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## The Fighting Spirit: Women's Self-Defense Training and the Discourse of Sexed Embodiment

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents ethnographic research on women's self-defense training and suggests that women's self-defense culture prompts feminists to refigure our understanding of the body and violence. The body in feminist discourse is often construed as the object of patriarchal violence (actual or symbolic), and violence has been construed as something that is variously oppressive, diminishing, inappropriate, and masculinist. Hence, many feminists have been apathetic to women's self-defense. As a practice that rehearses, and even celebrates women's potential for violence, women's self-defense illustrates how and why feminism can frame the body as both a social construction and as politically significant for theory and activism.

### **INTRODUCTION: DOING DISCOURSE THEORY KICKING AND SCREAMING**

Before studying women's self-defense culture, my engagement with sexual assault education and prevention revolved around raising consciousness about the abused, violated, and misrepresented female body. Looking back, I ask myself, how could I have been a feminist activist, and sexual assault educator specifically, and not practice or advocate self-defense? In this article, I begin to answer this question by considering

some of the tensions in feminism regarding violence and the body, specifically as these tensions occurred to me during the course of my ethnographic study of women's self-defense culture.

In feminist discourse, the body is often construed as the object of patriarchal violence (actual or symbolic), and violence has been construed variously as oppressive, diminishing, inappropriate, and masculinist. Feminist politics since the second wave have moved in a direction that identifies violence as the symbol of the problem of patriarchy. The feminist critique of rape culture that I deployed as an anti-sexual-assault activist was based on the critique of the media's misrepresentation of women's bodies, men's appropriation and violation of women's bodies, and women's physical vulnerability to men's violence. Doing self-defense felt like selling out, conceding that despite feminist efforts, men hadn't changed. Even worse perhaps, it felt like resigning myself to use "the master's tools."

Upon further reflection, I can say that my distance from self-defense also came from the related assumption that women's bodies are not as capable of the kind of agency or violence of which I routinely construed men's bodies. I came to question my feminist understandings of violence and its prevention after immersing myself in a culture that rehearses, and even celebrates, women's potential for violence. Along with many other women in all kinds of self-defense classes, I learned to jab, punch, poke, pull, kick, yell, stomp, shoot, and even kill with my bare hands. And I loved it. Some feminists will surely be troubled by my failure to honor nonviolence. This article will suggest that women's self-defense, by engaging the body and celebrating women's potential for violence, prompts us to rethink our assumptions about physicality, violence, and nonviolence.

Whether in a martial arts dojo, at a fitness center, or on a gun range, self-defense teaches women to fight off imaginary attackers through intense rehearsals of verbal and gestural scripts counter to those demanded by rape culture. Our society is a rape culture because sexual violence (including all gender-motivated assaults such as incest, rape, battery, and murder) and the fear of violence are subtly accepted as the norm and because the prevailing cultural models of sexuality and gender perpetuate men's violence and women's fear.<sup>1</sup> Rape culture accepts men's aggression against women as normal, sexy, and/or inevitable and often regards women's refusal of it as pathological, unnatural, and "aggressive."<sup>2</sup> Part of what has been considered natural, even to some feminists, is the idea that men's bodies make them good assailants and that women's bodies make them particularly vulnerable. Self-defense not only teaches women new responses with which to thwart assaults; it challenges basic assumptions-rape myths-about men's and women's bodies.

After briefly describing the methods of investigation, I present some of my ethnographic research on the women's self-defense movement, which includes data from interviews with self-defense instructors and students. Because of space limitation, I will provide a sampling of statements from interviewees rather than all available data. Hence, interviewees' statements should be taken as illustrative of discussed points, not as

exhaustive evidence for them. This article presents a specific component of my study and its implications. Although women's self-defense raises many questions and stirs up many tensions within feminist activism and theory, I shall touch on a specific set of issues here, namely, those that concern feminism, the body, and violence with regard to rape culture.

## **METHODS: UNDERSTANDING THE KICK OF SELF-DEFENSE**

Between 1992 and 1995, I conducted an ethnographic study of U.S. women's self-defense culture. I surveyed, experientially, a wide variety of self-defense instruction: self-defense with firearms, aggressive unarmed self-defense against padded attackers, and a number of other courses sold as self-defense in dojos (Krav Maga, as well as a one-day self-defense class for women taught by martial artists), aerobics studios ("Cardio Combat"), and fitness centers ("Boxing for Fitness" and "Kickboxing: Women's Self-Defense"). I spent over 120 hours in self-defense training and another 15 hours observing instruction on both the East and West Coasts of the United States. I also conducted formal interviews with two dozen self-defense instructors and students.<sup>3</sup> I talked informally with many other "selfdefenders" (a neologism I employ to describe those who take and teach women's self-defense). Most significantly, I went through the self-defense metamorphosis. The "fighting spirit" is more than a set of fighting tactics. Self-defense transforms what it means to have a female body.<sup>4</sup>

Participating in self-defense lessons established an experiential and appreciative relationship with the people whom about I write about. My position as a fan of women who take and teach self-defense has led me to a critical appreciation of women's self-defense practices rather than the more familiar approach of focusing on the patriarchal and capitalist interests that women's popular pleasures serve. Of course, another feminist participant with different theoretical or political commitments might have come up with a different interpretation of women's self-defense culture. Two feminist scholars have already offered criticisms of women's self-defense (Jackson 1993; Lentz 1993). Critical ethnography is a means of experience as well as a record of it; here I offer a way to understand women's self-defense, with an emphasis on current debates in feminist theory over corporeality, agency, victimization, violence, pleasure, and resistance.

## **AGGRESSION AND SEXED EMBODIMENT**

Our culture is wedded to distinguishing bodies as male and female. One way that sex is materialized is through regulatory norms surrounding the use of aggression. Cultural ideals of manhood and womanhood include a cultural, political, aesthetic, and legal acceptance of men's aggression and a deep skepticism, fear, and prohibition of

women's. The set of cultural assumptions that positions aggression as a primary marker of sex difference fuels the frequency and ease with which men attack women and the cultural understanding that men's violence and women's vulnerability are inevitable, if unfortunate, biological facts.

This is not to say that all men are rapists, all women are physically incompetent, or that all men and women aestheticize heterosexual femininity. Some women reject the feminine ideal and other women find it hard to achieve. Some women are assumed to manifest it and others have to prove they do. But whether we like it or not, feminine manners, a delicate physical comportment and a cheerful, compliant attitude, are demanded in many female-dominated occupations-secretarial work, sex work, domestic work, waitressing, flight attending, nursing, child care, and homemaking (Hochschild 1983). Their display of care and affection for others make feminine manners anything but aggressive; in fact, they are precisely the opposite. Imagistic discourses routinely position women as boundariless, vulnerable sex objects-objects that brave and physically capable men protect, save, and have sex with. Gender is no less bodily or material because it is discursive or textual.

