

POLITICIZING EMBODIED VIOLENCE: EMERGING AND DIVERGING FRAMES OF
SELF-DEFENSE

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This study bridges the gap between self-defense classes whose founders, instructors, and students are predominantly white, advocating for an individualistic and embodied self-defense, compared to the self-defense practiced by women of color that took a different form, communal and armed. Given this disparity I ask, “What happens to women’s bodies as they “do” self-defense”? I asked women about possible changes in their bodies given the tools acquired from a self-defense class. I found that racial differences significantly intervene in the self-defense classroom. I also asked, “How is a body implicated in a class dedicated to changing its capacities?” Two components proved to be crucial in turning a feminine body into a fighting body, fear and failure accompanied with laughter and expulsion of real harm. Taken together, this research asks, “What is the relationship of the self-defense body to communities that produced them?” Historically, quite different types of self-defense emerge, differing by the class and racial makeup of surrounding communities. How is this history embedded in the body? Overall, this project brings together historical as well as contemporary iterations of self-defense to ask, what does self-defense ask of the body, and what in turn does it do to it?

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Conflicting Definitions of Self-Defense

Contemporary claims posed by a body's right to self-defense can be traced all the way back to racial apartheid. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s deftly deployed self-defense rhetoric to stake a claim for civic inclusion. Far from a homogenous movement, civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and his friend and adversary Malcolm X, would draw on self-defense in opposing ways. Influenced by Franz Fanon (1961) and the post-colonial body, Malcolm X saw physical violence as the embodiment of a revolutionary uprising, a necessary show of strength to cast off the chains of oppression, both physical and psychological. Martin Luther King Jr. could not disagree more. King sought to bring the Black community into the national fold as full and equal citizens through civil disobedience – he stressed that absorbing the blows of white rage with one's body was the only path to Emancipation for Black life. Because intimidation and violence were such a core component of oppressing Black life, King preached that violence could not be the answer to dismantling the system of violence.

In contrast, Malcolm X wanted reform “by any means necessary” as he laid out in a famous speech “The Ballot or the Bullet” (Malcolm X 1964). Malcolm claimed that Black people have a right to self-defense, to defend themselves against racist, state-sanctioned violence. His father murdered by white supremacists; Malcolm makes the case that Black self-defense against racial terror is the only strategy to restore Black humanity (Peniel 2020). The praxis by which liberation occurs necessarily involves the body fighting back, a theoretical orientation to liberation that was not shared by the more liberal and popular ends of the Civil Rights Movement that advocated a rising above physical altercation through respectability politics. To be clear, both men spoke of self-defense, each with his own version of what our bodies do in and through self-defense. Black humanity was displayed by restraint and composure in the face of white brutality, King argued. It would be Malcolm X's radical strand of Black liberation that had the

most influence on the Black Power Movement and the radical strain of the Women's Self-Defense Movement that emerged roughly a decade later.

About ten years after the brutal assassination of both men, a group of radical mostly white women would begin the Women's Self-Defense Movement, an offshoot of the 2nd wave of the Women's Liberation Movement. The founding members of the Women's Self-defense Movement sought to end violence against women in a variety of ways. Ranging from self-publishing radical feminist thought, to setting up hotlines for battered women, to hosting retreats or organizing classes where women could learn self-defense instruction from other women, women's self-defense was an exciting if fringe component of the second wave. With roots in martial arts and schooled in feminist theory, women learning to physically defend themselves from violence became a kind of feminism that individual women could quite literally hold in their hands and carry in their bodies ensuring their own safety. This epistemology was not unlike Malcolm X's call for liberation through violent uprising. His principles are in line with the feminist self-defense principles of returning misogynistic violence with violence as the only way to ensure safety for women. Though radical in root, women's self-defense was far from inclusive about the women it could serve. The individualized and physical nature of self-defense as a solution, would select the kinds of abuses one could consider gendered violences at all. The women who could access classes to learn self-defense and learned to deploy physical tactics to prevent victimization were well served by the newly awakened sense of embodied self-value. The women who could not access these spaces took a separate path to classifying what constitutes violence against women and how to defend against it.

