



LUND UNIVERSITY

**A Better Version of Yourself**  
**Sweat, Smiles, and Muay Thai Tourism**  
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## Abstract

This ethnographic study investigates the functions of BestFighter Muay Thai and Mixed Martial Arts training camp in Koh Samui, Thailand, as a successful actor in a booming self-improvement economy. In this thesis I explore the entanglements with locality and power which enable what satisfied participants refer to as augmented experiences of self-improvement. Combining theoretical concepts such as Goffman's frame analysis, Foucault's care of the self, and critical masculinity studies, in this thesis I offer an analysis of the narratives and the practices that inform and construct the mythology of the training camp. The findings from my fieldwork indicate that participants largely thrive at BestFighter, finding self-discipline, meaningful friendships, and holistic balance. These benefits, however, are the end result of the complex interplay of socio-cultural factors including tourist imaginations of Thailand, the interstices of masculinity, sport and socialisation, and the way self-making processes are gendered and mythologized. This thesis analyzes not only why these (predominantly) men choose to spend their money and their holidays sweating and training intensely, but also how and why this type of holiday is framed as a transformational experience that always leaves participants at once satisfied and wanting more. Ultimately I argue that the success of the transformations enabled by BestFighter is due to the fact that it functions as a masculinity rehab: a place for men to enact simplified masculine archetypes incongruent with their everyday life.

Keywords: transformation; Muay Thai; self-improvement; tourism; Thailand; masculinity; sweat; experience economy; performance ethnography

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If you want a boxer  
I will step into the ring for you  
And if you want a doctor  
I'll examine every inch of you  
If you want a driver, climb inside  
Or if you want to take me for a ride  
You know you can  
I'm your man

-Leonard Cohen

## Index of Abbreviations and Common Terms

**MT/ Muay Thai:** alternately referred to as Thai Boxing is a combat sport of Thai origin in which involves kicks, punches, elbows and knee strikes

**Combat Sport:** Competitive contact sport usually involving competitive fighting between two participants

**MMA:** Mixed Martial Arts (Striking and grappling art involving Ju Jitsu, Western Boxing, Greco Roman Wrestling, Muay Thai, and Kickboxing)

**BF:** BestFighter Camp

**BJJ:** or Brazilian JuJitsu, combat sport which involves grappling, ground work, and submission

**UFC:** Ultimate Fighting Championship

**K1:** Heavyweight international Kickboxing organization

**Eskrima:** Filipino stick fighting

**Sanda:** Chinese kickboxing

**Farang:** Colloquial Thai word for a person of white race and/or European origin

**Wai Kru:** Ceremonial show of respect performed by boxers before a match

**Mongkon:** Ceremonial headgear passed from teacher to boxer worn while performing the Wai Kru

**Ladyboy:** Colloquial Thai term used to refer to transgender women and/or third sex people and gender non-conforming people

## Introduction

*“Come and visit us and let us help you to become a better version of yourself.” (BestFighter Website Copy, retrieved May 2019)*

The above quote comes from the website of BestFighter in Koh Samui Thailand, the Muay Thai and MMA residential training camp where I spent six weeks conducting the research for this thesis. This slogan is emblematic of the benefits many locales of this type promise whilst advertising their services: an invitation to the reader to transform themselves into someone better, someone more balanced, healthier, more disciplined and streamlined.

Muay Thai (also referred to as Thai Boxing) and more recently Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) training camps of this type have historically served as places where competitive fighters both Thai and *Farang* (a term commonly used to refer to westerners who visit Thailand) go to focus wholly on their fighting practice and hone their skills through immersive training in minimal facilities dedicated entirely to the training of Muay Thai. These camps call to mind images of fighters with bleeding shins and knuckles, running up hills wrapped in plastic bags, starving and sweating to cut weight for upcoming matches and collapsing at night on bare mattresses in concrete walled rooms.

However, in the new economy characterized by glocalization, network societies, and experience as commodity (Lögren & Willim, 2005, p.1) camps of this type have gained relative mainstream recognition (<https://www.nationthailand.com/national/30317237>) and are successfully positioning themselves within the experience tourism economy as places where diverse visitors of all levels can go to experience an authentic Muay Thai training in order to better themselves:

*“We understand that not everybody has the same goals. Not everybody wants to be a professional Athlete. Some people want to work out to lose weight, some people just want to get fit and other people want to learn to defend themselves. No matter what your goal is we can help you. Our classes are designed to help people from all levels with all different goals.” (Retrieved from BF website, May 2019)*

As shown in this quote from the BestFighter website (2019) Muay Thai camps of this type are no longer the exclusive dominion of the most dedicated fighters. They now advertise to practitioners of all levels, as well as non-practitioners seeking an alternative travel experience where health, self-discipline and personal development are the focus of their sojourn. BestFighter camp, the site of my

research, is emblematic of this shift, having successfully curated an image as a friendly and inclusive modernized facility where one is given the tuition and structure required to meet one's personal goals. Weight loss, gaining focus, building confidence, having fun, self defense, and restoring one's balance are just a few of the benefits offered through training at the camp which reflect the demands of a new labor market which increasingly requires the crafting of oneself as flexible, adaptable, holistically healthy and free of crisis and anxiety (Salomonsson, 2005, p.120).

Camps of this type provide a fertile arena for investigating the way self-improvement and transformation are proffered as consumer offerings attainable to those with adequate time, motivation and economic capital.

### Aim and Research Question

As camps such as BestFighter navigate transitions from niche economic offerings for high level athletes to mainstream tourist commodities, a thorough cultural analysis is required to understand the factors driving participant motivations for attending such places. By analyzing the culture of the camp as well as its embeddedness in culture it is possible to answer larger questions about the growing market for self-improvement and self-development and the interweaving of culture and economy which characterizes our current epoch (O'Dell, 2010, p. 12).

In this thesis I investigate BestFighter as a site where (primarily) men go to experience an augmented interval of self-improvement in order to remediate their identities through submitting themselves to the structures and processes particular to this camp. These include physical conditioning and training, the building of temporary communities as well as the spiritual, social and economic particularities of travelling to Thailand as a westerner. The objective of this thesis is to contribute to the fields of tourism and masculinity studies by delivering a detailed cultural analysis of how BestFighter functions as a successful actor in self-improvement economy which I address through the following interrelated questions:

- How do the men who choose to attend perceive and understand themselves as being in need of improvement?
- To what extent is self-improvement linked to embodying particular aspects of masculinity?
- How is self-improvement enabled and fueled by the spatial, geographical, and cultural context in which the training takes place?



## Theoretical Disposition

In my time at BestFighter my training companions and co-participants referred to the camp alternately as a healing place, sacred place, a family, the only place they truly felt like themselves, a rehab for broken souls, the hardest thing they've ever done, and a playground for men where anything is possible (Observations, 2019). The meanings and possibilities that the camp enables in its participants are outsized to the repetitive physical training which goes on there. In order to understand this one must understand the way participants use key discursive elements to frame their endeavors of self-improvement. Thus I conduct my analysis using Foucauldian ideas about *care of the self* (1986) in conjunction with Irving Goffman's *frame analysis* (1974) Roland Barthes *mythologies* (2000) and Raewynn Connell's *masculinities* (1995).

According to Michel Foucault, "care of the self" is an organizing practice which concerns the subject's governance and cultivation of their own selfhood. This practice of self-making is predicated on introspection tempered by an awareness of the world beyond one's interiority.

To be a well-cared for self as such is a not only about the pleasure of attending to oneself but a moral imperative. This dual mission arose in early Greek society as institutional apparatuses such as governmental and religious institutions began to systemically encourage behavioral austerity in populations.

The care of the self, for Epictetus, is a privilege-duty, a gift-obligation that ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence (Foucault, 1986, p. 47).

Foucault looks to early Greek philosophers to illustrate how the moral subject as such is expected to tow the line between self-development and self-indulgence in order to temper one's pleasures. This is done through the exaltation by early philosophers, religious figures, and state institutions of pursuits of physical and spiritual well-being, coupled with a social and philosophical consciousness (Foucault, 1986, p. 40).

In my analysis of how the BestFighter camp is articulated as a place where self-improvement becomes possible I will reflect on the way much modern day self-help and development rhetoric is

deeply rooted in this tradition and how “the cultivation of the self” remains an organizing practice for the construction of gendered subjectivities (Foucault, 1986, p. 65, Heyes 2007).

The cultivation of the self which occurs at BestFighter does so because it is done within a communally constructed frame. Framing mechanisms, per Goffman (1974) act to organize experiences in ways which allow the individual to make sense of them. Each frame will have keys which allow access to the shared understandings of the situation at hand. Goffman uses the example of animals at play versus fighting to illustrate these concepts, a particularly salient example for my subject matter: otters who play at fighting pattern their behavior after a real fight, but transform their activities into play, through performing the action of the fight without delivering harm. By showing that the engaging participants (in this case otters) know not only how to fight, but how not to, one can exaggerate or downplay certain acts, and tune their performances accordingly (Goffman, 1976). BestFighter participants can experiment with different roles and actions, as long as they do not compromise the commonly understood meaning of the activity at hand.

BestFighter acts as the frame in which the transformative experience is possible; through enacting and repeating what should be done in the space it becomes possible to agree on the outcome. When asked what do people do at BestFighter, one can simply answer “improve themselves” or give a reply of any activity which sustains the meanings inferred by the frame: training, socializing with other participants, resting, etc. all become legible within the frame as the activities which in sum are the shared practices of the cultivation of the self in this particular realm and interval. This framing is also symbolically and performatively constructed which I will explore in further sections.

However, the activities which I refer to above are not limited to the actions of which they consist, they are made meaningful through their form (Barthes, 2000, p.109). BestFighter runs on myths: what one learns there, what becomes possible there, the very existence of the place is a network of meanings propagated through speech, story, media, and history; these are just some of the materials always already invoked in BestFighter mythology. Barthes describes mythical speech as always already present in language:

Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance (Barthes, R. 2000 p.110).

The shifting significations which course through the camp are remobilized to simultaneously give the illusion of naturalness, while assuring certain measurable aspects which come to represent work

on the self do not seem so natural as to be effortless (Barthes, 2000). Thus by evoking certain mythologies (comparing one's experience to a champion fighter for example) it is possible to frame and discursively produce a legible experience of self-improvement. However, the cultivated self in question, framed and made meaningful through myth (Barthes, 2000, Foucault, 1986, Goffman, 1974) is a highly gendered self, and serves to lock ideas about self-improvement to a gender order which inextricably links attributes such as strength, power, and discipline to masculinity and men (Burstyn, 1999, Connell 1995).

Masculinity is not a stable identity category, nor does it have an essence; it is a set of behaviors, practices, and bodily dispositions that follow socially constructed norms, affixed to the bodies of men, meant to ensure the continuation of social domination of men through the unequal distribution of patriarchal power (Butler 2000, Connell 1995). It is impossible to discuss prominent mythologized archetypes such as the athlete, the fighter, the laborer etc. without signaling masculinity (Burstyn, 2004, Connell, 1995, Halberstam, 1998). Masculinity is located not only on the bodies of men, but in their social positions and relations to power (Connell, 1995).

Participants rarely express explicit attendance to the work involved in maintaining and claiming their masculinity, which according to Bourdieu is a position which itself emboldens masculinity:

“The strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it” (Bourdieu 2001: 9).

Despite a reluctance to problematize their own masculinity, many participants speak of perceived slippages of masculine power - be it in loss of physical, social or economic capital. Thus self-improvement is inextricably linked with the way masculinity is expressed and experienced by participants at BestFighter (Butler, 2000). As such masculinity is both part and parcel of the discursive production of the BestFighter mythos.

## Masculinity Rehab

Masculinity might well be unstable and largely unattainable, but my participants strive to approximate it through rituals, practices and engagements with power (Burstyn, 1999). It's not just the place and the stories of what occurs there which are mythical, but masculinity itself. The highly gendered work of self-improvement done at BestFighter is not just about producing the self as an individual but the production of masculinity onto the self. Therefore, I introduce the concept of

*masculinity rehab* which I define as: a self-making process through which a subject seeks augmented experiences of masculinity in order to transform themselves into an idealized masculine subject.

The mythology of BestFighter is heavily evoked through enacting of various rites and rituals; Varda Burstyn (1999) sees sport and masculinity as a co-conditional mythos: “The rites of sport create value-bearing mythologies around particular kinds of heroic figures: large strong, often violent, record-setting champions” (Burstyn, 1999, p. 22).

The participants who make up temporary communities within the BestFighter frame organize their experience around the twice-daily group trainings where Muay Thai is taught and practiced during intervals of ritualized engagement.

The training rituals are the repetitive sequenced actions (Burstyn, 1999 p.20) which structure and affirm the purpose of one’s time at BestFighter, but rituals permeate the experience beyond the structured trainings and the whole engagement is a liminal period which allow participants to experience a conditionally constructed culture (Bell, 1996). For Bell: “Ritual is a dialectical means for the provisional convergence of those opposed forces whose interaction is seen to constitute culture in some form” (Bell 1996, p24). BestFighter engages ritual and liminal placemaking processes where-in participants inscribe it with meaning and possibility based on shared experience and expression. However, it remains a place embedded in a larger geography of experience and power. In order to understand how masculinity rehab is conducted, and how it is conditioned on global flows of power and economy, it must be analyzed as a space and place (Gupta and Ferguson, 2000, Relph, 1976) and as part of a semi-colonial legacy and highly subject to an orientalist gaze (Ahmed, 2000, Said, 1978).

## Ethical Considerations

This project is autoethnographic, but only in an epistemological sense, as the value of my position in this inquiry lies not just in my experiences of the camp but rather in my positionality as a situated gender outsider; a queer trans researcher in a predominately cis/hetero/masculine space (Haraway 1987; Bornstein, 1994, Woodard, 2008).

As a transman, I have a particular sensitivity to the construction of my own masculinity. I oscillate between a desire to emulate masculinities' mythology in order to receive the social benefits my performance engenders, and a desire to dismantle it for myself and as a social project in attempt to interrupt the damage hegemonic masculinity continues to reap through the subjugation of those who do not embody its qualities. This internal conflict is the strength of my research experience and its output. In her 2008 article addressing insider/outsiderness as methodological positions in studying combat sports, Kath Woodward questions the ontological complicity of sport researcher's positioning of themselves in the field:

“Throughout the research process there may be collusion in a particular version of masculinity which goes unnoticed and unrecorded when the researcher and the protagonists at the research site are involved in the same, competitive, embodied project” (Woodward, 2008 p. 552).

Woodward advocates for a diversification of the field in order to offer more perspectives and dismantle the equation of closeness to the activity with depth of understanding and posits that there is valuable knowledge to be had from disruption and difference. Thus as I will address in my methodology section, my aim throughout this research is to leverage my trans perspective not only in the ethnographic project at hand, but toward a critique of what David Morgan refers to as the machismo of qualitative research “with its image of the male sociologist bringing back news from the fringes of society, the lower depths, and the mean streets” (Morgan, D. 1992, p.87).

Further, the self-improvement/care/help economy is characterized by popular representations and understandings of the masculine self project as contributing to the subject's ability to be productive, effective, and optimized. Many of the same behaviors, such as diet, exercise, and introspection, when undertaken by women and feminized subjects are understood as vain, self-indulgent, or in

effort to conform to homogenous standards of mainstream femininity (Heyes 2007, Spicer, A. & Cederström, C. 2017). The disposition of this project is thus highly personal and highly critical as my goal is to untangle the way certain social positions (in this case white, male, European) are naturalized and certain behaviors are validated precisely because they include practices which subjugate other identity groups.

