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Approaching the Gendered Phenomenon of *Women Warriors*

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Introduction: Why Write of *Women Warriors*?

Our initial motivation for producing *Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports: Women Warriors around the World* began several years ago when, as PhD candidates studying together at Loughborough University, UK, we developed a shared interest in combat sports through our separate but related research projects. Christopher's work, involving an ethnographic study of a working-class, predominantly male boxing club, and Alex's, which explored the phenomenon of mixed-sex training in a range of martial arts schools, fuelled many discussions between us on the sociological richness of these activities. Topics such as the contentious definition of 'violence', the emotional landscape of training to fight, the social class characteristics of participants in different clubs and schools, and the complex relationship between ethnicity and authenticity in the martial arts occupied many of our debates. However, the most salient issue for both of us, and that which we returned to with the greatest regularity, was the manner in which gender was constructed, portrayed, and lived out within these activities. Of particular relevance in this respect is the tendency for some combat sport settings to be relatively male-exclusive, and steeped in orthodox narrations of masculinity – as was the case in Christopher's study – or for sex integration to occur in ways which generate numerous complex, gendered problems for practitioners – a crucial aspect of Alex's work. Indeed, our doctoral theses and subsequent publications were eventually both based on analyses of the gendered behaviour of practitioners within such settings, and marked the beginning of our academic careers as scholars in this particular field (e.g., Channon, 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; Matthews, 2012; 2014).

We were fortunate enough to be doing such research at a time when what might reasonably be described as the traditional association between combat sports and male exclusivity would be challenged in some fairly important and highly visibly ways, beyond the immediate confines of our studies' empirical foci. Firstly, in 2009, the International Olympic Committee approved the inclusion of women's boxing for the Olympic programme; the following Summer Games, in London in 2012, saw a 116-year history of women's exclusion from the Summer Olympic sports programme finally end, with female pugilists entering the

boxing ring as competitors for the first time. The first gold medal to be awarded to a female boxer went to the UK's Nicola Adams – a previously unheard-of athlete who would instantly become one of the most celebrated stars of the Games in her home nation, and who continues to be a recognisable figure in mainstream British media over two years later. Also in 2012, the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC) – the world's premier mixed martial arts (MMA) promotion – signed its first female competitor: the former Olympic judo bronze medallist and undefeated *Strikeforce* MMA champion, Ronda Rousey. Rousey's victory in the first ever women's fight in the UFC, in February 2013 against former US marine, Liz Carmouche (which headlined that night's pay-per-view event), along with her subsequent feud with arch-rival Meisha Tate, saw Rousey's star rise significantly in the MMA world and beyond, drawing much attention to the fact that women were now competing at the highest level in a sport often seen as synonymous with male exclusivity and orthodox narrations of manhood.

In light of these high-profile accomplishments, it is arguably the case that the 2012-13 period will be seen in years to come as something of a watershed moment in the development of women's combat sports. While women have been actively training and competing in boxing and MMA for many years prior to this time (not to mention a vast range of other fighting disciplines – see Jennings, 2015), the events of 2012-13 represented a significant step towards the mainstreaming of their involvement in some of the highest profile combat sport competitions in the world. As Woodward (2014) describes, these developments effectively brought women's combat sports 'into discourse', seeing them legitimated and validated as part of the cultural landscape of contemporary sport via their overt construction as something serious, exciting, and worthy of wide public attention and mediated consumption.

Within such a context, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholarly interest in this phenomenon has expanded significantly over recent years. Indeed, within the UK alone, we are joined in our interest in the sociological study of women's combat sports by several others, including doctoral students, early career researchers and senior academics presently or recently engaged in researching this topic (e.g., Allen-Collinson and Owton, 2014; Dunn, 2013; Lindner, 2012; Maclean, 2013; Mierzwinski *et al.*, 2014; Phipps, 2013; Vaittinen, 2013; Velija *et al.*, 2013; Woodward, 2014) – some of whom we have had the good fortune of collaborating with in both this and other recent efforts. In addition, and as this volume reveals, there are many others currently or recently having worked on similar projects around the world (e.g., Boddy, 2014; Heiskanen, 2012; Jennings, 2015; Kavoura *et al.*, 2014; McNaughton, 2012; Paradis, 2012; Smith, 2014; Trimbur, 2013; van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012), such that this relatively small area of the wider sporting landscape has become something of a hot topic for, in particular, contemporary social and historical research on sport.

Building on an already strong foundation of work conducted throughout the past three decades, mostly by feminist researchers (see reviews by Channon and Jennings, 2014 and Follo, 2012), this recent explosion of interest led to the decision to produce this present volume, intended to engage with the broad attention that women's participation in combat sports has generated both within and outside of academia. It is our hope that this book will become a useful resource for students and scholars who share an enthusiasm for the subject

area, and will help generate future interest in furthering our collective understanding of this phenomenon. In this respect, when trying to grasp the contemporary significance of women's increasingly visible presence in these cultural spaces, many scholars have, like us, grounded their analyses as explicit studies of gender. While not all of the chapters in this present volume centralise gender as such, this remains a vital thematic concern for the text as a whole, and arguably constitutes the primary entry point for social scientific (and other) approaches to making sense of the phenomena surrounding contemporary 'women warriors'. It is to this theoretical concern that we now turn.

Gender, Women and Combat Sports: Some Theoretical Considerations

Broadly defining what is meant by the term 'gender', in its academic sense rather than how it may typically be used in everyday parlance, requires significantly more space than we are able to afford within the confines of this introductory chapter. Indeed, comprehensive discussions of what gender is, how and where it exists, and how it shapes our social lives, tend to require entire textbooks of their own – for some excellent, recent examples, see Bradley (2013), Connell (2009) and Ryle (2015). For the purposes of our present effort though, a brief outline of how we define and use this vitally important sociological concept remains necessary. For readers interested in exploring further the issues that follow, we locate our position within a pro-feminist, social constructionist approach to gender, well-articulated in the texts mentioned above as well as other works from, in particular, Connell (e.g., 1987; 1995), Hearn and Morgan (1990), Lorber (1993; 2000), West and Fenstermaker (1995), and West and Zimmerman (1987; 2009).

