were generally encouraged to 'play rough' through participation in sports such ice hockey in the winter and soccer, cricket, and rugby football in the summertime (Hall, 2016; Scraton, 2017).

World War I also brought about major changes in North American gender norms as young men abandoned their jobs to fight overseas while leaving women behind to 'man' the munitions factories, toil the farms, work the steel mills, and to also occupy the sports fields (Hall, 1999). Several female-run sport organisations popped-up during World War I and continued into the interwar years, such as the Commercial Girls Baseball League in Toronto (Hall, 2016). However, when World War II began, many female-run sports organisations were forced to seize operations entirely or, in the very least, merge with their larger male counterpart organisations as a cost saving measure (Hall, 1999). Women had nevertheless proven themselves to be both physically capable in the workforce and also athletically proficient on the sports fields.

Indeed, the so-called 'New Woman' of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had advanced both in terms of her social status and also in terms of having access to a range of employment opportunities and physical cultural pursuits they were previously denied (Scraton, 2017). By 1919, women's suffrage in Canada had also won adult females the right to vote in federal elections, as well as within many provincial elections across the country, with the notable exception of Québec.[5] Victories such as these challenged outright the male dominated political terrain in Canada (Dunn & West, 2011). However, as P.F. McDevitt (2004) observed, a corollary to such widespread gender developments was a general feeling of insecurity and anxiety among many socially conservative men of the era. Other historically male-dominated terrains, such as

[5] Women won the right to vote federally in Canada in 1919, but had been able to vote provincially as early as 1916 in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and in Alberta; by 1917 in British Columbia and Ontario; by 1918 in New Brunswick; by 1922 in Prince Edward Island; and by 1925 in Newfoundland (Strong-Boag, 2016). Women did not gain the right to vote in Québec until 1940 (Sangster, 2018).

boxing and savate fighting, thus functioned as important symbolic preserves for the demarcation of gendered boundaries between working-class men and the emergent feminisms of the early 20th century—a matter to which I now turn.

1.2. Women in Combat Sport

The deep rootedness of boxing and other combat sports within working-class male cultures throughout the Western world has been well-documented by sport historians and other scholars (Fulton, 2011; Halbert, 1997; Heiskanen, 2012; Jones, 1997; McDevitt, 2004; Sugden, 1987, 1996; Wacquant, 2004). Jennifer Hargreaves (1997) argued that boxing embodies the very essence of working-class male identity. Kath Woodward (2006, p. 3) similarly argued that "[b]oxing is not just about men; it is about masculinity." Widely referred to as the "manly art" within boxing subcultures (Wacquant, 2004, p. 14), the sport has long been conceptualized as a "purely masculine" martial art (Oates, 1987, p. 70)—one that is emblematic of broader societal tensions and contradictions between working class men and the newly active female population of the late Victorian era (Hargreaves, 1997).

However, it is important to note that women have also been involved in the fight-scene throughout history, albeit in more restricted capacities compared to men (Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997). For instance, bare-knuckle prize fights in the 18th and 19th centuries occasionally included lower-working-class female participants on the fight card as a means to facilitate the resolution of disputes among women and/or to potentially win money in the presence of entertainment-seeking male audiences (Hargreaves, 1997; McDevitt, 2004). Of course, the bodies of female fighters stood in complication to the idealized/middle- and upper-class constructions of femininity which tethered a woman's worth to her physical beauty, passivity, and outward displays of grace and social etiquette (Gems & Pfister, 2014). One might

also conversely argue, though, that female fighters exemplified an implied measure of resistance to the restrictive gender norms and physical limitations imposed upon their bodies by misguided conceptions of feminine frailty. Indeed, as Jennifer Hargreaves (1997, pp. 37-38) further explained, female boxing is in the most basic way a "celebration of female muscularity, physical strength and aggression," all of which contrasted against the "listless, weak, and sexually repressed image of the well-bred, middle-class Victorian lady" (p. 38).

Fights between female combatants grew in popularity throughout parts of North America during the Second World War; however, concerns about the fragility of the female body once again crept into public consciousness and slowed the growth of women's boxing by the War's end (Hargreaves, 1997). By the late 1980s, fitness trends such as Tae Bo, cardio kickboxing, and contactless boxing cast combat sports in a somewhat different light and became widely popular among middle-class women seeking to improve their physiques and enhance their general health and wellness (Gems & Pfister, 2014; Hargreaves, 1997). Of course, the image of women joining combat gyms for largely 'aesthetic' purposes versus preparation for actual combat was consistent with earlier gendered patterns, yet may have also provided an important catalyst for the ensuing decade that saw a massive uptick in the number of female boxers testing their metal in the ring (Halbert, 1997). Indeed, the 1990s was an era of uneasy yet unprecedented growth in the history of women's professional sport which, together with wider transformations in gender relations, contributed to an increased social acceptance of women's inclusion in combat sport. Martha McCaughey's (1997) *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defense* argued that women were effectively using combat sport as platform to demonstrate their strength, power, and competitiveness in sport and society, while at the same time countering the historical association of women as passive victims (as opposed to purveyors) of violence (Theberge,

2003)—an association that would be further challenged as more and more women took their skills to the professional stages of combat sport.

1.3. Combat on the Professional Stage

In 2001, the International Boxing Association (AIBA) hosted the first modern women's World Boxing Championship in Scranton, Pennsylvania, which included a total of 125 female boxers from 30 different countries (International Boxing Association [AIBA], 2001). Canadian boxer, Crystelle Samson, won the 60kg category to help Canada capture third place overall with a total of one gold, one silver, and seven bronze medals (AIBA, 2001). Women's boxing was added to the Olympic Games just over a decade later in London, England, in 2012, and well-over a century after men's boxing had debuted at the 1904 Olympic Games in St. Louis, Missouri (Tjønndal, 2019). Canadian boxer, Mary Spencer, earned a fifth-place finish in the middle weight division (69 kg to 75 kg) at the London Olympics, falling just short of the podium (International Olympic Committee, 2019a). However, opportunities for women to compete in boxing still remain limited at the Olympics due to the tournament's structure—i.e., only five weight categories are available for female boxers (featherweight, flyweight, lightweight, welterweight and middleweight)—compared to eight male divisions (AIBA, 2019).[6]

In terms of combat sport, the recent professionalization of MMA has made the sport highly popular in countries around the world, effectively surpassing the preeminence once enjoyed by boxing for both male and female fighters (Follo, 2012). Magnus Stenius (2013) referred to MMA as a 'meta-fight' in that it combines kickboxing, wrestling, Brazilian jiu-jitsu,

[6] Since the 2016 Olympics, the International Olympic Committee has changed the layout from ten weight classes for males and three weight classes for females to eight and three, respectively (International Olympic Committee, 2019b).

judo and many other fighting styles into one 'meta' style and/or discipline. Today, MMA fights are held in either rings or cages depending on which professional organization is hosting the event. Two combatants compete for approximately 3-5 five-minute rounds using various fighting techniques (e.g., punching, kicking, elbowing, kneeing) to either force their opponent into submission by way of tap out, by knocking them out cold, or by referee or corner stoppage (i.e., technical knockout) (Stenius, 2013).

Modern MMA is viewed by many scholars and martial arts practitioners as a reincarnation of the Ancient Greek combat sport known as pankration which, translated into English, means "all powers" (Stenius, 2013). Originally, pankration was a man vs. man freestyle fighting competition in which two unarmed combatants combined both striking and grappling techniques in order to defeat their opponent (Buse, 2006; Quinney, 2016; Stenius, 2013). The only two technical restrictions for this sport were that the fighters were not permitted to either bite or gouge the eyes of their opponent (Stenius, 2013). However, the most recent iteration of MMA combines the disciplines of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, judo and Muay-Thai (Spencer, 2009). Perhaps the discipline that most influences MMA is Brazilian jiu-jitsu which owes its origin to a Japanese martial artist Mitsuyo Maeda who came to Brazil in the mid 20th century to spread the martial art of judo. While in Brazil, Maeda worked directly with the Gracie family, a prominent fighting family who have studied and adapted the Japanese martial art of grappling over several generations. Together, Maeda and the Gracie family co-created what is now known as Brazilian jiu-jitsu—a style of fighting that exploded in popularity following Royce Gracie's dominance in the first ever Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in 1993. A distinguishing feature of Brazilian jiu-jitsu is that it allows smaller, more technical fighters to hold their own against larger, more powerful opponents. One of the smallest sons in

the Gracie family, Rorion Gracie, was sent to America to spread the art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu and to prove that size and strength could be overcome by one's technical competence (Quinney, 2016). Rorion began instructing and spreading his family's martial art to larger audiences, and even held competitions at which fighters from different technical backgrounds would square off against each other in hand-to-hand combat. Eventually, Rorion connected with some fight promoters in the United States who worked to create the UFC, with its first televised fight held on November 12, 1993 (Quinney, 2016). The UFC has since grown to become the marquee brand of professional MMA and has broadcasted fights to nearly a billion households in 149 countries worldwide (Weaving, 2015).

Like the rest of the history of combat sports, organizations such as the UFC have long been dominated by male fighters, administrators, and sports fans—a trend that persists despite women's inclusion as fighters in the organization since 2013. The UFC's president, Dana White, notoriously said during a 2011 interview that women would never be included as fighters in the UFC (Quinney, 2016). White's comments were consistent with the views captured in numerous studies of women's boxing in which female athletes have reportedly encountered unwelcoming attitudes in boxing gyms, with evidence of some gyms even refusing to allow women entry for purposes other than to watch male boxers compete (Gems & Pfister, 2014; Halbert, 1997; Heiskanen, 2012). White has obviously since recanted his original position and now permits women to fight in the octagon, most likely caving to broader social pressures as well as for self-serving purposes such as capturing a wider audience base (Fischer & McClearen, 2020; Weaving, 2015). Moreover, the inclusion of women in the UFC came just one year after the Invicta Fighting Championships (Invicta FC) All Pro Women's Mixed Martial Arts series entered the professional fight scene and almost instantly had become a huge promotional success

(Quinney, 2016). Invicta FC is still in operation, but manages fights on a much smaller scale than the UFC.

The widespread deployment of scantily clad ring girls who appear between rounds during combat sport competition is another example of female bodies being sidelined and assigned a limited role during athletic events (Heiskanen, 2012). To this day, the most visible women in MMA remain the ring girls whose duty it is to parade around the ring in a bikini while holding-up a sign that communicates the round number to a largely male audience (Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Paul et al., 2015). Read critically, ring girls perpetuate the idea that a woman's role in combat sports should remain sexualized and outside of the ring. As David Brown (2006) explained, "Both men and women come to embody and perceive (visually) as self-evident, the 'illusio' of a natural legitimacy of their dominating or dominated bodies and the concomitant social positions and practices that legitimately stem from these naturalized qualities" (p.170). However, women have also challenged society's view on femininity by participating in combat sports and by refusing to conform to dominant gender norms (Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994, 1997). Other combat sports associations have also tried to 'feminize' combat sport by hyper-sexualizing the bodies of female fighters. Prior to the 2012 Olympic Games in London, for example, the International Boxing Association (AIBA) discussed the possibility of mandating female boxers to wear skirts during competition so that they would be more easily distinguishable from their male counterparts. Female boxers spoke-out against this proposal and successfully lobbied for the right to choose between wearing traditional boxing attire (shorts) or 'gender appropriate' skirts in the ring (Godoy-Pressland, 2015; van Ingen & Kovacs, 2012).

Of course, sex-segregated sporting competition is virtually industry standard across all types of sports, and, combat sports, such as MMA, is no exception. Multiple scholars have

argued that sex-segregated sport competition risks perpetuating the view that a woman's physiology is 'naturally' inferior to that of a man (Gleaves & Lehrbach, 2016). In addition, Iris Marion Young (1980) also argued that the lack of opportunity to practice certain sporting skills encourages hesitancy and improper technique among females, which further perpetuates the myth and self-fulling prophecy of 'feminine frailty'. Jennifer Hargreaves (1997) similarly argued that dominant constructions of gender and sexuality negatively shape the comfort-level female athletes experience when participating in particular sports and/or physical activities, thus compromising their ability to perform certain techniques effectively. Finally, Pirkko Markula (2006) argued that female athletes tend to navigate social pressures by attempting to strike an awkward balance between their athletic performance and the performance of their femininity.

The 'double-standard' in which women are expected to be strong in their athletic performances, while also accentuating their femininity vis-à-vis 'playing up' their heterosexuality and physical attractiveness during competition has not passed unnoticed by numerous sport studies scholars (Alsarve & Tjønndal, 2020; Csizma et al., 1988; Follo, 2012; Halbert, 1997; Hardy, 2015; Heiskanen, 2012; Kolnes, 1995; Robinson, 2002). However, in the case of combat sport, Mari Kristen Sisjord and Elsa Kristiansen (2009) found that Norwegian senior-level elite female wrestlers were generally more critical and even dismissive of gendered ideologies if it in any way compromised their athletic training, at least more so than their junior-level counterparts who still felt pressure to conform to popular stereotypes about femininity. This suggests that younger female 'pugilists-in-training' may be a fruitful subgroup for examining how dominant constructions of gender, sexuality, and sport potentially cut differently across particular sport and societal contexts (Rich & Brown, 2002).

1.4. Gendering Sport-for-Development

Jacob Bustad and David Andrews (2017) explained that the underlying philosophy of Sport-for-Development and Peace (SDP) programs is that participation in sport and physical activity can be used to maintain social order, to teach self-control, and for promoting obedience, self-discipline, and life-skills through positive role modeling. The goal of many SDP programs—which really took off in the early 1990s—has been to fill the gaps in the broader social service industry by attempting to provide youth with the necessary tools to escape poverty by better managing their own life stressors and by 'staying out of trouble' (Bustad & Andrews, 2017; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). In this sense, today's SDP programs draw upon longstanding usages of sport as a tool for social control and youth development. For example, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) has long used sport, recreation, and leisure activities both in Canada and around the world as means to build character and health through athletics and outreach to children living in the shadow of the industrial revolution (Pitter & Andrews, 1997).

SDP has attracted global attention both politically and also as a field of research over the past two decades (Beutler, 2008; Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2010; Darnell, 2007, 2010; Forde, 2014; Giulianotti, 2004, 2011; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Hayhurst, 2014; Lindsey & O'Gorman, 2015). In 2002, the United Nations (UN) Inter-Agency Task Force on SDP was convened by the Secretary General of the UN to review activities involving sport within the UN system with the aim of encouraging sport's incorporation into the UN's various activities and initiatives, thus acknowledging sport as a potentially useful medium through which to address worldwide poverty, health, peace, education, and gender equality (Beutler, 2008). The UN also designated 2005 as the 'International Year of Sport and Physical Education' with the aim of establishing a "…better understanding of the value of sport and physical education for human

development and a more systematic use of sport in development programmes" (Beutler, 2008, p. 361).

