FEMINIST NARRATIVES OF SPORT: A SECOND- AND THIRD-WAVE CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING PROJECT

by

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Abstract

In Canada there are increasing numbers of girls and women playing sport (Ifedi, 2005). In part, these opportunities are the result of earlier feminist efforts in the 1970s and 1980s and yet feminism itself is very rarely a part of the experiences of girls and women once they are involved in sport. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how this might be different and to create feminist politics around women’s high performance sport in Canada. This consciousness-raising qualitative writing project features three narratives written from a first-person perspective based on my experiences playing interuniversity sport. Chapters on methodology, second- and third-wave feminism and Canadian sport history provide a context for the narratives chapter. I urge other athletes to take up feminisms so that they might gain a different perspective to understand their experiences and see greater connections between themselves and other women. This might inspire women to change what they expect from and how they evaluate their experiences in sport in ways that align with feminist ideas. The project concludes with some thoughts on doing a qualitative writing project that might be helpful to other graduate students who are considering doing this type of research.
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This is dedicated to the memory of my good friend and coach, Don Wright.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

It is surprising, in a way, that it took me until graduate school to become a feminist. Surprising in the sense that I already had what I would now call a feminist “track record” in my undergraduate years. After the end of my second year at university, I switched schools because I was so unhappy in the basketball program. I flew the coop, leaving teammates and my coaches aghast. I had always fit into the system and I wasn’t a “high maintenance” or difficult player from my coach’s point of view. I loved basketball, I showed up on time with a smile on my face ready to work hard. But I didn’t like being told that I would be a better basketball player if I would just lose ten pounds. I got tired of jokes told by my head coach that included punch lines like, “this is a dictatorship, and I am the only one with a dick.” I hated the environment of our practices, always cut throat and full of physical punishment. I didn’t like that my head coach would only acknowledge or engage with me if I played well during games. We had curfew, which meant that we were not allowed in a bar or near alcohol two days before a game. And since we played every Wednesday and Saturday evening from October to March this was a significant constraint on our social lives. Overall, my experiences contributed a lot to the case against women playing competitive sport in male structures. It was not a hard
decision to leave. I left the school and basketball behind without much of a second thought. In hindsight, I see my departure as an act of resistance.

But, after a year off of basketball I decided to try out for the Queen’s varsity basketball team. I felt hesitant at first, afraid I was making the same mistakes all over. I couldn’t have been more wrong. I played the next three years in an exceptional sporting environment. Teaching and learning were the cornerstones of the program. We competed hard in practices and games but mistakes were looked at as opportunities. The coaches supported and respected us. Our academics came first before basketball. The experiences weren’t perfect, and much of this thesis examines how I could have gotten more of the situations I found myself in. But the reality is that it could not have worked out better for me.

Yet, when I think about the fact that I almost didn’t play basketball after switching schools because of my disillusionment with the system or when I think of all the women my age I know who dropped out of sport because of similar awful experiences, I can’t help but think that something is wrong in the system. And, among players themselves, no one is talking about it. My thesis represents my attempt to start this conversation so that better frameworks might be developed for women’s sport.

**Feminism and Sport**

This thesis is part of a broader, ongoing discussion about the social value of sport in Canadian society. This project represents a feminist consideration of sport and it draws
on a larger body of work that reflects a thorough exploration of the ways in which sport intersects with masculinity and femininity, race, nationhood, identity, religion, sexuality, and the media.

In this thesis I assume that sport is a site of cultural struggle. This suggests that dominant and marginalized groups struggle for the recognition that their practices, values and ideas are more legitimate than other groups or people (Burstyn, 1999; Kidd, 1996; Theberge, 2000; Pronger, 1992; Hall 1996, 2000; Messner, 2002). It also suggests that sporting practices are not universal or permanent. What sports are popular, who plays them, in what way, and against whom are aspects of sport that are variable and reflect the constant struggle that is sport. Because sport is a site of cultural struggle it is full of meaning. Elaborate social codes about self and society are embodied, expressed and reproduced in sport (Kidd, 1996). It is a place where we might gain a greater understanding of people and our society.

The feminist engagement with sport that I draw on in this thesis is rigorous. Though perhaps late in developing, from roughly 1980 onward, the feminist response to sport has been diverse and comprehensive. My work relies heavily on the studies of feminist sport historians; sociologists and cultural studies scholars such as M.A. Hall, Susan Cahn, Bruce Kidd, Helen Lenskyj, Varda Burstyn, Leslie Heywood, Shari. L. Dworkin, Debra Shogan, Brain Pronger, Michael Messner, Nancy Theberge, and Pirrko Markula. These scholars’ efforts help us understand that sport is rarely “just” about the final score or what happens on the field. They create accounts that consider how power,
privilege, resistance and the struggle for legitimacy surge through our sporting experiences as weekend warriors, spectators, serious athletes, organizers, volunteers and coaches.

A single feminist perspective on sport does not exist. This lack of consensus should not raise concern because feminist politics in general are marked by multiplicities, competing and conflicting perspectives. There are, however, three critical academic approaches I will briefly outline. First, male-defined sports, for some, are the problem. It is not that feminists like Helen Lenskyj and Varda Burstyn oppose a culture of physicality and movement. Far from it, what these feminists oppose is the way that dominant, male-defined sports reinforce and recreate sexist, racist and homophobic attitudes. From their perspective the way that sport celebrates and promotes competitiveness, hierarchy, violence, mindless consumerism and individualism is cause for great concern (Burstyn, 1999; Lenskyj, 1986). A second approach to sport, developed by scholars such as Nancy Theberge (2000), Michael Messner (2002) and M.A Hall (1996), suggests that sports can still “deliver the goods” (self-esteem, physical competency, community and pleasure) in the right circumstances. These scholars acknowledge problematic aspects of dominant, masculine sport structures yet leave room for the possibility that sport could be different. They also recognize the pleasure that many girls and women experience from playing sport. A third feminist approach to sport is articulated by scholars like Leslie Heywood and Shari L. Dworkin who avoid professing male-defined sport as perfect but still believe that more good than not
develops from more girls and women being involved in sport. In their book, *Built to Win* (2003) these authors examine the changing way that female athletes are portrayed in the media and consider the liberatory potential that accompanies images of strong, capable women in the mainstream. What is attractive about Heywood and Dworkin’s (2003) approach is that they reject essentialist readings of men and women, conceptual binaries, and the suggestion that competition is inherently masculine. However, their analysis fails to account for the limitations of a pro-individualistic, pro-competitive sports model or the limitation of the iconic female athlete that is defined and driven by the market.

Throughout this thesis I mix and match aspects of each approach and develop a framework that is appropriate for examining and analyzing my own experiences in sport. I believe that feminism has the possibility to be a transformative tool in sport because it might provide athletes a different lens through which to interpret their experiences. Feminism might provide a way to understand sport which could help female athletes to see new connections between themselves and others and to gain a sense of the importance of a collective struggle against masculinism and oppression. By looking at our experiences in sport differently women might develop a set of new desired outcomes and create structures that help us achieve these goals. Feminism might expand how we think of and do sport.

Unfortunately, many young people, and especially young women, do not identify as feminists and would rather distance themselves from the label (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Yet, many of these women rely on and accept the privileges won
through past feminist struggles (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). At the same time more women and girls are playing sports in Canadian society than in previous eras (Ifedi, 2005) – these opportunities are the result of earlier feminist efforts. My thesis explores whether there is a way to connect female athletes with feminism.

**Terms and Approaches**
The goal of this project is not to critique people so much as it is to critique power structures that frame and reproduce culture. Though oppression happens at a personal level and is perhaps most familiar and recognizable at this level, it would be misleading to suggest that oppression only happens because of the result of other people’s intentions or actions (Adams, 1989). Privilege and subordination are produced in and reproduced by the discourses and structures of our society. By moving our focus away from people towards institutions and discourse it becomes more possible to see how people’s actions and responses are, for the most part, constrained and enabled by societal structures. This does not, however, remove people’s agency or suggest that people’s lives and their choices, emotions or reactions are pre-determined by structure alone. The concept of agency, or a person’s ability to choose and act as an individual, leads us to the idea of power. Many feminists who study sport draw on the work of French poststructuralist Michel Foucault. Foucault’s work appeals to many sport scholars because of his nuanced conception of modern power. In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990) writes of
the omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (p. 93)

Foucault suggests that power is produced at every moment and in every relation. Instead of thinking of power as a top-down, visible, oppressive possession exerted only by those in powerful stations in our society, Foucault encourages us to think of power as a set of invisible and anonymous networks which we all negotiate to produce the realities of our lives (Shogan, 1999). Instead of understanding power as only constraining, he encourages us to see how power might also be productive and enabling (Shogan, 1999).

Debra Shogan’s *The Making of the High Performance Athlete* illuminates the concept of power being both constraining and enabling. She points to the example of a set of rules for a game or sport. Rules prohibit some actions and prescribe other actions and together create what counts as skill in particular situation. People who know how to work within the system of rules are able to demonstrate skills and potentially exert dominance over other athletes who are less familiar with the rules or less able to perform certain skills (Shogan, 1999). People, in this example, exercise power while performing and being subject to discipline and constraint.

Another important aspect of Foucault’s (1990) conception of power is revealed when he writes, “where there is power there is resistance” (p. 95). For Foucault
resistance, change, negotiation and conflict are inevitable facts that accompany power. Part of the reason Foucault’s ideas of power work so well for many sport scholars is because he provides a way of exploring how power and resistance operate simultaneously. His work moves our analysis away from rigid binaries where all people are either completely empowered or completely dominated. His suggestion that power might be both limiting and enabling and that resistance is constant matches the reality of modern life, social practices, norms and institutions like sport.

In the context of this project sport is understood as a male preserve. While historical accounts such as M.A Hall’s *The Girl and the Game* (2002), Lenskyj’s *Out of Bounds* (1986), Bruce Kidd’s *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (1996) and Susan Cahn’s *Coming On Strong* (1994) show us that women have played sports in Canada with varying degrees of intensity and success since the 1800s, their work also reveals how sport has remained a masculinizing project. This is because the presence of women in sport has yet to completely disconnect the cultural assumptions that sports and athleticism are naturally male and masculine (Cahn, 1994). I will discuss this more in Chapters 4 and 5.

A final note for the reader: this project focuses on women in the Canadian university sporting system. The American sport system, which even in Canada is better known, differs significantly from the Canadian system. The U.S. university sport system is more commercialized and professionalized. The experiences of Canadian student-athletes differ significantly from those of their American counterparts. Similarly, the
experiences of athletes differ according to the sports they play. This project explores the experiences of women in team sports. I do not address the experiences of individual sport athletes because the discourses, or systems of ideas that inform meaning and practices, around women’s individual sports differ from than those around team sports.

**The Thesis**

This thesis is based on my own experiences in high performance, team sport. It is written with the intention of bridging the academic and athletic worlds. I use theoretical arguments and perspectives combined with my own first-hand experience in order to create a nuanced account of what it is like to play sports in the Canadian university system.

My research and writing are framed by these three questions:

1) How might a feminist politic change girl’s and women’s experiences in sport?

2) How might feminists rethink their relationship to sport in an era where sport has become an ordinary part of girls and women’s experiences?

3) Does sport have anything unique to offer in support of feminism?

This is a qualitative writing project composed of six chapters. The first four chapters set up the fifth chapter which features my personal narratives. Chapter Two, Methodology, describes the project in detail and discusses why personal narrative writing can be an excellent way to explore the self and society. This chapter includes an analysis of the theoretical assumptions that frame the method and project. Chapter Three, Feminist
Perspectives, provides background on second-wave feminism and the emergence of third-wave feminism and illustrates why combining second- and third-wave feminist perspectives is a formidable way to explore the experiences of young female athletes. Together these two chapters provide the reader with a sense of the academic conversations I am trying to enter. Chapter Four, Sport History provides a historical analysis of the relationship between sport and feminism and shows that the issues women presently face in sports are framed by the struggles of previous eras (Kidd, 1996).

Together the first four chapters of this thesis provide the reader with important background information and context that, in my own experience, is often missing from conversations amongst female athletes about sport, feminism, and “progress”. I want to provide other athletes with this information because I think that it might help facilitate a feminist transformation of sport. Context and background knowledge could help to create the conditions for more informed and productive conversations among female athletes about women in sport. Having this knowledge might contribute to women looking at their experiences in sport differently. Different perspectives might inspire women to change what they expect in sport and how they evaluate their experiences in a way that aligns with feminist ideas.

Chapter Five, Personal Narratives features analysis and writing about three separate events from my own sports career that I now perceive as lost opportunities to become politicized. For most of my sports career I thought I was the only person experiencing a mixture of moments marked by anxiety, marginalization, confusion,
pleasure and empowerment. At the time I experienced the events I write about I did not have the words or conceptual frameworks that would have allowed me to describe my experiences in a way that really resonated with what I was feeling. Now, two years later, after being exposed to second- and third-wave feminist theory and arguments around empowerment and subordination, I now have the words and the ideas to express what silenced and confused me before – the complexities of being a female athlete in a man’s world of sport.

Because I have benefitted from looking at my own experiences in a new way, I want other female athletes to have similar opportunities to gain new understandings of their experiences too. However, this project is not about “converting” female athletes into feminists. It is about providing women with an opportunity to look at their own experiences in a different way. Each narrative, though specific to my career, engages with themes and situations that many women would have faced throughout their careers. In this way, athletes can speak back to me and my story by adding their own stories to mine.

This thesis is the beginning of a conversation with other athletes. I plan to circulate an abridged version of my final work to former teammates and friends – many of whom volunteer and coach girl’s sports in their own communities- so that in this important conversation grows.

The final chapter of the thesis acts as an epilogue. I reflect on the process of writing this thesis and suggest what direction of change that I believe that feminists should move towards.
Implications of the Project

In an era where feminism is rarely seen or talked in the public in a positive way it is important for feminists to demonstrate how and why feminism is still a useful and relevant tool for social change. My thesis provides a platform to articulate how feminisms might benefit women- as a diverse group.

This thesis is about women’s high performance sport. This level of sport is one that many people, particularly other feminists, might not easily relate to. Yet, what connects this thesis to other areas of feminist struggle is that in sport female athletes find themselves negotiating norms and navigating institutions that are male oriented and defined. Lessons learned in sport might be applied to other contexts where women confront similar situations. And while feminism has not served all women to the same extent, it remains critical that as more women take on roles and move into positions once considered ‘male’ that they not be content or satisfied with merely “admittance”. Having a conversation about the diverse range of struggles that accompany being a woman in male-defined structures – be it in sport or any other context – might help ensure that women do not lose sight of this.
Chapter 2

Method

I have chosen to write personal narratives about three different events that happened while I was a member of the Queen’s university basketball team. Each of these written “snapshots” represents a missed opportunity for my teammates and me to engage with feminisms and to develop more complicated ways of looking at the world. By “complicated” I mean that female athletes might expand their perspective of sport to account for things like social structure instead of only thinking about an individual’s choices or work ethic. Female athletes might begin to question ‘commonsense’ narratives around gender, sexuality and sport. They might notice how their experiences are produced through relations that are shaped by broader power structures that influence gender norms and practices. In each narrative I identify the missed opportunity and use second- and third-wave feminist theory to construct alternative ways that my teammates and I might have taken up our experiences.

The first narrative that I write is based on my observation, as a basketball player, of the university dance teams that often perform at inter-university women’s and men’s basketball games. The dance team is sort of a modern version of the cheerleading squad and is loosely formed in the image of the professional dance packs that perform at professional men’s sporting events. This is a story of homophobia and the “feminine apologetic” (Felshin, 1974). I explore what happens when different femininities mingle
side-by-side on the basketball court, a cultural space that has, historically, been seen as masculine.

The second narrative is based on my own Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs “Battle of the Sexes” scenario\(^1\). At the conclusion of my fourth year season, the men’s varsity volleyball team challenged my team to a game of basketball to see who was better at the sport. Through this narrative I explore the difficulty of resisting limiting gender narratives from within male-defined sport.

The third narrative centers on daily team practices and highlights one particular practice in which my teammates and I were asked to “get physical”. I explore the hesitations and fear that accompanied our aggressive play. This story indicates that feminism still has important work to do around female physicality and the body.

**The Writing Process**

The method of this project is a bit unorthodox for a master’s project. Instead of interviewing other athletes or examining a set of cultural artifacts I turned my attention inwards. I took a set of experiences from my basketball career and asked what we might learn from each situation and in what way each situation might have been different. To answer these questions I read feminist theory, sport history and feminist sport theory and developed a framework informed by my renderings of these scholarly fields to analyze my experiences. Through thinking, writing and rewriting interpretations of my

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\(^1\) See Spencer (2000) for discussion of the King-Riggs match up.
experiences I developed arguments about what I thought my situations revealed. In chapter 6, The Epilogue, I reflect on the writing process and what it was like to do this type of project. These reflections might be useful for other master’s students who are embarking on research and wondering what it is like to undertake this sort of work.

**What Is and What Might Be**

An important aspect of my method is highlighting the gap between what “is” and what “might be”. Part of creating social change is being able to understand the current context and also creating a sense of possibility. While some scholars have explored the experience of American interuniversity female athletes through methods such as interviews and surveys (Blinde, Taub & Han, 1993; McClung & Blinde, 2002) there are few accounts consider Canadian women’s interuniversity sport (see Dutot, 2000; Harrigan, 2003). My narratives capture and contextualize the experience of a female varsity team athlete in Canada from a first-person perspective. My work fills a gap in the literature: there are no accounts that focus on Canadian interuniversity female athletes experiences as told from a first-person perspective using a combination of a second- and third-wave feminist lens.

An autobiographical account offers us a chance to gain a deeper understanding of the sporting experience (Tsang, 2000; Dension, 2006; Collins 2005; Collins & Hockey, 2001). This is because personal narratives have the potential to reveal information that might not surface through other ethnographic methods (Ellis, 2004). I write of the
complexity that accompanies being a woman have in sport. This required an on-going and constant engagement with my own experiences to figure out what they revealed and how scholarly work might fit with or explain them. It took many months for me develop an understanding of my experiences and even longer to develop a writing style reflected the complexity of the situations I confronted. I doubt that interviews or focus groups composed of female team athletes would reveal the same depth or reflexivity that is present in the narrative chapter of this thesis. Ultimately, I hope that my work will contribute to a fuller and more complicated account of women’s sports in Canada.

In considering what “might be” we imagine a future where changes desired by many female athletes have taken place. By envisioning change we may begin developing strategies to help us move towards our goal. It is through this process of trying to think of ideal sporting conditions that I have come to recognize the importance of a connection and dialogue between female athletes and critical sport scholars. Critical sports scholars have created work that should not be - but often is - ignored by female athletes and policy makers (Hall, 2005). Hall (2005) notes that feminist sports scholars face two related crises: the noticeable absence of “sport” within feminist academic literature and ever-increasing gap between those who “do” critical scholarship and sport practitioners and policymakers. She urges feminist sports scholars to find better ways to contribute to feminist scholarship and to discover ways to influence sports practitioners and policy makers or risk becoming irrelevant (Hall, 2005). I believe that this thesis responds to Hall’s concerns and offers a form that might both contribute to feminist and sport circles.
To feminists this work offers a nuanced and complicated reading of sport that links sport to broader gender politics. My thesis offers athletes an opportunity to gain a different perspective of sport and connect to feminist critical sport literature.

I hope that the narratives I have written are “consciousness-raising” for female athletes. Consciousness-raising, a strategy that dominated feminist circles in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, facilitates people seeing their lives in new ways. Chapter Three will explore this concept, but for now it will suffice to say that consciousness-raising allows women to notice connections between the personal and the political and thus promotes the understanding that power is in the small, everyday occurrence. An athlete with a “raised-consciousness” might become more reflective and critical of her sporting experiences instead of just accepting sport as immutable. Narratives, like the ones I present here, could potentially help athletes gain a feminist consciousness because they create the context of a conversation. Arthur Frank, a leading scholar on the social construction of the body and illness explains the value of this kind of conversation. In Frank’s (1992) words,

I want what I have written to be touched as one touches letters, folding and refolding them, responding to them. I hope ill persons will speak back to what I have written. Talking back is how we find our experiences in a story someone else has written. (p. 4)

Narratives offer female athletes the opportunity to speak back to the author and find their experiences, both of which are critical to advocating a political position. My narratives
might help female athletes find their own voices and become politicized which might make this group more receptive to the work developed by critical sport theorists. A dialogue could ensue that would create a wealth of knowledge to move towards creating better sporting practices for women in Canada. The narratives allow us to imagine a dynamic conversation between scholars, athletes and activists.

The remaining pages of this chapter will focus on personal narratives as a method. The discussion will touch on what “is” a sociological personal narrative and the characteristics of the method that make it a useful way to explore social phenomenon. There will also be a brief summary of the criticisms that are often levied against this method and a discussion of how these criticisms help us understand what distinguishes “good” personal narratives from “bad” ones. But before moving directly to discussing personal narratives, it is important to consider the conditions of possibility that enabled this method to emerge as a popular method to write about the self and society.

**Conditions of Possibility**

Personal narratives emerged as a popular way for scholars to write about the self and the social in response to the shift towards postmodernism and to the “crisis of representation” articulated by feminist and other scholars in the 1980s (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997). The shift towards postmodernism in the academy developed in the latter decades of the twentieth century as it became clear that the idea of a singular fixed “truth” or “subjectivity” could not account for the messiness of lived experiences that often involve multiple realities and subject positions.
The idea of a singular truth or a unified subjectivity left little room to account for how different aspects of people’s lives – e.g. race, class, gender – shaped their experience. Nor was there room to acknowledge that truth itself is largely influenced by a person’s position (Reed-Danahay, 1997). For example, a white, heterosexual basketball player would most likely locate and perceive the “truth” of a particular situation differently than her teammate who is a black lesbian. The awareness that multiple truths exist simultaneously provided scholars with impetus to move away from cultural discourses and narratives that speak of “the truth” as if it were a coherent and singular category perceived by everyone, everywhere in the same way. Similarly, in acknowledging that subjectivity is complex and multiple postmodernism provided scholars with a framework through which to explore hybrid identities, competing desires and contradictions that exist in people.

The “crisis of representation” more specifically applied postmodern concerns about the impossibility of singular categories of truth and subjectivity to the process of research, suggesting that neither of these narrowly defined categories could apply to the researched or to the researcher (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997). The crisis of representation led feminist scholars to refute the claims of objectivity that ground much social science research. They did this by showing the gendered, raced and classed nature of the knowledge produced through social science discourse. In doing so, feminist researchers illustrated that there was no “objective” view from which to observe or record the social world (Mykhalovskiy, 1996). Instead,
feminists argued that every view and perspective should be thought of as being informed by a number of assumptions and that each perspective is shaped by a person’s position and experiences in the world. This insight created more space for methods that relied on “subjective” measures and content, like personal narratives.

