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Soccer, Space, and Community Integration: Being and Becoming Canadian in London, Ontario Through the World's Game

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Abstract:

In this thesis I explore various forms of participation in organized soccer in London, Ontario – a mid-sized Canadian city with a diverse and growing immigrant community. My research took place between April 2015 and September 2015 and is based on focus group discussions, individual interviews, and casual conversations mainly, but not exclusively, with players and non-players, parents of players, and team or club administrators from London’s soccer community. My work’s primary objective is to provide an informed account of how and why soccer has and continues to be used by immigrant groups in London to integrate into Canadian society. I meet this objective by identifying the ways culture and identities are performed, remembered, gained, or retained through soccer both in the home and in the general community, specifically by immigrant men in the 1970s and more recently, two groups of immigrant women (Latina-Canadians and Muslim-Canadians).

Keywords: immigrants, soccer, identity, space, culture, experience, integration
Dedicated to the eternal struggle for identity and space – on and off the pitch.
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Chapter 1:
Introduction

Commonly referred to as “the world’s game,” the study of soccer’s role in everyday life can reveal much about the individuals and societies that are consumed by it. Across Canada and the world, whether it is in government literature, independent studies, or newspaper articles, there is a recurrent notion that due to its significance in many cultures, soccer is an effective way to integrate immigrant groups into Canadian or other societies. For instance, according to Dr. Arif Saeid of Refugee as Survivors (RAS), an Auckland, New Zealand-based non-profit, he and his team deliberately use soccer as a strategic tool to help refugees feel less socially isolated. Working mainly with Afghan refugees, Saied has found that playing soccer in and with the community has aided in creating a sense of connection and belonging for those involved with the RAS’s sports program (Cities of Migration 2011). Although soccer is not the only sport or activity encouraged by the RAS, it is the most popular and effective. Saeid explains the reasons for soccer’s success as follows:

[Soccer] is a point of integration. Refugees from all countries and all languages love soccer, and many of our groups just need a place to play and some support. Soccer is a universal language and culture. It has its own culture and it doesn’t need [a specific] language. [Soccer] helps refugees get more involved in the community and it helps them with better settlement (Cities of Migration 2011).
Like the RAS in Auckland, other organizations in various parts of the world are also turning to soccer as a tool for the integration of new immigrants and or refugees. In 2013, the Canadian Soccer Association (CSA) partnered with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the city of Ottawa, and multiple community centers in and around the city, to determine, amongst other things, the role of soccer in the general community. A major conclusion of the 100-page report was the following: "We believe that in the world of Canadian sport, soccer which mobilizes the greatest number of participants is a means of education, of healthy living, and of integration within our society” (Canadian Soccer Association 2009). The United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) has also recognized soccer’s potential for community building and integration for Canada’s increasing cultural diversity. In 2016 for instance, the UNOSDP, the United Nations Association in Canada (UNA-Canada), and the Canadian Soccer Association (CSA) came together for an initiative called Sport-in-the-Box. More than 70 teenage participants from an array of cultural backgrounds gathered at Edmonton’s Clarke Field on the International Day of Peace (21 September 2016) to compete with and against each other in a friendly soccer match. More than a soccer match however, the initiative’s goals were greater according to UNA-Canada official Sarah Kambites: “If we can come together on the [soccer] field and win as one people, and celebrate as one people, and lose together why wouldn't we transfer those skills from the field to our communities” (CBC News 2016).

Although I find the notion of soccer as an effective social integration tool in many societies to be generally persuasive, in this thesis I argue that the blanket perception of soccer as an integration activity is too vague and often overlooks more subtle ways that
soccer and cultural integration interact. For instance, less studied are how experiences vary across social groups. One example is the experiences of women with soccer which, as Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis will show, have different dimensions than those of their male counterparts. To provide then a more nuanced understanding of how soccer is experienced and used by a range of social groups, I looked beyond the physical playing of soccer and considered the often disregarded socially-situated practices that enable people to play soccer, and that for non-players involved in soccer, enable other kinds of activities and relationships in their broader lives. As I hoped when I began this research, an anthropological study that focuses on everyday practices and experiences can reveal new dimensions of soccer’s role in community integration, explored in this thesis through the particular development of the sport among newcomer groups in London, Ontario. By extending my questions to follow the issues that emerged in the course of my research I was also able to foreground what both integration and being Canadian means to the newcomers and more settled immigrants with whom I spoke.

Before continuing further however, it is necessary that I provide a brief explanation of the term “integration” as used in this thesis. According to Berry (2011), social integration is the cultural merging of different social groups and is only possible when a society’s dominant social group is open to the existence and development of a non-dominant group’s cultural diversity. Both the dominant and non-dominant groups, however, must accept the rights of each other to be culturally different. Non-dominant groups, according to Berry (2011), must adopt the basic values of the larger society while the larger society must adapt to better meet the needs of all groups living within the plural
society. For Berry, “a mutual accommodation [by dominant and non-dominant groups] is required for integration to be attained” (2011).

Equally important to the definition of integration is distinguishing the difference between integration and assimilation. While integration proposes a mixture or coexistence of cultural diversities, assimilation, Berry (2011) notes, proposes that once people arrive to Canada, they forget or discard their cultural behaviours in exchange for Canadian culture.

The above considered, the idea of soccer as an all-encompassing integrative activity in societies with growing immigrant populations is widely accepted around the world. Stephan Osnabrügge, the vice president of Mittelrhein Soccer Club (FVM) in Germany, typifies this notion in the following:

Soccer knows no language and there are no social barriers to participation. It is played all over the world with the same rules. Those who play soccer are measured by how well they pass or how good they dribble the ball, not on where they come from, what language they speak or the color of their skin.

Our [soccer] clubs are an integration engine (General-Anzeiger 2016).

Very rarely, however, are the game’s specific integrative capabilities studied or questioned beyond the following general narrative: people from other cultures like soccer; logically then, what better way to help immigrants integrate with their new communities than through or with soccer? In this narrow and incomplete model then, all that is considered is what I call the final on-field product – a soccer match. Missing are the countless other ways, including off the pitch, that people use soccer to become Canadian. Looking beyond the soccer field, for instance, how do
people learn where, with whom, and how to register a team, or where to acquire uniforms? And in the case of London, Ontario’s early ethnic communities, how did they find or create the necessary space to play a game they saw as key to retaining their ethnic heritage in their new Canadian environment? Accordingly, as my research evolved, it turned increasingly (but not exclusively) from the playing of soccer to how separate groups have and continue to use soccer off the pitch to both retain and express their ethnic heritages to other Canadians. As noted by an old coach of mine, Brent Rogers: “Other than my accent, football (soccer) is the only way for me to keep being an Englishman after having lived in Canada for some 30 years now” (Interview, Brent Rogers, 29 May 2015, Burns’s Howff Scottish Pub, Cambridge).

Also, the idea of space is central to this thesis – specifically the ways ethnic groups in London have used soccer over different periods to gain or create access to social spaces that include but are not limited to a soccer pitch. Soccer, this work argues, is a good integration tool not only because it brings people together physically, but because it can also aid in the finding, creating, or battling for space outside the soccer pitch. Space, in this case, can be physical, social, cultural, etc., as this work shows. Soccer then is a tool for gaining the spaces required to produce the subsequent more physical or visible forms of community integration people desire. It is the everyday micro-processes underlying this that interest me most in this thesis.

Soccer is indeed a game of space, both on and off the field. During a match, for instance, if one has no space to work, one finds it. If space is denied, one fights
for it. If there is no space to find, then one creates it. There are heroics in fighting for precious and contested space when that space is denied; and there is magic in creating space where there seems to be none. The beauty of soccer lies not only in the game itself but in what people are willing to do for and because of this game—again, both on and off the pitch.

If my description of soccer seems romanticized then I have expressed my thoughts exactly as I intended. For many, myself included, soccer is an art form. The Uruguayan novelist and journalist Eduardo Galeano, for instance, described soccer as “a feast for the eyes that watch it […] and a joy for the body that plays it” (Galeano 2014). To expand on Galeano, soccer is an anthropological and sociological treasure trunk for those who study it. In fact, one of the most fascinating aspects of soccer is its relationship with everyday life.

The similarities between finding, fighting for, and creating space on a pitch, and doing the same on a social level, are striking and provide an effective way to understand soccer as a tool for community integration and the game’s establishment by ethnic minorities in London. For instance, soccer players need space on the pitch to be present, visible, or effective in their specific realities. An ethnic group working towards being socially present and visible in its community also needs space. For many of London’s ethnic minorities, their struggles for gaining access to social space or acceptance in the general community is recalled through a lens consisting of their experiences with finding and creating space to play soccer as a community.
Accordingly, of great interest to this thesis is the relationship between people and their use of sport – soccer in this case – as a vehicle to create ideological, cultural, and physical spaces for the purposes of cultural retention, display, and community integration. This work then is divided into three core chapters that describe the experiences of three different groups of people who have served as innovators in London’s soccer community at different times and in different ways but not for entirely different reasons.

Chapter 2 reviews the origins of recreational, widely accessible soccer in London. This is because prior to 1970 soccer in the city was explicitly under the umbrella of London’s ethnic social clubs. By looking at soccer “in its beginnings” (as remembered by interviewees who were involved in the earliest initiatives to build and grow recreational soccer in London) not only do I aim to gain a better understanding of the city’s current soccer community\(^1\) in general, but more importantly to this thesis, I am able to show some of the differences and similarities in how soccer has been used by diverse peoples in different historical moments to gain access therefore integrating into spaces within Canadian society. The protagonists of Chapter 2, and of early recreational soccer in London, are a group of working-class men who were recent immigrants to Canada from various European countries, who are fondly known as “the Old Guys\(^2\)” in London’s soccer community.

\(^{1}\) “Soccer communities” refers to a group of people who play, coach, referee, administer, volunteer, and or are generally interested in soccer. As I use it, London’s soccer community exists within the city’s general community.

\(^{2}\) “Old” is used to reference the involvement and presence of these men during recreational soccer’s early stages in late 1960s London.
Chapters 3 and 4 focus on more recent processes in London, specifically exploring the uses and perceptions of soccer among women of two different backgrounds. First I present some of the experiences of women of Latin American background, including both first-generation Latina-Canadians (who mostly do not themselves play soccer) and second-generation, mostly Canadian-born, younger Latina-Canadian women who do play soccer. In the case of first-generation Latina-Canadians, I emphasize how soccer helps them understand and explain their past and present identities both as women and Latina-Canadians. For second-generation Latina-Canadians, I explore how playing soccer helps them declare their rights as Canadian women. Chapter 4 turns to the case of the Muslim-Canadian women who established and continue to operate the Muslim Youth Soccer League of London (MYSL). Here I examine how soccer helps this group integrate into Canadian society by engaging in activities that would be off-limits for them in their Muslim home countries. However, more than being about gaining space and visibility in the general community over time, the Latina and Muslim women who are presented in these chapters serve as case studies to highlight the use of soccer in terms of lesser known ways of being and becoming Canadian – that is, the female immigrant’s experiences.

Origins of this Study

This project originated in my experiences as a young boy growing up in Cambridge, Ontario. Born in El Salvador, I immigrated to Canada at the age of five with my parents (Ines and Marcelo Sr.) and two siblings (Carlitos and Pati). At age ten my father registered me in organized soccer. My best and earliest memories with soccer are
of my father taking me to play a sport that for him was an inseparable part of his life and culture. Soccer was so central to my childhood that I first learned history, politics, and geography through it. By watching soccer with my father or listening to his stories on long car rides to games and tournaments, I learned where certain cities were in the world; I learned of political tensions like those that caused the so-called “soccer war” between my native El Salvador and neighboring Honduras in 1969; I even learned about Franco, Mussolini, and fascism.

The first team I played for was Cambridge United – a team largely comprised of Portuguese kids my age. This was not surprising considering that Cambridge has one of the largest Portuguese communities in North America proportionate to the city’s overall population. At the time, my family was one of only three Latin American families living in Cambridge. Exposed to my teammates speaking in Portuguese to each other, I often felt isolated on two levels – as a Latino, alone in the community, and as a non-Portuguese-Canadian. (From this experience I also learned that soccer can in fact be played and enjoyed in different languages.) For me, outside the home there was no ethnic solidarity. My feelings of ethnic and linguistic isolation, however, did serve a purpose. As a cultural and ethnic outsider on a team that was not officially ethnic – but presented itself to opponents as a Portuguese team – I began to observe how soccer was structured and organized in Cambridge to represent ethnic identity. For instance, on display were Portuguese religious values; the ethic of manual labour; and visual representations of nationalism mainly through language and use of symbols like Portuguese national or club flags.
Years later as an anthropology master’s student, I look back to my youth and am again compelled by those same questions of identity, ethnicity, and soccer as a means to express ethnicity and culture. It is my deep love and connection with the “beautiful game” (as soccer is also known) that led me to research and write this thesis – to uncover the stories and experiences of those who continue to use soccer to shape themselves and the city they call home. While the many conversations and interviews I had during the research portion of my graduate years form the core of the material from which I elaborated the analysis, the research questions were also informed by my many years of playing and coaching soccer at various levels in Southwestern Ontario.

**Theoretical Background**

A key aim of this study is to understand and provide informed answers about how everyday practices associated with soccer are used by newcomer communities to integrate into Canadian society. The purpose of this understanding is to continue upholding the notion of soccer as an effective integration tool but with a more complete or all-inclusive approach. As noted above, however, rather than focusing on the typically male on-field product, this thesis looks at soccer from multiple perspectives – from the field, from the sidelines, and from the perspectives of both men and women.

Studying soccer from multiple perspectives required me to apply an array of the anthropological concepts I encountered during my time as an undergraduate and graduate student. These concepts were key to my understanding of matters like social integration and identity, for instance, which are necessary to the entirety of thesis. This being said, there are five theoretical approaches that are most prevalent in the following chapters. They are the following: socio-cultural transnationalism, specific veins of
multiculturalism, notions of identity and the creation of it, and the anthropology of experience. Within these wide-ranging theories, however, are the contributions of specific social scientists. These include but are not limited to (alphabetically) Benedict Anderson, Stuart Hall, Alejandro Portes, and Victor Turner. Also worth noting is that the theoretical approaches present in this thesis are and must be compatible with the sociology of sport – that is, sport and its social functions, as well as sport as a lens through which one can interpret and study culture. Also worth clarifying: while this thesis is not specifically about the experiences of women and their use of soccer to integrate into Canadian society, their significant appearances and contributions to this work highlight the fact that not just between groups, but often within them, experiences can vary. This considered, the fundamentals of gender theory as applied to (im)migration studies – that is, the understanding that men and women experience differently (Pozniak 2005: 17) – are present throughout the entirety of this work. As an example: although Chapter 2, titled, “London’s Old Guys and the Origins of Recreational Soccer as Integration” suggests that its contents are solely about a group of men – but it is here, precisely, that the reader will first encounter my application of gender theory.

Also, the work of Dr. Kinga Pozniak, as well as my many interactions with her throughout my years in the anthropology department, were an invaluable and major influence on this thesis. Specifically, through Dr. Pozniak’s work with Colombian immigrants to London (2005), I recognized the relevance that assimilation theory, socio-cultural transnationalism, multiculturalism, identity building, and the anthropology of experience had in my work. Accordingly, Dr. Pozniak’s approaches to understand and interpret the experiences of Colombian immigrants became a blueprint of sorts as I
worked to frame the stories of three different groups and their respective experiences with immigration, integration, identity building, and soccer.

In this section I specify where I applied the major theoretical lenses I used to approach and analyze my findings. Worth noting is that all three case studies in this work are infused with Stuart Hall’s argument that immigrants, especially, are often in a state of “becoming” rather than one of static “being” (Hall 1996: 4). As noted by Pozniak, “the immigrant experience is about becoming” (2005: 1). From this conclusion the questions that arise are: what, exactly, is “becoming,” and how does one do becoming? In this thesis I argue that becoming is more or less the construction of identity as a means of self determined representation for the general community. The challenge then was not understanding what becoming meant but rather, how it is done by different groups, as well as why – that is, what are the specific reasons for immigrant groups wanting to engage in the complex process of constructing identity.

The individuality of each group in this thesis, despite their similar desires to create identities that included Canadian culture, required me to focus specific theoretical approaches to each group. This is not to say that theoretical approaches did not overlap, but some were applied more than others depending on the group. For instance, Dilthey’s concept of the “lived experience” (Bruner 1986: 5) and how these experiences can be expressed publicly in the form of a theatre performances, poetry, art – or in the case of all the groups in this thesis, through the public participation and thoughtful engagement in and with a sport that meshes their experiences of back home with those here in Canada, and captures experiences of the past, present, and projects their aspirations into the future.
as well – is present in all chapters of this work. This is evidence, I argue, of the similarities that exist in many immigrant experiences.

For Chapter 2 I drew on the work of Benedict Anderson and Alejandro Portes. Anderson’s (1991) concept of imagined communities draws our attention to how people who have no direct relation or contact with each other, nonetheless believe that they belong to the same social family, culture, or national community. Portes (1999) argues that socio-cultural transnationalism involves activities that are “oriented towards the reinforcement of a national identity abroad or the collective enjoyment of cultural events and goods.” These dominant approaches allow me to tell the story of a group of men who in soccer saw a way to establish a community based not on ethnicity but on the love of a sport. Though the Old Guys’ decision to develop recreational soccer in London was a collective one, there were also the individual desires of each Old Guy to become part of London’s social landscape by creating something visible in the general community that was representative of each of their perceived individual cultures.

In Chapter 3, notions of identity as understood and expressed by Latina-Canadians was the most adequate approach to approach what “becoming” Latina-Canadian means and looks like for two generations of Latinas. Finally Chapter 4 focuses on the experiences of Muslim-Canadian women and their founding of a Muslim soccer league to preserve their Muslim values, while at the same time, exercising their “Canadianness.” Their story is best described using Turner’s concept of the anthropology of experience through which he argues that although “we can never completely know the experiences of others, only our own, we are sometimes provided with different forms of public expressions that aim to give life to otherwise static experiences and feelings”
Indeed, the women of this group argue that despite the fact that other women before them have also found soccer as a means to become more Canadian, theirs is a unique project because of their lived experiences as Muslim women in their countries of origin, as well as here in Canada.

**Research Objectives and Methodology**

The Canadian federal government, as well as local organizations dedicated to newcomer integration, have called for research into how sport might serve in facilitating newcomer integration in Canada’s growing multicultural landscape (Institute for Canadian Citizenship 2014). According to Pathways to Prosperity Canada for instance:

> There is strong circumstantial evidence suggesting that sports and recreation can be used as integrative tools, spanning a variety of age groups. Yet little research has directly addressed this assertion, examining how municipalities, sports associations, and other organizations can use sports and recreation to promote newcomer integration into the local community, promote community connections, and facilitate host community understanding of immigrants and their contributions (Pathways to Prosperity: Canada 2014).

In this thesis I aim to partially answer this call by stressing that for genuine integration to occur, the activities used to integrate people must include everyone and their respective experiences and conditions. For instance, what obstacles might some groups (ex. women) confront from inside or outside their ethnic groups or communities when looking to use an activity like soccer as an integrative social tool?

Building from Eastman’s (2014) notion of sport as “an often contradictory
endeavor” in relation to the possibilities and limitations of sport, this project thus includes a consideration of the accessibility of soccer. That is, questions of inclusion and exclusion need to be explored in any study that aims to discuss inter- and intra-community integration. To determine if, and how, soccer is an effective tool for integrating communities, it is necessary to determine who plays, who does not play, who can play, and who cannot play, and most importantly, why? That is, what internal or external factors determine how different people in London experience soccer.

To capture a nuanced picture of the relation between soccer, history, politics, class, culture, age, ethnicity, and community integration or assimilation in London, this project looked to both the playing field and sidelines for answers. People of various ethnic and social groups who are (or were) involved in the sport were approached. Talking to soccer players, parents of youth players, team/league administrators, and fans revealed a clearer image of the intended and actual roles of soccer in integrating newer Canadians with older Canadians (“older” as used here refers to Canadians who are the descendants of immigrants for one or more generations), new Canadians with other new Canadians, and people of the same group with others of that group (sometimes including their own family members).

The main research method for this study consisted of open-ended and semi-structured interviews with adult players, coaches, parents, and team and league administrators. I engaged participants of varying social classes, ethnicities, and genders to determine the functions of soccer involvement in changing relations between and within several groups. Some of the general questions posed were: How does organized soccer in
London reflect the cultural changes that have occurred with respect to the city’s demographics? Does involvement in soccer bridge the gap between the communities that have shaped London’s cultural landscape? Has soccer, in the past, served as an integrative tool? Is soccer currently being used as an integrative tool? And if so, how? Do social networks created through participation or involvement in soccer assist newcomers in domains such as finding a job, learning English, or appreciating cultural diversity? How does being a member of the soccer community integrate a person into London’s larger community? What does the organization of soccer in London say about the city, its people, and their histories?