Two fundamental points to make here concern firstly the largely constructed nature of sex differences, and secondly the implications which these differences have for individuals' power chances. In the first regard, social constructionist theories tend to suggest that while 'sex' refers to biological differences between people's bodies as they pertain to sexual reproduction (e.g., 'male'; 'female'), 'gender' refers to the varied sets of social norms and practices which people with differently-sexed bodies are typically expected to engage in within any given culture (e.g., 'masculinities'; 'femininities'). Added to this, a third layer of differentiation, described by West and Zimmerman (1987) as 'sex category' (e.g., 'men'; 'women'), refers to the social groups typically constituted by people based on their (assumed) sex – but importantly, made socially visible and meaningful by their gendered behaviour. That is, we tend to recognise and classify people as men or women based on their presentation of more-or-less masculine or feminine selves within a culturally-accepted, gendered system of signification – rather than actual knowledge of their biological reproductive capacities.

In this respect, socially-learned and culturally-specific performances of gender enable social 'men' and 'women' to exist as such, meaning that the basis of sex categorisation as a social phenomenon is fundamentally dependent upon cultural practices for its generation and maintenance. While discourses surrounding essential 'biological differences' between men

and women play an important role in making sense of sex, these effects are often largely overstated – a phenomenon which is also an effect of culture (Lorber, 1993; Matthews, 2014). In other words, from what Ryle (2015) describes as a ‘strong social constructionist’ position, cultural norms have a greater part to play in constituting social sex groups than do the absolute limitations of male or female biology, and this has important consequences regarding gendered individuals’ agency and destiny within hierarchally-organised societies.

Indeed, this reasoning takes on great relevance when a second important aspect of this phenomenon is considered: the power relations which arise out of sex category differences. It is widely recognised that social constructions of masculinity and femininity, and by extension the normative expectations surrounding men’s and women’s lives, are very often arranged in binary – that is, two-sided and oppositional – relationships (e.g., Bourdieu, 2001; Connell, 1987; Lorber, 1996; Weedon, 1999). And, more often than not, the binaries constitutive of sex and gender difference are hierarchal in nature, wherein qualities associated with men and masculinity are almost always more socially valued than their counterparts associated with women and femininity. At a theoretical level, this pertains to the general association of qualities such as physical strength, rationality, autonomy, leadership, and similar characteristics with masculinity; and physical frailty, emotionality, dependence, subservience, and other such qualities with femininity. Indeed, the binaries which often constitute sex and gender difference tend to be reducible to the broad construction of men and masculinity as being relatively more important and powerful than women and femininity, such that ‘doing’ gender in these ways generates social hierarchies which broadly privilege men at the expense of women (Bourdieu, 2001; Bradley, 2013; Connell, 1987; 1995).

Such hierarchal formations of gender are evident in many aspects of culture – such as gender-typing occupations, pay differences, the division of household responsibilities, political representation, and so on – but for the purposes of this chapter, their relation to the body is perhaps most significant. For instance, it can be seen at play in the fashions which men and women are expected to wear. Heteronormative exemplars of mainstream Western women’s clothing and body adornments typically restrict the body’s motion (e.g., high heels) whilst revealing or accentuating its (hetero)sexual attractiveness (e.g., ‘fitted’ clothing; makeup) and suggesting at sexual access (e.g., miniskirts). Meanwhile, men’s fashions in the same context (e.g., suits) rarely display or sexualise the body to the same extent, nor are they nearly as restrictive of movement, leaving the ‘masculine’ dresser less likely to be the object of others’ sexualising gaze, whilst being freer and more comfortable to move around and take possession of space.

This gender hierarchy becomes more explicitly embodied when men and women work upon and use their bodies in ways which are structured by codes of masculinity and femininity, respectively. Here, men (and boys) are expected and encouraged to practice activities, such as various sports or types of weight training, which lead to the development of their bodies’ strength, speed, and various motor skill competences, whilst generally favouring a lean and muscular appearance. This helps partly explain the long-term cultural

association between various athletic disciplines and certain forms of masculinity, along with the concurrent over-representation of, and disproportionate cultural rewards provided to, men within most professional sports. Meanwhile, women (and girls) are generally expected to work on their bodies in ways which limit the development of physical strength – especially its outward appearance through excessive musculature, a potent cultural signifier of both power and manhood. This phenomenon, in turn, partly explains the widespread tendency for girls to ‘drop out’ of sporting activities during their teenage years (e.g., Evans, 2006; Women’s Sports Foundation, 2011). The differential socialisation of boys and girls surrounding the culturally ‘appropriate’ use of the body then works to produce sexual disparity in physical appearances, attributes and skills. Thus, insults such as ‘you throw like a girl’ make sense as derogatory statements thanks to prevailing cultural formations which amount to the physical down-sizing and de-skilling of girls and women relative to boys and men (cf. Roth and Basow, 2004; Young, 1980).

Combining such reasoning with the assertion that sex category differences are constituted and maintained by gender rather than being the ‘natural’ consequence of sex is to recognise that such arrangements, although they may have the appearance of naturalness given their social commonality and close association with the biological bodies of women and men, are not fixed or inevitable (Lorber, 1993; Matthews, 2014). Indeed, if they have been created and maintained by the gender arrangements of society, then they can be altered by arranging society and its gender norms differently. It is with this important principle in mind that analyses of gender within sport studies typically begin, as scholars recognise the crucial role that various sporting activities can play in the construction or, indeed, reconstruction of gender at the symbolically important level of the body.¹

Gender Subversion in Women’s Combat Sports

With respect to this possibility of subverting sexual inequality, the notion that women’s participation in so-called ‘masculine’ sports and related activities can challenge traditional sexual hierarchies, at both individual and broader cultural levels, has been forwarded by many scholars (e.g., Cahn, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; McCaughey, 1997; Roth and Basow, 2004; Theberge, 2000; Thing, 2001). This position draws on the typically ‘gender-transgressive’ nature of participation, which is arguably the most immediately salient issue in analysing the phenomenon of women’s sport within contemporary cultural milieu in many countries around the world. In its most concise and simplified form, this argument centres on women’s development of athletic skills and cultivation of strong, tough, performance-ready bodies as an appropriation of what are assumed to be naturally and exclusively ‘male’ competencies. As women develop such embodied abilities and qualities, they not only depart from normative, subordinating constructions of femininity and the female body, but also trouble the exclusive and naturalised association between men, the male body, and those qualities culturally recognised as constituting masculinity. Revealing by example the socio-cultural roots of sex differentiation as established via gender performance, they problematize the hierarchal power relations at least partially built on such bases.