Personal narratives respond to the issues raised by feminists in the “crisis of representation” in a number of ways. First, personal narratives remove the presumption of an objective, unbiased perspective because authors acknowledge their own position and perspective in their writing. This allows scholars to locate themselves in the debate instead of writing in an authoritative, detached, objective voice. This disrupts traditional academic discourses that are premised around the authority and autonomy of the masculine academic voice (Mykhalovskiy, 1996). Instead of a detached, objective, all-knowing voice that purports to speak the truth of others, personal narratives and other forms of auto-biographical research offer a voice that has an agenda, a perspective, and a way of knowing that is opposed to “the” truth.

Second, in a sociological personal narrative the author’s voice is limited; the goal of this type of writing is not to make universal claims that apply to all people everywhere in every circumstance. Instead, the goal is to explore limited experiences and truths. For example, the goal of my research are not to declare “the truth” about women’s basketball in Canada, university women’s basketball in Ontario, or even of any of my teammates. Instead, my goal is informed by the knowledge that there are multiple “truths” in every situation, and it has developed around exploring truths from a particular location.
Overview of the Genre

Sociological personal narratives are a method associated with the category of autoethnography. There is, however, a certain amount of ambiguity that exists around this latter term. As noted by several authors (Ellis, 2004; Mykhalovskiy, 1996) there are many terms used in conjunction with or as a substitute for autoethnography that essentially all describe and mean the same thing. These include terms such as personal narrative, first-person accounts, auto-observation, socioautobiography, personal writing, and ethnographic short stories, among others. All these terms broadly encompass research, writing, and final products of a process that aims to connect the autobiographical and the personal to the cultural, social and political (Ellis, 2004). In this way personal narratives connect to the sociological tradition articulated by C. Wright Mills who advocated for social analysts to examine social problems in terms of both biography and history. Mills (2000) wrote that “neither the life of an individual or the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (p. 3).

Personal narratives explore the public through the personal. Authors recall personal experiences, develop a sense of emotion, recreate dialogue and develop ‘the scene’ in order to promote self reflectivity and insight. The major assumption within this genre is that writing about the personal or private will also provide insight and clarity to public and social spheres. The idea that we may learn from the way our private lives intersect with our public lives stems from the idea that our private lives have aspects that
are common to many people. In this way, by studying the individual we gain a sense of how our societies work. Western Feminisms, in particular, has a long tradition of taking up personal experiences and stories as sources of knowledge and the basis of theory and action (Markula, 2005). Indeed, the consciousness-raising practices from feminism’s second-wave were firmly rooted in creating links between personal problems and exploring how private troubles related to social issues (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988).

In the following section I will provide a more in-depth look at how personal narratives work and some of the theoretical assumptions that inform the way I write my narratives.

Stories at Work
The goal of each narrative is not to create a perfect historical account but is rather to convey the importance of each event to the reader. Ellis (1997) explains, “It’s not just facts that I wanted to redeem but rather articulate the significance and meaning of my experiences” (p. 129). In this thesis I am writing about events that happened two or three years ago. At the time when I was experiencing these events I never imagined myself writing a thesis on feminism and my basketball career so I did not think to record my feelings at the time I was experiencing them. This means that I do not remember exact conversations or dialogue. I can, however, recall the strong emotions and general slants of conversations. For authors such as Ellis (2004) this is not the best situation, but nor is
it the worst. Ideally if one knows one is going to write a personal narrative it would be helpful to draw on notes or a journal kept during the time of the experience. Unfortunately, this is not possible for me so I am left to recall past events and conversations. This, however, is not so different from what researchers might potentially require someone to do in an interview or other type retrospective recall activity. The point to keep in mind when you are reading the narratives is that these are not narratives based on absolute truth or on strict historical accuracy. They were crafted instead to represent the emotions and memories of my past experiences which are created from my current position.

In my narratives I am not simply retelling the events that transpired. Instead of emphasizing “what was” I add “horizontal” elements to the stories that require me to probe at my own “psychic defences” and reveal the “emotional complexities” in each situation (Ellis, 1997, p. 129). This means that sometimes I write in an unflattering way about myself. I speak of my own homophobia and silence, of pettiness and meanness. I am not writing a self-confessional tale to help me cope or experience therapeutic gain. By exposing myself and being vulnerable I hope to create an account that helps us to reflect on the conditions of women’s basketball. From my perspective, it is silence that surrounds and permeates women’s sports that most obstruct people from making changes to its structures. This is because it is difficult to confront or change that which goes unsaid. My work represents an opportunity to try to confront and name some of these
practices that happen in many elite women’s sport settings in the hope that in naming these things it will become possible to talk about them and move towards change.

However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the practices that contribute to the “conditions of silence” in women’s sport have not already been named and explored in the academy. It is more that athletes are, for the most part, disconnected from the academic work that names, identifies and explores the problematic aspects of sport for women. The goal of my thesis is to create a form that bridges the academic world and the sport world so that important work and arguments created by feminist sport sociologists are articulated to female athletes so that these athletes might name and confront practices that produce the “conditions of silence” in their own lives.

Personal narratives require readers to participate in the story. Readers are invited to compare, fill in, and consider what they would do if they were faced with a similar situation (Ellis, 2004). In this way a single personal narrative can resonate and create connections amongst a person’s many different stories and experiences. Instead of creating seamless, linear narratives that leave little room for the reader to think, reflect and question, I have tried here to construct narratives that potentially embrace the complexities of each situation (Ellis 1997, 2004). The benefit of leaving space around the stories is to allow other women in sport to think about their stories in comparison to mine. Returning to Arthur Frank’s (1992) work again, it becomes possible to think of personal narratives as the start of a conversation and the premise of a dialogue. Elite
female athletes need to address the sexism, racism and homophobia of their sport experiences otherwise these oppressive aspects will go unchallenged and unchanged.

Assumptions
There are some theoretical assumptions that guide the way in which I write my personal narratives that require “unpacking”. Because I subscribe to a postmodern paradigm an important theoretical consideration within my writing is the way that the “self” and subjectivity are positioned in each story. A second theoretical consideration pertains to the way that the category of “experience” is positioned in the narratives. The section that follows briefly describes how I have dealt with these theoretical considerations in my thesis.

Often in autobiographical genres there is an assumption that an individual is able to sit down and write about her experiences and that she is capable of self-knowledge and self-awareness (Gannon, 2006). This assumption is in conflict with postmodernist theories which teach us that knowledge, and especially self knowledge, is always partial and situated. In the words of Haraway (1988),

The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original, it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly...The search for a “full” and total position is the search for the fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history[...]. (p. 587)
Haraway (1988) calls for feminist epistemology to be based on “situated knowledges” wherein positions informed by partial knowledges and limited voice contribute to the conversation and guide our analysis. This idea of limited vision and voice informs the way I write my narratives.

Another tension in my project relates to the “I” of my stories. One goal of my project is to explore the ways in which the “I” comes to exist. Or in other words, how do we understand ourselves. This means exploring the discourses that influence self identity and knowledge. Yet, another goal of my project is to comment on how there is no “I” or essential self that corresponds to outdated humanist notions of the self. I am trying to avoid creating an “I” that suggests that the self is singular in nature, authentic and coherent (de Freitas & Paton, 2009). Replacing coherence, authenticity and singularity is a subject who is full of multiplicity and contradiction, whose shape is contingent on local conditions (de Freitas & Paton, 2009). Though this subject is perhaps more difficult to grapple with because it means that there is no consistent, enduring “self”, this subject allows for the nuance and complexity that I wish to create in my narratives. But this is difficult and potentially impossible to do. De Freitas and Paton (2009) ask:

Is there any way of writing the “fragmented self”? That is, can we represent a conflicted identity, a self with multiple affiliations, a self that is transient, a self whose shape is contingent on the given contexts in which it emerges, without, in the same pen stroke, confirming or consolidating some kind of wholeness or unity
associated with that self or identity, and thereby undermine our attempt to depict or portray the fragmentation? (p. 487)

My desire to engage with a “fragmented” subjectivity stems from my desire to create personal narratives that resonate with the complexity and messiness of female athletes’ lives. From my perspective, it would be unhelpful to create seamless narratives that fail to explore the difficulty of negotiating competing desires or contradicting identities because these conditions do not match my lived experience as an athlete. Since my goal is to write narratives that might create feminist consciousness amongst female athletes it would be counterproductive to write narratives that do not match the types of contradictory and complex experiences that female athletes have in sport.

The second theoretical concept that informs the way in which I write my narrative is the category of “experience”. I try to avoid creating a modernist tale of certain events that happened in my life because this would position my experiences as “fixed” and run athwart to my commitment to creating a postmodern account. Poststructuralism, a branch of postmodernism teaches us that meanings are never fixed or whole because it is through language and discourses, which are constantly in flux, that meaning is created. This means that the stories I create about my past are filtered and constructed by the discourses that I am currently bound by.

An important aspect of negotiating experience is considering how we come to have and understand our experiences. Feminists have often turned to experience as starting point of knowledge and this has been a successful strategy because making sense
of experience helps one understand how power structures influence and shape our lives (Weedon, 1997). But, it is critical to avoid thinking of “experience” itself as transparent or an unmediated truth (Weedon, 1997). Chris Weedon (1997) prompts us to problematize the category and see how even “experience” is constructed. Our interpretations of experience depend on where we are located and how we are constrained by larger discourses. In the narratives of chapter 5 I seek to understand how my position as a white, middle-class heterosexual woman who grew up in Canada during the 1980s and early 1990s constructs the framework from which I interpret my experiences and account for the ways that competing subjectivities are constructed.

Criticism of Personal Narratives

Personal narrative, like any method, is not without critics (Walford, 2004; Delamont, 2007). In the following section I will discuss some of the criticisms of the method and outline why, despite these criticisms, personal narratives still represent a valid and important mode of knowing the world. But first some thoughts on epistemology.

Different disciplines develop different theories of knowledge and ways of knowing. For many years the academic landscape has been dominated by positivist, scientific ways of knowing. Positivism has been so influential and pervasive that there is a tendency within the academy to evaluate all academic work against its standards whether these standards governed the creation of the work. The consequence of one
discipline imposing its judgment criteria on another is serious. Sparkes (2001) discusses how such practices effect our understanding of health,
such attempts would be, at best, misguided and, at worst, arrogant and nonsensical, a form of intellectual imperialism that builds failure in from the start so that the legitimacy of other research forms is systematically denied. This would leave the research community in a no-win situation in which researchers offer blind allegiance to their own particular paradigmatic position or tradition and refuse to acknowledge the contribution that other ways of knowing can make to our understanding of health issues. (p. 549)

Sparkes reminds us of the power that is imbued in knowledge and its legitimacy. Disciplines sanctioned as the legitimate way “to know” and understand the world achieve power and prestige, as well as the material security that accompanies this designation through potential grants and funding (Sparkes, 2001). Unfortunately, the way that power and knowledge are linked often leads to a situation where it is more favourable for a discipline to discredit and dismiss knowledge developed through different methods and ways of knowing than it is to acknowledge the contributions they might make. In part, the value of personal narratives is that they help to expose the mechanisms of power that surround the constructed nature of knowledge in society.

Sparkes’ (2001) ideas on the imperial nature of certain academic practices lead us to consider the problematic way that some academics universally reject personal narratives. From my perspective, it seems that dismissing an entire genre or method is
more related to the struggle for power and legitimacy within the academy than actually evaluating or rigorously engaging with the method. Mykhalovskiy (1996) argues that the universal rejection of methods like personal narratives reveals the desire for some academics to preserve “rationality, objectivity and subject/object as well as other dualisms, all often subsumed in the notion of an autonomous masculine subject or voice” (p. 135). Personal narratives and other methods that draw on the researcher as the research subject threaten to undermine academic traditions that are premised on binary understandings of the world, especially the distinction between the scientist and the object of study. Personal narratives call into question “objectivity” and demonstrate that rational, objective voices are not the only voices that can articulate and contribute to truth.

Academics that reject personal narratives often rely on the criticism that personal narratives are narcissistic or self-involved and that the work created through these types of methods contribute little to the academic community (Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Holt, 2003; Sparkes, 2000). A number of authors have created “writing stories” in response to the difficulties they have encountered in attempting to publish autoethnographic work (see: Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Sparkes, 2000; Holt, 2003). Many of these writing stories feature comments of anonymous reviewers who suggest that personal writing fails to contribute to the academic community and has little impact on anyone other than the author. Ellis and Bochner (1996) respond to these criticisms by suggesting that this view

2 Richardson (2000) coined the term and it reflects a piece of writing that written specifically about the process of publishing a scholarly article or book.
ignores the fluid way that the self and culture inform and shape each other. They ask, “If culture circulates through all of us, how can autoethnography be free of a connection to the world beyond the self” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 24)? In this way, examining the self does not preclude the possibility of learning about the social.

Other scholars develop Ellis and Bochner’s point by examining the ideological assumptions that enable certain work to be considered self-absorbed or narcissistic. For example, Mykhalovskiy (1996) defends the method against accusations of self-indulgence and other related charges by arguing the label of narcissism only applies to this type of work because of the deep sense that “proper” academic work only discusses, engages with and is about others. Mykhalovskiy points to the irony of this by arguing that academic conventions premised around writing about the “other” obstruct the reality that when you write of the “other” you necessarily write of the “self”. Trihn T. Minh-ha helps us understand this point when she discusses the legacy of anthropology: “Anthropology is mainly a conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them’ of white men with white men about the primitive-nature man” (quoted in Alcoff, 1991, p. 6). When white men wrote about “primitive” cultures they also tacitly constructed knowledge about their own cultures. So-called superior white, civilized western cultures were constructed and articulated through referencing their binary opposites. Native, primitive, “backwards” cultures only have context and meaning in the presence of their opposite. Yet, within these traditional academic discourses premised on exclusively studying the “other” there is no acknowledgement of the way that these practices dually construct both the self and the
other; and nor is there recognition that when you speak of the other you necessarily speak
of the self. Mykhalovskiy’s (1996) arguments highlight that labelling personal narratives
as self-indulgent or self-absorbed is more ironic than perceptive.

Though it is imperative to create arguments that refute critics of autobiographical
methods as self-absorbed, it is also critical to acknowledge that not all sociological
personal narratives are created equally nor are they all equally valuable sociologically. In
acknowledging this point, it becomes possible to move the discussion around personal
narratives away from a general defence of the genre to more productive avenues that
allow us to discuss issues of quality and contribution or how we might differentiate good
sociological personal narratives from bad.

It is difficult in some senses to evaluate personal narratives; traditional measures
of validity, reliability and objectivity do not readily apply to the genre (Ellis, 2004;
Richardson, 2000). Despite this, some scholars such as Laurel Richardson (2000) have
tried to develop alternative criteria to measure this type of academic writing.
Richardson’s (2000) helpful five-point list includes evaluating: a work’s substantive
contribution; its aesthetic merit; the author’s reflexivity; the work’s impactfulness; and
how well the work expresses a reality. Briefly, I would like to discuss three of these
points. The two points left out of this discussion, how well the work expresses a reality
and its impactfulness, are excluded because, from my perspective, personal narratives
only make a substantive contribution if these two aspects are evident.
For Richardson (2000), a piece of writing has a substantive contribution when it increases our understanding of social life. Above and beyond this baseline, Richardson (2000) suggests that to assess this characteristic readers should consider whether the “author demonstrates a deeply grounded (if embedded) social-scientific perspective” (p. 15). The impetus for grounding work in social-scientific perspectives is that the personal will be necessarily linked to the cultural. Personal narrative writing becomes good sociological work when it links the biographical to the historical and social. Once again, we are confronted with ideas articulated by C. Wright Mills (2000) who wrote “no social study that does not come back to problem of biography, of history, and of their intersections within society has completed its intellectual journey” (p. 6).

A second and related criterion of evaluation suggested by Richardson (2000) is that the narrative should demonstrate self-reflexivity on the part of the author. To ascertain the reflexivity of the author, Richardson (2000) suggests that readers and critics asks themselves if they believe that the author: is aware of the epistemological constraints of postmodernism; expresses how he or she came to write the project and reflects on the process of researching; and, displays adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the readers to make judgments about the point of view. In part, an author’s reflexivity develops from his or her ability to reflect on how his or her own shifting and multiple identities influence the stories that the author tells (Sparkes, 2002). From my perspective, sociological personal narratives might only be considered a substantive contribution
when the author demonstrates self-reflexivity and negotiates the messiness of research and experience

Writing, or the aesthetic quality of the work, is the final category of Richardson’s (2000) suggested evaluation criteria that strongly resonates with my project. For her, quality writing refers to the work’s ability to convey a complex, artistically shaped account while opening up the possibility of new interpretations of the text (Richardson, 2000). Returning to Hall’s (2005) previously mentioned “crises” faced by feminist sport scholars influenced how I wrote this project. I tried to create a form that would be accessible and interesting for athletes. I avoided an overly academic aesthetic and employed a causal, conversational tone in my writing. I include my opinion and try to demonstrate that negotiating sport and feminism is often confusing and full of contradiction. Instead of suggesting I know all the answers I share my opinion and note how being exposed to certain academic arguments and having particular life experiences led me to a particular position.

Conclusion
This method, while not necessarily one that C. Wright Mills would have used himself, resonates with his desire for sociologists to connect personal and social troubles and illustrate how personal biography intersects with history. Personal narratives offer a way to explore how individuals and culture connect and inform each other. The method emerged as part of the general shift towards postmodernism and the “crisis of
representation” that seriously challenged the existence of “objective” knowledge and methods in the social sciences. Personal narratives address these debates by removing the presumption of an authoritative, objective voice from sociological writing and by recognizing how a person’s position influences his or her perceptions of truth.

In terms of my project, sociological personal narratives offer a means for exploring the ways in which one female athlete has come to understand her experiences and herself. In this way, the “truths” of personal narratives such as I present here, and the sociological analysis through which I try to make sense of them, might contribute to a greater understanding of elite female athletes in male dominated, elite sporting structures. The strength of personal narratives lies in the ability of the author to explore his or her own messy, complicated life experiences. Instead of suppressing or concealing complications, effective personal narratives add layers of complexity and nuance that provide a more complete and realistic picture of life (Richardson, 2000). Though the method focuses on the experiences of one person, it would be misleading to think of the method as cutting off connections to the social. Indeed, any thorough and nuanced examination of an individual would examine the way that the social influences and shapes the person.

This method is particularly well suited to examining the experiences of female Canadian university team sport athletes because it leaves room for contradictions, competing desires, and multiple subjectivities. In this way, unlike social scientific writings that are constructed to present seamless narratives, the text can better represent
the life it is based on. Instead of portraying my own experiences in sport as all good or all bad, my narratives acknowledge that there are many problematic aspects of women’s participation in elite, masculine sports, but also many positive and rewarding moments.
Chapter 3

Third-Wave Feminism

At my thesis proposal defense it became clear that I was unsure how to conceptualize feminism within my project. In writing prior to my proposal defense I positioned feminism as a tool that could help empower women and transform the way individual women looked at their own lives and relationships. Though not completely “wrong”, the vagueness of my definition led to what one advisor suggested was “nostalgia for a moment in feminism that had past”. It was true. To remedy this, one of my advisors suggested that I contextualize the particular feminist moment that we are now experiencing in the Canadian context.

The present moment features complex and contradictory discourses around feminism. The rhetoric and politics of anti-feminist backlash and post-feminist discourses dominate the Canadian landscape. Many young women today make an effort to distance themselves from the feminist movement and the feminist label while relying on and taking for granted the rights and privileges won in the last decades of the twentieth century by second-wave feminists (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Other young women have accepted feminism but distance themselves from their predecessors by identifying with what they call the third wave of feminism. It’s this version of feminism which has been the primary influence on this thesis.
While anti- and post-feminist discourses seem dominant, the present moment is also characterized by the strong presence of liberal feminism in every day commonsense discourse. “Liberal feminism”, or the idea that men and women should have equal opportunities, is what comes to mind for most people when they think of the concept of “feminism”. Conflating all feminisms with liberal feminism - which seeks change from within the system- in the North American context obscures the range of approaches and perspectives that feminists adopt. Feminism includes a diverse array of social justice lobbies, anti-racist and anti-colonialist activists, peace activists, queer communities and disabilities rights activists, second-third- and even fourth-wave activists who take on projects ranging from reproductive rights, environmentalism and immigration policy to transgender rights.

For this project I adopt a third-wave feminist perspective. Though these ideas will be expanded and complicated later in this chapter, I would like to briefly introduce the concept of third-wave feminism here. Third-wave feminism “officially” began in the early 1990s but the roots of the movement extend back to feminists of colour who wrote during the 1980s (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Generally, third-wave perspectives and activisms are associated with work of young women (Henry, 2004; Heywood & Drake 1997; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Ideologically speaking, third-wave feminism embraces contradictions and ambiguity and blends feminist thought with other streams of contemporary critical scholarship like queer theory and critical race theory (Henry, 2004; Siegel, 1997). Gender is not thought of as a “lone” category in the third-wave but is
instead examined for how it intersects with other aspects of identity like class, race and sexuality. Third-wave contributors are often highly conscious of and appear to be responding to historical conditions that they confront (Henry, 2000; Heywood & Drake, 1997; Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). These three defining characteristics – generational age, ideology, and sense of historical moment – inform and shape third wave theory and practice. Instead of organizing around large scale social justice movements as second-wave feminists did, third-wave politics are not united by an overarching platform and there is no single, definitive third-wave feminist goal (Snyder, 2008; Henry 2004). Third-wave politics are instead dominated by textual and cultural productions and advocate feminist activism at a local level (Henry, 2004).

My decision to adopt a third-wave perspective developed when it became clear that this perspective could accommodate my competing commitments to sport and feminism. As previously mentioned, third-wave perspectives embrace competing and hybrid identities that perhaps might not have been possible in past generations of feminism. I also chose this perspective because I felt drawn to the work showcased in anthologies like Dicker and Piepmeier’s Catching a Wave and Heywood and Drake’s Third Wave Agenda which I became familiar with through a graduate feminist theory class. Authors in both collections made feminism seem daring and exciting. Their writing felt accessible and interesting, it made me want to learn more about feminism.

The third wave has led a contentious existence and in the discussion that follows I describe: what the third-wave “is”; in what ways is it similar and dissimilar to the second-
wave; why this perspective might help us explore the experiences female athletes; and some of the limitations of third-wave politics. But first, I begin with a brief summary of the first and second waves of feminism and note how transitions from the first and second wave drastically differ from the one between the second and third waves.

**A Brief Summary of the First- and Second-Waves of Feminism**

The history of the North American women’s movement is often described as a series of waves. Though the usefulness of the wave metaphor has been debated within the academy (see Gillis, Howie & Munford, 2004; Siegel, 1997), I think it can be helpful in discerning different phases of feminism. To understand the context of third-wave feminism we need to understand what constitutes second-wave feminism, which in turn requires us to touch on the boundaries of the first wave (Bailey, 1997). The following section is intended to create a map of the first and second waves. A more detailed discussion of the influence of second-wave feminism on third-wave feminism will follow later in this chapter.