Research participants were engaged in two ways: individual interviews and focus groups. The latter were arranged through posted advertisements at soccer venues and club websites while the former were products of my time spent at soccer games, venues, or ethnic clubs, as well as through pre-arranged meetings with individuals. Both methods proved useful in their own ways. Focus groups for instance provided me with a good platform to explore the factors that contribute to the creation, sustaining, or transformation of what Anderson (1991) called imagined communities (as noted above), and allowed people to discuss together their shared experiences. Individual interviews on the other hand allowed me to explore experiences (including perspectives on those imagined communities) at a more individual level, including how particular experiences might diverge from collective ones. The benefit of an individual approach to a larger community is that I was able to hear from smaller or marginalized segments of groups about their specific, less known experiences with cultural integration and retention through organized soccer. In both cases, I worked up and out from what people told me,
and much of it led me in unanticipated directions. This is one of the main advantages of an open-ended qualitative approach that invites research participants to share their views on the issues that they find the most relevant. In the pages that follow I present some of the experiences of women and men in London, Ontario who have developed and strengthened the sport of soccer in the city, and made it serve widely diverse needs. First, however, I provide a brief history of the city to help contextualize the experiences presented in the main body of the thesis.

A Brief History of London since c. 1960

This section summarizes the history of London, Ontario, in terms of issues directly relevant to this thesis, with a particular emphasis on the city’s major economic and geographic expansions from the 1950s and onwards, and different immigration waves. The purpose of this brief history is to give the reader a better appreciation of the different elements and events that contributed to the shaping of present-day London’s geography, business sector, cultural diversity, and of course, its large, nationally recognized soccer community. It concludes with an outline of the origins of soccer in London. That account aims briefly: to establish the role that soccer has had in the immigrant experience in London, specifically how it has been used by several groups over time to display or enact their cultural identities; and to serve as a suitable segue to describe how soccer is currently being used by newer Canadians in London to be or become Canadian.

London, Ontario (city area 421.77 km²) lies 185 km from Toronto and 190 km from Windsor. Incorporated in 1855 as a city, London is officially referred to in federal and provincial documents as “the seat of Middlesex County on the Québec-Windsor
Corridor” (Goodden and Whebell 2012). Nationally, the city is distinguished for being an educational, medical, and business hub, mainly because of the research and work conducted at the city’s two main academic institutions – the University of Western Ontario (est. 1878), with its associated hospital and medical research complexes, and Fanshawe College (est. 1967) (Armstrong 1986: 228, 243, 311; Miller 1992: 271). London is also known for the fertile and productive farmlands surrounding it, which result from its position between Lakes Erie and Huron. For instance, Canada’s largest tobacco plantations are southeast of London near Lake Erie (Goodden and Whebell 2012). The city also enjoys a reputation for attracting business and entrepreneurs from an array of industries. According to Scott Hamilton of 3M Canada (London), London’s ability to attract “big business” is due in large part to its people: “The city provides the space for businesses to build and grow […] but it’s London’s hard-working people that are behind all the success” (Interview, Scott Hamilton, 27 April 2015, London Convention Centre, London).

London is Canada’s eleventh most populated city, with 494,069 inhabitants according to the 2016 census (Statistics Canada 2017). Moroever, London is recognized as a culturally-diverse city with a welcoming attitude towards new Canadians (Canadian Magazine of Immigration 2016; CCLC 2014). Its support programs, as well as its many festivals aimed to celebrate cultural diversity, are well known to other Canadian cities and municipalities (Interview, MP Dave MacKenzie of Woodstock, 10 July 2015, Victoria Park, London). Historically, London’s population growth spurts have generally come from immigration and not from internal reproduction. This continues to be largely the case. Firaz, a youth worker at the Cross Cultural Learners Centre (CCLC) of London
notes that between the mid-1980s and 2014, the most visible additions (per capita) to London’s general population resulted from different waves of immigration from a multitude of groups, mainly from Latin America, the Middle East, and Central Africa (Interview, Firaz, 10 July 2015, Victoria Park, London). And according to Firaz, who is also in charge of the CCLC’s youth sport and recreation program, so fundamental are London’s various immigration waves to the development of the city, that “…you can research almost any topic by looking at what was happening with immigration in London at any given time” (Interview, Firaz, 10 July 2015, Victoria Park, London). As part of the community then, this would have to include the origins of London’s soccer community. Thus, a history of the city, even if only a brief one, is necessary for this work’s ability to establish the relationship between economic change, immigration, and soccer in London, Ontario.

The 1960s were an important and exciting time “for staid old London,” wrote local historian Orlo Miller (1992: 211). In the immediate years following World War II (1939-1945), London’s population had increased rapidly due to an industrial and economic boom (Miller 1992: 69, 201, 211). Foundries such as the Empire Brass Co., Sheet Metal Products Canada, Dominion Tin and Stamping Works, Kemp Manufacturing Company, and MacDonald Manufacturing Company all either relocated to London or were founded there during this period. The Ford Motor Co., the Canada Corn Co. (later Kellogg’s), the Labatt Brewing Co., Stihl, 3M (formerly known as the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company), and Canada’s largest insurance and financial company to date, London Life, among others, also made London their Canadian headquarters (Armstrong 1986: 246-70).
According to Armstrong, a Western University historian whose extensive works have focused on the development of Southwestern Ontario’s business sector and urbanization, London’s appeal to entrepreneurs was based on: a) the city’s many “empty spaces”; b) its growing oil industry (Canada’s first oil boom occurred only 80 km to the west of London); and c) its proximity to the United States border which would make the importing and exporting of materials more cost effective (Armstrong 1986: 99). With these factors considered, London became a center for “the manufacturing of the pleasures of peace and luxury that followed wartime restraint” producing myriad items, from pots and pans, to clothes washers and dryers, to automobiles, to beer (EMCO Corporation 2013).

For the most part, expansion was well received. Some of London’s long-time residents with deep roots in the city, however, were wary of an overly aggressive industrialization process. Specifically, there were concerns over the effects that manufacturing plants would have on “the forest city” – a city known for its clean air, dense tree-line, and picturesque pastures. Miller (1992: 212) points specifically to the city’s “old money” and their opposition to “new money’s” push for “progress” through rapid, reckless expansion. Growth was inevitable, however. Westminster Township (presently known as the Byron and Masonville areas) was annexed in 1961 for the “greatest common good,” as the Ontario Municipal Board put it (Miller 1992: 211-12). With the addition, London’s population rose from 83,072 in 1961 to 165,815 almost overnight (Miller 1992: 213). (The 1961 annexation was the most significant, population-wise. A subsequent 1993 annexation was the largest land-wise.)
In terms of the city’s population and demographics, Lutman (1977: 8-11) found that beginning in the mid-1960s a change occurred to the immigrant pool – the influx of European immigrants during this period resulted no longer from war, but from the political strife caused by the Cold War and its ideologies. As a result, many new European immigrants were from Eastern Bloc countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. This new wave of immigrants was generally well received by the now well-established German, Dutch, and Scottish communities who had been lured by Canada’s overall tranquility and farm space just before the outbreak of World War One (1914-1918) (Lutman 1977: 11). Although immigrants themselves, the German, Dutch, and Scottish were now the old stock of London’s society, and by the 1960s were no longer viewed nor did they speak of themselves as immigrants (Lutman 1977: 11).

Towards the late-1960s, London’s mostly white complexion started to become “diluted by exotic ethnic minorities” (Miller 1992: 221). These minorities were quite visible in London’s “racial” landscape. Specifically, there was a noticeable rise in the arrival of people of African descent from the Caribbean and Africa. Pakistanis and Sikhs, Vietnamese, as well as a growing Arab community also began to colour London’s social landscape (Miller 1992: 221). For the most part, since the city was in a prosperous economic state during the late 1960s and early 1970s, immigration was received with “commendable compassion” (Miller 1992: 222). Skin colour, according to Miller (1992: 222), was not “a problem” since people of colour were not competing with whites “for their daily bread.”

A demonstration of London’s emerging diverse ethnic composition can be found in a holiday festival held at the Canadian-Ukrainian Club in December 1968, where
various ethnic groups were invited to celebrate Christmas with each other. With the encouragement of the Canadian Folk Arts Council, it was suggested that they establish their own respective ethnic clubs (Miller 1992: 223). The holiday festival also served as an orientation for immigrants to inform them of community services such as document translation, for instance, which was being offered by both the Arts Council and the London Cross Cultural Learners Centre (CCLC). Originally established to help UWO students prepare to work and study abroad, the CCLC quickly assumed the role of providing services to people adjusting to Canadian society (Miller 1992: 223).

Notably, the use of cultural festivals to emphasize cultural diversity in the city continues today. Sunfest, the popular summer attraction held yearly in July, is one example. A Sunfest-type festival celebrating multiculturalism in London is not a recent creation, however. From 1980 to 1987 the Kavalkade festival was held every fall (N’Amerind 1985). Like Sunfest, its purpose was to introduce immigrant communities to host communities and to each other – food, drink, and music were at the center of the festival as is the case in present-day London.

By the 1980s, London’s industrial boom had quieted as the business sector of the city was by then well populated by companies that had opened their doors decades earlier (Armstrong 1986: 309). Though the industrial boom had calmed, it had not stalled by any means. Smaller companies began to emerge to act as third-party manufacturers. Rather than manufacturing products from beginning to end in one plant, specific projects were outsourced to “specialty shops” in the city – most of which were machine shops owned and operated by newer immigrant families looking to become entrepreneurs. During this period the city also saw an increase in labourers who specialized in cement and
landscaping, who were mainly from the Azores, Portugal, and southern Italy. Rui Gomes was one of these labourers. He moved to London from Windsor because the city’s general growth began to demand further aesthetic expansion and maintenance (Interview, Rui Gomes, 10 July 2015, Victoria Park, London). For Rui and thousands of others like him, the appearance of new business ventures and work opportunities attracted them to the city.

By the final two decades of the 20th century, the city again found itself becoming a magnet for additional different immigrant groups. Central Americans, mainly from El Salvador, as well as newcomers from the African continent, specifically Ethiopia and Sudan were now part of what Italian-Canadian interviewee Giancarlo Morata described as a “growing multi-cultural mini-metropolis” (Interview, Giancarlo Morata, 31 May 2015, Marconi Club of London, London). By the late 1990s, 25-30% of London’s overall population was non-white/Anglo (Statistics Canada: 2000). London’s proximity to the U.S. border and Toronto made it especially attractive to immigrants who had family in the U.S. or Toronto but could not or did not want to live there. Moreover, London in the 1980s and 1990s was widely recognized as having one of the best newcomer support networks in Ontario (CCLC 2013). Much of this was due to the work of the CCLC which by the late 1990s was almost exclusively dedicated to community integration and assisting new Canadians to adapt to life in London (CCLC 2013).

Already established as a city where work could be found and entrepreneurs could flourish, focus shifted to a different type of growth as Londoners turned their attention and tax dollars to expanding the city’s cultural landscape. “Culture,” as used here, refers to the appreciation for the arts and music in the form of museums, music halls, etc. The
acquisition of culture at the time was viewed as a requirement for a more complete transition from town to city. Thus, the London Regional Art Museum was inaugurated in 1980; Wilfred Jury in 1981 allowed for a building carrying his name to house London’s Museum of Indian Archaeology (since renamed the Museum of Ontario Archaeology); the London Regional Children’s Museum was opened in 1981 with the aim of exposing London’s youth to cultural activities as well.

The other kind of culture, that is, the traditions and customs of a particular group of people, also began receiving renewed attention during the 1970s and 80s. Although ethnic or cultural clubs and churches had existed in London as early as 1900 with the establishment of the Marconi Club (Italian-Canadian Club), and the German Club in 1933, these were now too small for the growing number of potential members arriving in the city. As a result, the Marconi Club, for instance, purchased a new and larger property – its current location at 120 Clarke Road (Marconi Club of London 2015). Newer clubs also began to appear. London’s Hellenic (Greek) Community Centre opened its doors to the community in 1975 to accommodate the city’s now large Greek community. The Portuguese Club of London was incorporated in 1975 and in 1987 was expanded so that it could host musical performances for Portuguese religious and cultural festivals. The club also added an athletic complex, whose sole purpose was for the playing of Portugal’s national sport, soccer. Like the Portuguese, the Marconi Club also constructed a soccer field on its new property. “The fields were viewed as necessary to the completion of the clubs” (Interview, Giancarlo Morata, 31 May 2015, Marconi Club of London, London).

Soccer in London
Jürgen Klaus, a long-time board member of the German-Canadian Club, compares the origins of soccer in London to planting a flag. He explained this as follows:

When mountain climbers reach the top of a mountain they plant a flag to mark [their arrival]. [A] flag symbolizes the presence and existence of a group. Soccer, for many immigrants in London, is our flag (Interview, Jürgen Klaus, 31 May 2015, German-Canadian Club, London).

To better understand the origins of soccer in London however, it is helpful to divide it into three categories – the professional, the ethnic, and the recreational.

As a professional club, London City FC’s (est. 1973) primary goal is to win games. As in any professional sports sector, winning generates money for team/club owners and sponsors. (Worth noting: unknown to many is that London City FC is one of Canada’s oldest professional soccer clubs established. The team first competed in the Canadian Soccer League [CSL] and was mainly comprised of players who had played professionally outside Canada). “Ethnic soccer” in London’s soccer community is used specifically to describe teams or clubs that are formed under a specific ethnic or cultural umbrella. For instance, the German-Canadian Bullets Soccer Club are part of the city’s ethnic sector. Recreational soccer can be both competitive and non-competitive (house league and or rep. soccer). However, rarely is recreational soccer given an ethnic attachment.

Much of the existing, scarce literature about London’s soccer history and soccer community are in the form of old league schedules, club histories, and individual recollections. Furthermore, these mainly focus on the city’s professional or ethnic sector. Often forgotten in narratives that hold soccer as key in the
integration process of many of the city’s immigrant communities are the grassroots efforts of people who, although ethnically diverse, were not looking to stake their claim in the community by being or forming part of their ethnic communities’ soccer programs. Instead, these people wanted to play together to “act out” what being Canadian meant for them without a divisive ethnic factor. For the Old Guys (discussed in further detail in the next chapter), feverishly competitive ethnic soccer was viewed as counterproductive to social integration and unity, and to an extent, discriminatory. As they saw it, soccer and everything else in the city had to be inclusive – using soccer to reenact old world rivalries, thus excluding those that were not part of this scenario, was non-Canadian.

As a city of immigrants from countries where soccer is often regarded in quasi-religious terms, there is little doubt soccer has had some role in forming the London we know today. While immigrants brought and have expanded soccer in London, this thesis argues that there is more to the story than a simple ethnic influence. Explaining soccer and how, exactly, it was and continues to be used in London by new immigrants to adjust to life in Canada is the goal of this work. Soccer is a good tool for integration – but how this integration is enacted by the groups involved is the main interest in this thesis.
Chapter 2:
London’s “Old Guys” and the Origins of Recreational Soccer as Integration

This chapter is about the experiences, memories, and accomplishments of nine men known in London’s soccer community as “the Old Guys.” Although they are not the official founders of all organized soccer in London (this occurred in the 1930s with the establishing of a German-Canadian team), the Old Guys are regarded by many as the group responsible for the vibrant soccer community seen in London today. Despite their focus being recreational soccer, all sectors of soccer in the city have benefited from their efforts over the decades.

All nine of the Old Guys immigrated to Canada between the ages of 11 and 30. Three are now deceased and two live outside Ontario. I was, however, able to speak to the four who remain in London – Albert Choi (Guyanese-Canadian, age 78 in 2015), Joe Pereira (Portuguese-Canadian, 73), Tomasino “Tom” Papadopoulos (Greek-Canadian, 71), and Angelo Bakas (Greek-Canadian, 77). During my fieldwork in 2015 I also spoke with three of their spouses – Tom’s wife Maureen, Albert’s wife Mona, and Joe’s wife Sonia. This was significant as it provided a multi-gendered perspective on the topics that surfaced from this group.

The story of the Old Guys is important to this thesis for two reasons. First, it explains some of the history underlying London’s large soccer community. Second, even more importantly, the story of the Old Guys provides a contrast for the other two case studies presented in subsequent chapters – specifically, how different groups, over

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3 In this chapter I use my interviewees’ real names. They are well-known figures in London’s soccer community, and proud of their contributions to the city, so they did not request anonymity.
different time periods in the city’s history, have used soccer to find or create spaces and identities, and how experiences even within groups can also vary. By studying how and why over time people have used soccer to integrate with London’s general community we can identify, for instance, recurring obstacles (or advantages) new immigrant groups face when attempting to do the same – with soccer or perhaps other activities. Likewise, we can identify new obstacles or challenges resulting from changing circumstances related to the development of the city, the timing of the arrival of different groups, and so on. Understanding the differences and similarities in immigrant experiences, for instance, is vital for any informed discussion about immigration and how people navigate through this often difficult and complex process. Accordingly, all three core chapters of this thesis explore two fundamental questions. Through what activities and practices has soccer been used as a tool for social integration by newcomers to London? And what results have their integration efforts involving soccer produced in their experiences of becoming, being, or feeling “more” Canadian?

Soccer Crazy London: An Introduction

Soccer appears to be everywhere in London, Ontario. Whether it is on one of the city’s many pristine pay-per-use pitches, or on makeshift concrete fields inside co-op housing complexes in the city’s economically poorer neighborhoods, somewhere in the city, at any given time, there are people playing soccer. According to the Ontario Soccer Association (OSA), approximately 33,000 people in the London area play organized soccer in some form (Toronto Metro News 2014). Soccer is so popular that on multiple occasions (and at a substantial cost) the city has been forced to find or create space to accommodate the game’s popularity. So much effort has been put into accommodating
the city’s soccer community that London is currently home to some of the best indoor
and outdoor playing facilities in Canada (Toronto Metro News 2014; Global News 2015).

As an example, BMO Centre, the city’s state-of-the-art $14 million 116,000-square-ft soccer complex which opened in 2011, was already in 2017 undergoing an $8 million expansion to meet the needs of the more than one million soccer enthusiasts (this includes players, parents, friends and families of players, officials, friends and families of officials, sport retailers, etc.) who walk through its doors each year (Global News 2015). Once the expansion is complete, London’s BMO Centre will be the largest indoor soccer facility in Canada. In addition to the BMO Centre, there are municipally owned and operated fields at North London Athletic Park whose natural grass and maintenance rival the best professional stadiums in Canada. There are also two newly-built artificial playing fields at the University of Western Ontario, two more at the City-Wide Soccer Complex, and countless other single artificial or natural pitches throughout the city. These structures – the demand for them and their cost – indicate the significant popularity and impact of soccer in London.

Its imagery and presence are so prevalent that for many, soccer “feels” like something that has always existed in London. Soccer’s longstanding connection to the city and community is evident in the following statement by Ricardo Rojas, an 18-year-old Salvadoran-Canadian who immigrated to Canada at the age of four and has been playing soccer in London since he was seven. “Soccer’s a big part of London. Every weekend there’s a [soccer] festival or tournament somewhere in the city. Soccer’s been here [in London] forever – like the Thames [River]” (Interview, Ricardo Rojas, 1 April 2015, BMO Centre, London).
Despite Ricardo’s impression of soccer’s infinite existence in London, Albert Choi (the oldest of the Old Guys as he jokingly refers to himself) recalls a time when one could drive across the city without seeing a single soccer game being played. Albert remembers baseball, instead, as the most visible and popular summer sport at one point in London. Despite its lack of visibility though, Albert stressed that the soccer was in fact being played in 1960s London. However, because it was mainly played at the ethnic level, soccer was neither accessible nor easily visible to the general community. Soccer in the late 1960s early 1970s then was played by a select group of men from the city’s existing ethnic clubs (the German, Greek, Italian, and Polish-Canadian clubs). Since ethnic clubs mainly recruited skilled players, preferred players from their respective ethnic backgrounds, and the teams mainly played on the property of the clubs rather than in public spaces, soccer’s availability and visibility was indeed limited (Interview, Albert Choi, 19 April 2015, Pereira home, London). Supporting Albert’s recollections, his neighbor of over 40 years, Camille, responded to my question about soccer in the 1960s by saying: “What soccer? Occasionally I would see Albert and his kids kick a ball in their yard, but as far as the soccer like we see today, there was none. Hard to imagine, isn’t it?” (Interview, Camille, 27 May 2015, front porch of Camille’s home, London).

The Industrial League

Few Londoners know that the thriving recreational soccer community they see today – the recipient of millions of dollars in municipal and provincial funding – began

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4 1960s London served as a point of reference for interviewees as the pre-recreational soccer era.
5 Industrial leagues mainly consist of players who work in the industrial sectors and are now common across the province. These leagues are highly competitive and have a reputation among players, officials, and spectators of being physically rough.
with simple pick-up games between men from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who worked at the 3M plant in the city’s east end. Old Guy Angelo Bakas notes: “This city’s soccer culture was born by accident. All we were looking to do was kick a ball amongst ourselves. This goes to show you, big things sometimes have small beginnings” (Interview, Angelo Bakas, 18 April 2015, Rei dos Leitos Restaurant, London). Although there were more than 30 men involved in planning, promoting, and carrying out these “informal” games (at one point or in one way or another), Albert, Angelo, Fred, Joe, John, Tony, Tom, Manuel, and Sam were considered the main organizers and are those known today as the Old Guys. According to the four who contributed to this chapter, the first pick-up game between 3M employees was played on a Saturday in May of 1969 in an open space behind the main 3M plant (Oxford St. E.). In that game there were no standing nets, sidelines, or uniforms – the teams were distinguished by whether the players wore shirts or not (shirts vs. skins) (Interview, Angelo Bakas, 18 April 2015, Rei dos Leitos Restaurant, London).