After her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) took the feminist academic community by storm, Judith Butler found herself continually having to respond to a concern that discourse theory ignores what seems to be the locus of oppressive violence, the body. This concern was often manifested in the question, "If everything is text, what about violence and bodily injury?" (Butler 1993, 28). Butler, of course, has an answer to that question. As the title of her subsequent book, *Bodies that Matter* (1993), suggests, bodies are no less important, material, oppressed, or violated because they are discursive. The discursive construction of the body, in fact, is precisely what gives oppression, empowerment, and violence their meanings.

The dominant discourse produces bodies whose appearance and desires are acceptable-bodies that are intelligible within the normative scheme. The normative behavioral rules of rape culture are assumed bodily; this is crucial to the perpetuation of the power system. Butler (1990) suggests that compulsory heterosexuality is the institutional context in which sexed embodiment takes place. The political system structures our desires, and our masculine and feminine bodily dispositions. In this way, compulsory heterosexuality and male domination are materialized at the level of the body. Our gendered bodies materialize power, specifically (for the purposes of this article) compulsory heterosexuality and male domination. The point is not that people fit the social ideals perfectly, but that people often measure behavior against them. Hence, during slavery and Reconstruction, African American women, who lacked the privileges of middle-class white women to avoid hard labor, were seen as unfeminine women, barely "real" women at all.

Although implicitly misrecognized as natural facts, commonsense understandings of gender are rehearsed over and over; they are not natural and therefore not as stable as they may seem and often feel. Gender ideology affects the way we interpret and experience physical bodies. Gender is a lived ideology-a system of ideas about men

and women with which we live our lives. As lived ideology, those ideas get transformed into specific bodily practices. As a collection of dispositions, gender is knowledge embodied through rigorous education.

Gender is thus an embodied belief, and aggression is part and parcel of what distinguishes male from female embodiment. Iris Marion Young (1990) suggests that girls do not develop a relationship with their bodies as agents, as instruments of action. Hence, we learn to "throw like a girl," that is, to withhold strength, to approach physical tasks in a timid manner. Girls and women tend not to make full use of the body's spatial and lateral potentialities (Young 1990, 145). Young remarks on this gendered difference in the performance of physical tasks requiring strength or muscular coordination:

Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force. When we attempt to do such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing. Women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as men. ( 1990, 145)

Feminine hesitancy and perceptions of women's physical incompetence relative to men are part and parcel of rape culture because they help men win verbal and physical fights with women, and because they help rationalize those attacks. Male dominance is inscribed in the bodies of women and men, and thus imposes itself as self-evident and natural. But this is not as bleak as it may sound.

## **UNLEARNING FEMININITY**

Because gender is not really natural, it requires constant enforcement and repetition. This repetition is abruptly interrupted in women's self-defense classes. Self-defense disrupts the embodied ethos of rape culture. What feminists talk about interrupting-femininity-self-defenders practice interrupting: They enact the deconstruction of femininity. Contemporary feminism has instigated the transformation of women's consciousness and has sparked a critique of the way the female body has been represented, thought of, and treated. Self-defense instruction actually reveals how the traditional sexist ideas find their way into the functioning of the body itself. In the process, self-defense enables women to internalize a different kind of bodily knowledge.

By forcing women to act in unfeminine ways, self-defense instruction not only identifies some of the mechanisms that create and sustain gender inequality but also a means to subvert them.<sup>5</sup> Women learn to shoot and fight in a highly charged sensorial atmosphere of supportive women, sweat, bullets, swear words, and fantasized and enacted fighting success. This often pleasurable process engages women mentally, emotionally, and physically, and it therefore effectively instills

in women a new bodily comportment. This new bodily comportment affects not only women's confidence about thwarting assaults; it proves highly consequential for many areas of women's lives.

Women's self-defense is a reprogramming regimen for the body. Here, women regardless of their conscious political beliefs about gender-rehearse a new script for bodily comportment. The body, then, is not simply the locus of patriarchal power, ideology, or brutality; it is a potential locus of resistance. In self-defense classes, women make their aggression, and the femininity that prevents it, conscious. They develop a new self-image, a new understanding of what a female body can do, and thus break out of the expectations under which they have acted expectations that have cemented themselves at the level of the body. In this way, a feminine bodily schema is supplanted by a fighting bodily schema, or what some self-defense instructors call the "fighting spirit."

Aggression and femininity are not complementary. Femininity, as it is socially defined, is precisely what women must overcome when learning to fight. I asked instructors who had witnessed more students than I, to tell me the biggest hurdle students must overcome. Their answers all reflected the way femininity is an obstacle to competent physical aggression. They reported that their students needed to get over being nice, a fear of guns, a fear of hurting people, a physical hesitancy, and their own disbelief in their physical power. The following quotes from self-defense instructors are illustrative:

They don't want to hurt anyone. (karate instructor)

Women aren't supposed to fight and aren't supposed to hit back and they're supposed to be nice and sweet, and not say no, and not do anything to tick people off. And to get women to go through that and actually fight and strike after years and years of being brought up, you know, where you're not supposed to, getting them through that "I don't want to fight" or "I'm not supposed to fight" [is the biggest barrier that women have to get over]. And once that's broken down, then everything else is pretty much easy sailing. (male instructor/padded attacker)

Overcoming the attitude that firearms are exceedingly dangerous and inherently evil and ugly and macho. (Lyn Bates, gun instructor)

The fear of the gun. (Paxton Quigley, gun instructor)

Digging through all of the mental attitude that's been developed and put there for many women since the time they were born. ... It's probably the most difficult thing to get across in class that they are strong, especially women ... and in most cases they will be able to defend themselves. (padded attacker course instructor)

The following student told me that she felt uneasy learning how to hurt someone:

They taught us a lot of stuff that they practice with, "Now, you don't think you'll be able to do this, but believe me you can." And that was kind of scary learning how to gouge people's eyes out or break bones or whatever. I remember feeling kind of like, oh, I don't know if I can do that kind of thing. It's just not my philosophy of life. (Rape Crisis Center self-defense course student)

Another simply stigmatized combative sports as too masculine, which intimidated her. She explains:

At first I thought boxers were disgusting, bloody, yucky men. But then I realized that you wear padded gear and everyone who enters the ring wants to be there. Also, it's good to be able to take a punch. We think we'll be overwhelmed, but we can handle it. (padded attacker course student, boxing student)

And a last student admits that initially she was embarrassed to act physically powerful:

I remember having a lot of embarrassment about my physical power. The coach demands and brings it out of you. In the gym it's encouraged to be as powerful as you can be. You're working to get more and more power physically. And there's also a mental power and emotional power that you develop. You may have four rounds to go and you can't just break down and leave the ring. It's realizing what you have and becoming less and less embarrassed about it, and it's permitted and it's desired. (boxer, boxing instructor)