The camp is a known public entity and despite receiving consent from the management to use it in this research I have chosen to abstract key identifying details. Additionally, I have used pseudonyms for all named in this research including participants and trainers. All participants were aware of my purposes at the camp, and all direct quotes were obtained with consent from participants. All materials retrieved from the field including recordings, transcriptions, field notes and photographs have been archived and have not been divulged to any outside parties. All photos were either taken by myself, submitted by participants or retrieved from the camp's public promotional social media and have been abstracted to remove identifying details.

## Previous Research

### Sweatnography and Carnal Sociology

In order to define my field of inquiry it is crucial to present an overview of the existing research dealing with identity and combat sports in the tradition of "Carnal Sociology", a term coined by Loic Wacquant in the seminal text of the genre *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Wacquant 2000).

Following Wacquant's ethnographic account of a boxing gym on Chicago's south side, many works within the Carnal Sociology genre probe issues of identity through an embodied lens in various combat sport and martial arts spaces. The subjects of such texts include but are not limited to: Wing Chun (Brown, D. Jennings J 2013) Capoeira (Delamont, S. and Stephens, S 2013) and Brazillian JuJitsu (Hogeven, B. 2013) many of which are presented in the anthology "*Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts in Combat Sports*" (Spencer, D., Garcia, R. 2013). For my purposes I wish to narrow the field to studies which look specifically at Muay Thai and MMA and to a lesser extent Western or English Boxing.

Sociologist Dale Spencer, sensitized by Wacquant, has written multiple articles investigating the way the MMA/Muay Thai body is produced and enacted through corporeal practice. Among these practices are the doing of MMA, the eating for MMA, and the attempt by Western Muay Thai fighters to embody the spiritual and religious aspects of the sport by performing rituals such as the *Ram Muay* and *Wai Kru* to evoke authenticity and what he calls the “Muay Thai Habitus” (Spencer, 2013).

As a participant ethnographer Spencer offers a deeply embedded view of the field and the way MMA and Muay Thai fighters produce their identities through their sensorial engagements with the sports. He argues the exchange of intimacies, the regulation of food consumption and the assimilation of Thai spirituality common the practice of MMA and Muay Thai complicate assumptions that only “real ‘stoic’ men engage in MMA” (Spencer, 2013 p248, 2013b, 2014).

Sociologist Lionel Loh’s 2015 book, “*The Body and Senses in Martial Culture*” following Marcel Mauss examines how individuals view the world through their bodily knowledge and thus looks at the way the Muay Thai body is enacted through performance of masculine norms and values. This book offers a wealth of knowledge on the activities one undergoes at an MMA training camp, and does a thorough job of theorizing the way habitus is produced through these activities onto the bodies of the fighters he interviews and trains with. The failing of this text however, like many others of the genre, is that it ultimately serves to reproduce what it critiques, through presenting an overly naturalized version of what a man’s body is and can do; homogenous male bodies participate in homogenous trainings resulting in a homogenous habitus. This text and many others tend to exalt the smallest details of men’s bodies in sport (ways of standing, looking, speaking, gesturing) as proof of certain types of embodiments, but here I argue what is often credited as embodied knowledge is actually gender performance.

Much of the research in this genre focuses on high achieving participants within their fields, and does not account for the many participants who for various reasons approach these types of activities with purely amateur aspirations such as weight loss, muscle gain, or general self-improvement. Thus these studies tend to reproduce a monolithic representation of participants as universally fit, cis-masculine and high achieving within the sport, if not at a competitive level at least in their various locations. A possible explanation for this is that many of these types of studies are conducted by researchers who closely resemble their subjects, with substantial histories with

sports, martial arts, or training at a relatively high level. To bridge the gap between existing research on Muay Thai & MMA among this monolithic representation of high achieving and competitive participants and the participants I introduce in this study, it is necessary to include works which deal with the wellness industry and new economy, as well as tourism studies.

### The Self-Improvement Economy and Tourism

Pine and Gilmore's seminal 1999 text *The Experience Economy* introduces the new economic models which have given rise to entities promising to deliver experiences of transformation and self-improvement. Carl Cederström and Andre Spicer's two co-written books, *The Wellness Syndrome* (2015) and *Desperately Seeking Self Improvement* (2017) provide a salient overview and analysis of the multi-billion-dollar self-improvement economy which houses Muay Thai camps such as BestFighter. These books, taken together, account for the economics of the wellness industry, from man-camps, to yoga retreats and wearables, explaining the how the invocation to optimize, to feel better, and be better through consuming goods, ideologies and services has become a key characteristic of late capitalism. Cressida Heyes' 2007 book, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics and Normalized Bodies*, explores how normalization is a gendered phenomenon and how the economics of self-improvement are predicated on conflating the outer self with an imagined inner truth. Works on the cultural economy such as Spas (O'Dell 2010) illustrate how the wellness economy has undergone a "culturization" where-in lines between commodity and culture are purposefully abstracted (O'Dell, 2010) in a 'New Economy' characterised by rapid transformations of cultural capital into consumer necessities (Lövgren & Willim, 2005).

Despite their history and cultural meaning, Muay Thai camps in Thailand function largely as training facilities for middle class western tourists. Works which deal with tourist motivations (Lövgren, 2010, Nawijn, 2010, Prentice, 2010) and the tourist's identity (Stein, 2011) are thus analytical necessities. Thailand is a semi-colonial entity (Lysa, 2004) subject to an orientalist gaze (Urry, 1990) with a global reputation as a paradise for tourists seeking a cheap and safe locale with amenities that include beach parties where westerners can flex unique body capital over migrant Thai workers (Malam, 2008a, 2008b) and where sex workers are readily available and seen as relatively safe and socially sanctioned (Bernstein & Shih 2014, Ryan, 2000). In the face of this global reputation, the tourists' quest for authenticity (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2003, Johnson 2004) is often used to sidestep associations with the western melee that ensues in the imagination of just what one goes to Thailand to see and do.



While a few ethnographic studies of Muay Thai camps in Thailand have been conducted (Loh, 2015, Spencer, 2013), to my knowledge none have analyzed the camps and their participants as part of larger cultural trends toward men's self-improvement or as functions of a tourist economy. This thesis aims to bridge the gap between ethnographic studies which investigate identity making and confirming processes undergone at Muay Thai/MMA camps and gyms (Loh, 2015, Spencer, 2013a, 2013b, Stenius 2015) with men's engagement of self-help and self-improvement technologies, and the commodification of culture and geography as a key offering of the experience economy.

## Methods and Materials

In order to contextualize the BestFighter camp as the site of ethnography, in this chapter I will provide an introduction to the methodological positions from which I conducted this research. Many anthropologists and ethnographers call for a rethinking of the field as a geographically bounded entity (Ehn, Löfgren, Wilk, 2016. P. 221) and while the camp's physical location; the boxing rings, the accommodations, and training facilities were the primary backdrop of this fieldwork, the field as such greatly exceeds its borders. Thus the location of the field stretches to the island of Koh Samui, the country of Thailand, and through my self as the constant site of reflection. As such, the methods used extend from conventional ethnographic modes of observing and documenting to intersectional methods which primatize embodied ways of knowing through feeling, sensing, doing and being (Pink, 2015, Bochner & Ellis, 1996, Ehn, Löfgren & Wilk 2016) and which acknowledge how the researchers "social markings" such as gender, class, race and habitus influence their involvements with the field (Herd, 2018, p.133).

In January of 2019 I left Sweden to spend six weeks in a Mixed Martial Arts gym and accommodation in Koh Samui, Thailand. While the camp is ostensibly an MMA training facility with twice daily BJJ trainings, once daily MMA trainings and multiple CrossFit training sessions a day, the majority of the camps visitors (generally referred to as participants) come for and participate in Muay Thai. The majority of the camps facilities and trainers are dedicated to Muay Thai, and despite its other offerings the camp's reputation and identity remains as a place primarily to train Muay Thai.

In searching for a place to conduct my research, I had a few prerequisites. I wanted a gym where the majority of participants stayed "on campus" so my field would feel at least somewhat contained, a place which was financially accessible to me as a student with no external funding, thus a camp which offered budget accommodations, and one which offered training beyond Muay Thai, especially Crossfit as I was initially very interested in studying men who travel to destinations to engage in this specific activity (I learned quickly, in this case few did). My last requirement was that the place would allow me to conduct my research openly.

After comparing the online profiles of three camps, I booked BestFighter for 33 days, which I would later extend an additional ten days, via a series of short e-mails with the gym's manager, who was neither interested in or averse to my motivations for booking.

Beyond my trainings, and beyond the confines of the camp, I went to meals with my participants, to clubs and bars, to the beach, and to attractions on the island. All of my participants were aware of my position as a master's student researching for a thesis, on the subject of "men and transformation journeys" which is how I introduced myself and my purpose at the camp.

### Performative Ethnography

Performance studies scholars call for the rethinking of epistemological models which privilege text-based analyzes, and those which employ a top down model of knowledge production (Denzin, 2002). Performance studies thus evoke "constitutive liminality" (Denzin, 2002, p152) which allows for knowledges to be produced through practice, and performance, in order to complicate the way the researcher negotiates the distance between themselves and their research. This embodied methodology, often referred to as performance ethnography allows for the translation of somatic practice into cultural understandings.

The embodied ethnographer in the field is thus entangled; never separate from global and social histories and power relations informing the phenomena they study. Sarah Pink takes the issue of the ethnographer's presence in the field further by proposing sensory ethnography as a method by which the ethnographer can maintain proximity and perspective by "cataloging the way place and experience are made of smells, movement, visuals to come closer to understanding how those other people experience, remember and imagine" (Pink, 2009 p1).

This type of performance-based, sensorially driven ethnography has proved seductive for many researchers, especially those who work with somatic practices such as dance, sport, or in this case combat sports. As we learn from doing, through finding synchronicity with the practices of our participants we are able to validate our knowledge through the sweat and bruising we incur in the service of understandings. But despite the closeness engendered through shared practice, the ethnographer remains the insider/outsider (Woodward, 2008, 2004), and the bruising is always elective. Thus, performance ethnography is always performative as the researcher is performing

multiple roles: insider, outsider, researcher and participant. The projects continue to conjure all the heavily gendered mythos of the anthropologist going away to a field to study something which evokes imaginations of danger and difference. In the case of carnal sociology, distance and identity-based difference can be replaced with the difference between the academic and the athlete, or a proximity to violence. In Wacquant's ethnography, his pugilistic practices put his skin in the game and his body in the ring, but the novelty of his identity, his Frenchness, his whiteness, his outsidership also proved fruitful in many ways to his research. In the space of a poor black boxing gym he is so strange he is disarming and yet he is willing to do all of the work of full participation (Wacquant, 2000). His performance both as enthusiastic participant in the gyms culture and as french-nerd-oddity allow him to remain on the floor with a bird's eye view.

In my own performative ethnography, I leaned heavily into my various insider/outsider positions in attempt to deepen my understandings of my situation. The following note from my field journal illustrates what being an outsider means in this research:

Gian and I are going to the Muay Thai shop to buy those steel cups everybody has. He forgot his and it's clear after my first few sparring sessions I have to buy one. (Field Notes, January 2019)

Conversations about the pain and indignity of getting "kicked in the dick" during sparring were many, as were discussions of the strangeness of "ladyboys". Homophobia and transphobia were an uncomfortable reality around the camp, themes I will refer to in later analytical chapters. From this note, I remember my anguish in the sense that my closeness to my participants, the shared experiences, frank and open discussion about our personal lives, desires, and insecurities could be invalidated based on what one had or didn't have beneath their Muay Thai shorts. The cup, which I purchased, was quite expensive, and to be frank, I don't need one, but it was clear to me at the time my position not only as a researcher, but as "one of them", hinged on my purchasing a totally non-essential device for protecting the balls I don't have.

The acute awareness of how my maleness is learned, bought, and performed is thus a methodological tool; it allows me an outsider's view of machinations of performance with an insider's proximity to it, and the underlying inability to ever completely let my guard down, a foundational requirement of anyone who seeks to engage a masculine performance (Connell, 1995).

## Interviewing

In the interest of approaching this project as a ‘compositional practice’( O’Dell & Willim 2013). I conducted interviews with key participants to hear them express themselves in their own words in order to produce a collaborative narrative of life at the BestFighter camp and document their views of the social world (Davies, 2010). However, it would be reductive to say interviewing and the transcription processes which follow represent objective knowledge, as the data gathered and produced are subject to my interpretation at all levels (O’Dell and Willim, 2013, Munro, Nairn, Smith, Anne 2005). While many participants became and remain my friends, this friendship is always abstracted by the research process, as all interactions including interviews were shaded by my overarching purpose; to leave the field with enough data to compose this thesis (Ellis, C. 2007).

In the course of my 43 days I spent at BestFighter, I sat for interviews with 12 participants. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours and took place either sitting beside the pool, at nearby restaurants or beach clubs, in one case on the participants balcony, and in one while sitting on the matt in the MMA cage.

Participants identified as heterosexual males between the ages of 19 and 46. I had one participant each from the following countries: The Netherlands, The U.S., Canada, Slovakia, Switzerland and Denmark, and 6 from Germany. Of the 12, 11 identified as white and one identified as black. 8 participants alluded to financial stability and relative financial success and were either self-employed or working white collar jobs. Only 4 indicated financial instability, and inferred their time at the camp was a luxury which required an extended period of saving. All have been anonymized and given aliases in this research.

In my time at the camp three men, including one of my participants, a 20 year old German named Marius, were training as camp fighters to undertake semi-pro fight cards in Samui’s Muay Thai venues in exchange for pay. The rest of the attendees fell into one of three camps:

1. (40%) Total novices to the sport starting their practice at the camp
2. (40%) Non-competitive practitioners who have had previous training in their home countries, or had previously trained at BestFighter
3. (20%) Former and current competitive fighters

While other countries, genders, sexualities and skill levels were present at the camp my sampling of participants is representative of the camps demographics, with women being in the vast minority in attendance, and men from Germany, Scandinavia and Benelux consistently being in the majority.

Interviews were semi-structured and conversational in nature; I chose to interview based on themes rather than using an interview guide as I wanted my participants to guide the flow of their narratives. However I did have four questions I made sure to ask during every sit down interview in order to create a baseline for comparative analysis. They were:

1. How did you find the BestFighter camp?
2. What motivated you to come here?
3. What did you expect of yourself coming in to this trip?
4. Describe your daily routine

Themes I identified in these interviews would come to guide the topics of my analysis; perceived failings of the self, perceptions of “Thainess” and a desire to be prepared for conflict. I supplemented this interview data with my own observations which I captured using the methods which I will introduce in the next sections.

### Field Notes, Photos and Recordings

I carried a small notebook with me basically any time I wasn’t actively training. I used this to capture my thoughts, reflections and observations. The notebook was lime green and I also used it as a wallet, so its presence was consistently registered by my participants. I used its physical specificity as a constant reminder I was a researcher. Only on rare occasions would I write in this notebook in front of anyone else, and if I did so it was with consent, such as during an especially illuminating conversation with Ken on the topic of visiting sex workers. The casual acceptance, and amusement felt by the majority of my observants in regards to my jotting habits can be understood from the following exchange:

Max: How many guys do you think hire girls?

Ken: Oh a lot man, a lot.

Max: Including you?

Ken: (laughs and points to his dick) Yeah man, when the monster is hungry you gotta feed it.

Max: Woah. When the monster is hungry... can I write that down, I don't want to forget.

Ken: (laughs again) Yeah man, be my guest.