As remembered by Albert, Joe, Tom, and Angelo, the initial reason for organizing these games was simple: a group of men wanted to play soccer – a sport they enjoyed but also considered to be an important part of their respective cultures and histories, a part of their social and ethnic fiber, to borrow from Wallace’s (2001) description of how soccer is viewed by some groups. Angelo, who immigrated to Canada from Greece at age 27, argues that there was also a deeper meaning for their desire to play soccer, however. He explained:

In the beginning, we just wanted to play our game. We wanted to remember home through our game. We were not looking to create anything, and we did
not consider our actions as part of some need or want to integrate with other people in the community. But as things progressed and our small games attracted attention and made people happy we realized soccer’s [greater] potential. We saw that with soccer we could achieve many things (Interview, Angelo Bakas, 18 April 2015, Rei dos Leitos Restaurant, London).

Among the things they could achieve through soccer, the four men identified the immediate effect their pick-up games had on their mental and emotional health. For instance, Joe recounted that after playing in just a few scrimmages, soccer, and the environment he and others had created around this activity, helped calm certain anxieties and frustrations he had been experiencing – anxieties and frustrations he attributed to feeling like an outsider in the general community (Interview, Joe Pereira, 14 April 2015, BMO Centre, London). In separate conversations, the others agreed with Joe and noted how they too had found emotional relief in playing in these games. Moreover, they reminded me of how draining it can be to be part of a new community that speaks a different language, eats different foods, and practices customs that are different than your own. If part of the integration process then is to feel mentally or emotionally comfortable in a new community, soccer for these men became a means to achieve this.

Continuing with the theme of emotional health (as related to immigrating to a new country), Albert pointed to a misconception he believes is common among Canadians who have lived in Canada for multiple generations: that once a person or group arrives in Canada, their problems disappear and they are instantly worry-free. Instead, Albert spoke of the emotions and hardships of leaving loved-ones behind,
and of leaving behind loved activities, as triggers to an array of emotional and mental difficulties for many immigrants. Soccer, according to all these men, was one of those irreplaceable things they had left behind when immigrating to Canada. Soccer, as they described it, “made life, life, back home” (Interview, Albert Choi, 19 April 2015, Pereira home). The connection and importance these men saw in soccer and their mental health was further explained by Joe:

In soccer we found a way to recreate a bit of home here in London. Through our pick-up games we finally began to integrate with our community because we felt relaxed enough [to do so]. Though some of us had been here for years, none of us felt we had [really] integrated with anyone. That’s another thing, Marcelo, integration doesn’t have a time-frame. For some it’s quick, for others it takes longer, some never feel integrated.

Soccer became [our] way to relax, to forget about [our] many anxieties and inadequacies in this country. Soccer was something we could do [well] without good English or knowing [much about] Canadian culture and customs. This helps a person […] in their heads and in their hearts.

The effects of feeling unique, skilled at something, relaxed, are not just felt by that person but also in the home by their families. Soccer, Marcelo, is a form of healing. Because of soccer, [like a domino effect], many [other] things in our home [lives] changed. Emotional health is very important for any person or community to integrate with each other (Interview, Joe Pereira, 14 April 2015, BMO Centre, London).
By the end of summer in 1969, small-sided games between men from “soccer countries” at one plant had captured the attention, interest, and imaginations of men at other plants in the city – men who also shared their 3M counterparts’ love and cultural attachment to soccer – developed into one of Ontario’s first “industrial leagues” (Interview, Albert Choi, 19 April 2015, Pereira home).

Albert offers a first-hand recollection of how “…it went from a few 3M guys, to guys at other plants, to a league” in the following:

By the end of the 1969 summer we had created a mini sensation. Stories of the pick-up games had reached other manufacturing plants in the city. It was unexpected. I remember receiving a call from Tony asking if I could gather enough players to play a team from an auto parts plant. I had no problems doing this. The difficult part was turning guys away when I had the number of players I needed. And [it] didn’t stop when summer ended. Once winter came we rented the gym at a high school to keep playing. (Interview, Albert Choi, 27 April 2015, EMSA fundraiser, BMO Centre, London).

In his personal journal, Joe designated 1970 as “the year of the league” since it was in March 1970 that the decision was made to organize a “real” soccer league involving “guys from all the plants” (Journal Entry. 1972. Joe Pereira. “Soccer and Canada”). From an anthropological, analytical approach – one that views the starting of the league as part of the “becoming” process for these men – this indeed was an exercise in doing Canadian culture. It was, I argue, one of many steps taken by this group towards becoming Canadian. In the following, Maureen (Tom’s spouse) supports this conclusion:
Tom and Joe spoke to their Canadian co-workers for advice. Advice about how baseball and hockey beer leagues were organized and run. Organizing a soccer league in Canada became a learning tool for Tom and the others about Canadian society [...] about how Canadians did the things they were also wanting to do – like start a sports league. John even went to watch hockey games at the arena to take notes. It was like he was studying for school.

Organizing a soccer league in Canada became a learning tool for John [and the others] about Canadian society. (Interview, Maureen Papadopoulos, 6 April 2015, Papadopoulos home, London).

The above highlights one way soccer was used by the Old Guys, purposely or not, to establish contact between communities – in this case between an imagined soccer community (in the making) and the general community – a community perceived by the Old Guys as being a separate community of “Canadians.”

Anderson’s (1983) notion of imagined communities is not only present here but key to understanding how some immigrants may see themselves as existing separately from the general community. This considered, the need and want for integration into the larger community becomes not only obvious but logical. To be clear however, the Old Guys viewed themselves as a community bound by their love of soccer and its significance in their respective cultures. Theirs then was a soccer community first – an ethnic/European community second. Portes (1999: 221) identifies this form of unification as being based largely on the collective enjoyment of an activity that for this group reinforced national identities abroad.
Physical and Social Spaces in the Community and at Home through Soccer

In its first season (1970), the industrial league (the first of many versions in London in the following decades) consisted of six teams with approximately 20 players on each of their rosters (Interview, Tom Papadopoulos, 6 April 2015, Papadopoulos home, London). Unlike present-day London’s industrial league however, the league then lacked nearly everything one would expect a functioning sports league to have, most importantly, space on which to operate (discussed more below). One thing they did have, however, was uniforms. Members from each of the teams had approached their respective managers at their plants and asked if the plant would be willing to sponsor their team. This meant the business paying for the uniforms and then having the company logo on the shirt. Except for one business, all the others agreed and thought it would be a good way to promote their business and brand further in the city. Of this experience, Angelo recalls: “Never would I have imagined asking a boss back home for money for [soccer] team shirts. But I was told this was common for beer leagues and such in Canada” (Interview, Angelo Bakas, 18 April 2015, Rei dos Leitos Restaurant, London).

Despite not having access to suitable playing fields, matches were played nonetheless on fields the players created (marked) and maintained themselves (in some cases, with the help of family and friends). The finding, creating, and maintaining of fields is remarkable and I discuss it in detail because the actions involved in this process show how, exactly, soccer can function as an integration tool in and outside the home. Unassigned spaces in and around city parks were transformed into mid-size soccer pitches. In addition to finding these spaces,
however, said spaces had to be further altered to look and function as soccer fields. Marking the spaces to “become” soccer fields was especially challenging (“marking” in this case refers to laying down the side and end lines, as well as the goal area) because of the potential risks and consequences of altering city property. As a solution that would avoid fines and problems with city officials, the use of baking flour to mark the lines was suggested. Though this was a messy way of marking field dimensions, it avoided using more lasting materials like field paint. Simple flour then solved the problem and became a temporary way for the league to mark its fields for matches (Interview, Tom Papadopoulos, 6 April 2015, Papadopoulos home, London).

For the actual playing of soccer, making and maintaining soccer fields was obviously necessary in a city where a) there were not many soccer fields to begin with and b) where they were available, they were expensive to rent (from the city and ethnic clubs). From a theoretical perspective however, the creating of these spaces represented something more profound for these immigrants. The fields, as conceptualized by multiple interviewees, represented the tending and caring of their respective ethnic cultures. As specifically explained by Joe, the relationship between soccer, integration, and building fields can be interpreted as “cultivating [their] culture” – that is, they were engaged in re-growing it here in Canada – making it visible, making themselves visible, they were literally laying roots (Interview, Joe Pereira, 14 April 2015, BMO Centre, London). Field making reinforced two ideals held by the group: 1) that Canada is a nation for and of growth, a place for physical and cultural expansion; and 2) it symbolized the
Canadian Dream (one that is often overshadowed by the better known “American Dream”), that in Canada things could be achieved, things could be built, through effort. For Joe: “Making and keeping our own spaces helped us build more than just soccer fields […] we built a community” (Interview, Joe Pereira, 14 April 2015, BMO Centre, London).

As noted, the work of measuring and marking the fields extended beyond the players and involved entire families in some cases. A recurring theme in immigration studies is the imbalance often found between how men and women experience migration (Grassmuck and Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). The experiences and memories of women who participated in field marking are greatly significant as they provide a first glimpse to a multi-gendered view of the meanings, effects, and uses of soccer during this period. Below, Sonia, Joe’s spouse, recalls her role in marking fields and uses it to explain what she called the “unequal integration” that can occur because of gender. Moreover, she explains how different terms or ideas can have different meanings – in this case, what “visibility” meant for her and other women involved with the league in comparison to what this same term meant for the men.

Joe and I had been in Canada for about six years when he became involved with the soccer. I was excited and happy when Joe asked that I help with the soccer. Up to that point most of my time was spent at home as a house-wife and mother to our son. At the fields I met other Portuguese immigrants, and immigrants from other countries. We shared stories about our lives back home and our new lives here – [this] made me feel heard and seen as
something other than a mother and wife. I felt part of a larger community of immigrants, and of the bigger general community. I felt real. There is such a thing, you know, as being real but still feel invisible (Interview, Sonia Pereira, 19 April 2015, Pereira home, London).

Sonia’s words were echoed by other women with whom I spoke (some of whom were not necessarily involved with soccer during the founding of the leagues but were at the time, acquaintances or friends of women like Maureen, Sonia, and Mona who themselves were part of the league’s origins). Visibility had further dimensions for women, as it had to occur in the home as well as in the community. For the women, they felt it necessary to be visible to their husbands as immigrant Canadian women. For the women involved with the fields then, being visible in this activity was an important first step to enact and adopt a Canadian identity at home through their work in the general community (outside of the home).

Another effect of field marking process was the reduction in spousal strain and “distance.” Sonia noted that field-marking allowed her to spend more time with Joe in a role outside their home (Interview, Sonia Pereira, 19 April 2015, Pereira home, London). Canadian women have relationships with their husbands inside and outside the home, she argued. For her then, being seen by her husband was important if she wanted to be visible to others in the community as well. “Quite simply,” I was told, “Integration in a new country happens within families and not just with others in the community” (Interview, Sonia Pereira, 19 April 2015, Pereira home, London). Continuing with the topic of family, those that had children who helped with marking the fields commented on how this activity often generated
conversations between parents and children about stories of home. Soccer was used as platform to discuss everything and anything of back home. Some kids, for instance, were told stories of their grandparents, whom they had never met, who loved soccer and how central it was to their parents’ upbringing. Ultimately, the league and the fields made a part of their culture real and visible in Canada to their children too.

The Old Guys’ position and explanation of visibility and invisibility are necessary for a more complete understanding of soccer’s role in helping this group understand, explain, and attain visibility. Moreover, and equally important, to support notions of the variations between immigration experiences between men and women, Tom and Albert agreed that the visibility they and other men sought through soccer was visibility in the community, whereas the women sought visibility both in the home, with their husbands, and in the community. The following is Joe’s perspective on the matter of visibility:

I came to Canada when I was almost thirty. I learned the language, the customs, I worked hard. I was part of the community, in a sense. Though I was part of the community some ways, I wasn’t in others. I felt no control over how I was seen. Soccer and our league helped with this – with no more feeling like a visible Portuguese but an invisible Canadian. Soccer allowed the community to see more of me and my culture.
From Industrial to Recreational League

Though the industrial league encountered a variety of difficulties and obstacles in its first year, it was considered a success by everyone involved – so successful and visible that 3M donated and built a field on their property which is still used today to host industrial league games. The Old Guys and everyone involved with the league would not stop with the industrial league, however.

Building from their success with the industrial league, there were talks, Angelo recalls, of expanding into the then non-existent recreational arena. These talks were not very serious, however, until a group of older stock Canadians (“older stock”, as used by Miller, refers to Canadians who are the descendants of immigrants of one or more generations) approached Albert wanting to enter an “all-Canadian team” into the league (Interview, Angelo Bakas, 18 April 2015, Rei dos Leitos Restaurant, London).

To clarify, up to this moment most of the teams of the industrial league were comprised of “ethnic men” but the teams were not purposefully divided by ethnicity. The idea of an “all-Canadian team” in fact countered everything the league fundamentally represented. For the Old Guys, ethnic soccer was counterproductive to the integration process. They held that in Canadian society, a game should not be divided along ethnic lines. The request then for the all-Canadian team was denied. In his journal Joe wrote the following regarding why soccer in Canada was best without the ethnic attachment:

Soccer, despite that it is not Canadian, contains and represents everything that Canada is about. In its purest form soccer does not discriminate. It is a game about existing and working with the people around you. The goal is the same
for everyone on the team. Everyone wants to succeed, everyone wants the same things. Like in life.

I see soccer like a mini Canadian model, like a little society. Like Canada, soccer is beautiful because anyone can play it, anyone can do anything. There are no restrictions, and if there are restrictions, they can be challenged, like in a soccer match. Like Canada, soccer can make you equal. If there are others on your team that are stronger than you, they will support you, they will help you. Canadian society is like this too.

The brotherhood that exists on the field between teammates should not be limited to 90 minutes. This brotherhood should not be based on race or culture. This is Canada. To divide people by race or culture goes against Canadian values. Ethnic teams are the opposite of what Canada, of what being Canadian is about. Matches played at the international levels are different. But dividing people that live in the same city? This is absurd. This city needs a league that is for everyone (Journal Entry. 1972. Joe Pereira. “Soccer and Canada”).

Although their request was denied on the basis that the industrial league did not permit ethnic teams, the group of Canadians understood. Mick, the person who had approached the Old Guys with the idea, recalls the following:

At first, I was a bit upset. But after thinking about the logic behind their decision I understood what it was they were trying to do. And they were right, you know? Making teams based on ethnicity, in our case, Canadians vs. foreigners was just going to recreate an “us vs. them” environment. So yeah,
once Angelo explained that we were more than welcome to register a team but that the team couldn’t be branded as a ‘Canadian team’ we went ahead and registered (Interview, Mick, 26 April 2015, BMO Centre London).

“True and All-Inclusive Integration”: The Southwest Soccer League

Two reasons summarize the Old Guys’ intentions in establishing the SWSL (Southwest Soccer League), London’s longest-running recreational league: 1) they wanted soccer to be accessible and visible to everyone in the city; and 2) they wanted soccer to be a “usable means” for “true and all-inclusive integration.” True and all-inclusive integration, as explained by Angelo, was something that could only occur if this process followed a “genuine Canadian model” (Interview, Angelo Bakas, 18 April 2015, Rei dos Leitos Restaurant, London). True and all-inclusive integration itself meant that everyone should have access to whatever tool or vehicle was being used to achieve a goal or task – integrating and communicating with others in the community, for instance. Regarding soccer, this involved offering an alternative to the community to any form of exclusionary soccer – something that countered “restrictive, divisive, and exclusionary” ethnic soccer, and even industrial league soccer as not everyone wanting to play the game worked in the industrial sector (Interview, Angelo Bakas, 18 April 2015, Rei dos Leitos Restaurant, London).

For the Old Guys soccer was supposed to unite people, not separate them. In Canada, ethnic separation seemed especially contradictory and problematic. Much of the industrial league’s success had in fact resulted from it not emphasizing ethnicity and or a specific skill set. Another reason for the industrial league’s
success they argued involved it embodying a specific interpretation or understanding of Canadian culture. Joe explains this concept further in the following, through his discussion of “integration by replication”:

When you’re wanting to integrate with a community you should understand that community. Integration is to mould […] to put different elements together to hopefully create something meaningful. But you can’t do this, in our opinion, through something that does not represent or in some way replicate the society or community you’re trying to integrate with.

Replication, as we use it, does not mean that we were abandoning our culture and traditions. Replication just means that we’re going to try to integrate by replicating that community’s structure and values (Interview, Joe Pereira, 14 April 2015, BMO Centre, London).

From this explanation it is obvious why ethnic soccer, the predominant form of soccer in 1970s London, was viewed with concern by the Old Guys. At the same time however, the idea that ethnic soccer teams were counterproductive to integration into Canadian society and represented the opposite of Canadian values and society is mistaken, some would argue. It is after all very Canadian to be able to build and celebrate one’s ethnicity be it through a community center, festival, or soccer team/club. The question then becomes: where should the line be drawn, if at all?

Although the Old Guys had strong connections and were members of their respective ethnic clubs themselves, they viewed “keeping people out” of anything as grossly un-Canadian nonetheless. They were aware and valued that Canadian
society encouraged ethnic activities that expressed pride in one’s background and was open to people creating their own clubs to continue to promote and maintain their cultural heritage within their community. However, when it came to an activity like soccer, an activity that did not require a player to be from the same ethnic background as his/her teammates, this was especially viewed as being wrong. In their view, not only did this keep groups “visible” mainly amongst themselves, it overtly excluded other immigrants, as well as members of the general community. For instance, they did not want older-stock Canadians to feel they were being excluded from something the “foreigners did amongst themselves” (Interview, Joe Pereira, 14 April 2015, BMO Centre, London).

In this context, and building on the success of the industrial league, the Old Guys decided it was time to introduce a league that made soccer available to anyone and everyone in London. No longer was soccer only going to be available at the industrial or ethnic levels. The new league would have two main goals. It would create a truly Canadian outlet for integration – that is, a visible and physical representation of Canadian culture at work. It would also be a way to introduce soccer to those who were not familiar with it – and for those who did know soccer, it would introduce them to different groups who also played. In keeping with their true and all-inclusive Canadian model, the league would have one main rule: like the industrial league, teams could not be registered as or be ethnic in nature. Though it would later prove difficult to monitor who was originally from where on each team, the point was made, nonetheless – the league was meant to bring people together, not divide them.
The SWSL evolved quickly between 1971 and 1974. The league began operating in the summer of 1971. Like the industrial league, however, the SWSL suffered some of the same difficulties in its formative year. Once again, access to soccer fields was the primary problem. As a result, league members decided to approach several of the city’s schools which had small (and somewhat inadequate) fields on their school yards. Since the recreational league now had a youth section, it was mainly the mothers of the member children who approached teachers and school principals for permission to hold league games on these fields (Interview, Mona Choi, 22 April 2015, Choi home, Dorchester).

By the end of the second season (1972), the field problem was almost nonexistent thanks in large part to several schools in the district. Yet the Old Guys and the many people involved with operating the SWSL aimed for something bigger and better for the growing league. Soccer-specific fields were the next step for the growth of the league. As a result, many from the league began writing and attending city council meetings to propose the building of public fields to support the city’s growing soccer community. Mona recalls this process as follows:

It was very political standing in front of city leaders and the mayor asking for spaces for our kids and friends to play soccer. How funny and strange? At least it seemed that way to us then. I remember sitting in a waiting area at city hall, waiting for our turn to speak to the assembly. We were all very nervous but at the same time we felt important. Imagine, getting the chance to speak to our local leaders by simply asking, and then being heard with respect and
attention. What an amazing country […] we all thought this (Interview, Mona Choi, 22 April 2015, Choi home, Dorchester).

Due mainly if not exclusively to the efforts of everyone now involved with soccer’s growing community, in 1973 the city built Kensal Park, London’s first soccer-specific complex. By 1973 the league had expanded to the point where a small office in the White Oaks area was rented. The office was usually open twice a week and it was run on a volunteer basis by Albert and Mona. With the office people could now register a team, discuss problems or concerns with league administrators directly, etc. Also, it was a place where donations or sponsorships were accepted from local business. Anyone wanting to promote their business through advertising on uniforms would go to the office and make their donation. According to Mona, at the time, the typical donation was 50 dollars (Interview, Mona Choi, 22 April 2015, Choi home, Dorchester). Ethnic bakeries, restaurants, and other service-providers sponsored the league to further promote their businesses to people within their communities, and to people outside their communities as well.