It is common feminist knowledge that girls tend to learn that they are the objects, not the agents, of aggression through routine sexist socialization as well as through fears and experiences of violence against them. Women who have experienced abuse as children have an especially acute sense that a female body in a sexist culture seems to belong to others and not oneself. Childhood sexual abuse survivors in the self-defense classes I took sometimes had to overcome a tendency to carry themselves in a particularly helpless manner. (This passivity which some claim "leads" to rape is itself a result of forced bodily intrusion.) Some self-defense instructors have this same analysis. For instance, "It's every child's birthright to body sovereignty. In boys, we overemphasize it; in girls, we 'no,' beat, incest, and rape it out of them" (Helen Grieco, padded attacker course instructor). Others note that, regardless of personal history, women learn that they are capable of nothing other than submission to assault. In "NRA Woman's Voice," a feature in the *American Rifleman*, Elizabeth Swasey provides a related argument about socialization:

From birth, most women are brainwashed into thinking the only proper response to physical aggression is submission. On the playground, we're told "girls don't hit" even if we're striking back in self-defense to flee a much larger and stronger school bully. Later, we're told women should "submit to criminal attack for fear of injury" as if the crime itself

were not injury. That's why for most women, the decision to learn to defend oneself is life-altering. It goes against what we've been taught from birth.  
(1993, 18)

## **THE LORE OF SELF-DEFENSE**

Self-defense instructors help women discard their feminine selves and take on a new assertiveness by employing a number of strategies that help women reimagine their bodies as active agents capable of fighting, yelling, and killing. To turn women into fighters, women's self-defense courses offer stories that make fighting OK, provide an emotionally supportive atmosphere, and suggest a new relationship to the media. In sharing stories of women's successful fights, for instance, instructors attempt to undo women's belief that they cannot fight. Sharing women's stories of triumph and survival are central to self-defense culture and important for students because success stories are rarely reported in the media, thus perpetuating women's lack of confidence. One instructor explains:

We don't hear those kind of stories in the newspapers, and if we did we'd have a whole different view of what's possible, so we have to support each other. And that's like the main purpose of the workshops that I do besides, you know, giving some ... practical information about "What would you do if this happened or that happened?" But a lot is about hearing each other's stories and knowing that whether we have formal education or not, in terms of self-defense, that we have a lot of wit.  
(Janet Aalfs, karate instructor)

These success stories help to instill in women a sense of confidence and a broader perspective of what counts as self-defense. For instance, self-defense is not only a formulaic set of tightly controlled moves, but a set of strategies employed that might begin with tricking or distracting an attacker, involve flailing and going ballistic, and even include making a strategic decision to submit to the first man in a gang attack in order to create an opportunity to escape. Women's own triumphs that occur while taking their self-defense courses are often shared in class: During the month I was taking a padded attacker course, I verbally confronted a man on the street who was sexually harassing me. Never before had I turned around and yelled fiercely at a man who was harassing me. In that same month, another student was confronted by a man in the parking lot where she worked. He faced her with his pants down, masturbating. So forceful and piercing was her clamor that the man had to release his penis to put his hands over his ears. The class applauded. Success stories are shared to provide women with an alternative fantasized possibility for action. This helps alter beliefs-and ultimately bodies.

Success stories allow women to imagine that, despite years of advice and images that have made them believe and feel otherwise, they might win a fight. Far from simply a false sense of security, such an affirmative belief in one's own capacities enhances one's abilities. Bandura (1977) has shown that not only does observing



someone model behavior affect one's ability to learn it and imitate it but that expecting and believing that one has the capabilities actually influences performance. This is the significance of challenging the rape myth of men's dangerousness and women's vulnerability. That myth actually becomes a soma-reality. Imagining a new scenario makes a new soma-reality possible.

In padded attacker courses, the group cheers each woman fighter on to victory. A karate instructor noted that women's egos need not be torn down (the way some think men's should be in the martial arts). Rather, women need to be praised relentlessly. Firearms course instructor Paxton Quigley pats her students on the back saying, "good job," while the rest of the women clap for the shooter. Women's self-defense courses celebrate women's strength and victories, their fighting and winning, KOs and killings. By extension, they celebrate women's entitlement, their living, surviving, and thriving. The sharing of success stories and the group support are combined with a modeling on the part of the instructors of a new womanhood. These factors create an overall atmosphere in self-defense courses in which, paradoxical as it may seem, women get nurtured into aggressivity.

## **"BODILY MEMORY"**

The coaching described above is only the tip of the iceberg: Women have to enact the aggressive posture. Self-defense provides an understanding or a knowledge at the bodily level that is distinct from that at the intellectual level. Self-defense, then, requires not only a theoretical understanding of body or voice. Women must inscribe it into their bodily schema. The sharing of success stories, the modeling of strength on the part of the instructors, the renegotiation of media images of women, and the encouraging atmosphere of women's self-defense courses help women discard their feminine hesitancy and physical incompetence and imagine new possibilities for action. But it is the intense physicality of self-defense courses, exemplified by mock attacks, that accomplishes this. In the language of some padded attacker course instructors, women get the fighting spirit and it becomes a bodily memory.

Committing fighting techniques to bodily memory requires practicing assertiveness. Quigley first instructs women to take on an assertive posture in daily life. She suggests that women mark a man with their eyes, avoid answering men who ask what time it is, and not worry about being polite to them. Quigley's technique of having each student yell obscenities at her command gets students to practice being rude. One martial arts course had students practice shouting "NO" at the top of our lungs and, during an exercise in which we sat in a circle taking turns responding to our neighbor's hands on our knees, had students state firmly, without smiling, "Take your hand off my knee." In this way, women begin to unlearn the enslaving feminine demeanor that prevents them from fighting effectively. Coaching continues throughout the practicing. For instance, as women practice defensive moves on the mat, padded

attacker course instructors remind them, "He's in your space!" "Set your boundary!" and "He has no right!"

The significance of practicing assertiveness is clear: If assailants rely on a script of femininity to overpower women, then women must begin to rehearse a new script. But unlike a traditional script that an actor reads, women's script is written into their bodies, and the physical nature of the instruction begins to write a new story of womanhood. Women's self-defense courses do not teach artistic, stylized techniques. They focus on practical techniques that any woman can use to disable an attacker and give her time to get away as quickly as possible: gouging eyes, kicking and punching vulnerable areas, and practical two-hand shooting (usually with revolvers. In one class, the instructor constantly repeated, "This is not Jean Claude Van Damme."

Indeed, this is practicing assertiveness under real-life conditions of fear and attack. Teaching women under high-stress, high-adrenaline conditions realistically captures the emotional and physical conditions under which women would have to defend themselves. Padded attacker course instructor Helen Grieco explains that teaching women to fight under conditions of terror reinforces in them techniques that will work under those conditions, because you lose fine motor control and only have major motor control. She thus teaches specific techniques that do not require fine motor control. This is scrappy fighting for safety: "It's not male, masculinist, Rambo stuff. You might even have a bowel movement." Fighting under conditions of terror, or simply in a high-adrenaline state, also enables students to commit the fighting techniques to bodily memory, so that women's first response in a real-life situation will be to fight.