Despite the personal and potentially inflammatory nature of the above exchange, Ken is amused at my desire to quote him in this instance. This was a common attitude to my asking for consent to note an exchange in the presence of my participants. Generally my note-taking occurred when I was not socializing, while recovering after training which led to a lot of sweat spotted pages and smeared running ink. I often did this while pacing in my room - a Pepto Bismol pink concrete square with a door which opened directly into a boxing ring - so as not to sweat on the bed.

In this thesis I use many photographs, taken by myself, submitted to me by participants and retrieved from the camp's public social media. Taking pictures with a smart phone was common practice among almost all the camps visitors and residents, including myself. While some of this was done as social practice, when on outings, or after lessons, I also took many pictures of the camps facilities in order to capture the geographical landscape and layout to and analyze for content and to jog my memory when I returned to Sweden and began writing. Thus I have a wealth of pictures of both smiling fighters - including myself - in the traditional fists up, squared off position, as well as more abstract pictures of hanging bags, cracked and worn gloves, gym matts, fliers, posters and logos. The use of pictures in this thesis is done in attempt to enrich the descriptions for the reader, rather than to try to demonstrate particular analytical truths (Davies, 2009).

Additionally, field recordings were used to capture the mood and atmosphere of the space (Ehn, Löfgren, Wilk, 2016). I obtained recordings of whole lessons with the consent of the trainers, in order to stay close to the sonic landscape of the camp. The heavy breathing, the shouts and groans of the Thai trainers, the rhythmic slapping of gloves hitting bags and pads, the collective counting of push ups, squats, and sit ups, the clapping the cursing, the starting engines of scooters and the distant barking of dogs are all data in their own right, allowing for a secondary reading of the goings-on in camp (Ehn, Löfgren, Wilk, 2016, p.83).

Because Muay Thai is a practice done on and through bodies, maintaining a sensitivity to its sensual dimensions is key to knowing the field (Ehn, Löfgren, Wilk, 2016, Spencer, 2014). It is through repeated description in this text that I will try to represent the heavy humid air, the heat of the tropical sun, the strain in my muscles and ligaments during and after training, the smell of sweat soaked gloves (best described as a mixture of mold and tortilla chips), the mingling of body odor, aerosol body spray, sun cream, your clinch partners' breath in your face, and the rotting garbage smell which blankets the camp from a nearby dump, as all of this contributes to the way the space maintains its aura both in the field and in my memory and forms the data from which I draw my analysis (Davies 2009, Ehn, Löfgren, Wilk, 2016, Pink 2009, Wacquant, 2000).



## Thesis Outline

In the previous introductory chapter I have introduced the methodologies, materials and theories which guide my analysis of the functions of BestFighter camp.

Following a brief contextualization of the sport of Muay Thai, the forthcoming analysis is presented in 3 main chapters:

1. *The Story*, which concerns the narrative and discursive elements which allow participants to frame and express their experience at BestFighter. 2. *The Space*, which explores the cultural context, and geography of the experience. And 3. *The Practice* which occurs at BestFighter, which investigates how certain dispositions are symbolically enacted by and onto the bodies who learn and perform them.

Following these three analytical chapters, I will present my conclusions along with suggestions for further research and applications of this study.

## Muay Thai and Muay Thai Camps

While the history and sport of Muay Thai are not the focus of this thesis, they do provide the backdrop so here I will provide a brief overview of what Muay Thai is and can mean. Muay Thai or Thai Boxing, is referred to as the art of 8 limbs. In addition to the hooks, jabs, and crosses familiar to many from western pugilism, Muay Thai also engages kicks, knee strikes, elbows and clinching. Thus it is often seen as more violent and brutal than Western or English Boxing (Spencer, 2014). It is the national sport of Thailand, developed originally as a combat skill in the 18th century, and is now the biggest spectator sport in Thailand, deeply connected to Buddhist belief and Thai national identity (Kitiarsia 2005, Vail, 2014).

Muay Thai is steadily increasing in mainstream popularity in the wake of the visibility of Mixed Martial Arts, as popularised by the UFC, as Muay Thai largely informs the kicking and striking components of MMA (Stenius, 2015). As Muay Thai gains mainstream popularity and recognition, so do Muay Thai camps. Residential gyms of the type modern Muay Thai camps are modelled after were originally established by and for Thai fighters who would train to compete as a means of

financial livelihood. Since the 1980's, congruent with the rise of the sport's global recognition, westerners have been travelling to Thailand to participate in Thai style immersive trainings.

Stories of early Muay Thai camps paint them as removed completely from the luxuries of many *Farang*'s associations with Thailand's beautiful beaches and resorts (Vail, 2014). Stories like those told by prominent Australian Muay Thai fighter John Wayne Parr (often credited as one of the first *Farang* to master the sport) paint a picture of monastic fighters sleeping together on concrete floors, using makeshift training materials, communicating across language barriers, and sharing food bought with the meagre earnings from fights (National Geographic Documentary: K1 Kickfighters, 2014) . While camps of this type certainly still exist, especially in Thailand's northern Isaan region, the majority of camps catering to *Farang* are a far cry from these conditions. Modern Muay Thai camps, like BestFighter, boast updated facilities often with private rooms, fully equipped weight lifting gyms, staff with English proficiency, access to private trainers, and cleaning staff who change your sheets while you train. While they purposefully distinguish themselves from resorts and hotels, they are not by definition remote, underdeveloped, or rough.

## 1. The Story

Despite varying degrees of severity in motivations for attending BestFighter, most participants still refer to the interval as part of their holidays. Holidays, or vacations are essentially exercises in the definition of the self, a period of time where it is possible to experience intensified intervals of personal freedom as one is discharged from the structures and responsibilities of everyday life (Aron, 1999). On holiday it becomes possible to experience an enhanced version of oneself, what sociologist Karen Stein calls the “vacation identity” (Stein, 2011). But in the case of BestFighter this vacation identity is not just the projection of the unfettered self, but a prescribed identity with semi-rigid norms and expectations produced by the discourse which surrounds the camp, as a place to ‘become one’s best self’ by training as a Muay Thai fighter. As such, through the imperative to self-improve, the camp starts to demonstrate value as a milieu for rehabilitation.

In this analytical chapter I use interview and observational data to examine the role sojourns at Muay Thai camps such as BestFighter play in the larger economy of tourism, holidays and the economics of self-improvement. I analyze these observations and anecdotes paying particular attention to the way participants invoke exaggerated discourses of healing and self-improvement during interviews using Roland Barthes theorization of ‘myths’ as a “type of speech” and “mode of signification” which steep existent signs with cultural meanings (Barthes, 2000 p.109). I will then analyze participant mythologies with Foucault’s formulation of ‘cultivation of the self’, an orienting practice invoked to produce valid and vital gendered subjects (Foucault, 1986). To further investigate how participants frame their engagements with these camps, I will use Irving Goffman’s frame analysis as a method for understanding human activity through the way actors inhabit and perform pre-determined social roles (Goffman 1974).

### A Working Holiday

In his work on Spa’s as ‘magical’ spaces whose benefits are largely propagated through their aura rather than their offerings, ethnologist Tom O’Dell asks:

Just how is ‘well-being’ produced on a mass scale? And what type of magic is required to transform a broken-down, stressed out and exhausted middle aged couple into a rejuvenated, relaxed and revitalised conjugal pair? (O’Dell, 2010)

The BestFighter camp, like the spas O'Dell refers to above both trade in the production of well-being. They both frame an experience outside of ordinary life through the invocation of atmosphere, rites and rituals (which I will explore further in later chapters) where it becomes possible to experience an augmented interval of self-restoration (O'Dell, 2010 p. 26). Despite the many similarities between Spa's and BestFighter camp as locations where ones physical and spiritual well-being are the locus of culturally specific economic offerings, a salient difference is that the benefits of the spa and likewise yoga retreats, and meditation centres are largely predicated on the illusion of the disappearance of work in order to deliver on the promise of restoration and relaxation (Cederström and Spicer, 2015, O'Dell, 2010).

Conversely, at BestFighter work is the restorative currency which circulates between the camps employees and participants. Work is something you come to camp to get away from, but it's also what you come to experience. In Barthes exploration of the mythical writer on holiday, he explains "Vocation is never better displayed than when it is contradicted" (Barthes, 2000, p.30). The writer on holiday, like the person who spends their holiday training at BestFighter, has the function of naturalising work, as if it is almost an involuntary expression of character (Barthes, 2000, p.30). The BestFighter participant is producing themselves as a worker who then produces their own well-being, through eschewing excess in favour of the "economy of regimen" where work is done on and for the self (Foucault, p.57). Thus to be hard working while on holiday becomes a conspicuous display of one's fortitude. This attitude is exemplified in the following quote from Zeilig, a 21-year-old railroad logistician from Bavaria:

I think if you only do holiday for pleasure it's always the same thing, you go to Egypt or Turkey or Spain you go on some cruise, you eat too much you lay on the beach or at the pool and you drink in the night. I don't take something with me afterwards (Zeilig, interview 2019).

For Zeilig, the value of the vacation will become apparent when he returns home. He has invested heavily in his trip, and wants a payoff, which would be unavailable to him were he to succumb to the empty pleasures of an ordinary beach holiday. Zeilig goes on to explain his daily routine at camp consists of a total of 5-6 hours of training a day including one hour of self-directed stretching and foam rolling to increase his flexibility, in addition to the twice daily Muay Thai trainings. In his home life Zeilig works two jobs, one full-time at the rail road, and a second shift job as an event

security guard. It stands to reason that a man working an average of 60 hours a week would want to spend his holiday relaxing, but for Zeilig, like many of the camps participants the opposite is true, the work and regimen the camp facilitates take on a liberatory mythos:

(On training) It's only about you, you want to achieve something and there's nobody pushing you like the trainers here can. You focus, you concentrate, you work and it's good for you. It's good for your life (Jurgen, interview 2019).

The above quote comes from Jurgen, a 43-year-old web developer who works remotely while travelling. Like Zeilig's quote about pleasure holidays, when Jurgen says "it's good for your life" we can infer these men see training as separate from their lives and an interval during which you develop yourself for redeployment after camp, after the holiday ends.

This implied benefit is central to the BestFighter slogan, "We help you become the best version of yourself" this bit of encouraging branding defines the ethos of the camp: while they provide the venue, and the training (the help) the impetus is on you to become your best. This injunction to work on oneself connects back to what Foucault calls "the cultivation of the self" (Foucault, 1986, p.45), a social practice derived from early Greek ideologies of body and moral capital predicated on embodying an ethos of control of one's physical, emotional and spiritual health (Foucault, 1986, p. 65). The implication of this BestFighter slogan being: with the removal of distractions and when given the proper tools and milieu, a 'conversion to self' can occur. Thus, BestFighter does not promise to make you a fighter, or even to help you achieve your goals. It is a rather, a moving target, predicated on what you're made of, so through putting in the work we may take our self as the object of pleasure in order to return home better than we left (Foucault, 1986, p.66). A becoming of best self, implies that we are not already that, we have let something slip away, and if we can recover it through hard work, the opportunities for satisfaction are myriad, (Foucault, 1986 p. 66).

Camps such as BestFighter deliver the experience of the "working holiday" an example of what Pine and Gilmore name as the fourth economic offering after commodity, goods and services: experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p.9). Experiences, per Pine and Gilmore, connect with consumers at the personal level and precede the forthcoming demand for an economics of transformation in which consumers pay to be changed through a guided experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p. 255). Transformation becomes a commodity when the transformation is guided, rather than delivered, and those who provide them show they care about the sustained outcome of

the transformational experience. In order to do so, they must be there in the beginning, at the diagnosis of what the consumer hopes will be transformed. It then becomes a matter of providing wisdom and setting the stage, but it remains the consumer who must do the work required of the transformation, because the work is in essence the transformation (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Rather than excusing one from work for a period of time to focus on extra-work indulgences for the self, the Working Holiday serves the function of producing oneself as an ideal worker, or in this case one's "best self". The value of the holiday is felt when the one who has holidayed returns to their everyday life and with increased capabilities which enhance their value in their work place and social strata.

Sociologically, the holiday itself is a product of the labor economy; Barthes traces the advent of the 'holiday' to proletariat roots, a feature of the working world, where in the worker gets a the break from their job, ostensibly to not work (Barthes, 2000 p.30). At BestFighter camp, one does not take a holiday from work, but a holiday to work. Work is always happening at camp in multiple forms: there is the Foucauldian work on the self which frames the experience through the physical work done on the body in training, and the work we do at home which we either take a break from, or do congruent with our working holiday, working remotely (Foucault, 1986).

In Barthes discussion of the myth of the writer's holiday, he posits the writer's holiday is not in fact the romanticized interval of the creative seeking inspiration through change of milieu, but rather a "cunning mystification which the Establishment practices the better to enslave its writers" (Barthes, 2000 p. 30). Thus I extend his argument to posit a primary function of participation in Muay Thai training is linked conditions of the present late-capitalist labor market which increasingly values readiness, adaptability, and flexibility as the keystone values of an individual's employability (Salomonsson, 2005, p. 118).

This formulation of the functions of the camp as a working holiday leads to the question of who finds themselves in need of supplementing work, how work certain kinds of work are gendered and what the ability to labor means in context of masculinity rehab.

## The Broken Men

In this section I will use interview data to present thematic discursive patterns presented by my participants. These discourses illustrate the way key participants stage their stories as tales of

the “cultivation of the self” (Foucault, 1986), in the style of rites-de-passage with clear examples of *pre-liminal separation* (the going away to camp) *liminal transition* (the community engendered in the course of experience) and *post-liminal reincorporation* (the return home) (Van Gennep, 1977). While the participants as a whole resist easy categorization, discursive patterns emerged which are key to understanding how the camp acts liminally as a masculinity rehab where one has the opportunity to remediate weakness of body or character through engaging in communal practices of sport and socialization.

To illustrate this, I will take the examples of Ken and Dietrich, my two eldest informants who both credit BestFighter with changing their life for the better due to conditions which they believe facilitate “healing”. Ken is a 43-year-old entrepreneur in the medical marijuana industry and Dietrich is a former food truck owner who currently subsides from disability benefits. I choose to stay with these two participants for the duration of this section as their experiences, though unique in many ways represent the common discourse of coming to be at BestFighter. A complex of the individual “push” factor, the acknowledgement that something is wrong with the life at home (be it physical, spiritual, or psychological) and the “pull” factors promoted as the benefits of the locale; simplicity, work, community, relaxation, and spirituality in paradise (Prentice, 2004, 261).

I met Ken in the BestFighter swimming pool. After hearing his American accent, I was immediately curious about where he came from. When I asked, he evaded answering, instead immediately launching into a tale of how he came to be travelling full time, spending extended periods in Thailand at BestFighter. He referred to this as his “journey” which I found interesting, so I arranged to meet him for an interview at his convenience. He suggested we meet at a beachside bar known for the open sale of marijuana, which he referred to as “his place” chatting jovially with the owner and telling anecdotes about the many interesting people he had met there. I began the interview by asking *how he came to be at BestFighter*, and his response started simply but grew immediately more complex:

(At 205 pounds) I didn't feel healthy, I didn't feel really confident, I didn't feel confident in myself physically and I was like ‘okay whats a way for me to jump start getting back into shape? and I thought I can live in the states and pay my \$1,200 rent and my \$300 car payment and work work work so I can pay these things off, but do I have time to eat right? do I have time to enjoy life? and I thought ‘nope, this will not work in this environment ‘ so I had been in Thailand in 2001 when I was a kid and I loved it. I absolutely loved it and through Facebook I knew I had a friend who lived out here so I got in touch with her and she said ‘I live in Koh Samui and I know about all of these amazing Muay Thai gyms’ And I

knew the cost of living in Thailand, so I thought let me just try this thing and jump start this process of getting into shape and losing weight and getting these numbers down (Ken, interview 2019).