In Canada, the first wave of feminism emerged around 1870. Though suffrage received top billing, first wave activists organized around a variety of social issues including pregnancy rights, education and economic independence (Adamson, Briskin & Mc Phail, 1988). It took feminists until 1922 in English Canada to obtain provincial and federal franchise. Women in Quebec were not granted the vote in provincial elections until 1940. For many feminists the period immediately following suffrage signaled the end of the first wave (Bailey, 1997). However, it would be misleading to think that
feminism itself ceased to exist in Canada after 1922. Many of the national and provincial women’s organizations that developed during the first wave, such as the National Council of Women, the Coloured Women’s Club of Montreal, and the Canadian Federation of University Women, continued their work in communities across the nation (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988). Yet, it would not be until the early 1960s that women across Canada would organize and mobilize at both the grassroots and institutional levels with the same intensity or numbers that had been seen prior to suffrage.

The resurgence of feminism during the 1960s is generally referred to as “the second wave”. The rise of second-wave feminism should be thought of as a response to the ideological and material conditions of the 1950s. In the aftermath of World War Two Canadian society retracted to a rigid, traditional gendered model that contrasted with the upheaval and turmoil that had marked the war years (Kidd, 1996). During the war many women had joined the war effort and crossed traditional sex/gender binaries by working outside the home, replacing men who were away at war (Kidd, 1996; Burstyn, 1999). Poor and working class women have always been a part of the workforce, but the inclusion of white, middle-class women in the public workforce during World War Two contributed to perceptions that gender roles were in flux.

When stricter gender norms came back in the 1950s, they were juxtaposed with evidence of progressive change. More women worked outside the home and there were greater opportunities for women to gain university and post-secondary degrees during the late 1950s and early 1960s (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988). While the jobs
available to women during this time were limited, and sexist attitudes prevailed in the workplace (Burstyn, 1999), increasing opportunities in the public sphere contributed to shifting material and ideological conditions in women’s lives. These shifts were necessary for the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s.

The rise of the second wave can also be attributed to the strong presence of Canada’s own anti-war, student power, counterculture and Quebec nationalist movements that developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Griffin Cohen, 1993). Many women came to feminism through activism in parallel social justice struggles. For example, some women arrived at feminism through their dissatisfaction with mainstream political groups. Women involved with New Left student unions on university campuses across the country gravitated towards feminism when it became apparent that their voices were not taken as seriously as the men’s voices in their organizations (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988). Other women found feminism as an outgrowth of their previous work with Native, Métis and Inuit peoples (Griffin Cohen, 1993; Adamson, Briskin & Mc Phail, 1988). During the early 1960s there was a growing consciousness that women needed to develop separate organizations in order to have their voices heard and their political needs met.

When the third wave was announced by Rebecca Walker in a Ms. magazine article in 1992, it was not apparent that the second wave had ended (Bailey, 1997). In her article, “Becoming the Third Wave” Walker proclaimed, “I am not a post feminist, I am the third wave” (Walker, 2006 p. 39). Walker’s declaration came in response to the
immediate crisis of the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings in the United States and to the more enduring predicament of the North American media constantly asserting that society had entered into a post-feminist era (Heywood, 2006).³ Walker’s announcement clarified that her politics were not that of her predecessors’ the second wave or her post-feminist peers. And while the success of the second-wave feminist movement was certainly not in question when Walker made her statement, it would also have been clear that the goals of second-wave feminism had yet to be fully reached (Griffin Cohen, 1993; Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988). There was still second wave work to be done at the time of Walker’s declaration.

An Overview of Third-Wave Feminism
In the more than fifteen years since its inception the third wave has led a contentious existence. The very idea that the third wave exists is contested by some within the academy and many second-wave feminists outside the academy (Bailey, 1997; Gillis, Howie & Munford, 2004). In part, questions around the existence of the third wave might be attributed to hesitations of third-wave feminists to say “we” or articulate a single representation of feminism. Siegal (1997) explains that the third wave develops from writing and insights provided by feminists who were marginalized and excluded from the “we” of second-wave. Post-colonial, anti-racist, postmodern and poststructural

³ On October 11, 1991 Professor Anita Hill testified against the then Supreme Court Justice Nominee, Clarence Thomas. Hill testified that Thomas, her former boss, sexually harassed her. Despite her testimonies, Thomas was elected to the Supreme Court. Henry (2004) likens the Hill-Thomas hearings to a ‘wake-up call’ that inspired many feminists who read about, organize around and think about feminisms.
philosophies inform and create third-wave politics that are aware of violence that is wrought by a collective “we” and master narratives (Siegal, 1997). Siegal (1997) suggests that this is one of the greatest challenges that third-wave feminists confront; recognizing the importance of saying “we” and advocating for “women” while at the same time promoting the knowledge that there is no single feminist subject or set of “women’s” experiences.

From roughly 1991 to 1995, the central question of third-wave feminism was whether it was synonymous with post feminism (Heywood, 2006). Though third wave discussions during this time also included dialogue around how to balance politics and theory, the importance of anti-racist ideology, how to incorporate pleasure with feminist practices, the conversation was dominated by the relationship between the third wave and post feminism (Siegel, 1997; Henry, 2004). The confusion around these two terms developed because it was not clear what differentiated them. This stemmed from the emerging popularity of a new type of “feminist” writing created by authors in the United States such as Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfeld and (the post Beauty Myth work) Naomi Wolf. These writers portrayed themselves as “anti-feminist feminists” (Bean, 2007). They were explicitly critical of second-wave feminism and advocated their position in a variety powerful and far-reaching contexts including opinion-editorials in the New York Times, books, films, women’s and men’s magazines and other media outlets (Bean, 2007). Roiphe, Denfeld and Wolf and others in their company cleverly co-opted feminist
language and rhetoric to create arguments that criticized the women’s movement for portraying and limiting women’s identities to victimhood.

Ambiguity that surrounded the third wave also developed because it was unclear if the third wave was just another form of “anti-feminist” feminism. Like the “anti-feminist feminists”, third-wave feminists defined themselves and their work in opposition to their second-wave predecessors (Bailey, 1997). This distancing or “dis-identification” with second-wave feminism is seen in early third-wave work. Such work conveys the idea that second-wave feminists were a bunch of strident, prudish, boring, unattractive women who didn’t have much fun. It was difficult to tell if the goals of third-wave feminism were that different from the goals of feminists like Rene Denefeld, Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf.


During this period a more prominent set of third-wave goals emerged. For example, in the introduction to *Third Wave Agenda* (1997) Heywood and Drake wrote

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4 Term coined by Henry (2004)
that they desired “developing modes of thinking that can come to term with the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity, and the creation of coalitions based on these understandings” (p. 3). In the introduction of Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real* she wrote,

“I hope that in embracing contradiction and ambiguity, *in using* and much than we use *either/or* theses voice can help us continue to shape a political force more concerned with mandating and cultivating freedom than with policing morality” (p. xxxv).

Elsewhere, Baumgardner and Richards (2000) penned,

“[m]anifesta is an attempt to open people’s eyes to the power of everyday feminism right in front of our noses. We must see its reality if we are to corral that energy into attacking the inequalities that still exist” (p. 49).

Comparing these three sets of authors offers us a glimpse of the diverse goals and desires encompassed in a third-wave agenda. From 1995 to 2000 third-wave feminists focused on developing politics that embraced contradiction and ambiguity; worked in coalitions across difference and moved towards a social justice for all. Yet, this basic sketch has to be held in tension with the fact that third wave epistemology prioritizes difference and diversity. This diminishes the need for a concrete set of goals because third-wave feminists believe that a woman’s location influences what her priorities and goals are. Difference emerged as the centerpiece of third-wave feminism during this period but problematically sometimes at the risk of obscuring commonalities and solidarity amongst third wavers (Siegel, 1997).
This half-decade was marked by the increase of “cultural work” by third wavers. This “work” reflected an enduring fascination and engagement with popular culture, music, television, print, the internet and popular icons. Popular magazines like *Bitch* and *BUST* emerged and represented the playful and invigorating nature of the third-wave. Third-wave cultural work contrasts with earlier second-wave feminist work. Instead of second wave work that displayed rigorous theoretical arguments and engagement with capital “P” politics, third-wave contributors often engage in small “p” politics by examining lifestyles, popular culture, fashion, art, music, trends around sexuality, and alternative forms of media (Snyder, 2008; Gillis, Howie & Munford 2004). Some third-wave contributors have explored how popular modes of femininity are positioned in society and have reclaimed “tabooed” symbols of womanhood, such as “girl power”, in order to move the discourse beyond “we’ve been duped” to account for the ways in which femininity might be empowering and about more than second-class status (Heywood, 2008; Gillis, Howie & Munford, 2004). Though some third-wave contributors write about Barbie dolls, lipstick, high heels, and “girl power”, the third wave is not limited to this narrow scope; just as the second wave was not all “brass tacks” (Jervis, 2004). Other third wave contributors write about their careers, their experiences of being bi-racial, surviving rape, having an abortion, keeping a baby, balancing religion with feminism and living with an HIV positive status.

Third wave cultural work is not confined to just writing or literature. There is a vibrant third-wave music scene that includes punk bands, hip hop artists and electro-indie
artists such as Riot Grrrls, le Tigre, Me’Shell Ndege’ocello, and Jenocide. Through their music these musicians address ideas around sexism, consumerism, Islamaphobia, racism, religion, domestic abuse and the daily struggle of life. The internet and blogosphere, youtube, twitter, myspace, and facebook are media that help create a virtual third-wave feminist community.

Since 2000 the third wave contributors have demonstrated a more rigorous approach. For example in the introduction of their book Dicker and Piepmeier’s (2003) wrote,

* Catching a Wave continues the discussion begun in [earlier third-wave] books. Unlike texts like *Listen Up* and *To Be Real*, *Catching a Wave* offers essay that use personal experience as a bridge to larger political and theoretical explorations of third wave. (p. 13)

The push for a greater exploration of transformative political and theoretical perspectives brings a new level of sophistication to the analyses presented in third wave literature. Instead of asking questions about “what” and “who” comprises the third-wave, the focus has shifted towards political imagining: “in what ways can the third wave contribute to future feminism” (Gillis, Howie & Munford, 2004, p. 5).

The preceding brief overview suggests a general sense of what the third wave is. In the next sections I outline how the legacy of second-wave feminism and the political climate of the 1980s and how these contributed to the emergence of the third wave.
Characteristics of Second-Wave Feminism

Feminism is included amongst the most successful social movements in Canadian history (Griffin Cohen, 1993; Adamson, Briskin & Mc Phail, 1988). Second-wave feminism named violence against women, identified discrimination, and exposed systematic heterosexism and racism that plagues North American society. Women’s groups created pressure that eventually led to legislative changes that secured: greater reproductive rights for women; protection against sexual harassment in the workplace; and the guarantee of equal treatment in society (Adamson, Briskin & Mc Phail, 1988). In addition to changes in legislation, feminism helped create more room and space for women within Canadian culture. Services and organizations were created by women for women. Shelters for battered women and rape crisis centers were opened; feminists celebrated women’s art, music and literature; the first women’s bookstore was opened in Vancouver in July of 1973 (Adamson, Briskin & Mc Phail, 1988). Sport was one of the last causes taken up by the feminist movement (Lenskyj, 1986). The marginalized status of sport in the early part of the second wave reflected the belief that other areas of struggles, such as reproductive rights or equal wages, were more important. However, with the increasing awareness that sport was an arena where gender and power were reproduced it increasingly became a feminist issue (Hall, 2002).

In part the success of second-wave feminism can be attributed to the success of the movement to adopt the philosophy “the personal is political” (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). This mantra provided a way for women to grapple with their own oppression. In framing seemingly personal issues as political issues women were able to gain new
perspectives on their lives and to look at disparate things such as relationships, family life, housework, orgasms in a political way. Consequently, many personal concerns came to be understood as the manifestation of power relations beyond the individual (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). This changed the way women could think about social change.

Second wavers used consciousness-raising groups to highlight the way that the personal was political. In small, leaderless groups, women would meet on a regular basis to discuss their lives and to gain new perspectives on their experiences. The goals of consciousness-raising were to politicize women and to bring awareness of the structures that framed women’s oppression. A critical point to remember about consciousness-raising is that it was meant to be the starting point for further political action (Adams, 1989). Consciousness-raising helped motivate and sustain political action carried out by women throughout the second wave (Adamson, Briskin & Mc Phail, 1988). The method was so useful because it resonated with women and provided participants with a sense of agency and power. Consciousness-raising made it clear that change was not just “out there” but could also be located in their homes, relationships and the mundane aspects of everyday life.

Yet some aspects of consciousness-raising were problematic. During the 1960s white, middle-class, heterosexual, leftist women’s experience dominated feminism and consciousness-raising (Griffin Cohen, 1993; Adamson, Briskin & Mc Phail, 1988). In *From Black Power to Hip Hop Power*, Patricia Hill Collins explains that the limitations of consciousness-raising lay less in the technique itself, but in other factors around the
method. In her words, “Consciousness-raising groups had difficulty transcending the limitations of homogeneity of their member's personal experience because they also lacked access to groups that differed from themselves” (p. 167). Hill-Collins’ words illustrate that the damage created through consciousness-raising was not necessarily intentional or malicious; nevertheless marginalization and exclusions resulted.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, second-wave feminists of colour brought awareness of the tendency within feminism to conflate and universalize the category of “woman” to reflect white, middle class, heterosexual women’s experiences. Feminists such as bell hooks, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Maxine Hong Kingston wrote about their experiences of being silenced and erased through feminist discourses that only had room for white, middle-class women’s experiences. These authors articulated powerful arguments around the second wave’s assumptions, homophobia and racism and its inattention to other forms of oppression (Henry, 2004). For example in Ain’t I a Woman (1981) bell hooks calls attention to the tendency of white feminist authors to make constant analogies between “blacks” and “women” in their writing. She writes about the damaging effects of this analogy and she articulates how this analogy erases black women by implying that all black people are men and all women are white (hooks, 1981). The work of feminists of colour challenged white women within the feminist movement to consider how power and privilege operated within the category of “woman” itself.
In response to the growing awareness of the importance of recognizing difference across the category of women, identity politics came to dominate feminist theory and practice. Identity-based politics highlighted assumptions and ignorance around race, class, sexuality and other axes of power (Griffin Cohen, 1993; Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988). Identity politics adeptly provided feminists with a way to recognize difference across the category of woman. Though the limitations of identity politics are too broad to engage with at this juncture, it is important to note how the rise of identity politics influenced consciousness-raising during the 1970s and 1980s.

The shift towards identity politics facilitated the fragmentation of feminism as women of colour, lesbians, working class women, and women in other specific identity groups developed their own political structures. One of the consequences of this fragmentation translated into an implicit shift in the everyday politics of the feminist movement. Adams (1989) explains,

Oppression has become a yardstick of our value to feminism and some women feel like they never measure up. Privileged women worry that their white skin or middle-class upbringings mean they aren't oppressed enough; they can go to great lengths to prove otherwise. (p. 30)

The consequences of this on consciousness-raising are obvious. Instead of trying to dismantle oppression, women focused erroneously on trying to prove their oppression as if to authenticate themselves and their place in the feminist movement (Adams, 1989). Adams’s (1989) insights resonate with this project because one of my aims is to explore
privileged women’s experiences. Throughout the process of writing this thesis I often wondered if my brushes with oppression were great enough to write about. I feared offending or silencing other women positioned differently than me. Adams’s (1989) observations helpfully refocus the debate on dismantling oppression instead of proving it.

The above summary provides a brief overview of aspects of the second wave that have been important to my analysis. I will now look at the relationship between the second wave and post feminism.

**Second Wave and Post Feminism**

Second-wave feminism fundamentally changed society by making women more equal to men and by instilling a sense of entitlement in women (Fidlen, 1995). This sense of entitlement meant that women began to recognize sexism and demand their right to equality and fairness in all areas of life. Ultimately, part of the legacy of second wave feminism is this sense of entitlement that defines how women born after the 1970s live their lives.

At the time Walker wrote her *Ms.* article, it would have been difficult for many women to imagine living in a time before feminism – as it remains for women today. While not all women have benefitted from feminism equally, it is also true that many feminist ideas are now woven into mainstream discourses. Even if these ideas are not recognized in all women’s lives for reasons of class and racial inequality (Baumgardner & Richards 2000). According to Baumgardner and Richards (2000), many young women
today believe that “feminist problems” have all been solved and that the movement is outdated. It can be confusing and difficult for young women to negotiate the present context because in many ways gender oppression has shifted forms and in some situations is less blatant than in the past. An example of this tension is evident in the experiences of women who play elite masculine sports. Drawing from my own experiences, I always thought that my participation in elite university sports acted as proof that feminist struggles had been successfully completed. Women’s teams competed in the same facilities as the men’s teams, had identical schedules, and received equal funding; what more could women want? Within my middle-class surroundings it was easy to see women like myself doing well in school and pursuing jobs in business, law, medicine and the academy. Feminism seemed out of line with what I saw around me.

Post feminism is the label that has been given to this idea that society has progressed to a point where feminism is no longer relevant or necessary in the lives of women (Siegel, 1997). Rhetoric around post feminism often reflects a strong anti-feminist bias. Third-wave anthologies such as To Be Real and Listen Up include essays by young women writing about their “discovery” that gender inequality still exists. These essays appear to confirm the idea that post-feminism has a stronghold in the present. The large focus on “discovering that inequality and oppression still exist” reveals that part of third wave “work” is convincing young women today that there is still work to be done despite the impressive and important feminist changes that have occurred in North American society.
It should not be surprising that the success of second-wave feminism is accompanied by anti- and post-feminist currents. This is because feminism fundamentally strikes at the institutions that hold the most power and privilege in our society (Griffin Cohen, 1988). Some feminists like Marjorie Griffin Cohen (1993) and Karen Dubinsky (1985) believe the strong anti- and post-feminism that developed during the 1980s might be seen as a testament to the success of second-wave feminism.

**The Relationship of Feminism and the New Right in the 1980s**

The cultural and political rise of the new right throughout North America in the 1980s contributed to circulation of anti- and post- feminist discourses. Internationally influential conservative leaders were elected to office in Britain and the United States: Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Regan and George H.W. Bush. In Canada the people elected Brian Mulroney to office for two consecutive terms during the 1980s. These leaders and their supporters ushered in a new era of politics and ideology. Quite simply, the rise of the right threatened the survival of feminist organizations, infrastructure and the gains that feminists had struggled to obtain over a twenty year period.

While the Canadian climate of the 1980s was distinct from that of the United States, many Canadian feminists looked to American scholars and their analyses of the rise of the right in the United States to understand the phenomenon in our own country. One such writer was Karen Dubinsky. In her work, “*Lament for Patriarchy Lost*”? Anti-feminism, Abortion, and R.E.A.L. Women in Canada” (1985), she drew on the work of
American feminists to contextualize and understand the increasing trend towards economic and cultural conservativism in Canada.

In her nuanced account Dubinsky traced the way in which the right successfully combined conservative impulses by linking social, economic and sexual conservatism into a coherent, unified message that called for the return to the traditional family (Dubinsky, 1985). The right suggested that all of society’s ills could be traced back to the disintegration of the traditional family. A strong Judeo-Christian undercurrent provided “the glue” for the new right. This religious angle contributed to an almost euphoric celebration of the traditional patriarchal family while simultaneously mobilizing an ideological assault against abortion, birth control, homosexuality and alternative arrangements to the traditional patriarchal family, the very same institutions that feminists had taken on in the previous decades (Dubinsky, 1985). In this way, feminism itself became a threat to the goals of the new right.

The right attempted to discredit and villainize feminists by repositioning the meanings and values attached to feminism. In the media the new right highlighted the most radical activists and the alternative-lifestyle practices that some feminists had adopted during the 1960s and 1970s. Feminists were portrayed as angry, hairy, man-hating, lesbians (Sowards & Renegar, 2004). These enduring images and ideas continue to deter many young women from engaging with feminism today (Sowards & Renegar, 2004).
Within Canada, the emergence of the organization Realistic, Equal, Active for Life (R.E.A.L) Women during the 1980s exemplified the presence and potential of the new right and anti-feminism backlash within our own borders. R.E.A.L. Women were against abortion, contraception, the concept of equal pay for equal work, affirmative action strategies, sex education for minors, prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, promiscuity, no fault divorce and universal child care (Dubinsky, 1985). On one level the presence of R.E.A.L. Women in Canada illuminated the success of feminism in so much as it can be seen as a reactionary response (Dubinsky, 1985). But on a different level, the emergence of R.E.A.L. Women revealed feminism’s failures. Feminism did not equally affect or positively change the conditions of all women’s lives to the same extent. Dubinsky (1985) points out that feminism “freed” many women to enter low paying work and contributed to higher divorce rates which resulted in more women raising their children on their own. Dubinsky also notes the limitations of sexual liberation in a broader culture that had yet to renounce patriarchy. She concluded her report by cautioning feminists from dismissing women on the right as “duped” women. The traditional family and other conventional practices offered some women more economic and material security than alternatives developed from feminism. This is part explains why some women gravitated to the right despite the gains of feminism in Canadian society.
The Third Wave Emerges

The 1990s, however, brought a renewed sense of possibilities for many young feminists. Galvanized by the Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas Senate hearings in 1991, a new era of feminism emerged in America (Henry, 2004). Henry (2004) writes that in Hill-Thomas hearings were a “wake-up call” for U.S. women that prompted many back many into feminist activism (p. 16). Many women were inspired to organize and rally for action at both a grassroots and institutional level. Within this broader cultural response third-wave feminism emerged. For Deborah L. Siegel (1997) third-wave feminism might be considered, “a response to what one might call the cultural dominance of post feminism” (p. 52) that circulated throughout North American society thanks to the practices and ideology of the new right that emerged during the 1980s.

From my own research and reading it is clear that third-wave feminism in many senses is an American phenomenon that has slowly penetrated into some Canadian feminist circles. This limits how I discuss third-wave feminism in this chapter. Though the cultural similarities between the United States and Canada allow one to draw parallels, the complexity of the intersections of gender, race, class, and other systems of privilege and power are different in each country. Despite this, what follows is my attempt to describe some of the limitations of the third wave and why the literature created by third-wave feminists provides a useful perspective to adopt for my own work which is placed firmly in the Canadian context.

