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Emilia Aaltonen

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Punching Like a Girl: Embodied Violence and Resistance in the Context of Women's Self-Defense

By Emilia Aaltonen¹

Abstract

This essay explores the way discourses of gender and aggression can be combined in the female body. Traditionally, the female body has been seen as that of a victim and the man's body as that of an aggressor. Although the behaviours are absorbed through learning and repetitive action, these essentialist discourses of the gendered body have become naturalized. I suggest that gendered behaviours are not fixed and, just as they are learned in the first place, they can also be unlearned and replaced by new ones. Using the example of women's self-defense, the essay investigates how women can train their bodies to both cause and endure pain and, through this, challenge the traditional feminine corporeal habitus. Women's self-defense offers a theoretical, but, more importantly, a practical way of resisting women's victimization in contemporary patriarchal societies.

Keywords: women's self-defense, gender narratives of violence, body techniques

Introduction

Western cultures appear to be saturated with norms of bodily comportment linked to the socially significant categories of "male" and "female". From a very early age, we are encouraged to walk, sit, talk and eat in a "feminine" or "masculine" way, and our bodies become inscribed with cultural values and norms that tell us dichotomously, as women and men, which practices are acceptable to our gender and which not.

Violence and vulnerability are traits that have come to be strongly associated with the gendered body, and they have given rise to a "gendered grammar of violence" (Marcus, 1992: 392) that associates aggression and courage with masculinity, while weakness and vulnerability are equated with femininity. The essay focuses on these discourses, particularly on how they are embodied in the female subject.² I start from the premise that gender is performed (Butler, 1999), and that through repetitive action gendered discourses of violence and aggression have become embodied in individuals as habits that mould their bodies into particular postures, gestures and movement. However, while the body has become a primary site in which discourses of violence and vulnerability are perpetuated, I suggest that it is also in the flesh that these can be resisted. Therefore I accept the notion of the body as fluid and indeterminate as well as a site of human subjectivity (Csordas, 1993; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

¹ (enni@riseup.net) Emilia Aaltonen received her undergraduate degree from the University of Sussex in 2010 in Anthropology and Spanish. 'Punching like a Girl' was submitted as her final dissertation. As well as issues surrounding the concepts of gender, violence and the body, her interests include the relationship between gender, language and nationalist struggles. Emilia is currently on her second extended stay in the Basque Country and studying the Basque language.

² While I use "women" and "men" as analytical categories in the paper I recognize their inadequacy in explaining the experiences of a multitude of gender identities.

I begin this essay by exploring feminist discourses of the feminine body, which has been assigned the victim status either because of its “biological” attributes or, more recently, because of its inscribed gendered traits of passivity and docility. In both discourses, though in different ways, the fragility of the woman’s body becomes naturalized. I will then consider how habits of aggression and submission are formed and trained in the body, drawing on Marcel Mauss’ theory of “body techniques” (Mauss, 1973; 70) as well as on Iris Marion Young’s discussion on female body comportment (Young, 2005), and using these theories of learned behavior as a starting point for exploring how the body is capable of both learning new habits and challenging old ones.

Self-defense, here, functions as an example of a means through which women can incorporate knowledge of aggression in the form of fighting techniques, body postures and speech, into their somatic consciousness.³ The majority of material is drawn from semi-structured interviews which were conducted with seven self-defense and martial arts trainers and students, all of whose names have been changed.

Finally, as the issue of violence is a highly contested one in our society, I will briefly look into some views on the ethicopolitics of using one’s body as an “implement of violence” (Arendt, 1969) and explore potential risks involved in training one’s body to endure as well as to cause pain.