When asked the question of how he came to BestFighter, his answer has less to do with the processes by which he chose the camp and everything to do with why he felt in need of it. Ken remembers himself in 2001, during his first visit to Thailand as a ‘kid’, and thus another-self unfettered by the shackles of adulthood (Barthes, 2000, p. 53), namely his job and the economic conditions which he blames for his weight gain and unhealth. He feels the pull of memory in tandem with the pull of a place which promises cheap cost of living, in an environment which will allow him to focus on himself.

Ken explained he had never been particularly physically fit or active, and at 205 pounds was only about 25 pounds above his average weight, so it is curious that he, a socially gregarious and relatively successful man with an exciting Los Angeles job in a field he is passionate about and which afforded him ample opportunities for travel and socializing, found himself in such a crisis of confidence due to moderate weight gain. Following his quote, it is not just weight gain, but a lack of enjoyment of life and financial instability which erode his confidence to a degree which pushes him to seek remediation.

For Connell, referencing Turner “bodies are objects over which we labor, eating, sleeping, dieting, exercising” (Connell, 1995, p.50); but in many cases work becomes the impediment to bodily-labor, which is a problem associated with manual workers but also relevant here. Connell theorizes that historically manual laborers have defined their strength and masculinity through their physical work, but this physical work is what will over time lead to the degradation of their bodies (Connell 1995 p. 53).

Though Ken’s job, like those of many of my participants is not physical, or working class, he still blames it for his physical weakening. Likewise, the majority of my participants (with the exception of 19 year old Paulus who had spent the previous summer, post high school graduation working in a grocery store, and Zeilig who worked part time as an event security guard) did not work in labor positions, and thus do not have the benefit of the masculine codes of the laborer; toiling with other men, doing trade based or physical work, and must seek alternative technologies, like sport, to replicate this experience of male strength and fraternity.



Sport for Connell presents an opportunity for men to bring themselves into “stylized contests” with each other meant to display the force and skill central to masculine recognition (Connell, 1995, p54). For Ken, like many other participants, Thailand and the camp represent a web of possibilities for this type of recognition: a chance to return to the simple pleasures of youth, a locale where they have greater economic capital due to the low cost of living and a chance to engage in physical work with other men through sport. When Ken and others talk about wanting to get back in shape, though they refer to the physical self as what needs reconditioning, the physical always appears as a symptom of other social and spiritual ails and Thailand becomes through memory, or projection the place where it is possible to eliminate the ails which have left, in this example, Ken lacking confidence.

Dietrich finds his way to BestFighter similarly at the urging of a friend living on the island who he reaches out to during a low period. He is 46, and a former Escrima champion fighter who found himself with chronic pain and mobility issues after a life-changing collision on a scooter, he describes himself as unable to work, depressed and feeling nothing, leading up to his first three month stay at BestFighter:

Dietrich: I figured out that it's not only your bones which are broken it's also your soul which gets broken when you have a life-changing accident like this. So as I said I was sitting at home and I did not feel anything there was no happiness there was nothing so I called my psychologist and told the guy and he said ‘come to see me’ so I went in the next day and we were sitting in his office and he asked me what makes you happy and I said I don't know, maybe when I was in Croatia for holiday. And he said ‘now you have your answer you go and travel.’ (Dietrich, interview, 2019)

Like Ken, Dietrich remembers a time before complications when he was happy, and this happiness is also associated with travel. The memory of travel holds who he was at the time, before his accident. For a time after his accident, Dietrich was wheelchair bound, and explained, that being a martial artist, and a large, physically fit and heavily tattooed man he was used to being regarded as imposing, saying “people see a guy like me, and they think oh, he’s a gangster”. Being in a wheelchair, the extensive physical therapy, and a lingering limp all contributed to his feeling this toughness had been taken away from him. He cannot work and doesn’t have to as the result of a

large insurance payout, he is unmotivated to socialize, and is left broken and feeling nothing. This description is a stark contrast to the good humored optimistic man I met at BestFighter.

It is possible to extrapolate from these two anecdotes that happiness is something that is experienced through reminiscence, which is acknowledged as a lasting benefit of vacationing (Nawijn, 2010, Larsen 2007; Morgan and Xu, 2009). However, while recollections are a seed, what these men seek is bigger than a desire to be 'happy': they want to be fixed. Dietrich finds his fix at camp:

And this was my life changer, here, this new independence for me, because I was just one year out of the wheelchair and then I explored this wonderful island, and after my 4th day I was sitting here not crying anymore and then I see the BJJ class over there and I thought 'oh let's give it a try' and then I met the unbelievable trainer here (Damien) and he changed completely the class for me because at first they were running also like you do in the Muay Thai and I said I cannot run and he said oh no worries we'll do other stuff, I cannot do all of the exercises, but he makes it work with me, and this has been my life-changer. (Dietrich, interview, 2019)

Our interview was not the first time Dietrich told me this story of what brought him to BestFighter. He is the self-proclaimed camp ambassador, and he tells his story readily and eagerly, including in a promotional video posted on the camp's Instagram page, and during a public speech given at his going away party. It is through the telling and retelling of his story, through his speech that he makes himself into a myth (Barthes, 2000) which extends to the mythos of what becomes possible at the camp.

From the above quote, we can understand how the camp, discursively produced as a healing place, works as a framing mechanism which bounds the transformative experience of Dietrich and many others, and acts as a stage on which various performances are enacted (Goffman, 1974). In his story, it is participating in the modified BJJ lessons that acts as his life-changer, and allows him to enact the roles (student/trainer) and hierarchical-structures (through the earned belt-system) which enable his performance as a fighter (Goffman, 1974). Thus he performs within the frame of camp, through the telling and re-telling of his story, his participation in BJJ class, and the wearing of BestFighter logo clothing. While he is not literally or functionally the 'fighter' or 'gangster' he once appeared to be, there is a shared agreement of his role in the camp as a respected and hard-working man (Goffman, 1974).

When I interviewed Ken, like Dietrich, he explains he has already given multiple interviews on what he refers to as his “journey” and gives a storied account of his travels. He speaks at length of the connections he made at BestFighter camp which have opened doors to him all across Europe. Both men’s stories embody all of the tropes of *rites-du-passage*, beginning with a separation where they leave their countries for the unknown; followed by a liminal period where they construct a new community through the camps practices, followed by a return home, restored and imbued with a new sense of power. While these two participants are exceptional in their length of stay, their narratives are widely representative of the way participants speak of the feeling the camp engenders.

### Fight Camp

(Muay Thai) is a good sport. It’s good for self confidence, not that I have low self-esteem but it’s always good to be able to defend yourself if something bad happens (Yordi, interview, 2019).

Confidence, or the lack thereof, appears in the previous section as a push factor which drives participants to remediate their perceived weakness of body or character through participation in BestFighter camp. In this section, I follow participant discourses about confidence in one’s skills as a fighter and discussions of what makes a fighter as inextricably linked to performances of masculinity which require the ability to fight, and defend oneself. This is a recurrent theme in the articulation of what one expects to gain by participating in BestFighter. While the majority of participants are hesitant to admit to wanting to become a fighter as vocation, and express distaste for those who seek out unnecessary confrontation, the idea of being “fight-ready” is commonly listed as a positive and necessary.

In the course of the camp, participants performatively and discursively exalt and emulate the practices of the archetypical fighter; we dress as fighters, training bare chested in Muay Thai shorts purchased locally from vendors or the camps on-site gear shop, we rent accommodations billed as “fighters rooms”, we discuss the merits of the techniques practiced during training, we monitor our food intake for optimal training performance, and even pose for pictures in the fists up posture of the competitive fighter being photographed after a weigh-in, but these performances have limits. Humility, and respect for the “real fighter” like Marius, the 22 year old German who fights competitively for the camp, and others like the trainers who possess the body capital necessary to

fight competitively, and who do so as their vocation, are held to a separate account within the frame of the camp as objects of admiration.

Max: Do you see yourself as a fighter?

Thor: Me? No, I just come to train, to get fit.

Max: What makes a real fighter?

Thor: You know the guys, who are super fit, they just eat, sleep, and train, like Marius. The guys who fight in the stadium, and the trainers who have had hundreds of matches (Thor, interview 2019).

This quote shows how the real fighter is acknowledged as operating on another level. Rather than seeking self-improvement, they are assumed to be single mindedly in pursuit of fight training. The majority of participants I spoke to actively reject the notion that they have come to camp with the goal of becoming a fighter, what is sought rather is to accumulate the bodily and social capital attributed to those who fight.

Sociologist Raul Sanchez Garcia refers to gym's and dojos as "civilizing workshops" and explains subjects in these spaces acquire "more detached and controlled ways of dealing with conflict" (Sanchez, 2013, p.155). In the course of his ethnographic study of a boxing gym and Aikido dojo he uses examples from sparring interactions to illustrate how internal control, and a relaxed attitude are lauded skills taught in these spaces, and advanced practitioners are recognized for their ability to temper their power and skill thought enacting a high level of control of their physical capabilities and emotional states (Sanchez, 2013). Similar discourses are echoed by many of my participants, highlighting the interplay between the skills one possesses as a fighter, and how one presents themselves socially.

You know I'm not a fighter. I'm like a polite guy, nice to people  
I don't say you can't be polite guy and a fighter at the same time but  
you know, I was like the nice guy, and then when I found this sport it  
makes me more confident. It gives me more confidence (Alexej,  
interview 2019).

Alexej infers being a “nice guy” is in some way contradictory to being a fighter, but then complicates this statement by recalling how he was the “nice guy” until he gained confidence through the practice of Muay Thai. The confidence which he and Yordi in the quote above speak of derive from the knowledge that they can defend themselves, they have trained as a fighter incurring all of the deeply embedded cultural associations attributed to one; violence, physical strength, and the capacity to endure pain, but their humility is also a requirement of the fighter (Birrell, 1981). The humility present in the above quotes allows the men to say they are fighters precisely by saying they are not, denying the fantasy of wanting to become a fighter while projecting the attributes of being one.

While the terms fighter and masculinity are not interchangeable they are inextricably linked (Burstyn, 1999, Connell, 1995 Hearn, 1998, Spencer, 2013 ) the attributes, central to the practice of fighting are discursively linked to the male physique and thus become ways of signaling what one wishes to display as ‘true masculinity’ (Connell, 1995, Matthews 2015, 2016; McNaughton 2012; Owton 2015). Masculinity, for Connell is always located in the body and while masculinities:

“are not equivalent to men; they concern the position of men in a gender order. They can be defined as the patterns of practice by which people (both men and women, though predominantly men) engage that position.” (Connell, 1995)

‘Patterns of practice’ which allow people to access and project the masculine position are made highly visible at BestFighter camp, as they are shared and institutionalized in the camps day to day structure (which I will elaborate on in further chapters). Masculine identity is an enacted fantasy (Butler, 1990) and a key benefit of a sojourn at BestFighter for many participants is the opportunity to experiment with taking on the role of the fighter, to enact the fantasy within communally agreed upon limits:

**I wouldn't say that I'm a fighter, I'm doing this because I have fun. In training I'm a fighter maybe but I wouldn't say that in my life I'm a fighter (Paulus, interview 2019).**

In this statement, Paulus simultaneously infers that he doesn’t take himself too seriously, preempting any potential accusation of living in a fantasy, but he stops short of allowing himself to fully deny the fantasy by overly trivializing the experience and reminds that during training he is a

fighter, not just playing at being one. The interstice between fight and play is crucial to the experience at BestFighter, as social norms dictate one should not take themselves or their practice too seriously or else risk being labeled deviant.

**It's always a sign of weird-ness if when they throw jabs or punches they do loud noises, like this one guy now at camp this french guy, he is older, maybe late 40's he has a little gut going on but I think he's been doing Muay Thai for his whole life because he's really really good technically, but this guy goes full mental he jumps around he takes the space of like four guys, with jump knees and everything, everybody had the same thought like what a freaking douchebag (Gian, interview, 2019).**

The Frenchman to whom Gian refers violates the way fighting is framed in the context of the camp. Referring back to Goffman's frame analysis, the 'key' or codes by which the frame is set are the "set of conventions, by which an activity one already meaningful in terms of some primal framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (Goffman, 1974, 43). Training, and sparring in this context enact the modalities of fighting but are transformed into practices of self-development in the BestFighter framework (Goffman, 1974). The Frenchman, with his dismissal of the established norms of the camp, shows a lack of the self consciousness exemplified in the earlier quotes from Paulus, Thor, Yordi, and Alexej. His actions, the loud noises, and lack of consideration for the space he is taking up mark him as abject, in disregard of the "proper sociality and subjectivity" (Grosz, 1990, Kristeva, 2009). Abjection, per Kristeva, is the feeling incurred when an individual is confronted by the realities of one's own "corporeal reality" and the loss of boundary between the self and other this can confer (Kristeva, 2009).

To abject the Frenchman, is to firmly establish we are not him. We are in control of the space we take up in training, the noises we make, we do not do the things he does that are weird, per Gian, despite knowing that we could easily slip into such behaviors. Everybody can agree that he is a douchebag, not fit enough to be considered a "real fighter" and not humble enough to be a part of the group at large. This abjection is further compounded by the fact he is "older" and has "a little gut going on" and thus lacks the body capital to be taken seriously as a "real fighter" who would deserve to take up space. Despite his technical proficiency, the Frenchman is litmus for what we

should not allow ourselves to be, though many of us are, as we generally more closely resemble the Frenchman, with his gut, than the trainers or “real fighters”.

At the camp, one made abject in this way was cast out from the rites of community such as invitations to meals and outings (Kristeva, 2009) commonly seen as available to all. Other notable outcasts, guilty of misunderstanding the frame often found themselves the subject of gossip and abjection for transgressing the behavioral norms of the space. These included a young Moroccan fighter who was criticized for going too hard in sparring matches, on one occasion giving a trainer a black eye which threatened to disqualify him from an upcoming match, blurring the borders between play and fighting (Goffman, 1974). A young queer Thai man who worked at the local airport and would joke and play during training, flirting demonstratively with the fittest fighters and showing off his flexibility and yoga training, again blurring the borders between fighting and play, in this case illuminating the playful aspects of training. And a Russian woman who was derided for displaying a bad attitude when receiving instructions from a trainer. They refuse to be ‘civilized’ (Sanchez, 2013) and flaunt the norms of the space: control, seriousness, and docility by refusing to play along with them (Foucault, 1975 Goffman, 1974).

It is crucial to note that all these abject figures are racialized, gendered and sexualised having visible identities which complicate the norms of the camp as a largely heterogenous place of heterosexual, white, masculinity. Thus abjection ensures “the expulsion or exclusion of the improper, the unclean and the disorderly elements” (Grosz, 1990, Kristeva, 2009) securing the narratives of who is eligible to become their best selves to the bodies of the majority (Foucault 1975, Grosz, 1990, Kristeva, 2009) and those who understand and abide the way the BestFighter experience is framed. The ideal camp participant must strive to become the fighter even if he denies the label, and only those whose identities do not complicate the frame are eligible.

This distinction between who is abject and who is included in the camps production of the ideal subject (masculine, heterosexual, male, western, and able to adequately perform the fighters identity) will become particularly salient in the next section as I analyze instances strategically left out of the narratives invoked through interviews, and through discursive formulations of the characteristics of a fighter.