Third-wave feminism is usually positioned as a young woman’s feminism. Though there is general consensus among many on this fact, some grey area remains. For
example, designating third-wave feminism as a youth movement becomes more difficult when one asks, “how young is young?” Or tries to account for “young” women who grow up (Orr, 1997). Heywood and Drake (1997) define the third wave by potentially including any woman born from 1963-1974. For a number of reasons this definition does not work. It is rigid and excludes many women, such as myself, who were born outside of these dates, but who have contributed to the third wave or adopted third wave perspectives. Later third-wave work has moved away from rigid chronological boundaries. This can be seen in the work of Baumgardner and Richards (2000) who benefit from writing three years after Heywood and Drake. They suggest that the third wave should be conceptualized as a feminism developed by women who grew up “in the wake of feminism” and who have always experienced “a sense of entitlement” and perceived themselves to be “relatively equal” with their male peers (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Baumgardner and Richard’s (2000) definition of third-wave feminism is more helpful than earlier definitions because it conveys the idea of a cultural moment rather than a simple set of dates.

One author who believes that the third wave has a lot to offer is Claire Snyder. In her article, “Third Wave Feminism: A New Directions Essay” (2008), she argues that third-wave feminism offers tactical strategies that might overcome the impasses that “hobbled” feminist theory and practice in the 1980s. In the following sections I draw on Snyder and other authors to discuss some of the major concepts of third wave feminism. I
hope to show why the philosophical shifts of the third wave create an excellent feminist frame within which to position my own work.

The category of “woman”

As previously noted, during the 1980s feminists of colour brought attention to the way in which the category of woman was conflated and universalized to represent the experiences of white, middle class, straight women at the expense of women whose experiences differed. The landmark anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Colour* (1983) edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga illustrated how the general category of “woman” could actually undercut the goals of feminism by silencing and marginalizing certain groups of women.

Feminists of colour challenged the way “woman” was universalized and how differences amongst women were conflated. This led to the dismantling of the category. Feminists of colour shattered the idea that there was one universal subjugated female by demonstrating how different aspects of women’s lives such as race, economic status, religion, level of education, ethnicity and sexuality created a diverse spectrum and range of “women’s experiences”. Because much of the second wave’s theory, activism and politics were based on the idea of a universally subjugated female, the decision to abandon the category of “woman” brought feminism to a crisis of sorts. In 1990 Judith Butler asked, what is feminism without the “woman” as its subject? How might women
advocate and rally around the idea of the subjugated woman’s experience if they do not believe in the idea of a universal subjugated female experience?

The third wave does not resolve issues around the category of woman confronted in the 1980s and early 1990s, but it does offer a way around the impasse (Snyder, 2008). More precisely, the third wave moves away from the idea that there needs to be a united, single women’s platform. This means that groups of differently located women may set their own agendas and retain their autonomy from an overarching feminist platform. This opens up space for third-wave feminists to pursue a diverse agenda relating to issues such as social and political justice, the environment and immigration policy and to collaborate with other special interest groups outside of “the women’s movement” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). This is a key departure from second-wave feminist strategies. Though second-wave feminists advocated coalitions during the 1980s, the coalitions most second wavers envisioned were still coalitions within the feminist movement and still favoured women’s issues. The third-wave expanded the vision of coalitions to include social justice groups outside of the feminist movement with interests beyond narrowly defined “women’s issues”.

**Intersectionality**

Another concept embraced by third-wave feminists aligns with the broader changes and intellectual shifts that have occurred in the academy over the past fifty years. Snyder (2008) explains that coinciding with the collapse of the category of woman was the shift
away from grand narratives towards postmodernity. Instead of relying on concrete, universalized categories and deterministic narratives postmodernism privileges local conditions and acknowledges the way in which life, identity and experience can often be confusing and full of contradiction and hybridity. In their book, *Catching a Wave*, Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) suggest that the conditions of postmodernity shape and influence the third wave. In their words,

third wave feminism’s political activism on behalf of women’s rights is shaped by- and responds to- a world of global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism and environmental degradation. (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003, p. 10)

Many authors in the third wave explore the ways in which global trends such as the AIDS epidemic, the internet, mass consumerism, capitalism and other conditions of the postmodern world affect and influence people’s lives at a local level. A third-wave approach allows us to consider how different axes of power and oppression may operate simultaneously. For example, gender, race, class, sexuality and ethnicity are categories that constitute all of us. However, different aspects of our identity may be more important in certain situations and less important in others. Propelled by the work of feminists of colour during the 1980s as they worked to dismantle the universal category of “woman,” this shift towards embracing the complexity and messiness of the postmodern world aligns and compliments shifts within the academy.
Consequently, within a third-wave approach a woman could still consider herself a feminist, but prioritize her racial or class oppression above her gendered oppression (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). This is evident in Rebecca Walker’s collection, To Be Real (1995) where authors explore their relationship to feminism and how they have balanced feminism with other important aspects of their identities. Third wavers write about: loving hip hop music despite the genre’s propensity for misogyny; balancing being a young bride and mother with a feminist identity; and negotiating the world of corporate law. It is interesting to note that while I have come across third-wave feminists writing about the contradictions of identifying as a feminist while still enjoying hip hop, about playing up their girlie-ness, wearing makeup, wanting to have a white wedding, about taking up a pro-life stance and practising religion, I have not yet come across first person accounts of how female athletes balance their third-wave feminist identity with the hierarchy, dominance and elitism that rule competitive high level sports. This, despite the outstanding number of third wave authors who consistently make reference to the room within third wave feminism for athlete/feminist identities to co-exist in an individual (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Fidlen, 1995; Heywood & Drake, 1997; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003). My project represents the opportunity to explore some aspects of the athlete/feminist experience.

Judgment Free and Inclusive Practice and Politics
The third wave strives to create an inclusive environment where diversity and differences are respected. This commitment is seen in the third wave’s philosophy that moves the
discourse beyond the category of “woman” and recognizes how an individual’s position in life influences both her identity and experience. It would appear as if the third wave does create a welcoming environment for many individuals with diverse experiences and needs as demonstrated by the mission statement of The Third Wave Foundation, an organization founded by Rebecca Walker and Amy Baumgardner. This organization is dedicated to working to support young women and transgender youth ages 15 to 30. The foundation provides leadership opportunities and philanthropic advocacy for groups and individuals working towards gender, racial, economic, and social justice (www.thirdwavefoundation.org). Their mission statement reads, “Third Wave envisions a world in which young women and transgender youth have the skills, power, and opportunity to engage in and lead efforts for social justice” (www.thirdwavefoundation.org).

Though third-wave feminism might create more inclusive politics than previous eras of feminism within Western contexts, critics have noted that third-wave work often fails to make connections to women’s movements outside of the West. For example, Sherin Saasallah’s essay, “Muslim Feminism in the Third Wave: A Reflective Inquiry” (2004) suggests that a Western-centric third-wave feminism ignores and obscures the existence of feminisms outside of the West. As proof she points to the ignorance among many young western feminists about the strong Arab feminist movement in the Middle East. The failure of the third wave to engage with the work of authors who do feminism in “other cultures”, or to engage deeply with the implications of diversity and difference...
in a postcolonial world potentially marginalizes women outside of the West. Despite the rhetoric of diversity within the third wave, Denise deCaires Narain (2004) warns "difference" in the third wave is in danger "of being completely articulated in terms of consumable chic, metropolitan hybridity rather than an engagement with "other" contexts and representations" (p. 242).

The rhetoric of accepting difference and diversity that dominates the third wave can be traced back to the roots of the movement and its dis-identification with second-wave feminism. For example, in her introduction in To Be Real, Rebecca Walker likens her experiences in feminism to being in a "feminist ghetto" because she always felt constrained and constantly judged as if she was not "feminist enough" (Walker, 1995). In her words,

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. (1995, p. xxxiii).

A large part of "remodeling" feminism in the third-wave included changing the perception of constraint and judgment within feminism. The third wave accomplished this by allowing more hybridity and contradictions to exist within individuals and within groups of feminists than previous feminisms had. This means that athletes, Christians, supermodels, actresses, girllie girls, stay-at-home moms, career women and many others
women whose identities might have excluded them in previous generations can be accepted as feminists by other feminists. Baumgardner and Richards’ (2000) explain,

You’re sexy, a wallflower, you shop at Calvin Klein, you are a stay at home mom, a big Hollywood producer, a beautiful bride all in white, an ex-wife raising three kids, or you shave, pluck and wax. In reality, feminism wants you to be whoever you are- but with a political consciousness. (p. 56)

Though I am drawn to the idea that third wave feminism creates space for people to be who they want to be, I am not convinced that “be whoever you want to be, but with a political consciousness” is enough.

If third wave feminism is going to become a political tool for those seeking gender and social justice, it needs to account for the way that individual actions, or “being who you really are”, accumulate and influence wider social trends – and how such actions are produced by the broader culture. Can women pursue their own agendas and still forward a collective agenda? Do one’s actions have to align with one’s political beliefs? Is it asking too much? I do not think so. If third-wave feminism is going to be a political tool for gender and more broadly, social justice, it must involve more than labelling and identifying ourselves as third wavers. We need to examine and explore the social and political commitments that should be attached to the label third wave. From my perspective, this does not reduce the space for individuals to be who they want to be, or to explore hybridity and contradictions within themselves. But it does hold individuals
to a higher standard than is currently demanded. The third wave needs more thoughtful theorizing on how to balance the personal with the political.

Part of the reason why third-wave feminists advocate a judgment-free philosophy stems from the fact that this feminism developed from a specific branch of feminism that was explicitly “pro-sex”/ “anti-censorship” during the infamous anti-censorship debates of the 1980s (Snyder, 2008; Henry, 2004). In Canada the term “anti-censorship” was preferred by feminists because of their desire to show that these debates arose in reaction to the actions taken by the State and not just infighting amongst feminists (Burstyn, 1985). Anti-censorship/pro-sex feminists objected to: the passing of municipal by-laws restricting the display of pornography; the censoring of art and particular “progressive” artists; the epic trials of doctors Henry Mongentaler, Leslie Smoling and Robert Scott for having performed abortions; injunctions forbidding sex workers from working in West Vancouver - effectively forcing these workers into the skid row areas of the city; the mass arrests of gay men in Montreal bars and bath houses; and the government of Alberta’s attempt to eliminate sex education (Burstyn, 1985).

The two characteristics that made the anti-censorship debates of the 1980s stand apart from similar watershed moments in Canadian feminist history was the central nature of pornography and the expansion of “key” players in the debates (Burstyn, 1985). Burstyn (1985) explains that within the North American context, battles around sexual issues have historically involved social conservatives and supporters of fundamentalist religions who confront and struggle against feminists. Feminists, for the most part, have
supported sexual health education, abortion, contraception and people’s right to their own sexual preference (Burstyn, 1985; Vance, 1984). However, during the anti-censorship period of the 1980s feminists were not united around these issues. Feminists divided onto both sides and women on either side believed the fate of women’s emancipation and liberation depended on their side winning.

Problematically, third-wave feminism approaches anti-censorship by simply side stepping the ideological battles, by being demonstrably on the pro-sex/anti-censorship side of the debate without necessarily engaging with the arguments presented by the other side. Snyder (2008) cautions,

while third-wavers claim the mantle of being pro-sex, however, the central issue at the heart of the sex wars- how to create gender equality when women enjoy female objectification (pornography), claim the right to make money servicing male sexual needs (prostitution), and eroticize relationships of inequality (sadomasochism) – has never been resolved; it seems to have simply dropped from sight. (p. 189)

In order to avoid renewing the divisive debates of the 1970s and 1980s, third-wave feminists have opted instead to avoid contentious issues. This contributes to the tendency for third-wave feminists not to theorize effectively the relationship between personal politics and actions. Consequently the discussion that does happen within the third wave around sexuality seems to always boil down to questions around choice and agency (Snyder, 2008). The problem with this narrative is that the idea of “choice” itself is not
deconstructed. Instead of acknowledging the way in which culture, dominant and marginalized discourses can influence and frame “choice”, the debate morphs into a discussion about individual empowerment (Snyder, 2008).

A recent article in BUST illustrates the tension between agency and structure, or personal empowerment versus collective empowerment, that continually surfaces in third wave writing. The article, “The Vagina Dialogues” (2009), explores the emerging popularity of vaginal reconstruction (labiaplasty), a medical procedure in which a woman’s labia are trimmed and the vaginal muscles tightened in order to achieve a more aesthetically pleasing and tighter vagina. Gohmann (2009) explores the way in which vaginal reconstruction is positioned as empowering and therefore feminist by the medical professionals who perform the surgeries. Women who undergo this surgery report feeling more sexy and confident and having better sex post surgery (Gohmann, 2009). For some third wavers (and potential patients) this is all the evidence they need to label vaginal reconstruction as “feminist” and a good thing. However, Gohmann (2009) asks if the surgery can be truly empowering. According to the article, one of the major motivations for women to get the surgery is their belief that it will please their male partners whose ideas of what is an attractive vagina are more than likely based on the unrealistic, airbrushed images of women in pornography. Can this surgery be empowering for women if the reason why women want to have their vaginas tightened is to make sex more pleasurable for their male partners?
The example of vaginal reconstruction raises many issues. What are the limits of individual empowerment? How should individual empowerment be defined? Is it just about a woman feeling strong and good about herself? Is every action that provides pleasure and positive feelings feminist? How do you account for actions that empower a woman at the expense of another woman?

What troubles me is that within most of the third-wave work that I have read, it appears that it is only curious second wavers who are asking these tough questions of the third wave. Few third wavers appear to be weighing in on how to balance personal empowerment and collective empowerment or how to create a connection between the individual and the collective within their work. These questions are central to my thesis. Questions of the individual and the collective are especially pertinent in discussions of women who play competitive sports and expect some form of liberation or emancipation from the experience. Playing in a competitive environment where winning is the goal means that playing time is limited and some athletes must sacrifice their opportunities to play to better players on their own teams in order to win. Is it possible for individual empowerment and group empowerment to coexist in this environment? Extending the idea of the collective, is it possible to balance the empowerment of athletes with the larger collective of women who might not play sports? These are the sorts of questions with which third-wave feminists must engage.

Ultimately, feminism must become a lever to change both personal lives and social structure, and it therefore requires that individuals engage critically with both
elements. Currently, a large amount of the third-wave material focuses on the individual, and with good reason. Yet, although second-wave feminism taught us that “the personal is the political”, third wavers have taken this mantra potentially to its limit. One of the criticisms that continually surfaces around the third-wave is that the focus is too much on the individual and that third wave work fails to create a critique of dominant discourse (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Part of my project will be rearticulating the importance of linking personal to the public by weaving a critique of individualistic dominant discourse into my personal narratives.

**Consciousness-Raising in the Third Wave:**

As I mentioned earlier, consciousness-raising is a strategy that came to prominence in the second wave and proved to be a critical aspect in politicizing many women during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Today, second-wave consciousness-raising has been reworked and adapted so that it is relevant and applicable to women who face a different social world than their second-wave predecessors. Instead of face-to-face, intimate gatherings that characterized consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s, third wavers use public forums, classrooms and popular culture such as blogs, zines, books and music to convey personal stories and create connection amongst women (Sowers & Renegar, 2004). Although consciousness-raising is different than it was in the past and these processes are not explicitly labelled “consciousness-raising”, the fundamental way that they work in the lives of women remains the same. Personal stories continue to help women make
connections between their lives and wider social relations. The shift from more private discussions to public venues, however, does change some aspects of consciousness-raising. Sowards and Renegar (2004) explain

when individuals read third wave anthologies or consume popular culture, consciousness raising is produced via internal dialogue rather than small group interaction. For example, reading essays is a process of conversing with the writers of those texts, but the writers cannot actively respond to the reader’s questions and idea. Instead, readers must engage in their own self-dialogue and self-persuasion that may lead to building one’s self-esteem, recognizing gender inequalities, or developing a critical perspective. (p. 547)

The mechanisms for consciousness-raising have evolved because of the success, in particular the institutional success, of second-wave feminism. Many third-wave feminists find feminism within women’s studies classes in higher learning environments (Sowards & Renegar, 2004). Though this reveals the problematic elitist aspect of third-wave feminism, it also is a testament to the success of second-wave feminism to integrate into the academy.

The second wave created cultural space for third wavers to extend consciousness-raising beyond discussions groups. This is not to suggest that women from past eras have been limited only to small discussion groups. Books, plays, art, icons, role models, education and jobs outside the home have all helped women at different points in past decades understand their lives in different ways and see similarities between themselves
and other women. However, third wavers operate in a climate where there is more cultural space within which to operate. Hence, third wavers experience “moments of identification and private reflection” in a public forum that would not have been possible in the past (Sowards & Renegar, 2004).

The general shift from consciousness-raising in private, small groups to more public venues such as the classroom or the internet has many benefits. For example, anthologies such as *Listen Up* and *To Be Real* feature the stories of women from all walks of life. Potentially, readers are more exposed to a greater diversity of experiences and perspectives then they might be in a small consciousness-raising group (Sowers & Renegar, 2004). This point suggests that third-wave consciousness-raising can overcome certain shortcomings of insulation and homogeneity within small groups that limited the method during the second wave. There is more diverse cultural space for feminist engagement in classrooms or public spaces and there is perhaps a better chance of developing a greater range of ideas and perspectives.

Yet, I would be remiss if I did not point out that something is also lost with the shift from private, small group setting to larger public forms of consciousness-raising. A small group offers things that a large group cannot. Trust, security and a sense of connection, are amongst the qualities that are sometimes sacrificed with the move to bigger, more public venues. As a “new” feminist I have often shied away from speaking out in larger, public venues, afraid that I might “get it wrong” or offend someone.
The personal narratives that I offer in Chapter 5 reflect one way consciousness-raising happens in the third wave. I am creating an account of my experiences in sport. In theory, other young, university female athletes might read the narratives I write and engage in self-dialogue, reflecting on their own differing experiences in sport. My stories will highlight some of the shared aspects of experience in sport, a perspective that could inspire female athletes to ask different questions and start demanding more from their sporting experiences. My story, when considered alone, is limited because I only provide one perspective on a series of events and that perspective is informed by a white, middle class lens. The strength of consciousness-raising in the third wave is its appeal to diversity and range, which means that my version of the story needs the company of other athlete’s accounts told from different perspectives. However, herein lies the problem. Many female athletes do not appear to identify themselves as feminists, consequently these women are not creating feminist narratives around their experiences in sport. The narratives that I write seek to provoke and inspire other female athletes. By grounding my narratives in my own problematic experiences in sport I recount and revise situations that many female athletes might recognize and relate to. This process may provide an entrance into an engagement with feminism for a group of women who are generally disinterested or hostile to feminism, as they understand it.

Conclusion
In this chapter I have attempt to define what “is” the third wave, how third-wave politics influence its practices and noted some the limitations of a third-wave perspective. I have
also highlighted how the legacy of the second wave influenced the present context and also noted important second wave concepts that are relevant to my project—such as the slogan the personal is political and political strategy of consciousness-raising. This chapter is a significant piece of the overall project because it provides the lens by which I evaluate my experiences in chapter 5. In the next chapter I look historically at the relationship between feminism and women’s sport. This chapter provides the context for my own sporting experience and also for the stories I tell of it.
Chapter 4

Canadian Women’s Sport History

This chapter analyzes the history of women’s sport in Canada. A historical view of the relationship between women and sport is an important piece of my overall project because this perspective allows us to see how the conditions that women presently face in sport are framed by the outcomes of previous struggles (Kidd, 1996). This chapter also frames the analysis and narrative writing featured in chapter 5 because it explores feminist ideas that have surrounded sport in the past few decades. This chapter provides a sense of “context” that deepens how we might think of women in sport.

The history of sport has often been a male story; of men and their experiences (Vertinsky, 1994). During the 1970s this began to change thanks to the emerging feminist movement and, increasingly, the legitimacy of the field within the academy (Vertinsky, 1994). In the early 1980s American feminist sports historians Roberta J. Park and Nancy Struna were among the first to call for women’s sport history to move beyond a “compensatory” mapping of women’s sport history to engage more deeply with ideas and analysis of identity and conflict (Vertinsky, 1994). By the end of the 1980s their request had been enthusiastically met by Canadian scholars such as Nancy Theberge, M.A. Hall, Patricia Vertinsky and Helen Lenskyj, as well as by American scholars Susan Birrell and Susan Greendofer, German scholar Gertrud Pfister, and Norwegian scholars Gerd Von Der Lippe and Kari Fasting.
The history of women’s sport in Canada is complicated. In part, this is because we know that all Canadian women do not share a single history (Hall, 2002; Vertinsky, 1994). Geography, language, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and other categories of difference mean that there has not been a singular way that “women” have experienced sport. Adding to this is the fact that there are huge gaps in the historical sport records; accounts of aboriginal women, working class women, women of colour and women with disabilities are largely excluded from newspapers, documents and records that historians use as primary sources (Hall, 2002). Though this lack might be explained as the absence of opportunity for these women to play and compete, these gaps more likely reflect how marginalized groups of women have often been less documented and/or asked to share their experiences (Hall, 2002; Vertinsky, 1994).

By framing the story of women in sport as a story of multiplicity, one may think about how competing discourses affect women in different class and racial spheres to experience sport in different ways. Sport is a place where many women from all positions have eked out spaces to play and compete. Sport is a place where dominant groups constantly battle for supremacy and legitimacy, but where “othered” groups have contended for similar recognition.

My analysis here proceeds through revisiting important shifts in federal sport policy, feminist academic arguments, and watershed moments credited with shifting gender relations in sport, from 1960 onward. The chapter is segmented by decade and in each section I place broad cultural trends and policy changes in relationship with shifting
practices in women’s intercollegiate sport. Though this chapter draws on a variety of sources, it is worth noting here that I rely heavily on Patrick J. Harrigan’s (2003) “Women’s Agency and the Development of Women’s Intercollegiate Athletics, 1961-2001” for information specifically related to the history of women’s intercollegiate sport in this chapter.

The analysis begins in the 1960s for two reasons. First, this period coincides with the rise of second-wave feminism which led to fundamental changes in all aspects of society, including sport. The opportunities for women in sport prior to the 1960s were limited. Class and race were major barriers that obstructed many women participating in sport or recreation (Kidd, 1996). Middle class white women did have greater opportunities to play, yet the lack of sport infrastructure and cultural ideas about female decency denied many women from achieving success on more than a local level.

Second, the meanings that society attached to sport changed significantly during the 1960s. Prior to the 1960s, Victorian notions of sport prevailed in Canada. Generally, people understood sport as a frivolous pastime and something to be outgrown upon entering adulthood (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks, 1987; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990). However, with the rise of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc nations began using sport as a tool to promote their political ideology (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks, 1987, Macintosh & Whitson, 1990). Dominant performances in international

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5 The Cold War was at its peak in the 1948-1952 period (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks, 1987). The Soviets developed extensive state run sports programs during this peak time and achieved sporting dominance during the 1950s on the international scene (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks,
competition became a way to confirm the superiority of the Communist state and peoples. Canada and other Western countries responded to this by elevating sport to a state interest and by trying to refute the U.S.S.R’s claims of superiority. The strength and dominance of Canadian teams in international competition became a metaphor for the strength and power of the nation.