While these arguments have long been made with respect to women in sport more broadly, their impact is amplified when the subject of discussion becomes those activities which most closely approximate the ability to exert physical domination over others – a key component of what might be considered to symbolically constitute ‘hegemonic’² forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1990; 2002), and something which we argue is a vital element of many (if not most) combat-based sports. In this respect, not only do the bodily capacities of women fighters trouble enduring myths of ‘natural’ female frailty and passivity (cf. Dowling, 2000); nor simply do they depart from the normative construction of women as vulnerable to and thus dependent upon men for protection (McCaughey, 1997); but they also signify women’s occupation of one of the few remaining social enclaves largely reserved for men (at least, in Western countries), for the purposes of reifying male power, in societies where “dramatic symbolic proof” of male superiority (Messner, 1988, p.200) has become increasingly difficult to come by. With these possibilities in mind, the social significance of women in combat sports is difficult to deny, and the study of how this phenomenon may instigate or facilitate challenges to sexual hierarchy becomes paramount.

However, to suggest that any iteration of women’s engagement in combat sports stands to transform or subvert inequitable gender relations is to over-simplify this phenomenon in a number of respects. Firstly, the manner in which sex constitutes an axis of power difference in contemporary societies is known to intersect with a variety of other phenomena in multiple ways – various formations of gender and sexuality work to mediate the power chances of men and women *as* men and women, while social class stratification, ethnicity, physical ability, and other socio-demographic variables complicate any discussion of power differences across diverse populations. Such an ‘intersectional’ approach to understanding power, privilege and social hierarchy has become common practice within many academic approaches to understanding gender (e.g., Ryle, 2015; Weedon, 1999; West and Fenstermaker, 1995), and in the wider discussion of sport as a form of ‘empowerment’ for women, it is acknowledged that the women most likely to experience this are those who already occupy relatively privileged social positions (e.g., Hargreaves, 2002).

Addressing the gendered significance of women’s combat sports therefore requires that scholars consider more than the traditional sexual inequities constitutive of ‘patriarchy’; as important as these are, they alone cannot account for the full spectrum of power relations impinging upon (or potentially transformed through) the experiences or symbolic meaning of ‘women warriors’ (cf. Heiskanen, 2012; Mitra, 2009). For instance, a black woman boxer within a white-dominated, patriarchal society may confound normative conceptions of femininity through her fighting ability and toughness, but racializing discourses connecting ‘blackness’ with violence, and defining femininity around exclusively white-centred norms, may be used to reposition such a boxer in ways which reduce the subversive impact she might otherwise have had on wider structures of sexism, while also shoring up racist symbolism in the process.

Secondly, and extending from this first point, the specific cultural contexts within which women participate in combat sports complicate universalising claims as to the

transformative value of their experience or involvement. While the collected studies represented within this volume illustrate a number of compelling similarities across varied national settings, the importance of cultural sensitivity in addressing questions of gender performance, sexual hierarchy and social change cannot be overstated. For instance, in an ostensibly liberal, Western society such as the United Kingdom, where the legacy of successful feminist activism can be seen through women's broad enfranchisement in public life along with the legal and political valorisation of sex equality, female boxers, such as Olympic champion Nicola Adams, may constitute important symbolic challenges to enduring forms of sexism. In other words, the cultural and political context of gender in the UK today generally makes for fertile ground for figures such as Adams to enter the public consciousness in potentially transformative/progressive ways (notwithstanding, of course, the possibility for racist/heterosexist interpretation – Adams is both Black and openly bisexual, inviting varied responses to what she personally signifies vis-à-vis normative constructions of femininity).

However, the same cannot be easily inferred of women in nations where it is in fact sex inequality and segregation which are formalised, both within law and orthodox visions of public morality. For instance, the 2012 Olympic judoka, Wojdan Shaherkani of Saudi Arabia, cannot be thought to bear the same meaning for Saudis as female judokas or other athletes might for Britons, despite the broadly celebratory tone struck in the Western press over her inclusion in London 2012 as one of the first ever female Saudi Olympians (e.g., Addley, 2012). For women from such divergent backgrounds, the experience of participating in combat sports is likely to be contoured by vastly different cultural forces, both within their home nations and abroad (cf. Kipnis and Caudwell, this volume). Likewise, the symbolic meanings of such women within their nations of origin are likely to be understood quite differently, and in this respect their place in public discourse as generated through mass media presence is sure to differ vastly. As such, while much of our own thinking on the significance of women in combat sports is produced by and remains structured around a veritably Occidental ontology, it remains necessary to avoid the uncritical transposition of this reasoning beyond the cultural location which it primarily describes.

Thirdly, the format of activities which may be described as 'combat sports' vary significantly, and so their meanings relative to orthodox gender norms, and potential to challenge the sexual hierarchies sustained through these, must be approached sensitively. Indeed, combat sports and martial arts activities differ along multiple axes, and numerous attempts have been made by previous scholars to delineate and categorise them in diverse ways – such as their supposed geographical origin, degree of 'hardness', modernised or 'traditionalist' character, and so on (e.g., Mennesson, 2000; Theeboom and De Knop, 1999; Vertonghen *et al.*, this volume). For our present purposes, a typological delineation of such activities with respect to their possible gendered meanings for practitioners provides for a useful initial step towards understanding the divergent range of experiences and representations of women within them. To that end, we propose a five-point typology as a point of departure for this book; not as a definitive means of categorising women's

experiences within combat sports, but as an introductory exercise in thinking through their significance for contesting gendered normality and sexual hierarchy.