Furthermore, through the participation of “older-stock” Canadians in the league, many began to reconnect with their ethnic or non-indigenous Canadian pasts. Although some of the Canadians had never played soccer, many began to look into their heritage to find their soccer roots. People began talking about their backgrounds and according to Joe, it led to a narrative that everyone, even the Canadian-born, knew that we were all immigrants at some point, and that the
league had been made precisely to bring us together under the immigrant Canadian umbrella (Interview, Joe Pereira, 14 April 2015, BMO Centre, London).

While it was not necessarily a deliberate goal of the Old Guys, through the SWSL true integration was achieved both on and off the pitch. People interacted. They began to know each other. They spoke. Visibility was no longer an issue for those who had felt invisible only a few years earlier – they were now part of a sporting community that was curious to know everyone and everything about its different members. The processes and struggles to find space, and finally reaching that space, had united and integrated people who did not know of each other. As Joe put it, “like Canadian society, soccer had made people work together for a common goal” (Interview, Joe Pereira, 14 April 2015, BMO Centre, London).

However, and of great significance, not all groups found the SWSL to be as accommodating and as inclusive as professed by its founders and organizers. As players, women were generally excluded from the “all-inclusive” league. Although it may have proved difficult to find enough women to form a team the time, let alone several teams to compete against each other (women’s soccer in 1970s London was not as popular as it is now both here and in the rest of the world), the opportunity to attempt it was neither offered nor encouraged. The Old Guys acknowledge now that they were in large part to blame for this as soccer in those days was very much still viewed by many as a man’s sport – including by them. The women of the next two chapters, however, are evidence that in 2018 this is longer the case, considering that now girls and women outnumber male soccer players not just in Ontario, but nationwide.
In the next two chapters I will present some more recent struggles by women to find their place in London’s soccer community. It is worth noting here that their struggles for visibility and inclusion exhibited some of the same processes that were experienced by the Old Guys when they began their work. Indeed, women had to look for space where there really was none for them. Although the Old Guys had expanded inclusion in some ways, they had failed to notice that inclusion for women was more than just in administrative roles – it had to also include them playing. Despite some parallels, the processes experienced by these two groups were different. As one female interviewee put it, “it is more difficult to enter a space when it is not you that has created it” (Interview, Stephanie, BMO Centre, April 4, 2015, BMO Centre, London).
Chapter 3: 
Latina-Canadians: Experiencing Identity through Soccer

Soccer is Canada’s most popular team sport with girls (ages 5-17) (CSA 2011). Further, at both the youth and adult levels, the number of registered girls/women playing organized soccer in Canada is growing rapidly. In 2015, 41 per cent (360,000) of the total number of soccer players in Canada were girls/women – this is a substantial increase from the 16,000 registered female players 35 years ago (Hall 2004: 38). Victor Montagliani, a member of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) council and current president of the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF), considers Canadian women to be some of the most passionate soccer fans and players in the world. During a conversation, Montagliani told me: “Soccer is a part of Canada’s culture now, it’s not going anywhere – it’s only going to get bigger. Canadian women have made the game their own – it has a recognizable identity” (Interview, Victor Montagliani, 13 May 2015, Fairmont Royal York Hotel, Toronto). Of interest to this thesis is that many of the players that make-up women’s soccer in Canada are second-generation Canadians with roots in countries where soccer has been, and continues to be, a male pastime. Montagliani’s comment regarding the identity of Canadian soccer leaves much to consider in regards to what, exactly, makes Canadian women’s soccer “Canadian.” The experiences of a Latina-Canadian women’s soccer team in London, Ontario, the Azulitas, offers some answers to this question.
This chapter consists of two main sections, both of which draw on a series of focus groups held during the summer of 2015. Section one is about a group of first-generation Latina-Canadians (las soccer moms) in London, Ontario who are using soccer as a tool to understand and explain the culture of their native countries. (“First-generation” as used here refers to women currently between the ages of 40 and 60 who were born outside of Canada.) In their experiences with soccer “back home” (as they often refer to their native countries), interviewees have found what they consider to be a working model that explains the sexist social structure of their respective Central and South American countries.

For the more than 20 Latina-Canadians who contributed to this section, education is the first step towards change. Understanding how and why things work the way they do back home is important to their current roles in the development of their new Latina-Canadian culture and identities. As noted by one interviewee: “To explain, adopt, and or create culture, you should first try to understand how it works” (Focus Group Discussion, Paola, 4 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). Notably, these Latina-Canadians have transformed the contrast between soccer “back home” and soccer in Canada into a lens through which, they argue, the birth of a new Latina-Canadian identity is occurring and can be observed.

Section two looks at a soccer team consisting of 18 second-generation Latina-Canadian soccer players who call themselves the Azulitas (the Little Blues). (Here “second-generation” refers to women aged 18-30 who were either young children when

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6 The names of all interviewees/participants in sections one and two of this chapter are pseudonyms.
7 The word “sexist” was used by interviewees to describe the overall social structure of their home countries (as per their experiences and or views).
they immigrated to Canada, or more often were born in Canada to Latin American parents.) Canadian born (except for two players) the Azulitas see soccer as a game that is as Canadian as they are – one with no gender restrictions, for instance.

Women’s soccer for the Azulitas serves as a form of resistance against what they call “old world” traditions that in their experiences and opinions, continue to be prevalent in many Latino-Canadian households: specifically, traditions that maintain unequal power dynamics between men and women. For the Azulitas, playing a sport that according to Votre and Mourao is “forbidden to women” (2004: 255) in most Latin American societies because it is viewed as a male activity is a major step towards gender equality in London’s Latino community. Simply playing soccer is not enough, however. To actively use soccer as a method of change and resistance the Azulitas visit various multicultural community events throughout London to promote gender equality in sport. They believe if a gender-equal sports model can be transferred into the household, then other areas of social life can also be affected. According to the Azulitas, husband and wife, father and daughter relationships, even mental and emotional health can be improved in the Latino community through a unified stance against gender inequality in soccer.

Las Soccer Moms: Understanding, Explaining, and Creating Culture with Soccer

The idea for Latinas FC (Fútbol Club) (London’s first all-Latina soccer team comprised of first generation Latina-Canadians) stemmed from a series of focus groups organized by London’s Cross Cultural Learners Centre (CCLC). These focus groups were part of a year-long study conducted in 2013-14 by two doctors working with the Canadian Diabetes Association and the Heart and Stroke Foundation (London offices).
The aim of the study was to identify the causes for what doctors G. Plum and T. Morgan considered to be especially high rates of type 2 diabetes and heart disease in first generation Latinas in London. Their research methods included daily food and exercise logs, family medical histories, bi-weekly blood and urine exams, stress EKGs, and focus groups (Interview, G. Plum and T. Morgan, 21 April 2015, CCLC, London).

Upon the completion of their study one of Plum and Morgan’s conclusions was that there existed a “common culture of inactivity among older Latinas [in London]” (Interview, T. Morgan, 21 April 2015, CCLC, London). Thus, they argued that significant lack of physical exercise, more than diet and family history, was the primary cause for the development of type 2 diabetes and heart disease in first generation Latinas in London (Interview, G. Plum and T. Morgan, 21 April 2015, CCLC, London). Also, Plum and Morgan found that most of the women in the study were reluctant or unable to include intentional aerobic exercise in their daily routines for “cultural reasons beyond the scope of [the] study” (Interview, T. Morgan, 21 April 2015, CCLC, London).

In view of the study’s results, activity coordinators at the CCLC, who had assisted Plum and Morgan in finding participants for their study, decided to revisit the centre’s existing health and wellness program for new Latinas to Canada. Subsequently it was determined that the existing program lacked structure in that there were no set activities or groups Latinas could sign up to join. Those looking to be more active were simply referred to London’s downtown YMCA to explore options on their own. The proposal for London’s first all-Latina soccer team, Latinas FC, was the CCLC’s attempt to provide first generation Latinas with a “suitable” activity that was organized and sponsored by the centre. The assumption was that all Latinos, men and women, were familiar and enjoyed
playing soccer. However, their project faced some obstacles that revealed problems with this generalized approach.

With extensive contacts in the Latino community (Pentecostal churches being perhaps the most influential and wide-reaching), the CCLC made great efforts to promote their new program; the program received little interest, however. The reasons for this were simple. First, not all Latinos play or are interested in soccer. There are numerous countries in Latin America that do not have a “soccer culture.” Due to historical interactions with the United States, Nicaragua, Panama, Venezuela, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, for instance, are baseball-playing countries.

Second, and more relevant to this thesis, soccer in Latin America is a male pastime. Soccer as the obvious or suitable choice to help improve physical activity in first generation Latina-Canadians ignored long-standing cultural traditions, as well as social understandings of gender and access to gender-specific spaces in Latin America. Despite soccer being an activity of fanatical proportions in the countries from which first-generation Latina-Canadian interviewees emigrated (Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua), soccer is in many ways foreign to women in and from these countries. It is not surprising then that only two women signed up to join Latinas FC. The program was ultimately abandoned.

There is, nonetheless, much to be learned from the rejection of Latinas FC by its intended participants. Case workers and coordinators at the CCLC, for instance, were forced to re-evaluate and improve their wellness and support program for Latina newcomers (Interview, Fazi, 27 April 2015, CCLC, London). The program’s health section was subsequently redrafted – this time, however, with input from first-generation
Latina-Canadians (many of whom had been approached to join Latinas FC). One of the new activities organized by the centre is a jogging club – an activity that (first-generation) Latinas felt was better suited for “women their age and of their cultural backgrounds and experiences” (Focus Group Discussion, 4 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). Beyond the redrafting of its program, the CCLC’s experience with the Latinas FC idea served as a reminder to the centre that cultural traditions and experiences vary even within an ethnic group. In this case, they learned that even something as ostensibly trivial as a sport may sometimes require an approach that considers gender.

Inadvertently, the idea for London’s first all-Latina soccer team for first-generation Latinas brought together a group of Latinas in another and unusual way – not to play soccer, but to discuss their shared views on soccer’s ability to helping them understand and explain concepts about life, culture, and identity in both their home countries and in Canada. Las soccer moms, as they are referred to by family and friends, first met while discussing alternatives for Latinas FC at meetings arranged by CCLC program coordinators.

To be clear, las soccer moms are not a club or a team in that they have regular scheduled meetings, for instance. In fact, the only times these women talk is when they run into each other at soccer games, the supermarket, shopping malls, etc. Simply, they are women from various countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean whose children play soccer in several of London’s soccer clubs but who share one fundamental view: they believe that their histories and experiences with soccer can explain much about who they are as Latinas, and help define who and what they want to be as Latina-Canadians.
During the first of four focus group discussions (4 May 2015) with first-generation Latina-Canadians, las soccer moms, Victoria explained that in her native Guatemala the belief that soccer is a men’s activity is widely-accepted by both men and women (Focus Group Discussion, Victoria, 4 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). Marlene and Regina (both from El Salvador) reminded us that this was not to be taken as mere ignorance, however (Focus Group Discussion, Marlene and Regina, 4 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). That is, men and women back home understood there is nothing physiologically male or female about soccer – they understand that the gendering of soccer in El Salvador is strictly a social determination. Moreover, interviewees identified their acceptance of this belief as the main reason for having declined the opportunity to form part of Latinas FC. This belief they argued was part of their lived culture as Latinas.

Further, interviewees noted that since they had always accepted the idea of soccer being for men, they also felt no sense of loss or regret in not having played it in their youth. They argued that these long-standing cultural traditions absolved soccer from being a deliberate source or cause of gender inequality in what they called their “old lives.” Thus, a desire to play soccer in their current circumstances, for instance as a display of sexual liberation, was non-existent.

Soccer’s unchallenged gendering, however, was “only valid back home.” My question “Is soccer in Canada a male activity?” was answered with a decisive and unanimous “No.” The only-for-men rule, one woman explained, “did not apply to [their] daughters, nieces, granddaughters” (Focus Group Discussion, Carol, 4 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). Here in Canada, their Canadian daughters were protected by Canadian culture from restrictions due to gender. When asked if they too felt protected by Canadian
culture, interviewees said they did. Regarding themselves, however, this protection did not involve being able to play soccer. Protection in their case was instead viewed as the ability to choose – the choice to play or not play was *their* Canadian protection. This notion of protection through choice via citizenship is best articulated by Laura:

> I think we all agree [referring to the others in the group] that there is tremendous value in choice. I see my ability to choose as protection. The ability to say no, I don’t want to do something or yes, I do want to do it, is very Canadian. This is where I see value. Canadian is being able to choose (Focus Group Discussion, Laura, 4 May 2015, BMO Centre, London).

For *las* soccer moms, soccer helps define and separate two stages in their lives – life back home and life in Canada. The thinking about soccer from a then and there to a here and now perspective is an important part of what interviewees Marlene and Sara first introduced as “acceptable explanations” (Focus Group Discussion, Marlene and Sara, 22 May 2015, London Public Library at Wellington St., London) – a notion that is essential to how this group understands, explains, differentiates, and takes control of culture. This alerted me to pay close attention to their explanation of this idea as it would help me understand the logic behind soccer’s seemingly unchallenged gendering being valid [only] back home, as well as other topics we would later discuss regarding their understanding of their worlds through culture. A meaningless term on its own and without context, acceptable explanations was used repeatedly by multiple interviewees. Marlene explained the term as follows:
Social freedoms and restrictions are created and sustained by explanations which are deemed acceptable [...] beliefs and customs are made and then justified by what is eventually explained as being part of a larger cultural tradition [...] the idea of things being inseparable from history and tradition ultimately become acceptable explanations for beliefs that may or may not be right (Focus Group Discussion, Marlene, 22 May 2015, London Public Library at Wellington St., London).

The notion acceptable explanations provides some insight into why interviewees accept, and seemingly agree, that soccer back home is rightfully for men despite opposing this very idea if it concerned their Canadian daughters in Canada. Interviewees recognized this contradiction and feared that their thinking could be interpreted as being unjustly convenient – that is, accepting the exclusion of women from soccer back home yet treating it as a social right for their Canadian daughters because as Latina-Canadians they were now able to oppose such baseless discrimination. They defended their position, however, by explaining that in both instances they are adhering to cultural norms. One interviewee argued: “Culture is like the popular food metaphor, you are what you eat. I think of culture in a similar way [...] you become where you live” (Focus Group Discussion, Rosario, 22 May 2015, London Public Library at Wellington St., London).

To further emphasize the significance of acceptable explanations to their understanding of culture, Ana noted:

We are not experts in things like culture [...] but I think I speak for others in this group when I say that many aspects of daily life in our countries are explained through the teaching that things are how they are because they have
always been that way [...] Imagine, history and tradition, what better or more acceptable explanations than those two? Being aware that things in Canada are different and then playing by those rules doesn’t make us hypocrites, it makes us conscious citizens (Focus Group Discussion, Ana, 22 May 2015, London Public Library at Wellington St., London).

Socially accepting the status quo, however, does not always equate to personal acceptance, interviewees stressed. But what does one do when it is difficult, if not impossible or dangerous, to disagree with things that have been justified through history and tradition? Therefore, whether explanations and their acceptance of them regarding soccer (or anything else) in their pasts were right or wrong, they are important for these women nonetheless to make sense of the world both at home and in Canada. Views on sexuality in their home countries is one example used by the group to detail how acceptable explanations develop into solidified cultural norms – norms that can and often do travel with people when they immigrate. Further, through sexuality, interviewees offered another explanation as to why the Latinas FC idea was for them so unattractive and intimidating.

For instance, the homophobic culture that surrounds soccer in their home countries is unforgiving – a mixture of ignorance, religious conservatism, and machista attitudes. A common component of this is what interviewees called the “stripping of sexuality” (Focus Group Discussion, 22 May 2015, London Public Library at Wellington St., London). Homophobia combined with underlying suggestions of gender inequality as effective deterrents to an array of social spaces and liberties can be understood as follows: the loser in a soccer match, in addition
to being a loser, is stripped of his masculinity and is relegated to having a partial female identity – a sissy or maricón in Spanish. Being relegated or associated with femininity, on a larger social scale, reinforces the idea of women being secondary to men – in a sporting context, second equals being inferior to your opponent.

The stripping of sexuality is worse when it involves a homosexual element. Women too can be further relegated, interviewees explained, by being stripped of their proper womanhood and given a homosexual female identity. To avoid experiencing the ridicule of being stripped of their sexual identity women themselves become active participants in the same type of logic that justifies their own social obstacles – obstacles that extend beyond soccer. Carol expressed the following as her perspective on sexuality through a soccer lens in Costa Rica:

A woman’s sexuality is important to her – it’s central to our culture. We do woman things […] we accept woman things […] playing soccer was, and is still, not for women in Costa Rica. If you played [soccer] you were called a lesbian. Even if you were a lesbian this was not a good thing for people to know. After some time, it becomes natural to think this way. You join your society and how it thinks. I admit, I thought the girls that played were maybe a little lesbian because they did something they knew was for men and lesbians. I feel stupid here and now for thinking this way, but not then and there (Focus Group Discussion, Carol, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).

Moreover, the body, according to interviewees, is another key factor in the social and physical dynamics between first-generation Latinas and soccer. In their respective native countries, male and female, and what these two should look like,
is unwavering. The body and gender have an inseparable connection that is in many respects visual. “To act like a woman makes you look like a woman […] it makes you a proper woman in the eyes of everyone” (Focus Group Discussion, Paola, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London). Women are expected to look like women – the body, first and foremost, must have a feminine appearance. Even something as simple as a hairstyle can be a decisive marker in looking like a “real” woman or a lesbian.

The muscular development caused by soccer’s physical requirements is viewed as resulting in being too brawny and thus too male. To visually contradict social norms in relation to physical appearance is again cause for ridicule and violence, one interviewee explained (Focus Group Discussion, Lorena, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London). In relation to the nature of soccer, one woman reinforced that what made it male had more to do with macho ideals of gender and sexuality rather than the physical expectations of the sport itself (Focus Group Discussion, Yoana, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London. “[Soccer] being for men back home is not an easy thing to understand. It involves more than just [your] private parts” (Focus Group Discussion, Mercedes, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).

*Las* soccer moms adamantly stressed, however, that it is false to state or suggest that men are solely responsible for the continuance of homophobic and sexist attitudes back home in relation to soccer and other areas of social life. The group agreed that women like themselves are also complicit. One interviewee stated: “We are not victims of our culture […] we are very much a part of it.
Regardless of how things became the way they are, and how they are kept that way, with or without different forms of violence, everyone is responsible for their continuation in some way. But just like one can be part of continuing something, one can also be part of changing it” (Focus Group Discussion, Margot, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).

From the above the following is clear: through their experiences with soccer these women are putting their lives into a larger cultural and historical perspective. Soccer is a stage from which a social history is understood and re-told. However, although being able to explain their past through soccer is important for this group, what is more important to las soccer moms is how they are taking these memories and interpretations of cultural norms back home and using them to shape their new Latina-Canadian identity. To understand is key to implementing change – and soccer has become a tool for their “understanding,” interviewees noted (Focus Group Discussion, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London). The creation of the new Latina-Canadian woman is dependent on some form of explanation as to why things are how they are in one place, and how they differ in another. According to Carolina: “To see something different is not only to believe it but also to replicate it” (Focus Group Discussion, Carolina, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London). Regardless if it is agreed with or opposed by others, las soccer moms will continue to understand, reject, accept, or shape their culture through their acceptable explanations concept. It is, after all, Canadian to have one’s own opinion of the world whether others accept it or not, the group stressed (Focus Group Discussion, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).
Soccer also serves as a marker of time and space, distinguishing their old lives from their new lives, old identities from new identities, past time and space with the present and future. Simply being able to choose or continue rejecting an activity helps these first-generation Latina-Canadians create a contrast for significantly different times and spaces. That is, soccer is a point of reference – a time and spatial marker – a way to divide life in one society from another (old home vs. new home).

Moreover, memories and experiences with soccer in their home countries were described as something deeply entwined with their current process of creating a Latina-Canadian identity. That is, for these women, soccer embodies many of the social norms of their home countries; equally, soccer in Canada embodies what they believe to be Canadian norms. Ultimately this creates contrasting views of two different cultures. Culture, therefore, as well as their state of physical and social being, are conceptualized through soccer.

Carolina, Margot, and Estefania explained how soccer was for them the reference point that marked time and geographical space (Focus Group Discussion, Carolina, Margot, and Estefania, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London). This reference point, they argued, plays a key role in their processes of becoming Latina-Canadians. Specifically, it marks their social and physical existence before and after this process began (time and space before Canada – time and space in Canada). Carolina explained this concept as follows:

Soccer back home helps me understand my life today […] in Canada. It helps me separate between two different times and cultures and how these cultures
think and act. The ability to compare, agree, and disagree is only possible because of the other […] My past life and experiences in El Salvador are necessary for me to understand and live my new life in Canada (Interview, Carolina, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).