The central argument of this chapter is that change in Canadian women’s sport has been anything but linear and that aspects of both progress and retrenchment have often been closely coupled. To understand the history of women in sport it is important to dispel notions of women as victims (Lenskyj, 1986; Hall, 2002). Though women’s sports have often been marginalized, women have been active agents in shaping sporting practices and competing factions have continually struggled over how to get the most out of sports for women. The choices faced by those concerned with women’s sport have centered on integrating women’s sport into existing male structures or keeping it autonomous but marginalized. This chapter explores the implications of past decisions and considers how the consequences of past decisions shape present conditions in Canadian women’s university sport.

1960s
During the 1960s, the state became increasingly interested in the sporting habits of Canadians in reaction to a number of factors both at home and abroad. As previously

1987). Western countries responded to this domination towards the latter half of the decade. In the Canadian context, the lingering notion of the Victorian gentleman delayed the state interventions until the 1960s (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks, 1987).
mentioned, Cold War politics revised the meanings of sport in Canada. The poor performances of the men’s national hockey team at the World Cup and Olympic tournaments during the 1950s caused concern for many about the nation’s image (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks, 1987). Compounding this, the 1950s ushered in a more urbanized and industrial model of nationhood. More Canadians moved from farms and to cities and exchanged manual labour for more sedentary lifestyles (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks, 1987, Macintosh & Whitson, 1990). In response to international diplomacy and alarmingly low levels of physical activity amongst the populace, in 1961 the Federal Government passed Bill C-131, *An Act to Encourage Fitness and Amateur Sport*. This bill developed cost-sharing agreements and focused on developing massive fitness and sports programs across the country (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks, 1987; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990). This bill, however, did little to assist women in sports. Women were not identified as a group that required special interest or attention from the federal government. This omission reflects the marginalized status that most women experienced in sport during this period.

During the 1960s Canada’s most high profile female athletes played individual sports like skiing, track and field, figure skating, gymnastics, fencing, tennis, and golf (Lenskyj, 1986; Hall 2002). Team sports like basketball, soccer and ice hockey were not as popular for girls and women during this period. Many of the most popular female athletes in this period were teenagers who fared well on the international scene despite the growing pressures to represent the nation. Athletes such as track runner Abby
Hoffman, skier Nancy Greene, and swimmers Elaine Tanner and Mary Steward, dazzled the nation and sports journalists alike (www.caaws.ca). Top athletes were portrayed in in-depth articles featured in national magazines like *Maclean’s* and *Saturday Night* (Hall, 2002). As international sport took on more cultural importance, young male sports writers, including Peter Gzowski, Jack Batten, Alan Edmonds and Paul Grescoe, inherited the right to cover female athletes and replaced legendary female reporters like Bobbie Rosenfeld and Mrytle Cook McGowan who had written about women in sports in national newspapers since the 1940s and 1950s (Hall, 2002). These male reporters were often respectful but problematically they were also paternalistic (Hall, 2002).

Opportunities for women in intercollegiate sport during the 1960s were limited. Though women had been competing at the intercollegiate level in basketball, volleyball and swimming since the 1920s, women’s athletics had little visibility and national championships simply did not exist for women’s sport (Hall, 2002; Harrigan, 2003). The absence of national inter-collegiate championships reflected both a lack of funding, as well as a general ambivalence from the governing body for women’s university sport about the value of competition for women. The Women’s Athletic Committee (WAC) of the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (CAHPER) was an organization composed of physical education instructors that set standards for all women’s amateur athletics in Canada during the 1960s. The WAC wanted to avoid the commercialization, elitism and violence of men’s sports and feared that emphasizing
competition would compromise opportunities for female athletes to gain health, develop social skills and friendships through participation (Lenskyj, 1986; Harrigan, 2003).

M.A. Hall argues that the majority of feminists during the 1960s thought of sport as trivial and less important than other causes such as the fight for abortion and equal wages. This opinion developed from the failure of many feminists to perceive sport “as a site of cultural struggle where gender relations were reproduced and sometimes resisted” (Hall, 2002, p. 183). Though sports would be one of the last causes taken up by feminists, the feminist movement would, nevertheless, contribute to great changes for women in sport in the following decade.

1970s

The Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, published in 1970, outlined the role of women in the economy, politics, education, and made no less than 167 recommendations to improve the status of women in Canada. Though sport was not a major concern in the Report, the Royal Commission nevertheless recommended:

school programmes provide girls with equal opportunities with boys to participate in athlete and school activities and establish policies and practices that will motivate and encourage girls to engage in athletics and sports activities. (points 77/78, 1970, p. 244)

The Royal Commission correctly identified sport as an arena of life that contributed to unequal gender relations in society. This awareness contributed to a growing sense
amongst feminists of the importance of sport in the struggle for equality. Two years later in 1972, Title IX, an educational bill directed at eliminating sexual discrimination in federally funded schools became law in the United States. The bill mandated equal opportunities for girls and women in all school-based activities including sport. Though the implementation of equal programming would prove difficult, both the Royal Commission and Title IX represented symbolic victories for women and linked opportunities in school-based sport to women’s rights.

Broad cultural changes around women’s bodies and the value of physical activity led more women to get physically active during the 1970s. Ideas around women’s bodies began to shift in part thanks to the feminist movement which advocated that women gain autonomy and knowledge of their own bodies. The decorative womanhood of the 1960s was replaced by a more physically active ideal (Lenskyj, 1986). Soon capitalist industries developed around the new active woman; aerobics, fitness clubs, television shows, books and fashions presented her as sexy and heterosexual (Lenskyj, 1986). At the same time, more women began playing team sports such as softball, hockey, basketball, and physical activity became a bigger part of more women’s lives.

During the 1970s feminists found things to celebrate in sport. In 1973, at a moment when, according to scholar Nancy Spencer (2000) ”women’s lib met women’s lob” (p. 388) tennis star Billie Jean King took on Bobby Riggs in “The Battle of the Sexes” and won. In the same month that King battled Riggs on the court, Ms. magazine ran a story called, “Closing the Muscle Gap” that explored the potential for women in
sport to develop self confidence and reconnect to their own physical power which would translate to revolutionary changes in gender relations (Cahn, 1994). Other mainstream periodicals such as *Sports Illustrated* and *Time* also ran stories in the fall and winter of 1973 about the pervasive sexism in sport and the need to reform the institution (Cahn 1994).

During the 1970s major changes happened on the interuniversity sport scene in Canada. In 1971 the Canadian Women’s Intercollegiate Athletic Union (CWIAU) relieved the Women’s Athletic Committee (WAC) of its responsibilities and took over the governing powers of women at the intercollegiate level (Harrigan, 2003). The CWIAU represented the first national sport governing body for women’s intercollegiate sport. The impetus to develop a national sport governing body developed from a having one qualified women’s university sport programs to receive significant funding from the Ministry of Fitness and Amateur Sport (Harrigan, 2003). The CWIAU formed in part because of the growing awareness amongst women’s physical educators that women’s intercollegiate sports were not being encouraged or supported (Harrigan, 2003). Immediately following the formation of the governing body the CWIAU held inaugural women’s national championships in swimming, diving, gymnastics and volleyball (Harrigan, 2003). The CWIAU represented an autonomous women’s governing body that promoted a “women’s sports run by women” ideal. This organization was less ambivalent about competition than had been previous governing bodies. Its agenda reflected a commitment to growing the visibility and equality of women in interuniversity sport by
providing high level competition for women who were “suited” for it (Harrigan, 2003). Though most members of the CWIAU were united in their desire to improve the conditions of women’s intercollegiate sport, the organization was divided on how to best achieve this goal.

By the mid 1970s it became increasingly apparent that sports in Canada at all levels still privileged men and boys at the expense of women and girls. Despite the cultural shifts around womanhood and the expanding numbers of women competing, women’s sport remained secondary to men’s sport in terms of both resources and status. The media all but refused to acknowledge the increasing number of women in team sports and coverage continued to be dedicated to individual female athletes or to men. In response to this grim reality some member of the CWIAU agitated for change by advocating that the CWIAU integrate into the men’s CIAU (Harrigan, 2003).

Women in favour of integration argued that joining the men’s organization would better accomplish the goals set out by the CWIAU which were to promote national championships competitions and to grow the visibility of women’s university sport. Members against integration worried that joining the CIAU would be detrimental because women would be forced to give up their independent position outside of male sport. From this position they had been able to promote a unique vision of sport that contrasted with the dominant male model. Despite such concerns, the CWIAU was absorbed into the CIAU in 1978. In this decision women’s interuniversity sports gained greater financial resources, increased their political clout within mainstream sport and tapped into a
A stronger national network of university sport (Harrigan, 2003). However, these advancements came at a cost. Theberge (1985) argued that this decision forced women to pass control of women’s intercollegiate sport to men. In 1978 at the time of the integration 75 per cent of women’s intercollegiate sports were coached by women (Harrigan, 2003). After integration of the WCIAU into the CIAU opportunities for women in leadership in at the intercollegiate level were all but decimated; athletic directors, coaches and administrative positions that had once been held almost exclusively by women were now more likely to be filled by men (Theberge, 1985).

The decision of the CWIAU to integrate into the men’s CIAU set the course for women’s intercollegiate sport in Canada. The decision to integrate women’s interuniversity sport into the male model sacrificed a dissenting, autonomous voice and an alternative vision of sport. Ideally, the WCIAU would not have been forced to choose either/or and might have found a way to preserve their voice and vision without sacrificing access to resources, visibility and status. However, this was not to be. I believe that the decision to integrate women’s interuniversity sport was the best choice of two limited options.

1980s

The early 1980s represented a time of building momentum for women in sport in Canada. The second National Conference on Women in Sport took place in 1980 at Simon Fraser University. This conference led to the development of the Canadian Association for the
Advancement of Women in Sport (CAAWS) in 1981 (Macintosh, Bedecki & Franks, 1987; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990). CAAWS represented the first Canadian woman’s sport advocacy organization dedicated to improving the status of women in athletics. The purpose of the organization was “to advance the position of women by defining, promoting and support a feminist perspective on sport and to improve the status of women in sport” (Hall, 2002, p. 173). By identifying sport as an arena that contributed to unequal gender relations in society, CAAWS established sport’s legitimacy as a worthy area for feminist inquiry.

In 1981, Former Olympic flag bearer and track athlete Abby Hoffman, became the first woman appointed to the position of the Director of Sports Canada. Formative experiences in the Canadian sporting system surely influenced her term. At nine years of age “Ab” Hoffman had cut her hair like a boy’s and suited up for a boy’s hockey league because no girl’s hockey leagues existed in the 1950s in Toronto (www.archievescbc.ca). In league play she proved herself and was named as a league all-star but this eventually led to the discovery of her real identity by league officials (www.archievescbc.ca). Though she was able to finish the season, she was banned from playing the following season. Later, as a university student at the University of Toronto, Hoffman was denied (on three separate occasions) entrance to the all-male University of Toronto track facilities (Harrigan, 2003; Hall, 2002). Though Hoffman’s ascent to the top administrative office of Canadian sport represented a significant milestone it must be tempered with the reality
that during the same period the majority of women were essentially absent from decision-making positions at all levels of sport (Hall, 2002).

In 1986 the federal government published *Sport Canada Policy on Women in Sport*, more than 15 years after the release of the Royal Commission Report on the Status of Women which had first identified sport as important area of gender inequality. This policy focused on attaining equality for women and girls in sport. The policy identified thirteen points of government intervention ranging from program development, research, education, leadership initiative and increasing participation rates (www.caaws.ca). This policy positively positioned girl’s and women’s participation in sport as a reflection of their freedom and emancipation in Canadian society. This narrative would later be complicated by sport scholars. Unfortunately, the implementation of this bill proved difficult. Many sporting organizations did not want to fund women’s sports equally and the policy failed to have punitive measures for organizations that did not comply (Hall, 2002).

During the mid-to-late 1980s new scholarly discourses in academic work on women in sport emerged. Scholars such as M.A. Hall, Nancy Theberge, Jennifer Hargreaves, Susan Birrel, Michael Messner, Helen Lenskyj, many of whom were either former athletes or physical activity enthusiasts, began contributing important feminist analyses of sport.6 These scholars challenged traditional practices and articulated a

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6 Helen Lenskyj (2003) remained an exception to this trend: she writes that as a young woman she hated sports and ‘was a bit frightened of joining in’ (p.xiii).
variety of alternatives for increasing opportunities and improving women’s experiences in sport and but they did not share a unanimous opinion on sport.

For example, some scholars doubted the potential of male-defined sport to help emancipate women. In *Out of Bounds* (1986) Helen Lenskyj argued that the interconnectedness of male privilege, compulsory heterosexuality, competition, violence and hierarchy, prevented sport from being a venue that might liberate women. Susan Birrell and Diana M. Ritcher’s article, “*Is a Diamond Forever? Feminist Transformation of Sport*” (1994) urged women to seek out and organize alternative feminist sport structures. They promoted a version of sport based on participation and enjoyment, arguing against the competition, elitism and hierarchy that, from their perspective, negatively defined male sport.

Other scholars, however, took a different position on sport. Nancy Theberge, in an article entitled, “*Sport and Women’s Empowerment*” (1987), avoided caricaturizing sport and competition as unequivocally bad and considered how they might be positive for women under certain circumstances. She suggests that team sports like field hockey and softball, in the right conditions, might allow women to experience spontaneity and power within a community of women and she linked these experiences to the emancipation of women in broader society. Michael Messner in an article entitled, “*Sports and Male Domination: the Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain*” (1988) explored the implications and meanings of organized sport on gender politics. Messner challenged the commonsense view that women’s increasing participation in sport directly signaled
unequivocal freedom by noting the inherent contradictions that accompanied the experiences of being a woman in male-defined sport. Yet, he also conceded that female athletes represented a powerful and authentic challenge to a crumbling, but resilient, patriarchy.

In the mid-to-late 1980s the Justine Blainey case proved to be another source of fuel for the feminist debate around women’s sport in Canada. The 1984 case, which proceeded over three years, polarized the women’s sport and feminist communities and ultimately struck at the heart of institutional male privilege in Canadian sport.

Justine Blainey, a 12-year old hockey player from the Toronto, Ontario, tried out for and was selected to play on a boy’s travelling team. However, the governing organization, the Ontario Hockey Association (O.H.A.), denied Blainey membership because she was a girl. Blainey sued the O.H.A. and used the Ontario Human Rights Code to illustrate that she was discriminated against because of her gender. The first ruling went against Blainey. She appealed the initial decision and the ruling was reversed in the Provincial Appeals Court. Mr. Justice Charles Dubin declared the decision unconstitutional and ruled that Blainey should be allowed to play.

The feminist community was divided in its reaction to the Blainey case. While many people believed that the Blainey decision represented a victory for human rights, many women were uneasy about the implications of the ruling (Robinson, 2002). Women who preferred to keep sport separate, a group composed mostly of female athletes and women’s sports organizations like the Ontario Women’s Hockey Association (OWHA),
feared that the ruling would have an adverse effect on existing women’s sports leagues (Robinson, 2002). These women, and their supporters, feared that there would be an exodus of the best players to men’s leagues. The ruling implicitly reinforced the supposed superiority of men’s hockey leagues, a position that sports separatists rejected. From the separatists’ position the issue came down to the question of how could women’s sport ever obtain anything but secondary status if the best players were continually siphoned from women’s leagues (Theberge, 2000)?

Proponents of integrated sport drew support from major feminist organizations like CAAWS and Women’s Legal Educational and Action Fund (LEAF). Integration advocates argued that ability, not gender, should be the determining factor in organizing sport (Hall, 2002; Robinson, 2002). The position relied on several assumptions including the idea that gender holds back the most talented female athletes unfairly and that the best way to dismantle archaic ideas about female frailty and ability might be achieved through integration (Robinson, 2002).

The Blainey case, heralded by many as the case that changed the face of women’s sport in Ontario, is now seen by some as a hollow victory (Findlay, 2008). From a legal perspective, the decision did not achieve all that it might; gender discrimination cases in sport continue to plague the courts. Early on, lawyer Andrew Petter (1989) argued that the Blainey case failed to engage with the underlying conditions of inequality that affect the majority of women in sport, such as a lack of funding, because the primary focus of the case remained at level of the individual. In the case comments lawyer Susan Vella
(1989) argued that the case missed the opportunity to engage with why inequality in sports happens and how inequality in sports contributes to women’s inequality outside of sport. From a legal perspective the case did little to dispel traditional justifications of female exclusion from male-dominated sports (Vella, 1989).

Yet, from my perspective, the Blainey case should not be so easily dismissed. The transformation of an entire sport structure is too great a burden to place on a single legal challenge. Legal perspectives perhaps overlook certain aspects of “cultural work” that the case accomplished. Justine Blainey’s case struck at the heart of institutionalized male privilege and male power in Canadian society by taking on the Ontario Hockey Association and winning. Allain (2008) identifies hockey as a key site where hegemonic masculinity is performed and reinforced at a personal, structural and cultural level in Canada. Hard, aggressive, physical masculinities are rewarded and celebrated within team cultures (Allain, 2008). Though hegemonic masculinities are not universal or static, the type of masculinity often associated with “jock culture” relies on denigrating, discrediting, and excluding women and gay men (Allain, 2008; Messner, 2002). A twelve-year-old girl stood up to this and eventually she won the right to be included. The case stirred emotions and ignited the conversation inside and outside of women’s sport to talk about the complicated issues that develop in sport. Though the intervening years have proved more complicated than not, and in some ways it is difficult to know the exact consequences of the case, I believe that Blainey scored a greater victory than she even realized.
1990s and 2000s

The 1990s brought great changes to the Canadian sporting landscape. The following section examines how changing sport policy and market forces influenced the opportunities and experiences of female Canadian interuniversity athletes.

In 1992 the Task Force on Government Sport Policy: The Way Ahead was published. The Way Ahead policy allocated funds and made special provisions to help girls and women have more opportunities and better experiences in sport. This appeared to be very favourable for girls and women, especially in light of Canadian women’s historic erasure in federal sport policy. However, Harvey, Thibault and Rail (1995) suggest that The Way Ahead (1992) signaled an important shift in federal sport policy towards what they call “neo-corporatism”. The Way Ahead (1992) aimed at harmonization and streamlining the delivery of the Canadian sport system through facilitating greater coordination amongst government agencies, not-for-profit organizations and corporate organizations (Harvey, Thibault & Rail, 1995). For critics the growing reliance on corporations by the government signaled the interference with a democratic sport delivery system. Corporatism, the political left argued, stifles competing ideologies leaving little room to question or disagree (Harvey, Thibault & Rail, 1995). Though decisions may be made faster in this environment, the narrowing of perspectives and ideas potentially leads to groupthink and conformity (Harvey, Thibault & Rail, 1995). Marginalized perspectives and people are forced to the periphery.

The history of women’s sport shows that a truly democratic sports system never existed in Canada, and yet it is ironic that just as certain groups of women began to gain
rights in sport, the system itself changed and became even more undemocratic. But, because the system incorporated programs for “girls” and “women”, historically marginalized groups in sport, it was understood as progressive. The fact that only the most privileged girls and women benefited from the new legislation was and remains all but ignored.


The success of North American female athletes in team sports at international competitions during the 1990s paved the way for professional sports leagues to develop in the U.S. For example, the gold medal match of women’s basketball in the 1996 Olympics was one of the catalysts for the establishment of the Women’s National Basketball League in 1997 (Theberge, 2003). The 1999 women’s soccer World Cup

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7 While the IOC made changes to bring greater gender parity to the Olympic Games during the early and mid 1990s, it is important to recognize that during this time the IOC continued to sex test female Olympic athletes. A practice that continues to undermine women’s achievements in sport by implying that if a female athlete is too dominant she must tested to see if she is really a man.
finals between the U.S. and China helped facilitate the launch of the Women’s United Soccer Association, an eight team league in the United States (Theberge, 2003).

The combination of greater opportunities in international competition and the development of professional sports profoundly changed the way girls and women across the country played sport. Girls and women flooded into team sports. In the mid-1980s fewer than 6000 females were registered in hockey leagues across the country (Hall, 2002). Hockey Canada reports that for the 2008-2009 season the number of girls playing hockey had exploded to 85,309 (www.hockeycanada.ca). While this number pales in comparison to the 499,695 men who play, the number of registered in girls’ and women’s leagues has nevertheless increased by 40 per cent since 2003 (www.hockeycanada.ca). Soccer Canada’s annual demographic survey reports that in 2008-2009 season 377,320 girls and women played soccer across the country (http://canadasoccer.com). The report Sport Participation in Canada highlights that basketball, a sport with a rich history and large participation base, boasts 181,000 female participants over the age of 15 (Ifedi, 2005).

Changes at the grassroots level of women’s sports coincided with expanding opportunities for women in Canadian intercollegiate athletics. In the interval between 1978 and 1995 the number of female athletes playing interuniversity sport increased by 86 per cent and the number of women’s teams increased from 136 to 211 (Harrigan, 2003). In comparison, during the same period the number of male participants increased by 35 percent and the number of men’s teams marginally increased from 253 to 257.
The growth of women’s interuniversity sport can be linked to increases in the number of sanctioned national championships for women’s sport. In 1971 there were three national championships for women, in 1978 this number rose to seven, in 1996 to nine and eventually in 2000 to eleven (as compared to the number of men’s championships which were at nine in 1978 and rose to ten in 2000) (Harrigan, 2003).

Broad cultural changes and demographic shifts on university campuses across the nation also helped to facilitate the increasing opportunities for women in intercollegiate sport. During the 1960s and 1970s women were less than the majority of undergraduate students (Armour & Staton, 1990). In 1967, women made up 12 per cent of medical classes and 5 per of law classes in Canada (Armour & Staton, 1990). In the 2007-2008 school year women received 57 per cent of the undergraduate and 51 per cent of the graduate degrees given out in Canada (Council of the Ministers of Education, 2009). Women now compose 59 per cent of law and 53 per cent of medical classes in Canada (Intini, 2006). The greater number of women enrolled in universities made it more difficult for universities to keep providing unequal opportunities for women’s intercollegiate sports. This suggests how women’s opportunities in sport are linked to broader gender politics and wider social structures.

Though participation rates reached parity, problems still persisted for women in intercollegiate sport. Funding proved to be an ongoing struggle for women’s teams. Universities often spent more money on their men’s programs than their women’s programs. As of 2003, schools like the University of Western Ontario, the University of
Waterloo and the University of Windsor continued to fund their men’s football and/or men’s ice hockey teams separately from the rest of their athletic budgets (Harrigan, 2003). This effectively removed the men’s programs from having to remain within budgetary constraints that would align with equity measures. Women also continued to be underrepresented in coaching and administrative branches of Canadian interuniversity sport. By 2001 women made up only 15 percent of the 559 total coaches for men’s and women’s interuniversity sports programs across the country (Hall, 2003 p.170).