The Body as Enemy: Feminist Theories of the Body

The view of feminists of the female body has tended to be a victimizing one. While it is recognized as a central element and target of patriarchal oppression, its perceived fixedness and controllability have made it appear useless for a theory that would aim to change women’s position in society (Grosz, 1994). In addition, the Cartesian mind/body dualism, within which the body is commonly equated with the feminine and the mind with the masculine, is another reason for the reluctance of feminists to pay much attention to the body and to focus rather on women’s intellectual capacities and equality with men (Ibid. 1994). While some feminists, such as Susan Brownmiller (Brownmiller, 1975), described the (woman’s) body as a precultural and ahistorical entity which inherently contributed to their physical oppression, it has in recent decades been largely ignored in feminist writing, which has tended to see it as a product of cultural inscriptions.

Brownmiller and other second wave feminists tended to see rape as something which is at the centre of women’s oppression, and the idea was promoted that, following Brownmiller, the “*male’s structural capacity to rape and the female’s corresponding structural vulnerability are as basic to the physiology of both our sexes as the primal act of sex itself*” (Ibid. 1975: 13). More specifically, Brownmiller suggested that the reason for this lies in the construction of their genital organs which have made the male a “*natural predator*” for whom the female serves as “*natural prey*” (Ibid. 1975: 14). Within

³ Although I present self-defense as an example of women using violence, I don’t wish to suggest that female aggression is confined to this, or that it is a new social phenomenon.

this framework the female body is a biological trap through which the woman is rendered inherently weak and violable. Men's bodies are seen to yield weapons, while women's bodies are characterized by the lack of them.

The idea of women's inherent violability has since been rejected by many feminists, who have argued that there is no natural essence of femininity, but women are rather trained to fit a certain role in society. Long before Brownmiller, Simone de Beauvoir claimed that "*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*" (de Beauvoir, 1993: 281). Her statement asserts that "feminine traits" such as passivity and victimhood cannot be reduced to some mystical essence of femininity, but they are, instead, learned through processes of social sexing. In relation to using one's body in a violent manner, de Beauvoir notes that while young boys "*go through a real apprenticeship of violence, when their aggressiveness is developed*", girls give up aggressive games (Ibid. 1993: 347). Although this view importantly highlights the role of cultural processes in the formation of corporeal habits of the gendered social subjects, it grants very little space for individual subjects to challenge the roles that have been ascribed to them. The body is seen as an empty shell, a blank slate onto which cultural values are projected, and it is only important insofar as it helps us to gain a better understanding of ideological social components.

Perhaps one of the most influential scholars to describe the body as a site onto which regimes of discourse and power are projected is Michel Foucault. He draws attention to how normative categories, such as sex and gender, are created as regulatory ideals through which an individual's body is governed and controlled. In a critique of modern society, Foucault (Foucault, 1977: 138) describes how bodies are managed through disciplinary practices which produce subjected and practiced "docile bodies". However, pointing out the lack of gender analysis in Foucault's theory on discipline, Sandra Lee Bartky (Bartky, 1988) extends this framework into a feminist model and suggests that the woman's flesh in contemporary society is moulded to a much more severe level of docility than that of men. Their postures, gestures, mobility and body shape are controlled by disciplinary regimes, and the male gaze is aimed at the production of an idealized and homogenized femininity. The result, according to Bartky, is a particularly strongly trained and subjected body to which an inferior status has been given and one that is geared towards undermining any desire for social change. What all of these examples have in common is their profound distrust of women's bodies, which are considered above all as their enemies. Constrained either by biology or ideology, women's bodies speak silently of their oppression.

Forming the feminine subject

Mauss (Mauss, 1973) and Young (Young, 2005) have described in more detail how corporeal existence becomes moulded into certain habits and body techniques, and their analyses can serve as a means of explaining of how such habits can be challenged and subverted. While postures, gestures and types of mobility, cannot be considered natural or innate, they are trained in our bodies to the extent that they come to be considered second nature (Butler, 1999). Mauss, in "Techniques of the Body" (Mauss, 1973), introduces the view that "body techniques" (Ibid. 1973: 71) reflect cultural regimes and are acquired through imitative and repetitive action by which they become mechanical.

Body techniques are constitutive of the “habitus” (Ibid. 1973: 73) which Mauss describes as those aspects of culture that are embedded in the corporeal habits of individuals and social groups.⁴ Deriving from the Latin *habere* (to have or to hold) (Stein 1973: 634), the embodied habitus relates to movement as well as body postures and gestures.