Simply *marking* time and space is not soccer’s only function for this group of women, however. There is the equally if not more important function of using soccer to put into effect their current social reality – that is, taking something like soccer which at one point, was not for them, and using it to create the Latina-Canadian identity they claim to want, and are presently developing – an identity that also adheres to Canadian cultural norms with respect to women and gender equality. Canada too, they argue, has acceptable explanations – one, for instance, is that history and tradition promote gender equality. Their daughters are living under an umbrella that Canadian women created through many years of work and struggle – their daughters were born under this umbrella and so as good mothers and good immigrants the group feels that they must continue these Canadian customs. As one woman stated: “We form part of Canadian culture by raising our girls like Canadians. Girls play soccer here […] our girls are here and from here, so they will play too. This is us contributing to Canadian culture” (Focus Group Discussion, Samantha, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).

According to interviewees, being in Canada allowed for a woman or girl to play soccer without being socially transformed into a lesbian; muscles in Canada, as one interviewee put it, “…were a sign of female strength […] not a sign of masculinity” (Focus Group Discussion, Yoana, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).
London). Women here, as well as their sexuality, are protected – a sport did not challenge sexual preference or true sexual identity. The ability to play as a woman and remain a woman was protected. Safety and peace were viewed by interviewees as being physically represented or enacted through something as simple as being able to play as you were and remain that way.

Subsequently, the group noted that all of them pushed physical health and participation in sport onto their daughters and granddaughters. The aim was to raise a woman who was different from them – a stronger more adept woman. A physically strong woman they argued was representative of the status that Canadian society gives its female population. Further, they wanted to avoid the insecurities they argued were present in themselves – insecurities that were responsible for the culture of inactivity Drs. Plum and Morgan had correctly identified. *Las soccer moms* elaborated on this point by using the example of access and denial of spaces in their home countries as triggers to what they claim have manifested in social anxieties and traumas in many Latinas their age.

The existence of male-only activities and spaces is not only common but widely accepted in Latin America. Soccer and soccer stadiums, according to interviewees, are perfect representations of the overall social condition with respect to gender and space. Interviewees agreed that in Latin America, home and social life are controlled by men. Following the soccer model, other spaces are privileged environments reserved for the elite class. In Colombia, according to Yesenia, mainly gender and not monetary wealth divides social classes (Focus Group Discussion, Yesenia, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London). In contrast, access to
restricted spaces would include or result in better jobs for women, roles other than mothers and wives, and even protection from domestic and public violence. One woman, Rosario, told of an incident that occurred on her last trip to her native Honduras. It involved her niece and the consequences of entering a restricted space:

My niece and her boyfriend went to see a match between two local clubs at the stadium in San Pedro Sula. My niece was upset when she arrived home. Men had put their hands on her as she walked to her seat. Fans from the other team yelled profanities at her. Of course, no one was going to say anything […] or defend her […] it was her fault for going there” (Focus Group Discussion, Rosario, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).

As noted, having experienced the denial of social space in their old lives, combined with the feelings of danger and vulnerability that can occur from this, are triggers for emotional and psychological traumas that many of the group’s women feel they are suffering from. Rosario, for instance, charged “having lived like an outsider [due to her gender] in [her] own country” as being partly responsible for being too frightened to join a gym, and to attend the gym on her own “like other Canadian women” (Interview, Rosario, 16 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).

Rosario and others, however, find solace in knowing that they are now in a different time and place – a time and place where space is not set apart by gender.

Knowing that they are in a different place with access to an array of new social spaces, according to the group, is an important step to one day finding the courage to form part of these spaces. This considered, las soccer moms aim to suggest to workers at places like the CCLC that perhaps a good activity to add to
their women’s program might include accompanying newcomers to gyms. 
Something as simple as this, they argue, would help these women see and experience first-hand the safety involved in venturing into these previously perceived restricted spaces on their own.

In addition to using soccer to understand and interpret culture, soccer is also being used as a tool by las soccer moms in their integration process – or as they call it, “the process of creating a new Latina-Canadian identity” (Focus Group Discussion, 8 July 2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London). In response to my question: “Can you give me an example of how soccer is an active part of your integration process?” Lorena volunteered to summarize the group’s answer:

As young girls we didn’t have the type of relationship with our mothers that our daughters have with us. My mother never took me shopping for cleats or soccer socks or shorts […] our mothers didn’t attend high school soccer games. These things we’ve had to learn to do here with our daughters. We are in the process of learning how to be Canadian moms to our Canadian daughters. Just learning and knowing how and why soccer in Canada is also for girls is part of this process. Learning about the traditions and history of Canadian culture and how these contribute to the life my daughter enjoys now is part of our learning and integration process (Focus Group Discussion, Lorena, 8 July 2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London).

As new soccer moms, first-generation Latina-Canadians feel they are exercising their Canadian citizenry. Their involvement in their daughters’ extracurricular
activities alone is a new social experience. To see their daughters on a soccer pitch happy and safe or protected is for them a uniquely Canadian experience. It is an experience they associate with being a Canadian mother.

Part of being a Canadian parent involves being socially involved with people with similar interests or responsibilities. To encounter people with similar interests and lives, however, one must first find transportation to encounters with said people and their interests. In the past las soccer moms relied mainly on their husbands and public transit to get from one place to another. Thus, one significant change to come out of their roles as active Canadian soccer moms has been their acquisition of driver’s licenses. Through driving, this group of women has discovered and taken on an array of newly desired responsibilities. As noted by numerous interviewees, driving for them is about much more than driving a motor vehicle. “Driving” signifies taking control of their lives, bodies, minds. Driving is about taking control of the type of women they want to be in their new Canadian home.

Accordingly, as drivers many of las soccer moms have found a new role in their daily routines. Some participate in team carpools, for instance, and admit to eavesdropping on back seat conversations to “learn new words and how they are used by young people” (Focus Group Discussion, 8 July 2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London). In addition to listening in, some mothers join the conversation with the girls – “it’s good practice for my pronunciation,” one woman noted (Focus Group Discussion, Mercedes, 8 July 2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London). One interviewee even admitted to asking
her daughter’s teammates for help with her ESL homework on the drive home from
games and practices. “Her friends don’t complain when I ask them for help,” she
stated (Focus Group Discussion, Marlene, 8 July 2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at
Wellington St., London).

In addition to driving, soccer has also helped las soccer moms discover
friendships they would have never known existed (Focus Group Discussion, 8 July
2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London). According to the group, a
lot happens on the sidelines. For them, the sidelines of soccer fields are a meeting
place for individuals and in some instances, entire cultures. Some interviewees note
that they made their first Canadian friends through their involvement with their
daughter’s or son’s soccer. Some were White Anglo Canadians, others Asian and
Black Canadians – the point being that for many interviewees this was the first time
they had had any major interaction in a social setting with people who were not
from their home countries or from other places in Latin America. This in turn has
created new social activities, such as: invitations to dinners or functions at each
other’s homes; job networking; child care; and in the words of one interviewee,
“the experience of Canada’s diversity” (Focus Group Discussion, 8 July 2015, Ben
Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London). Interviews with people of non-Latino
descent revealed similar experiences. A Sudanese-Canadian woman, for instance,
purchased Rosetta-Stone⁸ (Spanish) to speak “…that beautiful language that Norma
and her mother speak” (Interview, Nafy, 17 July 2015, North London Athletic
Fields, London). She and Norma’s mother Maura (Norma and Nafy’s daughters are

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⁸ Rosetta-Stone language-learning software.
teammates) became good friends while on the sidelines. Both are single mothers, and they are quick to note the fact that they are a tremendous support network for each other.

Life at home has also been affected by soccer. The responsibilities involved in getting a soccer player to the soccer pitch involves more than just driving. This leaves my interviewees with less time to do the traditional work at home, which in some cases has led to the delegating of housework. Men have become more involved in the cooking and cleaning of the home due to their wives and daughters “living life like Canadian women,” as one Latino-Canadian father and husband put it (Interview, Mario, 10 July 2015, Lo Nuestro Latin Restaurant, London).

The mother too has acquired a new role in the eyes of her children. Mothers are now viewed with more autonomy, and thus more authority. As the facilitators of their sport, daughters and sons admit to changing attitudes and behaviours towards their mothers. One second-generation Latina-Canadian explained this as follows: “Soccer is [our] thing (referring to her and her mother). If I do bad in school or talk back she tells me I’m not going to my game. There’s nothing my dad can do about this […] my mom is in charge” (Interview, Erin, 29 July 2015, Latino Market, London). Las soccer moms have also noted changes in their sons. Mothers of boys claim that by being more “like Canadian moms,” their sons – “the next generation of Latino men” as one woman put it to me – are beginning to view the role of Latina women in the household as being more than mere passengers but instead, as equal or co-driving forces along with their fathers (Focus (Group Discussion, Paola, 8 July 2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London). The way they are
viewed by their daughters and sons has tremendous meaning for this group as they believe that this will ultimately form part of the legacy they are leaving behind. This legacy is perhaps best understood as the Latina-Canadian identity or culture they are in the process of forming.

In academia people and events are often studied in hindsight. My interviewees urged me to look at their situation as ongoing and still incomplete – that is, they feel they are “somewhere in the middle of the process” (Focus Group Discussion, 8 July 2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London). “In the process,” one interviewee explained, meant I was studying something as it was happening in real time (Focus Group Discussion, Victoria, 8 July 2015, Ben Tanh Restaurant at Wellington St., London). Soccer, and the contrast between how they experienced it back home and how they experienced it here in Canada (through their daughters’ and through their own experiences), was one way to understand their process of integration into Canadian life and culture.

The Azulitas: Our Canadian Game

Mostly Canadian-born, the Azulitas see soccer as a game that is as Canadian as they are. For these women soccer’s gender neutrality is indicative of Canadian values. The fact that soccer (or any other sport or activity) in Canada can be played by a man or a woman without it being a noteworthy occurrence highlights Canada’s modern and progressive culture. In contrast, places and instances where activities are gender exclusive are viewed as antiquated – “old world ways of thinking” (Focus Group Discussion, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London).
Playing soccer, a traditionally non-Canadian sport, has become for these women the very definition of Canadianness. Soccer, one Azulita stated, “lets [her] show everyone how Canadian [she is]” (Focus Group Discussion, Julia, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). Adela added: “Playing soccer is a way for me to embody Canadian culture” (Focus Group Discussion, Adela, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). The idea of using soccer to physically display Canadian culture is striking, however, since ice hockey and lacrosse are Canada’s national sports (National Sports of Canada Act 1994). Furthermore, and for Canadian girls specifically, the team sports of choice have long been ringette and figure skating.

Considering soccer’s limited place in Canada’s history the idea of soccer as a method to embody citizenship and culture is quite curious. Sonia offered the following explanation: “It’s hard to explain but soccer is freedom. Canada is freedom. I feel incredibly free and Canadian every time I play soccer. Being Canadian is being able to do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else” (Focus Group Discussion, Sonia, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). To this Erica added: “For me citizenship is about expression. I was born in Canada. One of the privileges of being Canadian is being able to express my citizenship in whichever way I interpret it best. Even if it’s through something that’s not necessarily historically Canadian” (Focus Group Discussion, Erica, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London).

For a foreign element like soccer to become part of mainstream Canadian culture is possible because of the way Canadian society is structured, these women argue. Soccer’s growing nationwide popularity is a testament to a social structure that welcomes change and cultural additions. The Azulitas make clear, however, that their specific use of
soccer to feel free, Canadian, empowered, etc., is not accidental. Feelings of elevated Canadianness when playing soccer result from the role that soccer has and continues to hold in their ancestral cultures. The Azulitas view soccer as being indivisibly entwined with the old-world ways of thinking that they consider largely responsible for gender inequality in Latin America (Focus Group Discussion, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). Gender inequality specifically is considered by the Azulitas as the cornerstone of old world thinking and the gateway for other various forms of violence (physical, emotional, psychological, economic) against women in Latino communities both in Canada and in Latin America. By playing and making soccer central to their perceived and conveyed identities as Canadian women the Azulitas claim to be doing their part in resisting and countering “back home’s brand of sexism” in Canadian society (Focus Group Discussion, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London).

In a similar way to las soccer moms, the Azulitas use soccer as a reference point to mark cultural place and time (old world vs. new world culture; old vs. new ways of thinking, etc.). However, unlike las soccer moms who experienced first-hand the thinking that keeps soccer and other activities and spaces as male institutions in their respective home countries, the Azulitas have only experienced life and culture in Canada. Yet the Azulitas claim that not having physically lived in Central or South America does not mean that they also have not experienced back home’s culture here in Canada. “For many of us back home is and has always been a part of home here in Canada,” stated one Azulita (Focus Group Discussion, Teresa, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). In fact, the Azulitas argue that they have spent most of their lives fighting the ideas of back home on Canadian soil. Not having lived the exact experiences of women in Latin America
regarding gender inequality does not mean that they too cannot speak of these matters with conviction.

To emphasize the above, the Azulitas note that the strongest opposition to their playing soccer because of their gender has not come from general Canadian society but from their own families and community – mostly but not exclusively from Latinos who continue to view soccer as an activity more appropriately suited for men. As athletes, the very suggestion of not playing the sport they love is unacceptable; as people, the fact that members of their own families and community are the main opposition is hurtful and frustrating.

Soccer is, nonetheless, considered by the Azulitas to be a part of their culture on two fronts – both because of soccer’s centrality in and to their ancestral cultures, and because of what it symbolizes to them as free Canadians. As noted by Filomena: “Soccer is as much a part of our culture as English and Spanish” (Focus Group Discussion, Filomena, 9 May 2015, BMO Centre, London). Ironically, soccer is viewed as something inherently part of their histories and cultures even though this perceived cultural staple was non-existent for women in their ancestral cultures or even to previous Latina-Canadian generations. This is precisely the point, however. Claiming soccer as theirs too is one way the Azulitas are fighting against the past, present, and future negation of women from soccer, its spaces, and on a larger scale the ideas and traditions that allow for something like soccer to be gender exclusive.

In addition to exercising their Canadian citizenship through what they call their “right to play,” the Azulitas play soccer to physically display what they consider to be multiple identities (Focus Group Discussion, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA,
London). This too, however, has a purpose in fighting back home’s brand of gender inequality here in Canada. One *Azulita* explained: “Soccer helps us define to others in our communities who we are. Through soccer [we] remind people, [our] parents for example, that yes [we’re] Latinas by ethnicity but that [we’re] also Canadians by birth” (Focus Group Discussion, Soraya, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). Soccer then is a tool to physically embody, display, and ultimately explain to the Latino community what Canadian culture looks like when it is embodied by a Latina born in Canada. That is, the existence and balancing of two identities: the second-generation Latina-Canadian with the first-generation Canadian woman soccer player.

The challenges for balancing their two identities is caused by what the *Azulitas* call the “one girl, two cultures” effect: that is, being Latinas for their families at home, and fully integrated Latina-Canadians in the general community (Focus Group Discussion, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). London Soccer is how they try to introduce and merge Latino culture with Canadian culture; soccer is thus a mediator between their two cultures and identities. In fact, the application of soccer to matters of cultural identity, integration, and retention stems from the difficulties these second-generation Latinas experience when trying to determine who they are to themselves and to others (Focus Group Discussion, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). Soccer as the mediator of choice, however, is puzzling. Claiming soccer as part of their cultural identities and histories as an act of resistance is one thing; using soccer to also build a navigable bridge between two very different cultures is a different, much larger task.

Nonetheless, for the *Azulitas* soccer is the best outlet for the change they are looking to produce. Their logic for this approach combines the importance and role of
men in Latin American culture with the importance of soccer to how Latino men interpret the world. Men they argue are the architects and keepers of cultural norms back home and in Latino households in Canada (Focus Group Discussion, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). By using one of the things (soccer in this case) that (some) Latino men use to understand and justify their thoughts towards society, culture, and women, the Azulitas have found in soccer a way to capture and maintain the men’s attention long enough to show them gender equality through a new lens (Focus Group Discussion, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). Latino men, therefore, are the primary focus of what some of the Azulitas refer to as their “equality through soccer project” (Focus Group Discussion, Teresa, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London).

Filomena describes soccer as a bridge to [her] father and his culture (Focus Group Discussion, Filomena, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). Collectively the Azulitas support this statement by explaining that in Latino culture women and soccer are especially important to men because the two are in many ways directly related to how men understand and reinforce masculinity (Focus Group Discussion, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). To better understand the connection, the Azulitas have found between Latino fathers, daughters, and soccer, and how they believe this connection can help their community become further integrated with Canadian society and norms, one must first consider the cultural relationship between Latino fathers and daughters.

Latino fathers are known to have close relationships with their daughters. The love and genuineness of this cultural trait is not disputed by the Azulitas. Latino fathers are also known to be overly protective of their daughters, however.
Although the Azulitas appreciate the importance that protecting women has for Latino men at both biological and cultural levels, they also think that good intentions and genuine protectiveness can and have also developed into overbearing forms of control (Focus Group Discussion, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). These forms of control (physical, emotional, or social) can then become contributing factors to the relegation of women to specific gender roles (keeping house, producing children, etc.), as well as the overt exclusion and deterrence from male activities. Soccer is one of those things that women are kept from because of a misconstrued interpretation of protection. Intentionally or not, the role of strict fathers is another opportunity for men to enact and display cultural expectations of male strength and authority over women. Gina explained the above as follows:

Girls are thought to be delicate and good, docile even, whereas boys are wild and limitless. This way of acting and thinking leads to fathers and other men to view women as too weak to do this and to do that; as too innocent to be around this and that. What does this do? It leads to the type of thinking that ends up determining gender-specific roles. The types of roles that constantly see and keep girls in more ‘feminine’ environments (Focus Group Discussion, Gina, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London).

The significance of daughters and soccer in Latino culture is readily acknowledged by men also. In this sense then, the Azulitas have not uncovered anything that is not already known. For instance, during a discussion between myself and a Latino father while we watched his daughter play, he stated:
In our culture daughters and soccer are two of the most important things in life. In different ways of course, both have tremendous meaning for us. Latino culture would not be Latino culture without soccer and women. Before our daughters are born, life revolves around our mothers and wives. When we become fathers our lives then are dedicated to caring for our daughters. During our transition from boys to husbands and fathers, soccer is always present [though] (Interview, Nelson, 3 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London).

Considering the importance of daughters and soccer to Latino culture, it is easy to understand why the Azulitas see soccer and themselves as practical and effective means to further introduce the Latino community to more Canadian approaches to gender and gender equality. Although men are not exclusively targeted by the Azulitas, they are a primary audience for the group’s activities.

The Azulitas are aware of the magnitude of their goal: that is, encouraging a community to be more receptive to Canadian norms regarding gender. By their own admission, however, their time to experience the full extent of such a change has passed (Focus Group Discussion, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London). They are too old now, they argue, to need dad’s approval, support, and presence at games to consider themselves real Canadian soccer players/athletes/women (Focus Group Discussion, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London). Thus, the Azulitas believe they are working this project for the next generation of Latina-Canadians. It will be their younger sisters and others of that generation who will benefit from being viewed and treated more like Canadian women or athletes. Essentially, they hope that these
girls will experience less cultural resistance and more support while very young as they struggle with the challenges of being one girl with two cultures.

A change in London’s soccer world, the Azulitas argue, will be indicative of a change in the Latino community in general (Focus Group Discussion, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London). Some of the changes for instance will include the appearance of more all-Latina soccer teams; soccer games organized by Latino religious groups during outings will encourage the participation of both men and women; and most importantly, perhaps, more Latino fathers will be visible on the first day of mini soccer⁹ to support and cheer on their young daughters. As one Azulita put it:

My hope is that the next generation of Latinas have their fathers with them every step of the way. My father only started watching me play and taking me seriously as a player when I was around 18 and began playing for Western. My younger sister is lucky though. She’s only 10 and my dad goes to all her games. I want this to happen for every little Latina that wants to play soccer, or anything else that’s not considered for girls in our community, because the support of a parent and community early on is so important for success (Focus Group Discussion, Lara, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London).

Despite considering it too late for them to fully experience what they hope will be the eventual achievements of their project, the Azulitas claim to have already begun seeing some changes in their own lives. Interestingly, simply watching soccer together on television is considered by the group as a substantial

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⁹ “Mini soccer” is organized soccer for children usually under 7 years of age. Most players in Canada begin playing organized soccer at some “mini” level.
step in the right direction. Specifically, watching soccer with their fathers (and other male relatives like uncles and bothers) has helped establish more dialogue and shared time. In Maria-Luisa’s words:

My dad and I watch soccer together every Saturday. We have so much fun. We always say that this is the start of a new tradition…. My dad knows that I know soccer, so during the game he doesn’t talk to me like I’m a clueless girl. Instead we discuss the game like two players watching other players play the sport. The fact that he talks and treats me like a real player, one who just happens to be a girl, is important to me and to my teammates who are also doing the same with their fathers. To us this is progress […] attitudes and ways are thinking are changing…. But it’s not just about soccer anymore. Though soccer brings us together, we also talk about other things during the game like my school, his work, and a bunch of other things […] Soccer is not just about soccer anymore (Focus Group Discussion, Maria-Luisa, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London).