## Off the Mats and Off the Record.

The common framing of the camp by participants through interviews is as a healing place where one goes to focus on the cultivation of the self: through practicing self-discipline, relaxing, socialising, and training Muay Thai. Interviews largely gloss over key elements of the social dimensions of the camp which contradict this discourse of self-development through discipline and clean living. What happens off the mats, on the Saturday nights which precede Sunday 'rest days' represent another dimension where augmented masculine-identity is experienced and refer to a different kind of masculinity rehab.

The following anecdote contains a description of an evening out from my field notes. Over the course of this evening myself, Gian, Jurgen, Dietrich, Ken and a few others watch teen girls participate in a sexualized amateur boxing spectacle, then nearly engage in a physical altercation with a tourist, purchase illicit substances, and visit a venue where sex and companionship are sold. I include this anecdote to illustrate the way the practice of Muay Thai (and BJJ for Dietrich and a few others) and the community their shared practice engenders, represents only a fraction of the possibilities for experiences of augmented masculinity available to the camp's participants.

It's Saturday night and Gian, Ken, Dietrich, Jurgen, and Damien, and I head to Lamai to see the fights. We start the night at the outdoor Muay Thai ring surrounded by open air bars with names like "SEXXX" "MONEY BAR" and "LIPS." In the ring, teen girls with no training slug it out, as do seasoned boxers well past fighting age, and it's clear the event is more about selling booze and getting tourist money flowing than the sport. Ken is wearing a wide brimmed hat and thick glasses in a flashy move, especially bold on an island where even wearing closed toes shoes is seen as trying too hard and Dietrich and Jurgen tease him like they're high school football jocks and he's trying to make the team. Falling out of his chair doesn't help, and when he sulks off to go talk to a friend at the bar, another guy claims it prompting a heated exchange between him and Dietrich, who despite his ribbing of Ken, defends the honor of his chair immediately and for a tense moment it seems like there will be a fight. I comment that the guy was quite brave to engage in this way with the wall of men we make up, many of whom are visibly dangerous with oversized biceps bursting from BestFighter logo shirts to which Dietrich replies "No



shit” and points to a large Italian man who has joined our crew. He tells me: “they call him the king of the leg lock, I watched him submit my trainer (Damien) in fifteen seconds. He is a bodyguard for royals in Dubai.” After the fights we get back on our scooters and go over to what Dietrich calls sin alley. At the bar, Samsang whiskey is poured over red bulls and rounds of nitrous balloons are bought and passed around by Damien, who at one point pulls Gian and I aside and menacingly assures us we will be buying some rounds over the course of the evening. We agree, and Gian, the seasoned Sanda fighter, takes a deep rip from a balloon yelling “I Love Thailaaaaaaaand” as he exhales and grabs me to take a picture with the bar-girls who rub their tits on our heads, and then ask for cash after the photo is taken. Ken sneaks off, commenting about the bill at the end of previous nights like this and wanting to avoid having to reach for his wallet. I make a major faux pas, accidentally bursting a balloon with the lit end of a cigarette, prompting all to rib me about the state of my sobriety. Jurgen, the Yoga practicing digital nomad, relaxed and unphased by the ensuing madness assures me while puffing a cigarette, that if I’m ‘too fucked up’ I can just take home one of the girls who will drive my scooter for me. The energy of the night, the balloons, the near fight, the confrontation about money, the attitudes toward to bar girls, the posturing and teasing each other, are so in contrast to the feeling of camp, all the talk of discipline and family and spirituality and the ‘magic of Thailand’ (Field Notes, Feb. 10 2019)

The fraternity visible in this story comes not from the shared practice of working and sweating together in training, but from hazing each other, uniting in the face of a common enemy, and the casual objectification of women, equally potent mechanisms for the expression of male friendships and bonding (Burstyn, 1999). While this dimension of life at BestFighter is experienced and discussed openly it remains curiously absent from interviews. During interviews, when the subject of partying or hiring sex workers came up, participants would ask for them to remain ‘off the record.’ Conversely, participants were not concerned with hiding these behaviors from me as a researcher, as I was upfront with them about my intention to observe all aspects of camp life, and in fact, when Dietrich invited me out that night he voiced how amusing it was to have the researcher along. Regardless, these articulations of heterosexual hyper-masculinity are conspicuously absent from the majority of participant narratives of their journeys, especially during interviews.

It stands to reason that participants compartmentalize these experiences in order to keep them discursively separate from the camps frame as a place for the cultivation of the self. This tendency to separate hedonism and sexual pleasure from the cultivation of the self is rooted in the early philosophical invocation to exercise self-respect through depriving oneself the pleasures associated with sex and practice austerity toward one's pleasures in order to distinguish oneself from the "throngs" (Foucault, 1975, 40-42). In the case of my participants, presenting themselves as distinctly different from the pleasure tourists who run amok on the island is a key element of their discourses.

Tomas: So I'm in the hostel dorm and there was another guy I think from Holland and one night he came in the room and he was like 'oh my god this was a crazy night I f\*\*\*\*\* like three hookers...' It's nothing like the kind of trip I would want to do. But also I have a different approach to life than a guy like this, at least that's what I think (Tomas, interview 2019).

These activities for some, like Ken, whose quote about "feeding the monster" I referred to in an earlier chapter run parallel to what happens on the matts, and taken in sum expand the possibilities for the doing of masculinity beyond the services offered by the camp in order to help one rehabilitate their masculinity. The sex, drugs, and violence which circulate the island can be profound elements of masculinity rehab as long as they are compartmentalized from the noble pursuit of self-cultivation (Foucault, 1986 p. 40).

In the next analytical chapters I will explore how rehabilitation is further emplaced and how the particularities of the camp, and of Thailand as a storied tourist destination are crucial elements of masculinity rehab.

## 2. The Space

In the previous chapter I analyzed who comes to BestFighter and why. In this chapter I will focus on where they have gone; the place they travel and how this place, the physical location, becomes the space and the context in which it is possible to enact their rehabilitations (Relph, E. 1976, p.8).

In order to do this I will describe the Best Fighter camp and its location, the island of Koh Samui, and introduce the framing mechanisms which distinguish it as a “perceptual space” produced by the contents and meanings imbued into by the BestFighter community as a “*space* of action, centered on immediate needs and practices” (Goffman, 1974, Relph, 1976, p. 10) and as the symbolic *place* of rehabilitation, made meaningful through collective imagination, and reinterpretation (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). I will then analyze participant interviews, observational anecdotes and photographs to discover how the BestFighter camp, the island of Koh Samui, and the country of Thailand supply immaterial cultural commodities to participants such as “atmosphere, symbols, images, icons, auras, experiences and events” (Löfgren, Willim 2005) which fuel the self-making processes they seek to engage.

The camp, the island, and the country are imagined by participants as the perfect backdrop against which to conduct their rehabilitations, and so I will pay attention to the erasures and power relations which turn a place into a backdrop, by showing how placemaking is, per Gupta and Ferguson, procedural and conditioned on evoking imaginations of emplaced peoples and cultures:

The special challenge here is to use a focus on the way space is imagined (but not imaginary!) as a way to explore the processes through which such conceptual processes of place making meet the changing global economic and political conditions of lived spaces- the relation, we could say, between place and space (Gupta and Ferguson; 1992, p.11).

To do so, I look to texts from human geographer Edgar Relph to map how places are made through the ways they are used and imagined, and to tourism studies (Malam, 2008 Johnson, 2007) to analyze how these made-places are engaged within tourist economies. I then use theories on the

stranger and the elsewhere from Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2000) to untangle the complicated relationships between people and these places.

## The Camp

The BestFighter camp is located off the main road on the island of Koh Samui in the gulf of Thailand. Koh Samui is Thailand's second biggest island and its economy is largely dependent on the steady influx of tourists they see between the months of December and May. BestFighter is one of the higher rated and more renowned camps in Thailand. It's connected to two Dutch-led international kickboxing promoters, which means it is regularly visited by elite MMA, Muay Thai and K1 fighters; this gives it an aura of notoriety and the possibility for non-elite trainees to train in proximity to the real professionals. The legends of these visits are passed around by the participants and trainers. The identity of the place lies in this distinction: it's a place where real fighters train, and individuals identifying with this, both as insiders and outsiders, fighters and their admirers give the place this identity (Relph, E. 1976).

The camp is located 400m from the main ring road which circles the island, a figure I know in this exactitude as most lessons start with 15-45 minutes of running up and down this road. Upon turning up the dirt road which leads to camp, the first sign of its presence is the billowing hand wraps, Muay Thai shorts and BestFighter shirts which wave like flags from the drying racks of the two paid laundry facilities, minutes walk from the camp. At these facilities, the participants bring bags of sweat-soaked clothes to be laundered and retrieved the day after for approximately 1 euro a kilo. The significance of these facilities is explained in the following quote by Thor, a 35-year-old Danish professional, who spent 3 weeks at the camp:

Thor: When you're coming from outside, you see the laundry and you know you're home.

This quote demonstrates how the camp marks the surrounding area, and asserts itself on the landscape. When spotting the laundry, Thor recognizes himself and feels he is re-entering the liminality of camp. Once past the laundry flags, you are met with the first BestFighter sign announcing the camp's location ahead and their Muay Thai, MMA and Fitness facilities.

While walking or driving up the 400m hill from the road to camp it is not unusual to be met by camp participants who throughout the day run bare chested up and down its length. Neighbors on scooters and in cars easily dodge these sweaty, mostly white bodies, who claim the shared road as

an extension of the gym, while flaunting local behavioral and cultural norms (Malam, 2008). This highly visible practice serves to extend the surrounding areas into gym facilities to be used by participants.

The everyday business of the road: trucks full of agricultural workers on the way to work spewing heavy black exhaust into the air, neighboring farmers who daily tend to their water buffalos who wander into the road to menacingly confront the runners with their enormity, the starving dogs who lie directly in the runners' path, staring lazily up at them, is emblematic of the way tourist experiences are prefigured by those who offer them, as the locations in which tourism is performed. In this case the training of camp participants is something which is placed upon existent landscapes, turning them into something consumable for visitors (Crouch, 1999 p. 86).

The camp itself consists of two sets of modern buildings which house the 'air con' rooms, the camps median accommodations used by many participants, which resemble budget hotel rooms. Two open air structures, with just a roof, house the Muay Thai mats where lessons are held, and the regulation size boxing rings, where sparring and pad work occur. The ring areas are covered with cracked and worn boxing gloves, which don't get used by anyone, but establish a patina of work and history, the implication being; these are the gloves left behind by fighters who go on to do great things (Abrahamson & Mozdelewski, 2011).



FIG 1.

The outdoor rings are where the majority of private lessons are conducted throughout the day, these can be booked for 1000 bhat (approximately 30€) with any of the camps trainers. These private lessons occur almost continuously and provide the soundtrack of the camp, the thumping of gloves on pads, noise of the trainees exhales and grunts, and the noises specific to the trainers: “OHHH AYYY”, thump, “AYYYYYYY”, thump, setting a rhythm to a day at camp and eliciting the “sensuous intoxication” (Wacquant, 2000, p.71) referred to by Zeilig in the following quote.

It's motivating you know you get a...

You get a bad feeling if you miss a class, so it's motivating to hear what's going on, the other guys are fighting and always training (Zeilig, interview 2019).

Wacquant refers to the sights, smells and sounds of the boxing ring as key elements of the making of a fighter (Wacquant, 2000, p. 71). What Zeilig describes here evinces this, the noises are an ever present reminder of the work he came to do, and he knows that if he is not a contributing part of the soundscape, he does not deserve the good feelings engendered by training, and risks being excluded from the community. For Zeilig, this dynamic is especially intense as he stays in one of the “fighters rooms” which are a part of the open air structures, with doors that open directly to the rings where this pad work occurs.

The fighters rooms, including my own, are relatively primitive, with concrete floors and walls, furnished only with a single fan for cooling, and a twin sized bed. The spartan accommodations are significant for many, like Zeilig and Paulus who below describe the experience of living so simply as having the effect of showing oneself how little they need, and how quickly they can adapt, displaying the “gameness, heart, courage and asceticism” (Birrell, 1981, p.365) the collectively recognized virtues of the fighter (Birrell, 1981, Abramson & Modzelewski 2011).

So maybe there's no TV in your room, maybe you shower with just a hose, and the bed is not very comfortable. But you can also have fun and live with less comfort (Zeilig, interview 2019).

I thought I would have a bit more space and a bit more equipment and then I got this small room like a prison, but I'm ok with this room now. Actually I like it (Paulus, interview 2019).



FIG 2.



Staying in the fighters rooms becomes a point of pride, adding to the authenticity of the experience. They are a unique feature of the camp, which confirms the participant is not on vacation, assuring the severity and pureness of their motivations at BestFighter. Sacrificing certain luxuries and comforts like air conditioning, television, and hot showers imbue their training sojourns with enhanced meaning and truth (Abrahamson & Modzelewski, 2011). This extends to those who book them based on budget, as the very fact of their economic necessity becomes a part of their identity at BestFighter as serious, ascetic, and minimalist, with key similarities to the fighters of yore (like John Wayne Parr sleeping on the floor in a gym in Isaan) or the real Thai fighters (Birrell, 1981, Spencer, 2013, Abrahamson & Modzelewski, 2011). Conversely, the luxury apartments which feature flat screen TVs and sliding glass windows are primarily rented by families and couples who remain socially and spatially separate from the majority of the camp. The general sense among the camp's participants is that the people who book these apartments with their indulgence in luxuries, their travelling with their relations and relationships, are not here for the same reasons as the solo, ascetic travelers, but are pleasure tourists on holiday (Prentice, 2004).

The Muay Thai matts are situated around a small pool which is the camp's only designated social area. They are flanked by a Buddhist altar attended to primarily by the Thai trainers, and a large set of mirrors in front of which sits a statue of Buddha which presides over all activity on the matts. The heavy bags used in training hang from the ceiling of this structure as does the large brass bell which is rung to signal the beginning of lessons. This religious iconography serves to evoke the religious and spiritual dimensions of Muay Thai here, which intensify training as it compares to participants' home gyms which many acknowledge lack the cultural dimensions and deep knowledge available to them when training in Thailand (Bell, C. 1992, Spencer, D. 2013 p. 174).



FIG 3.

One of the camps most recognizable images is large painted mural of a heavily tattooed Muay Thai fighter next to the swimming pool. This mural was painted about ten years earlier when the camp was the location of a reality television production where international heavyweight kick boxers trained and competed for a sponsorship opportunity. The mural presents a larger than life image of a Muay Thai fighter which blends Thai and Western aesthetic imaginations. The fighter pictured wears the *Mong Kon* and bows deeply in a *Wai Kru*. He has *Sak Yant* tattoos on his back, all deeply ritualized symbols of a Muay Thai fighter (Vail, 2014). However, he is racially ambiguous, his arms are covered in western style tattoos and his body and musculature have more in common to the European heavyweight Kickboxers the show featured than a champion Thai Boxer, such as the trainers at camp. Sociologist Linda Malam explains body size and musculature as an important signifier of western masculinity, whereas in Thai masculine hierarchies more import is given to the ability to control one's emotions and demeanor than having a large physique (Malam, 2008 p. 586).

The figure in the mural is thus both a simplification and exaggeration of the ideal outcome sought by camp participants: nothing about the figure is real, and it has little to do with the body and subjectivity produced by participation in the camp, but it encapsulates the fantasy the camp facilitates; that participants can train like the Thais, eat like the Thais, sleep like the Thais without ever having to actually be Thai.



Fig 4.