A Rough Typology of Women's Combat Sports

Our proposed typology contains the following five groupings of activities: 'combat' workouts; purposive self-defence; competitive fighting; performative combat; and 'recreational' martial arts. Unlike comparative approaches which take formally differentiated fighting styles as unique categories of analysis (e.g., Cynarski and Kudlacz, 2008), this typology is constructed on the basis of four inter-related characteristics of practice, each of which bears relevance for understanding the degree to which women's participation reflects, reproduces, modifies, or overtly challenges orthodox constructions of gender. These include: the ostensible purposes for which fighting techniques are learnt; the physical interactions typical within practice; the ways in which the body and its occupancy of space are conceptualised relative to these outcomes and interactions; and the degree to which men may be involved in the activity. As such, women's practice of any given combat discipline (e.g., boxing; judo; karate; etc.) could conceivably fall into any one of these categories, dependent upon the specific manner in which it is undertaken.

While the cultural resonance of this typology is rooted in Western gender norms, drawing on our own experiences and viewpoints as Westerners as well as research literature on women in combat sports composed mostly by Western (by which we primarily mean Australasian, European and North American) scholars, we argue that its usefulness as an exercise in thinking through and working out how to conceptualise women's combat sports trumps its value as a definitive means of describing such activities. As such, we suggest that readers engage critically with what we have to say here, and in so doing consider some of the same gendered problems that we have highlighted when trying to understand the significance of women's participation in combat sports.

'Combat' Workouts

The first category in this typology is something of a misnomer, as it involves activities which are unlikely to be listed in other considerations of what constitutes either 'combat' or 'sport'. Indeed, activities which fall into this category do not involve actual combat between practitioners, nor are they oriented around preparing practitioners for (competitive) fights; instead, they feature adapted movements derived from fighting techniques, practiced principally for enhancing fitness, toning muscle or losing weight. 'Combat' workouts include generic aerobics classes variously described as, for instance, 'boxercise' or 'body combat', as well as commercially branded formats such as the globally popular 'Tae Bo', brainchild of American world karate champion, Billy Blanks. As per Blanks' example, charismatic (male) instructors – particularly those with an impressive martial arts pedigree such as high-degree black belts or competitive success – may be an element of the marketing of such activities,

lending a veneer of martial authenticity, while also helping distinguish these from other aerobic workout routines.

An important feature of these activities is that they involve a relatively restricted level of physical contact between practitioners. While some may involve paired work such as holding punching bags or pads for partners to hit, participants otherwise occupy their own designated spaces, generally do not move into spaces held by others, and emulate movements demonstrated by instructors for the duration of a class. Indeed, an extensive range of commercially-available workout DVDs within this genre allows practice to take place in altogether private settings, far removed from any form of body-to-body interaction. In this respect, such activities tend to mirror other workout classes in their positioning of bodies, and thus may reproduce conventional relationships between spaciality, embodiment, and femininity observed in other such settings (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995; see also Markula and Kennedy, 2010).

Furthermore, they may be explicitly marketed and practiced as a means of shaping the body in ways intended to enhance heterosexual attractiveness. As Hargreaves notes, they promise to provide women – to whom it would seem that such classes are most prominently (although not exclusively) marketed – access to a challenging and effective fitness regime whilst keeping them from “the worrying relationships between combat, aggression, pain and injury” (1997, p.40), which may imply a masculinisation of the body. Hargreaves further describes how one such class advertised itself to women by stating that “the only pain you inflict is on yourself” (1997, p.40), reflecting the normative feminine practice of enduring pain or inflicting harm upon oneself in the pursuit of an idealised body (cf. Bordo, 1993). Thus, despite their superficial association with a range of martial arts or combat sport activities, women’s involvement in ‘combat’ workouts appears to offer relatively little departure from normative gender constructs and so-called ‘female-appropriate’ versions of sport and fitness (see Kim *et al.*, this volume; Owton, this volume).

Purposive Self-Defence

Although practitioners of various martial arts and combat sports may purportedly train for reasons which include ‘self-defence’, this category involves those activities which are structured solely around this particular end. A large body of literature, mostly composed by feminist scholars from North America, provides a compelling and far-reaching analysis of self-defence as a potent cultural site for the empowerment of women (e.g., Cermele, 2004; De Welde, 2003; Drwecki, 2009; Guthrie, 1995; 1997; Hollander, 2004; 2009; McCaughey, 1997; 1998; Searles and Berger, 1987; Thompson, 2014). Here, the outcomes of training are typically oriented around preparing women to effectively prevent (sexual) assaults perpetrated by men; to recover from the consequences of having been assaulted; and/or to otherwise resist the norms of ‘rape culture’ – that is, those aspects of gender behaviour or discourse which facilitate or normalise male-to-female sexual assault.

While various fighting styles or techniques may be learnt through self-defence training, these are practiced in ways which emulate ‘real’ interpersonal violence, rather than

in preparation for rule-bound competition or formalised grading exams. As such, interactions in self-defence training often involve attacker-defender role-play, with a range of pre-drilled techniques practiced in response to a specific attack, such as a punch or a stranglehold. Practice will often progress from static rehearsals of set movements to more intense, dynamic and open engagements, as 'defenders' learn to preserve their spatial and bodily integrity through foiling 'attackers'' attempts to enter their space and take control of their bodies. To do so, techniques which often require very little (upper-)body strength, but are capable of inflicting significant damage if performed correctly, might be used. In this sense, self-defence training seeks to equalise the (assumed) strength differences between men and women (Noel, 2009), or to exploit the (assumed) specific lower-body strength advantages of female bodies (Hollander, 2004). Additionally, while men do attend self-defence courses, many are women-only, although these may include men as instructors or assistants (Drwecki, 2009; McCaughey, 1997), whose presence may add to the 'realism' of training when they play the role of attacker (Channon, 2013a).

Furthermore, these practices may be oriented around an overtly feminist pedagogy, aimed at raising consciousness about sexism and its various manifestations in women's lives (Drwecki, 2009; McCaughey, 1997; Thompson, 2014). Additional methods for realising such goals include formal assertiveness training, discussions about violence and resistance, and the sharing of practitioners' personal experiences, each of which help to explicitly foreground the woman-centred and gender-subversive aims of these types of activities (De Welde, 2003; Hollander, this volume). With an overt focus on empowering women physically and otherwise, such training "not merely (teaches) women to fight. (It teaches) women that they are important, that they are worth fighting for" (McCaughey, 1997, p.98).