While Mauss does not explore in detail the specifics of female body comportment, this has been further explored by Young (Young, 2005). Young uses a phenomenological approach to analyze the modalities of feminine comportment, the manner of moving, and its relation with space. Following Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of the lived body as transcendence that moves out of the body and upon the world as pure fluid action, she concludes that, in contrast, the orientation and movement of the woman’s body display restricted modes of embodiment and are rooted in immanence. Drawing on Erwin Straus’ depiction of male and female body comportment in throwing, Young argues that while boys use their whole bodies to “*reach back, twist, move backward, step and lean forward*” (Ibid. 2005: 32), girls remain immobile apart from the arm which carries out the action. The way that women are taught to use their bodies, therefore, commonly fails to summon the full strength they have in their muscles, and, with the lack of use of certain muscles, their power further diminishes. This, according to Young (Ibid. 2005), leads to a feeling of being distanced from one’s body and existing, therefore, in discontinuity with it, a feeling which is further enhanced by society’s constant gaze upon the shape and size of the female body which becomes to be seen as an object or “thing”.

Bodily comportment functions as the primary means by which we identify with social groups that are based, for example, on class, age and gender, but also a means by which others may recognize us as belonging to these specific groups (Mauss, 1973). According to Luis Althusser, the element of recognition is important in the process of “interpellation” (Althusser, 1984: 47). The act of recognition displays the normative functions of a dominant discourse and it is important both for the person who is interpellating, who recognizes the person who is interpellated, and for the person who recognizes that it is them at whom the interpellation is directed (Ibid. 1984). The paradoxical condition of the subject is that she is both formed and confirmed by the act of recognition in the process of interpellation.

The violence which is implicit in the process of interpellation becomes explicit, for example, in a rape situation in which the “recognition” of the victim through embodied discourse of gender leads to their interpellation as one. Susan Marcus (Marcus, 1992) elaborates on this process asserting that rape is a script-like process that takes place as part of a naturalized “gendered grammar of violence” (Ibid. 1992: 392). This is based on normative assumptions about embodied gender and includes the elaboration of men’s aggression and power in contrast to the docility and powerlessness of women. In this way, rape can be seen as an act of violent social sexing, where the social woman is raped by the social man who attacks her on the basis of her status as feminine and, a victimized social subject. The process is both scripted and scripting (Marcus, 1992) as the victim

⁴ The concept of habitus has been developed further by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977), who expanded it to mean a person’s mental dispositions and beliefs.

becomes further “feminized” by the act itself (Monique de Wittig in de Lauretis, 1987: 36).⁵

While the seemingly preconditioned models of interpellation and embodied narratives of violence and submission present a very passive framework that grants little agency to its subjects, body language can also be used as a premise from which to interrupt the gendered grammar of violence precisely because of its script-like nature (Marcus, 1992: 393). While neither Mauss nor Young explicitly discuss the possibility of changing habits, their theoretical basis, that habits are not natural but instead formed through repetitive action, can be used as a starting point for their transformation (Carlisle, 2006).⁶

Fighting Bodies: Embodied Aggression in Women’s Self-Defense

The following analysis draws on material that was gathered in interviews with self-defense and martial arts students and teachers. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and in informal contexts (in cafes and at people’s homes). Although questions had been prepared in advance, many of the interviews turned into more informal conversations in which interviewees were allowed to describe their experiences of self-defense without constantly being prompted by questions. The informal character of the interviews often opened up unexpected, yet interesting terrains.

In self-defense classes women learn through their bruised bodies and their exhausted muscles effective techniques of kicking, punching and even killing their opponents. Through these techniques, as well as by learning to assert themselves aggressively through body posture, gestures and speech, women embrace the potential for violence in their bodies, and challenge women’s status as victims in the gendered grammar of violence.