When places become disseminated through mass media they are simplified for consumption by an audience outside of their immediate proximity, thus they are fabricated into pseudo-places (Relph, E. 1976 p.58). These simplifications, evinced by the larger than life mural of the fighter linger. Despite varying degrees of awareness of the camp's history as a reality television backdrop, participants enjoy the remnants of it and continue to extend its performance by reproducing and redistributing the imagery of the program. Through this mural, and a few other very modern and stylized paintings of the logos of the camp's Dutch affiliate kickboxing associations and sponsors, the camp retains some of the characteristics of its former life as a television locale. These remnants have the effect of allowing participants (like myself in the picture below) set against this background, to perform an augmented camp subjectivity, as if their experience were ultimately enacted for an audience, which it is, through the omnipresent practices of filming and photographing oneself (as I have done) for social media, and through the telling of one's holiday narrative as I evinced in the previous chapter.

The hopes and ideals the participants enter the camp with are confirmed by the particularities of the setting described above: the noises of training representing discipline and setting the rhythm of the elsewhere, the spartan accommodations which assure them they're not on pleasure holidays, the altars and Buddhist iconography which lend religiosity and the feeling of sanctity it engenders (O'Dell, 2010, Bell, 1992), the evidence of work and promise gleaned from the worn gloves, and the authenticity promised by the proximity to poor and working class Thai people. All of these cultural forms and symbols amount to economic offerings to be consumed by the camp's participants (Löfgren & Willim, 2005 p.13).

### Koh Samui and the Muay *Farang*

Koh Samui is Thailand's second largest island with an economy largely dependent on tourism. It features three Muay Thai stadiums and seven Muay Thai training camps. Muay Thai is highly visible and deeply embedded all over the island. In this section I will discuss how Muay Thai and Muay Thai camps such as BestFighter, and the image of the *Farang* fighter (a mediated figure of the Western subject who dedicates their life to the study and practice of Muay Thai) are embedded in the greater socio-cultural and economic strata of Koh Samui. I then explore how this embeddedness roots and spreads through narratives about what cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996)

from “The East” to “The West” represent in the imaginary of many of the camps participants and how it is reflected back to them by the island.

On a Saturday night in Chaweng passing the beckoning calls of massage practitioners trying to lure us in for relaxation, Gian recognizes a particular parlor and relates an anecdote about a previous trip to Samui, when he and his brother, bruised and swollen from sparring went for recovery massages. Upon seeing their battered forms the masseurs asked if their injuries were from Muay Thai, when they confirmed, the masseurs called for all the ladies on staff to gather round and behold the ‘Muay *Farang*’, laughing and lavishing them with concern (Field Notes, January 2019).

The ‘Muay *Farang*’, the Thai Boxer of non-Thai origins, is a figure largely informed by media representations, perhaps most famously Jean Claude Van Damme in the 1989 movie “Kickboxer”. More recent examples include Sean Fagan “The Muay Thai guy” an American social media persona with a 6-digit following who video blogs about his travels through Thailand and beyond, training and competing as Muay Thai fighter. Many other successful global, professional Muay Thai Fighters such as John Wayne Parr from Australia, Ramon Dekker from Holland, and Liam Harrison, from the U.K have substantial presence in the world of Muay Thai. With the exception of Dekkers who passed in 2013 all have enormous social media followings, are gym owners, compete globally, and travel internationally to conduct seminars.

BestFighter participants benefit from this growing visibility, and while the rituals of training are where the Muay Thai bodily performance is composed, it is often when we are outside of the camp that we can really perform the role of the fighter, or “Muay *Farang*” as evinced by the above anecdote. Thus the island of Koh Samui becomes the stage on which we test this performance (Goffman, 1956). Muay Thai is everywhere on Koh Samui, with billboards advertising the latest matches and trucks which drive the main and beach roads blasting loud and spirited announcements of the exciting fights on view any night of the week. Muay Thai is the national sport of Thailand, and a training regimen, career path, and spectator hobby for many locals (Kitiarsa, P 2005). In the following quote Gian describes the casual attitude surrounding Muay Thai in Thailand.

Gian: To them it's just any given Sunday right? They just do it every weekend, fighting, watching, betting.

Muay Thai is also packaged and heavily promoted to tourists on Koh Samui as a large-scale spectacle which pervades every aspect of the tourist economy. From camps like BestFighter where it is possible to train with former champions, to the Muay Thai shorts sold *en masse* at market stalls, and 'boxing massages' on offer at massage parlors where one has the opportunity to be rubbed down with the same pungent mentholated liniment oil applied to the bodies of boxers between rounds of combat. The tourist on Koh Samui has many opportunities to buy their way closer to the sport, and by virtue of its embeddedness in Thai culture, to Thainess itself (Ahmed, 2000).

Another way Muay Thai is promoted on the island is through omnipresent billboards, posters and fliers advertising fight nights in the island's 3 stadiums. The billboards and fliers like the one seen below all feature similar imagery: the fighters of the night shirtless with their fists up, with the western fighters featured most prominently as the main match of the night.



FIG 5



Marius, a handsome young German man who fights for the BestFighter camp was surprised to see himself become the poster boy for Western fighters on the island after a photoshoot for one such fight promotion. Not only was his face featured centrally on the island's largest roadside billboard, it was heavily reprinted on posters, plastered on trucks, and passed out on fliers for matches he wasn't even scheduled to fight. When I asked him about his starring role as a Muay Thai fighter on Koh Samui, he responded:

It's an island where a lot of tourists come and what interests them? They want to eat Thai food, get Thai massage watch Thai boxing, so if there's a German guy fighting there they put it big on the poster because German tourists will think 'oh that's someone we can root for' (Marius, interview, 2019).

Marius understands his role as a tourist spectacle on Koh Samui, as someone who by virtue of his identity can give tourists a window into the world of Muay Thai, a chance to get closer to it by recognizing themselves in a practice which is both exotic and ultra-ordinary.

As shown in the above two quotes, Muay Thai on Koh Samui is ultra-ordinary; it's consumed by residents of Koh Samui and tourists alike, and the Muay Thai frame extends far beyond the boundaries of the camp, saturating the whole island with images of Muay Thai. This is connected directly to the greater imaginary of Muay Thai as part of what Sociologist Lionel Loh calls the "Martialscape" (Loh, 2015, p.95), following Appadurai's formulation of 'scapes' as multidirectional global cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996) the Martialscape "reflects these deterritorialized cultural practices, and the hybridization process these cultural forms undergo by a receiving audience, and the transnational movement of fighters" (Loon, 2015. 96). Muay Thai, and the camps which teach it, receive global recognition through bodies of fighters who travel to and from Thailand to their local gyms, who partake in internationally televised bouts, and on the myriad social media platforms where one can share their experiences at a camp. Thus, through the MartialScape, the flow of Muay Thai to and from Thailand, combined with the omnipresence of Muay Thai imagery on the island implicates the BestFighter fighter as a recognizable piece of the economy of Koh Samui; a tourist, but one with a purpose, to train or fight.

In his work on tourism and self-discovery in Thailand anthropologist Alan Johnson distinguishes between the tourist travelling for the pleasure of the experience, and the tourist travelling for culture who seeks to locate something about themselves through travel “through immersion in the other, the tourist seeks an authentic self-image” (Johnson, A, 2007 p.155).

What Marius named as the standard tourist experience: ‘eat thai food, get thai massage, watch thai boxing’ is also exactly what we, the camp participants do on the island. The bi-cultural flow from us to the island (Appadurai, 1996) makes it possible for us to draw crucial distinctions between ourselves, as trainees of Muay Thai and tourists on the island at large. Doing so allows us to contextualize our own instances of touristic consumption practices which we otherwise look down upon, as purposeful elements of our practice: food fuels us, massage restores us, watching Thai boxing allows us to study our sport and watch our comrades compete (Johnson, 2007, Crouch, 2004). In order for the work we do at BestFighter to authenticate our self-image, we position ourselves as closer to the culture of Muay Thai, allowing a key distinction between us and the tourists who come to Koh Samui to consume wantonly.

I understand this exchange of immersions with the other and the authentication of the self-image from Gian’s anecdote about getting a Thai massage after sparring. Gian’s bruising evinces his participation in Muay Thai and further differentiates him from the pleasure tourist. In his retelling of the story he becomes the “Muay *Farang*” (the Muay Thai foreigner) and thus an object of curiosity for the staff of the massage parlor. I experienced similar feelings of differentiation and authentication of purpose, a swelling of pride which coincided with the swelling of my left eye, the token of a jab I took in a sparring bout, and the recognition which the superficial injury brought from concerned waitresses who would ask about it. When I told them it was the result of Muay Thai sparring, they would express concern and praise me for my bravery. I felt more like a fighter walking around with this shiner, than I did when I took the flailing punch from my sinewy opponent in our woefully amateur sparring match (Observations, 2019).

According to Johnson’s analysis, tourism and authenticity are always linked, the tourist searches for authenticity through deriding other tourists as shallow or hedonistic (Johnson, A. 2007, p.158) . Thor, the Danish grocery supply manager exemplifies this when he talks about spending time with family whose visit to the island coincided with his participation in camp:

I'm looking back on my 3 weeks here, I wish I could cut off the part where my family was here. I would do that because it took a lot of time trying to be together with them so you're not feeling the purpose of being at the camp. I didn't have time to rest when we're going out to eat at night at eight or nine something like that and then we go to a bar and maybe not get drunk but we have a couple of beers and then it's 12 or 1 before you're home and if you have to go back to train the next morning (Thor, interview, 2019).

For Thor, his travel has a purpose, which is in direct conflict with the vacation his family wants to have, and this affects his ability to meet that purpose, rather than going out for a beer, he should be resting for morning training. It is through purpose which we establish the authenticity of our travels, but following Johnson, authenticity presides only in the perception of the tourist (Johnson, A. 158).

In the next section I will explore how notions of “authentic Thainess” and the popular perception among camp participants of the attributes of Thai people allow us to further mythologize our own transformations.

### The Land of Smiles

In *Strange Encounters* (2000) feminist theorist Sara Ahmed asks: “How are ‘strangers’ consumed? How does the consumption of strangers involve a transformation in the subject who consumes?” (Ahmed, 2000 p. 116) The flow of images and objects across border lines invites us to consider how identity is reconstituted in an intimate relationship to ‘the strange’ and the exotic. In this section I will analyze how Thailand and an essentialized vision of what constitutes Thainess become a commodity for camp participants through the popular designation of Thailand as the ‘Land of Smiles’, and a crucial element of the placemaking which enables their rehabilitation. The mediation of the Thai smile through tourist advertising initiatives which have branded Thailand the Land of Smiles, is the mechanism of the “the flow of images and objects across border lines invit(ing) us to consider how identity is reconstituted in an intimate relationship to ‘the strange’ and the exotic” (Ahmed, 2000).

Ken: Thai people are so unbelievably...I mean they call it the land of smiles, right? My thing with Thailand, for me Thailand is like... It's like Disneyland for a single man.

Dietrich: I did a little interview last year for BestFighter and I said to them wherever you go on the world you find nice beaches, you can find sun you can find everything but the smile and the friendliness here are what makes it so special. (Interviews, 2019)

The smiles are part of what people travel to Thailand for, and like the ones referred to in the above quotes, the smile gives participants license to interpret the behaviors and attitudes of the Thai people. For Ken, the smiles confirm that the Island is specifically constructed for someone like him, a man from the U.S., to enjoy, everything is a gendered commodity. Ahmed links commodity fetishism to stranger fetishism; the commodity is valued as enigmatic, detached from the labor which produced it, and can thus be invested with ‘truth’ which is actually just unknowability, the thing or the stranger we can displace fantasies on and become close to through consumption practices (Ahmed, 2000 p.115). Thus what Ken can do in Thailand, is always about who he can do it to; the strange smiling Thais who welcome him and indulge his fantasies.

A mechanism of keeping the Thai people with whom we interact strange is participants repeated framing of the cultural imperative of Thai people to be nice, gracious, respectful, warm etc. A woman who cooks well at a nearby restaurant and greets us warmly is referred to by many as their “Thai mama” despite not knowing her name. Trainers are likewise often referred to by their attributes rather than their names: “the nice laughing one, the smiley one with the ears, the long haired one who is never smiling but is pushing you really hard”. There are the “nice housekeepers who always have a smile for you”, and even “the nice girls at the sex clubs who are joking with you” (field notes 2019). The niceness and the “smiles of the Thai people” come to represent every imaginable relationship available between the tourist and the host; sexual permissiveness, familial acceptance, camaraderie. One participant explains you can even punch them in the face and they just keep smiling:

(during sparring) He would just stand there in the typical Thai pose, the hands wide, so the face is not really covered so I could jab him straight into his face and I landed every jab and he just kept smiling he just kept smiling, and of course it didn't...  
I mean I didn't go all the way but I jabbed him, I jabbed him I stung him...(Gian, Interview, 2019)

This fantasy is historically rooted and inextricably linked to a legacy of Europe’s imposition into Thailand. Despite avoiding direct western rule, Thailand can be considered a semi-colony, having been subjected to large scale interferences with trade practices and forced concessions of land by the U.K. and France in the 18th and 19th centuries (Lysa, H. 2004 p. 328). Historian Hong Lysa uses semi-coloniality as an analytical framework to confront “the assumed independence and

unreflective racially based elite nationalism that has defined Thai self-representations and public cultures, but also in how Thailand is understood by others” (Lysa, H. 2004 327). The smile, in this light, is an orientalist fiction predicated on a legacy of European supremacy, affixed to the east by the west through “a system of representations” (Said, 1978) which allow the continued construction of fictions of fundamental difference between the East and the West (Said, 1978).

Following Said, the smile, is a construction of the tourist gaze, which according to human ecologist Dean McCannell, “privileges the tourists power to look with the ‘native’ relegated yet again, to colonized object which reflects a positive light back onto the tourist” (McCannell, 1973, p27).

Both tourism and post-colonialism are rooted in colonialism as theoretical constructions and perceptual mechanisms which perpetuate myths of the exotic (D’Hautessere, 2004 p237). Tourist imaginaries, as evinced by my participants, define Thailand’s southern islands as a paradise, where weather, the sea, and the people together form an exotic nirvana where one can go to relax and restore. But Koh Samui and nearby Koh Phangan are key labor migration sites for people from rural areas seeking service sector employment, as well as key sites of touristic imaginations (Malam, 2008). Thus the paradise is actually a staged encounter between tourists and “locals” (who are rarely that, as it is largely internal migrants working in the tourist sector) where the smile comes to stand for all of the entrenched economic, racialized, and colonial dynamics between who has the power to look and whose job it is to be looked at. What occurs through the tourist gaze is an erasure of all the particularities, especially the uncomfortable of the economic and power disparities between the tourist and the local (Urry, 1990).

The smile gives the tourist permission to get so close to the stranger that it is possible to become them, through training, through sex, through food, through consuming tourist commodities. The closeness is crucial, as the rules of the transformational engagement require that the fantasy of becoming other end not with an abnegation of self, but with the becoming of one’s true self through the incorporation of the other to remediate what one lacks (Ahmed, 2000 p.123). The way the Thai people are commonly feminized and racialized through orientalist discourse feed masculinist fantasies of white western male supremacy contributing to the feeling that “Thailand is a Disneyland for single men” (Ken, interview 2018) where they can measure and demonstrate their masculinity without the fear of consequences.

In this way, Koh Samui, Thailand, the people who live there are subsumed into the discourse of the tourist who goes away to find himself, adding crucial socio-cultural and spatial dimensions to the fantasy of masculinity rehabilitation.