Epistemology of Violence Against Women

Before Women's Self-Defense was an organized front, "violence against women" was a phrase socially agreed upon to encompass a wide array of discrimination, harassment, and assault visited upon women on account of their gender. There were several attempts at incorporating a disparate range of injustices into a single category that would help define and delineate various abuses against women. In 1975, before sexual harassment as an actionable concept existed, Carmita Wood, an administrative assistant

was made ill and eventually quit her job after years of being propositioned, kissed, and groped by her boss.

The lawyers who took on Carmita Wood's case, the first of its kind, (filed for unemployment compensation claiming she was forced to quit her job) brainstormed on what to call her experience. They knew that the lack of a name for this experience was unlike an innocent gap in a system of naming, this "was no plain epistemic bad luck, for it was no accident that [her] experience had been falling down the hermeneutical cracks" as philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007:153) put it. It was "no accident" that Carmita or any other woman experiencing this abuse at work did not have a name for it because the absence of a name was a braiding together of experiences that labelled women who complained as overreacting, unable to take a joke, or naïve to the ways of the workplace. These norms all combine to normalize and invisibilize the collection of behavior that we now refer to as sexual harassment. Now a widely understood term, women have a phrase to point to when suffering these types of abuses. Before 1975, they did not.

The act of naming itself has a part to play in separating out categories of experience, lending legitimacy to certain experiences and rendering others invisible. Rather than using language to uncover the relations of meaning, I follow a Foucauldian analysis by focusing on language to uncover relations of power. As Ian Hacking notes,

A concept becomes possible at a moment. It is made possible by a different arrangement of earlier ideas that have collapsed or exploded. . . Concepts remember this, but we do not: we gnaw at problems eternally (or for the lifetime of the concept) because we do not understand that the source of the problem is the lack of coherence between the concept and that prior arrangement of ideas that made the concept possible. (Hacking 2002:37)

Concepts propose challenges to activists and individuals seeking redress because as Hacking notes, concepts have a history that are reliant on previous ideas whose liminality makes it difficult to grasp. For example, what to call a set of practices, like sexual harassment, is highly consequential. Before Carmita Wood won her case in court, countless women shared this experience but could not name it, much less connect it to what other women were experiencing. In this view, concepts like "violence against women" or later "gender-based violence", shape experiences rather than uncover them.

When Hacking refers the “prior arrangement of ideas” that allow certain concepts to emerge and enjoy widespread use while silencing other concepts, he points out the history of concepts, which is also the possibility of concepts.

Concept possibility was a rather big deal in the Women’s Self-Defense Movement (in fact, in all social movements). Categorizing rape and domestic violence as prosecutable crimes instead of private embarrassments was top on the list of 1970’s feminist groups concerned with women’s safety and access to the public domain. As women’s groups in the U.S. began to demonstrate, march, and otherwise protest, it was not only to be free of sexual harassment at work, domestic violence at home and sexual assault in the street. Access to reproductive health care including safe abortions would also be included in the range of services without which women of the second wave women’s liberation movement said they were not free. These women, the majority of whom were white and middle-class did not think to include forced sterilization or unsafe housing, or police brutality as women’s issues (Rios 2011) because these issues tended to happen in communities of color far outside the purview of mainstream feminism’s concerns.

Women of color would experience so called “women’s issues” like sexual harassment, domestic violence, sexual violence and so on but these abuses were always lived through a racialized body. Theorists of Black feminism have written extensively about the gendered and classed components of racism along with the failure of mainstream (white) feminism to speak to the intersecting axes of domination that gendered violence is lived through (Davis 1983; hooks 1995; Smith 1979). It is to one such experience that I now turn.