To this point I have been examining the relationship between changing sport policy and opportunities in women’s sport. Now, I will turn our attention to how market influences affect the nature of these expanded opportunities. We begin by considering the commodification of the female athlete.

The commodification of the female athlete during the 1990s contributed to the increasing visibility and cultural importance of female athletes in North America. Cultural shifts and changes occurred more intensely in the American context and were present to a lesser extent in Canada. Leslie Heywood and Shari Dworkin (2003) argue that according to the mainstream media the 1996 Summer Olympics proved to be the moment that the female athlete “arrived”. Media coverage of American female athletes during the Olympics characterized them as “powerful”, “strong” and “skilful”, rhetoric and language usually reserved for male athletes (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Contrasting earlier eras, women’s team sport received a large amount of glowing press and television coverage during the Atlanta games. Important team athletes such as U.S.
soccer player Mia Hamm and basketball players such as Lisa Leslie and Rebecca Lobo became celebrities and role models for many. To an extent not previously seen, female Olympians appeared on Wheaties boxes and graced the covers of magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times Magazine* (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). The increasing visibility of female athletes, and especially team athletes, in the mainstream in the mid-to-late 1990s contributed to legitimizing female athletes in dominant cultural narratives.

If the female athlete “arrived” in 1996, economic shifts in the early 1990s provided the conditions of possibility for this phenomenon. Essentially, in the early 1990s corporations like Nike commodified the female athlete and co-opted feminism in pursuit of profits. Corporate strategies are critical to understanding the 1990s because these companies not only produced identities, they also shaped and constructed desires and possibilities (Cole & Hribar, 1995). This means that Nike and other companies did not just happen upon a society with ideal conditions. These companies actually constructed and shaped the moment in a way that benefited their profit ambitions.

Nike, one of many dominant corporations that rewrote narratives around women and empowerment during the early 1990s provides an excellent case study to examine the commodification of the female athlete and feminism. Nike, a company that didn’t even make products for women in the 1970s for fear that selling to women would undermine the company’s image as a “serious” sports company, realized the consumer potential in the women’s market and subsequently started making products for this group (Cole &
Hribar, 1995). Cole and Hribar (1995) note that through a variety of strategic moves, Nike “displaced the potential antagonism between feminism and consumption” and marketed itself as a feminist brand (p. 356). In rewriting feminism, Nike focused on the individual and her choices but in doing so erased the social (Cole & Hribar, 1995). Race, class, socio-economic status and other aspects of identity that often shape the amount and types of opportunities girls and women have in sport were obscured. Physical activity and sport became narratives of empowerment. Within this climate team sports became a part of the empowerment narrative. Theberge (2003) and Heywood and Dworkin (2003) suggest that one of the reasons that team sports became increasingly popular during this time was because of this strong cultural connection between team sports and empowerment. Sports, often thought of as a way to teach boy skills to bring them success in “life”, now became as important for young women.

The commodification of the female athlete is not without complications. On some level the increasing commodification might be positive for particular athletes. Robinson (2002) notes that in response to drastic funding cuts the 2001 Canadian Nordic women’s ski team raised $80 000 dollars in profit from a nude calendar featuring members of their team. They were able to donate 30 per cent of their profits to a non-profit ski foundation and split the remaining money between five athletes which was enough to fund opportunities at international competitions and their training expenses (Robinson, 2002).

8 Unfortunately, the idea of Nike portraying itself as an advocate for women’s right is more ironic than correct. Nike notoriously adopted a pro-woman mantle in the affluent Western while relying on poorly paid, malnourished and most likely physically unfit women to make products in the Global South (Cole and Hribar, 1995).
Yet, in the end the calendar was “all female, all naked, and all passive” (Robinson, 2000, p. 30). Beach volleyball provides us with another example of the complexity that accompanies the commodification of the female athlete. The International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) mandates that female players must where bikinis or high cut one-piece bathing suits that are no longer than 7 centimeters at the hips while men are permitted to play in baggy shorts and tank tops (Robinson, 2002). Yet, the FIVB is one of the only sport governing bodies that distributes prize money equally between men and women (Robinson 2002; Hall, 2002).

The drive for profits often means that female athletes are sexualized, which, from my perspective, contradicts the increased opportunities and positive developments that women have struggled for in sport. Third-wave scholars Heywood and Dworkin (2003) would likely argue against this position. For them not all sexualized portrayals of athletes are the same and they should not be universally criticized as constructing “female-as-object”. Heywood and Dworkin (2003) suggest that some sexualized portrayals allow female athletes to embrace their beauty and show off their bodies that they have worked hard for. These authors might also point out the increasing number of male athletes such as David Beckham, who are sexualized in the media as evidence that all the sexualisation is just another way that women can engage with and display power in the modern, sports mad, media-driven, internet savvy world.

This third-wave approach which creates room for the possibility that an individual might experience some type of gain through their sexualisation fails to account for the
consequences that develop for other women. For example, Hall (2002) notes that the increasing commodification and the promotion of a “hetero-sexy” image in women’s sports has been accompanied by an increasing wave of “dyke-bashing” (p. 99). In narrative 1 in chapter 5 we will explore this phenomenon further by examining how competing femininities, homophobia and lesbian stigma mingled in my sport experiences.

The implications of the sexualisation of professional female athletes create major contradictions and complexities for many women. Theberge (2000) captures some of this complexity. In her work with elite Canadian female hockey players she reports that female athletes offer authentic resistance to the idea that sport is a male preserve and yet at the same time confirm and reproduce hierarchal difference between the genders. Currently, to play hockey well is to play like a man. Many players interviewed by Theberge (2000) expressed their sense of satisfaction from physical contact and aggressive play. Yet, all of the promotional material for the elites league that Theberge studied and wrote about in Higher Goals (2000) advertised that play in the league “is the way it is supposed to be played”, implying that women’s hockey should be about fineness and playmaking instead of the physicality and aggression that marks the men’s game (p. 115). In sports such as basketball and hockey female athletes constantly negotiate between the norms of aggression that are required within elite sport and residual beliefs about the proper way for a woman to behave.

Part of the problem that develops with the commodification of female athletes is that it appears to reduce the space for alternatives measures that might produce the same
desired effects without all the "baggage" that accompanies commodification. For example, in response to drastic funding cuts the women’s Nordic ski team opted to use the market to its advantage and secure funding for its own team. But, surely there were other avenues that might have helped their cause, arguably to a greater extent. Robinson (2002) notes that the Nordic ski team mentioned above did not rally to have their funding reinstated or lobby with the host of other sports programs—both men’s and women’s—that also suffered funding cuts administered by Sport Canada. The Nordic ski team’s response in this situation is symbolic of types of individualized, depoliticized solutions that happen at all levels of women’s sport. While it might be too severe to admonish the Nordic ski team for trying to make the best of a grim situation, as feminists and athletes we should be raising questions about the limitations of such market ventures and exploring how these limitations shape the types of experiences that women have in sport and how they intersect broader gender politics.

Tensions between womanhood and sport continue to surface despite women’s important gains in sport, in part because these gains have been facilitated by corporations that, despite their rhetoric to the contrary, do not have women’s rights as their priority. The bottom line drives these corporations. Profit, not a vision of the equality of all people, has been one of the reasons why women have been able to play sport and especially team sports, in unprecedented numbers during the 1990s and 2000s. Corporations do not have to change social structures or challenge narratives that relegate women’s sport to a lesser status than men’s sport because women literally buy into
corporate narratives that suggest women have achieved equality in sport. Corporations have rewritten dominant cultural scripts around feminism and empowerment. Companies such as Nike pedal to women individualistic depoliticized feminisms that equate consuming and being an athlete with being empowered and equal in society.

Conclusion

Writing this chapter proved to be the most difficult challenge of this thesis. In part this stemmed from my ignorance of the topic. Which is revealing because it brings us back to the initial premise of this thesis: that the types of opportunities women experience in sport, which in many ways are the result of feminists efforts during the 1970s and 1980s, are disconnected from feminism so much so that feminism rarely influences the types of experiences that women have in sport today. Athletes might gain a sense of connection to feminism by learning about the histories of women in sport. Understanding how women from all stations life struggled and carved out spaces to compete and play, sometimes against incredible odds, made me look at my experiences of sport differently. Mostly, it gave me hope and the sense that sports were worth struggling for.

It is evident in this chapter that women today inherit a rich and complex sport legacy. Sport has never been and never will be perfect. But that is beside the point. There have often been competing ideas around how women’s sports should be organized, how women should play and what women should “get” from participating. These past debates have facilitated and framed the experiences that I have had in my sport career, three of which we explore in the next chapter. From my perspective it is important to continue the
tradition of conversation around sport that features different ideas about what women’s sport might be and should be. I fear that as feminists if don’t speak up or if we fail to figure out how to balance the good with the bad in sport, we risk not being involved in the debate at all. The next chapter represents my attempt to inspire other athletes to get involved in the important conversation that is happening around women in sport.
Chapter 5

Personal Narratives

This chapter represents the “data” of my thesis. In the following pages I weave feminist theory with my experiences in sport to explore how the personal is political. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. The first is to contribute to the scholarly conversation around women in Canadian sport by adding a first-person account as told from an athlete’s perspective. The second is to create writing that might help other athletes view their experiences through a different lens. These commitments reflect my belief that change in women’s sports depends on an ongoing conversation amongst athletes, advocates and academic scholars.

This chapter builds upon the previous chapters in this thesis. Chapters three and four, Feminist Literature Review and Canadian Sport History, helped to develop the “context” for the following conversation by assisting the reader with a third-wave feminist perspective as well as a sense of the historical struggle for women’s sport.

Here, I write in a narrative style about three separate but interconnected events. Though the narratives are told from a first-person perspective they do not reflect traditional biographical form nor do they subscribe to a meta-narrative of truth. The names of my teammates and friends have all been changed. These narratives are written and informed by my present position and offer an interpretation of my experience and the truth I take from it. Each story might stand alone. However, when all three are read
together they offer an account of some of the complex and competing narratives that shape many female athletes’ experiences in sport.

This chapter has been written with two distinct audiences in mind: the scholars who compose my thesis committee, female athletes and others who may be involved in women’s sport. When I write to these unknown athletes I do so with the hope that this chapter might be consciousness-raising. I draw on this second wave strategy because from my perspective it is “consciousness” about feminism that is noticeably absent among young female athletes. I hope that if a female athlete were to read this chapter she might think about her experiences in a way she had not considered before and she might see new connections between herself and other people. My own experiences are highlighted and suggest that many opportunities to gain a political consciousness and a greater sense of connection to other women are lost in sport. Opportunities pass by because many of us find ourselves competing and playing in a male-sport culture that is dominated by individualism. From my perspective, female athletes would do well to resist this aspect of male-defined sport culture because an ethos of individualism contributes to and maintains a gender order that privileges certain men and forms of masculinity at the expense of many other men and women. One way for athletes to resist this culture is to begin discussing problematic aspects of our sporting experiences and generating ideas as to how we could make them better.

To get to a different place in sport we need to move the struggle beyond individual models of resistance. Individual resistance has always been and will continue
to be an important part of change, but individual acts must be accompanied by a more collective and systematic resistance. Collective feminist response to male-defined sport is a critical part of transforming the institution and evidence of the need for this type of response surfaces in each of the following narratives. Moving towards a culture of dissent would require that athletes understand the shared nature of struggle while at the same time recognizing difference. This chapter focuses on the experiences of a white, middle-class, heterosexual female. I write of these categories of race, class and sexuality because they are where I am located. Yet, aspects of my narratives might resonate with people who are located differently because each narrative introduces ideas of power, privilege, and resistance, which touch all of our lives. Some may question the value of focusing on the experiences of someone who is relatively privileged. But, an analysis of the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women can contribute to a culture of resistance by demonstrating how privilege and power work. Women who benefit from these social categories must be aware of their de facto power and privilege or they risk unknowingly reproducing the conditions of marginalization for other women located differently. I share my experiences and analyse them with the hope that they might prompt a feminist change in sport.

In this chapter I was initially attempting to create a third-wave feminist politics around sport. As previously mentioned in Chapter Three there is little scholarly third-wave work that engages with sport or articulates a third-wave vision of sport. Unfortunately, in writing this analysis I too failed to develop a “purely” third-wave
analysis. In part this is because I believe that feminist change in sport depends on a collective response which is difficult to reconcile with the consumerist, individualistic parameters of third-wave politics. What I offer to readers is an analysis that blends second- and third-wave approaches.

Ultimately, the narratives in this chapter explore the implications of certain groups of women being admitted to the centre of “male” sport. In Narrative One, I consider the “feminine apologetic” (Felshin, 1974) and examine the complicated way that it often coexists with lesbian stigma and homophobia in women’s sport. In Narrative Two, I revisit a basketball game where the men’s volleyball team challenged my basketball team to a competitive matchup. In this narrative the complex nature of empowerment and resistance for women in male sporting structures is considered. I urge athletes to develop a collective culture of dissent and critically assess which aspects of sport culture might be productive for women in sport. In Narrative Three, I recall a practice where my teammates and I pushed the limits of our own aggression and consider what my own reaction to this practice reveals. Throughout these narratives I problematize gendered binary thinking by using my own experiences to illustrate how homophobia, heteronormativity, and the feminine apologetic largely shape the way that many white, middle-class women experience sport. In each narrative I theorize how conditions might be different and how female athletes might contribute to cultural shifts and change through sport.
I believe that a feminist version of high-performance sport would move in the direction of creating competitive environments that facilitate personal growth, pleasure and enjoyment while avoiding exploitative situations where winning is valued above all. My belief that sport might be a positive force in women’s lives echoes liberal feminist arguments that suggest sport is a place where women build self-esteem, confidence, and skills that might transform how they live. Yet, I recognize that this particular vision of sport it limited and that not just any sporting environment can achieve these feminist ends. Sport does not unequivocally transform girls and women into empowered, confident people. Athletes, feminists and scholars need to work together to create sport conditions that achieve these ends.

**Narrative One – The Dance Team**

It took a long time for me to recognize that dance teams might help improve the conditions of women’s basketball. In truth, I always thought that it was “us”, the basketball players, who could help “them”. This narrative examines how homophobia permeates many situations in women’s sports. I consider my experiences of being in the stands watching dance teams perform at men’s basketball games; a subtext where different performances of femininity struggle for legitimacy is revealed. The conclusion of this narrative considers how such situations might be different and suggests how basketball teams and dance teams might work together across differences towards feminist goals.
Femininities and Sport

To grasp the dynamics of the relationship between the women’s dance team and the women’s basketball team in the space of the gym requires us to give some thought to gender, masculinity and femininity. But first, we must consider the way that race and class intersect with gender in this context. The context of a Canadian university women’s basketball game is elitist in many senses. Though not everyone in the space is middle-class or white, the majority are. The discourses that constrain middle class white women are different than those that constrain other groups of women who are positioned differently.

In Canada during the twentieth century the fear that sport would masculinise white, middle-class women kept many women out of athletic activities (Hall, 2002; Lenskyj, 1986). While there is not space to outline them here, a variety of cultural shifts helped to change this narrative towards the end of the century making it more possible for femininity and athleticism to co-exist (Hall, 2002). However, from my perspective as an athlete this “masculinising” narrative has yet to completely dissolve and my experiences provide evidence that this narrative still surfaces in many women’s athletic experiences.

The belief that sport will masculinise particular groups of women depends on a broader understanding of dominant gender logic and the way that particular groups of women fit into dominant ideology. Broadly, gender logic positions men and women in a binary which suggests that men and women are opposite of and complementary to each other (Pronger, 1992). Sport often reinforces and maintains difference between men and women. Within gender logic dominant masculinity and sport are often linked to each
other. They are both positively connected to ideas of bravery, character, self-sacrifice, physical domination and self-discipline (Smith, 2003). White, middle-class femininity and womanhood have historically been disconnected from sport and thought of in terms that fit poorly in sport discourses: delicacy, passivity, vulnerability, moral purity (Lenskyj, 1986; Smith, 2003). These parameters of dominant femininity have historically excluded aboriginal, black, white working-class and other marginalized groups of women. Often it was these marginalized women who did the physically demanding work that white middle-class women were protected from, illustrating that passivity, vulnerability and frailty were not essential feminine qualities but socially constructed differences. The fear that sport will masculinise particular groups of women is extremely specific and might be seen as reactionary and measured because it reveals how “difference” contributes to distinctions and hierarchies amongst women, illuminating the complicated way that race and class intersect with gender and how sporting experiences vary across the category of “woman”.

“Difference” also plays a major part in dividing women from men. Women who are read as “masculine” lessen the perception of difference that exists between men and women in our society. Narrowing the gap between men and women is significant because it erodes the explanation for male privilege in our society. Masculinised women threaten dominant gender order that privileges males above females because they undermine the logic that masculine domination is premised on: men are naturally stronger, braver, more self-disciplined, and therefore more deserving than women.
Enter the dance team.

Across many university campuses, dance teams have replaced traditional cheerleading squads at women’s and men’s basketball games. They dance and entertain the crowd during timeouts, as well as half-time and quarter-time breaks of basketball games. Dance teams, in contrast to most women’s basketball teams reflect dominant ideals of white, middle-class femininity. Their performances are often sexualized and cater to the white, heterosexual male gaze. The dancers’ femininities are displayed in the ways they move their bodies in the gym and in the way they appear and present themselves to the crowd. Most teams are exclusively composed of thin, white, heterosexually attractive women wearing tight-fitting uniforms. However, in some ways dance teams do not completely fit into the dominant feminine role because they perform difficult and physically demanding dance routines, challenging narratives that equate femininity to passivity.

Dance teams often appear to emphasize and highlight their gendered differences from men’s basketball teams. By contrast, women’s basketball teams often emphasize their similarities to male players. Side-by-side, female dancers and female basketball players offer starkly different feminine performances and the differences between the two performances contribute to a tension between the groups. Each group vies for legitimacy and recognition in public space while contributing to the marginalization of the other.

For example, the dance team contributes to the heteronormative logic of the space. Heteronormativity, or the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, depends on
gender logic that positions men and women as opposites and complimentary to each other (Pronger, 1992). Dance teams perform femininity in a way that reinforces gendered difference; dance team members appear as the opposite of and compliment to the masculine performances of male athletes on court. Heteronormativity marginalizes masculinities and femininities that do not fit neatly into binary gender logic. White, middle-class, female athletes whose feminine performances emphasize the similarities between men and women are marginalized through heteronormative discourses that require and therefore construct differences between men and women.

As an athlete I did not easily accept my marginalization from heteronormative narratives. Though I didn’t know what “heteronormativity” meant I did have a sense that the dance team “othered” me. So I responded by trying to marginalize the dance team and their feminine performance.

We sit in the stands at our rival’s gym. My teammates and I relax; we had finally finished the preseason. Most of us wear our team-issued jogging suits and lounge with our legs and feet draped over the seats in front of us. I have no makeup on and my hair is wet and pulled back in a ponytail; I had a quick shower after our game because I wanted to be at the tipoff of the men’s game, the second game in today’s double-header. Playing university basketball, in general, is difficult. But the preseason is the toughest part. It is physically and mentally exhausting, with endless practices, heavy weight training, and the ups and downs of trying to build confidence while you are making mistakes. But my
team had made it through preseason and that felt good; we were on to league play. Now we had a chance to relax and watch our men’s team play...

Ten minutes later my pleasant mood evaporated.

You’ve got to be kidding me. How does this add to the experience of watching a basketball game? Do people take this seriously? I crank my neck around, looking beside and behind me, scanning, trying to figure out what other people in the stands think about what’s happening. At center court fifteen women perform a dance during the quarter time break at the men’s game. They all resemble each other; their skin is bronzed, their bodies are slim and neat. Even from this distance I observe carefully applied rouge on their cheeks and lips. I suddenly realize how sloppy and “un-put together” I must appear.

Katie, a teammate, interrupts my scan of the crowd with a yelp and bursts out laughing. The dance team had just performed a “wardrobe change”. Now, they dance in sports bras and skin-tight pants.

NO WAY! three of us say in response.

Their shirts must have been holding them back, I say sarcastically. Can you imagine dancing like that in public? It’s so embarrassing.

Some of us continue, berating and judging the dance team even after the men’s game resumes. We resist acknowledging anything positive about the dance team and only devalue their presence.

Next to the dance team I experienced a sense of self-consciousness and visibility that I didn’t often feel in a gym. My own sense of self-confidence faltered and I felt less
sure of myself because I wondered if other people might see me as “masculine”. Next to the dance team I felt masculine and that was problematic for me. I will explain why in the following section, but first let us explore my reaction more closely.

My reaction to the dance team reflects the complicated way that the feminine apologetic manifests itself in women’s high performance sport. The feminine apologetic refers to a situation in which a woman, having perceived that she has transgressed a gender boundary, then attempts to regain her feminine status by emphasizing her own femininity (Felshin, 1974). In sport the apologetic is visible in small gestures – an athlete ties a ribbon around her ponytail or wears visible makeup during competition.

Canadian society has changed a great deal from the era when the “apologetic” term first was first coined by Jan Felshin in 1974. More women enter into fields that were once exclusively male and more women do “masculine” things in their daily lives. Theberge (2000) hypothesises that the place of the feminine apologetic in sport deserves revisiting because the increasing numbers of girls and women in high performance sport have irrevocably changed how women play sport. I agree with Theberge’s hypothesis and my experiences shed light on the complicated way that the feminine apologetic persists in women’s sport.

On my team we silently policed each other for any signs of the feminine apologetic. Implicitly, boundaries were established around femininity to root out the most overt forms. A subtle comment often reminded a woman of “our” collective values. If a player wore makeup to practice or put on something “dressy” (meaning anything other
than jogging pants) on the bus she would likely be rebuffed. Many of us made fun of a notorious team in our league that had a number of women who were always tanned and wore makeup and high, long ponytails in competition because these women seemed so obsessed with looking sexy and feminine while they played.

The rejection of the feminine apologetic by my team might be seen as resistance to dominant ideals of femininity. Our resistance to the apologetic reveals the extent of our own hostilities towards the feminine. Almost everything I desired in sport was defined in masculine terms: a hard body; to play like a man; to be stronger and tougher than other more feminine women. I regularly devalued things I associated with femininity. Within the insular nature of women’s university basketball, our team’s policing of the feminine apologetic was normalized. When the dance team showed up it exposed the tension hidden just beneath the veneer of our resistance to constraining feminine ideals. The dance team interrupted the insularity of our team culture. Regardless of my membership in this alternative culture that policed for the feminine apologetic, I thought that because I was a woman I would still be judged by my femininity. The nature of our sport culture clashed with broader constraints by which I still felt bound. In spite of playing basketball, I still wanted to be considered a feminine woman and next to the dance team it was difficult to appear as I desired. And so I thought it was women like “them” that prevented me from fitting in and being considered a “normal” woman. Instead of recognizing the skills, pleasure and energy that the dance team brought to the gym, I considered their presence only as a hindrance to my own legitimacy and recognition. The way I reacted to
their presence, devaluing their performance and trivializing them as people, reflected misplaced frustration and anger. I did not think to question the underlying system that problematized my femininity. This situation reveals the difficulty of negotiating difference and sameness, gender and femininity for women within masculine sporting structures.