### 3. The Practice

In this analytical chapter I will explore how Muay Thai training practices in conjunction with the social dimensions of the camp produce an idealized body and performance through the repetition and assimilation of ritualized practices inside and outside of the ring (Burstyn, 1999, Goffman 1974). The Muay Thai body is thus treated not as an individual assemblage of fat, muscle, blood, skill etc. but as “an image of society” (Douglas, 1970, p. 72). In this case, the temporary society enacted within a liminal engagement at BestFighter.

Many studies in carnal sociology talk about somatic practice as producing the Muay Thai habitus through the repetition of stylized acts and the exchange of contact, intimacy, and pain during training and sparring (Loh, L. 2015, Spencer, 2014, 2014, Stenius 2017, Wacquant 2000). While these practices can and do transform the subject through reforming of bodies and the changing of dispositions, here I will argue that rehabilitating transformations happen not to the body, but on the body, as an aesthetic reimagining of the body in conflux with symbols and discourse, and as a medium for the expression of the social system in which it is steeped (Douglas, 1970, p.74).

Thus to distinguish how practice is a symbolic and ritualized invocation of communal expectations of the body, I will use Mary Douglas’ 1970 text “*The Two Bodies*” from her work on atural symbols, together with key concepts in cultural performance theory such as Victor Turner’s liminal and liminoid, *communitas* and *flow* (Turner 1966, 1982) and with Barthes formulation of the sign (Barthes, 2000).

With these theories I will analyze how performances of self-disciplining (the rhythm, work, social censoring, and the display of the body) produce the behaviors which render us legible as ideal camp subjects and the performance of particular masculine tropes this entails. I will set the stage by describing the practices of training, followed by an investigation of some of the social symbols and rituals which saturate the two-hour twice daily lessons.

#### The Role(s) of the Trainers

Each morning and afternoon at 7:51am and 4:51pm the Muay Thai trainers ring a bell signaling training has begun, and that all those who intend to partake in the morning training should begin running.

A bow is exchanged between the trainer and the participant en route to begin their run, signalling training has commenced. The ringing of the bell and this bow to the trainers signals the period of time in which the individual submits himself to a symbolic system, tacitly agreeing to its values and beliefs (Durkheim, 1912, Birrell, 1982). Sport is the legacy of ritual (Birrell, 1982) and though specific ritual actions may lose their meaning (such as the bows which start and finish a Muay Thai training session) their forms remain, and are reapportioned, largely to signal the joining of the individual to the sporting community (Bell, C. 1992, Birrell, 1982, Durkheim, 1912).

Though one's entire sojourn at BestFighter can be understood as a liminal engagement, a period outside of time where participants can exist in alterity to their everyday lives (Turner, 1966), it is during training that liminality is ritualistically invoked and manifested through the structured roles and relationships between the trainer and trainee (Birrell, 1982, Turner, 1966). Trainers turn from mere employees of the camp to masters of ceremony *vis a vis* a "ritualized status elevation" where social structures are inverted and subjects of lower position, in this case racialized and socio-economic become the authority for a liminal period (Turner, 1966 p.167).

After the ringing of the bell, regardless of the participant's origin, be they a student researcher, like myself, or a very successful public relations professional with a client list that includes Cadillac and Harley Davidson, like Gian, we are all transformed into trainees, "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1967) work, familial obligations, and civic responsibility for the duration of our engagement in the limina. This inversion of status works precisely because it is temporary; roles are inverted but not subverted and clear distinctions and expectations remain (Turner, 1966).

Inversion here takes the form of strategic authorisation (Hirose, 2010) where-in participants temporarily exalt certain aspects of Thai masculinities exemplified by the trainers which are germane to their rehabilitation projects (Hirose, 2010). The trainers come to represent the ideal Thai masculine archetype, they are our arbiters of wisdom, bravery, skill, style and heart (Kitiarsa, 2012, p.57). The nexus between boxing and Buddhism (Kitiarsa, 2012) is the framework by which Kitiarsa analyzes the "ideological practices" which constitute much of the construction of Thai masculinity, and it is also the nexus by which participants seek entrance into the cultural milieu of Muay Thai sporting practice, which Paulus explains below:



I like the traditions of Muay Thai. It's the national sport of Thailand and it has a longer tradition than some other sports like boxing or kickboxing. It's more Eastern. So this, I like. The spiritual aspects of Muay Thai, like the ring ghosts (Paulus, interview, 2019).

The trainers give us access to the “Thai” of Thai Boxing, and take on a role in our narratives not unlike the “magical negro” (Lee, S., 2001) a mass-mediated image of a black character whose narrative duties are to help the white main character access their own spirituality, and to offer wisdom and folklore from their own life and culture in order to guide the white main character’s journey (Lee, S. 2001, Cunningham, L. 2009, Entman and Rojecki, 2001). Thus in my participants’ narratives, the Thai Trainers are relegated the role of *The Magical Asian* as evinced by the following quotes.

Paulus: I like the trainer with the long hair... he don't talk so much and he was a bit scary at first but I think he is pushing me the most.

Ken: I love all the trainers you know Lamon, with the ears? Great guy, nice guy, he doesn't talk that much, but you know... he pushes me, he knows his shit. (Interviews, 2019)

In these two examples the trainers’ paucity of words is interpreted by each participant in different ways, but always to support their own interpretation of them. For Paulus, the silence of “trainer with the long hair” is intimidating in the beginning, but this intimidation is turned into motivation. For Ken, the silence is a given, the trailing off at the end of the sentence implying, “but you know... he’s Thai.”

These quotes exemplify the “strategic authorization” which occurs in training: the dominant group (we *farang* who pay for training) accept selected elements of East Asian masculinities in order to “incorporate them into the constant reformation and maintenance of the hegemonic position” (Hirose, 2010, p192). This practice is linked to greater orientalist attitudes which extend well beyond East Asia (Hearn, 2015).

We participants use Thai masculinity as a means by which to bolster our training with an authentic spiritual dimension through enacting physical practice as sacred under the auspices of ritual (Hirose, A, 2010). This works, as long as the trainers maintain the social order through enacting

their authorized social role. When they do not put forth the idealized performance (Goffman, 1969), liminality is ruptured and the value of the engagement is called into question.

My own notes about a private lesson with Chakan, who was also my neighbor in the fighter's room, show one such rupture.

Private with Chakan, basically sucked. He was completely distracted, kept stopping to chat with the other trainers, I barely sweat. Group trainings are way more useful (Field Notes, Jan. 2019).

Yordi voices similar frustrations with his private lessons:

Maybe it's a cultural difference because if I have private lessons in Holland or wherever in the world I can't imagine they take a break and talk to a different trainer for 5 or 10 minutes or just go easy, first training I had I was like 'what the fuck are you doing I mean come on I'm paying 30 euros which is a lot for Thailand' so I thought 'come on put some focus in' (Interview, Jan. 2019).

During training one has the chance to get incredibly close to the ultimate practitioners of the sport, as close as you can get to real contact with, in some cases, legendary Thai boxers. Chakan, my trainer had over 200 fights, most of them wins, so it stands to reason that even cursory training from them has immense value. The disappointment we voice is thus not about the quality of the training, but the rupturing of liminality which occurs when our trainers show themselves to not be sacred objects or masters of ceremony but employees engaged with us in an exchange of service for money, rather than a sacred duty (Birrell, 1982, Goffman, 1969, Turner, 1966). They also fail to respect the superiority of our whiteness and power, and take our money but don't care adequately about us in the way we imagine ourselves to deserve, rupturing our imagination the centrality our progress plays in their lives.

With the exception of these instances of rupture it is the relationship between the trainers, and the participants who submit themselves as *trainable* which enables rehabilitation. In the next section I will further analyze the way trainings are conducted in order to create the optimal circumstances for rehabilitation.

## Ritual Repetition

In training, the lines between the individual and the group become blurred (Wacquant, 2000). Participants often credit their ability to push themselves past reasonable limits in training due to the

communal nature of the exercise (Spencer, 2013, Stenius, 2015). Jurgen was one of a few participants I spoke to who kept regular working hours during his sojourns to BestFighter. Jurgen spent up to 8 hours daily working alone at his computer from a nearby cafe. He had a very salient analysis of the role group training plays for him:

It's a complete collapse. When we're moving together, counting together, kicking together. You can do things here you can't do at home, go so much further, because of the group. (Jurgen, interview 2019)

The blurring of the lines between the individual and the group leads Jurgen to feel his capabilities expand (Birrell, 1982, 254). He "collapses" himself into the others and can therefore move with them as one communal body, the antithesis to the days he spends working alone at a computer.

I experienced this sensation of blurring with the group myself as evinced in the following observation which I made after watching myself and other fighters shadowboxing in the large mirrors of the Muay Thai practice space.

I'm beginning to look like a fighter, harder, better movements, you watch yourself in the mirror, with everyone else and I'm starting to look more like them. (Field notes, 2019)

In this note, I am expressing satisfaction with the loss of the parts of my body which make me stick out from the group. I see the success of my training in my ability to blend into the communal body, which begins to happen for me as my body hardens and I am able to more convincingly perform the movements required of training (Pringle and Markula, 2006).

The production of the communal body happens through the synching of movements as such, and through a certain mimesis of the hegemonic standard. Sport is referred to as a mimetic practice in that it resembles combat competition, and allows participants to enact physical and emotional displays limited in most areas of life (Atkinson, 2002). The communal body thus is invoked through the submission of oneself to the rhythms and repetitions of training, through prescribed drills and behaviors. This begins during warmup when the majority of participants run slow barefoot laps in formation, which in addition to warming up the muscles, submits the body to the rhythm of the group in order to get us into the zone. The zone, per Kath Woodward is a state of "heightened

experience where everything comes together” (Woodward, 2015 p.121). Feeling in the zone, or being in the zone, is often referred to as the measure of successful training.

The attempt to push participants into the zone through the drilling of rhythm into the body continues after running as the trainers begin to signal us to a line of tires placed on the ground in front of the Muay Thai structure. Here one bounces their weight from left to right foot in a way which simulates footwork in the ring, while throwing soft straight jabs and alternately blocking their head.

While we do this the trainers pace up and down correcting form and technique: this is not an exercise in personal style and like the running, it’s done for the purpose of getting the rhythm of the lesson into the participant’s body (Woodward, 2015 p.120). In her work on the ritual dances among the Puno of Conga-Brazzaville, anthropologist Carine Planke explores the way rhythmic dance practices use music, repetition, and group synchronized performance to create a feeling of continuity between bodies (Planke, C. 2012). Continuity is established in training during this phase: we are not dismissed from the tires until we move as one, bouncing steadily and releasing punches straight out from the chin on tempo. Once we move as a group, we are released by the trainers to the matt to continue the training session. The monotony of these intense intervals of repetition holds many pleasures for participants who commonly distinguish successful training sessions as ones spent ‘in the zone’, tuned-in to their bodies in an experience of “corporeal wholeness” (Wacquant, 2000 p.57).

The following selection of photographs display common scenes from a training session. They demonstrate a partial, though visibly salient representation of how much of the practice of training is about performing repetitive motion synchronously and how much of the performance of training is enacted through repetition (Wacquant, p.70). By using photographs from which I have removed the color I aim to represent the homogeneity engendered over the course of trainings, and the symbolic loss of individuality in favor of the building of a tightly knit community of fighters (Birrell, 1982, Douglas, 1970).





FIG 7.



FIG 8.



FIG 9.





FIG 10.



FIG 11.



FIG 12.



FIG 13.

Through participation in sport modern bodies are normalized through the disciplinary techniques of the practice, like a bootcamp which organizes participants into a unit (Pringle and Markula, 2006, p. 103). Successful training in sport is demonstrated through the display of comprehension of specific rules and forms by working in unison with the group. One should make minimal errors and avoid displays of weakness or discomfort (Pringle & Markula, 2006 p.102). The uniformity in the above photos reminds that Muay Thai is a sport with roots in military practice, the movements of which are entirely based on an exchange of blows: punches, kicks, knees, and elbows used to physically dominate an enemy. Despite actual violence remaining absent from these photographs, violence is symbolically on view through the display of its symbols, the tattooed muscular shirtless men, who in their shared endeavor of the training of Muay Thai evoke what Vayda Burstyn (1999) in her work on manhood and sport calls The Warrior Cult:

Historically, there are strong links between the masculinist or patriarchal nature of a society, its physical games, and its military orientation and specialization. The culture and values of the masculine sphere of organized violence - the sphere of armies, war, and warriorhood - I refer to throughout this book as the 'the cult of the warrior' or the 'warrior cult' (Burstyn, 1999, p. 42).

Burstyn notes that modern sport is the legacy of warrior mythos with “very strong links to this ancient cultural stream of mythology and draw on it in constructing numinous practices and ideals of manhood and masculinity in the industrial age” (Burstyn, 1999, p.43). She further explains that lacking the experience of fighting in a war, many seek sport to emulate the experience of overcoming individual isolation through seeking alternative opportunities to create the “brotherhoods” engendered through participation in a group with common practices which involve strength, danger, and competition (Burstyn, 1999, p. 187).

The photos above explore the visual dimension of BestFighter as a warrior cult, the heavily signified mass of bodies we see moving, sweating, working, being together, emulating each other offer a reprieve from rigors of feeling these men say the face in the modern post-industrial age. In the following quote, Jurgen names some of the issues which lead him to seek a lifestyle of digital nomadism, where he is able to prioritize training.

When you work you are stressed, when you live in a big town you are stressed, here you have two hours of exhaustive training, *you don't feel anything anymore*. Your head is clean you don't think about work it's the same as yoga. You focus on

yourself you calm down you learn how to breathe while you're moving and all of this kind of stuff so you focus on a completely different thing.  
(Jurgen, interview, 2019, my emphasis)

Yordi expresses a similar discourse, in simpler terms, when I ask him what kinds of feelings he experiences during training.

Max: What do you think about during training? Do any emotions come up for you?  
Yordi: Emotions? No, it's just satisfaction.

From these quotes it is possible to understand how trainings are a ritualized theatre of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995). The unfeeling becomes the exalted feeling, when individual preoccupations are replaced with ritual behaviors, and the participant, through submitting to the sequence of actions which constitute the training session, is rewarded with the sensation that he has had an ordered and regimented experience with a clear and satisfying outcome (Burstyn, 1999 p.20, Goffman, 1979). Sweating comes to stand in for the feeling of satisfaction and so, in the next section I will introduce the way sweat is used to gauge and validate the outcomes of training.

## Big Sign Energy

In this analytical chapter I have used descriptions, quotations and photographs to analyze the rituals invoked and enacted in the practice of training Muay Thai at BestFighter. In this final analytical section I will focus on the way the sweat present in so many participant discourses, and so visibly textural in the photos, circulates discursively, physically and symbolically amongst participants, trainers, and the physical environment.

Upon watching the film "Julius Caesar", Roland Barthes notes that all the characters wear fringes, and while there are minor individual variations to the styling of the fringe, he speculates that the film's hairdresser still manages to coax even the most unruly heads of hair into "one last lock which duly reaches the top of the forehead" (Barthes, 2000, p.26). He calls this detail a "sign operating in the open", the unmistakable proof of Romanness, used to dispel any disbelief in the actor's actual Romanness.