Initial suspicion of one’s bodily capacities and the internalization of women’s aggression as a taboo become apparent in the interviews. A mixture of distrust in the strength of their own body and the fear of hurting someone else’s combine into hesitation and half-hearted attempts to carry out drills. Participants mentioned frustration with getting used to the idea that they were able to, or even allowed to, use their bodies in a violent way. In addition, traditional ideas of femininity appeared to be perpetuated even in some of the combat classes. This was the case for Jenny,⁷ who mentioned how she was told by her karate teacher that she was punching like a girl and should try harder. Another participant, Kate,⁸ described how she had to repeat the move several times before she felt able to punch her opponent in the face even when they were wearing a padded face-covering helmet.

Kate: “My teacher just told me to keep punching and punching until I felt like I was not holding back anymore and using all my strength. And it took

⁵ Male rape victims are also “feminized” by the act (Monique de Wittig in de Lauretis, 1987: 36).

⁶ Butler (in Mills, 2007) uses the same model to describe how norms can be transformed (only, however, to create new ones).

⁷ Karate student for five years.

⁸ Student for one and a half years in Systema, a Russian Martial Art with a strong component of self-defense.

me quite a while but then in the end I was able to do it ... It was strange not to feel worried about me being able to actually hurt someone.”

This sentiment was echoed by Maria:⁹

“It is interesting how when you show women the weak points in someone and how you can kill someone. Most of the time it makes them really scared. You can see it in their eyes they just look really scared ... It is one of the most terrifying ideas when ... you are not used to thinking about yourself as violent.”

The above citations demonstrate how the process of learning violent body techniques firstly involves the breaking of the taboos about the gendered grammar of violence to oneself. It became apparent that practicing combat moves through simple repetitive drills was key in the process of learning as, through this, punches and kicks that at first felt unnatural began to feel more fluent and familiar.

Interviewees also mentioned difficulties they had had with coordinating different parts of their body, referred to by Young (Young, 2005) as a key reason for why women fail to summon their full strength in moves, but, as Lisa notes,¹⁰ these also became easier with repetitive drills:

“Well in the beginning all these moves seem really impossible and just kind of unnatural and I’m like “I would never do that in a real situation!” but then you start getting used to them and notice that they are quite effective. I find it quite hard to position my hands sometimes...sometimes the teacher says to me that “your hand is just hanging down, use it like I showed you”, and all that time I didn’t even realize that I hadn’t moved it. It’s like it’s not part of my body. And then when I did use my arm I found it hard to use my whole body with it. Like when I first tried to punch I just did it with my arm and kind of forgot about the rest of my body.”

Young (Ibid. 2005) claims that because of being conditioned to see their body as an object to be gazed at, women exist in discontinuity with it and do not feel entirely in control of its movements. This notion became evident in Anna’s¹¹ experiences as a teacher when she was asked about the difficulties that students encountered in learning self-defense techniques. She described how some students struggled with a lack of “body sense” (although not all of them) and having to repeat a move several times before learning it:

⁹ Student and teacher in women’s self-defense, especially in the form of ‘Wendo’, which is a non hierarchical feminist self-defense movement originating in Canada. It includes women sharing skills in horizontally organized classes and self-defense gatherings. Maria has been training for the last ten years.

¹⁰ Kickboxing student for two years.

¹¹ Student and teacher in women’s self-defense. Ten years of experience in self-defense and martial arts. Currently enrolled in kickboxing classes.

“There’s people who you can see don’t have such a good...aren’t really in their bodies as much as others ... so when you’re trying to show them something they just like...it really takes them a long time to get the move right.”

Contrasting these difficulties with her own experiences, however, Anna mentioned that she did not generally find it difficult to learn new combative techniques. She suggested that this was the result of her long involvement in martial arts and self-defense, which meant that her body had learned fighting tactics at a very young age, and these had become ingrained in her comportment through repetition.