As they commit fighting techniques to bodily memory, women exorcise the bodily memories that a sexist culture has lodged in them. Learning self-defense is sort of like learning to drive a car on the opposite side of the road in a foreign country. Anyone who's done this knows how conscious one's actions behind the wheel suddenly become. The turning and signaling and looking that were second nature become strained and stressful, perplexing and purposeful gestures. In much the same way, acquiring an aggressive response system takes purposeful reflection and mindful motions.

For this reason, classes begin with very slow and purposeful movements, usually in a very strict order or routine. Women have to think about how to hit, to shoot, to kick, and to yell. Gaining confidence in physical abilities and overcoming a fear of getting hurt are two primary objectives of self-defense instruction for women. Many women realize that they become paralyzed at the sight of a gun or an assailant. Students learn that they must use their voices for effective self-defense; many realize that they are not accustomed to talking firmly, much less yelling. Although some women find this fairly easy, most, even those who feel relatively secure in their physical strength, find it difficult:

I have a pretty strong body and I've always been very confident that I can kick ass .... The scary part in the course was the verbal stuff when I had to use my voice to tell them "get away" you know like I would smile a lot, as I am now .... The power of the course was definitely the voice and the shifting position, like startling the assailant by taking the initiative. You turn the tables .... Like I was "don't" [meekly] you know like, it was never like totally my power .... But I felt the shift. (padded attacker course student)

Still others felt that they were verbally assertive but lacked the physical skills to fight. As women start out just aiming a gun toward a target, or giving a kick to a punching bag or to a stationary padded attacker, they often apologize or let out nervous laughter.

After hours of practice employing very specific stances, aims, punches, and kicks, self-defenders eventually learn to make decisions about how to move their bodies as they encounter specific situations. In the padded attacker course called Model Mugging, for example, we initially know what kind of attack we are going to encounter (e.g., walk-by assailant, rear-grab, or forced oral copulation while being pinned on the ground). In gun classes, we are initially told exactly what kinds of shots to fire and where to fire them.

Eventually, women get used to fighting, and it becomes ingrained. As we become more experienced and comfortable with the moves, we become better able to think of appropriate techniques in the moment-what Model Mugging instructors called "seeing your openings." We begin to be able to apply spontaneous moves from a repertoire of techniques. The mock attackers become more and more spontaneous as well, forcing us to think and act quickly, spotting open targets (a knee, an eye, a groin, a face) and deciding on appropriate moves, in the moment under peril. This assessing and "split attention" is especially necessary in the Multiple Assailants padded attacker course. In martial arts classes, students begin to fight against unanticipated types and levels of attack. In firearms classes, students eventually speed up the pace and spontaneity with which they shoot. The feminine gestures like smiling and limited physical competence gradually go by the wayside as women practice conscious control of their responses ("I'm not going to smile this time"). As women adjust to using their bodies in new ways, their confidence and readiness to fight bloom.

In learning how to stop attackers in their tracks, self-defenders learn that a man's attack is a process, not an inevitability, echoing Sharon Marcus's declaration that rape is "a scripted interaction in which one person auditions for the role of rapist and strives to maneuver another person into the role of victim" (1992, 391). Self-defenders learn how to deploy their bodies, including their voices, in ways that surprise and overpower the assailant, allowing them time to escape to safety. Crucial to self-defense instruction is the demystification of rape culture's myths about fighting back. Women not only learn that they are much stronger than they thought but also that men are more vulnerable than they thought. One student put it this way:

I think they were trying to educate and train people to know that they can fight back .... Even a weak, light, small person can do things like, you know, crush someone's kneecap or gouge out their eyes or Adam's apple or whatever. I mean she [the instructor] taught how to kill someone! She stressed that a lot, like with the Adam's apple technique. And I personally thought that was cool, I was struck by that. (Rape Crisis Center self-defense course student)

The significance of knowing you can take a punch is almost as significant as knowing you can deliver one. A student elaborated:

Women don't get to learn they're physical, what they can do physically, and it's kind of neat to learn that you can actually-one time I got hit by a woman and I actually got whiplash, this like pain shot down all the way down my arm and I was scared, I thought something horrible had happened, and it turned out I had whiplash. And another time a woman hit me and my feet actually went off the mat, you know I went right up in the air. The surprising thing was I was OK in about 30 seconds, I was fine .... There was kind of a power in being actually able to take a punch .... And even being able to give it, giving a really good strong punch, is kind of a neat thing. (padded attacker course student, boxing student)

The experience of being hit in boxing classes made this student more sure that, although students in the padded attacker courses do not get hit during the mock assaults, that she could prevail even if struck:

[The padded attacker] will pretend he's going to hit you and then he'll hit the mat next to you or something. Well you kind of figure that if he really hit you, you'd be out of it; but it might not be true, maybe you could take the punch and still fight, even if it did daze you.

Thus, women learn that fighting is not as impossible as they had imagined. Women lose fights with men not because of physical size but because they have developed a demeanor that makes them unable to resist attacks effectively. This sentiment is represented on the T-shirts worn by some of the padded attacker course instructors and passed out on a Xeroxed flyer, which says, "It's not the size of the woman in the fight, but the size of the fight in the woman."

As self-defenders become more aware of the many ways in which men try to manipulate women into a situation of sexual vulnerability, the continuum of sexual violence is thrown into sharp relief. Students can start to realize how few entitlements men grant them. Self-defense training helps women set boundaries and get out of dangerous situations early on, helping them avoid extremely vulnerable situations that might then require three black belts.

The realization of one's ability to fend off men's advances and attacks comes through the bodily activity of rehearsing powerful responses to assault. The resulting changes in bodily comportment occur quickly for self-defenders. The consciousness raising (I will

refer to the bodily and emotional transformation that takes place here as "CR") happens fast because of the do-or-die, emergency, and visceral nature of the training. Much as military soldiers learn their moves precisely because high-stress training conditions force them to suffer a physical consequence for a mistake, self-defense trainees undergo a series of intense, often terrifying, bodily experiences that force them to respond to simulated crises. In padded attacker courses, for instance, students who fail to deliver a knock-out blow, or fail to check to be sure that they knocked out their attacker, are inevitably assailed again.