Categorizing Sexual Assault

One humid summer night in North Philadelphia, teenaged Elaine Brown emerges from the bathroom of her friend’s house to find the front door kicked in and a group of eight or nine boys from the neighborhood spilling into the house. They are drunk and likely up to no good she thinks to herself as they turn on music and make themselves at home. She hears her friend crying outside the door frame saying her mother was going to kill her when she gets home from work and finds the door kicked in. Elaine knows these

boys; they all grew up together. One of them asked her to dance. “No thanks” she said and moved toward the door, but it was quickly shut before she could leave. When the boy who asked her to dance grabbed her and began dancing, she tolerated his crudeness.

Before she knew what was happening, lights were turned off, she was moved to a couch by many hands, her legs pulled apart and skirt pulled up. She was frozen in disbelief and hoped only that it would be over soon and not hurt too much. Just as suddenly, the lights were switched back on and the leader among them yelled for the boys to get off of her, “Naw, man, this ain’t right, this a *Avenue* bitch. We can’t pull no train on no Avenue bitch” (Brown, 1992:43). And they all got up and started to leave. Elaine sat up, pulled down her skirt and watched the neighborhood boys she grew up with file out into the night. The leader among her friends stopped the assault for one reason, he recognized that they and she were part of a community. If she were not an “Avenue bitch” she likely would have come away from that assault much worse off. The year was 1956, she was thirteen.

Eighteen years later, Elaine Brown would become the first woman President of the Black Panther Party, founded as a male-dominated, paramilitary Black Liberationist organization agitating for radical social and political change. Perhaps surprisingly, in her memoir she refers to the above harrowing scene of attempted gang-rape as a community problem – a long suffering, abandoned, brutalized black community that has in a way, turned on itself. She refers to the “abject harshness” of life in poverty growing up in the black section of North Philadelphia. She is careful to point out “*I* was not tough. *We* were tough.” (1992:44). Referring to her circle of friends, “we” instead of “I” points out the comfort and even necessity of navigating life’s hardships collectively. She recounts the difficulty of her mother’s life, a Black woman who did hard labor for long hours at low pay continuously “brac[ing] herself for life’s next *assault*” (1992:44 emphasis added) although these assaults were not always sexual, they were the mundane everyday machinations of life as a poor Black single mother struggling to make ends meet in the 1950’s. Brown interprets her mother’s life as one of relentless toil and hardship. Difficulties in her life are described as “assaults” which included racial segregation in housing and employment, and verbal racial abuse. Housing that was dilapidated and in

need of repair, employment policies that kept her in the lowest paying jobs were all interpreted as assaults.

Framing the attempted gang-rape that she experienced as a problem with roots in community abandonment instead of individual pathology marks a radical turn away from dominant understandings of sexual assault both in 1987, when her autobiography was published as well as today. Throughout Elaine Brown's memoir, she paints for her readers a picture that does not draw boundaries around sexual violence as an issue separable from the torment of structural racism in the form of state-sanctioned violence, assault and neglect that the black community faced in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Black communities together faced police intimidation and brutality, assaults in jail, crippling poverty, educational neglect, and limited access to health care that were impossible to disentangle from strictly "feminist" concerns like sexual assault in Black communities. Simultaneously, a gendered and racialized crime, sexual assault along with efforts to combat it would take on different meaning across social contexts effecting women directly yet differently.

It is not the goal of this dissertation to assert that one way of framing gendered violence is more correct than any other. If one group of white, middle-class women frame gendered violence as harassment, assault but also lack of access to reproductive healthcare and another group of working-class and middle-class Black women framed gender violence as community violence, inextricable with racial violence, this project is not to prove one of them correct and the other misguided. Rather, following Foucault we are better served to ask questions of the discourse and systems of meaning out of which they arose. Just as for Foucault's seminal work, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, (1978) there is no "truth" in sexuality, only its history which provides clues as to why sexuality means what it does for us today. Similarly, there is no "truth" in "sexual assault" or "self-defense". There is no interpretation of concepts that is ahistorical, natural, and correct. Instead, the taxonomies of sexual violence matter not because they help explain what sexual violence really is but because they legitimate what we can think of as prevention strategies – whether training bystanders to intervene is important, or toxic masculinity is important to define and address, or is it better to physically train women how to thwart an assault once its begun? (Hacking 2000; Hollander 2018). Settled as we are to a major