Dale Spencer (Spencer, 2009: 120) also underlines repetition as a key component in the development of the “MMA fighter habitus”. He emphasizes bodily repetition “*without thinking*” and describes how a MMA trainer makes (male) students repeat combat moves “*like parrots*” (Ibid. 2009: 128). Trying to prevent students from thinking about the move too much he asks them: “*Do you guys know what a parrot does? ... A parrot repeats exactly what you say. It does not think, it just does it. Just do the move, don’t think. It will make sense to you later*” (in Spencer, 2009: 128).

The importance of repetition was echoed by all interviewees who mentioned how it helped them to gain confidence in both channeling aggression into their punches and kicks, and realizing that their bodies were capable of receiving them.

While it was relatively easy to establish some similarities amongst participants concerning how they had learned combat moves and how this had changed the sense they had of their bodies, it was surprisingly hard to establish consistent patterns of difficulty or ease in relation to different moves. Self-defense trainer Anna, for example, pointed out that “*everyone finds something different difficult*”. While some found it hard to shout during training, she herself had never experienced problems with this. Some found it hard to hit or punch hard, but kicking came more easily to them, while for others it was the other way round. Anna herself mentioned finding physically aggressive body techniques easy, whereas trying to be otherwise physically assertive or trying not to be polite in drills did not come so easily to her. Lisa found it hard to punch using her whole body, while Lucy¹² had never had problems with it. These examples demonstrate the importance of accepting the multitude of experiences of embodied aggression between different women.

As well as violent body techniques, the interviewees spoke about the significance of everyday body language as a form of self-defense. Its importance within the embodied scripts of violence and passivity became clear in their descriptions of self-defense situations where gestures that indicated fragility had been transformed into ones that contained within them the potential for violence.¹³

Body Postures, Speech and “Unlearning” Politeness

Although learning fighting techniques is an essential part of women’s self-defense, none of the participants in this study had ever had to use violent self-defense skills in a

¹² Kickboxing student for ten years.

¹³ See also Bartky’s interesting description (Bartky, 1988) of gender and body language as it appears in Marianne Wex’s photographic study.

one-to-one confrontation. Many of them were of the opinion that learning to assert themselves through postures, gestures, and voice were skills that they needed a great deal more. These had been most useful in public speaking, crowd situations and feeling uncomfortable with someone else's behavior. Assertive body language can be seen as part of the gendered grammar or narrative of violence, therefore containing within them the potential for violence.

Anna: "When you're like feeling a little bit sketchy ... I really do recall the self-defense training that I've had in my life ... and think "no!" and walk down the street, all strong ... you know put your head up, don't slouch."

This also came across in Mia's¹⁴ experience. She described how her assertive body posture acted as a preemptive form of self-defense. She explained how on her way home at night across an empty car park, she suddenly noticed how a man was following her some 15 meters behind. Although feeling panicked and simply wanting to start running, she realized her chances of getting home, if the man started running after her, were slim. So after some hesitation she decided to stop, turn around, and simply stand there and stare at the man in the most assertive posture that she could do. To her surprise and relief, the man stopped, took one look at her and walked away.

Expanding the understanding of embodied femininity by asserting oneself differently seems to have worked both because of the potential of violence that it contained and because of the element of surprise that came with subverting what was thought of as correct feminine behavior. Maria described how she was accused of being crazy when she faced a person on the street who had only minutes ago stolen her mobile phone:

"I went up to him, grabbed his hand which he had hidden underneath his coat and took back my mobile phone. The guy just looked shocked and started shouting "she's crazy, she's crazy!" and I walked off. This is also what is important in self-defense, the surprise element. Men don't expect you to turn around and assert yourself in any way, they think you're crazy or just stupid."

The accusation that Maria would be crazy because she acted in an unexpected way and thus ceased to be a "*grammatically correct feminine subject*" (Marcus, 1992: 395) echoes the idea that behavior which challenges norms is rendered unintelligible (Foucault, 2001). This idea was also cultivated in self-defense classes. Mia, for example, described how she always suggested to her students some everyday strategies by which women can assert themselves through "*un-ladylike*" means:

"If you are attacked, use all the things that you have always been told not to do in public because these are the ones that will shock them the most. If someone is bothering you in a bar talk to him with your face close to his face

¹⁴ Self defense student and teacher for eight years.

and talk so that your spit flies in his way not like deliberately provocative but just so he gets a bit disgusted and leaves. It's not really ladylike to do that and that's why it works. If you seriously get attacked, use all the moves you can remember, the simplest ones, but if you get really stuck just do anything, piss yourself, shit yourself, that'll really throw him off his track."