However, as Fred Coalter (2010) explained, many SDP organizations, including *Right to Play*[7]—the most prominent SDP organization in Canada—have been critiqued as paternalistic toward 'underdeveloped' or so-called 'Third World' nations. Simon Darnell (2014) further argued that SDP programs risk solidifying social hierarchies throughout various institutions. As non-profits, SDP organizations generally rely upon a network of socially and economically affluent volunteer-workers who travel around the world with the aim of empowering marginalized populations through sport and physical activity often without ever thinking through the wider histories and structures of inequality that have contributed to peoples' marginalization in the first place (Darnell, 2010). SDP has, thus, been further critiqued for blindly imposing Eurocentric norms and values on targeted nations and for not grounding such programs firmly within local cultural contexts (Darnell, 2007; Guest, 2009; Hasselgård & Straume, 2015; Lerner et al., 2000; Lindsey & Grattan, 2012; Segrave, 2000).

In a similar vein, Richard Giulianotti (2004) critiqued SDP programs as being set-up and operated by modern-day 'sport-evangelists' who naively believe that participation in sport—without any corresponding non-sport components or broader structural changes—inherently fosters social capital, builds character, and gives guidance to 'at risk' youth (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2007; Giulianotti, 2011; Spaaij et al., 2013). Robert Pitter and David Andrews (1997) described the ascendance of SDP programs as part of the new "social problems industry" that aims to utilize low-cost sport and leisure programs as an alternative human service against a

[7] *Right to Play* is a non-profit that began prior to the 1994 Olympic Games and that really gained traction when Johann Olav Koss donated his gold-medal winnings to support refugee and humanitarian assistance programs (Darnell, 2007).

backdrop of recoiling social services in the wake of neoliberalism. Virtually all SDP researchers agree that participation in sport alone does not inherently produce positive youth development, nor does it necessarily foster their ability to thrive socially and economically as older adults (Benson, 2003; Damon, 2004; Pittman & Fleming 1991). Karen Pittman and Wanda Fleming (1991) argued that much more work is needed beyond the sport programs themselves when it comes to youth development: "problem-free [youth] does not mean fully prepared" (p. 3).

In the North American context, numerous SDP programs have been initiated by both government and non-government actors as a seemingly cost-effective strategy for reducing crime and violence among 'high risk' and racialized youth populations (Coalter, 2010; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Kidd, 2008). For example, the Police Athletic League in Baltimore was initiated in 1996 with the aim of building positive relationships between law enforcement and local 'at risk' youths from tough neighbourhoods (Bustad & Andrews, 2017). Jordan Koch (2015) also profiled the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's investment in a youth cadets corps in the four Cree First Nations of Maskwacis, Alberta. He argued that, while the program was well-received among many families and youth, others in the community also saw the program as a flagrant attempt by the police to gain notoriety in the media at a time of heightened reports about youth gang violence in the region.

The most notorious SDP program in North America has been the Midnight Basketball Crime Prevention Program that was first launched in Chicago in the 1990s in predominantly Black neighbourhoods. The program traditionally ran between the hours of 10:00pm and 2:00am as a means to reduce truancy among a highly racialized population during the supposedly high crime/unsupervised hours of the night. Douglas Hartmann (2016) observed that the program was conveniently initiated by politicians at a time when they were aggressively recoiling much

needed social services for low-income residents while also ushering in a new era of heightened police surveillance, including Bill Clinton's infamous 'three strikes law'. Hartmann (2016) further critiqued Midnight Basketball for: associating Black youth with crime and the sport of basketball; for offering-up a simple solution to complex public problems; and for diverting attention away from the root causes of crime and violence.

Of particular significance to this thesis is the fact that combat sports such as boxing and MMA have been frequently promoted as a 'common sense' solution to youth deviance. Gyms across Canada and throughout the United States continue to offer combat training programs that target 'at risk' youth with the hopes of keeping them 'off the street' and engaged in socially 'productive' extracurricular activities. As noted in the introduction, one of the most renowned combat gyms in Canada is the Cabbagetown Boxing Club and Youth Centre located just east of downtown Toronto (Brunt, 1987). Other celebrated boxing/martial arts programs in Canada include: the Eastside Boxing Club (Vancouver), the Pan Am Boxing (Winnipeg), Bloor Street Boxing (Toronto), and the East Boxing Club (Montréal). Harm-reduction initiatives led by police and law enforcement also tend to utilize boxing and/or other classically male sporting activities, such as floor hockey (Koch et al., 2018), to offer racialized youth a safe place to go in the afterschool hours. The Boxing Against Drugs and Guns Everywhere (B.A.D.G.E) program in Toronto is one of many similar programs (Bloor Street Boxing & Fitness, n.d.) that either explicitly mentions 'at risk' youth or that offers free programming for youth-in-need.

Still, whether the goal of an SDP program is to reduce boredom, to develop and shape the character of 'at risk' youth, to improve community-police relations, to increase employability, or to maintain social control, there exists scant literature that examines how participants experience these programs against the backdrop of structural violence and urban marginality (Koch et al.,

2018; Holt et al., 2016; Scherer et al., 2016; Wacquant, 2004; Wamsley, 1999). One important exception to this trend is a recent study by Ross Deuchar et al. (2016) who explored the role of a boxing program in the lives of gang-involved men in Denmark. The authors noted that these men primarily utilized the boxing program as a tool for social bonding amongst one another, but were reluctant to alter some of their more deviant behaviours and lifestyle choices. Whitney Wright (2006) conversely observed that 'at risk' male youths tended to use boxing as a resource to help navigate difficult situations, such as finding alternatives to gang life and violence on the streets. Boxing also gave these youths a sense of community and a renewed identity in an urban environment that had been routinely deprived of economic resources and other opportunities. Wright (2006) observed that the youth found mutual support in one another and were able to work together to stay accountable for their actions by keeping the fighting 'in the ring'.

Collectively, these studies support some of the more recent claims by sport studies scholars who argue that SDP organizations targeting 'at risk' youths ought to evaluate success using criteria that extends beyond crime reduction, drug and alcohol avoidance, and school graduation rates (Forde, 2014; Giulianotti, 2004; Koch et al., 2018). The fact that youth may be pursuing sport as an opportunity to socialize, have fun with one another, and to exercise are important wins for SDP programming, and should be considered as such (Deuchar et al., 2016). Moreover, experiences of leisure, pleasure, and community-building are also significant wins for SDP programming, and especially for many youths who have been forced to navigate difficult social contexts (Coalter, 2010; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012). Richard Lerner et al. (2000) explained that SDP programs should focus on nurturing play, fun, leisure, and positive relationships within a community, rather than focussing on laboratory-tested prevention and 'harm-reduction' programs.

However, an important critique of both SDP programming and of the supporting literature remains its heavy focus on 'at risk' young *men* from racialized backgrounds. Young women, on the other hand, have remained largely on the sidelines, literally so in the case of SDP programming and also figuratively in terms of the sport studies scholarship (Chawansky, 2011; Forde & Kendall-Taylor, 2007). The larger sport studies scholarship has also focused primarily upon the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied women, thus naturalizing these characteristics across all non-male athletes (Kearney, 2009, p. 19). Yet, the sporting experiences of non-male athletes cannot be disassociated from social class, ethnicity, race, sexuality and ability (Hargreaves, 1994; McRobbie, 2000).

Martha Saavedra (2009, p. 128) argued that, in the context of SDP programming, "'Gender' is usually only invoked when referring to the involvement of girls and women, and is spoken of primarily in terms of sport being able to empower girls and women or to help them change some element of themselves." Lyndsay Hayhurst's (2013, 2014) ethnographic research into a girl-focused martial arts SDP programming in Eastern Uganda similarly observed that female participants were encouraged to become self-sufficient through training them as 'entrepreneurs' (in this case, training them to become martial arts instructors, and also by employing them as factory workers). The martial arts program that Hayhurst (2013) studied also communicated some basic strategies to women about how to avoid gender-based violence that was considered 'commonplace' in parts of Uganda. Using ethnographic methods, Hayhurst (2013) concluded that, while many positives can be associated with girl-focused SDP programming, the girls within these programs still had to navigate various structural inequalities that tended to marginalize them in the first place. Hayhurst (2014) argued that SDP programs tend to romanticize the role(s) they play in the lives of participants. Simply bombarding girls

with messaging such as “make the ‘right’ choice to take part” (Hayhurst, 2013, p. 9) does little to address the underlying power dynamics that perpetually oppress girls and women in cities around the world. As Megan Chawansky stated, “empowered girls should play and live alongside enlightened boys” (2011, p. 131).

Similarly, Sarah Oxford and Ramón Spaaij’s (2019) ethnography used 6-months of participant observation and various interviewing techniques to study two women’s soccer programs in Colombia. The authors found that long-established gender roles and religious views that had historically excluded women from sport proved difficult to overcome in the context of SDP programming. Community stakeholders and parental figures interviewed for the study identified several hoops and social norms that remained unchanged by SDP programming. In another article, Sarah Oxford and Fiona McLachlan (2018) used similar ethnographic methods to observe that female soccer players’ experienced an improved sense of self-worth through participating in SDP programming. The authors also observed that the program produced little, if any, sustained impact on broader gender dynamics and structures of inequality that continued to exclude women from Columbia’s sport community.

Finally, ‘Moving the Goalposts Kilifi’ is another female-focused sport-for-development program that uses soccer as a ‘hook’ to deliver important messaging about broader social issues such as early school-dropout, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and HIV/AIDS in Kilifi, Kenya (Forde & Kendall-Taylor, 2007). The program also tries to use soccer to develop confidence, leadership, self-esteem, and teamwork among girls and young women in the region, in addition to promoting physical health and well-being. A study by Sarah Forde and Andrea Kendall-Taylor (2007) found that female participants experienced many positive outcomes through soccer, such as an improved sense of self-worth; however, the study also found that women experienced

certain negative outcomes, such as severe social disapproval for having resisted existing gender norms. As Martha Brady (2005) argued, “Building girls’ skills and agency will go only so far if girls find themselves living in the same restrictive environments” (p. 47).

1.5. Chapter Summary and Concluding Remarks

This chapter reviewed sport historical and sport sociological literatures dedicated to two main subject areas: 1) the history of women in sport (combat sport, primarily), and 2) the study of sport-for-development. A common theme that emerged across both of these areas was the lack of female presence. Although sport has begun to be used to address gender inequalities and improve the lives of girls and women around the world, there was also a lack of research exploring the perspectives of female participants within these programs or that problematized some of the unintended consequences associated with their introduction (Hayhurst, 2013). The chapter demonstrated that women have long been stereotyped as less capable, less athletic, and as out of place within the realm of sport and physical activity. However, this chapter also showed that women have long fought back against the socially restrictive gender norms associated with femininity and ‘feminine frailty’ and, in so doing, have successfully struggled to legitimize their participation in sport, including within sports such as boxing and other combat activities. Finally, this chapter further observed that, while sport has long been used by socially affluent classes as a tool for top-down development among marginalized populations, women have, from the bottom-up, used sport to alter dominant attitudes and false beliefs that have kept them on the proverbial sidelines—an occurrence that merits further exploration in terms of both the potential power and usages of sport-for-development in the modern era.

Chapter II:
Methodology

This thesis adopts a methodological framework similar to that used in previous ethnographic studies of combat sport (Beattie, 1997; De Garis, 2000; Domaneschi, 2018; Green, 2016; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Paradis, 2012; Spencer, 2009, 2014; Sugden 1996; Trimbur, 2009; Vaittinen, 2014; Wacquant, 2004), and that has also been used in several other studies of sport-for-development programming (Hartmann, 2001, 2003; Holt et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2018; Scherer et al., 2016; Oxford, 2017; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018). As noted in Chapter One, a limited number of researchers have explored the experiences of participants within sport-for-development programming. Moreover, researchers have primarily focused upon the experiences of boys and young men, and have largely overlooked the experiences of all other genders (Chawansky, 2011). My research, thus, aims to expand this body of scholarship by inserting my own white cis-gendered female LGBTQ+ sporting body as a participant observer within the classically male-dominated milieu of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). [8]

The chapter is divided into two main sections. Section one explains the theoretical framework adopted for this work, which has been loosely informed by Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology (Bourdieu, 1978, 1984, 1998/2001a; Laberge, 1995). Section two, next, outlines the core ethnographic methods used for this research, including: participant observation, conversational interviews, and textual analysis. The research setting, data collection procedures, analytic strategies, and other methodological considerations are also outlined. The chapter concludes with a brief commentary about the ethical concerns and issues of trustworthiness connected to this study.

[8] LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, etc.) is an umbrella term for people with minority sexual orientations and/or minority gender identities (Herrick & Duncan, 2018a).

2.1. Sporting Feminisms

Sport studies and feminist scholars have documented a range of different ways in which the bodies of female athletes have been discriminated against in various sport, recreation, and leisurely activities (Clasen, 2001; De Garis, 2000, Follo, 2012; Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994; Heiskanen, 2012, Laberge, 1995; Messner, 1988; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019; Woodward, 2004). Chapter One noted that female athletes were historically labelled as 'fragile' and thought to be incapable of competing to the same high standard and with the same intensity-level as men—a stereotype that still persists across numerous sports and physical activity contexts (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Follo, 2012; Hall, 1999; Kidd & Donnelly, 2007; Pirinen, 1997). Being called-out as a 'girl' in sport is also viewed as an insult by many male athletes (Clasen, 2001). Indeed, a male athlete who fails to use his body to its fullest potential is often tormented by spectators through the use of derogatory phrases such as 'you throw like a girl' or 'you hit like a girl', implying that girls naturally deploy improper sporting techniques compared to boys who exhibit correct techniques (Theberge, 2003). A person who does 'girl push-ups', moreover, deploys a modified training technique which requires less upper body strength (Channon, 2014).

The collective implication of these associations is that the feminine sporting body is considered weak, more passive, and generally inferior in comparison to the male sporting body (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Clasen, 2001). Feminist researchers have, thus, drawn upon a range of social theorists to enhance their analysis of the complex relationship between sport, gender, and power at both macro and micro-political levels (Connell, 1995; Hayhurst, 2013, 2014; McCaughey, 1997; Theberge, 2003; Woodward, 2008; Young, 1980). For example, Yvonne Lafferty and Jim McKay's (2004) ethnography of an inner-city boxing gym in Australia drew upon Raewyn Connell's (1995) Gender Regime theory to examine how gender operates in the

sporting arena (Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Connell (1995) identified four key structures that are interwoven to inform the dominant gender order: 1) *labor*, which refers to the relationship between paid/masculine and unpaid/feminine work; 2) *power*, which refers to the different modes of social control; 3) *cathexis*, which refers to emotional-sexual attachment, and; 4) *representation*, which refers to the symbolic aspects of gender (Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Mennesson, 2012). Lafferty and McKay (2004) argued that competitive boxing affords an arena that "simultaneously enables and constrains how women choose to perform and/or 'do' gender" in sport (p. 249). Women who box find themselves caught trying to prove their identities as top-tier athletes, while simultaneously trying to disprove the widely held belief that women are gentile, weak, and passive. Female boxers, in this way, reject normalized constructions of femininity (weak, passive, fragile) but, by doing so, they also risk being perceived as 'un-feminine' in relation to dominant discourses of femininity (Channon & Phipps, 2017, p. 26).