By the end of the course, self-defense scenarios become more and more spontaneous. For instance, in padded attacker courses, we simply stand, walk, or lie down, not knowing what kind of assailant we will encounter (he might be someone you know aggressively "coming on" to you, a screaming psycho running at you, a man behind you who grabs you just when his friend distracts you by asking you the time). Thus, we begin to practice looking for our target areas and performing moves that seem appropriate for the situation. If we get pinned, we reassess, perhaps feign cooperation, and then begin to fight again when we have an opportunity (such as when the assailant puts his weapon down or leans his body in a way which enables a quick leg retraction and side-thrust kick to his head or groin). In firearms courses, shooting quickly at steel plate targets, the locations of which you do not know until ready to fire, shooting while walking toward your target, and shooting after having fallen onto the ground (firing the gun between your knees) also increase the spontaneity of the action and incorporate mind with physical technique. Ideally there is no pause between deciding and doing.

In her firearms safety course for women at Lethal Force Institute in Concord, New Hampshire, Lyn Bates trains women to shoot under stressful conditions, so they get used to the feeling, and they discover that they can shoot quite well under those conditions. She has a "garbage mouth" come in and shout obscenities and threats to women who, at the instructor's command, must shoot at their targets. This gives them the sense of trauma that they might have while shooting, incorporating their fighting techniques into that sensibility one has when one is afraid. In her classes, Bates also employs the lower intensity "spaz drill," started by nationally known shooting instructor Masaad Ayoob, which is where the shooter clutches her gun, aimed at the target, as hard as she can until her hands shake, and then shoots while shaking. Since "it is not easy to shoot well under pressure, and shooting under pressure is what you must be trained and prepared to do" (Quigley 1989, 196), Quigley recommends combat shooting or action shooting as a way to "learn to use a handgun safely and effectively under time constraints and in stress situations, which will prepare you to save your life and your family's life, should the need arise" (1989, 23). Instructor Lyn Bates also recommends competitive shooting of any kind to produce that sense of intensity while shooting.

In the same way that women in padded attacker courses learn that their determination to fight and their surprise of their assailant will give them the advantage in the fight, gun students learn that their training in threat management can minimize the immediate

paralysis that one is likely to feel when attacked. This involves knowing the layout of your house, having a "safe room," and getting immediately into a position of tactical advantage. One of my gun instructors shows his students the places in their homes that might be good to shoot from and helps them develop a strategy for home defense with a firearm. Women learn that they must keep their cool. This does not mean denying fear or anger, but channeling them. Gun instructors say that this kind of self-control is the advantage the self-defender will have over her attacker. As Quigley states, "Never forget: tactics beat marksmanship" (1989, 247).

The high-adrenaline state is achieved in the mock assaults of padded attacker courses, during competitions and tests in the martial arts, and during the "garbage mouth" and the "spaz drill" in firearms courses. The feelings of fear and degradation with which an assailant hopes to immobilize a woman get turned into part of the feelings a self-defender has while, and associates with, fighting. This kind of control over, or incorporation of, one's feelings in fights becomes part of the self-defense scenario. In this way, self-defenders are taught to bring their minds and bodies into emotive, mean fighting machines.

There's something about boxing that is so raw and so emotional. And you can't escape if you're in the ring. You've already committed, you're already in there. So it forces you to confront things you might be able to avoid otherwise. It's a catalyst really; I mean I don't want to be Miss Therapist or anything, but that's what I've noticed. (boxer, boxing instructor)

To get women to merge the mental with the physical, instructors explain the importance of "staying in your body." In the martial arts, students are taught to find their "ki," a mental power that centers and energizes you, increasing your strength, resolve, and control. Instructors stress making your emotions work for you in the fight. Instructors do not tell women to stop being afraid; they tell them to use their fear by turning it into anger or energy. Fear is what gives women the boost of adrenaline they use to fight powerfully. Determination to stop the attacker also provides this boost. Students are told to assess situations and are supposed to think clearly and "coil up" their energy when they are pinned. In karate, they learn a variety of response techniques that demand different types of emotional-physical energy levels. In these ways, learning to fight involves a coordination of thinking, feeling, and acting.

The belief that a combination of training, physical strength, and emotional strength is required for good self-defense explains why so many self-defense instructors advocate a variety of methods of self-defense training. Bates and Quigley have both taken Model Mugging courses and recommend them in addition to firearms courses. Although *Women & Guns* refers to the "armed sisterhood," which possesses the means by which they might "truly take back the night" (quoted in Wolf 1993, 218), the firearms instructors I spoke with by and large favor a variety of self-defense techniques for women.

All sorts of instructors believe in the benefits of a variety of defense strategies, and all incorporate emotion, muscle, voice, and a will to fight. The bodily memory makes these skills stick. This is "the fight" or "power" women achieve in self-defense training. This set of dispositions is called the fighting spirit not incidentally. After all, the new bodily comportment itself captures a new will to fight that is based on a new idea of what a female body can do and be. Model Mugging instructors tell stories of women who stopped assailants years after having taken self-defense thanks to bodily memory. There was the sixty-something woman who knocked a man out cold within one minute of his assault of her. She had taken the Basic Course five years prior. Then there was the woman who had been knocked unconscious in an accident, and when the paramedic's hands made their way up her leg (checking it for possible broken bones) she kicked him while still unconscious, sending him sailing clear across the room. (She wrote the man a letter of apology.) As these stories illustrate, the fighting gestures become as automatic as the feminine gestures had been.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PHYSICALITY AND PLEASURE TO TRAINING**

The sensuousness of the activity presents the stakes of self-defense—you can smell them and feel them as the adrenaline rushes through your body. Fighting or shooting while some big smelly, swearing, sweat-dripping thug is going after you or yelling at you makes you tangibly, organically invested in the scene. Despite the unpleasantness of these attack simulations, there is a certain pleasure in the aggression that stems from the fast pace, the heightened adrenaline state, and the physical and emotional consequences of fighting. Women train not only to ensure physical survival; they train for dignity, to survive socially as a person with a certain sense of entitlement. In this way, the increased sense of value a woman has for herself is etched onto the body through a series of aggressive fights or an explosion of gunpowder. The physicality of the practice, the emotional character of the venture, and the sensual nature of the atmosphere solidify in women a new body. One student explains, "Whereas therapy may take weeks, to talk about it, this just brings it up immediately .... I go into these really intellectual things, whereas the body just needs to go 'whoa, like what are you doing? It's not OK' " (padded attacker course student). An instructor suggests that the physicality of self-defense training is what makes the difference over all sorts of traditional consciousness raising: "I spent *years* in rallies, feminist therapy, etcetera, and when I get a woman in her body for 40 hours and she has a kinesthetic experience of her power, that's a major difference" (Helen Grieco, padded attacker course instructor). In his interviews with women who took Model Mugging, John Gaddis (1990) also heard this theme:

I'm a lot more sensitive to my boundaries—this began during the training, and I preface this with saying prior to the training I had studied boundaries, and disorders of boundaries, through therapy, psychology school, AA, Adult Children of Alcoholics,

etc., and I had done a little bit of "boundary work;" but in Model Mugging I did the real work-I became hyper-aware of my boundaries. (padded attacker course student in Gaddis 1990, 166-67)

Self-defenders do not just think about assertiveness; they practice it. That the practice engages the body, the mind, and the emotions is critical. Femininity is embodied, sensual, and habitual; this is how it gets disembodied and replaced with the fighting spirit. The fighting spirit is simultaneously a new body, a new idea, and a new feeling.