Politeness can be seen as a repressive force that is strongly associated with control and submission in society. Norbert Elias (Elias, 2000) suggests that cultivating politeness combined with a critique of bodily aggression was an important part of the "civilizing process" through which individuals became better controlled and "tamed". Politeness, he argues, is often expected from inferiors and people in a more vulnerable position in society.

Many feminist scholars have described how women's facial expressions and comportment are trained to display politeness and deference from an early age (see, for example, Henley, 1977; Bartky, 1988; or Brown (in Coates), 1988). This is echoed by McCaughey in her ethnography of women's self-defense (McCaughey, 1997) where she describes how it took women several attempts not to smile or say sorry when they were learning to punch their opponent, for example. This was echoed by self-defense trainer Anna who mentioned that "not being polite" was an important component of the self-defense classes she had taught. She described how in drills where women were encouraged to make an assertion to a hypothetical opponent without being polite, many of them found it hard not to consider themselves rude as soon as they "*stopped saying please and thank you after every other word*".

"We did exercises where you're supposed to say something or ask for something without smiling or saying excuse me, please, thank you and people are constantly just going "ups!" It's almost impossible for a lot of people ... they think they're being really rude."

As politeness is a trait which is often associated with "correct" femininity, the breach of this habit can act as an effective form of self-defense. Lucy pointed out how she had found even mildly rude behaviour extremely effective in protecting her personal space. She described how she had used this skill on several occasions when she had been harassed on the street. Moments later in the interview, however, it came across that this was something she had not originally learned in her self-defense class but mainly in "*growing up on dodgy council estates*". While avoiding deterministic categorizations of individuals on the basis of their living environment, when discussing women's experiences with, and embodied responses to violence, it is necessary to recognize the diversities between individuals from different social strata, and cultural background. It can be suggested that hegemonic discourses concerning violence and its relation to women are constructed through a paradigm which favours the experiences, or the perceived experiences, of a particular section of society, that is, of white, heterosexual and middle class women. It is important also to recognize the existence of an "off-space" (De Lauretis, 1987: 18) or "off-spaces" which subsist in the margins of hegemonic discourse, allowing for a multiplicity and heteronomy of lived experience.

Elias (Elias, 2000) points out that while politeness and bodily self-constraint first became traits that individuals of socially inferior status had to display to their superiors, in the systems of class, for example, these were methods of social control that were developed and upheld especially by the economic elite sections of society who considered the rudeness of their inferiors as primitive. Politeness cannot therefore be considered an attribute which is homogeneously displayed in excess amongst women of all social strata.

In relation to women and aggressive or combative sports, it is thus interesting to look at the historical differences in social class and the acceptance of violent behaviour. Boxing, for example, was widely accepted among working class women already in the 18th and 19th centuries, and in boxing matches “*the woman’s body was imbued with aggression and strength similar to physical capital of working men*” (Hargreaves 1997: 4). Due to its low class status, however, women’s boxing remained largely a marginalized activity, and middle class women who saw themselves as more sophisticated, looked down on the boxing working class women as primitive and uncivilized. This evidence suggests that neither politeness nor aggression can be considered (un)common in all women, but they have to be considered in relation to social variables as well as the historical context.

The embodied experiences from the self-defense classes that the interviewees described demonstrate that the body is not fixed in space or in time, but it is a lived through structure that is in a constant process of change. Assertive body postures, speech and fighting skills are formed through repetitive drills by which a new sense of the self as someone who is capable of embodying discontentment and aggression is acquired. However, while it is possible for individuals to learn new habits by repeating them, these have to continue be practiced in order for them to remain in the somatic conscious. As Lucy pointed out, after training in kickboxing for 10 years, if she missed a couple of classes, once she started again, it took her a while to feel confident in attacking as well as being attacked: “*You just have to remind yourself a bit of the strategies that you’ve learned so that you don’t really hurt someone or let yourself be hurt*”.