Nancy Theberge (2003) similarly used Iris Young's (1980) feminist theory of embodiment or 'feminine bodily comportment' to examine the experiences of female ice hockey players across Canada. Young's (1980) theory discussed the conservative manner through which girls and women have been historically taught to navigate social spaces in ways that restrict their body size, as well as limit the amount of space they occupy—two physical strategies which have been reinforced through dominant social messaging and exposure to various physical cultural pursuits that habitually idolize the masculine sporting body (Theberge, 2003; Young, 1980). Theberge (2003) argued that female ice hockey players effectively challenged the societal expectation that women ought to hide their physicality and, instead, placed value upon strength, physical competency, and aggression during competition. Theberge (2003) further argued that

the broader institution of sport must evolve to better support the development of female athletes according to whatever virtues they choose to pursue.

Feminist researchers have more recently drawn upon Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology as a framework to advance the dialogue on sport and gender. Bourdieu referred to relational sociology as "a system of relational concepts" (Schinkel, 2007, p. 712) in which the positions and material goods that make-up particular social "fields" are made meaningful precisely because of the perceived differences between their relational properties; i.e., not due to any intrinsic or essential properties that set them apart from one another (Schinkel, 2007). The binary oppositions that have commonly been used to classify human relations (e.g., man vs. woman, gay vs. straight, etc.) tend to also be imbued with power so that one classification (e.g., man) is habitually privileged over the other/woman (Brown, 2006; Laberge, 1995). The intersecting of power (or capital) with human relations is at the core of Bourdieu's work, and is applied to both individuals (vis-à-vis social positions) and also to material goods.

My thesis draws mostly on Bourdieu's work, so I will elaborate upon his theories in the following paragraphs; however, I wanted to first re-state the importance and pioneering contributions of female scholars in this area, such as Raewyn Connell, Iris Young, and Nancy Theberge, as well as Patricia Vertinski, Jennifer Hargreaves, and Pirkko Markula whom I mentioned in Chapter II. My theoretical inclinations draw loosely on all of these scholars.

2.2. Pierre Bourdieu

Two of Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts are *field* and *habitus*, which are dialectically linked with one another:

> A field consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital), while habitus consists of a set of historical relations 'deposited' within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.16)

Bourdieu more simply used field as a heuristic device to describe the distinct social arenas in which individuals/stakeholders interact and compete with/against one another for power (or capital) and, ultimately, to advance their relative position in the field (Defrance, 1995; Kay & Laberge, 2002). Bourdieu, thus, characterized each field as semi-autonomous "space of conflict and competition" between hierarchically arranged stakeholders (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17). Bourdieu considered the social dynamics between actors within a particular field as largely informed by the field's internal logic, which he considered to be distinct from (yet interconnected with) various other fields of struggle (Defrance, 1995).[9]

Another of Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts is *habitus*, which he defined as:

> The strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations. . . a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.18)

For Bourdieu, habitus is constitutive of a person's embodiment of the social; i.e., it represents "the social embodied" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.128). Bourdieu thus

[9] For example, Joanne Kay and Suzanne Laberge (2002) used Bourdieu's concept of field to investigate how appeals to 'authenticity' and 'spectacularization' operate as key stakes in the lifestyle sport of adventure racing. The authors noted how stakeholders' understandings of 'authentic' adventure racing practices shaped the field itself.

conceptualized habitus as the internalization of a whole series of values, beliefs, and resources that exist within the broader social world and that, in turn, manifest themselves within the pre-reflexive nature/disposition of individuals who have internalized such matters as 'common sense' (Laberge, 1995; Paradis, 2012; Webb et al., 2008). Much like 'field', then, a person's habitus is also dynamic, and subject to change based upon the various fields encountered over time, as well as the social relations that exist within those fields (Webb et al., 2008). Habitus in this way is shaped by both external and internal factors, and, at the same time, is generative and open-to-change resultant from internal/individual and external/social forces. Bourdieu (1990) explained, "the body is in the social world, but the social world is also in the body" (p.190).

In terms of gender, one of Bourdieu's more controversial viewpoints was that patriarchy and male domination occur because *both* genders[10] (men *and* women) participate in its reproduction (Bourdieu, 1998/2001a; Lovell, 2000; Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu argued that both men and women habitually misrecognize the symbolic violence associated with male dominance as 'the order of things' (Bourdieu, 1998/2001a, p. 8) or as 'the way of the world' instead of viewing it for what it is: learnt behaviour that has been reproduced within various fields throughout history and that, in turn, perpetuates male dominance within the minds and bodies of both men *and* women (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu (2001b) further argued that the mutual investment in patriarchy constitutes a "symbolic violence", which he defined as:

> [violence] wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it … the people involved are manipulated as much as they manipulate. They manipulate even more effectively the

[10] It is important to note that Bourdieu tends to discuss gender as binary, although we both recognize a multicity of genders (Bourdieu, 1998/2001a, p. 23). While interpreting data, we remained open to the possibility that some of the youths may not subscribe to binary-oriented gender identities; however, issues surrounding the self-identification or classification of gender identities never came up during conversations within the MMA program.

> more they are themselves manipulated and the more unconscious they are of this. (Bourdieu, 2001b, p. 246)

Symbolic violence can thus take the form of both psychological marginalization, where an individual and/or group considers themselves as inferior to another, or material deprivation, where a group is systematically denied access to financial, social, or cultural capital as part of the naturalized "order of things" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 168).

Capital represents the third key edifice that Bourdieu regularly deployed in his sociological analyses. Capital, for Bourdieu, is what individuals (as social agents) use to navigate and/or 'play the game' within particular social fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 118; Lovell, 2000; Webb et al., 2008). Individuals may be imbued with many different species of capital, such as economic capital,[11] cultural capital,[12] social capital (i.e., acquaintances and networks), and/or symbolic capital (Swartz, 1997; Thorpe, 2009), [13] which are transferrable through an 'exchange rate' across social fields. For example, Holly Thorpe (2009) observed how snowboarders in her study sought to leverage symbolic capital (status, lifestyle, prestige etc.) to gain economic capital; i.e., a species of capital that held sway in both the sport field and also in broader social fields. Cultural capital was also gained through various cultural performances that were valued among snowboarders (e.g., displaying physical ability, risk taking, etc.).

Certain feminist scholars have drawn from Bourdieu's work to claim that there exists a distinct species of 'feminine' capital gained through a woman's outward displays of beauty, sexuality, grace, and also by demonstrating other dominant characteristics of femininity

[11] Wealth in the form of money or property is an example of economic capital (Thorpe, 2009).
[12] Cultural capital can be thought of as noneconomic goods, and may include resources such as verbal facility, general verbal awareness, educational credentials, or aesthetic preferences (Swartz, 1997).
[13] Symbolic capital is "a form of power that is not perceived as power but as legitimate demands for recognition deference, obedience, or the service of others" (Swartz, 1997, p. 43).

(Huppatz, 1999). The female sporting body is in this perspective rewarded for emphasizing (hetero)sexuality through activities such as 'foxy boxing' (Heiskanen, 2012) or by playing-up one's sexuality as 'snow bunnies' in the context of snowboarding (Thorpe, 2009). Bourdieu, however, considered such acts simply as another dimension of cultural capital, as opposed to constituting its own species of capital (Lovell, 2000; Skeggs, 2004).

For Bourdieu, a person's habitus is fundamentally linked to the embodiment of masculinity and femininity (Thorpe, 2009, p. 500) in the sense that particular gendered characteristics are forged and normalized through active participation in various social fields: "[gender is an] absolutely fundamental dimension of the habitus that … modifies all the social qualities that are connected to the fundamental social factors" (in Krais, 2006, p. 128). Holly Thorpe (2009), for example, observed that female snowboarders experienced sport differently from their male counterparts due to their marginalization within the field. Thorpe further noted that, "while *some* female snowboarders are able to negotiate space within the snowboarding field and accumulate capital (symbolic, gender and both), their gender identities remain limited and determined by a male valuation system" (Thorpe, 2009, p. 502).

Another related concept that Bourdieu used to describe the practical knowledge, core values, and/or 'rules of the game' that operate within particular 'fields' is *doxa*, which he described as:

> The set of fundamental, prereflexive assumptions that social agents engage by the mere fact of taking the world for granted, of accepting the world as it is, and of finding it natural because their mind is constructed according to cognitive structures that are issued out of the very structures of the world. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 168)

Bourdieu described a person whose habitus and doxa are well-aligned within a given field as "a fish in the water," meaning that they were so comfortable within that field that they were virtually unaware of its sociological underpinnings (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992 p. 127). Conversely, a person whose doxa and habitus are misaligned will experience tension, confusion, and feel out of place within the field. Elise Paradis (2012), for example, argued that women who participated in the sport of boxing initially encountered a great deal of resistance, until both the field and its doxa underwent a change that normalized their participation. Yet, many female boxers still feel out of place (and are perceived as being out of place) due to the deeply-rooted nature of habitus, which is reluctant to change (Heiskanen, 2012; Paradis, 2012).

David Brown (2006) provided an important overview of Pierre Bourdieu's applicability to the study of gender in sport. Brown (2006) explained that, conceptually, Bourdieu was correct in asserting that the 'gender order'—by constructing particular iterations of gender in relational opposition to others—is kept alive through the "dynamic principle of alterity or otherness" that operates across all genders (and that is also ubiquitous throughout societal settings) (p. 165). Women have, more plainly, been socially constructed in relation to men; they have been imbued with both physical and social properties that differentiate them according to various social attitudes and behaviours; e.g., women have been historically cast as smaller, weaker, socially passive, and physically fragile compared to men who, in contrast, have been viewed as strong, assertive, and physically dominant (Bourdieu, 1998/2001a). Bourdieu (1998/2001a) himself argued that the historic division of sexes has helped to naturalize a whole set of behaviours across various social spheres (including sport), which has further normalized such properties.

Both Brown (2006) and Bourdieu (1978) viewed sport as a particularly effective venue for the reproduction of gender divisions, as well as for the propagation of various other class,

race, and sexual attitudes (Anderson, 2009; Bourdieu, 1978, 1985; Clément, 1995; Laberge, 1995; Mennesson, 2000, 2012; Paradis, 2012; Sage, 1990; Swanson, 2009; Thorpe, 2009; Tomlinson, 2004; Wachs & Chase, 2013; Wacquant, 2004; Wilkes, 1990). However, few scholars have used Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit to study how gender dynamics operate (or are potentially contested) in locally-specific sporting contexts—a matter to which I will turn during the analytical chapters of my thesis.

2.3. Methods

The primary method for this study is critical ethnography—a method that aims to "articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that operate beneath appearances" (Madison, 2012, p. 15). Ethnographic research generally consists of three core research methods: 1) participant observation, 2) interviewing and/or focus group techniques, and 3) textual analysis. The strength of ethnographic research resides in the fact that it situates the researcher within the research project (or community, more accurately) and, thus, involves his or her close contact with the participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007)—making this an important methodology for researchers in the field of SDP. The researcher from this vantagepoint aims to interpret a specific research setting, community, and/or 'field' of interactions as a means to gain deeper understanding into how participants interpret and negotiate a particular phenomenon (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Pierre Bourdieu's field-analytic perspective is thus particularly well-suited to this task as it involves contextualizing actors' experiences relative to their social positioning within a community/field of struggle.

The following sections outline my deployment of the core research methods associated with ethnographic research with the aim of explicating my research process.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a distinguishing feature of ethnographic research and, quite literally, involves the researcher acting as both participant and also observer within the particular community that he/she is observing (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). As participant observer, the researcher endeavours to observe and identify recurrent, 'everyday' behavioural patterns, interactions, and social themes displayed by the participants over the course of the fieldwork. The close interaction between the researcher and her participants promotes in-depth, firsthand experiences, and helps the researcher to capture lived qualitative accounts of a social phenomenon as a means to shed light on the individuals/communities/cultures under investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This method usually involves building relationships and recording ethnographic field notes in a fieldwork journal that details the researcher's interactions in the field/community; i.e., descriptions and reflections of various issues and matters in the field that the researcher has deemed significant (Emerson et al., 2001).

As noted in the introductory chapter, the ethnographic setting for this research is a not-for-profit drop-in youth centre located in the heart of the historically working class neighbourhood of Côte-des-Neiges in central Montréal. The youth centre has grown considerably in both size and scope since its inception in 1983 and has become an important resource and gathering point for neighbourhood youth (Youth Digital Media Ecologies in Canada, 2017). The overarching social objective of the drop-in centre is to create safe, productive, and cost-free programming for local youth between the ages of 11 and 18years in the afterschool hours. Youth are able to partake cost-free in various centre-led activities, including: various sports and physical activities, e-sports, 3D printing/editing, computer coding, homework help, and gardening. They also enjoy regular access to a well-equipped recording studio where they can

cut tracks under the guidance of a professional musician. Youth can thus learn to hone their technical skillsets through training in music production, disc jockeying, singing, rapping, dancing, writing, poetry, videography, drawing, animation, and painting lessons at the centre.

In terms of sport and physical activities, the centre and its surrounding parks also afford youth the opportunity to participate in a number of physical activities, including: soccer, basketball, boxing, MMA (kickboxing, jiu-jitsu, wrestling, and self defense), as well as unorganized activities such as foosball, table tennis, pool, videogames, and board games from 3:00pm until 8:00pm on weekdays. Of significance, too, is the fact that youth are also regularly invited and encouraged to take-on a leadership role in the centre by attending organizational meetings at which decisions are made about the centre and its programming.

Mixed Martial Arts

In 2018, I began attending MMA classes at the youth centre on a weekly basis as a participant-observer after gaining access through my supervisor's pre-existing social networks. A male staff member at the youth centre, Adam (a pseudonym), had recently initiated a mixed-gendered MMA[14] program in the hopes that it would appeal to local youth. He was looking for an assistant to help manage the classes, to demonstrate certain technical/combat skills (of which I had none!), and to better connect with the female youth population in the area who had been surprisingly keen on attending MMA sessions. Adam was at the time living in Côte-des-Neiges and had over 15 years of competitive training in martial arts. He also held various martial arts credentials, including a jiu-jitsu and self-defense instructor diploma certified by the Brazilian

[14] As previously mentioned, MMA is a sport that combines a range of martial arts disciplines into one 'meta fight.' I recognize that professional MMA typically takes place in a caged arena and combines all disciplines into three rounds of five minutes (Stenius, 2015); however, each discipline was trained separately at the youth centre and sparring for each discipline was also practiced independent of the others.

Jiu-Jitsu Federation. Moreover, Adam also had over 12 years of active training and experience in community engagement; i.e., working with local children, adolescents, and young adults from the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood. Finally, Adam's ability to speak and understand multiple languages also made him an ideal gatekeeper for this study as he helped me to open important channels of communication with the centre's diverse youth population.

Under Adam's mentorship, I had the opportunity to learn MMA and to slowly build rapport with local youth in Côte-des-Neiges, which enabled me to collect a series of "naturally occurring" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 99) oral accounts over the course of my fieldwork. I spent a total of 22 months volunteering and working with the youth centre (both in person and remotely), nurturing rapport with staff members and local youth through prolonged and in-depth engagement in various group activities such as movie nights, staff and community dinners, visiting presentations and also by way of attendance at general organizational meetings. I was eventually entrusted to independently facilitate MMA sessions at the youth-centre, and, on occasion, run training sessions at another off-site facility/community centre in Côte-des-Neiges.