The energy of this practice is extremely intense. In karate, being around the women who are so committed and so self-possessed, visible through their piercing eyes so focused on the physical tasks before them; audible through their grunts, shouts, and feet stomping; and olfactory through the smell of sweat and dust so characteristic of gyms and dojos. You can feel the determination in their grip and taste it when it is your turn to eat the mat. On the gun range, the smells and sounds are different-gunpowder, sometimes the great outdoors, the startling sound of gunfire and the clanking of steel plate targets-but the overall atmosphere is much the same: a stirring sensorial one that engages the body.

Women find that mastering the challenges of getting out of holds and handling weapons that heretofore would have left them baffled and feeling helpless gives them a sense of pride, accomplishment, and bodily mastery. This itself can turn into a physical "high" that makes women really need and enjoy the fights. For instance, after watching other women fight in Model Mugging, occasionally the instructor's assistant would mention that she "needed a mugging" to give her a sense of release after watching so many assaults from the sidelines.

When I was in one of my first self-defense courses, I heard a more experienced woman remark that she really enjoyed the sparring that took place in the mock attacks. I was stunned. Can we, should we, actually enjoy mock combat? Later, a boxing instructor told me that whether a woman takes up boxing for the great upper body workout, for some self-defense training, or for the one-on-one combat, the thing that captures the hearts of all is the sparring. She explained:

When they get their punches down and all the footwork, then we start sparring, that's actually the most fun for all types of them .... The feeling is, when you were a kid, did you ever have friends you could horse around with? It's that feeling-a fun way to see how powerful you are.

The pleasurable character of combative bodily practices no doubt reflects the pleasurable character of becoming a new kind of woman. Self-defenders' new body-selves are celebrated throughout the course and solidified at the conclusion of many self-defense courses through a series of celebrations and rituals. For example, in Paxton Quigley's firearms course, students took home the targets they shot, autographed by Quigley, and went out for drinks. In Model Mugging, instructors



presented roses with thorns to the students, symbolizing the women they had become beautiful and with thorns for protection.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF METAMORPHOSIS**

To get the fighting spirit, self-defenders learn a new set of reflexes that encompass attitude, will, spirit, body, and technique. The change is quite literally metamorphic. What was once ingrained and felt so natural, femininity, is displaced by a new learned-and-ingrained bodily disposition. The end result is like finally getting used to driving a car on the other side of the road. Self-defenders internalize a new bodily disposition, but not from a natural state of passivity and helplessness. For the "nice girl" is itself a bodily disposition previously internalized and, until self-defense, mostly taken for granted as natural. Thus, it is not that self-defense inscribes a set of unnatural rules onto the naturally docile bodies of women. Nor is it that patriarchal culture enforces a set of rules onto the bodies of women and self-defenders finally free themselves of any rules, disciplines, or ideologies. Nor is it that women in self-defense unleash a naturally aggressive instinct. Self-defenders replace an old embodied code with a new one—a more pleasurable one and a differently consequential one. In the context of self-defense, imitation becomes mimesis. That is, conscious acts (imitation) of female aggression simply become new aspects of who the women are, such that, much like the feminine dispositions they had when they arrived to their first self-defense class, they no longer think of themselves as imitating anything (mimesis) (Bourdieu 1990, 73).

Students mention that the emotional part of self-defense is so much more than the physical, not only because they realize how often men assert their privilege in everyday situations (which do not involve a sexual assault and a response of physical self-defense) but also because they develop a new disposition, from which new sets of values are projected. In this way, the physical and the emotional impact of self-defense training are inseparable. Self-defense constitutes a habituating order that installs itself right into the daily lives of the women. The consequence is a new way of being in the world.

Women learn a new set of assertive responses to various forms of intimidation, threat, and harassment that fall on the continuum of sexual violence. Self-defenders sometimes remark on the "little assaults" they respond to with "little defenses." One instructor explains:

The physical aspect is such a little part of what self-defense is. We women are always defending ourselves all the time, just the little slurs on the street, the looks, the stares, interacting with a boss or teacher that's not taking you seriously. That's all self-defense. That's the harder part of self-defense. (Chimera instructor)

One woman who took a class offered by her local Rape Crisis Center (which included practice of verbal defense skills and explanations, but not practice, of physical defense) found the verbal assertiveness the most important aspect of self-defense training:

Verbally I think I'm even more inclined to say "NO." You know, not even address the comment, but just turn and yell "NO" or whatever, something. And the feeling that I had in that class with just saying that was really something positive, really empowering and, yeah, I think I'm more likely to do that. ... Physically I'm not sure.

Some women remarked that their increased self-confidence is a psychological effect of their training and concomitant sense of strength, distinct from the utility of their fighting techniques for specific threats. For instance, this boxer told me that although she thinks boxing is not really the best form of self-defense, she feels confident nevertheless:

The feeling I have now is different from what I had before. It feels like a sense of power but it's really about confidence. I don't feel afraid anywhere I go, even if it's in a bad neighborhood. And it may be foolish because someone could pull a gun or something. But I just don't have that fear anymore. Identifying yourself as a fighter and as somebody of strength.

This is not a simple false sense of security. Research has shown that a confident demeanor is a deterrent to attack, and a woman's belief that she can fight, and the concomitant willingness to put up a fight, are central components to successfully thwarting attacks in the vast majority of situations (Bandura 1977). A Rape Crisis Center self-defense course student, who explained that she was less certain about the physical aspect of self-defense than about the verbal, still feels increased confidence:

I think that I'm more confident. That I do feel a little more threatened but I also feel tougher and so when I get onto the subway, you know, I look around, I make eye contact with people, I have my back to the wall, and I just-that's, you know, kind of common, it was what I always knew from when I was little, but I do think I'm more confident about it.