Lucy’s assertion demonstrates how body techniques form a paradoxical self which is, at once, fixed in its habits and fluid because habits depend on repetition for their affirmation. Habits can be cultivated in the body, and the formation of new bodily habits in self-defense is significantly complemented by an increased awareness of the body as an entity which is capable of transformation. This leads to the formation of a more creative sense of the body, which can choose to embrace (or not) new learned habits in each situation. Maria pointed out that just as fighting someone off physically is self-defense, so is deciding not to do so. Others in my study pointed out that self-defense was not just about being able to kick, punch or kill someone; it was about knowing that your body is capable of these tasks in a situation where they might be considered necessary. While I suggest that awareness of the body’s capabilities increases with self-defense training, this is not something that is confined only to self-defense classes. Maria’s point that self-defense is something which all women can use all the time supports this:

“Women should not feel like only if they go to self-defense class will they learn to defend themselves. All women should know that they have already

at one point or another in their lives acted in self-defense. This can include showing someone verbally or physically that they are invading your personal space, but also deciding not to engage in confrontation is self-defense”.

The agency and freedom of the individual is contained in the element of choice combined with an awareness of their body as an entity that is capable of change, and, through this, of creative action. The habit is thus transformed from “*a force of bondage to a force of liberation*” (Carlisle, 2006: 33).

The Ethics of Violence

“Violence is the authentic proof of each one’s loyalty to himself (sic), to his (sic) passions, to his (sic) own will ... anger and revolt that does not get into the muscles remains a figment of the imagination. It is a profound frustration not to be able to register one’s feelings upon the face of the world”. (De Beauvoir, 1993: 138)

While the evidence I have given suggests that self-defense is not confined to violent means, learning violent tactics is an essential part of it. Because of the sensitive nature of violence and its destructive potential, the ethicopolitics of violence is an important aspect of the discussion (Arendt, 1969). Although learning violent body techniques can be seen as an important move to break the gendered grammar of violence, where the male-as-aggressor and female-as-victim setting becomes naturalized, feminists have generally been suspicious about violent bodies precisely because of the fact that those of men have been among the main tools that have been associated with the oppression of women. The question has been raised whether, as an unintended consequence of the emphasis of the violent woman’s body, there is a possibility that they will act increasingly in the destructive and oppressive ways that men of the same socio-political setting have done (Bar-On, 2002).

I suggest that, because all bodies are lived through and informed by different socially and historically constructed experiences and methods of embodiment, the ways in which they choose to embrace, or not, violent body techniques, are multiple. Therefore rather than reducing the justification of violence to the dichotomous gender identities, I suggest that a much more complex set of social and economic components intertwined with questions of gender are at play in each situation. Most importantly it is necessary to distinguish between grassroots violence and violence carried out by those in power or acting within “repressive state apparatuses” (Althusser, 1984: 11). The violent abuses carried out by women police officers or soldiers¹⁵ should not be compared with the violent means women might use to protect themselves against, for example, their abusive husbands.

I agree with Hanna Arendt’s idea (Arendt, 1969) that there is nothing intrinsically evil in the use of violence because as well as acting as a repressive force, it can be used

¹⁵ A recent and widely publicized example of this being the abuses carried out by women soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

for protection and as a force of liberation. While she expresses worry over the capacity of violence to run loose, she asserts that the use of violence and violent self-defense is justifiable as long as “*the danger is not only clear but also present ... the end justifying the means is immediate*” (Arendt, 1969: 52).