While women's self-defence is thereby based on resisting men's violence, its potential outcomes often extend further, challenging sexism by seeking to undo the normative embodiment of women's subordination in various ways (Brecklin, 2008; De Welde, 2003; McCaughey, 1997). Interestingly though, the marketing of and demand for women's self-defence classes simultaneously depends upon the cultural formation which it seeks to oppose – violent, heterosexist patriarchy. This invites criticism from some other feminists, who argue that women training to physically resist men's violence is less important than challenging the cultural antecedents of that violence, and in fact reflects a reification of male-to-female assault as an inevitable phenomenon which women are being encouraged to take personal responsibility for preventing (cf. Thompson, 2014). Meanwhile, similar to 'combat' workouts, the often female-specific character of self-defence may also lead to the activity being positioned as a 'feminised' variation of combat sports, reproducing a gendered, and possibly hierarchal, patterning of participation within specific schools and clubs (cf. Jennings, 2015). This potentially complicates the degree to which self-defence classes might challenge orthodox understandings of gender, due to the perpetuation of purposively separate spheres of experience for women and men, along with the implicit reification of the 'male attacker/female victim' gender trope.

Competitive Fighting

This category includes activities which involve women pursuing careers as competitive fighters, and is the category which likely best exemplifies what is commonly understood by the term 'combat sport'. Here, training in any given discipline is principally structured around preparing for rule-bound fighting contests, which are usually organised according to formal regulations, often imposed by a centralised governing body, and involve opponents who are matched by weight or, in some cases, experience or skill level. The nature of the physical interactions between practitioners vary dependent upon the norms and rules of the specific fighting discipline(s) in question, and training methods may vary widely between practitioners. However, the competitive fights which define this category usually take the form of one-on-one combat across a series of time-limited rounds, and may be broadly positioned as either 'cultivating' or constructive on the one hand, or 'negating' and destructive on the other (cf. Spencer, 2011). That is to say that competitive fights can primarily serve to mutually test and develop contestants' abilities – arguably a co-operative, mutually nurturing, and thus potentially 'feminised' exercise (cf. Abramson and Modzelewski, 2011) – or determine which of the two competitors is the superior fighter – a struggle for victory through the domination of the other, which easily lends itself to being read as 'masculine'. Particularly in this latter instance, the body is mobilised as a weapon; it must forcefully enter the space occupied by the opponent's body, overcoming attempts to resist, and control and/or damage said body in such a way as to earn points, elicit a submission, or cause a fight-ending injury or knockout.

Such practices are largely the same as those constitutive of men's competitive fighting, and given that the aggression, toughness, and combat skills typically required to produce victory in such competitions have long been associated with men and masculinity (cf. Matthews, 2014; Sheard, 1997; Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009; Woodward, 2006), this makes women's practice a distinctly gender-troubling phenomenon (e.g., Boddy, 2014; Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Mennesson, 2000; McNaughton, 2012; Paradis, 2012). Thus, unlike self-defence or 'combat' workouts, competitive fighting as an overall genre is not discursively positioned as being particularly 'female-appropriate' (Jennings, 2015); women's involvement constitutes a direct appropriation of an otherwise quintessentially masculine cultural space.

Perhaps because of their vast over-representation in this masculinised field, men are often important agents in the career development of competitive women fighters, and can provide vital assistance through working as coaches, managers and sparring partners in many disciplines (Kavoura *et al.*, this volume; Owton, this volume). Unfortunately, a reliance on such men can be a hindrance to some women, as certain male coaches/instructors may have dismissive attitudes towards, or little interest in working with, female athletes (Lantz, 2002; Lafferty and McKay, 2004; McNaughton, 2012; Paradis, 2012; see also Schneider, 2013), while others may actively discriminate against women and frustrate their career development in varied ways (McCree, this volume). Meanwhile, training in mixed-sex groups is relatively common in this category in some contexts (Channon, 2013a; Guérandel and Mennesson, 2007; Maclean, this volume; see also Lökman, 2010), and may involve mixed-sex sparring

(Channon and Jennings, 2013; McNaughton, 2012) – practices which hold particularly meaningful opportunities for embodied and symbolic challenges to normative sexual hierarchies (Channon, 2013b; Miller, 2010; Noel, 2009). However, formal integrated competition is rare, often being banned by local or national legislature. By insisting on sex segregation in (particularly adult) competitions, orthodox gender relations are at least partially maintained, since the logic of essential male superiority remains a structural feature of an otherwise potentially gender-subversive practice (cf. Fields, 2005).

Meanwhile, other conservative impulses may also be at work; notably, the tendency for female athletes in various sports to be gender-marked, or portrayed in sexualised ways, similarly affects women in combat sports. Controversy surrounding proposed uniform regulations for female Olympic boxers (van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012; see also Halbert, 1997), and the nude or ‘glamour’ photo shoots of professional MMA fighters such as the aforementioned Ronda Rousey and Meisha Tate, offer two recent examples of ways in which sexual differentiation, heteronormativity and male privilege can be at least partially maintained in women’s competitive combat sports (see L.A. Jennings, this volume). Finally, the gender-marking of combat disciplines themselves, wherein ‘softer’ styles may become labelled as ‘female-appropriate’ (akin to the feminisation of non-contact ‘combat’ workouts), also risks perpetuating images of women as essentially weaker or less aggressive than men (cf. Mennesson, 2000; Mierzwinski and Phipps, this volume).

Performative Combat

Unlike the previous categories, performative combat involves practices which are fundamentally oriented towards others, rather than the self. That is to say that here, practitioners demonstrate techniques, or engage in more-or-less scripted mock-fights, for the purposes of communicating with and/or entertaining an audience³. Prominent examples here include action sequences in film, television, or other media (Inness, 2004; Knight, 2010; McCaughey and King, 2001); professional ‘sports-entertainment’ wrestling matches (Haynes, this volume); public demonstrations of martial art techniques (Looser, 2011); and purposively erotic or sexualised performances (Scambler and Jennings, 1998). The bodies of women fighters may be viewed by audiences in a wide range of contexts; they may exhibit highly stylised, or simple and efficient martial arts moves, effectively executed against various (and often male) opponents; they may be shown as subject to rigorous and exhausting training in combat sport disciplines (Caudwell, 2008); but they may also be engaged in modified wrestling or boxing matches designed to sexually titillate an audience (Hargreaves, 1997) or as a fetishized prelude to performing sex acts in pornographic videos (Rotella, 1999).