Of significance is that Adam routinely prioritized open discussions with youth participants at both the start and end of each MMA session, which promoted detailed insight into their personal goals, aspirations, and other happenings in their lives. The MMA sessions were held in what is called the 'combat gym', which is located in the basement of the youth centre. The gym is fairly small, about the size of a schoolroom, with windows on one wall and murals of Muay-Thai fighters on the other three walls. The floor is covered with temporary foam flooring, which can be removed after training sessions in order to make room for other programming held in the combat gym. There is a large punching bag in one corner of the gym that is weighted down

with car tires. Two large bins filled with boxing gloves, worn out sparring pads and focus mitts, and old hand wraps are located in another corner of the gym for youth to use at their leisure.

Importantly, just as combat sports themselves have been historically gendered, the physical space in which sport of MMA takes place is also gendered (Brady, 2005; Kidder, 2013; Oxford, 2017). The combat gym at the youth centre is no exception. Indeed, all of the imagery is masculine in orientation, with the murals featuring exclusively male fighters. The first thing your eyes are drawn towards when you enter the combat room is a colourful mural featuring two male Muay-Thai martial artists in mid-combat. One of the fighters has his head thrown back as a result of 'the kick to the head' he has received from his opponent. The two fighters are both shirtless, showing-off their chiseled muscles. On the adjacent wall is another shirtless male martial artist kneeling in meditation. Finally, hung on the window is a poster of the famous actor and martial artist, Bruce Lee—a striking reminder of the male dominated history and narratives associated with combat sport.

Field Notes

Preliminary ethnographic field notes were recorded beginning in September 2018 (following REB approval), and continued until March 2020. My initial field notes focused primarily upon the structure and organization of the MMA program and, as such, were largely descriptive in nature. I eventually learnt how to record more detailed, in-depth, and analytical field notes, which captured a wide range of informal interactions and naturally occurring oral accounts that spoke to the lives and complexities of the youth participants in the MMA program. I also tried to contemplate and exercise reflexivity throughout my fieldwork, with the aim of staying alert to how my own values and life experiences shaped my analysis (Bloomberg &

Volpe, 2016). Reflexivity is central to Bourdieu's theoretical framework, which can be characterized as "a systematic and rigorous self-critical practice of social science" (Swartz 1997, p. 11); i.e., a practice that is sensitive to both individual and social biases.

In January 2019, I began taking more detailed analytic field notes that sought to capture "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of various interactions in the MMA program. The program had grown considerably by that time and was eventually held on multiple days per week (as opposed to just one) due to its widespread popularity, particularly among teenage girls. The field notes were based on my personal observations and conversational interviews with youth and staff members, and were recorded within 24-hours of each visit to the youth centre. I attempted to avoid taking notes during the actual MMA class in order to participate fully in each class and also to avoid potentially alienating youth from their programming. This strategy also enabled me to omit from my notes any youth who did not want to be included in the study for whatever reason. In addition, I also did not audio-record any conversations during the study; instead, all field notes were written entirely by memory once I left the youth centre. I would occasionally jot down a few notes in the bathroom at the youth centre directly after the conversation had occurred in order to capture as accurately as possible particular exchanges. I would later refer back to these notes and elaborate upon their meaning within my fieldwork journal. I found this strategy allowed conversations to flow naturally and avoided any interruptions to the MMA program.

My supervisor and I met on a roughly biweekly schedule to interpret my field notes and to identify various themes that arose from session-to-session. I would then return to the youth centre with the aim of further probing into particular observations and themes that we had identified during our discussions. As several scholars have noted, field notes should be subject to reading and rereading, and open to alterations throughout the research process as they are not

final text (Emerson et al., 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Lewis & Ritchie, 2003)—a practice I embraced throughout my study.

The format of the MMA program was constantly changing and adapting to the needs of the youth in attendance. Initially, for instance, the MMA sessions were held only once per week, and included three martial arts components: Brazilian jiu-jitsu, kickboxing, and general self-defense training taught in a three-hour session divided into one-hour blocks. However, in December 2018, it was decided that the three-hour sessions were too long for most youth and, thus, the program was modified to three separate one-hour times slots for youth who had signed-up to participate the week prior. Each session was capped at four participants with the aim of maximizing one-on-one instructor/youth time, to elevate the intensity-level and quality of MMA training, and also as a means to enhance youths' comfort-level and their relationship with the instructor. The relatively small physical space of the combat room was also a factor in this decision, as was participant safety. Of particular significance to this study is that this modified (i.e., small, three session) format enabled female youths to register as a single sex group should they so desire; however, no youths took advantage of this option as they preferred to train in a co-ed environment.

The layout of the sessions also continually evolved throughout the year with different training components being introduced and removed on an experimental basis. During the summer months, for example, sessions were held Monday through Friday, and included an outdoor running component intended to improve participants' cardiovascular fitness and to also help broaden the scope of activities to which the youth had access. MMA sessions during the winter months were typically held on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. There was almost always a steady flow of youth participants training in MMA throughout the year.

Participants

The primary participants in this study were female youth aged 11-18years who regularly attended MMA training sessions, and were thus identified through a purposeful sampling technique, which is used when looking to understand and explore a specific phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The goal of purposeful sampling is to uncover in-depth insight into the specific context of a population, which is, in this case, the youth attending the MMA program (Ritchie et al., 2003). It is important to also note that the gendered make-up of the centre is heavily skewed towards young men rather than young women—approximately 20% of the centre's participants were female, whereas approximately 10-15% of participants in the MMA program were female. We, thus, felt it was imperative to also include the perspectives of male participants during the actual analysis and write-up of this thesis in order to avoid unnecessarily dislocating female voices from the actual context in which they were experiencing the MMA program. Importantly, in terms of highlighting female voices, a qualitative researcher needs only a small sample size to secure rich, valid findings (Mack et al., 2005; Ritchie et al., 2003). A smaller sample size can also help researchers to explore in greater-depth the lives and experiences of the participants in the study (Bloomberg &Volpe, 2016).

Participants in the MMA sessions varied greatly over the course of my fieldwork, which was consistent with most of the other programming at the youth centre. Some youth moved into (and out of) the neighborhood over the course of this ethnography due to a whole range of different sociological factors, most notably the widespread gentrification unfolding in parts of Côte-des-Neiges (further discussed in Chapter 3). However, the relatively high turnover of youth participants provided another opportunity to learn about the day-to-day happenings within the community and to further familiarize myself with participants' interests and assessments of the

various issues they encountered in the neighbourhood. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (2007) explained that these sorts of "naturally occurring" oral accounts are instructive because they are filled with rich data that can be useful for obtaining direct, first-hand information that may also help to explain the moods, perspectives, and characteristics of the participants.

It is also worth pointing out that the MMA sessions were instructed in a blend of both French and English, and were, occasionally, informally translated into either Arabic or Spanish depending on the backgrounds of youth in-attendance. Many of the youths had also recently relocated from another country or had parents who were born outside of Canada. Communication was, thus, occasionally challenging (especially in the early-goings of this study); however, the youth were always able to communicate through body language, broken sentences, translation by peers, gestures, or by translation apps on their cellphones. Adam also made a point to demonstrate each MMA technique in front of the class prior to inviting them to try it out in order to assist those who had difficulties communicating in either French or English.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis involves the review and analysis of both formal and informal materials with the aim of establishing a deeper understanding of various issues at play in the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 123). Textual materials may include existing formal scholarly documents, program or governmental records, and/or informal materials such as blogs, newspapers, or websites—all of which can be used to supplement and/or contrasted against information that is gathered through other means, such as by way of participant observation, interviews, and/or focus groups (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Ritchie, 2003).

I considered a variety of both formal and informal literature for this study. For example, I reviewed numerous formal and informal documents connected to the history and social context of Côte-des-Neiges, Montréal, and of Québec and Canada more generally (discussed in later chapters). I also reviewed literature on the history of women's involvement in sport (especially combat sport), and about sport-for-development programs. Examples of informal documentation reviewed for this study include: web pages about combat sport-for-development programs in Canada (e.g., Cabbagetown Boxing Club, Eastside Boxing Cub, Bloor Street Boxing); the web page of the youth centre itself; and various other public documents about the centre's vision and mission statement. Other public documents and reports from local community organizations (e.g., Centraide and Project Genesis, two locally-based non-profits) were also used to shed light on various population demographics and societal trends in Côte-des-Neiges.

Data Analysis

All data was analyzed by triangulating the observational fieldwork, informal interviews, and the relevant textual data that was reviewed for this study. Triangulation involves collecting and reviewing different sources (e.g. participant accounts, observation, and documents) in an attempt to validate inferences made in qualitative research (Hamersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 183). Jane Ritchie (2003) explained that triangulation increases the depth and clarity of the research by considering different perspectives, which provides a more fulsome understanding of the overall context and social issues at play in the study. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (2007) further argued that triangulation is best used to determine which inferences from data are likely to be valid and can open-the-door to further analysis rather than determining its validity at the outset. Triangulation was thus an appropriate approach for this ethnographic study given its

aim to re-present a multi-faceted social phenomenon such as this SDP MMA program (Van Maanen, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

Approval for this study was obtained through the Research Ethics Board-III in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement for Research Involving Humans. Four fundamental ethical principles guided this study from conception to completion: 1) respect for persons, 2) respect for communities, 3) the minimization of risks and maximizing benefits to participants, and 4) a fair distribution of benefits that come from the research (Mack et al., 2005). To this end, I maintained close contact with the director of the youth centre throughout this research, as well as with the primary instructor of the MMA program. Both individuals alerted me to any changes and/or minor adjustments that were required throughout the research process in order to maximize adherence to the four aforementioned principles. I also actively and regularly explained to the youth my role as a researcher, what I was researching, and ensured them that their identities would be kept confidential. I also informed all stakeholders/participants in this study that their participation was strictly voluntary and noted that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time—an option that no participant requested. Finally, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and staff member to disguise their identity and to maintain anonymity (Lewis, 2003). All data was stored on a USB device in a locked, secure cabinet, and managed by Dr. Koch (my supervisor) and myself.

The ethics of this study also required that the researcher give-back to the youth centre through prolonged engagement and extensive volunteering services. As noted previously, I spent two years volunteering and working at the youth centre (sometimes 5 days per week) where my

responsibilities ranged from assisting with program delivery to researching potential funding opportunities and/or helping with other requests. This long-term, multi-faceted engagement with the youth centre also helped me to nurture a high-level of trustworthiness, reliability, and validity for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Relationships were also built with various staff members at the youth centre, as well as with those youth who were involved in various other programs not connected to MMA. I attempted to maintain a reflexive analytic stance throughout this study, which also helped keep my ethical considerations in-tune with my research objectives and methodology (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.4. Chapter Summary and Concluding Remarks

This chapter outlined the theoretical and methodological approach used for this study. The first part of this chapter introduced relevant feminist sport scholarship to help situate the current study within the broader sport studies frameworks. Next, the specific theoretical underpinnings of this study—Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology—was discussed in-depth. Concepts such as habitus, field, and capital were outlined with particular attention to how they impact the current study. The final part of this chapter laid-out the different ethnographic methods that were used in data collection, including: participant observation, conversational interviews, and textual analysis. The research setting, participants, and my general role as an ethnographer and participant observer in the study were also touched upon in this section.

The following chapter further situates the youth centre within the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood, the City of Montréal, and broader Canadian context. It aims to shed important light on the social conditions in which youth, especially female youth, conceived and negotiating MMA programming at the youth centre.

Chapter III:
The Ethnographic Setting

This chapter paints a small yet important picture of the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood within which the youth centre that housed the MMA program is located. I have loosely framed Côte-des-Neiges as a social field, drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology as outlined in the previous chapter. Bourdieu (1985) framed social fields as sites of struggle in which hierarchically arranged stakeholders compete with (and for) capital. My application of Bourdieu's theories is loose in the sense that I intend to examine how female youth at the centre—as relatively low-ranked stakeholders in the broader field of Côte-des-Neiges—conceived and negotiated MMA against a backdrop of increasing urban poverty.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section one discusses the population demographics in the City of Montréal and also highlights certain trends in Côte-des-Neiges. Section two, next, discusses various trends in housing, poverty, and poverty governance in Côte-des-Neiges—features that have become increasingly contentious over the past few years. The chapter's final section describes the youth centre itself, including its physical layout and various other public amenities to which youth have access. My aim is to highlight a few of the sociological trends that have shaped youth experiences in Côte-des-Neiges.

3.1. Diversity

The City of Montréal is the second largest city in Canada and the largest city in the province of Québec with a population of approximately 4 million in the greater metropolitan area (Dea et al., 2019; Perez et al., 2019). A total of 120 different nations and nearly 200 languages and dialects are spoken in Montréal according to the Canadian Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; however, French and English remain

the most prominent languages throughout the city, with French recognized as Québec's official language (Holley & Jedwab, 2019). Montréal's bilingual character and diverse population-base has attracted scores of immigrants from around the world who comprise approximately one third of the City's total population (Immigration, Diversité et Inclusion, 2014). Montréal also welcomes the majority (at least 70 per cent) of Québec's new immigrants every year (Perez et al., 2019). Between 2001 and 2016, the number of immigrants residing in Montréal increased by roughly 50%, many of whom reside in Côte-des-Neiges (Perez et al., 2019; Centraide, 2019a). Both the City of Montréal and the neighbourhood of Côte-des-Neiges have also expanded their population-base through regional immigration as numerous citizens have relocated from other parts of Canada in search of employment in one of the city's burgeoning local industries.

The neighbourhood of Côte-des-Neiges is located in the valley between the two summits of Mount-Royal. In the 1700s, this area was a rural paradise with fresh water from creeks (that no longer flow)[15] and lush green, open land. As people began to populate the area, the unused land was initially repurposed for farmland. Parts of the land were eventually also used to support a successful leather making industry with local tanneries attracting even more residents to the area (Gyulai, 2016). Various taverns, schools, churches, and other developments emerged shortly after to support the area's growing population. By the mid 1800s, however, Côte-des-Neiges still afforded residents and the city's elite with a relaxing reprieve from the hustle and bustle of city life. Sporting clubs took advantage of the open rural spaces and offered activities such as snowshoeing, hunting, and tennis. In 1884, a passenger railway linked Côte-des-Neiges to

[15] Present-day Côte-des-Neiges Road follows the winding natural path of the former Raimbault Creek that used to flow from the Rivière des Prairies to the northwest of Montréal. In the 1950s, the city transformed the stream into an underground sewer line (Gyulai, 2016).

downtown Montréal via present-day Côte-Saint-Catherine Road, making the commute into and out of Côte-des-Neiges increasingly feasible for both workers and nature seekers.

In the early 1900s, Upper and Lower Côte-des-Neiges were annexed into the City of Montréal. This annexation coupled with the arrival of many Eastern European and Russian Jewish immigrants sparked an additional wave of urban development in the area. By 1920, a newly built tramway made the area more accessible and cost effective to a wider population (Dey, 2011; Montréal InSites, 2007). The addition of the tramway also prompted the development of new infrastructure, including the University of Montréal (est. 1878) and the Jewish General Hospital (est. 1934), which attracted even more residents to the area and helped transform Côte-des-Neiges into a largely service-based economy. Another wave of immigration to Montréal following World War II further diversified the city's population, making farmland and empty plots of land in Côte-des-Neiges increasingly scarce as new housing developments commanded even more space, thus placing strain on the leather industry and the crops of animals that used to supply it. Churches and other religious establishments also continued to develop and attract diverse religious and ethnic groups to Côte-des-Neiges, including a large Irish population[16] and Eastern European population, as well as smaller—but still notable—Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, and Vietnamese populations (Montréal InSites, 2007).