Prior to spending more time together through a shared love of watching soccer, the relationships with their fathers were much different and suffered because of the exclusion of girls and women from certain activities or spaces, the group recalled (Focus Group Discussion, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London). Whereas time spent with sons and other men seemed voluntary and was eagerly anticipated by fathers, time with daughters felt almost obligatory to the women. Through soccer however the Azulitas have found the time their fathers spend with them to be voluntary because gender is no longer a factor at all. “When we sit to
watch a game it’s two people watching a sport. We’ve both played and know the game. I’m not just sitting there to be close to daddy for 90 minutes” (Focus Group Discussion, Leonora, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London).

Fathers spending time watching soccer with their daughters, although important, is not a significant enough change for the Azulitas, however. Real change they argue must also leave the home and make its way into the community (Focus Group Discussion, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London). It is here then, in the methods and tactics employed by the Azulitas to improve gender equality where their uniqueness and true innovativeness can be appreciated. Being visible or known in the community is one method used by the Azulitas to further their agenda. One way they do this is by making public appearances as a team and in full uniform in spaces that are not associated with soccer. A favourite space for the Azulitas to become and be visible is at community and multicultural events throughout London.

During Sunfest 2015, London’s largest annual cultural festival, the Azulitas stood at the Richmond St. entrance of Victoria Park and distributed blue and white bracelets to people who asked them “what their deal was” (9-12 July 2015, Victoria Park, London). In full uniform the Azulitas juggled balls and did other tricks to attract attention from festival goers. During the event’s nightly music concert(s) the Azulitas again juggled balls but they did so as they danced to the music being performed. Witnesses were impressed, and one stated to me: “Oh my God they’re so good with that [soccer] ball. They’re dancing with the ball. I’ve never seen any of the guys do this” (Interview, no name, 10 July 2015).
If visibility was the goal, the *Azulitas* met and exceeded it at Sunfest. So much was the interest they generated that the team manager ran out of flyers the *Azulitas* had made containing their season game schedule. Moreover, and particularly rewarding, was the fact that the *Azulitas*’ team manager was approached by several Latino and non-White Canadian families who were curious to know where the *Azulitas* had learned to play, and where they could register their young daughters in organized soccer. Much of the interest from parents of all ethnicities, according to the team’s manager, resulted from little girls looking to the *Azulitas* with awe and as women worth emulating. “The players were like celebrities that day. Men, women, and children all wanted to watch them do tricks, talk to them, and some even wanted to take pictures with the girls,” the manager recalled (Interview, Rosa, 23 July 2015, White Oaks Mall, London).

Like Sunfest, the *Azulitas* have also made appearances at other local events in London like the Kid’s Expo, Rock the Park, Colombian Independence Day, the International Food Festival, and the Harvest Festival and Pow-Wow. Visibility and interaction with festival goers is the main method used by the *Azulitas* at the events they attend. When asked why they do this the answer provided by the *Azulitas* is always the same: to show other girls and their families the beauty and value of being a happy and healthy Canadian athlete (Focus Group Discussion, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London). They also emphasize that in Canadian culture athletics are not off limits to anyone because of gender.

Due to positive feedback from multiple communities in the city, in 2016 the *Azulitas* began conducting small training clinics for children between the ages of
six and ten. The sessions are free of charge and aim to promote gender equality at a young age. The sessions consist of teaching basic soccer skills like passing, receiving, and shooting the ball. The underlying lessons however go beyond soccer mechanics and focus on teamwork, equality, and respect for others. Scrimmage teams for instance are organized as co-ed to further the idea that sport itself doesn’t care who plays it, or who you play it with (Focus Group Discussion, 19 July 2015, BMO Centre, London).

The program has been a success. Thus far the Azulitas have never had to cancel a session because of low numbers. On the contrary, when some of the Azulitas are working or unavailable they often find themselves short on coaches for the large number of kids who attend with their families. At the end of the day, in typical Azulita fashion however, things are made to work and the girls, boys, and parents who attend leave happy and with both a positive view of women in sport and a good look at Canadian culture at work.

Another tactic used by the Azulitas for the Latino community’s further integration with Canadian culture involves persuading Latino fathers and other men to become involved in the soccer community as volunteers. The aim is for fathers to experience Canadian culture from a closer, more personal or inclusive position. According to Noemi, there are an array of benefits from mere community involvement. She describes these as follows:

When out in the community men learn to interact differently with girls and women. The dynamics change. Ways of thinking change. Their involvement and interactions become forms of work that look past gender. By working
together and closely with women, men learn to appreciate the work, sweat, and determination of the girls as players, as people, not ‘just girls.’ This appreciation can then go beyond the dimensions of the soccer field. That’s our hope anyway (Focus Group Discussion, Noemi, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London).

One important experience the Azulitas believe to be a powerful motivator for change is when Latino men become the mocked instead of the mocker. It is an especially powerful, eye opening experience they argue when a person becomes the recipient of the same type of harassment to which they have subjected others (at some point). Specific to this case, sometimes these men encounter mocking from other (“old-school”) men because of their involvement with women’s soccer. One Azulita noted:

It makes my dad angry to hear the way some of his friends talk about women’s soccer. Once he even yelled at my brother in front of the whole family for saying that women’s soccer didn’t matter. As a women’s coach it bothers him how women’s soccer is made to be less or even meaningless in comparison to men’s soccer. I also think he’s a bit angry at himself too for having thought and said similar things in the past (Focus Group Discussion, Erica, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London).

Their involvement in the community is also beneficial to the fathers themselves, according to the Azulitas, in terms of refining their English language skills, meeting new people, and improving mental and physical health. For instance, when coaching, the men are doing something that is new and different. The
challenges and joys that come from successfully trying and accomplishing new things, the Azulitas have noticed, have helped many of the men involved in this project relieve home- and work-related stresses (Focus Group Discussion, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London).

Further, in addition to going to work at their regular jobs to provide monetarily for their families, by working in the community the dads are also experiencing a new sense of gratification and social worth both as men and as immigrants. According to Sofia “they’re not just working to pay taxes […] they’re giving back in different ways.” Specific to soccer, “everyone, not just Latinos/as, benefit from our dads being more involved” (Focus Group Discussion, Sofia, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London). For instance, the soccer knowledge and experience the fathers/men bring to the soccer community is significant in a country that is new to soccer. Moreover, because of their volunteer roles with soccer, some Latinos have branched further to other non-soccer related projects. For instance, one father who was a chess champion in his native Mexico, now volunteers his time at a local high school teaching and coaching the chess team (Focus Group Discussion, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London). For the Azulitas, these seemingly small changes in routine have monumental consequences in terms of how their fathers and community continue their integration processes.

Though men and fathers appear to be the focus of the Azulitas, the reality is that women, mothers, are equally if not more significant to their project. After all, it is women who will benefit most from a Latino community that embraces Canadian
views on gender and gender equality (Focus Group Discussion, Leonora, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London). Women too, however, must also contribute to this change. Like the men then, the Azulitas also work to educate and encourage Latinas to “go out and experience Canadian life” (Focus Group Discussion, Lara, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London). Volunteerism is again used to achieve cultural discovery. During the Azulita-organized practice sessions with the kids, for instance, first-generation Latina-Canadians are encouraged to come onto the field and help organize the kids, help them with drills, etc. A primary aim is to simply “get women out there too” (Focus Group Discussion, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London). “Out there,” however, has multiple meanings. It can refer to women simply being out on a soccer pitch helping with the kids and getting some exercise themselves, or it can also refer to being “out there” on a larger cultural level.

On this broader cultural level, Latinas getting “out there” refers specifically to them leaving old ways of thinking and traumas in the past. The nervousness and fears the Azulitas feel are present in many first-generation Latinas because of being limited to restricted social spaces back home can be alleviated by experiencing Canadian life and culture first-hand. Healing can be a slow and delicate process, as the Azulitas are aware. By gradually introducing Latinas to a more Canadian way of being women however, the Azulitas claim to be witnessing rapid changes in how older Latinas see the world and themselves within it as new Canadians (Focus Group Discussion, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London).
Through women’s involvement in soccer, as players (some moms have begun contemplating putting a recreational team together), coaches, administrators, etc., the Azulitas believe they have been able to achieve a liberation of sorts for older Latin American women who often find themselves trapped in another place and another time. The logic behind this is simple: if soccer has long been used as outlet to keep things a certain way, then why can’t it also do the opposite? Rather than restrict, soccer can liberate.

On the topic of liberation, one Azulita humbly compared their work to Latin-American liberation theology. Although she made clear that she understood the important differences (especially since many people died as a result of believing in and fighting for liberation theology in 1970s and 1980s Latin America), she did stress that liberation is liberation and the kind they were trying to implement for present and future generations of Latina-Canadians was one that we agreed could be called liberation futbology (Focus Group Discussion, Filomena, 3 August 2015, St. Francis-St. Martin Catholic Parish, London). Ultimately, soccer is viewed and used by the Azulitas as healer and liberator.

To add to our understanding of the diverse ways that groups use soccer for expressing experience as well as community integration, we turn now to another group of female innovators in London who are using soccer to express their identities in new ways in the Canadian context.
Chapter 4:
The Muslim Youth Soccer League of London, Ontario

Across Canada there are numerous Islamic youth soccer associations, better known as “Muslim youth soccer leagues” in soccer communities. The exact number of Muslim leagues in existence is unknown, however, as the majority are not registered with their provincial governing bodies or the CSA (Canadian Soccer Association) (Interview, Kate A. of the Elgin-Middlesex Soccer Association [EMSA], 6 June 2015, BMO Centre, London\textsuperscript{10}). Although they vary in size (depending on the Muslim population of a city), Muslim soccer leagues share a common philosophy – to create an Islamic environment for everyone involved with the league. This includes players, parents, coaches, administrators, and volunteers (Islamic Soccer League 2013; Canadian Arab Federation 2008; (L)MYSL 2017).

But what does soccer in an “Islamic environment” entail? An individual’s or a team’s behaviors on the pitch (and on the sidelines), for instance, are closely observed by clerical and non-clerical members of the Muslim community and any act considered unbecoming of a devout Muslim such as cursing or arguing a decision by the referee can result in expulsion from both the game and league (Interview, Imam M. Attia, 7 June 2015, Centennial Sports Complex, Toronto). Also, game and practice schedules are coordinated to avoid conflicting with daily prayer times: this is mostly to accommodate adult members of the Muslim soccer community such as parents, referees, and administrators, as children under 15 years of age are not typically expected to participate.

\textsuperscript{10} London indicates London, Ontario. Pseudonyms are used in this chapter, except when referring to well-known members of the community or those with formal institutional roles.
in daily prayers. For players 15 years of age or older, during Ramadan, in addition to halftime (the only period during which an official soccer game stops), “cool-down” breaks are given throughout various stages of a match for those who may have already begun the practice of fasting and may need a quick rest (Interview, Imam M. Attia, 7 June 2015, Centennial Sports Complex, Toronto; Interview, Imam M. Abuelezz, 11 June 2015, RIM Soccerplex, Kitchener). Regarding female players (and especially relevant to this chapter), A. Chahbar, an activities coordinator at the London Muslim Mosque, explained the following to me: girls and women are expected to dress modestly when playing by wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants underneath their jerseys and shorts. Also, men cannot coach girls who are over the age of seven and teams cannot be co-ed. For players who wear hijabs, hijabs are permitted on the pitch as removing them is not considered a requirement for playing soccer (Interview, A. Chahbar, 13 June 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London). Below I clarify why being able to wear a hijab on a soccer pitch is significant to this chapter.

Although Islam is clearly a fundamental part of Muslim soccer leagues, this does not mean that these leagues are completely about Islam. That is, regardless of their strong connection with Islam, Muslim soccer leagues are still organizations that enable organized soccer. Nonetheless, separating the two can be difficult and it is the apparent inseparability between Islam and Muslim soccer leagues that concerns some members of Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

From some in London’s non-Muslim soccer community I found that there are typically two main arguments that oppose Muslim soccer leagues. The first questions their “true” nature – that is, are these leagues sports associations or religious
organizations? Specifically, do these leagues exist to simply enable organized soccer for a specific community, or, is their purpose to use soccer to indoctrinate young children with Islam? The other questions the overall effects on the game itself when religion becomes a determining factor in how soccer is played, when it is played, etc. For example, scheduling game times to accommodate religious beliefs can (and in many cases, does) affect the scheduling and game times of other teams/clubs that use the same fields as Muslim teams/leagues. There is also the “uniform issue.” As noted by a non-Muslim interviewee, G.W., whose son and daughter play for North London Soccer Club:

Muslims don’t allow girls to wear [soccer] shorts despite shorts being part of the uniform. Arguing about soccer shorts might sound trivial but believe me it’s not. This is about religion dictating something it has no right over.

Changing rules [e.g., uniform standards] to accommodate specific religions is a recipe for trouble (Interview, G.W. 21 June 2015, North London Athletic Fields, London).

Both of the above arguments are founded on the notion that soccer in an Islamic environment (or any other religious setting) is fundamentally paradoxical as soccer, being a modern sport$^{11}$, is a secular activity conceived in large part, according to Guttmann (1978: 10, 129), as an alternate communal activity to organized religion – as part of modern society’s disenchantment (Weber)$^{12}$ with the

$^{11}$ Allen Guttmann argues that sports can be divided into two categories, “Greek games and contests” (1000 BC – 100 AD), and “modern sports” (1800-present). For Guttmann, the most important dividing factor between the two is that ancient Greek games/sports were rooted in religion (e.g., through rituals and or ceremonies associating strength and victory with mythical heroes and Gods) whereas modern sports are secular in nature since they were not specifically conceived as a way to exercise religious beliefs.

$^{12}$ Disenchantment: A term coined by Max Weber during a lecture in 1918 to describe the cultural rationalization in Western societies for a divide between the secular and the sacred.
sacred acting as a tool for social control. This considered, the arguments supporting soccer’s inherent secularity are indeed persuasive.

FIFA, soccer’s global governing body, prohibits the mixing of religion (and politics) both at the international and grassroots levels. FIFA’s preference for a secular game is not unfounded, however. In addition to soccer’s inherent secularity as a modern sport, the preference for secular soccer also results largely from what is commonly referred to as “football hooliganism” (Buford 1993) – violence between fans/players due to ethnicity, geo-politics, and/or religion. On multiple occasions in the last decade, FIFA has publicly reiterated its position for a secular game. In 2009 for instance, then FIFA President Joseph Blatter stated, “There is no room for religion in soccer” (Stavrinos 2009). Blatter called religious displays on the pitch “a danger” to a game that does not endorse any religion (Buckley 2010). Blatter’s comments were made following the Brazilian men’s (largely Christian) national team joining together in prayer after winning a match against the United States at the 2009 FIFA Confederations Cup.

Then in 2011 (and more relevant to this chapter), Iran’s women’s national team was disqualified from an Olympic qualifying match against Jordan because the Iranians attempted to play while wearing hijabs and full-body warm-up suits (CBS News 2011; Rauhala 2011). FIFA defended its match officials for the disqualification by citing its rule on uniforms (a rule the Iranians were “thoroughly informed [of]” prior to the game) (Dunbar 2011): “Players and officials shall not display political, religious, commercial or personal messages or slogans in any language or form on their playing or team kits” (FIFA 2015: 22). As religious garments then, Islamic hijabs were in violation of FIFA’s uniform rules.
In addition to their religious significance FIFA also highlighted the potential safety hazard of hijabs to a player’s neck and head as a player being pulled or caught by loose garments could sustain serious injuries – there was also concern over the pins used to hold hijabs in place. Still, regardless of whether the decision by match officials to disqualify the Iranians was motivated by safety or political concerns is irrelevant since headscarves were at the time a violation of FIFA approved game-wear.

Nonetheless, in both the Brazil and Iran cases FIFA was accused of being overly anti-religious and more specifically anti-Muslim since many Christian players (for decades) have played (and continue to play) while wearing crucifixes around their necks and performing the sign of the cross after scoring, for instance, without any significant (if any) reprimand from FIFA (Fassilhlan n.d.; Rosenberg 2011). Further, women’s rights activists weighed-in on the Iranian disqualification. Alyssa Rosenberg for the organization ThinkProgress wrote:

If we’re concerned with how women are perceived and treated in Muslim communities, it seems hugely counterproductive to adopt policies that force women to choose between abiding by the tenets of their faith and participating in activities that let them demonstrate their physical prowess and strategic intelligence (2011).

The Iranian case, however, was a completely new experience for FIFA and world soccer in general as women’s soccer in the “Muslim world” was in its infancy in 2011. In fact, the Iranian team itself was only formed in 2005. (For comparative purposes: the Canadian women’s national team played its first international game in 1986.) A serious debate then concerning uniform revisions for female players whose cultural beliefs are so
intrinsically tied to their cultural-religious beliefs had not been truly warranted prior to 2011 (at least not on the international stage). This considered, rather than an act of prejudice towards Muslim women, the Iranian case could instead be viewed as a moment of inexperience by FIFA. Perhaps more accurately and importantly, the Iranian case could be considered a watershed moment that both highlighted the arrival of competitive international women’s soccer, specifically in the Middle East, and brought to light the needs, rights, and efforts of female Muslim soccer players in other parts of the world fighting to enter their respective soccer spheres (e.g., grassroots/amateur soccer).

In 2014 FIFA lifted its ban on religious head covers (BBC Sport 2014; FIFA 2013). For factions that continued to favour the ban, citing player safety, Nike began manufacturing the first of many future versions of a tightly-fitted athletic hijab that does not pose a danger as there is no loose material on which to pull and no securing pins (Nike 2018). (Worth noting is that the removal of the ban affects both men and women. Sikh men, for instance, can now participate in FIFA sanctioned games while wearing turbans.) It is important to note that the lifting of the ban does not change FIFA’s general position on religion in soccer. Moreover, critics attribute FIFA’s decision to lift the ban to convenience and corrupt economic interests ahead of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, a Muslim country (Nanji 2018). Regardless of FIFA’s motivations, however, a significant change was made by an organization known for its traditionalism.

Too often however, significant changes to a major organization’s policies only seem to receive adequate recognition when they occur on a large scale. According to Adrianna (an 18-year-old Syrian soccer player now living in London), in this case the “arrival” of the female Muslim soccer player has been mainly determined by the high-
profile Iranian case. Though Adrianna recognizes the importance of the Iranian case to the inclusion of Muslim women in international competitive soccer, she was keen to emphasise that long before the Iranian team’s highly-publicized disqualification, Muslim women in different parts of the world were already fighting for their inclusion and right to play at the grassroots/amateur levels of the game (Interview, Adrianna., 29 June 2015, BMO Centre, London). For instance, Nike’s “game-changing” athletic hijab was designed prior to the 2011 Iranian incident by an Iranian-Canadian woman named Elham Seyed Javad (CTV News 2009). Javad first thought of the idea (and manufactured her own prototype of the sports hijab) in 2007 in response to cases of Muslim girls in Québec being asked to step off soccer fields (before and during games) by referees, league administrators, parents, and players for wearing hijabs (Blatchford 2007; CBC News 2007). It is worth noting that instances of girls being asked to remove their hijabs or step off soccer fields are neither a recent phenomenon nor has this only happened in Québec.

A high-ranking official at the OSA told me that “sadly,” acts like this happen all throughout Canada, and “have happened for decades” (Interviewee asked that neither his name nor the location of our interview be disclosed. 9 August 2015, Greater Toronto Area).

Javad’s athletic hijab is a good example of a Muslim (in Canada) finding a way for some Muslim girls and women to play soccer without having to change or remove an important aspect of their cultural/religious dress. Like the athletic hijab, I argue that the appearance and continuance of Muslim soccer leagues across Canada are another example of how some Muslim-Canadians, specifically women,
have fought (and continue to fight) to play soccer “as [they] are” (Interview, Adrianna, 29 June 2015, BMO Centre, London).

Unlike the largely unopposed acceptance of the athletic hijab however, Muslim leagues have encountered far more challenges and resistance, many of which span beyond soccer. For example, Muslim leagues have in some instances given way for the further conceptualization of what Said (1978) defined as the Muslim “Other.” In fact, during interviews with four non-Muslim men from London’s soccer community (all of whom asked to remain anonymous), the men referred to London’s Muslim Youth Soccer League (MYSL) as “fake” and its members (in an apprehensive/unflattering tone) as “them/they.” The interviewees expressed the opinion that the MYSL was an outlet for Muslims to indoctrinate children with non-Canadian Islamic values. One interviewee stated to me:

It’s ridiculous! Soccer in this city is supposed to be about community but instead of joining the rest of us they created their own league. It’s strange when a group of people isolate themselves from everyone else. It’s bullshit! It doesn’t sit well with me or [with] other families (Interviewee asked that his name not be disclosed. 2 April 2015, London Optimist Sports Centre, “the [soccer] dome,” London).