Clearly, the sociological significance of such performances vary widely, for while the potential exists for women fighters to be depicted as formidably powerful combatants or dedicated athletes deserving of fear or admiration, so too can they be positioned as fantasised objects of male sexual desire, with their fighting ability rendered as little more than erotic spectacle. To complicate matters, it is also quite possible that such constructs may coincide to produce erotically-charged imagery of ostensibly powerful fighters (cf. Heinecken,

2004; Knight, 2010; Sammond, 2005), problematizing analyses wherein 'serious' depictions signify gender subversion through women's agency and physical power, while their sexualisation re-imposes an objectified, subordinating image of femininity. The media sexualisation of 'women warriors' thereby echoes controversies surrounding that of female athletes more broadly, which constitutes a well-researched and much-debated phenomenon in the sociology of sport (e.g., Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Kane, 2011; Khomutova and Channon, forthcoming; Messner, 2002).

Given the positioning of bodies as the objects of an audience gaze, some commentators have asserted that performative combat – whether undertaken by female or male performers, or steeped in ostensibly masculine or feminine imagery – can itself be read as generically feminised (cf. Gomes, 2004; Tasker, 1997). This is an interesting conceptual argument given the often highly masculinised connotations of (particularly) men's on-screen combat. Perhaps more importantly though, and regardless of actual content, the interactions occurring on screen/stage are scripted affairs, and thereby open to manipulation by actors, writers and producers. This 'staged' nature must certainly be taken into account when considering the potential of such performances for challenging or reinforcing dominant sexual stereotypes. Firstly, whatever the bodies of female fighters are shown to be capable of here is not necessarily representative of 'reality'; as writers in the emergent field of martial arts studies have argued, questions over the 'realness' of martial arts in general have recently been reinvigorated by the growth of MMA, and other hybrid, 'realist' fighting styles such as the Keysi fighting method (e.g., Bowman, 2014a; Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, 2011; van Bottenburg and Heilbron, 2006). In such a context, the suspension of disbelief required of viewers of dramatized, fantasized action cinema or 'sports entertainment' is thrown into sharp relief, troubling the implication that women's scripted, dis/embodyed performances necessarily constitute a transformative alternative to discourses of naturalised female weakness (Lindner, 2009).

Nevertheless, the creative freedoms of this genre simultaneously allow producers to explicitly problematize or parody such orthodox gender formations, constructing narratives surrounding sex, gender and sexuality wherein women's fighting skills can explicitly feature as a device for critiquing specific aspects of patriarchal constructions of femininity (e.g., Caudwell, 2008; Gomes, 2004; Lindner, 2009; McCaughey and King, 2001). Of course, such productions may also construct narratives which blatantly or subtly reassert traditional gender formations (cf. Boyle *et al.*, 2006) or other dominant cultural value systems (cf. Hiramoto and Teo, 2014), such that the polysemic quality of fictional representations leaves open the possibility for multiple interpretations of their meanings. Thus, while the feats of the body within this genre very often depend upon fantasised exaggerations, they nevertheless carry important symbolic potential for dramatically indicating and potentially re-writing the gendered significance of those bodies (cf. Lu, 2011).

'Recreational' Martial Arts

While each of the four categories listed above have a fairly clear set of well-defined outcomes or purposes, what we here describe as 'recreational' martial arts practitioners may be more or less motivated by each of these. The cultivation of fitness or some other form of body management; development of various self-defence competencies; pursuit of competitive success within inter- or intra-club sparring matches; or the opportunity to give public demonstrations may all be a feature of practice in a variety of activities which might be broadly described as 'martial arts'. In addition, both men and women participating within them may be motivated by several other factors, including the pursuit of spiritual or moral self-development (e.g., Abramson and Modzelewski, 2011; Boddy, 2014; Brown and Leledaki, 2010); educational benefits, particularly among children or younger people (e.g., Brown and Johnson, 2000; Lakes and Hoyt, 2004; Vertonghen *et al.*, this volume); the enjoyment or excitement of the activity and its socio-cultural significance (e.g., McCaughey, 1998; Mierzwinski and Phipps, this volume; Mierzwinski *et al.*, 2014; Thing, 2001); the sociability and social capital of club membership (e.g., Jennings, 2010; Lantz, 2002; Looser, 2006); the chance to experience 'other' cultures, or preserve/reinvent one's own cultural tradition or ethnic heritage (e.g., Brown and Leledaki, 2010; Carruthers, 1998; Farrer, 2011; George Jennings, this volume; Joseph, 2008; 2012); and yet more besides. Given this multiplicity of possible training goals and outcomes, great variation inevitably exists within the (gendered) physical practices which might be observed in such settings. Indeed, within this category in our typology, one could elaborate on a variety of further sub-categories, each of which may bear its own unique relevance for gender-based analyses in numerous ways, but which are too diffuse to adequately articulate in this present undertaking.

Further complicating matters here (as, indeed, with the other categories in this typology) is the different extent to which any one individual may be invested within their given practice; casual, on/off engagement is not uncommon in many sports and physical activities such as these, but so too are many 'recreational' practitioners dedicated to their martial arts practice as a form of what might be called 'serious leisure' (e.g., Green and Jones, 2006; Stebbins, 2007). This makes generalising about potential outcomes and meanings of engagement in these varied forms of martial arts practice, vis-à-vis gender subversion, all the more problematic. Nevertheless, in understanding the gendered significance of the great variety of activities which may fall into this category, it is important to consider the delineating features discussed above. For instance, to what ends are fighting techniques being studied by women? How do practitioners (physically) interact with one-another? What meanings are ascribed to the capabilities of their bodies, and to the physical and/or cultural space(s) their bodies occupy? In what manner are men present in the activity, if at all? And ultimately, how do these considerations map onto the gender norms and sexual hierarchies operating within the wider cultural spaces the activity occupies? While we are reluctant to leave this fifth category so poorly defined, this is perhaps indicative of the limitations inherent in any attempt to place complex and varied social practices within the conceptual boundaries which constitute sociological typologies.