Côte-des-Neiges has continued to grow in both population size and infrastructure and is currently the second most populated neighbourhood in Montréal with nearly 100,000 residents living in its 11.6 km^2 area (Centraide, 2019a; Corporation de Développement Communautaire de Côte-des-Neiges, 2017). The neighbourhood remains home to a large number of newcomers with over one in two residents (52%) identifying as immigrants to Canada, and roughly 14% of its

[16] In 1871, people of Irish heritage made up approx. 23.7% of Montréal's total population (Linteau, 1982, p. 29).

total population identifying as recent immigrants[17] to Canada compared to the 7% average for the City of Montréal as a whole (Centraide, 2019a). Moreover, 83% of the neighbourhood's population has reported having at least one parent born outside of Canada (Centraide, 2019a). Visible minorities make-up over half (54%) of the population in Côte-des-Neiges, making it one of the most ethnically diverse and multicultural neighbourhoods in Canada (Deir, 2014).

In 2002, efforts to decentralize and restructure the Montréal government were undertaken by city officials. The 28 municipalities that at the time made up Montréal were replaced by 27 boroughs.[18] Following this restructuring, the neighbourhoods of Côte-des-Neiges and Notre-Dame-de-Grâce were combined to create a single borough, Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (Collin & Robertson, 2005; Tomàs, 2012)—although in many ways the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood remains independent and distinct from Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. For example, Notre-Dame-de-Grâce has reported significantly lower poverty rates compared to Côte-des-Neiges where approximately one in three individuals are considered low-income compared to one in four for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (Centraide, 2019a). The rate of unemployment is also considerably higher in Côte-des-Neiges than in most other parts of Montréal despite the fact that a significant portion of the adult population has earned a university degree (Centraide, 2019a). In 2006, the 27 boroughs across Montréal were once again consolidated into 19 boroughs, which remain in place today. Each of the 19 boroughs in Montréal are responsible for organizing their own various cultural and community initiatives, sporting activities, security services such as policing and other emergency services, garbage collection, and for managing certain municipal services such as roads, bike paths, and green spaces (Tomàs, 2012).

[17] The term 'recent immigrant' refers to "landed immigrants who came to Canada up to five years prior to a given census year" (Holley & Jedwab, 2019, p. 7).
[18] The 27 boroughs were eventually given autonomy to manage their own budgets, organize services, plan infrastructure development, and determine the uses of budgetary surpluses (Tomàs, 2012, p. 562).

3.2. Poverty

Of significance is that roughly 41% of households in Côte-des-Neiges are considered low-income (Montréal en Statistiques, 2014, p. 17); however, the borough is also bordered by some of the wealthiest areas in Montréal, including: Westmount to the south, the Town of Mount Royal to the north, Hampstead to the west, and Outremont to the east (Centraide, 2019a; Corporation de Développement Communautaire de Côte-des-Neiges, 2017). Westmount, in particular, remains one of the wealthiest areas in Montréal and also in North America, with an average annual household income of roughly $210,120 CAD (Perez et al., 2019) compared to a mean of $37,897 CAD for families in Cote-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—a number that descends even lower to roughly $31,352 per year for families living near the youth centre; i.e., the social hub of my ethnography (Montréal en Statistiques, 2014, p. 17).

Recent immigrants, visible minorities, and young people are among the most at risk for experiencing working poverty according to a 2016 report about Montréal's working-poor (Leloup et al., 2016). The term 'working poor' has been generally used to reference people who cannot escape poverty despite being fully employed (Leloup et al., 2016, p. 7). The report also found that the spatial distribution of Montréal's working poor was closely linked to the geography of general poverty throughout the city, meaning that many of the city's working poor lived in neighbourhoods where the social environment, housing conditions, and services were also more run down than in other neighbourhoods (Leloup et al., 2016). Furthermore, Côte-des-Neiges was also reported as having the highest rate of poor workers in the city at 19% (Centraide, 2019a).

Neighbourhoods with high numbers of low-income, immigrant, and racialized populations have habitually been stereotyped as areas of "collective unrest" (Wacquant, 2008, p.

22). Despite this stereotype, in Côte-des-Neiges, where, as noted before, there resides high numbers of recent immigrants, households with low income, and people that are of visible minorities, the rates of crime are well-below Montréal's average. A recent report by Gilbert Cordeau and Maurizio D'Elia (2018) for the SPVM (PDQ 26) found that the overall rate of crime (per 1000 inhabitants) in the area ranked only 21st out of 32 areas, and the rate of crimes against a person ranked 19th out of 32 (11% lower than the median) for the City of Montréal.[19] In fact, the rate of crime dropped by 37 per cent in Côte-des-Neiges between the years 2008 and 2017 (Cordeau & D'Elia, 2018). Still, a constant police presence is felt by the youth in Côte-des-Neiges despite the relatively low crime rate, especially in the area directly surrounding the youth centre. It is also noteworthy that the rate of 'juvenile delinquents' (aged 12-17years) in the neighbourhood ranked well-below the City of Montreal's average (21st out of 32) (Cordeau & D'Elia, 2018).[20]

In 1997, the City of Montréal adopted a new community policing strategy with the aim of responding quickly to public concerns in order "to prevent the downward spiral of urban decay" in certain neighbourhoods (Sylvestre, 2010a, p. 806). The City of Montréal Police Service's (SPVM) repressive 'broken window' approach to policing generated constant police presence in places like Côte-des-Neiges despite the below-average rate of crime (Sylvestre, 2010b). In the 'broken window' or 'zero tolerance' approach, it is assumed that "if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken" (Sylvestre, 2010a, p. 806). One broken window is thus viewed in this perspective as an open-invitation for more acts of vandalism. This metaphor would be exemplified by one misdemeanor crime snowballing

[19] The same report ranked Côte-des-Neiges third in the city for the number police calls initiated by patrol officers—although the rate of calls in the area initiated by officers is ranked 19th (Cordeau & D'Elia, 2018).
[20] Additionally, the overall rate of criminal offenders living in Côte-des-Neiges is also lower than the overall average in the rest of Montréal (Cordeau & D'Elia, 2018).

into more serious crimes if left unattended by the police. The belief, then, is that order will be maintained only by setting strict standards and by enforcing 'correct' behaviours in society's streets or enforcing 'zero tolerance' policies. This approach is a continuation of the policing structure in the United States in the 1990s and has also been referred to as 'managerial policing' (Fortin, 2018). This general approach has also been widely criticized for criminalizing the poor and the homeless due to the fact they often reside in areas with heightened signals of urban decay (Sylvestre 2010a; Kelling & Coles, 1997)—a tendency that was regularly observed throughout my fieldwork.

However, perhaps the most pressing social disruptions in Côte-des-Neiges in recent years has been brought-on by the rapidly rising property values across Montréal and other gentrifying areas that have applied significant pressure to cash-strapped families (Lowrie, 2019). Between the years of 2007 to 2017, a total of 2,767 new private units were developed in Côte-des-Neiges in an area that was initially only home to roughly 570 households total, most of which were luxury condominiums (Abraham et al., 2017). Moreover, the pace of these transformations has far exceeded the wealth of many local residents, nearly 80 per cent of whom are renters who pay an estimated 60-70 per cent of their household incomes on rent alone (Baasien-Capsa et al., 2017). As a result of these processes and other structures of inequality, a growing number of low-income—and racialized—families have found themselves largely excluded from the city's re-imagination of public space, including sites of sport, recreation and leisure which have long facilitated community cohesion. Such trends also further highlight the need for public spaces where kids of all socio-economic demographics and cultural backgrounds can gather to recreate for free in the afterschool hours, such as the youth centre.

3.3. The Youth Centre

The youth centre is located in Martin Luther King Jr. Park—formerly Kent Park—in central Côte-des-Neiges. The park was renamed in 2019 in honour of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the American civil rights leader. In so doing, Montréal became one of the first cities in Canada to recognize Dr. King's contributions in this fashion; however, community leaders have since raised concern about the disconnect between the values that Dr. King espoused and the (in)adequacy of protecting and preserving civil rights in Montréal—an observation that has been made even more prescient in recent weeks as protests rage in Montréal against police brutality against people of colour, among other forms of systemic racism. A local columnist for *Pride New*s,[21] Yvonne Sam, addressed these issues in a recent column about the park's name change:

> It is obvious that we have become more interested in idolizing Dr. King than applying the principles, for which he died, to contemporary Canadian life. We have a knack for celebrating the hero's past deeds, instead of examining how they apply, or might apply, to us. It is almost as if we are saying, if we have a park named in his honour and we acknowledge his birthday, then, clearly, we have eliminated racial bias. I personally think that is part of why so much work still needs to be done. Instead of his birthday symbolizing some great success, we should see in his birthday a great challenge. (Sam, 2020)

Sam's words are particularly prescient in consideration of the social context of Côte-des-Neiges, especially as they relate to the widening social and racial inequalities in the area surrounding the youth centre. Indeed, many of the youth attending MMA sessions came from low-income backgrounds with extended family living in regions all over the world. For example, youth from

[21] *Pride News* is Canada's leading Caribbean and African news magazine.

African countries were largely represented in the MMA program, in particular many North African countries where French is the commonly spoken language. Central American and South East Asian countries were also well-represented among other youth at the centre.

Both the park and the youth centre share an interesting past rooted in Montréal's hosting of the 1976 summer Olympic Games. In 1972, the City began equipping many of its parks and leisure spaces with various sporting infrastructure to support athletes training for the Olympics. The facilities at Martin Luther King Jr. Park—notably the tennis courts, the Chalet/youth centre, and the outdoor running track—provided convenient training venues for athletes preparing in the weeks leading-up to competition (Cormier, 1990). In total, the Olympics attracted over 6000 world-class athletes to Montréal, even though 29 countries boycotted the games in protest of South Africa's Apartheid regime ("Montréal 1976", n.d.).[22] Montréal's then-Mayor, Jean Drapeau, had infamously promised that hosting the Olympics would stimulate the local economy and provide a bonanza of revenue for Canadians. In the end, the event ended-up putting the City of Montréal 1.5 billion (CAN) dollars in debt (Chalkley & Essex, 1999). The official report that was written after the Games' closing nevertheless emphasized the importance of the newly built sports venues for future generations of Montréalers and highlighted the renewed local interest in sport and physical fitness over the crippling debt (Chalkley & Essex, 1999).

Since 1995, the former athletes' chalet in Martin Luther King Jr. Park has operated as a non-profit youth centre financed by the City and open year-round (Youth Digital Media Ecologies in Canada, 2017). Inside, the youth centre is divided into three different levels, each of which is equipped with breakout rooms to accommodate the diverse interests of local youth. The

[22] Twenty-two of the 29 boycotting nations were African. Organized by Tanzania, these countries were boycotting the International Olympic Committee's decision to permit New Zealand to compete following the All Blacks rugby tour with South Africa's Apartheid regime (Chalkley & Essex, 1999; "Montréal 1976", n.d).

entrance to the youth centre functions as the main activity space where the majority of youth spend their time—a spacious living room with high ceilings, a video game station, ping-pong and pool tables, and an arts and crafts/games station. The walls are covered with colourful murals that have been painted by different groups of youth over the years. In the afterschool hours, this main area is packed with youth, mostly male, and staff members helping to organize and assist with various activities. A multifunctional games table is also located close to the main entranceway and doubles as a station for youth to challenge staff members to compete against them in a variety of fun games such as Uno, chess, checkers, or Connect4. There are also several additional tables with computers located on the outer perimeter of the main level for youth to do homework or play videogames privately should they desire.

Just off the main area is a small backdoor leading out onto a sizable terrace that overlooks a 400-metre running track with aluminum grandstands and soccer turfs in the centre. The terrace is always packed in the summertime as youth either work on their dance moves, hone their gardening skills, or showcase their disc jockeying and mixing skills to other park-goers by blasting their new beats over loud speakers. Back inside from the terrace is a staircase that leads-up to a small reading nook fully stocked with comic books, artwork, and comfy chairs for youth to hang out in quietly. Just past the reading nook is another small kitchen-type area with a fridge, microwave toaster, and snacks for purchase.

The Fem Space was formed in response to the largely male/masculine presence at the centre. It is located just past the kitchen area and is dedicated to affording female youth a safe place to discuss topics that may be considered sensitive to talk about to others. The centre's hope is that the Fem Space encourages open-mindedness, reflexivity, and respect for others while giving youth a space to learn tools that can help them to better navigate the various stresses in

their lives. However, due to the limited space of the centre, the room has also been used to house the centre's activities when necessary. For example, videoclips for various film projects have been recorded in the Fem Space, as have different self-care workshops and one-on-one meetings. Just like other areas of the centre, the Fem Space has colourful murals covering its walls, comfortable seating, and soft lighting that is both warm and welcoming.

The largest room on the centre's top floor is well-equipped with innovative technologies for the youth to exhaust their creativity, including: a 3D printer for artwork and a few other computers with internet access. This room also has a long table in the middle for youth to socialize, innovate, and brainstorm various technological initiatives with their friends.

There are two main areas in the basement: 1) the combat room—where the MMA sessions take place (as previously described in Chapter II), and 2) an old changeroom that has since been converted into a music recording and producing studio. The studio's walls are covered in soundproofing material, but the beats can still be heard throughout the basement. The studio is also well-equipped with all sorts of high-grade recording equipment, as well as lounge couches, art, decorations and soft lighting to keep the vibes smooth and styling.

As noted above, the south side of the building has an open terrace that overlooks a 400-metre rubberized running track, turf soccer fields, and a couple of baseball diamonds on one side of the building. The youth enjoy free and unfettered access to these outdoor facilities during program-hours, which are weekdays from 3:00pm until 8:00pm. The north side of the building has tennis courts, two basketball courts, and an outdoor 50 metre swimming pool—all free of charge to the public. Other amenities in Martin Luther King Jr. Park include a small playground with water-features for children, and an abundance of tables and green space for picnics.

In the wintertime, youth and other community members enjoy access to an outdoor skating rink and cross-country ski tracks. During the warmer summer months, the park is packed with various community groups such as the Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce Soccer Association, as well as youth, teens, and families from across the borough coming together to enjoy the outdoor leisure space and other public amenities. The main source of organized recreational sports for youth in Côte-des-Neiges are run through community and cultural programs such as the YMCA, the Côte-des-Neiges Black Community Association, and the Côte-des-Neiges Sports Centre—although many local youths also participate in pick-up soccer and basketball games, as well as other spontaneously organized activities.

3.4. Chapter Summary and Concluding Remarks

This chapter stitched together a few pieces of local history that have shaped Côte-des-Neiges into the neighbourhood it is today, such as significant waves of immigration, the Olympic Games, and the restructuring of the city and borough system. I specifically highlighted the community's diversity, social inequality, and public sporting infrastructure to better situate this ethnography in relation to current social factors that shape the area's youth. The social hub of my ethnography is the youth centre located Martin Luther King Jr. Park—a public park that is open to residents of all ages, ethnicities, and income-levels. The following chapter explores how a particular group of female youth navigated the MMA program against this backdrop.