My reaction to the dance team would not likely be embraced or considered positive by my fellow third-wave feminists. This is because third-wave feminism often articulates a fierce commitment to femininity and beauty culture in order to show that femininity can be about more than domesticity and second-class citizenship (Heywood, 2008). I agree that femininity should not be automatically and unequivocally be equated to subordination and that the third-wave has contributed critical nuanced readings of femininity and beauty culture that were lacking in previous decades. Yet, I still equated and understood femininity as more marginalized and less important than masculinity. This suggests that at a cultural level there is still important work to be done that rescues femininity from its second-class standing.

Lesbian Stigma Persists

A feminine appearance often thinly veils the heterosexuality of women’s sport (Hall, 1996). The policing of femininity on my team presented a problem for me because the easiest way to confirm my heterosexual status was essentially tabooed. Adding to this tension was my own sense that I appeared masculine next to the dance team and my fear
that my relatively masculine appearance would be taken as a marker of being a lesbian to “outsiders”. Theberge (2000) writes that the cultural connection between sport and lesbianism increases the amount of homophobia within women’s sport. My experiences confirm this. And while there is not a singular or uniform reaction to the presence of lesbians and bisexual women in sport, I often encountered situations that reflected a mixture of acceptance, invisibility, silence and fear.

*We share the bus ride home with the men’s team. Members from both teams chat, listen to music on their ipods and finish homework. A few of us talk about the dance team. We picked up where we had left-off in the gym, bashing and making fun of the dancers. Soon athletes from the men’s team join our conversation and want to know our perspective on the dancers. Even the men noticed the dance team’s “scandalous” performance at the gym today.*

*I struggle to figure out what to say. Should I let these men know that I can’t stand it when dance teams are at our games? That’s pretty harsh. I could come across as really bitter if I did that. It would sound jealous. I am not jealous, am I? Is that why I am so mean to them?*

*My thoughts are interrupted by my teammate. She says, I think they’re smokin’ hot.*

*Immediately the calculations begin in my head: she’s not a lesbian, she has a boyfriend and appears feminine. I know those things don’t mean you can’t be a lesbian, but there is no way she is one. Who else is around? What should I say in response? Did Heather hear? How is she reacting? I am not 100 per cent sure she is a lesbian, but I think she is.*
She’s a good friend, but how would I even ask that? What if I was wrong? I wouldn’t want anyone to think I am a lesbian....It’s not that I am homophobic; I support people being with whomever they please, it’s just that I don’t want to be mistaken for a lesbian.

My teammate’s comments are taken up by the men’s team. They agree with her. No one on my team says much. We move to a new topic. This exchange was quick and unremarkable in most ways.

My teammate’s remark that the dancers were “hot” interrupted and complicated the heteronormativity of the space. She offered a different interpretation of the dance team that I had not considered. I would have expected that comment from a man, I felt surprised when she said it. Was she trying to be pre-emptive with her remarks, saying what she thought the around us were men were thinking? In some ways her comments could be read as reinforcing heteronormativity of the space, but could she have been expressing lesbian desire? Can “straight” women see other women as “hot”? Maybe she was evaluating the dance team’s attractiveness through a framework that she herself prescribed to?

Though I did not know what her remarks “meant” I knew she spoke from a privileged position. I didn’t think she was a “real” lesbian and her comments were mitigated by discourses that continue to equate femininity to heterosexuality. Though not overtly feminine, my teammate did not seem to represent an authentic “lesbian threat” because she still appeared feminine. Other women on the bus, those who appeared more masculine or ‘butch’ or failed to have the protective pretext of a heterosexual
relationship, did not speak out in the conversation. The conflation of femininity with heterosexuality and lesbianism with transgressive gender performances in popular discourses obscures and ignores the presence of lesbians who are invested in their femininity.

The silence that followed my teammate’s comments might have meant a number of things. From my perspective it said much about the fear and invisibility that often develop around the possibility of homosexuality in sport. The links between femininity and heterosexuality operated even as our team policed for overt forms of the feminine apologetic. I felt pulled in two directions. Layers of meaning that appeared contradictory were implicitly registered and laid over each other. Lesbian stigma and policing for the feminine apologetic often coexisted in my experiences of sport.

On the bus I wanted to avoid being labelled a lesbian and at the same time I did not think this desire made me homophobic. I did not understand that homophobia could be more than slandering a lesbian or bisexual woman. This misrecognition allowed my silence to go unproblematised. My silence, though personal, reflects a larger and systematic failure of women’s sports. I did not know how to talk or engage with the fact that women on my team were lesbians. I also thought that since I wasn’t a lesbian homophobia was not my battle, so I found it easier to keep silent.

The systematic failure to discuss homophobia and lesbian stigma in women’s sport reflects how deeply embedded these discourses are. But it is not only athletes who suffer; many coaches, referees and administrators are also limited and policed through
lesbian stigma (Griffin, 1998). In sport many lesbians fear retribution and job loss; others choose not to talk about their sexual preference because they feel it is a private choice and that sexuality should not be thought of as a public issue (Griffin, 1998). However, scholars such as Griffin (1998), Theberge (2000), Pronger (1992), remind us that issues around lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender people should be thought of as “public” because in these conversations we are not narrowly talking of personal choice, but of systematic prejudice, discrimination and human rights. I wrongly thought that because I wasn’t a lesbian, homophobia wasn’t my problem. Homophobia is also a feminist issue because it infiltrates the lives of many women—regardless of their sexual preference. As a straight woman I didn’t perceive how homophobia shaped the ways that I presented myself and behaved in sport.

Conclusion
At the beginning of this narrative I wrote that I always thought it was basketball teams that might help dance teams and not the other way around. This belief stemmed from my own convictions that women in sports were more empowered than other women who were not athletes. After examining the complicated way that lesbian stigma and the feminine apologetic manifest themselves in high level women’s athletics it is apparent that athletic femininities are still mired in problems. However, I am hopeful because I believe that together dance teams and basketball teams might be able to remove the antagonisms that presently exist between different femininities and replace them with a greater connection across difference and a shared sense of struggle. Dance and basketball
and other similar activities offer feminists ideal “breeding” grounds for critical thought and activism. For example women from each team might begin a dialogue around their experiences of performing in the gym or work towards creating coalitions around issues that affect them. Dance and basketball teams might collaborate and work towards a shared feminist goal such as fundraising for a worthy organization or creating education and awareness around women’s issues on university campuses. By working together women from each group might begin to expand and create more space for women in the gym or different understandings of the women who already occupy it.

A feminist vision of sport is not about creating conformity and squeezing everyone into the same mould. Rather, it is about carving out space for people to be as they wish and facilitating opportunities for personal growth and experiences of pleasure. Sport offers us a powerful transformative tool because in sport we might learn to celebrate many different gendered performances. This might lead us on a systematic and cultural level to develop and attach new meanings to femininity and masculinity than we do presently. Masculinity and femininity might not be understood in such binary terms and femininity might be rescued from its marginalized status. Ideally our society might move to a place where we have expanded our ideas of gender performance so that there might be enough space for all sorts of gender performances to happily co-exist on basketball and dance teams.
Narrative 2 – The Game Against Men

This narrative revisits a basketball game that some of my teammates and I played against the varsity men’s volleyball team in the offseason of my fourth year. The men’s team challenged my basketball team to a friendly game - no coaches, no refs, no complaining, just two halves of hoops for the title. What ensued, however, was about more than just basketball and the situation allows us to reflect on the implications of certain groups of women being admitted to the centre of male sport. I argue that female athletes might work towards a culture of resistance from within their positions in sport to overcome the limitations of seeking empowerment and equality in male-defined structures. By “a culture of resistance” I mean that athletes might question common practices in sport and begin to consider how these practices could be different. Ideally feminist changes might move sport in the direction of placing athletes in conditions that are conducive to personal growth, empowerment and pleasure. I would suggest that in our present sport system these outcomes rely too heavily on athletes being lucky enough to play under coaches who have “feminist” inclinations and believe that sport can and should be about more than winning.

This narrative begins by considering social changes that have taken place over the past fifty years that can make it difficult for many young women to recognize that sexism has an influence on their lives. The narrative goes on to suggest how sport might help young women recognize the ways that inequality persists despite the progress in gender
relations that have been brought about by feminism. I conclude by considering the complex nature of both empowerment and resistance for women within male-defined sport.

**Sexism Today**

Most people who grew up in North America and are presently in their mid-twenties have been exposed to more feminism than previous generations (Fidlen, 1995; Baumgardner & Richardson, 2000). Though feminism is not always acknowledged as such, it has nevertheless changed both men’s and women’s lives. Feminism and other social movements have transformed major institutions, altered expectations and attitudes in our society. Many women have entered fields that were once off-limits, including medicine, law, business, the academy; women now make up the majority of undergraduate classes in universities (Baumgardner & Richardson, 2000). Middle-class ideas around roles and behaviours that are appropriate for both men and women have shifted. 9 With the rise of social movements like feminism and gay liberation we have also learned how systems of oppression intersect. No longer do we think “sexism” is a singular category that affects all women in the same way. And while feminism has notably improved many women’s

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9 Sullivan (2004) notes that reported attitudes around the domestic division of labour and childrearing responsibilities in heterosexual relationships have shifted from previous eras but cautions that these progressive attitudes are not necessarily reflected in the practices or everyday experiences of many women. Women in many situations continue to be primarily responsible for the majority of domestic work in the home.
lives, this should not obscure how disparity still persists between men and women and amongst women.

When I moved in with Chris and Scott I was pleasantly surprised. They both had been varsity athletes on the men’s volleyball team that we played at the end of my fourth year. I moved to their apartment during the first summer of my master’s program. We were more acquaintances than friends at that point. As I became better friends with them my own confusion about “the game” grew. They did things that I believed “sexist” men wouldn’t. They were neat and tidy; they cleaned more than any of the women whom I had lived with in my undergraduate degree ever did. They cooked meals like pork tenderloin with smashed potatoes and spring greens. They owned men’s beauty products for exfoliating and moisturizing and used pomade to style their hair. Chris and Scott did things that are traditionally thought of as “feminine”. But, although these men weren’t particularly sexist, I gained the impression that “the game” still meant a great deal to them and more so to their teammates.

On the Sunday morning of the game their team had fourteen players to our eight. Two of our strongest players decided against playing and one other athlete on our team was injured. In the second half when we threatened to win the game they made dramatic changes to their lineup and only played their top seven players in order to secure a victory. I swore it was because they could not handle losing to a bunch of women.
Sport has the potential to help us to grasp and measure social change. Complicated ideas around power and privilege that might otherwise remain hidden in supposedly post-racial, post-feminist, post-sexist society surface in sport because things such as funding, ice-time, media coverage and quality opportunities are not consistent or fair in sport. Sport has the potential to reveal broader social networks of power, reflecting which groups in our society have power and what their interests are. I could sense that the men’s team did not think of my team as an equal on the court because they could not fathom losing to us.

Within a broader climate of feminist-inspired social change and changing gender expectations, sport offers men an enduring and concrete symbol of their own importance and power (Messner, 2002). While gender roles seem to be constantly changing, sport offers a reprieve. Men’s performances are usually faster, stronger, more powerful and, by standard definitions of what counts, superior to women’s performances in sport. Sport offers men an enduring and positive interpretation of manhood that is increasingly challenged in other areas of life. Of course not all men experience the privilege of sporting institutions equally. Aspects of identity such as race, class, and sexuality structure the types and quality of opportunities that men have in sport. Additionally, it is critical to recognize that while many men thrive in dominant sport culture many other men feel alienated from its homophobia and misogyny and do not experience sport as an enduring symbol of masculine importance (Messner, 2002).
While sport in many ways remains “male”, it is also true that more women have made their way to the center of sport culture. Some girls and women are admitted with the help of brothers, fathers, uncles, male teachers, volunteers and coaches from the community. In this way the “center” of male sport has been heavily contested (Messner, 2002). This process has been easier for white middle class women than for women from less privileged groups (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). In reading the admittance of privileged women to sport as a “success story”, we risk reproducing hierarchies amongst women. This is, in part, what motivates some feminists like Helen Lenskyj (1986) and Susan Birrell & Diana M. Richter (1987) to suggest that women seek out alternatives to male sport and develop a separate sport structures that emphasizes participation, cooperation and bodily pleasure. For these feminists male sport that is developed around violence, elitism, competition and masculinity will never emancipate women.

My experiences in sport force me to depart from feminists, like Lenskyj, who believe that male-defined sport has to be abandoned in the name of feminism. But I also believe that female athletes should not unconsciously adopt male sporting values or blindly reproduce male sporting structures as if these were are the only options. Though this may at first appear contradictory upon closer examination my position reveals my belief that there are certain aspects of male sports culture that women should absolutely embrace: confidence, self assuredness, a sense of self worth and a culture of physical and emotional strength (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). And, there are certain aspects of male-
defined sport that women should be critical of accepting such as its culture of individualism and an ethos that is predicated on denigrating the feminine.

Ultimately, I advocate for feminists and athletes to transform sport from within because history shows that changes that result in more women having better experiences in sport have often depended on having access to decision-making opportunities that influence practices and understandings of sport (Harrigan, 2003; Lenskyj, 1986). From my perspective the best way to create better sporting experiences for girls and women and make sport more accessible for those who have been excluded and marginalized depends on having feminists who are conscious of inequalities across the category of women and committed to changing these discrepancies in power and making decisions within mainstream sporting structures.

Bartlett Gym

We played “the game” in Bartlett gym on a Sunday morning in April. Bartlett gym was delightful; it had an old-school charm. A single hardwood court surrounded by muted yellow walls, lit by old dim lights. That Sunday we pulled up two benches to the sideline and relied on a small plastic scoreboard to keep track of the points.

The first play of the game I knew it was going to be a rough match-up. They won the starting jump ball at centre court and gained offensive possession. They moved down the court towards our net looking to score. We played tough defence. They passed the ball around eventually working it inside close to the net. They were much taller than us so this
was a good strategy for them. However, when the ball did finally get to one of their tallest players (190 pounds, 6 feet 5 inches) right under the net, one of my teammates (160 pounds 5 feet 11 inches) shoved him so hard that when he landed from his missed jump shot he was three feet from where he started. I was a little surprised at how easily he was moved. I couldn’t contain my smile; maybe we would be able to compete with these men after all.

We called a foul against our team and he shot and missed both foul shots.

From that point things escalated. We hit them as hard as we could at every chance. We clutched their t-shirts, put our elbows into their stomachs, roughed them up and used every dirty trick we knew. They did not know how to react; they didn’t want to hit women. We used that to our advantage.

On my walk home from the gym I thought about the game. We were better basketball players than them. But, in the end we lost. We played well; they were bigger and stronger. A bunch of men who had never really seriously played basketball could show up and beat us. We had practically dedicated our lives to basketball. It felt demoralizing and quickly dampened the feelings of empowerment that I experienced from hitting their team really hard. Part of me regretted playing, had I just reinforced every single stereotype I had been trying to resist?

This situation illuminates the complexity of women trying to resist constraining narratives within male-defined sport. On one level I felt a sense of empowerment from showing the men that I was strong. As a team, we surprised the men’s volleyball team
with our intense physicality. Perhaps they had not realized how physical and aggressive women’s high performance sport is. We controlled and dictated their movements on the court with our bodies. Hitting and pushing I fought against narratives that placed the burden of passivity on me. Knowing that I had the means within myself and my body to struggle and resist physical domination helped me to feel empowered. We literally lashed out at the men to prove that they weren’t the only ones who were strong and powerful.

However, the experience of being physical with the men’s volleyball felt confusing in other ways. A sense of resignation and defeat accompanied my feelings of power. Even though we were so rough and violent, the men’s team still physically dominated us and in the end they won the game. I felt anger because I assumed the men just thought that was how it was supposed to be, that they were naturally better at sports. This situation highlights the limitations of women trying to completely assimilate into the male model of sport. Men are, on average, stronger, faster and more powerful than women (Messner, 2002). Women who simply assimilate into the model will always remain in second standing unless the terms and values we attach to sport change. If women fail to shift the terms and understandings of sport and physical culture, they will continually run into frustrating and marginalizing situations like my experiences of playing the volleyball team.

In the present system, the recognition that women cannot assimilate into male sports and expect to be validated as the equals of men provides the impetus for women to begin creating a culture of resistance in order to shift the meanings we attribute to sport.
and the way that the sport system is organized. Most of my teammates and I had tried to resist limiting cultural narratives about femininity by engaging directly with the ideologies that place men above women in sport. But the fact that two of our strongest players declined to play in the match with the volleyball team shows that there are a variety of ways to resist. Though all of my teammates might be thought of as resisting constraining cultural narratives in some way, a culture of individualism prevailed amongst us. We didn’t talk with each other or try to gain new perspectives on the situation which might have helped us negotiate the experience in a productive way. Those of us who played did not articulate how it felt to lose or try to figure out our shared frustrations that developed from the difficulty of challenging men in sport, men who were bigger and stronger than we were. We never acknowledged that hitting and trying to play physically against the men’s volleyball team had its limitations as a mode of resistance. I figured my teammates’ frustrations would not have matched mine so I kept my thoughts to myself.

Towards a Culture of Resistance

Part of changing dominant narratives in both sport and society relates to challenging masculinist narratives of sport. One way to do this as athletes is to support the expansion of the types of sports and activities that are celebrated and recognized in our culture. This might help dissolve the definition of male dominated sports like basketball, football and hockey, as the sports that really count (Messner, 2002). This means promoting activities and sports like dance, gymnastics, long distance swimming that develop around the
potential of the female body (Messner, 2002). But care must be taken not to promote any sports or activities as essentially linked to men’s or women’s bodies. Rather we need to develop the idea that there are many different types and ways to experience movement, sport and athleticism.

If as a society we begin to shift and recognize a greater range of sports and physicality, the power and privilege that presently connect masculinity and sport at the expense of the feminine might be dissolved. Ultimately, it is this connection that feminists and female athletes must undermine because until masculine privilege in sport is challenged the ghettoization of women’s sport will persist, regardless of what model of sport we choose to pursue or how many women are admitted to the center of male sport (Kidd, 1996; Cahn, 1994; Messner, 2002).

Our experience playing the men’s volleyball team exposed the limitations of women trying to completely assimilate into masculine sport structures. Dominant team sports like basketball and hockey are presently understood and structured around the most extreme potentials of the male body (Messner, 2002). It is doubtful that the average woman will be as strong or fast as the average man in these sports, and this creates the impetus for women in male defined sport to cultivate a culture of resistance and to create strategies to expand how as a society we experience and understand sport. My teammates and I, with the men’s volleyball team, might have accomplished this in the gym that Sunday morning if we would have been less rigid in our focus.
For example, many third-wave feminists believe that social change depends on working with men and building change together (Heywood, 2008). This makes a lot of sense to me. Sport provided us with this site of potential intervention to actually “do feminist work with men”. Instead proving our worth through a “the battle of the sexes” we might have tried playing a game with different arrangements of players and mixed up the teams so that each side would have been composed of male and female athletes. We could have organized a co-ed three-on-three round-robin tournament where everyone continually played and no one had to sit on the bench at any point. There were many options that we might have tried that might have avoided many of us walking away from the gym in frustration and ambivalence.

**Conclusion**

How we understand sport largely depends on broader discourses and relationships of power in our society. Feminism and other social movements have influenced our lives and expectations. Feminism has helped many women to compete in sports. But women who have reached the centre of male sport are not always cognisant of the way in which their access and experiences of empowerment are limited and shaped by larger discourses of masculinity. Indeed this is one of the biggest obstacles that the feminist project around sport faces; politicizing a group of women to agitate for change in an institution that appears to be working for them on many levels. Yet, in my own experiences, you do not have to dig very deep to find that even the most successful female athletes have
experienced brushes with sexism, homophobia, racism, and are very much aware of the constant negotiation of being a woman in male-defined sport. This is why feminist’s struggles in sport should not only focus on “admittance” to the centre but should additionally focus on evaluating what values and practices will help women – as a diverse group – have positive experiences.

Feminists who may, with good reason, have an aversion to sport should nevertheless be concerned with the institution because more girls and women than ever before participate and increasingly define themselves through sport. Feminists might, for instance, appreciate the fact that the lessons that might be taken away high performance sport have the potential to help women who do not play sport. This is because sport is not the only insular, male-defined institution in our society. In all areas of life – education, the workplace, politics, music, religion -- women negotiate similar situations. Feminists need to have conversations around what it is like to negotiate various male-defined institutions with the explicit goal of creating consciousness and a sense of a shared struggle amongst women who are located differently. In turn, these women who share a “raised-consciousness” might develop feminist strategies that could contribute to transforming these institutions into ones which are committed to valuing and promoting practices that encourage social justice and equality.
Narrative 3 – The Practice

“Huddle Up.” Our coaches called our team into the center of Ross gym. Thursdays we always practiced late in Ross gym. Ross gym was 10 feet short of regulation. This meant less running, making it my favourite gym. Tonight, we started our practice the same way we always did, a quick huddle at centre court and a cheer.

Our coaches met in the middle of the court. “Tonight’s practice is going to be different. We want you to play hard. We know you think you already play hard, but we want more. Hit someone on every play, foul, claw, struggle, dive for loose balls, get dirty. Your teammates are now your toughest opponents. Think of it this way: the harder we practice the easier it will be for us to play in games. Here are the rules: the game will be half court, keep score for your own team, play man-to-man defence, run our team offenses, and there is no such thing as a foul. Any questions?”

This narrative revisits a practice from the preseason of my fourth year. I argue that aggression might be thought of as different than violence and that aggression in the context of sport might be empowering for groups of women who have been labelled “fragile” and “delicate”. In this narrative I explore what I consider the difference to be between aggression and violence. I highlight my own struggle to embrace an aggressive physicality and advocate for other athletes to think about their experiences so that they too might contribute to developing more nuanced narratives of women’s aggression. I explore how femininity is linked to bodies and what is considered appropriate feminine
behaviour and then I conclude by considering the implications of advocating for a sport culture that celebrates aggressiveness for women.

Violence and Aggression

What’s the difference between aggression and violence? Violence is often understood as an insufficiently justified, intentional harmful act that oppresses and dehumanizes (Messner, 2002; Burstyn 1999; Roth & Bascow, 2004). From my perspective, aggression and violence in sport are different. I believe that aggressive play is not about dehumanizing an opponent or acting in a way that is intentionally harmful. Instead I believe that aggressive play is the embodiment of intensity and engagement that requires skill, concentration and strong sense of competition. Yet, in the course of researching my thesis I encountered many feminist scholars who conflated violence and aggression, often using the terms interchangeably. The conflation of aggressiveness and violence sacrifices nuance and obscures the value that might be associated with learning how to use the body in an aggressive manner. But before we move on to considering how aggressiveness might help groups of women who have been labelled “fragile” we must first “unpack” violence and aggression further.