extent on the actionable definition (if not “truth”) of sexual assault, this project looks at racialized sexual assault. Do racialized sexual assaults differ from their race-unmarked (white) counterparts? How have the communities of Black and white radical women resolved to protect themselves from these assaults? What follows are chapter summaries.

Methods Overview

The research questions for this article-style dissertation are separable into three points of inquiry that correspond to three distinct methods. My first research question is “How can historical groups doing self-defense inform our understanding of contemporary versions?”. To answer this question, I sought out personal narratives, any first-person accounts from women leaders of two organizations: the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the Women’s Self-Defense Movement, both of whom emerged in the late 1960s. I utilized memoirs, autobiographies, newsletters, interviews, poetry, and plays as writing forms that captured the experience of being in these movements. While not all sources contained direct reference to their self-defense lives, most at least touched on the matter and the majority wrote at length about it.

My second research question is “What epistemology explains women’s bodies as they “do” self-defense”? To answer this question, I interviewed participants of an Empowerment Self-Defense Class. I asked them to reflect on their bodies before and after the class ended. I asked about the embodied experience of “simulating” violence. I asked about possible changes in their bodies given their newfound strength and tools. Unexpectedly, I ended up with a split of six women of color and six white women. This allowed me to investigate further whether racial differences lead to different outcomes.

My third and final research question is “How does the body react in a class dedicated to changing its capacities?” The method I choose was a participation/observation of a traditional self-defense class. I observed fellow class members watching the instructor perform a maneuver and then trying it themselves. This was usually met with failure and laughter. Two reactions that proved to be important components of turning a feminine habitus into a fighting one.

Taken together, my research questions along with the chosen methods of inquiry, come together to ask, why do bodies dominate the research on self-defense? What do

bodies actually do as they learn self-defense? Historically, there emerged more than one type of self-defense, some of which did not rely on an individual woman's body to keep herself safe. Overall, this project brings together historical as well as contemporary manifestations to ask, what does self-defense assume of the body, and what in turn does it do to the body?

Overview of Chapters

Chapter I

This chapter begins with the Civil Rights Movement and the conflicting theologies preached by two leaders, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for “non-violent direct action”, excluding any violence including self-defense from the movement for Black civil rights. Malcolm X held the opposite view, that violence was necessary (including self-defense) for a subjugated people to cast off their oppressors. These men and their thoughts on self-defense would foreshadow the chasm between Black Power Feminists and Women Self-Defenders of the 1960s. One believing a trained body was crucial to maintaining personal safety as a woman under patriarchy, the other finding self-defense in the community and with guns. The communal versus the individual explanation for what constitutes sexual assault and therefore the best practice to combat it are introduced in this chapter.

Chapter II

Why did different approaches to women's self-defense form? To answer this question, I look at two groups that are nominally committed to self-defense that materialize at roughly the same historical moment. The Black Power Feminists and the Women's Self-Defense Movement both emerge in the social upheaval and political unrest of the late 1960s. Frustrated by the slow progress toward racial equality, young radicals in the Black community sought out their own pathways toward justice. In direct contrast to Civil Rights Movement protocol, they advocated armed resistance to the violence visited against their community. At the same time, the Women's Self-Defense Movement, a subsidiary of the Second Wave of the Feminist Movement, forged a particular understanding of the politics of women's vulnerability. This chapter will ask why did these two groups operationalize their commitment to self-defense so differently?

To answer the question of why different approaches to self-defense form, I investigate personal narratives, and other documents if they were first-person writings to discern why ideologies of self-defense would differ so wildly across two movements with the same language and the goal.