Chapter IV:
Results/Discussion

This chapter discusses the results and major themes that emerged over the course of my ethnographic fieldwork at the youth centre. It is important to note that all of my interactions at the youth centre were mediated by my background as a middle-class Euro-Canadian LGBTQ+ cis-gender female. I entered the field in September 2018 with no prior martial arts or kickboxing training; however, my athletic background acquired over years of playing competitive sports translated into a valuable form of cultural capital among the youths and staff members. I had for years coached youth in track and field in British Columbia, and this turned out to be a fortunate skillset as dryland training was decidedly useful in MMA. I was eventually tasked with leading weekly running and conditioning sessions for youths during the summer months.

My analysis of fieldwork data yielded four prominent themes: 1) 'countering the female frailty myth' discussed in Chapter II, in which the girls I encountered in many ways challenged the stereotypical view of women as 'too soft' to participate in physically challenging sporting endeavours; 2) 'disrupting the disinterested label', in which I expose the passion and tenacity with which female youth participated in MMA to further challenge the above myth; 3) a 'mixed bag of mixed martial artists', in which I explore how many youths conceived MMA as a vehicle for supporting various agendas beyond the sport of MMA; and 4) the 'gendering of self-defence', in which the gendered realities (profiling and marginalization) experienced by many racialized/non-white youths in the area were reflected in the teachings of MMA—a matter that I also interpret with special sensitivity to recent protests over systemic racism and police brutality against Black communities. Collectively, these themes shed important light upon the experiences of a small group of minority female youths at a non-profit youth centre as they actively conceived and negotiated a mixed gender MMA program in a divided Canadian city.

4.1. "Girls Don't do MMA!" The Feminine Frailty Falsehood

One of my first observations when I began attending MMA sessions in September 2018 was that the vast majority of the program's participants were male. This observation reflected a broader demographic trend at the youth centre and, indeed, in many other sport-oriented afterschool programs in low-income areas throughout North America (Chawansky, 2011; Hartmann, 2016; Koch et al., 2018). However, I also observed that those few female youths who attended the MMA sessions were among the most passionate and dedicated of martial artists. I was particularly struck by the fact that most female youths were supremely confident in their fighting abilities and displayed a rough and tumble attitude towards training. I often overheard girls commenting to their male training partners, *"You'd better watch out! I'm a girl, but it'll still hurt!"*—evidence of both an awareness of lingering stereotypes about feminine fragility, as well as a general preparedness to playfully subvert them.

Consider the following excerpt from January 2020 where Christen, a novice kickboxer, drew the group's attention when she decided to stay late to train after her first training session:

> *Adam (instructor): Ok, that is enough training for today. Everyone can put their gloves and hand wraps away. Good work today!*
>
> *Jon (a 16-year-old who participates regularly in MMA): Thank goodness we're done! I just started my new job at Wendy's today. I didn't realize that standing at work all day would be such a workout. I'm beat!*
>
> *Adam: Who's still hitting the heavy bag? Is that Christen? What a beast!*
>
> *Christen (14 years old): I need to make sure that I get the 'jab-cross' down before I leave. I'll only be a bit longer, okay?*
>
> *(Jon turned to look at me with his eyebrows raised in surprise).*

Jon: Dude, I wouldn't want to mess with her, jeez!

(He scrambled to get his street clothes on over his athletic gear).

Jon: I'm just trying to leave before Adam makes us keep training with her!

(Christen overheard Jon's comments and smiled as she continued pounding away at the heavy bag working on her jab-cross combination).

Christen: Just wait until I have proper training. This is nothing!

Jon: I don't think that she needs anymore training, look at that bag shake!

(personal communication, January 13, 2020).

Incidences of this nature in which young girls pushed the competitive needle beyond their male counterparts occurred numerous times over the course of my fieldwork. In one sense, they revealed an underlying passion exhibited by several young women at the MMA sessions—one that certainly challenged the 'taken for granted' assumption that girls and young women naturally avoided engagement in physically laborious sporting pastimes such as MMA as part of "the order of things" (Bourdieu, 1998/2001a, p. 8). Indeed, the passion and physical aggression displayed by Christen can be positively read as 'undoing' of gender stereotypes in the sense that they forced other/male participants at the MMA session to bear witness to the physical strength and athleticism possessed by developing female pugilists. However, on the other hand, these sorts of hyper-aggressive and outward displays of passion for MMA can also be more critically read as fulfilling a compensatory-purpose—one that potentially demonstrate the existence of an underlying (though somewhat modified) 'feminine apologetic' that compels female athletes who transgress dominant gender norms to over-compensate for their intrusion by demonstrating a 'true' belongingness within male-dominated sporting terrains. Another potential explanation is that female youths felt compelled to display an enhanced interest and passion for MMA

programming simply due to the lack of alternative sporting opportunities for female youths; in other words, they felt the need to stake a territorial claim in the MMA program simply because they didn't want to be excluded from it.

Regardless, the female compulsion to display hyper-aggression and physical competency when practicing MMA can certainly be justified for several reasons. Indeed, my fieldwork also observed several incidences in which the myth of feminine frailty discussed in Chapter II still persisted among many of the male youths at the centre. For example, the boys regularly apologized for even the slightest transgression involving a female partner, thus demonstrating another rationale for women's compulsion to display overt toughness and grit when training in MMA. Consider the following excerpt that describes a particular training session in which I was paired with Anthony—a 17-year-old male youth who was relatively new to the centre's MMA program. The excerpt begins with the MMA instructor, Adam, instructing Anthony about how to properly train for 'real-life' fight scenarios:

> *Adam: Anthony, you can either participate fully or you can sit out. Are you so exhausted that you cannot do this activity properly?*
>
> *Anthony: No, I am not tired! I don't want to hurt her!*
>
> *(Adam shook his head in disbelief).*
>
> *Adam: Just practice like you would with anybody, okay? Whether it's Zach or Emma: go slow and stop if she taps. You won't be able to do it when it counts if you can't do it in the gym!*
>
> (*personal communication, May 24, 2019*).

This theme of male combatants 'easing-up' when forced to train with a female partner was commonly witnessed during my fieldwork. It is also a theme that has been identified in

numerous other studies of mixed-gender sport. For example, Alex Channon (2014) observed various mixed-gender martial arts clubs located in three different cities of England's East Midlands region in which male martial artists regularly 'held back' when training with a female athlete because they were uncomfortable 'hurting' a woman. As Channon (2014) explained, "Despite such men's best intentions in not wanting to cause harm, their reluctance to apply the same degree of force as with male partners nevertheless became profoundly frustrating for some women" (p. 595).

The following excerpt illustrates another occasion in which a male athlete (Josh, 16 years old) was partnered with a female athlete (Vanessa, 17 years old) at the centre during a kicking drill in which she held the pads for Josh:

Vanessa: You can hit harder, you know?

Josh: Oh, okay!

(Josh looked uncomfortable and was clearly reluctant to kick the pads with force).

Adam: Josh, hit harder! Vanessa can handle it!

(Vanessa rolled her eyes as Josh kicked the pads).

(personal communication, September 9, 2019).

Importantly, the lack of male intensity was a trend repeatedly identified as 'annoying' among female participants. Many female youths felt disrespected and patronized when their male training partners held back as it implied they were less capable, less strong, less skilled, and less tough than their male counterparts. In response, Vanessa and many of the other female martial artists made certain to 'prove' themselves (through physical toughness and intensity) as 'good' training partners—again, likely owing in part to the fact that they were burdened by the pressure of 'disproving' the myth of feminine frailty. For example, Vanessa, held absolutely nothing back

when it was her turn to strike the pads, which caught Josh and her other male training partners off-guard: *"Ease-up, Vanessa! I have to go to school tomorrow!"* As a consequence, many of the male youths gradually learnt to 'let go' of their inhibitions when training with female partners, and stopped holding back once they witnessed how Vanessa and other female youths stood their ground in MMA. Crucially, this abrupt 'change of face' points to the potentially generative properties of MMA for disrupting the stereotypical views of females as 'weak', 'passive', and 'docile', as well as for challenging other associated 'feminine fragility' myths discussed in Chapter II.

However, it is also important to note that the stereotypical incongruities surrounding female athletes and the sport of MMA was not limited to male participants. Indeed, I regularly witnessed other *female* youths at the centre interrogating the female MMA participants about their involvement in a sport that *"only guys do"* with questions such as *"Why would you want to do that with all of those sweaty boys?"* or "*Doesn't it hurt when you get thrown around?"* Even my own gendered sporting body was viewed as "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966, p. 36) by youths trying to 'make sense' of a female's presence in a predominantly male MMA class.

Consider the following excerpt that describes one of the many awkward incidences in which my gendered sporting body was scrutinized by a group of female youths participating in other (i.e., non-MMA) programming at the centre:

Sarah (15 years old): I always see you here. Are you a boy or a girl?

EB: I am a girl.

Rachel (14 years old): You can't ask people that! She helps Adam with the MMA sessions downstairs.

> *Sarah: I thought so. I always see you down there, but I wasn't sure. I've never seen a girl do MMA before!*
>
> *EB: There are actually a lot of us.*
>
> *Sarah: I've never seen any other girls there, but maybe I just assume that you are all guys when I walk past. I don't know any girls who would want to get all gross and then want to fight with guys—especially when they are that sweaty.*
>
> *(personal communication, November 2, 2018).*

This interaction initially caught me off-guard as my gender had not been questioned since I was a prepubescent girl with short hair and donning my brother's hand-me-down clothing. I originally figured this incident to be merely a 'one off' and chalked it up to a misunderstanding or as an immature attempt at humour. I also originally figured that my gender-neutral wardrobe may have contributed to the girls' confusion as I had consciously avoided wearing tight clothing such as leggings and tank-tops in order to blend in with the style of other (mostly male) MMA participants; instead, I wore loose-fitting sports attire such as sweatpants and hoodies during the wintertime and basketball shorts and t-shirts during the summer months. I also wore my hair tied-up in a ponytail during training to keep it from obscuring my vision.

However, a few months following the above incident, my gender was again called into question for a second time during the centre's annual general meeting in March 2019. The MMA director, Adam, was delivering a formal address to the centre's board members when a male youth accidently blurted out, *"What? Is she a girl?"* Adam calmly replied, *"yes,"* and continued his presentation about the MMA program *(fieldnote, March 25, 2019*). The young man who made the comment was clearly embarrassed by his mistake, and looked at me apologetically throughout the remainder of the board meeting. The exchange—and the boy's own embarrassed

reaction to it—suggest it was a genuine misunderstanding, as opposed to a maliciously-intended insult or a failed attempt at humour.

Finally, a third incident occurred a few months later when a different male youth—a regular attendee at the youth centre, but not the MMA program—scrutinized my gendered identity in the stairwell alongside his friends as I was descending into the combat room:

> *Dylan (14 years old): Hey! We were wondering if you are a boy or a girl?*
>
> *(The boy looked back toward his friends as if seeking validation from the group that this was, indeed, a sincere issue about which they had deliberated).*
>
> *EB: I am a girl, yes.*
>
> *(The boy took a second to process my abrupt response and then proceeded to justify the crew's inquiry by noting the incongruity between my female body and the sport of MMA).*
>
> *Dylan: Hmm, I only ask because we always see you down there wrestling and boxing with all of the guys, so we weren't sure. I don't see many girls doing that kind of stuff.*
>
> *EB: There are actually quite a few girls that participate in the MMA program. Feel free to check it out for yourself sometime.*
>
> *Dylan: I'm good! I don't box! (Laugh)*
>
> *(personal communication, July 18, 2019).*

Collectively, these sorts of examples illustrate how dominant constructions of femininity still persisted among segments of the youth at the centre. This can be explained using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus—"a somaticized social relationship, a social law converted into an embodied law" (Bourdieu, 1998/2001a, p. 39)—as well as his conceptualization of gender as a "sexually characterised habitus" (Bourdieu, 1998/2001a, p. 3). For Bourdieu, the social construction of women as innately weaker compared to men has been naturalized as 'biological fact' over time

(Bourdieu, 1998/2001). This, in turn, has contributed to the naturalization of gendered 'spaces' and 'practices', which includes those of the sport and physical cultural variety. Indeed, many of the youths were confused by my—and other female athletes'—presence in the MMA sessions and figured that I/we *must* be a boy if I were training in such a "purely masculine" sporting endeavour (Oates, 1987, p. 70). The regularity of these sorts of incidences suggest a subtle yet omnipresent disconnect between female participation in MMA and the hidden assumption that girls 'just don't do' these sorts of aggressive athletic activities. Sharon Guthrie and Shirley Castelnuovo (1994) explained that dominant constructions of femininity are invariably associated with the sorts of physical looks, spaces, and activities in which girls are encouraged to engage. Females who participate in MMA, therefore, are viewed as disrupting the 'natural' order of things by associating themselves with venues and practices that have long been treated as exclusively 'male' domains, which generates confusion among others (Cox & Thompson, 2000; Kolnes, 1995).

4.2. "I've Caught the MMA Bug!" Disrupting the Disinterested Label

As noted above, female youths were among the most passionate, dedicated, and active members of the MMA program. Many female youths, for example, were extremely vocal about enjoying MMA training, and did not hesitate to share their enthusiasm for the sport with a room full of strangers. Consider the following excerpt when Vanessa proudly declared her adoration for MMA upon her arrival at the centre—a declaration that prompted everyone within earshot to stop what they were doing and stare back at her in disbelief:

Vanessa (17 years old): I've caught the MMA bug!

Adam: What?

Vanessa: I love MMA! I was talking to my sister about it yesterday. It's just so cool! I am ready to work in the gym! And then can we watch some fights later, right?

Adam: Yes, of course! We can watch some more Rhonda Rousey fights after today's session, if you like.

Vanessa: Yes, please! That would be amazing! I love seeing women like Rhonda Rousey just dominating the ring and owning it.

(personal communication, August 23, 2019).

Excerpts such as this one is emblematic of a wider trend that I witnessed over the course of my fieldwork—one in which many female youths who participated in the MMA program did so out of a joy and passion for the sport, and generally not for competition-sake.

Consider the following dialogue between myself and Vanessa who had arrived late at the youth centre one evening because she was finishing-up her internship at the YMCA:

Vanessa (17 years old): So sorry I'm late! I'm doing an 'environmental studies' work experience at the YMCA and didn't think that I would be able to train today. I came down here to let you know that I might be a little late for future MMA sessions because of my internship.

EB: Environmental studies? That is really interesting! Do you work a lot of hours?

Vanessa: Yeah, it's really cool! I usually work until 5:00pm every weekday.

EB: Awesome!

Vanessa: I think environmental work is super important. Not enough people take it seriously. But don't worry, I am still going to come to MMA as quickly as possible after my internship. I hate missing training!

(personal communication, July 8, 2019).