Both aggression and violence might be thought of as relative terms. Age, weight, height, experience, gender, and a host of other factors influence how people define and understand the difference between the two. Differences in social and personal bodily expectations and experiences of different groups of people help us understand that what would be violent for one group might be understood as “normal” physical behaviour for
another. And while it is important to acknowledge the relative nature of aggression and violence, I believe that violence in sport, particularly in men’s sport but increasingly in women’s, needs to be understood in more absolute terms. Clear parameters about behaviour that is acceptable and the consequences of transgressions should be set out by leagues and referees. These parameters need to account for factors such as age, weight, and experience. An example of the type of regulation that I think is beneficial comes from the National Hockey League (NHL). In 2010 the NHL instituted a rule banning “blindsided” hits and head shots in an attempt to protect players from violence.

That said, violence and aggression can be difficult to isolate in a dynamic sport environment. There is no way to guarantee that aggressiveness will not escalate to violence. It might not be possible to advocate for aggression without acknowledging the possibility that it might be a vote for violence. Third-wave authors such as Veena Cabreros-Sud (1995) and Jen Smith (1997) argue that women cannot afford to be non-violent in our society and point out that many women have never had the privilege to position themselves against violence. Cabreros-Sud (1995) argues violence is often linked to self preservation. Consider that women of all ages and from all classes, races, backgrounds and sexualities confront violence on a daily basis. Women suffer from the omnipresent fear of rape and are disproportionately the victims of domestic abuse (Smith, 1997; Cabreros-Sud, 1995; McCaughey 1998; Roth & Bascow, 2004). And yet violence against women is not limited to the physical; advocates often expand our ideas of what
violence “is” by speaking of the emotional, spiritual and psychic damage that is wrought in a misogynist, racist, homophobic society.

For scholars such as Martha McCaughey (1998), Amanda Roth and Susan Bascow (2004) part of resisting violence is learning self-defense. These authors argue that self-defense is more than a series of controlled movements or reactions but encompasses physical, mental and emotional skills. McCaughey (1998) writes that through training students learn a variety of techniques such as the importance of using assertive language and a loud voice to set personal boundaries. They also learn how the combination of a confident demeanour with the knowledge that one can take a hit are often critical components of thwarting an attack. The skills required for self-defense violate dominant feminine norms in many ways. Many women who were taught from a young age to be nice and polite and to take up as little space as possible and who have endured constant reminders of their vulnerability and fragility, are taught new feminine scripts and asked to internalize a different type bodily knowledge (McCaughey, 1998).

Conveniently, many of the lessons taught in high performance sport mimic lessons that women might encounter in self-defense training (McCaughey 1998; Roth & Bascow, 2004). For example, in basketball teammates are forced to yell and communicate loudly on defense. Athletes learn that their bodies are resilient and strong and that they can take a hit. Essentially, through sport young girls and women learn the bodily scripts that offer a measure of resistance against many of the types of violence that women are subject to in masculinist culture.
Complicating Aggression in Sport

In 1990 scholar Iris Marion Young argued that girls learn to use their bodies in ways that are marked by hesitation and constraint whereas boys are taught to extend and to move through the planes of their bodies. In the more than twenty years since Young’s publication, we would most likely complicate how she conceptualizes “girls” and “boys”, as well as observe the narrowing of the gap she describes between the groups because of the increasing numbers of girls in sport. If Young were to complete a study on girls today I believe that she would see more girls moving and living their bodies the way that boys did in her study from 1990. And yet in many ways Young’s (1990) observations still resonates with present conditions and my experiences reflect this.

But first, I would like to note how and why I depart from scholars McCaughey, Roth and Bascow. These scholars suggest that through activities like sport and self-defense training women develop new bodily scripts that necessarily transform a woman’s consciousness which influence every aspect of her life. McCaughey (1998) notes that through self-defense training the women she interviewed became more confident with men in everyday situations, left abusive relations, got divorces, started business and developed better body-images and self-esteem. I do not doubt the existence of these
positive personal affects. What I question is the automatic or unconscious nature of these transformations\textsuperscript{10}

From my perspective McCaughey, Roth and Bascow underestimate the importance of feminist consciousness in the “transformations” that develop from self-defense training and fail to recognize that feminist consciousness is not inherently linked to athleticism or sport. As we will see below, though I grew up playing sport this did not protect me from understanding aggression as “masculine” or modifying and constraining my own behaviour and body in sport to fit with what I considered to be “feminine”. McCaughey, Roth and Bascow’s accounts gloss over and obscure the difficulties that I encountered when I had to negotiate my own strength and aggression.

\textit{Is this practice ever going to end? I look around trying to find a clock, damn there’s no clock in Ross. How did I forget that? Okay, just get through it. Get through it...I am thinking way too much this practice....just focus on playing defense....}

\textit{We are in the middle of practice. Every play I get hit hard by at least two other players each play and my team is finding it difficult to run an offense because it’s impossible to move freely anywhere on the court. Someone is always grabbing my arms or obstructing my path. It is incredibly frustrating. The atmosphere is intense and focused; no one talks or laughs. Earlier, a fist fight almost broke out between two women.}

\textsuperscript{10}Mary Louise Adams presented this idea in \textit{White Fantasies: Feminist Sport Discourse and the Privileging of Physical Strength} at the 2006 North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) annual conference.
I tensed up almost as soon as we started playing. Though there were no obvious lines that we crossed I just felt a deep sense of anxiety and self-consciousness. I didn’t want to appear or compete as my teammates did. They seemed to easily slip into this new style of play, I didn’t. Part of me wished I could. I wondered if I even would be able to do what they were doing. Are they just more competitive than me? Are they more athletic than me? What’s the difference between us?

On many levels the symbolic importance of the female athlete connects to ideas of opportunity, empowerment and independence that have been promoted by feminists (Messner, 2002; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Though it is positive and important that female athletes are celebrated and acknowledged, sometimes this popular narrative leaves no room to express doubt or the contradictions that can accompany the experience of being a female athlete.

I thought I wasn’t supposed to care about my appearance, about looking “masculine” when I played basketball. Most of the time I don’t, but this situation feels different. My teammates looked so manly, it frightened me. I didn’t want to look like that; so extreme and “unfeminine”.

It is a rather paradoxical situation; being heavily entrenched in masculine sporting discourses while at the same time not wanting to appear too masculine or unfeminine. And, even though a culture of masculinity prevailed on my team—we policed for femininity as seen in Narrative 1—I still felt a deep sense that I needed to preserve my femininity when I was pushed to my limit in the Thursday night practice. Even though I
played sport at a high level and most likely performed and engaged with the type of comportment that scholars like McCaughey (1998), Roth & Bascow (2004) suggest is empowering and transformative, I found it difficult to easily embrace my own aggression and powerfulness. This is because I viewed aggression as masculine and therefore as a deviant performance. Many of my teammates who were located differently from me did not share this interpretation of aggression and were less likely to think of playing aggressively as “deviant” or transgressive. Perhaps this made it easier for them to play in that practice. Some of my teammates might have been less invested in their femininity than I was. Or maybe they might have just more used to playing in an aggressive style and understood that they liked it.

In the weight room in the basement of the Physical and Education Center (PEC) my teammate and I alternate sets of free weights. On my team we lift weights with a buddy during season to keep up conditioning and strength, both of which somehow deteriorate as the season progresses. Lifting with a partner is supposed to make you more accountable and committed to lifting weights three times a week when you are exhausted and busy during term. My partner and I have an unspoken understanding. We both want to improve our conditioning and to get “cut” through lifting weights, but sometimes we modify our workouts or over emphasize certain areas of our bodies more than we are directed to by the “power-explosive” routine picked for us by our coach. Implicitly, we both work towards a lean and “toned” look.
Today we loosely follow the workout. I put more effort on certain exercises than others. I try to target my “problem areas”: my thighs, my bum, and the backs of my arms. I always finish my workout with a tough abdominal workout.

While I “spot” my partner and watch her struggle to raise the bar from her chest I am racked with guilt since I usually ease off on the bench press because I don’t want to look too “manly”. As she finishes her set of repetitions I think of many things at once: I shouldn’t care so much about getting really big arms or shoulders. I am doing this for basketball. Lifting weights might get me thin anyways. Just go do the last set over again, you half-assed it. It will pay off this weekend when you play. It’s worth it, go’ “Hey,” I say to my partner, “I am just going to do that set again, wanna spot me?”

I go back to the bench press and do the last set over. After, I feel much better.

It is ironic but I subscribed to a “culture of smallness” while playing university basketball. This desire stemmed from my goal of retaining my femininity. Burstyn (1999) writes there is a “need to actively resist a culture of physical ‘smallness’ – as exemplified in thinness and delicacy- for women. Smallness is a symbol for youth, weakness, and subordination” (p. 267). I played a physically rough sport and yet I still craved smallness. The relative nature of the “culture of smallness” which I performed perhaps made it more difficult to identify. Smallness in this context did not mean waif-thin. Instead, I desired what Markula (1995) describes as, “fit but sexy, strong but thin”. I wanted visible, long, lean, hard muscles without the fat. I wanted a small, lean compact body. I constantly
negotiated my desire for “smallness” with my desire to play and compete at the highest level possible.

The “culture of smallness” in women’s high performance sport is complicated because it manifests itself in many ways: athletes putting in extra hours in the gym; dieting or watching their calories; holding back or avoiding certain exercises all together. Thinness blends into the ethos of higher, faster, stronger that is key to male-defined sport, making it harder to discern when lines are crossed or when an athlete goes “too” far. In my own experiences and through conversations with other athletes, it is clear that coaches often instill the idea that being thinner translates to better performances. Many coaches encourage athletes to lose weight and body fat. This “culture of thinness” in women’s sport exists alongside a broader sport culture that values powerfulness, athleticism and performance which are also promoted by coaches.

My desires for smallness and thinness were often offset by my desire to perform well in sport. Performing well required strength and power and depended on physical training, endurance and stamina. On a practical level, the fact that I did not have to wear spandex to practice and compete helped in my struggle against thinness. Other interuniversity athletes such as female volleyball players or cross country runners were less fortunate and had the added pressure of tight fitting, small spandex uniforms.

I thought of my struggle with thinness and powerfulness like a balancing act that I could pretty much control. But, when my coaches asked for aggressive play in our practice on that Thursday night the request seemed to throw my own careful negotiations
of aggression and strength into a crisis of sorts. Part of the value of in the aggression of women’s sports could be that it might force athletes to confront their understandings and negotiations of their own bodies and strength. Aggression is one of the characteristics that supposedly differentiates men from women in sport. For example, the major difference between women’s and men’s ice hockey rules is that women aren’t allowed to body-check (Theberge, 2000). Aggression and violence are important markers of sex difference and they are instrumental in maintaining difference between men and women (McCaughey, 1998). In part the subversive potential of aggression lies in the fact it helps bring to the surface ideas that control and inform not just the way women experience sport but also how they live their lives. For those groups of women who tend to be represented as weak or delicate, the value of aggression might be in realizing that they really can take a hit, that they are stronger than they had been led to believe.

A “culture of smallness” in women’s sport robs many women of positive experiences; it contributes to eating disorders, self-loathing, the draining of physical and emotional energy (Burstyn, 1999). It is important to recognize that a “culture of smallness” has the capacity to persist even as more women enter into physical team sports. This is because smallness and thinness are ideals that are intimately linked to ideas about what is appropriate behaviour. Part of the reason sport might be transformative is because it expands the range of activities, movements and behaviours that are considered appropriate for women. Yet, as my career demonstrates being in a physically demanding and aggressive sport does not automatically protect women from
measuring their bodies against or modifying their behaviour to align with what they perceive to as dominant feminine ideals.

Implications
Though I believe it is important to advocate for a more aggressive and physically tough culture for women in sports, we also need to account for the fact that this position will have different implications for women who are located differently socially and economically. And what of women who are not interested in athletics? What about women who don’t want to express their physicality in this manner or who are not able-bodied or who are chronically ill? Does the promotion of a tough physicality create just an additional set of hierarchies amongst women’s bodies? In what ways do race, class and sexuality intersect when a culture of physicality is advocated?

One way to think about the implications of advocating for an aggressive physicality is to consider long and short term goals. A long term goal might be to move towards a culture that celebrates all bodies and recognizes the value in difference and diversity. This would require expanding our understanding and ideas around physicality, sport and movement. Sport alone cannot bring us to a place where all bodies are celebrated and valued. However, in the short term we might move towards this goal by beginning to try to shift our culture of physicality and sport by recognizing the importance of challenging “a physical culture of smallness” in women’s sport. We need to honestly and thoughtfully assess strategies that would help women challenge narratives
around gendered logic that constrain and limit. Feminist voices must raise questions around why particular sorts of behaviours continue to be considered “appropriate” for girls and women while others are stigmatized. Third-wavers who embrace beauty culture and femininity need to consider the implications of this position and assess how these politics fit with the gender politics by recognizing that femininity still might not be “empowering” or “freeing” for all women.

By examining the “Thursday night practice” we are again confronted with the need for a collective sense of resistance and dissent in women’s sports. I believe that team sport athletes are particularly well suited to challenge narratives that equate certain types of femininity with delicacy and smallness. But, athletes must forge ahead with a set of goals in mind and an idea of what they are displacing and why or else I fear that they risk creating more hierarchies amongst women. Though many of us find an aggressive physicality pleasurable in itself, I believe its value lies in its ability to interrupt and upset many people’s understanding of appropriate feminine behaviour.

A feminist voice should be involved in promoting a conversation around violence and what is appropriate in sport. If not, we risk losing the ground that women before us struggled for. It is important to not set the clock back to a period where women were essentialized as morally superior and incapable of violence or aggression. This does not mean condoning violent actions such as American college soccer player Elizabeth Lambert’s decision to violently tug at her opponent’s ponytail or Britney Griner, a college basketball freshman at Baylor University who punched and bloodied the nose of
her opponent (Longman, 2010). A feminist voice might instead draw attention to the way that these women were villainized and stereotyped in the media. It might question why rare incidents of violence in women’s sport are the only sports stories that seem worthy of mainstream media coverage (Messner quoted in Longman, 2010)? Conversations that surround women’s sport and violence have consequences for women beyond sport. This is because these questions are really raising ideas about what is appropriate behaviour for women in our society. Feminists must be present and vocal in these discussion or we risk losing a lot more than the right to box-out our opponents with our elbows out.

Chapter Conclusion
In this chapter I have tried to complicate feminist understandings of sport. I have also tried to create an account that might be consciousness-raising and compel female athletes to develop a dialogue around sport that explores how might feminisms change how people understand and “do” sport. The stories that I share with the reader are not supposed to be definitive accounts of “truth”, but rather are an interpretation that might be added to, complicated and refuted by other people positioned differently than me. I created this account because it didn’t exist and I thought it needed to.

I started writing this chapter with the explicit purpose of creating third-wave politics around sports. But, as my advisor observed, in the early drafts of this chapter I rarely used the word “feminism”. This was rather strange considering my intentions. Without realising it I was trying to make this chapter more likeable and “feminism-lite”
for other athletes who I assumed would not adopt a feminist perspective. I didn’t want to appear too radical because I thought that would make athletes turn away from me and my work. I think this reveals how powerful and entwined anti- and post-feminist and feminist discourses can be. Curiously, this reveals how in trying to move past post- and anti-feminist discourses in my writing I continued to use them as a reference point on a certain level.

Aspects of third-wave ideology can be seen throughout my narratives. I have tried to avoid universalizing the category of women. I advocate for women to recognize how differences operate within the category of “woman” and “man” and to avoid essentializing either of these categories. In the first narrative I suggest the importance of creating space for many different types of femininities and I problematize the way that sport often reproduces gender logic that devalues and denigrates the feminine. In narrative two I advocate for women and men to work together for feminist transformation of sport and I explore the difficulty of “doing” feminism in the present supposedly “post-feminist” context. In the third narrative I articulate a vision of feminism that makes room for aggression.

Yet, my analysis cannot be considered purely “third-wave”. There were some major limitations around third-wave feminism that I was unable reconcile. As outlined in chapter 3 from my perspective the third-wave has not done enough work to acknowledge the limitations of individualistic politics and fails to consider how individual decisions “add up”. To maneuver around this I tried responding to arguments created by scholars
like Nancy Theberge, Varda Burstyn, Helen Lenskyj, M.A. Hall and Michael Messner who write from what would most likely be considered a second-wave perspective and I tried to ask questions that relate to individual and systematic transformation. I tried to complicate and speak back to their arguments as a third-wave feminist who grew up playing sports and holds on to the belief that sport has the potential to be a positive part of girls and women’s lives.

The final result is a piece of work that blends second and third-wave perspectives that seeks to provide other athletes with a different lens to examine their experiences in sport. To athletes who are reading this, I pose the following questions: have you been faced with similar situations as accounted for in this chapter? How did you react? If you have not been confronted with experiences similar to the ones in these stories, how do you think you would react? How do these situations relate to other aspects of life such as school, work, religion, and relationships? What would you change about what I wrote, and why?
Chapter 6

The Epilogue

I began this project with the desire to gain a greater understanding of my own experience in sport. I hoped that I might somehow bridge my newly found academic world with the sport world which I had been immersed in for twenty plus years. With the help of my advisor I developed a set of questions that guided how I thought about and researched this project. I asked how might feminists rethink their relationship to sport in an era where sport has become an ordinary part of some girls’ and women’s experiences? How might a feminist politic change girl’s and women’s experiences in sport? And finally, does sport have anything unique to offer in support of feminism? I would now like to briefly comment on how I think this project as a whole responds to these questions.

In this project I have tried to highlight what I perceive as the reciprocal need of feminism for sport and sport for feminism. Sport is relevant to feminists because through sport questions are raised, and often answered, which affect how girls and women live and move through the world. Sport is a site that often reinforces and recreates attitudes and conditions that feminists struggle against. But we know that sport itself is not immutable. It could just as easily be reinforcing and recreating feminist ideals. Sport offers a potential site of “feminist intervention” that might expand how we think of gender, difference and community. The increasing numbers of girls and women who are
involved in sport only intensifies the necessity for feminists to recognize the importance of sport in their politics.

Feminism is relevant for women in sport because adopting a feminist perspective would allow female athletes to gain different experiences as they compete. Instead of understanding themselves, their relationships and the world through a masculinist lens, athletes might expand and transform their perceptions. This might seem abstract but consider the narratives that I shared in Chapter Five. Adding a feminist “take” in each situation opened up greater possibilities for thinking about connections across difference that could move sport beyond a culture of individualism. If athletes used feminism to understand their experiences they might develop a different set of desires which would mean adopting different practices to achieve their goals.

**A Feminist Utopia of Sport**

In this section I will briefly outline what I would consider a utopian sport world. I draw my ideas from feminist scholars such as Varda Burstyn, Helen Lenskyj and Michael Messner, M. Ann Hall and Nancy Theberge who have similarly written on what they think a perfect sport system would entail.

On a cultural level, I would like to change the way that our society thinks about sport and physicality. I would like us to embrace and celebrate a greater range of activities. I agree with Burstyn who argues that municipal, provincial and national funding should support a broad range of activities for the majority. I believe that
competitive sport should be seen as just one of many options. One of the benefits of expanding how we think of physical culture might be changing the way we think of bodies, difference and function. These ideas could be reinforced by teaching and exposing children to dance, movement, sport, recreation, competition, cooperation and a variety of sport environments without categorizing certain activities or sports as girls’ or boys’ sports. I would also love to see movement and play being thought of as important as other things such as work and incorporated into our lives at each stage.

Significant changes would also be required within sport. I agree with Burstyn (1999) and Pronger (1992) who suggests that it would be beneficial to move away from a success/failure approach and begin emphasizing pleasure, skill, and development. From my perspective competition might still be a part of this physical culture because competition in itself can be about pleasure, skill, mastery and does not have to be tied to a success/failure approach. I think it would also be important to move away from a “sacrificial” sport culture (Messner, 2002; Burstyn, 1999). We should not be promoting a sport culture that see athletes sacrificing their physical or mental health – popping pills to play through pain or developing arthritis at 25. These are not inevitable consequences of all sport systems.

Sport should not be about “breaking down” people on any level. People should walk away from courts, fields, stages, arenas and tracks feeling good. This does not mean that every experience has to be positive or that sport itself should be devoid of struggle. But I don’t think sport should monopolize an individual’s waking moments or that
athletes should be forced to prioritize sport above other aspects of life. I advocate for moving away from a “win-at-all-costs” mentality and believe that this shift would erase many of the problems that presently plague sport. Athletes might not be used up and discarded by coaches and programs. I think we would witness less violence in sport. In abandoning a singular vision of sport where winning is valued above all we would also move away from a system that demands conformity and political unconsciousness. Sport might be a place where we expand our ideas about ourselves, politics and the world around us.

Reflections on Writing this Project

I did not really realize what I was getting myself into when I told my advisor that I wanted to do a personal writing project for my thesis. Though she thoroughly warned me and cautioned that I would “have to go deeper” than I had in any of my previous work, I (naively) felt up to the challenge. Unfortunately, at the start of this project I would suggest that did not have all the facilities required to do it. I did not know how to research, how to compose an argument and my writing, at its best, was shaky. For grad students interested in learning these skills and improving their writing, this is an excellent type of project. However, there are other methods that would allow someone to learn these skills. I would caution anyone wanting to do this sort of project to reflect on how intense their interest is in the particular topic that they might want to research. This is because the process of re-writing that is so critical to “moving deeper into the analysis” is
difficult and sometimes it feels like it is never-ending. (A strong writer might be spared on some level but even a strong writer would still be forced to re-visit the narratives and the experiences upon which they are based more times than he or she might believe is possible).

Six months before I embarked in this project I did not identify as a feminist. In fact, somewhere in the middle of my first term I decided my whole goal in grad school was to get out “unscathed” by feminism. To say the least, the process of writing this project has been intimately connected to my own changing identity and growth. Not knowing much about feminism made the process of researching difficult. I did not pick up on the conversational nature of feminism or the way that authors responded to each other’s work and arguments until quite late in the process. Often this context of conversation and response was missing from my work. This led to frustration because I didn’t know why my work felt so disjointed and “off”. But, I would suggest not knowing much about a topic shouldn’t deter someone from doing a project in a new and unknown area. This is because when you do actually get to the point where you understand what is going on it feels great.

The best part of writing this project has been the sense of anticipation that I have experienced from the start. I have written with the thought that I will share my work with my teammates, coaches and friends when it became good enough. Now as I near the end of this project I am considering throwing a feminist shin-dig complete with a retro
second-wave consciousness-raising group conversations for some of my old teammates and myself to celebrate.
References


Canadian association for the advancement of women in sport and physical activity.


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