Chapter III

Despite the significant and growing literature on the efficacy of women's self-defense class, how women navigate racial and class differences within gender-empowerment spaces is empirically and theoretically thin. This study attempts to close the gap between race and class analysis in feminist endeavors. Interviews were conducted with a racially diverse group of women who completed an empowerment self-defense class. This chapter turns toward the interview as a method to find another piece of the self-defense puzzle. It has been established that there is information in the individual's experience of the bodily techniques and instructor's scenarios present in the empowerment self-defense class. I asked several questions about participants' experience of their bodies before and after the class. I asked about the embodied experience of performing techniques in the class, many of which involve touching other women, pretending to attack other women and simulating being attacked by other women. In this chapter I ask, what is the role of the body in moments of self-defense? How is the body implicated (or not)? Do racial differences arise?

Chapter IV

Located in the body, a feminist politics of self-defense became synonymous with a particular style of physical training that delivered safety to practitioners. Through participant-observation of traditional self-defense classes, I report on my embodied experience as well as interactions with and observations of classmates. What is done in the class – what do women say and do? How do they use their bodies to unlearn weak and vulnerable femininity? How do they learn to internalize, even embody a new bodily form? While the type of class I experienced and observed, the traditional self-defense class, differs slightly from the empowerment self-defense class of the previous chapter, I contend that the physicality (which is my focus) is nearly identical.

Chapter V

Scholars have written that gender violence is not solely an act of misogyny but also a tool of white supremacy and colonialism (Deer 2015; Glenn 2015). These intersectional insights shed light on the problem of violence against women and the difficulties in finding a solution. Even if focused on legal reform and legislative supports, expanding the defense of women to include the racialized, immigrant and religious minorities would have ushered in a sea change to the work that liberal feminists did and currently do. For example, a long running issue in the Women's Liberation Movement, "NOW for example, could not build a broad women's movement when it failed to 'consider genocide, welfare rights, the Black Panther Party and Gay Liberation as 'women's issues'" (Balk, 2008:79). Women's issues they rightfully are as women are affected by all these issues and more.

Conclusion

This dissertation unravels the historical and structural roots that have shaped not only particular embodiments but whether collectives arrive at individual-based or community-based orientations of how we define what we want to protect but also how best to protect it. In the period I discuss, in different communities of women, there existed deep ideological and analytic fractures resulting from highly divergent lived experience of racialized gendered violence. How did women frame what they were experiencing? How was it made visible? Or invisible? What form did it take?

I ask the question of these two contemporaneous social movements of the 1960's that used identical language ("self-defense"), yet with oppositional tactics – armed and communal versus martial-arts and individual. What made a class you could register and pay for seem like the right environment for learning to stay safe and protect your body for middle-class white women? It is the goal of this dissertation to help parse out these complexities, with the understanding that all gendered experiences are simultaneously classed and racialized ones, with a nod to how can we more fully account for power and privilege when constructing narratives of protections against sexual violence.

CHAPTER II

MAPPING THE INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL BODY: TRACING THE DIVERGENCE OF RACIALIZED SELF-DEFENSE

The word *define* derives from the Latin word for *boundary*, which is *finis*. To define something is to mark its boundaries, to surround it with a mental fence that separates it from everything else. As evidenced by our failure to notice objects that are not clearly differentiated from their surroundings, it is their boundaries that allow us to perceive ‘things’ at all.

(Eviatar Zerubavel *Lumping and Splitting: Notes on Social Classification* 1996)