The fact that Vanessa prioritized MMA training amidst her busy workload and other social obligations demonstrates her love of MMA and also shows her interest in various other public issues. Vanessa further revealed that MMA oftentimes occupied her thoughts outside of the gym:

> *Vanessa: Ever since my first session, whenever I have a little bit of free time, I watch YouTube videos of fights. I even showed my sister some videos. We especially love watching Rhonda Rousey. She is so strong and so confident! Actually, after watching a few fights, I have been thinking that I want to learn how to do an arm bar!*
>
> *(personal communication, July 8, 2019).*

Vanessa here demonstrated a high-level of initiative and independence in her efforts to expand her MMA knowledge. She also revealed her desire to not only perfect the 'body work' of MMA, but to also hone the 'head work' through studying various YouTube videos. As Loïc Wacquant (2004, p. 17) wrote, and Vanessa intuitively recognized, "…to understand what you have to do, you watch the others box, but you do not truly see what they are doing unless you have already understood a little with your eyes, that is to say, with your body…" (Wacquant, 2004, p. 118).

Vanessa was also analytical and self-reflective about lots of things: her personal life, academic interests, and also her athletic ability. For example, she routinely questioned the rationale behind various training techniques and did not hold-back from challenging Adam on the applicability of certain techniques: *"Hey Adam, I know that you said I should force the submission, but I think that knocking him out with a few solid punches to the head would be more effective, no?"* In this sense, Vanessa was like many other girls and young women that have been celebrated throughout Canadian sport history—she unapologetically challenged the gendered dimensions of sport and physical activity (Channon, 2013; Kavoura et al., 2015) by taking herself off of the proverbial sidelines and re-inserting herself into the ring.

In theoretical terms, Vanessa deployed cultural capital (authority, strength, confidence, and humour) to advance her position within the sport of MMA (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Another female youth, Andrea (15 years old), shared similar tactics. On Andrea's first day of training, she and her friend, Nikita (15 years old), excitedly tried to 'prove' themselves to others in the group by kickboxing fearlessly against their opponents:

> *Andrea: I am so excited to start training today! I told my friends that I am starting boxing—they weren't even surprised! They asked if I was going to fight someone. I said, "maybe," but I really hope that I get the chance!*
>
> *EB: Sparring is my favourite part! We will probably do some sparring at the end of today's session. You can tell them about that.*
>
> *Andrea: Yeah! I think that might make my friends want to come out and try boxing, too! It doesn't even matter who I spar with—I just want to challenge myself and get in the ring!*
>
> *(personal communication, February 11, 2019).*

Expressions of enthusiasm such as the one above was commonly displayed among female martial artists. For example, Sierra (15 years old) was another confident young woman who exhibited a fiery intensity at each MMA training session:

> *Sierra: I came to MMA because I love it! My friends got me into it. I also continue to come because not many girls train in MMA, so I want to encourage more girls to participate [by being a positive role model]. My 'guy' friends got me into it, but now they don't even come out because they forget the rush that it gives you!*
>
> *(personal communication, August 19, 2019).*

This excerpt is especially revealing for the social justice role that Sierra saw herself as fulfilling through her regular and visible presence at MMA sessions. Indeed, an important part of Sierra's

role modeling behaviour was that she confidently challenged anybody—male or female, youth or instructor—to 'roll' with her at jiu-jitsu class and would jokingly call-out anyone who refused to take-up her challenge as 'chicken'. As a result, I often found myself as the only willing combatant to spar or grapple with her during training because she was always looking for a challenge. (The fact that I was twice her size never seemed to faze her, nor did it prevent her from routinely getting the better of me during sparring). Indeed, Sierra repeatedly called me out during MMA class for always trying to "dodge" her and would always give me pointers on how to beat her—advice that I appreciated, but could never fully execute without her finding a different way to beat me by getting me to 'tap out'.

As noted previously, another common theme that I witnessed over the course of my ethnography was that female participants regularly 'called out' their male training partners for lacking in intensity when training—an observation that is similar to Anna Kavoura et al. (2015) who conducted an ethnography of a mixed-gender Brazilian jiu-jitsu club in which female participants actively sought out training partners who would give them the most out of each session. For example, Sierra regularly called out Erik, a tall and muscular 17-year-old male, to practice various combat situations with her. The two combatants frequently trained all night until the centre closed at 8pm, 'calling out' one another in a light-hearted manner if ever the other appeared tired or had to leave training early.

In another incident, Janelle and Jessica—two novice martial artists who attended the MMA program on a quasi-regular basis—playfully encouraged each other to try-out new combat techniques and to practice with greater intensity as a means to help nurture confidence. When Jessica responded passively to the challenge, Janelle taunted her by saying, *"My little brother*

kicks harder than you, come on!" Jessica proceeded to kick the pads more forcefully, with a slight smile on her face *(personal communication, May 3, 2019).*

Finally, on another occasion, Sierra volunteered to be the aggressor as the class was freshening-up on the five basic jiu-jitsu mounts, leaving me to defend myself against her attacks. The particular mount we were practicing is called the 'back mount', in which Sierra's aim was to choke me out from behind while restraining the rest of my body with her legs. My aim as the defender, then, was simply to prevent Sierra from submitting me with her choke attack, while also trying to transition my body into a better/less vulnerable position. Of course, Sierra had locked me in a rear-naked choke in practically no time at all, which forced me to 'tap out', thus acknowledging my defeat. Sierra was noticeably excited after we had repeated the drill a few more times with frustratingly similar results:

> *Sierra (15 years old): I am so strong!*
>
> *EB: Yeah you are! I am still trying to catch my breath after you destroyed me with that rear-naked choke!*
>
> *Sierra: It just feels so great to be able to use my body like this. I feel so strong! Next time make sure you don't leave any space for me to escape from your holds, okay? That is where I got you. You always have to be aware of what your body is doing. Watch me!*
>
> *(personal communication, January 31, 2020).*

These sorts of moments were illustrative of the high standards held by the female youths in virtually every training session that they attended. This excerpt in particular is emblematic of a wider pattern that I also witnessed among female youths at almost every MMA training session: they felt empowered by their ability to control a situation. In this way, MMA afforded a unique opportunity to use their bodies in a manner that most other activities had not permitted; that is, as

a tool of dominance, power, and sheer control over a situation. A situation that, if not for the MMA program, they may not have gotten.

4.3. A Mixed Bag of Mixed Martial Artists

It is important to point out that physical and social empowerment were not the only motivating factors behind female youths' involvement in MMA. Over the course of my ethnography, I observed a host of different reasons for why youth trained in MMA. Many youths, for example, simply wanted to learn MMA in order to better defend against the playful attacks of older siblings. Others saw MMA as a terrific outlet for 'blowing off steam' whenever they felt stressed out, frustrated, or overwhelmed. A third popular reason for why many youths pursued MMA training was that it equipped them with a whole new repertoire of physical movements that they could then re-employ in other physical cultural venues such as dance choreography, parkour, MMA videogames, and even on the soccer pitch. In fact, one of the least common reasons I observed for youths joining MMA was the desire to one-day fight competitively in a local contest or professional organization.

Consider the following interaction between myself and Nikita (15 years old) as she discussed her very first MMA experience:

EB: You looked like you knew what you were doing out there. Are you a boxer?

Nikita: No, I wouldn't say that. But I love it! I am a dancer.

(We can hear music coming from the music studio that is just beside the gym)

Nikita: I like to try everything and work the best parts of it into my life. I have also signed up for a few sessions in the music studio even though I don't sing much. I use music and MMA to express myself and also to fuel my creativity as a dancer.

EB: What type of dancer are you?

Nikita: Dance hall—like old school dance hall, not the kind of dance hall where you just shake your booty. (Laugh). Actually, the real reason why I wanted to try boxing was so that I could integrate some of the movements into my dance choreography.

(personal communication, February 11, 2019).

Learning new movements that were transferable to dance or other physical cultural venues was a creative way that Nikita and other female youths chose to re-deploy their kickboxing and MMA skills into other personally useful terrains. Curiously, female youths embraced the challenge and raw physicality of MMA, yet they rarely described themselves as 'full-fledged' martial artists. Rather, female youths preferred to self-identify as 'dancers', 'visual artists', or 'singers' who happened to enjoy martial arts in their spare time. Read critically, this ambivalent relationship with MMA could be considered consistent with other discursive tactics that effectively marginalize women by redefining their athleticism according to 'gender appropriate' sporting activities; akin to the 'feminine apologetic' discussed earlier whereby girls effectively apologized for intruding into a classically male dominated sporting terrains by accentuating their femininity (Kane, 1996). As Mary Jo Kane (1996) stated, "Sportswomen are often presented as ladies first, and athletes second, if at all" (p. 108).

However, of additional significance is that almost all youths—male or female—explained their involvement in MMA through the prism of alternative agendas. For example, several youths also described MMA as a productive outlet for blowing off steam after a stressful day at school or following a tense altercation at home. In fact, almost all youths I encountered commonly cited 'stress relief' as a driving force behind their involvement in MMA. Consider the following dialogue between Vanessa (17 years old) and Adam, the MMA instructor. Vanessa

had previously disclosed to me a few situations that were frustrating her at school, but on this day, she came to the centre straight from school and was fuming with anger:

Adam: How are you, Vanessa?

(Vanessa was pacing back and forth in front of Adam.)

Vanessa: Not great! School is so stupid this year! I almost got expelled today! The school staff are so annoying. Can I go down and punch something already? I heard it helps.

Adam: Yeah, you can go down. I will come down to visit with you in a bit.

Vanessa: Come with me, Emma. I need to vent!

(personal communication, September 9, 2019).

Incidences such as this were commonly observed at the youth centre, and were likely reflective of the many broader stresses that youths in this area of Côte-des-Neiges regularly had to negotiate in their daily lives. MMA thus afforded them as a useful tool for 'venting', and for redirecting their anger toward something productive (i.e., exercise). MMA also afforded them with a safe space and opportunity to 'talk out' their problems with a close friend or, occasionally, with an MMA instructor or other youth worker.

Consider the following dialogue between Vanessa and myself (EB) as she hit the focus pads with aggressive punches whilst brainstorming potential strategies for improving her mental health the next time a stressful episode occurred during the school day:

EB: Is there a boxing club at your school? You said that you really enjoy it. Perhaps you can join the school boxing club to help clear your mind.

Vanessa: There is no boxing or kickboxing club, but there is a really small room with a punching bag in it. The only thing is that the room is always filled with a bunch of guys, so I don't want to go in there by myself.

> *EB: Have you thought about getting a bunch of your girlfriends together and picking a time to meet up in there? Maybe that's an option. You could even teach them the fundamentals if they don't have any boxing experience.*
>
> *Vanessa: Good idea! I need to figure out a way to clear my mind.*
>
> *(personal communication, August 19, 2019).*

This is just one example of female youths using MMA as a coping mechanism for dealing with the many frustrations they faced over the course of daily living. Vanessa was well-aware of her frustrated-state of mind and used MMA as a productive outlet to manage her emotions so that she could avoid making bad decisions in the future; i.e., the sorts of decisions that could get her expelled from school. Vanessa's experience is consistent with the findings from various other studies of sport-for-development programming in which youths used physical activity as a mental reprieve from other life pressures (Holt et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2015). In particular, a study by Nick Holt et al. (2011) found that youths from low-income environments had an increased feeling of emotional control and temper management in other aspects of life after participating in a sport setting, especially with sustained participation. Indeed, the researchers noted that "an important point to emphasize is that several of the benefits reported by parents and children appeared to 'transfer' from sport to other areas of the children's lives" (Holt et al., 2011, p. 494).

Similarly, sport-for-development programs centred upon combat sports, such as boxing, have also proved to be particularly effective at taking the edge off of everyday stressors. For example, Whitney Wright (2006) examined two different sport-for-development programs in New York City and San Francisco that combined boxing with social work. The authors concluded that youths who used boxing programs were better able to acknowledge, control,

structure, refine, harness, and 'own' their emotions, talents, and strengths, especially when training was paired with other social supports such as individual counselling and group discussions. The authors further noted that youths were able to transition their negative emotions into 'productive' and valuable capital through regular training in a physically demanding sport such as boxing in this case.

4.4. The Gendering of Self-Defense in a Low-Income Urban Environment

Beyond being a venue for managing emotions, one of the most commonly cited reasons for learning MMA was to learn self-defense. Several female youths felt insecure walking in the city streets or even in the schoolyard by themselves, and determined that MMA would increase their sense of security. Other research on combat sports has found similar desires among female participants to have the ability to protect themselves from potential threats of violence (Channon, 2013; Hayhurst, 2013; McCaughey, 1997; Vertonghen et al., 2015). Crucially, the ubiquity of this desire among female participants in the literature points to the existence of a far-reaching patriarchal structure rooted in violence against women, as opposed to a community-specific one; in other words, the fact that several female youths joined MMA in Côte-des-Neiges because they felt insecure is not an indictment of their neighbourhood *per se*, but is rather evidence of a much wider threat of gender-based violence experienced by women across Canada and elsewhere.

Consider the following dialogue between the centre's director, Jay (a pseudonym), and two female youths (approx. 15 years old) who were playing ping pong together and chatting about their experiences of being bullied at school:

Jay: What are your plans for the rest of the day?

Jessica: We don't really know, probably just chill here. My dad just called and said I could stay here until it closes.

Jay: You should go and do some kickboxing. Emma will be coaching today.

Jessica: I can really punch hard, you know, because of bullying. But I have never taken any classes on kickboxing. Maybe it could help if people try to tease me again. They used to tease me because I'm not super skinny or athletic. I guess they didn't know that I could still punch pretty hard.

Jay: You should check it out. It will be super chill.

Jessica: Hey, Janelle, we need to try kickboxing. I think I'll be a natural!

(personal communication, May 3, 2019).

This excerpt reveals that both Jessica and Janelle, like many of the other female youths I encountered at the MMA program, had previously been bullied at home, school, or outside of the youth centre. The two girls further articulated a desire to learn basic self-defence techniques in case of a future threatening encounter in which they were being 'teased'. The fact that Jay made sure to communicate to the girls that the tone of the MMA class would be 'super chill' is also revealing. In particular, Jay's assurances seemed rooted in his belief that aggressively-toned programming would be potentially alienating to youths, especially female youths with a history of being bullied—a practical knowledge Jay had acquired over years of working at the centre.

Similarly, Christen—a 14-year-old female who prides herself on her fine art skills—also credited her involvement in MMA to her personal history of being bullied at school. Christen walked into her first MMA class after she had finished her art class and, curious to know what we were doing, she asked that I show her some basic striking techniques. After the session had ended, Christen said*, "Kickboxing was so good! If the bullies at school try anything, I am going*

to show them what I have learnt today!" (personal communication, January 13, 2020). I later discovered that Christen had also been bullied throughout much of her life—a phenomenon that she attributed to her introverted disposition as well as to her 'artsy' background. *"I've always been picked on because I don't want to go out and do things with a bunch of people. Sometimes, well, most of the time, I prefer to chill somewhere I can focus and just draw"* (*personal communication, January 20, 2020).* In this way, the MMA program afforded a safe and practical training grounds for youths to learn self-defence techniques that may prove useful in their daily lives.