Some simply find their ability to fight liberating and pleasurable: "It felt great to kick the shit out of a 6'2" guy (referring to the padded mugger in the class) (padded attacker course student). Women credit their self-defense courses for all kinds of changes they make in their lives-like getting divorced, starting their own businesses, going back to school, confronting an abuser, and getting over an eating disorder. It was common to hear women say things like: "The physical part of self-defense is only 'this' much [pinching thumb and forefinger almost together] and the emotional part is '*THIS*' much [stretching arms out wide]." One instructor remarked on the transformation, which she sees routinely in her students after their completion of her course, and its extension into many aspects of their lives:

[The transformation] is very swift and it's very exciting but I know that it continues. They move on, they end unhealthy relationships, they quit their jobs, they go back to school. They jump out of planes! They climb mountains, they start new businesses. I mean they just reach a place within themselves that they can do more than they have and they unleash that chain or the wall, or however you want to label it with that person, to pursue other things in life .... I've had students walk in here maybe six months later and I don't even recognize her because she's so proud of her appearance, and her body. (padded attacker course instructor)

This karate student explains that many aspects of her life have changed, including her dreams at night:

My dreams over time have changed from being always stopped and hiding and people trying to kill me and rape me to where right in the dream I would say "I know karate." And I would either stop them from doing it right there or wake up just as I was about to and then other times I'd be fighting back. And I know that what was happening was a real shift like in my understanding of who I am in the world and what I can do. (karate student, in Turaj 1993, 61)

One of the most striking transformations I found reported by women who took self-defense was a greater sense of courage around men in everyday situations. I heard many stories of women who noticed that they were less willing to put up with everyday intimidation, insults, and abuse. The following woman, a nurse who took three padded attacker courses and began boxing after that, described the transformation in her relationships with men at her workplace:

I didn't realize until after I took Model Mugging that when I was around the doctors I felt like I didn't exist. I felt like I was this little mouse running around in between all these big, important men and that they didn't even recognize my existence, that I didn't even have a right to expect them to recognize who I was, and that they were obviously far superior to me. Once I took Model Mugging-it wasn't like I thought all the doctors were going to beat me up-but somehow it gave me a sense of: I have a right to be here, I do exist, you have to recognize me, I have a right to challenge you, and I have a right to tell you what I want. And it kind of made me feel equal to the doctors.

Other students' comments suggest that they too stand up to men more often as a result of their self-defense training:

Before I felt equal and now I feel better. I used to feel I had more boundaries: I'm a woman so I have to go into the education field; I married a big, macho man. You know what I mean? I never really thought of it before. I feel stronger. I feel like the knowledge I have makes me feel stronger. I feel like I can defend myself if I need to. I feel safe by myself now. I'm not afraid to be in my house alone. I don't feel like a wimp anymore. I don't really ever feel afraid anymore. The last thing I want to do is go to an ATM at night, but I don't really feel afraid. (gun student)

A boxing student explained that sparring brought back painful memories of abuse, rendering her physically helpless during a match, but ultimately leading to a more healed, more confident state: "I was in an abusive relationship for three years, and it kind of brought that up-when I spar with my trainer it kind of brought all that up again. Fortunately, I have an understanding trainer." When asked if it was therapeutic, she replied,

Yes, I think for a long time I didn't think it really affected me as much as it did. I thought that since I had gotten out of the relationship I had kind of gotten over it. This one night we were having a particularly intense sparring match and all of a sudden I just had this flash of my old boyfriend coming at me and feeling helpless and not being able to defend myself. My trainer had me cornered and I wasn't fighting and I started crying. My trainer helped me face my fear and helped me realize I could defend myself. It just really changed my mindset that I don't have to be helpless and intimidated by somebody but that I could defend myself.

When asked if her response to abuse in an interpersonal relationship would now be different as a result of her training, the boxing student answered, "Yes, but I don't think it would be my first response to bust out with a right hook. The boxing has helped reinforce my self-confidence to know that I could leave that situation." Thus, the combat in self-defense classes can actually help assault survivors still struggling to come to terms with the powerlessness they once felt.

Of course, not all women are affected the same way by self-defense training. This student explained that she felt self-defense enhanced the assertiveness she already displayed:

I don't know if it like totally affected me, I know like some of my friends who took the class were much more affected by it than I was, in terms of having been a little bit more meek before they started. But I was always kind of loud and pushy so it didn't [affect me] as much. (Rape Crisis Center self-defense course student)

Although my data could not group experiences learning self-defense by "types" of women, and no statistics are available to tell us how many women have taken self-defense courses, some self-defense instructors have suggested the specific challenges common among women of specific subjugated racial ethnic groups. One self-defense instructor noticed that African American women in her self-defense classes were usually more psychologically prepared to channel their fear into anger and defend themselves and needed to learn physical skills more than the psychological ones (Searles and Berger 1987, 72). Bart and O'Brien (1985) found that Black women are more likely to resist and stop attacks than white women. Black women, on average, might have an easier time than other women mastering the mental aspects of self-defense.<sup>6</sup>

Native American women, according to DuShane (in Sanford and Fetter 1979,

164-65), often need more help with the mental aspects of self-defense. Often feeling that outsiders control their destinies, Native American women may experience assault as yet another instance in a life over which they have no control, making the mental self-worth component of self-defense particularly important. Chicanas and white women often face both physical and mental challenges learning self-defense. But unlike white women, the Chicana may be more likely to fear that the pride and physical strength involved in learning self-defense makes her a "manhater," taking her outside her own cultural frame of reference from within the context of racism (Benavidez, in Sanford and Fetter 1979, 162-63). Asian American women must learn self-defense in the context of stereotypical North American media portrayals of themselves as always sexually available to white men or as damsels in distress in Bruce Lee films (although martial arts films for Chinese-speaking audiences tend to portray men and women as equally strong in the martial arts) (Wong, in Sanford and Fetter 1979, 156-59). While the challenges of self-defense for women differentially positioned within a racist social structure vary, self-defense that teaches both physical skills and a confident, entitled attitude clearly benefits all of these women.

## **CONCLUSION: GETTING PHYSICAL IN BOTH THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Feminists have long been contesting the idea that gender differences are natural. My participant-observation research in self-defense courses reveals two important points for extending that feminist critique and thinking through the questions of how the discourse of sexual difference operates and how it might be challenged. First, this research reveals the level at which gender, an historical effect, is incorporated into the body. Second, it reveals the significance of aggression as a marker of sexual difference, and the corresponding importance of learning physical aggression as a route to challenging the discourse of sexed embodiment. When the self-defender confounds the script of helpless female victim and unstoppable male attacker, she is refusing the sex-class status that the attack attempts to impose. Self-defense enables us to see gender ideology operating not just at the level of ideas, social interaction, and relationships, (as though the effects of ideology are limited to one's beliefs, roles, or psychology), but at the level of the body as well.

Some women might think that self-defense makes them unnaturally capable, hence leaving gender undeconstructed. I do not suggest that women's cultivation of aggression is an essentialist unfolding-as though the aggression or the fighter identity was there and simply repressed due to female socialization (a narrative that Jackson [1993, 125] suggests characterizes self-defense instruction). Self-defense students do not release a more real, albeit dormant, instinct. They adopt a new behavior; this behavior is as imposed as women's old behavior (e.g., an inability to kick hard) once was. Self-defense enables us "to imagine the female body as subject to change, as a potential object of fear and agent of violence" (Marcus 1992, 400). The male attacker and his female victim are not in some primal predator-prey

relationship; those are precisely the terms of the event that the act of self-defense rejects.