In the above photographs, we can note many such signs operating in the open: the common fighters hair cut (a high and tight fade, or a buzz cut, close to the scalp), the short Thai style shorts, the

tattoos which allow the individual even shirtless to express aspects of their personality through their choices of adornment. Perhaps the most salient of these open signs is the sweat which streams down naked torsos, soaks shirts, and pools on the mats. I note its significance in the following observation:

*There is something democratizing about the sheer amount of skin on display which melts hard bodies and soft bodies together into a stew of flesh. About ten minutes into the lesson the sweat starts, and it doesn't stop until well after the last bow is taken. Sweat drips and jumps off our mostly shirtless bodies, shorts sag under the weight of it, gloved hands try pointlessly to wipe it from brows between punches. Sweat leaps off the pads into the faces of the trainers (who barely sweat). Feet graze sweaty stomachs and haunches when practicing kicks, and sweat blends between us on foreheads and in hair pressed into necks and chests as we work the clinch (Field notes, 2019).*

Participants talk endlessly about sweat, about how much they sweat, how much they were sweat on, why they sweat and what sweat means. At one point, Gian even dedicated an Instagram post to wringing out his training clothing in an attempt to quantify how much sweat he expended in a training. The sweat is ugly, it's inconvenient and embarrassing, it turns bodies slick and has the power to pull down your shorts, it cross contaminates, and even splashes into the eyes and mouths of the people you train with, yet it is not dirty. It is the right sweat at the right time (Douglas, 1966) a mere fact of training, as seen in the quote below.

It's just so hot so warm during training and you sweat so incredibly much that to me it's like coming out of a shower after training I'm completely soaked (Interview, Gian, 2019).

In the world of BestFighter, like in Julius Caesar, "sweat is an attribute with a purpose" (Barthes, 2000, p.27). Sweat signals moral feeling. The Roman's sweat signifies for Barthes the internal debates of the man gone to war for his country, but our sweat evinces our work toward rehabilitation; our conflict with the limitations of our bodies. Sweat here is the sign operating in the open (Barthes, 2000). We work up a sweat in order to transform ourselves, we sweat out impurities, detoxify and shed the weight of our disappointments, we sweat to become streamlined, hardened and taut (Pringle & Markula, 2006).

This experience teaches you about life and living and like how to be a better person how to be disciplined how to wake up early in the morning and f\*\*\*\*\* sweat like you've never sweat for f\*\*\*\*\* 2 hours (Interview, Ken, 2019)

Ken sees sweat as the material proof of his discipline, of his becoming better. Through sweating he learns, and like we see when Thor says- “when I’m home I’m not sweating so much” sweat is used to measure the value of our experience, it is the currency of the rehabilitation. The sweat in question is gendered; it is “man’s sweat”, the clean sweat of work (Grosz 1994, 195, Douglas, 1966). It is not the shameful sweat which betrays nervousness and self-doubt which one attempts to halt or hide (Waitt, G. 2014 p. 667); it is encouraged to flow freely, and according to Dietrich the sweat we spill together is what binds us:

I think it's just that you stick more together because you train everyday together, you're sweating together you're punching together there is no difference between us (Dietrich, interview 2019).

Sweat is intimate (Waitt, G. 2014). It mixes among us, blurring the divides between individuals and the environment. It is a “biological, psychological and social assemblage” (Waitt, G. 2014 p.670): the conflux of our bodies, the work they are doing and the tropical climate.

The value of the experience at BestFighter as transformational is largely gauged through how much sweat is spilled, and where it is spilled. The spilling of sweat in this context signifies all the intended benefits of BestFighter as presented by management and as paid for the participants: work, purification, brotherhood, challenge and discipline. It is proof that one does not go to Thailand as an indulgent pleasure seeker, and it can even represent the material dimensions of weight loss, and allow one to emulate the monastic devotion of a fighter sweating to make weight for a match (Waquant, 2000 p. 67). Sweat is the currency of masculinity rehab, the material and the receipt which demonstrates the value of what we have paid for.

Participants ending their sojourns at BestFighter are faced with finding ways to make the sweat stick, and upon leaving attempt to resume their regular lives without losing who and what they have become at BestFighter. In my final conclusive chapter I will explore the negotiations participants make with ourselves as we navigate our returns.



## Conclusion: How to make sweat stick

In this final chapter, I will make suggestions for the applicability of this research and deliver my conclusions about how BestFighter fosters a transformational experience, and how participants experience their transformations as a form of *Masculinity Rehab*.



*In the above photo I am sitting cross legged before an Ajarn on a clean tile floor in the lobby of a repurposed office building in Bangkok on the day before my departure from Thailand. The Ajarn, through a Swiss translator asked me about myself and what I was looking for. I explained I had spent the past six weeks in Samui learning Muay Thai, and that it was the focus of my studies back in Sweden. He showed me the image of a tiger looking backwards and explained that it's popular among fighters and provides protection from attacks and sharp objects. He credited his Sak Yant tattoos with helping him ward off 6 muggers earlier in the day, evidenced by his lateness (for which he was very apologetic) and some facial bruising.*

*I recognized the image of the tiger from tattoos common at camp, on the mural by the pool, and among Farang who have spent extensive time training in Thailand. I selected the image and*

*kneeled before him. Over the course of two hours the bamboo needle knocked into my skin repeatedly as the Ajarn alternately tattooed me and checked his cellphone. I breathed through the pain channeling the calmness and control I had learned in my training.*

*Looking at this image now, I continue to be shocked by my decision, it is uncharacteristic of my cynicism and total lack of spirituality, but at the time, I remember it felt important to mark my experience and hoped the tattoo would evidence some change of my fundamental character, if only to myself. I felt confident, powerful, connected and in many ways like a fighter, and I feared losing all of that upon returning to Sweden, back to my studies, my comfortable bed, and a social life in which men are the vast minority.*

*Months after this picture was taken, the tattoo remains, but much of my romanticism of the BestFighter camp faded as I read through my field notes and interview transcripts and began to connect my observations to theory and larger phenomena.*

*The evidence of thousands of push ups, regimented eating, and days spent kicking a heavy bag quickly became invisible and I no longer stand shirtless in mirrors admiring my daily progress.*

*I continue to practice Muay Thai at a community gym with a socialist mission which is a very gender diverse and inclusive space. Despite thoroughly enjoying the trainings, I struggle to make it to twice weekly one hour classes where I am still very much a beginner, and ironically since summer has come have found the trainings to be prohibitively hot, despite the temperature in the gym registering at 30c which would be considered a very mild day on Samui. I have already booked a return ticket back to Thailand for another 6 week camp, as I have given myself a goal of competing in one amateur fight before my thirty fifth birthday, which is in 11 months.*

BestFighter camp functions as transformational space where augmented experiences of self-improvement become possible. In this way, more than a training camp, or a resort, it is a *masculinity rehab* where transformational experiences are crafted situationally through work, ritual, performance and proximity (Birrell, 1982, Burstyn, 1999, Turner, 1966). Rehabilitation is actually a transformation: rather than restoring one's best self, one is transformed into it. What participants seek to rehabilitate was never there to begin with; an idealized and unchallenged masculinity.

Transformations are built on aspirational experiences whether the aspirations in question are named or not, but in order for a transformation to endure it must sustain over time (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p.265). Thus the transformative rehabilitations sought by participants can only be considered successful if they last beyond their sojourns at BestFighter. As I have explored in the previous three analytical chapters, masculinity rehab is predicated on the conflux of story, space, and practice, a precarious engagement that by nature cannot be brought home and is therefore a bounded and conditional offering.

The men who participate in these camps, removed from the limitations and responsibilities of everyday life have the ability to produce their own mythologies. At BestFighter they can be heroes, or martyrs, laborers, soldiers and spiritualists. They can access and enact the simplified masculine archetypes they believe themselves to be denied at home. These archetypal identities are purchased; one can exchange the strength of their local currency for a vast array of goods and services to bolster their mythos; from sex and attention from women, to personal instruction from champion trainers, to BestFighter logo training clothes and *Sak Yant* tattoos, the impermanence of the locality can be transmuted into souvenirs worn on and through the body.

Many participants whom I checked in with after returning home or leaving the camp for further travels find their healing to be ephemeral. It is difficult to maintain outside of the frame of the BestFighter experience. In addition to missing the structure and trainings the camp provides, their home lives also restrict the sexual and economic freedom life on Koh Samui makes available, and the articulations of heterosexual masculinity this freedom engenders.

Shortly after I returned to Sweden, I learned from social media that Dietrich's depression had returned and he had already booked his return trip to Samui. Ken would later visit me in Sweden, having gained substantial weight and complaining unceasingly about the cost of goods and services outside of Thailand, and informed me he would also shortly be returning to Thailand, this time to Phuket to participate in another three-month camp. Having left BestFighter, and the security of their masculinity rehab, they relapsed into the conditions which drove them to seek rehabilitation in the first place.

Masculinity rehab is an ephemeral space, created fraternally in a bounded location where one is conditionally given access to augmented masculine experiences: socializing and training in a team

of men, submitting oneself to the hierarchies of student/trainer relationships, fighting, picking up women, and spending money freely. These liminal experiences are antithetical to the realities and restrictions of everyday life, but are commonly believed to make one better suited to face them.

As the demand for transformational tourism and the self-improvement industry continues to grow with greater economic trends toward optimization of the individual (Cederström and Spicer, 2015, 2018), camps such as BestFighter are exceptionally well positioned to continue to foster the self-development projects of their attendees. O'Dell reminds in his work on spas that our commitments to care of the self are the conflux of our commitment to our work and to satisfying our wants: "the search for wellness, relaxation and serenity is to some extent predicated upon our continued commitment to the world of work; to the commitment of our own work...but it is also predicated upon a commitment to our own desires" (O'Dell, 2010 p139). BestFighter exists exactly at this axis; the most successful participants love to train, train to work and work to train again, laboring over their bodies so that they may be better suited to the laborious work of maintaining their masculinities.

While masculinity may not be predicated on anything real, the realest way to experience it for many comes packaged in the sweat, smiles and stories they gather at BestFighter.

### Applicability and Continued Studies

As the returns of the self-improvement economy keep growing, and middle-class consumers seek bespoke experiences catering to their wellbeing and optimization, this study provides a valuable blueprint and an example of how ethnographic insights can contribute to a better understanding of what makes certain places successful. As evidenced in the conclusion, participants keep returning to these camps, having failed to maintain their desired outcomes. Yet their disappointment is never with the camp, so the recurring engagement is a long-term commitment one where the promised rehabilitation retains its strength despite the requirement of upkeep.

On another level, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the discourses and practices framing white men's behavior. Much of what happened at BestFighter follows rather closely the unspoken rules of "bro-ism", a motley mix of regulatory practices used to establish masculine hegemonies. As men's rights discourses become more mainstreamed it is imperative we study the

way hegemonic masculinity is imagined, approximated, and exalted in designated spaces such as training camps. In this way it becomes possible to trace disturbing elements and understand the ways seemingly innocuous behaviors might contribute to masculinist ideologies through the exclusion and subjugation of those who do not meet its requirements.

To deepen this investigation requires further studies which question the effects of camps like BestFighter on their surrounding localities and economies. I would further ask: how does this type of tourism effect the cultures and geographies in which it is embedded? And how sustainable is this type of tourism if it maintains its current growth rate?

Lastly, I advocate for a continuation of this study which takes a more intersectional look at the populations who visit these types of camps, in order to learn from the experiences of not just the majorities but the outliers to gauge the motivations and experiences of those who complicate the conditions of masculinity rehab.

## Index of Interviews and Participants

**Alexej:** 29 year old cinematographer from Slovakia, long time practitioner of Muay Thai who has never had a competitive fight. He came back to Koh Samui after a recent split with his fiancé who he had proposed to on the island six years earlier.

(2019, February) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Damien:** 36 years old, French Canadian, On-site BJJ coach and long time Martial Arts practitioner who credits BJJ with teaching him to stand up straight and keeping him out of trouble. Proudly claims he is 120kg in fighting shape, with no steroids.

(2019, March) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Dietrich:** 46 years old, from east Germany, sneaker collector and all around good time guy, comes to BestFighter for three months every year since a debilitating scooter accident.

(2019, January) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Gian:** 33 year old Swiss public relations professional and long time combat sport athlete. Considers himself a bit of a hedonist and enjoys the freedom from presenting himself as a slick P.R. guy life on the island provides.

(2019, February) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Jurgen:** 43 year old digital nomad and web developer who has spent the past three years using BestFighter as his home base while he travels south east Asia training and working. Smokes a lot of cigarettes and is regularly managing relationships with multiple local girlfriends.

(2019, February) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Ken:** 43 year old American freelance cannabis consultant, struggles to maintain an ideal weight, and loves Thailand and BestFighter for the feeling of freedom and brotherhood it engenders. Struggles to maintain a balance between his love of the islands party vibes and his training.

(2019, January) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Marius:** 22 year old camp fighter who left his nursing job to pursue full time competitive fighting. Sometimes feels frustrated by the extreme limitation of always being fight ready, but enjoys a very close and meaningful relationship with the trainers.

(2019, March) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Paulus:** 19 year old German guy from Berlin who worked the first summer after high school, saving up to spend 2 months at BestFighter. Found the dance scene on the island disappointing compared to his home in Berlin, but always has a good attitude despite being clumsy and often the butt of jokes from the trainers due to his tall skinny frame and inflexibility.

(2019, February) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Zeilig:** 21 year old aspiring MMA fighter from Bavaria. When he is not working as a logistician for the rail yard, he participates in the biker club in his home town, provides security at gigs and events and trains MMA and Muay Thai.

(2019, March) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Yordi:** 28 years old, first time Muay Thai practitioner from Amsterdam where he manages a bar. Waited a long time to take his trip as it involved many negotiations with his girlfriend.  
(2019, March) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Thor:** 34 year old Danish guy living in Germany. Former marathon runner who lost his shape after an injury, faced a lot of stigma from co-workers about travelling to Thailand as a single man so elected to spend a lot of time hanging out with some cousins who were also visiting the island.  
(2019, February) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

**Tomasz:** 28 year old political activist from Berlin. Tomasz trains to interrupt Nazi activity in his city, he is a political science student, who volunteers with asylum seekers in his city and lives a vegan straight edge lifestyle.  
(2019, February) Personal interview (M. Gonen, interviewer)

## Index of Images

Fig 0. Leftover mural from reality series on k1 kick boxers filmed at the camp. This mural remains poolside, and is often a backdrop for camp participant photos. (Submitted by participant Andrezej 2019)

Fig 1. De-commissioned gloves left ringside. These gloves are not really used, yet remain as a sort of decorations left behind by fighters and trainees. (Authors own 2019)

Fig 2. View of door from Author's ringside room. (Authors own 2019)

Fig 3. Buddhist altars located next to the practice areas attended to by the trainers. (Authors own 2019)

Fig 4. Author posing in front of camp mural, taken by participant Thor (Authors own 2019)

Fig 5. Roadside billboard advertising a standard night of Thai Boxing (Authors own 2019)

Fig 6. Footwork exercise conducted during warm up portion of Muay Thai lessons (Authors own 2019)

Fig 7. Jumping rope for warm up (Retrieved from BestFighter facebook, 2019 )

Fig 8. Participants listen to the rules of sparring. (Retrieved from BestFighter facebook, 2019 )

Fig 9. Heavy bag exercises during a PM lesson. (Retrieved from BestFighter facebook, 2019 )

Fig 10. Drilling boxing combinations with partners. (Retrieved from BestFighter facebook, 2019 )

Fig 11. Group conditioning to end a training session (Retrieved from BestFighter facebook, 2019 )

Fig 12. The "Wai" or bow which ends a session (Retrieved from BestFighter facebook, 2019 )

Fig 13. Shaking hands with the trainers to thank them for the session (Retrieved from BestFighter facebook, 2019 )

Fig 14. Photo of the author receiving a Sak Yant tattoo (Submitted by SakYantEmbassy 2019)



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