However, over the course of my fieldwork, I also observed a more sinister rationale for learning self-defence among youths. Indeed, the first few MMA sessions that I had ever attended at the youth centre focused exclusively on teaching movements that would prove useful during an altercation with witnesses in the area, including the police. Adam emphasized mastering the art of 'verbal jiu-jitsu', which meant learning how to master the ability to scare-off an attacker through confident and firm responses to potential threats of violence. For example, we practiced repeating phrases such as, "Stop! Turn around! I don't want any trouble!" This form non-contact self-defence is common in virtually every self-defence class across North America, and also includes learning how to project confident body language through upright posture; however, when taught at the youth centre, this verbal self-defence technique also contained an added twist.

Consider the following field note in which Adam advised a group of youths that if ever they found themselves in danger, they must first weigh in their minds the potential consequences of their actions at both individual and broader societal levels. Importantly, all of the youth in the flowing exchange were non-white:

Adam (instructor): I want to know what would you do if ever someone wanted to start a fight or altercation with you on the streets?

Louis (12 years old): Probably fight back.

Zach (16 years old): [shakes his head in disagreement]

Erik (17years old): I would ask why they wanted to fight before I did anything.

Adam: The very first thing you need to do is keep a safe distance and tell them you that don't want any trouble. Make sure that you vocalize everything really loudly so that people around can hear. Most importantly, try not to act aggressively toward anyone.

Ben (12 years old): What if there are a bunch of guys trying to gang up on you?

Adam: No matter what, do not throw the first punch. Always try to de-escalate the situation. However, if you must engage, try to control the situation using the different submission holds that you have learnt in class. Again, it is important that you make sure to vocalize loudly what you are doing and why you are doing it. Remember that you need to be extra careful on the streets because you aren't Québecois [a term that stereotypically references white French-speakers native to Québec]!

(the boys looked around and appeared somewhat surprised that Adam had so candidly verbalized what they all knew to be true regarding racial profiling)

Adam: Remember, when the police come and see that you were in a fight—even if you are surrounded and outnumbered by a bunch of Québecois—you will be blamed for the whole thing if you have thrown even one single punch. You need to protect yourself from this sort of thing, even though it's unfair.

(personal communication, November 15, 2019).

Conversations of this nature revealed several deep and underlying issues related to systemic racism in Montréal. The fact that learning effective self-defence for many racialized youths in the neighbourhood meant extending their MMA repertoire to include self-defence against racism and acts of state violence cast the program in an altogether different light—one where racialized youths feel targeted by both police and a criminal justice system with built-in double standards (Maynard, 2017). Crucially, the substance of Adam's claim has been substantiated in numerous public inquiries into experiences of racism and racial profiling in Montréal. For example, a recent report by the Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal (2020) acknowledged that "municipal administration is well aware that its police subject Montrealers to differential treatment based on factors such as their race, their colour, their ethnic or national origin, their religion or their social condition." The report further explained, "Persons in authority use force without valid reason or reasonable suspicion" (p. 23). The Superior Court of Québec also noted that "in spite of the actions taken for over 30 years, racial profiling is still a reality within the SPVM" (Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal, 2020, p. 23).

Indeed, conversations about defending oneself against unwarranted police surveillance and state-sanctioned bias in Montréal policing emerged almost organically among youths and staff. Consider the following dialogue between Vanessa, Dominic and Adam:

> *Vanessa (17 years old): Dominic and I went to the Pride parade downtown last weekend. I really liked the fact that each float was blasting music. We just danced the whole time.*
>
> *Dominic (17 years old): I saw Justin Trudeau at the parade.*
>
> *Vanessa: There were a bunch of cops and security people around him. I don't get why, though, because nobody cares about him. What would the police do anyways?*

(Adam overheard the conversation as he was preparing the combat room and came over to where we the girls were seated)

Adam: All it takes is one person that doesn't like him, and that could be the end of him.

Vanessa: I don't know, Adam. I really don't think people care about him enough that they would try anything. He seems pretty safe to me.

Adam: A few years ago, I spent the summer working sound for some events around here. There was this lady [Pauline Marois, the former premier of Québec] who was running for an election. I couldn't be at that particular event, but my co-workers covered for me. Some guy came onto the stage during her speech and tried to shoot her. My co-workers stopped him, thankfully, but they both got shot. One of them actually died. You see, all it takes is one person who doesn't like Trudeau. He could've been shot.

Vanessa: Wow! That's intense! I still hate cops, though.

Adam: Why?

Vanessa: They are so abusive with their power. Like, there is no need to use power and physical force at a peaceful protest, but they do it anyways just to make sure people know that they are in control. Oh, and they are homophobic. I would say that they are useless, but really, it's just that they do more harm than good.

Dominic: …and they don't like Black people.

(personal communication, August 19, 2019).

Excerpts such as this one illustrates the general unease and tenuousness that underlies the relationship between the police and many Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) in Montréal, as well as those within the LGBTQ+ community. Vanessa and Dominic—who are Black and Latino—exhibited significant distrust of the police stemming from their own

observations, as well as from the broader history of racial profiling, racial discrimination, and excessive force used by police towards Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal, 2020). Vanessa, in particular, struggled to make sense of the need for a police presence to protect Trudeau who, apart from being the Prime Minister of Canada, exhibits numerous other signs of privilege (i.e., white, wealthy, heterosexual, male, cis-gender, able-body)—all of which, in theory, should protect him against harm (Koch et al., 2015). In contrast, the reality for many of the youth at the centre is that they have been targeted by police at some point in their lives *because* of their race and less-affluent social status (Chung, 2010; Fortin, 2018). This reality that has been cast into the public spotlight in recent weeks by numerous anecdotal accounts of police brutality that appeared on social media in the summer of 2020, as well as by corresponding public protests against police brutality and racial profiling[23] incited by the killing of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

It is important to emphasize that the constant police presence in-and-around the youth centre was regularly discussed by both staff and youths as a source of frustration and anxiety.[24] Consider the following exchange among Adam and a couple of youth at the centre:

> *Jon (16 years old): Dude, there are so many cops out there! What do they think is going to happen?*
>
> *Frank (16 years old): They are literally always there. Haven't you noticed?*

[23] Robyn Maynard (2017) described racial profiling as, "surveillance or police encounters that occur because of stereotypes regarding race, ethnicity or religion" (p. 87).

[24] For example, consider the following statement from Adam to a group of male youths during a self-defence session in late-Fall 2018: *"If you find yourself in a situation in the streets where you have no choice but to defend yourself, do only that. Vocalize every move that you make for the police or for bystanders to hear. You have to make sure that people around you can back up your account of 'how things went down' in court when you say you were acting in self-defense. I know that it's frustrating. It is just the way the system works." (personal communication, November 30, 2018).*

> *Jon: Well, yeah, obviously. How could I not notice them? But there are like three cars outside today. They are just sitting there waiting for something to happen.*
>
> *Adam: It is important to be mindful of your actions when you leave here, fellas, especially on days like today. Being mindful is a huge part of any martial art and is useful outside of the centre because you need to be able to recognize your emotions and assess the possible consequences for any actions that you take.*
>
> *Jon: I'm always aware of what I do around those guys (the police). It's f'ing exhausting!*
>
> *(personal communication, July 31, 2019).*

The regular presence of police vehicles and officers surrounding the youth centre perpetually weighed on the minds of youth, many of whom openly fumed that "they couldn't be themselves" with someone watching them all the time. As Adam noted, the youth were made hyperaware of their racial identity through police surveillance and were forced to adapt due to their second-class status by always being mindful of how they, as racialized youth, were being viewed by police—a practice that Adam constantly reinforced through his teachings. Self-defense was, therefore, being taught to the youths from two different angles: The first angle emphasized the need to protect themselves against an attacker from the streets or schoolyard; however, the second angle taught youth how to defend themselves against police surveillance and other state violence by avoiding confrontation altogether—which has been well established as an ongoing issue for racialized and minority communities in Montréal (Austin, 2013; Chung, 2010; Fortin, 2018; Hampton & Hartman, 2019; Leclair, 2013; "Montreal racial profiling", 2014; Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal, 2020).[25] In a final analysis, then, the MMA program also

[25] By way of example, an independent report conducted by Victor Armony et al. (2019) on the SPVM found that Black and Arab youths (aged 14-25years) were four times more likely to get arrested than white youths of the same age range. In response to this report, the SPVM police chief, Sylvain Caron, denied the presence of systemic racism

served as a staunch reminder to the all youth at the centre that, due to prevalence and history of racial profiling (Chung, 2010), their embodied identities did not afford them even the simple privilege of walking inattentively in the neighbourhood where they lived.

4.5. Chapter Summary and Concluding Remarks

This chapter examined four different themes that arose from the experiences of the youth in a mixed gender MMA program hosted by an urban youth centre. Theme one speaks to my observation that female youth who participated in the MMA sessions did so with toughness, aggression, and grit, and in stark contrast to the stereotypical characterizations of these girls as weak, passive, and physically ill-equipped for combat sports (Weaving, 2014). Theme two builds upon Theme one by exploring how several female youths further disrupted the view of combat sports as a 'purely masculine' enterprise by participating in MMA with an uninhibited and fiery passion that helped them to dominate the mat and that set the standard for their peers—both male and female. Theme three, next, explored how both male and female youth used the MMA sessions to supplement various other aspects of their lives. For example, one youth expressed her desire to become a movie stuntman, and was attending MMA sessions to improve her muscular strength, coordination, and control in support of this career goal. Other youths trained in MMA to support their wellbeing, whether that meant controlling stress levels or by becoming more self-aware. In fact, MMA was rarely viewed as an end in itself; instead, the program was generative for a whole range of associated pastimes, such as dance choreography, basketball agility, improved self-confidence, and especially for stress management. This observation not only demonstrates MMA as a potentially useful tool for personal development, but it also affords

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and stated, "This report does not report racial profiling at the SPVM. It does indicate big and concerning disparities" (Laframboise, 2019, October 7).

unique insight into the diverse hopes and dreams of young people living in a low-income urban environment, as well as the social pressures they face on a regular basis. Finally, and relatedly, Theme four explored various gender messaging that was encoded within the MMA program. For example, male youths were taught to adopt a non-confrontational posture if ever they found themselves in an altercation with police in the area. Female youths, on the other hand, were instructed to use any means necessary to remove themselves from a threatening situation, even if that meant using their strength and aggression to escape. The conflicting messages reflected the gendered reality (profiling and marginalization) experienced by racialized/non-white youths in the area—a reality that has become even more pronounced in recent weeks following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Chapter V:
Concluding Remarks

This ethnography shed important light on the lives of a small group of female youth navigating a sport-for-development program centred upon the traditionally male pastime of MMA in Montréal, Québec, Canada. In so doing, the study extended upon a body of sport studies literature that has been generally slow to integrate the diverse voices of female youth, especially those living in low-income urban environments (Chawansky, 2011; Hayhurst, 2014). My study not only highlighted the strength, confidence, and ambition of these young women, it also revealed the joy and sense of humour with which they participated in MMA. These were women stereotypically cast as passive victims of urban poverty and violence (McRobbie, 1991), yet who came together each week to 'glove up' for a whole variety of different reasons.

Chapter One situated this thesis in relation to the broader scholarly literatures on women in sport and sport-for-development. I argued that certain gender ideologies and stereotypes persist within today's sport settings, yet they have also been pushed back against. I further argued that the historic role of women in combat sport has been primarily associated with their inclusion as either a sideshow or as spectator. Finally, I also argued that the voices of female athletes continue to be cast to the sidelines within sport-for-development programming.

Chapter Two discussed the overarching theoretical framework that guided this work, which loosely centred upon the writings of Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology (Bourdieu, 1978; 1984; 1998/2001a). I specifically highlighted how Bourdieu's key concepts such as field, habitus, and capital could prove useful for studying female voices in MMA. Chapter Two also outlined the core ethnographic methods that were deployed for this research, which included: participant observation, informal interviewing techniques, and textual analysis. The research setting, participants, and my general role as a participant observer were also outlined.

Chapter Three grounded this thesis at the youth centre/hub of my ethnography in the neighborhood setting of Côte-des-Neiges in central Montréal, where the MMA program took place on a twice-weekly basis. The chapter further theorized Côte-des-Neiges as a distinct cultural field comprised of an abundance of different actors. Other factors that contributed to the community's historic and contemporary fabric were also discussed, such as the patterns of immigration, social inequalities, and funding of public parks and sporting infrastructure.

Finally, Chapter Four discussed the major themes that emerged over the course of my ethnographic fieldwork at the youth centre, including: 1) 'countering the female frailty myth', in which I showed how the MMA participants challenged residual stereotypes of young girls as 'too soft' to participate in physically demanding sports such as boxing and MMA; 2) 'disrupting the disinterested label', in which I highlighted the passion and tenacity exhibited by many female youth in the MMA program; 3) a 'mixed bag of mixed martial artists', in which I explored how different youth conceived MMA as a vehicle for supporting a whole variety of innovative agendas that extended well-beyond the sport itself; and 4) the 'gendering of self-defence', in which the gendered realities (profiling and marginalization) experienced by many racialized/non-white youths in the area were reflected in the teachings of MMA.

In closing, I hope this thesis has provided an important glimpse into the complex lives of the different youth whose lives I've been privileged to touch over the past two-years. I last visited the youth centre in March 2020 just prior to its four-month closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A guest speaker from Los Angeles, California, spoke to the centre's staff about an inner-city school that had offered its students part-time employment and the opportunity to write and produce their own music while completing their last few high school credits. The presenter was intrigued by what Adam had to say about the centre's role in the lives of local youths:

I think my role in this centre extends far beyond being an instructor or coach. I think the centre is a very important place for youths. A lot of youths have things to do: they have deadlines at school; chores at home; jobs outside of school; exams; everything! They always have so many things to do! This is a place where they can come to relax without the pressure of having to always 'do' something. They can visit the music studio and go record or produce a piece of music that they have been working on. Or they can come to the gym and do some jiu-jitsu—but they don't have to. They can just go in there and chill with their friends. They can go to the studio because there is a good vibe. A good vibe is so important! And maybe the good vibe will inspire them to create something, or not. Good vibes are where creativity and inspiration come from and they also make you want to come back. My role at the centre is to establish 'good vibes' while, at the same time, being there for the youths. A lot of them are shy when they arrive, and they don't want to talk to you about everything that they are going through—and they don't have to. I don't tell them what to do. It is so important just to give them space! I always leave them space in both my mind and in my heart so that they know they can come to me if and when they feel comfortable. They often worry that we will judge them about what they do. When they know that I won't do that, they can let me in if they want. Most of the time, though, the youth just enjoy when I am physically and emotionally present at the centre. Even just sitting next to them as they play games is important. That is the most important thing. Leaving space in your mind and in your heart for the youths because they need that sometimes. And secondary to all of this, I am there to help them learn jiu-jitsu, self-defence, and kickboxing if they choose.

(personal communication, February 5, 2020).

Adam's response captured what I believe to be the essence of the MMA programming offered at the youth centre. Youth came to the centre for a whole variety of different reasons: as a venue to escape boredom, to relieve stress and frustration, to be with friends, to find support, to exercise, and to learn self-defence or other transferable life skills. However, the female youths also found in the MMA program a venue at which they could be themselves—a generative space of reprieve and creativity that effectively pushed back against many of the restrictive gender norms that have been historically associated with women's involvement in combat sport.

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