Opposition to the establishing of Muslim leagues and Muslim girls and women playing soccer “as they are” has not only come from non-Muslims but also from some in Muslim communities as well. Traditionalist Islamic leaders (as well as traditionalist members of their congregations) around the world, including London, have argued that soccer is a potential Trojan horse of sorts – an agent of
Western culture to further colonize the Muslim world by promoting the defiance of traditional Islamic beliefs (Sorek 2007: 128-133; Interview, Imam A. Tahir, 5 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London). Muslim girls and women playing or participating in a male activity is a widely and commonly used example to highlight soccer’s potential sinister and disruptive nature. Another example given to stress the “dangers” of soccer involves the possibility of it becoming equally or more important than Islam in the lives of young Muslims due to the sport’s feverish popularity (Chehabi 2002). In view of this claim Muslim leagues have received harsh criticism and are seen with skepticism by some Muslims.

With regards to soccer posing a conflict to traditionalist Islamic views and traditions, a member of London’s Muslim community who is not involved with soccer expressed the following to me during an interview:

Something like soccer is a problem for our community. It is a door to other things. I have a friend and his daughter insists on playing on a [soccer] team with her school friends. His daughter is the only Muslim in the group. The other girls do as they please […] their parents let them do as they please. Their influence over [his] daughter is very strong. She has begun to rebel […] questioning her father’s beliefs and traditions. It began with soccer, an activity for boys and men […] eventually I think she will ask to do other things that [my friend] disapproves. One day it was asking her father to play soccer, the next day it will be to dress like her friends and do the things they do […] parties, drinking, boyfriends […] who knows (Interview, 5 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London).
Of course, the above view is not held by all Muslims. Most Muslim leaders and community members I spoke with see value in soccer’s social capabilities – for one, they view it as an effective tool to counter and resist what many Muslims deem as an inaccurate representation of their community. As explained by a mother of three young children who currently play in the MYSL:

Our children playing soccer together will strengthen our community. Our children playing soccer together in the same way that children from other cultures play together might also help us rid ourselves of the stereotype that Muslims only gather at mosques and have no other life other than a religious life. A league like the MYSL shows that we too act like other Canadians because from what I understand, ethnic soccer clubs are very Canadian (Interview, Nila, 7 September 2015, Windermere Soccer Complex, London).

Indeed, from the above it is easy to see the obstacles that those involved with Muslim soccer leagues encounter – they face opposition from multiple communities. Fundamentally the conflict originates from different interpretations of Islam. Islam and its complex theological relationship with soccer, however, is not the focus of this chapter. Instead my objective is to show how Muslim soccer leagues in Canada (in London specifically) are not religious organizations that aim to a) inject Islam into youth soccer and b) separate Muslims from non-Muslims. Rather, I argue that Muslim leagues are forms of resistance to discrimination and gender inequality, as well as outlets for cultural retention and cultural pride. Specifically, my research is with London’s Muslim Youth Soccer League (henceforth the MYSL or LMYSL – the first is ‘L’ is for London) and is focused on
the opinions and roles of the women involved with this league. Women as I found embody an interesting dilemma when studying community integration in an Islamic soccer environment.

Accordingly, my research will show that more than just a “Muslim soccer league,” the MYSL is the product of complex personal and social struggles that includes Muslim women discovering and attempting new gender roles, determining their perceptions of citizenship, integrating with Muslims and non-Muslims, fighting gender discrimination from both their community and the general community, and resisting cultural and religious traditions that counter “being” Canadian. The latter are primarily that Muslim girls/women are not able to participate in “male activities” (at the player/administrative levels), and opposition to Muslim girls/women establishing a soccer league, regardless of its religious affiliation.

Muslim Leagues in Canada (Origins)

The first and largest (both financially and in terms of number of members) Muslim league to date was established in Toronto in 1989 (TMYSL 2016). According to Abd al Hakim who has been involved with the league as a treasurer for two decades, the Toronto Muslim Youth Soccer League (Toronto or TMYSL) was founded because some people in the Muslim community felt that their cultural and religious values were not present in traditional youth soccer leagues. Further, the founders of the league also aimed to mirror other ethnic clubs that used soccer to further and retain ancestral/cultural values. The main difference, however, is that ethnic soccer clubs and leagues were founded based on “racial” ethnicity and not religion. Nonetheless, the GTA’s first Muslim league
prided itself in being a safe and accepting environment for all Muslims to be Muslims (Interview, Abd al Hakim, 7 June 2015, Centennial Sports Complex, Toronto).

With respect to female players, “the league was a space for Muslim girls and their families to feel protected from having to choose between their cultural and religious traditions and a recreational activity” (Interview, Abd al Hakim, 7 June 2015, Centennial Sports Complex, Toronto). Parents, for instance, felt “safe” in knowing that their daughters were in a space that protected their traditional Muslim values. The most obvious of these was that female players were able to play while covered (hair, arms, and legs) without discrimination or opposition from game officials, other players, coaches, or parents.

According to the parent of a 15-year-old female Muslim player who currently plays in London’s Muslim league, the discrimination endured specifically by some Muslim players before the hijab ban lift made Muslim leagues a "necessary thing. They were an escape [...] a safe place for Muslim girls to play without being forced to change their appearance and beliefs" (Interview, Faddi, 7 September 2015, Windermere Soccer Complex, London).

Presently there are several Muslim soccer leagues in Ontario. Muslim leagues are also common in British Columbia and Québec. This is not surprising considering that British Columbia, Ontario, and Québec are home to Canada’s largest Muslim populations (Environics Institute 2016). Though some clubs like BC Muslim Youth Soccer and La Fédération de Football Musulman du Québec have registered with their provincial governing bodies and successfully attained membership, the majority continue to remain self-regulating (Interview, Tina P., 11 June 2015, Ontario Soccer Association, Markham).
The motives to remain autonomous vary. The most common is explained by Muhammed from a small and unregistered recreational Muslim league in North York, Ontario:

There are many reasons to be what people from other [soccer] clubs call unofficial. It costs money to be part of the OSA. In Québec I know membership is even more expensive. Many of our leagues are small […] they can’t afford membership fees. More important than money is the issue with the girls. FIFA said it’s OK for them to play with hijabs but [some] referees continue to refuse to let them play. Parents and coaches also put pressure on officials when they see a player that is dressed differently from the rest [of the players]. Sometimes it’s just better to let things be […] save ourselves the trouble and run our own leagues (Interview, Muhammed Said, 30 July 2015, North York Civic Soccer Fields, North York).

Muslim Youth Soccer League (MYS), London, Ontario

The London Muslim Youth Soccer League was founded in 2001 as an affiliate of the GTA’s MYSL (LMYS 2015). Fundamentally, the MYSL is like most other Muslim leagues in the country. As per the league’s website: “The MYSL is a non-profit organization formed to serve the Muslim youth and the community at large [and] to provide an Islamic environment for the community to enjoy the sport of soccer throughout the year” (LMYS 2015). All the Muslim leagues I came across during my research share this creed. The MYSL too then operates around Islamic law and is closely monitored by religious leaders. Whenever possible MYSL games and practices occur outside prayer times or windows. Uniforms, particularly for female players, are also in
accordance with Islamic principles and are strictly enforced. Girls aged 10 and older for instance must play in long sleeves and long pants. Further, teams cannot be co-ed and girls’ teams (regardless of age) must be coached by a woman (Interview, Ola S., 29 May 2015, Tim Hortons, 616 Wharncliffe Rd. S., London).

With respect to boys and men, the conduct and appearance of male players in the league must also adhere to Islamic principles. Imam A. Tahir, one of three imams at the London Muslim Mosque, explained this as follows:

Temptations on the field are monitored for adequate Muslim reactions. We discourage players from being too boastful when scoring against another team or defeating an opponent. Sport should not be used to humiliate others. I have been to many [MYSL] games and only on a few occasions have I had to remind a player that even on the soccer field he is still a Muslim […] and should behave like one. Foul language or any other negative behaviors are prohibited in our league. Soccer serves as a way to challenge and assess a person’s devoutness (Interview, Imam A. Tahir, 5 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London).

Operating under a religious umbrella is clearly a mandate of the MYSL. In this respect the MYSL is no different from countless other Muslim leagues in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada. However, like any other experience, soccer is experienced (and in this case, exercised) differently by different people depending on time/place/space, etc. It is with this considered that London’s MYSL can best be understood – that is, as unique to London and to the people who experience life and soccer in London. During my time with members of the MYSL (players,
administrators, volunteers, etc.) interviewees insisted that their league is a unique result of a combination of circumstances specific to London.

Most obviously unique to the MYSL is that it was founded and continues to be run by a largely female Muslim staff and volunteer pool. In fact, at the four multicultural sport festivals (three in Ontario and one in Québec) that I attended in 2015, I did not come across another Muslim league with a majority female staff like the MYSL. The fact that Muslim women are the main driving force for an organization that would not exist, or at least would be run by men, in traditional Muslim societies is significant.

Another founding condition that members of the MYSL attribute specifically to London is the city’s large, traditionalist ethnic soccer community and its views regarding women and soccer. Greek, German, Italian, and Portuguese clubs were the first to establish ethnic soccer teams and clubs in the city – with these clubs also came views that see women and soccer as “oil and water,” as put by an interviewee and current MYSL volunteer Sammi (Interview, Sammi, 9 August 2015, Jesse Davidson Park, London). A main contributing factor then for the women of the MYSL to start a soccer league was to counter the narrative that soccer is for and by men. A group of women in London wanting to gain entrance into the city’s male-dominated soccer sphere is nothing new, however – others have and continue to attempt this (and successfully attain this). Still, the women of the MYSL argue that the process of wanting a league, exercising their right to build one, and facing an array of obstacles to do so was a unique experience for them – one that was shaped by who they are as people, their cultures, histories, etc. Further they argued that the tremendous opposition to their involvement in soccer from both the
Muslim and non-Muslim communities was enough to consider their experience as “respectfully unique.”

Turner’s anthropology of experience is particularly useful here to grasp how this group of women can claim uniqueness or exclusivity to an experience lived by others before them, as is Dilthey’s conclusion regarding the impossibility of truly knowing another’s experience regardless if it appears to be similar or the same as one’s own (Walton 1993).

Unique or not it can be difficult to argue against views that see the MYSL as isolationist rather than integrative, as well as views that see the league as being more concerned with religious indoctrination than soccer. Certainly, the MYSL operates under rules that are aimed at a specific religious group and therefore do exclude people who do not share these same beliefs to some extent. Regardless of what the MYSL appears to be however, non-Muslims can and do play in the MYSL as the league is open to everyone. (Nowhere, not on their Web registration form or any other way of communication, did any Muslim league I came across limit membership to Muslims only.) The belief then that Muslim leagues are strictly for Muslims is incorrect. Of course, anyone who joins the MYSL is aware that the league is not like other entirely secular leagues.

During my research with the MYSL I had expected to hear more about the connection between the MYSL and Islam, but this was not the case. I was told by several of my contacts that although the league openly endorsed Islamic values/regulations the MYSL was about much more than Islam. Though the line between adhering to Islamic values and soccer was thin, they noted, there was a
line nonetheless. Indeed, my interviews with several MYSL members show that the
MYSL does in fact symbolize different things for different people – religion or
religious piety is not necessarily at the forefront for everyone involved with the
league. Rather, I found that the MYSL is the product of work with numerous goals
in mind. With respect to the role of women, it serves as a way for Muslim women
to become part of Canadian society by doing the same type of work or activity that
other Canadian women do. Founding and running a sports league, for instance, is
considered by interviewees as being something that Canadian women do. This
considered, the league is not meant to ideologically separate Muslim women from
other Canadians but to integrate them to Canadian society by doing similar tasks as
other Canadians. Even still, different women have different reasons for being part
of the MYSL. Some see it as a kind of movement towards Canadian identity while
others see it as a way to preserve who they are as Muslim women.

According to one of the MYSL’s founders, Ola S., the league takes on
different roles for different people. Ola is the MYSL’s current president and one of
its four female founders. In a community with cultural traditions that regard the
participation and presence of women in “male sports” as taboo, the fact that women
founded and currently run the MYSL is greatly significant. More relevant to this
thesis however is the fact that the women of the MYSL – its founders and its
current members – attribute their initial and continued involvement in the league as
being a product of the general Canadian culture that surrounds them. That is, their
ability to form part of the MYSL, whether at the administrative or player level, is a
very Canadian action in itself. From a theoretical perspective, I found the league to
be a stage of sorts to enact and/or display experiences publicly. Following Dilthey’s position in regard to how we “transcend the narrow sphere of experience by interpreting expressions,” (quoted in Walton 1993), the MYSL ultimately reveals itself as precisely that – a display aimed to interpret the experiences of those involved with it.

For Ola, the MYSL is mainly a vehicle for the Muslim woman to safely navigate through the complexities of becoming a Muslim-Canadian woman, and a safe space to practice Canadianness “once that vehicle makes a stop during that journey.” In Ola’s words:

The MYSL is a moving vehicle and a stationary safe space. It’s a safe space for the kids to play and be healthy; it’s a safe space for our cultural and religious beliefs; it’s a safe space for immigrant Muslim women to learn about daily life as new Canadians. Many of the restrictions that impede Muslim women from fully integrating into Canadian society are non-existent in the MYSL environment. One example I can give you is related to shyness. New immigrants often feel embarrassed to ask questions about things that are relevant to their new surroundings. But here, when we’re working on league tasks, shyness quickly becomes curiosity. Information is exchanged […] questions are answered, and not just questions related to the league, but about other important things. I have heard people discuss bus routes, family doctors, food bank services, school names, the list is long (Interview, Ola S., 15 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London).
For the above to occur, however, physical space is needed. As noted by Dima (another MYSL founder), “it begins with space” (Interview, Dima, 15 June 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). Indeed, physical space is needed to produce the ideological or social “safe” space Ola argues that the MYSL provides and represents for London’s female Muslim community. This key space – the space that makes the MYSL possible and remarkable – is located inside the London Muslim Mosque on Oxford Street. Prior to the league’s founding in 2001 the room that currently holds the league’s offices was a storage room for books, discarded computer parts, broken bookshelves, shoe racks, even small items of landscaping equipment at one point. Today this same space is a fully functioning office where on average four women work between two and four days a week (during the spring and summer months however, the staff may work up to five days a week to prepare for the busy outdoor season). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that this space was once a walk-in junk drawer of sorts. Now fully repurposed, the office walls are covered with countless post-it reminders, drawings by kids of kids playing, team photos, calendars, etc. There are also two small book shelves filled with books on how to teach soccer, and four small work stations for its employees.

The space from which the MYSL operates is significant because it exemplifies the often-forgotten relationship between people and things – in this case, space and its repurposing. Interviewees stated that they appreciated the repurposing of this space from container of random objects to container of specific ideas, tasks, and workers. Also, the actual physical location of the office space is greatly significant for an array of reasons. As noted, the MYSL is a largely female-operated soccer league with its offices in a mosque. According to interviewees, this alone is a very remarkable Canadian occurrence.
However, the fact that the mainly female-run MYSL offices are in a mosque is not to be taken as an example of Muslim women continuing to be constrained to work under the close supervision of Muslim men. Rather, the location of the offices is indicative of women occupying a space that would typically, and traditionally, be reserved for men. Having a place in the mosque designated specifically for their work is evidence, according to Ola and others, of the making of modern Muslim-Canadian women. The league then can also be viewed as a modernizing agent. As stated by one interviewee, “the [MYSL] is an outlet for the modernization of the women involved with the league” (Interview, Melly, 9 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London).

For many Canadians, the participation of women in organizing and managing sports leagues may not seem impressive. In Muslim cultures with strong patriarchal traditions, however, the work of the women who operate the MYSL is not only impressive but a true testament of cultural integration into Canadian society by way of adopting typical Canadian female roles. Both Ola and other interviewees (both men and women) were clear in telling me that “back home” (an array of Arab countries), this simply would not occur. Furthermore, they stressed that the appearance of Muslim leagues cannot be viewed as Muslims purposely trying to separate themselves from non-Muslims, nor can they be viewed as a way to continue every aspect of Islam. Rather, Muslim leagues or teams (particular women’s teams) should instead be viewed as a form of resistance to interpretations of Islam that conflict with certain aspects of Canadian social life. Quite simply, soccer is being used to create something new, they noted.

“New,” however, must be approached carefully. As we know, when people integrate something new is formed. The forming of a new group does not mean that the
parties involved will lose what makes them unique and thus valuable to the merger. It is through this lens that the MYSL can also be understood. As noted to me by one of the league’s female volunteer coaches: “integration into Canadian culture does not mean the abandonment of the culture I was born with and brought with me to Canada” (Interview, Bella, 21 August 2015, North London Athletic Fields, London). My arguing then that Muslim leagues (or their organizers) involve countering certain aspects of Islamic traditions is not to be taken to mean that the leagues are intended to represent an outright rejection and separation from Islam. As noted above, Muslim leagues are indivisibly entwined with Islam. The women I worked with at the MYSL, as well as women who have children that play in the MYSL, made clear that Islam is of great importance to them. However, they were also clear to note that as new Canadians, exploring their social role as Canadian citizens and women was also very important. Of this, Bella stated, “being Canadian doesn’t make us less Muslim” (Interview, Bella, 21 August 2015, North London Athletic Fields, London). A Muslim woman who volunteers with the league clarifies how Muslim leagues can be both tied to religion yet not entirely be about religion:

If someone created a vegan league, and called it the Vegan Soccer League, it doesn’t mean that the league is about veganism. It just means that the people who chose to play in this league happen to be connected to each other through their belief of not eating meat. At the end of the day the league is still about soccer. It’s a soccer league by and for vegans, or for anyone else who doesn’t mind playing soccer with vegans (Interview, Nancy, 21 August 2015, North London Athletic Fields, London).
Generational Perspectives of the MYSL

In addition to Ola, the MYSL has three other permanent staff: Zari, Melly, and Sana work part-time during the winter, and full-time during the summer months. Zari, Melly, and Sana are younger than Ola – they are the “new and future generation of Muslim-Canadian women,” according to Sana. “New,” she briefly explained, mostly meant “different” from “Ola’s generation” (Interview, Sana, 9 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London).

Indeed, soccer has multiple participants: players, coaches, administrators, and fans collectively animate the sport to produce what ultimately becomes an organized soccer match. Soccer, therefore, can be studied from several different perspectives, as the game’s meaning and the way it is experienced by a person can vary based on the nature of their participation. Ethnicity, age (generation), and gender are all dimensions that can also shape the way a person experiences soccer, as well as their relationship with the sport. For instance, Ola and the other MYSL founders’ initial involvement with the league originated from their desire to “become” Canadian. In her thesis on Colombian newcomers to London, anthropologist Kinga Pozniak points out that “Immigrants […] are constantly engaged in a process of translating. Translating from how others represent them and how they want to represent themselves” (2005:1). For Ola and other women of her generation then, gender and how Muslim women are perceived both in their community and in the general community are key factors motivating their participation in the MYSL. The shifting of certain traditional gender roles is especially important to this group. As one interviewee told me:
The days of [women] only being important at home are over. To become more Canadian we must work and live like Canadians. The MYSL helps us achieve this. I am showing my community, other Canadians, and myself, that there is a change happening […] a good change (Interview, E.G. 27 July 2015, North London Athletic Fields, London).

Second-generation Muslim-Canadians like Zari, Melly, Sana and other Canadian-born Muslim players, volunteers, coaches and referees I interviewed during my fieldwork, noted that they were aware that the MYSL had a completely different meaning for them than it did for older, non-Canadian born Muslim or Arab women. They argued that this difference resulted from lived experiences in relation to gender restrictions that were not just limited to sport. Sana stated that the MYSL was a way for older women to discover their rights as Canadian women whereas for her and other women her age, the MYSL was, in reality, just another soccer league that simply happened to be founded and run by women. To focus too much on the fact that Muslim women were at the head of this league, Zari argued, was to give too much importance to notions that see Muslim women as incapable, male-dependent persons (Interview, Zari, 9 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London). Though they saw great value in the efforts of women from Ola’s generation given the cultures in which they had lived prior to immigrating to Canada, they did not put much emphasis on what the MYSL represented in terms of it being a cultural “breakthrough” of sorts for Muslim-Canadian women. As noted by Melly: “Even though we have a lot of respect for the cultural significance of the MYSL for those who started it, my friends and I chose to appreciate the things that
the MYSL *does* [her emphasis] instead” (Interview, Melly, 9 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London).

Though indivisibly entwined, what something does and what it means are indeed different. One thing the MYSL does for the Muslim community, according to several of the league’s current members, is protect young Muslim players (boys and girls) from continued discrimination – the same type of discrimination that many interviewees had experienced themselves while they were youth players. To emphasize the point of the MYSL (and other leagues like it) serving as a means for protection, interviewees noted cases like that of the nine-year-old Rayane Benatti, who was removed from a tournament in Gatineau, Québec for wearing a headscarf in 2012 (National Post 2012). Like Benatti, many of them had also experienced similar if not exact experiences with this type of discrimination. Regarding playing with or without a hijab, an interviewee told me: “It’s Canadian to play with it or without it. Without this choice, we’re not in Canada […] we’re in a different place” (Interview, Lisa, 22 June 2015, Kensal Park, London). Continuing with the challenges of being a Muslim athlete who wears a hijab, and one who has encountered discrimination on the soccer pitch because of this, she added: “I read that in past women’s movements, women took off their bras as a sign of resistance to the status quo. It’s funny, for us [Muslim athletes], it’s keeping a piece of clothing on [hijab/long pants] that makes us feel empowered” (Interview, Lisa, 22 June 2015, Kensal Park, London).