Indeed, we invite readers to critically adapt and refine those categories listed here, and improve upon the limited utility which our tentative model holds. For example, further considerations may also involve interrogating the degree to which any combat sport practice is structured around commercialised, market-driven formats. In particular, gender scholars may ask how the worked-upon self has become a consumer imperative for both women and men in many Western contexts (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Smith Maguire, 2008), and how the commercial appropriation of (post)feminist slogans (Cole and Hribar, 1995; LaFrance, 1998) might have thereby spread throughout many women's combat sports practices and products. Such questions may be particularly pertinent for interrogating the first two categories mentioned here, which are often constructed and marked out as 'feminine'/'female-appropriate'. In addition, and as much of the research on women's sport has argued, participation alone is often not sufficient for challenging the male hegemony constructed through or supported by many (if not most) modern sports. The degree to which women can exert control over their own or others' training and performance constitutes an important dimension through which to evaluate the gender-subversive potential of any such activity. While this consideration doesn't map neatly onto the typology presented here, it does feature as an element of some of the contributions to this volume, wherein questions over the institutional structures within which 'women warriors' operate help to drive the analysis of sexual power differences. With this point in mind, our present chapter concludes by considering the layout of the rest of the book.

Structure of the Book

The sixteen chapters comprising the remainder of the volume provide an extensive (although far from exhaustive) discussion of contemporary experiences and representations of women involved at various levels within multiple different combat sport activities, drawn from many parts of the world. These are broadly arranged into four thematic parts, each of which contains four distinctive contributions.

Part One, entitled *Discursive Constructions and Mediated Representations of Women in Combat Sports*, begins with Amy Godoy-Pressland's discussion of changing media discourses surrounding women's boxing in the UK between 2008 and 2014. Godoy-Pressland evidences a clear shift in discourse during this Olympic period, largely underpinned by the success of the London 2012 women's boxing tournament in general, and the exploits of gold medallist Nicola Adams in particular. Here, media framing is shown to transition from demonising and mocking women's boxing towards accepting and celebrating it during this time. This chapter is followed by Hillary Kipnis and Jayne Caudwell's essay on 'the boxers of Kabul' – young Afghan women learning to box within a radically different social setting to that outlined in Godoy-Pressland's study. Highlighting the tendency among Western media to misrepresent Afghan women's lives relative to orientalist constructions of Islam and the propaganda associated with the 'war on terror', Kipnis and Caudwell nevertheless discuss

how conservative interpretations of Islam prevailing throughout Afghan culture impede the development of the sport and powerfully shape the experiences of the young women themselves. Next, Charlene Weaving offers a philosophical critique of the recent inclusion of women in the UFC, with specific attention to the organisation's first women's bantamweight champion, Ronda Rousey. Engaging with issues surrounding empowerment, objectification and violence, Weaving argues that the UFC, whose discursive universe remains heavily predicated upon male-centred practices and gender relations, is a difficult space for women to enter and thrive within, despite its recent recruitment of female fighters. Finally, these themes are further developed in L.A. Jennings' chapter, which explores the UFC's representation of the female body in the promotion of its recent television show, *The Ultimate Fighter Season 20 (TUF 20)*. *TUF 20*'s all-female cast of fighters were promoted via an advertising campaign entitled 'Beauty and Strength', which Jennings takes to task over its blatant reproduction of sexualising discourse, arguing that the re-imposition of restrictive, orthodox gender framing damages the potential of what might otherwise have served as a potent site for women's self-expression through combat sports.

Part two, entitled *Institutional Structures and Actors in Women's Combat Sports*, begins with George Jennings and Beatriz Cabrera's discussion of online resistance to weight category restrictions in Olympic boxing. Noting the importance of Olympic recognition in providing women's boxing with global legitimacy, Jennings and Cabrera discuss the inequality enshrined within the inclusion of only three weight divisions for women in the Games (compared to ten for men), along with the health implications for boxers who must radically change their bodyweight in order to compete within them. Roy McCree's chapter follows, offering an account of the professional experiences of women involved in the administration of boxing in Trinidad and Tobago. His research reveals various challenges faced by a select few women who have managed to carve out careers in the largely male-dominated organisational infrastructure of two different governing bodies in the Caribbean nation, and argues that until women are more evenly represented in the governance of combat sports such as boxing, the interests of women practitioners are unlikely to be adequately represented. Following this, George Jennings' second contribution to this volume shifts attention to the Mexican martial art of Xilam, founded in the late twentieth century by the long-term martial arts practitioner, Maestra Marisela Ugalde. Adopting a life-history approach, Jennings' chapter explores Ugalde's personal journey towards becoming the 'mother' of Xilam, charting her struggles within a cultural context hostile to both the idea of an 'indigenous' Mexican martial art, but also to Ugalde's role as its female figurehead. This section then finishes with Anna Kavoura, Stilian Chroni, Marja Kokkonen and Tatiana Ryba's case study on the development of women's Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ) in Finland. Drawing on Foucauldian theory, and with a focus on the role played by female practitioners themselves in promoting women's BJJ and developing chances for participation and competition, Kavoura *et al.* argue that women's agency must be considered key to building more inclusive, gender-subversive spaces in martial arts.