Although self-defense is often accepted in the liberal paradigm as a woman’s “right”, I propose that the concept of self-defense is not entirely unproblematic. The responses relating to its ethicopolitics become more complex and less accepting when there is a move away from the image of the lonely woman being accosted in the alleyway to a situation where the aggressor is not an individual man but a repressive entity, such as the state¹⁶ or even a women’s fashion store. If a clothes chain promotes the image of a starved woman as ideal embodied femininity, leading to women’s low self-esteem, eating disorders, and through this, even death, can sabotaging their billboards or breaking their shop windows, for example, be justified in ethicopolitical terms as self-defense? Carrie Hamilton (Hamilton, 2007) suggests that we move away from the idea that the formation of violent female bodies is justified only as immediate self-defense against violent men and rape, and consider the idea that sexual liberation is always linked to many other types of liberation.

I suggest that, as things stand at the moment, women using their bodies violently, apart from in one-to-one self-defense situations, face much more severe criticism than men in similar situations. They also often face a double punishment; the official punishment carried out by the state as well as societal ostracism because, as summed up by one of the interviewees:

“We are there to give life, to give birth, not to kill it or destroy it. But then how many women’s lives have been destroyed by violence? So we have to realize that violence is necessary sometimes in order to keep ourselves alive, so violence can also be a positive thing. Violence can also bring life.”

Society comprises manifold levels of violent oppression as well as resistance to it, and a certain gender identity cannot be considered a marker to either justify or condemn violent body techniques as such. One body’s potential for harming another may always imply both repression and liberation.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that body techniques and habits can be challenged, reworked and transformed. I have attempted to show how, by cultivating a “ready-to-fight-body” (Bar On, 2002:149), women not only challenge their own beliefs about their capabilities but also subvert normative gendered narratives of violence which equate femininity with passivity and victimhood.

While the study set out to study women’s self-defense with the focus on violent body techniques in mind, in the process it has become evident that equal, if not more, importance should be placed on more subtle methods of self-defense, such as assertive

¹⁶ For an interesting article on female ETA militants and how they justify their use of violence against the Spanish state in terms of self-defense see Hamilton (Hamilton, 2007).

gestures and speech. This was voiced by Maria, for example, who mentioned that in one of her first self-defense classes listening to women describe situations in which they had felt threatened and had to defend themselves, she realized that self-defense was important because it was not only the relatively rare violent attack from the man in a dark alley of which one should be afraid but also everyday abuses and invasions of physical space. This was also evident in the way Anna justified the importance of body language in women's self-defense.

“We do live in an intimidating and abusive society where you can't really expect your personal boundaries to be respected and you have to kind of struggle to get what you want, be treated like you want...and that's something you have to deal with and you're not necessarily given the tools for it because you're supposed to be always so accommodating. It's part of finding some power in a world that tries to make you powerless.”

What became clear through my interviews was that while bodies function in a world in which rigid cultural regimes and processes of socialization are at play, they are not constrained by them. While Young (Young, 2005) suggests that women's bodies are rooted in immanence, learning to channel aggression into powerful and concentrated punches and kicks in self-defense offers an example of how this pattern can be broken.

Self-defense teaches women not only to defend themselves physically but, more importantly, it challenges the social taboo of violent women. To recognize the possibility of both gender norms and discourse to have violent consequences to individuals, on both material and structural level, is an important task (Butler, 2004; Monique Wittig in De Lauretis, 1987), and, I suggest, therefore, that the theoretical and practical deconstruction of the gendered discourses of both violence and victimhood may, as such, act as a form of self-defense.

In his boxing ethnography, Wacquant suggests that with training the body in the use of certain body techniques, it is not only the physique of the individual which is being transformed “*but also his (sic) “body-sense”, the consciousness he (sic) has of his organism, and through his (sic) changed body, of the world around him (sic)*” (Wacquant, L. J. D, 1995: 73. Italics added). This is also the case in women's self-defense where, through learning a combination of combat moves and techniques of bodily assertiveness, women develop a new awareness of their surroundings through their bodies, which come to be seen as entities that are not only capable of docility but also of rebellion. With this new sense of the body, attention is drawn to women as agents in their own right that are not just fought for, or fought over, by others, but which are capable of fighting their own battles.

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