Elaborating on the notion that soccer is experienced differently by generation, during a focus group with six Canadian-born Muslim women, participants emphasized
that it was important to recognize that there is no generic female Muslim experience.
Second, the women noted that one of the most difficult things about being Muslim-Canadian was learning how to navigate between their obligations as Canadians and their obligations as practicing Muslims. The combination of these two things, they argued, often leads to misconceptions that perpetuate the idea that Muslim women are not permitted to play sports as per Islam. The women pointed out that in addition to non-Muslims thinking that Islam prevents women from playing sports, they also had to contend with Muslim men thinking this way through a distorted mixture of Islam and sexism. From their perspective then, the MYSL was also a tool for resistance through education (Focus Group, 7 August 2015, Jesse Davidson Park, London).

According to the group (consisting of six Canadian-born Muslim women – Elli, Sandi, Angela, Daria, Maria, and Nasimi) the MYSL largely exists due to a general lack of infrastructure in Ontario to accommodate female Muslim athletes – particularly those who choose to preserve their beliefs pertaining to the conservative covering of the body. Moreover, with this lack of infrastructure also comes a general ignorance regarding the importance of covering the body for (some) Muslim women. In the MYSL the group believes, as the saying goes, “there’s no such thing as bad publicity.” Views that see the MYSL and other leagues like it as suspicious or isolationist are welcome and were called “a good thing” by the group. According to the group, a discussion about “suspicious” Muslim soccer leagues would eventually venture into discussing the question of why they even exist. This in turn would provide the perfect opportunity for women like themselves to point out the type of discrimination that exists in youth soccer towards Muslim women specifically both before and after the lifting of the headscarves ban by FIFA, serving a
general educational function. Ultimately, the main goal would be to encourage the re-educating of soccer officials in Canada with respect to cultural diversity, for instance, and their knowledge of FIFA’s position on racism and discrimination.

Not just non-Muslims but Muslims too, the group argued, need to be re-educated with respect to Islam, sports, and women. Many participants cited their own personal and school research projects regarding Islam and women taking part in sports. They all agreed that not only does Islam allow for women’s athletics but that it requires it. Nasimi stated: “Islam teaches that women should participate in sports so that they can maintain good health, de-stress, and be ready for war […] that last one I think is a bit scary, though [laughs]” (Focus Group, 7 August 2015, Jesse Davidson Park, London). The opposition that many Muslim girls find, particularly at home from fathers, mothers, and brothers, etc., needs to be addressed on a significant scale in the Muslim community, the group argued.

Though the group was clear to point out that this is not the case in every Muslim household, and that there are in fact many Muslim men who support their daughters’ participation in sports, Sandi noted that the number who continue to uphold “sexism through religion” is still substantial (Focus Group, 7 August 2015, Jesse Davidson Park, London). In this particular case, the group argues that the MYSL serves as a “step-ladder” for fathers learning to cope with the fact that they have Muslim-Canadian daughters who do not view abstinence from sports as a condition for religious devoutness. Fathers that were wary of allowing their daughters play soccer, for instance, could feel more comfortable if they began experiencing sport with their daughters in an environment like the MYSL which follows Islamic principles regarding behaviors for
men and women. Ultimately, the MYSL is seen by this group as a good introductory teaching tool for a larger discussion regarding the re-education of many in the Muslim community with respect to Islam, women, and sport, and how these relate to the development of the new Muslim-Canadian woman.

Yet another thing the MYSL does involves the more conventional use of the term education. Women’s soccer is the number one source of athletic scholarships for women in North America (Marks 2017). Interviewees noted how the MYSL allows Muslim players, who perhaps found it difficult (due to various forms of discrimination) to play in the city’s other clubs or were not permitted by their families to play soccer in a league that was not the MYSL, a chance to develop their soccer skills sufficiently so that they too would have a chance at securing an athletic scholarship to UWO, Fanshawe, or other post-secondary institutions in Canada or the United States. The combination of university education with athletics was “awesomely Canadian and exciting,” according to the group (Focus Group, 7 August 2015, Jesse Davidson Park, London).

In regard to the MYSL as resistance, Sana noted that working with the MYSL was her way of enacting solidarity with Muslim and non-Muslim women who have experienced discrimination due to their personal beliefs and attempts at sexual liberation (Interview, Sana, 9 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London). Significantly, she and others in the group argued that the ability to resist or counter inequality is a very Canadian privilege. In Melly’s words:

The ability to say we’re here, we’re Canadian like you, and so we have the right to play in Canada and for Canada if we want, is the best form of resistance against prejudice and exclusion. To play a game and still come out
of it the same devout Muslim woman is the best way to resist those in the community who continue to think that women should not be allowed to do the same things as men – here in Canada or anywhere else in the world (Interview, Melly, 9 August 2015, London Muslim Mosque, London).

Despite generational differences and experiences with soccer and cultural identity, however, all the women I spoke with made clear that they were aware of what Muslim women working in a male setting in Islamic culture meant with regards to membership and participation in Canadian society. All understood and appreciated the symbolic and literal importance of the connection between their roles in the MYSL and the cultural setting that made this possible.

**Soccer as Work – Working to Become Canadian**

Unknown to me when I first began working with the MYSL is that the league employs over 100 volunteers. These are mostly the parents of players. From coaching to refereeing to a cleanup crew responsible for making sure that fields are free of debris once the players and parents have left, these volunteers are, as noted by a man I met named David, “…the backbone of this league and of our community” (Interview, David, Jesse Davidson Park, 19 June 2015). When I asked a group of women collecting empty plastic water bottles after an August afternoon game how they had become involved as league volunteers, one woman quickly answered that they were not volunteering but were instead working. She proceeded to explain that although they were not paid money for their time and work, it did not mean that they were not working or that their work lacked value. I asked if not in monetary value, then how was their work measured? One woman, Amelia, explained that in her case the work she did for the MYSL counted towards
community hours for a “Welcome to Canada” course she was taking at an adult learning center. In her words: “I am paid for this time […] I am paid for my work […] I am paid with school credit” (Interview, Amelia, Jesse Davidson Park, 19 June 2015).

Labor can technically be paid in more ways than through money. At a later meeting with this woman at the adult school she attends year-round, we discussed how being “paid” in school credit was a very Canadian way to “replicate” currency. When I asked her if this type of currency or program existed in her native Turkey she laughingly told me that no one she knew of would work for “A’s and B’s” (Interview, Amelia, 23 June 2015, *did not want name of school mentioned). I then mentioned that the very notion of putting in “community hours” with an organization was also a Canadian action on its own. She again laughed and said: “So I’ve been tricked into working to be a Canadian” (Interview, Amelia, 23 June 2015). Moreover, I asked her if there was a particular reason why she had chosen to work with the MYSL to obtain credit for a course about Canadian life. To this she responded: “The class is about Canada. What can be more Canadian than working for a Muslim organization in a Christian Canadian city? This is what Canada is about […] about being who you are but still being like everyone else. The MYSL is very Canadian” (Interview, Amelia, 23 June 2015).

The conversation about labor and its connection to the MYSL highlighted for me how MYSL female volunteers use the league as a gateway to other work opportunities and how the league, as an organization, facilitated (whether deliberately or not) other work options. I became increasingly interested in how the league might serve as a springboard to the conventional labor market – that is, were volunteers putting their experience for the league to work, so to speak, in London’s labour market? And if so,
how? Julia, an immigrant from Jordan who has been living in Canada since 2008, helped me understand these issues. Julia’s involvement with the MYSL began in 2010 when she began volunteering as a coach. Her aim was to use her time coaching as work experience to fill out what she called her “empty resume.” According to Julia, many of the MYSL volunteers she had met over the years had also used the league “to show work experience in Canada.” Like Amelia, Julia too seemed to take offense when I suggested that volunteerism could be interpreted as free labor or simply an act one did as a gesture of communal belonging or responsibility. For Julia, volunteerism was the beginning of work life in Canada – it was the means to an eventual financial end and thus, “real” work. Julia currently works at London Life but credits the MYSL for being her “first and only line to work experience in Canada.”

Julia continues to volunteer with the MYSL “in gratitude” for the work experience the league provided her with. In fact, during our talk, she repeatedly expressed gratitude to the league and to Ola for having hired her even though she knew nothing about soccer prior her arrival to London. I was curious about the fact that Julia had coached soccer despite, by her own admission, knowing nothing about the game. When I asked her about this she explained that the MYSL was “50 percent about soccer and 50 percent about everything else in life” (Interview, Julia, 17 August 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). She explained that for me to have a better grasp of what the MYSL was, in addition to a soccer league, I should speak to more volunteers. “It can be different things for different people,” she told me (Interview, Julia, 17 August 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London). “For me it was my first job in Canada… I know many people that
apply and are hired for jobs that they have never done before… you learn as you go” (Interview, Julia, 17 August 2015, Stoney Creek YMCA, London).

Taking Julia’s advice, I spoke to six additional volunteers at various games and practices. Several of the interviewees shared Julia’s sentiment – that the league was a way to gain work experience in Canada, and thus a vehicle to help them become “valuable” and “normal” Canadians. Moreover, for all six of my volunteer interviewees, the MYSL was not outside of the realm of other Canadian clubs or organizations. On the contrary, the MYSL was a part of it. As one woman told me: “Volunteering with the MYSL is no different from volunteering at the YMCA […] It’s all Canadian […] we are all Canadians” (Interview, 24 August 2015, North London Athletic Fields, London). The lack of distinction between a Muslim-Canadian soccer league and an organization as well-established as the YMCA provided the framework through which volunteers of the MYSL saw the league and subsequently the Muslim-Canadian community – no longer as outsiders to the cultural environment of the city but rather, very much a part of it.

In summary: this chapter focused on the London’s Muslim Youth Soccer League’s all-female permanent staff, countless female volunteers, and what their involvement in this league signifies for a group of women who see the MYSL as evidence of a new female Muslim-Canadian identity in the making. For the women of this chapter, the march towards an identity that is truly representative of both Canadian and Muslim culture involves resistance against both Western and Islamic ideals that place Muslim women outside of social spaces based solely on gender and religion. This considered, above I argued that Muslim leagues, particularly when involving women, must be viewed as active resistance on two fronts – opposition to some forms of
exclusion of female Muslim players in Western society such as the obstructing of Muslim girls from playing soccer while wearing head coverings, and opposition to exclusionary practices in traditionalist Muslim societies that see soccer as being a male activity and thus, inappropriate for Muslim women.
Conclusions and Summary:

While researching and writing this thesis I was asked by many people if this work was about soccer. My answer to this question was always the same: “Yes, my thesis is about soccer – in a way.” The next question was almost always the same: “How do you write an anthropology thesis about soccer?” It was here, usually with a smile, that I explained to my questioner that although soccer was an integral part of my work (and yes, I had chosen soccer because of my love of it), it was how people use soccer off the pitch that most interested me as an anthropology student (not necessarily as a soccer enthusiast).

To be frank, when I first considered what soccer does for people other than make them laugh, run, sweat, cheer, and sometimes cry, I found it difficult to find something worth researching. It was not until I began to look to the sidelines and talk with people who did not necessarily play themselves but were just as invested in the game (as the players, only differently) that I began to approach this topic from the following perspective: if we conceptualize soccer in London as a stage play, we can see why a production like this could not run with actors (players) alone. This then provoked curiosity and thought with respect to the lesser known pieces of the overall production.

As noted but worth repeating, channelling Turner’s notion of the anthropology of experience throughout my fieldwork and later, during the writing of my findings, I realized that for many groups in London’s soccer community soccer was a performance of sorts for the public to witness. It was a stage to enact specific ideas and messages. These public expressions of the “lived through” (as coined by Dilthey), like theatre
performances, poetry, art, could also be displayed, in the case of all the groups in this thesis, through the public participation and thoughtful engagement in and with a sport that meshes their experiences of back home with those here in Canada, and captures experiences of the past, present, and projects their aspirations into the future as well.

Although the experiences of each of the groups in this thesis were different in terms of their specific connection to soccer, as well as their countries and cultures of origin, they were similar in that they all chose soccer as the method to realize and demonstrate their identities as Canadian immigrants. Further, closely linked to their perceptions and understandings of identity, they all considered space as a necessary element to develop or display these identities. Just as in the game itself where players must find or make space to manoeuvre, people off the field also looked to make special things happen but were aware that for movement, for advancement, spaces were needed. These spaces, as my interviewees showed, could be physical spaces, like a soccer office in a mosque; ideological spaces, like first-generation Latinas’ understanding of available and restricted spaces; or quite simply, adapted natural spaces, like a piece of grass to play a game, as was the case for the Old Guys and their work colleagues.

In the introduction of this thesis I posed the following question: “why is soccer considered, and often used, as an integrative tool here in Canada (and in other countries)?” I was surprised to find during my research how complex the answer to this question could be, given the variety of experiences that were shared with me. But the simple answer is that soccer can be a good integrative tool but only if it involves everyone – if it mirrors what Canadian society claims that it is, an inclusive society. As shown in Chapters 3 and 4 especially, soccer has been a great tool for the integration of
Latina and Muslim women to Canadian society. This, however, was only possible because of the women’s agency in their respective identity-building processes.

Although London’s soccer community is large and well established, there continue to be new additions – new groups looking to find or create social and physical spaces for themselves and their interpretations of what soccer means and looks like when mixed with their histories and Canadian culture. Soccer, then, in addition to being a good integrative tool when used inclusively, can also be (as suggested by the first-generation Latinas) a marker of both time and space – a historical marker, for instance, of a particular group’s arrival to London. As my father had done with me, I recently explained a bit of history and current world affairs to my daughter Valentina in the context of soccer. Specifically, I explained to her that the rise in Syrian immigrants to London was due to the war currently happening in Syria. This conversation occurred on the sidelines of a soccer pitch as we watched Syria FC, a team comprised of Syrian immigrants who all have arrived to the city within the last year, play a team of young Serbian-Canadians.

Soccer as a marker of time and space then can be effective as it can teach, create questions, and produce answers about people, their pasts, presents and futures.

Reflecting on the continuing evolution of London’s soccer community, one must wonder if the process of newly-arrived groups finding space for their brand of the game, their aspirations to create identity, and so forth, will follow similar or different lines when compared to the city’s now established soccer groups. Consider the following: now one can rent a city field for an hour, two hours, etc. with a cell phone app. This seems easy in comparison with the Old Guys’ efforts to find space, mark their own sidelines, and so on. But is this easier? Although renting a field is much easier than making one from nothing,
there are other barriers that still interfere with the acquisition of space for newer groups looking to “become” something, or be part of something.

Nepali immigrants, whom are quite visible in London today as a result of the earthquake that hit Nepal in 2015, told me that what they have found most difficult in playing soccer was access to money to rent the city’s very expensive fields. As a group that is generally economically poor, a lack of money is a considerable obstacle. As a result, however, some Nepali young people have resorted to making concrete fields in building parking lots using chalk. Moreover, as in previous cases, Nepali girls are often told they cannot participate in these concrete games because soccer is for boys. To my joy and surprise however, one girl told me that she had a good idea: “Wouldn’t it be cool if I started my own Nepali girls team?” Indeed, though the circumstance are different, it appears that the same processes explored in this thesis are happening again in other groups. This suggests to me that in some ways, the immigrant experience remains similar over time.

Finally, I mention the present-day case of Black Canadians in London seeking “visibility” through establishing Africa-Caribe FC in 2016, a team comprised of all Black players from various African countries and the African Caribbean. For the players and administrators of Africa-Caribe, their soccer team is a way of attaining cultural and ethnic visibility in the general community. Although they all identify as Black-Canadians, members of Africa-Caribe FC stress that identifying as Black and playing for a black team does not erase differences among Black people. Africa-Caribe FC’s objectives then are to celebrate diversity in London’s Black immigrant communities and to also generate
a discourse that recognizes that Black Londoners have different origins, traditions, histories, and experiences.

The visibility sought by individual members within the collective whole that is Africa-Caribe is one that displays the cultural differences between Black groups. The establishing of separate cultural identities has not been easy, however, as many players and teams in the city’s soccer community continue to view and define Africa-Caribe as being no more than Black – “Black” being an all defining cultural blanket. Nevertheless, through various methods including the presence and the waving of national flags on the sidelines (fan area) and sometimes even on the player’s bench, Africa-Caribe members continue to use their team to resist and counter homogenization via skin colour.

In sum, despite the many differences in the experiences and integration processes of the groups mentioned in this thesis, one thing remains constant throughout: soccer has and continues to be used as a tool for social integration by different immigrant groups in London, Ontario. This is also the case nationwide in Canada, but based on my findings in London, in other cities too specific immigrant groups will have had different experiences based on their specific histories, the circumstances that brought them to Canada, and the changing configurations of the communities they have joined. Foer suggests why soccer has such power to operate in this way: “[soccer] is often more deeply felt than religion, and just as much a part of the community's fabric, a repository of traditions” (2004: 4). And it is precisely because soccer is a part of the fabric of many cultures around the world that so many feel that soccer is uniquely their own, and thus, is a way to express and share their culture with their new community as part of their integration into Canadian society. As this thesis has shown, however, being able to do so in London,
Ontario has also been the result of the actions of previous groups who have arrived in the city and made new spaces available for themselves, providing in turn a foundation on which others can build.

One of this thesis’ most important finding is that despite the existence of similarities, the “immigrant experience” varies – and in some cases, it can vary within groups. Although this thesis is not specifically about women, women are central to my understanding and conveying of this fact. Pozniak notes that men and women experience migration differently and that “practices and institutions that are presumed to be gender neutral – such as the family, education, or employment – are in fact gendered in multiple ways” (2005: 17). Pozniak’s conclusion could not be truer when we consider the obstacles women in London have and continue to encounter when looking to enter and create space for themselves within London’s soccer community – an institution in itself. There is a positive to be taken from this realization, however. As I have already noted above, soccer, as an integration tool, can work incredibly well. For this to happen though, a) soccer must be accessible to everyone and b) those promoting or facilitating its use must recognize and understand soccer’s possibilities and limitations within this type of arena. For instance, if we accept that one of soccer’s (the “world’s game”) greatest contradictions is that it has historically excluded women, then we must ask ourselves, in what other ways, areas, or activities is the immigrant experience being underappreciated through standardized approaches like those that consider soccer, for instance, as a globally inclusive activity? And even more importantly, how can we prevent this from happening? For both questions I argue that the best approach is to always be mindful of the fact that most, if not all things in this world, including immigration and the means
people use to navigate through this often-difficult process, are *unique* experiences that are innately linked to a person or group’s pasts, presents, and future goals.

This thesis’ most fascinating finding and thus, one worth reflecting on at the end of this work, is the parallel present in all three cases between space on the soccer pitch and spaces in the community. Perhaps here, more than anywhere else, soccer can be viewed as a manifestation of the search of the immigrant groups for the access to social space in their adopted Canadian society. Perhaps here, through this theoretical yet very real parallel, we can understand why soccer has and continues to be an effective tool for immigrant groups to integrate society in London and most likely, in other cities, places, and spaces.
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Armstrong, Frederick H.

BBC Sport

Berry, John

Blatchford, Andy

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Buckley, David
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CBC News
2007 Rule against hijab stands: world soccer body.

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(CCLC) Cross Cultural Learners Centre

(CCLC) Cross Cultural Learners Centre

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(CSA) Canadian Soccer Association

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Dunbar, Graham

Eastman, Benjamin
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FIFA


Foer Franklin


Galeano, Eduardo

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Global News

Goodden, Herman and Whebell, C.F.J.

Grassmuck, Sherri and Pessar, Patricia

Guttmann, Allen

Hall, M. Ann

Hall, Stuart
Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette


Institute for Canadian Citizenship


Islamic Soccer League (ISL)


Lutman, John H.


Marconi Club of London


Marks, Shannon


Miller, Orlo.

(L)MYSL


(T)MYSL


N’Amerind (London) Friendship Centre


Nanji, Noor


Nike


Pathways to Prosperity: Canada


Pereira, Joe


Portes, Alejandro, Guarnizo, Luis E. and Landolt, Patricia

Pozniak, Kinga


Rauhala, Emily


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Walton, Susan

Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kim Clark
Department & Institution: Social Science/Anthropology, Western University

NMREB File Number: 106633
Study Title: Soccer and Community Integration in London, Ontario
Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

NMREB Initial Approval Date: June 02, 2015
NMREB Expiry Date: June 02, 2016

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

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The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

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Western University. Research, Support Services Bldg., Rm. 5150

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Assistant Coach, UWO Women’s Varsity Soccer 2015 – 2016
Technical Director, London Youth Whitecaps (Future Caps) 2015 – 2016
Assistant Coach, North London Galaxy Women’s Premier 2015 – 2016
Technical Director, BMO Centre (Sills and Drills/Pipsqueak Programs) 2014 – 2017
Editor, Totem: The UWO Journal of Anthropology 2014
Department Representative, Western Anthropology Graduate Society 2014