When women learn how to respond aggressively to thwart assaults, they realize that feminine niceness is a historical effect, not a natural given of womanhood. The body-self is transformed through rehearsals of aggression that solidify a new embodied ideal, not because a woman gets conscious of her political situation and then changes her behavior. This is the political, and feminist, importance of learning self-defense, beyond its ability to enforce women's refusal of attacks. When women get the fighting spirit they get the energy and resolve with which to protect themselves around violent men. By declaring the body an idea, a construction, and a materiality, the fighting spirit defies the traditional duality between body and spirit.

Feminist struggles over the body's inhabitant or owner and its exploiter or appropriator have failed to challenge the mind-body dualism (Grosz 1994, 9). The body is a compelling and important expression of cultural norms and ideologies, not just a thing that is harmed or controlled. We must not oppose the view of gender as deep inside one's body, as natural or inborn, by de-emphasizing the body altogether—as though cultural norms and ideologies are expressed by psychologies or disembodied wills or consciousnesses.

The body is significant, then, because it is a place where patriarchy is embodied in the flesh, or contested in the flesh. The fighting spirit of self-defenders urges a physical feminism, one that enlists the body as part of consciousness. This analysis of self-defense might enable us to meet Moira Gatens's (1996) insistence that bodies are always "imaginary," not with cautionary references to the bodily injury of gender violence but instead with heartened relief that we might expose gender violence as a practice reliant on imaginary bodies, and simultaneously imagine new versions of female embodiment that defy rather than accommodate rape culture.

A practical outcome of this theoretical shift is that feminists, and anti-sexual assault activists specifically, put more emphasis on self-defense. However, women's pleasurable engagement with violence in the context of their past and/or potential victimization by men's violence presents somewhat of a quandary for feminists. But as long as we continue to construe violence as something patriarchal and bad, the binary opposite of which must be good, virtuous, feminist nonviolence, and deny the inherent complexities of deciding which is which, we will see men as the only ones capable of violence and agency. The corollary of this is that the female body will continue to be seen as a nonagent—an object of patriarchal violence. And while the female body is seen as an object abused in patriarchy, it will be nearly impossible for feminist activists to imagine that women might interrupt the embodied ethos of rape culture, train to thwart attacks, and disrupt rape culture by embracing the very threat of violence that men have used to keep women in line. Feminism, unfortunately, will symbolize a paradoxical position uninteresting to many women: All bad things are violent/patriarchal, all victims are innocent, and women can only be either nonagenic

victims or agenic anti-feminists. Self-defense pushes feminism out of this stance and allows us to celebrate women's agency while not denying the ways women are victimized. Oppression and resistance work together in women's lives; our analyses and our activism need not trade one for the other.

## NOTES

1. This definition of rape culture, adapted from Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth (1993), is meant to avoid a narrow definition that might exclude forms of male violence that women commonly experience and fear, and that are as bound up with normative gender expectations as rape is. Hence, *rape culture* denotes a culture that supports and excuses not only rape, but also woman beating, incest, and other forms of sexual assault. Such crimes have been deemed "gender-motivated assaults" by the Judiciary Committee on the Violence Against Women Act of 1990 because they are not simply individual or personal injuries but rather gender-motivated forms of discrimination (Biden 1990, 40-41).

2. An important exception must be noted here. Most rapes are intraracial (as are most violent crimes more generally) and committed against someone the assailant knows (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 30-31). But under statistically less probable circumstances, such as when a man sexually assaults a stranger or when a male ethnic minority assaults a white woman, the act of rape is more likely to be seen as aggressive or inappropriate and women's self-defense, if it occurs, is regarded with less skepticism. It should also be noted that Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data are somewhat misleading because so many date and acquaintance rapes are not even reported to the police.

3. My interviewees did not, and could not, constitute a random sample of women in self-defense courses across North America. Although I interviewed self-defense teachers and students in a variety of contexts, these people are not meant to represent the perspectives of all self-defenders. Most of my interviewees were white. Since no data exist to tell us how many women of different racial ethnic categories take various forms of self-defense, I cannot answer the question of how many white women versus women of color participate in self-defense. Some interviewees did not wish to reveal their racial ethnic identities or their sexual preferences, so I did not make conclusions about self-defense training and sexuality or race from my interview data.

All of the student interviews, and some of the instructor interviews, were anonymous. Some instructors chose to be identified either because they are already known publicly for their opinions or because they wanted their views to be known publicly and associated with their self-defense organization. I also use interview data collected by Gaddis (1990) and Turaj (1993), each of whom interviewed students at a specific self-defense instruction site (Model Mugging and karate, respectively) with lines of inquiry somewhat different from mine.

4. I realize that women's use of firearms for self-defense is a highly controversial subject. That controversy is given more attention in Mccaughey (1997). The arguments I make here, however, do not hinge on being either pro- or antigun. My research did include both armed and unarmed self-defense for women, and I did find that the metamorphosis this article discusses occurs in both armed and unarmed self-defense courses for women. My argument here implies only that anyone wishing to argue against women's use of firearms would be unable to do so on the grounds that self-defense training with firearms does not transform women.

Some feminists support women's bodily transformation through self-defense but remain skeptical of women's use of firearms, partly because they assume that firearms fail to transform the body in ways that padded attacker and martial arts courses do. One instructional self-defense videotape, for example, dismisses guns, like male protectors, as "outside the woman" (Grant 1989). Yet, I found that even a firearm transforms women's bodily comportment. Women have been associated with an inability to master technology and to handle guns specifically. Despite the irrelevance of one's size or strength for successfully operating a firearm, guns have been associated with masculine power and ability to use coercive force. Finally, the learning process in a firearms self-defense course is much the same as in other self-defense courses, encouraging women to rehearse aggressive responses to men's attacks. As Grosz (1994, 188) has stated, the body is capable of prosthetic synthesis. I suggest that the gun is a device that enables the body to transform its environment. Incorporating objects into the body's own spaces can augment its powers and capacities. Such objects, "while external, are internalized, added to, supplementing and supplemented by the 'organic body' (or what culturally passes for it), surpassing the body, not 'beyond' nature but in collusion with a 'nature' that never really lived up to its name" (Grosz 1994, 188).

5. Self-defense is not the only body project that might prove transformative for women or for rape culture. This analysis suggests that self-defense can be a transformative and feminist body project but does not attempt to suggest that it is the only such project.

6. This does not imply, however, that Black women escape the social dictates of femininity and have more freedom than white women. Black women are as routinely victimized by sexual assault, incest, and battery as other groups of women, and they also usually lack encouragement to fight. Certainly the ideal of the corseted woman, so weak she'd have to retire to the fainting couch for a spell, was one that only privileged white women could attain. But the social ideal is one that all women are measured against. Hence, an assumption that Black women do not need self-defense training would ignore the reality of their victimization and actually construct them as though their survival of harsh circumstances meant they are not vulnerable. Such logic dangerously conflates the racist stereotype that hasn't as easily allowed Black women to count as "feminine" with the reality of Black women's lives (see Ammons 1995).



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