Part three, entitled *Recreational Practice and Self-Defence*, explores the experiences of women and girls whose engagement in combat sports fit broadly within the first, second and fifth categories listed in our typology above; that is to say, those who are not primarily involved in competitive or performative practices. It begins with Chloe Maclean's ethnographic study of mixed-sex karate practice in Scotland, which provides a detailed discussion of the gendered dynamics of this globally-popular martial art in a range of Scottish clubs. Maclean argues that while women's involvement in karate challenges broader societal conceptions of female inferiority, culturally specific codes of masculinity remain relatively privileged in these settings, with women's enfranchisement within karate at least partly built upon their ability to demonstrate such 'masculine' characteristics. Next, Jikkemien Vertonghen, Hebe Schailleé, Marc Theeboom and Paul De Knop's chapter reports on a broad study of young girls practicing various martial arts and combat sports in Belgium, exploring how factors such as girls' demographic backgrounds and behavioural characteristics might mediate the social-psychological outcomes of participation. Vertonghen *et al.* conclude that while these outcomes are broadly positive, exploring such factors reveals patterned differences which problematise generalisations about the beneficial consequences of young girls' engagement in such activities, and their analysis suggests the need for greater sensitivity towards social differences when advocating participation. Following this is Jocelyn Hollander's chapter, which draws on her mixed-methods study of women's self-defence training in the United States. Hollander highlights the personally transformative potential of such training by way of examining the emotions women feel during a self-defence course, arguing that transitions in women's emotional experiences achieved during such a programme – from fear to anger, shame to pride, and so on – facilitate wider challenges to the construction of gender in broader social contexts. This section then concludes with Yun Jung Kim, Sun Yong Kwon and Jung Woo Lee's ethnographic study of women's boxing in South Korea. Here, Kim *et al.* discuss women's involvement in both non-combative and combative forms of boxing, relative to prevailing gender norms in Korean society as well as the historical development of boxing in this national context. They argue that while women may feel a sense of empowerment through either form of participation, this often remains contoured by 'hegemonic' constructions of gender in various ways.

Part four, entitled *Competitive and Performative 'Women Warriors'*, explores the experiences of women whose participation in combat sports fit broadly into the third and fourth categories of the above typology. It begins with Helen Owton's autoethnographic chapter, which draws on feminist phenomenology to explore the gendered, sensorial aspects of boxing in England, including her experiences of entering new training environments, training with men, and engaging in a competitive fight. Owton's personal account reveals much about the lived reality of women's boxing relative to feminist conceptualisations of embodiment and patriarchal relations, making a strong case for the employment of phenomenological research in understanding the lives of 'women warriors'. This is then followed by Mark Mierzwinski and Catherine Phipps' study of women training and competing in MMA and muay thai, also in England. Noting that these competitive, full-contact, so-called

'hard' fighting disciplines are typically considered to be among the most 'masculine' of martial arts, and thus thought unsuitable for women, Mierzwinski and Phipps argue that participation involves an explicit rejection of 'female-appropriate' physical culture, and rewards women with a profound sense of 'exciting significance', the likes of which are rarely available in so-called 'feminine' sports. The book's penultimate chapter, by Jorge Knijnik and Marco Ferretti, explores the careers of a range of highly successful Brazilian combat sport athletes and takes a more explicit focus on the bodies of these female fighters as sites of social change. Drawing on Judith Butler's post-structural theory, Knijnik and Ferretti argue that such bodies present the potential to subvert dominant constructions of gender in Brazil, yet are frequently beset by a lived ambivalence which must be constantly negotiated throughout fighters' careers. Finally, the book concludes with Nell Haynes' chapter, which presents her anthropological research into the lives of indigenous Bolivian professional wrestlers, the 'Cholitas Luchadoras'. Haynes' richly detailed narrative draws on multiple sources, including the accounts of the Luchadoras themselves, charting intersecting discourses surrounding violence, gender and ethnicity at play in the construction of their public identity. Haynes' discussion suggests that the notion of women's empowerment through celebrated combat prowess and sporting stardom must be cautiously tempered relative to the often derogatory, essentialist framing of the Luchadoras' indigenous ethnicity.

Together then, these sixteen research reports and scholarly essays attempt to capture some of the diverse and complex experiences of women practicing a variety of combat sports, engaging in them in differing ways within a broad range of national and cultural settings. Mindful of the near-ubiquitous cultural positioning of women's participation in fighting-based sports as constitutive of gender transgression, we believe the stories told in these sixteen chapters make a meaningful contribution to the well-established academic field of sport and gender studies. Attending to the struggles and setbacks, as well as the joys and triumphs felt by the women within them, provides further insight into the pervasive but ultimately changeable structures of gender and power which have long defined women's engagement in sports of all kinds. More importantly though, as these athletes exist at some of the more extreme symbolic ends of socially-constructed gender regimes, we suggest that their stories provide particularly intriguing examples of the possibilities for alternative, exciting, and even subversive articulations of womanhood, femininity, and wider gender and sexual relations. Perhaps, as Judith Butler (1998, p.108) suggests of female athletes more broadly, such stories as these might show us "just how radically gender norms can be altered through a spectacular public restaging"; along with the other contributors to this text, we believe that few such 'public restagings' are as spectacular as those at play in the accounts of the 'women warriors' that follow.

Notes

¹ As noted above, there is certainly more that could be said regarding the construction of sex difference and the various factors which impinge upon this vital social process, which for lack of space we have chosen to omit from

this passage. For example, phenomena such as sexuality and homophobia, intersex biology (see Blackless *et al.*, 2000) and transgenderism all bear significantly on how individuals' sexual status and corresponding power chances may be discursively and institutionally framed, as well as personally experienced at embodied and relational levels. For relatively recent discussions of how such complexities in the social construction of gendered differences pertain particularly to sport and physical culture, see Aitchison (2007), Caudwell (2006), and Hargreaves and Anderson (2014).

² We recognise that there is an important debate to be had over the exact meanings and academic uses of this term (cf. Anderson, 2009; Demetriou, 2001; Hearn, 2004) which, for lack of space, we are unable to fully engage with here. At this point, we take it simply to refer to *forms of masculinity which grant men power*, in both an embodied and discursive/representational sense. See Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Messerschmidt (2012).

³ As some readers are sure to note, there may very well be 'performative' elements involved in the practices described under other categories of this typology. For example, as Bolelli (2014) recently suggested, the development of the UFC as a thrilling combat sport spectacle owes much to competitors' mimicry of the fighting styles seen in martial arts movies. The UFC even rewards fighters with cash bonuses for giving the most entertaining performances of each event it hosts, meaning that its fighters might sometimes balance a focus on winning with 'going Hollywood' for the sake of entertaining paying fans/earning a larger paycheque. This parallels somewhat the historical development of professional wrestling, itself existing today largely as a choreographed spectacle but with roots in genuinely competitive contests (cf. Beekman, 2006).

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