Feminist Activism

Early second-wave feminists surveyed the landscape of legal (spousal) rape, domestic violence not taken seriously by the police, and found violence to women in their supposed domestic havens more the norm than an aberration. Susan Brownmiller called rapists the “shock troops of male supremacy” (1985), and Ann Jones called domestic abusers the “home guard” of patriarchy (Madden 1981). Physical violence and sexual violence were positioned as the front line in the war against women (off our backs 1970). Fighting back became almost an imperative of radical feminist politics. Patriarchal institutions ostensibly meant to serve and protect the population did not translate well to safety and security for all women. When women were abused, police did not arrest abusers; prosecutors did not bring charges, juries did not convict, courts did not remand perpetrators into custody because abuse against women was not considered a serious crime. All manner of “what were you wearing” to detailed accounts of a victim’s sexual past were fair game in court. From this socio-political context, radical feminists pivoted toward equipping bodies with the means to fight back. Developing a specifically feminist form of self-defense, founders of the empowerment self-defense movement elevated the body practice of physical self-defense, forging an individuated response to the social problem of violence against women, especially sexual violence. The feminist prescription

of self-defense as the best defense against physical and sexual violence would dominate feminist politics from the 1980s to the present day.

Founders of the Women's self-defense movement were radical in action, and revolutionary in theory. Coining the phrase, "the personal is political," Hansich (1970) ushers in a new idea that politics were operating not only in the public sphere but in private lives as well. Not only politics but social norms, economic principles, and power hierarchies were at work in the personal dynamics at home (Rosen 2000). Once together in small groups, later called consciousness-raising sessions, the goal was to share personal experiences of how women were treated, eventually, these experiences could be linked to political action (Allen, 1970).

When agitating for an emphasis on "the SOCIAL nature of the oppression of women" (5) *No More Fun and Games*, a feminist activist group acquired a feminist consciousness that they described as like being reborn, all events in life come to take on renewed meaning, and "every conversation and transaction with a man is seen in a new light. The role-playing and unnaturalness of one's actions are revealed". "Despair," "confinement," "anger and frustration" were commonly heard at early feminist meetings. Even "existential misery" was evoked in the pages of the first manifesto of the women's movement, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In it, she wrote of "the problem that has no name" This nameless problem referred to college-educated, middle class, primarily white women relegated to the duties of house, husband, and children. Domestic life was considered the height of feminine training for the class privileged. There was no standard terminology for the women affected to discuss their shared oppression until Friedan's book. Feminine training was a new concept that these women would apply to several areas of their social lives, before they would apply it to their bodies.

This feminine training would eventually land on an actionable surface. This surface would end up being women's bodies. The fight against sexist treatment both in the public sphere and the private domain, would be reimagined on the body and how to undo that very training would locate on the body as well. A triangulation of police and military training, martial arts, and sports training, during the 1970s, dozens of organizations sprouted up across the country claiming to teach women how to defend

themselves, no doubt encouraged by the rhetoric of the women's movement. In 1975 the Women's Self-Defense Council was founded by an ex-martial artist (Helen Groom Stevens) and an ex-police officer (Joan Koerper) who saw flaws in their respective fields in addressing the specific needs of women in the face of violence. In 1972, black-belt martial artist Matt Thomas recounts his female friend and fellow martial artist suffered a brutal rape, which her extensive martial arts expertise could not thwart. Frustration motivated Matt to design a course to address the needs specific to women fending off an attack.

The Women's Self-Defense Council had a goal of standardizing instructors' training and formalizing the philosophy and techniques of feminist self-defense. The result was a teaching manual, the focus of which was the practicality of self-defense instruction for women – physical skills had to be easy to learn, techniques had to take into consideration a woman's body (typically shorter and weaker than her attacker) and her social position (it is men and not women who usually initiate conversations, speak for longer, interrupt more, take up more physical space, etc.) while being effective at stopping or preventing an assault (Searles and Berger 1987, Stevens 1978). For certification, instructors had to take self-defense classes numerous times; eventually co-teach a class, lecture in the community on the topic, involve themselves in the local criminal justice system and victim advocacy services, and pass a written and physical test to become certified¹. Extensive certification processes were meant to ensure women were not “only” being taught martial arts. They wanted to ensure the “woman” component was there.

The original organization to teach women martial arts with a feminist lens and formed a for-profit business, Victim Prevention, Incorporated², named their teachers victim instructor specialists. Victim instructor specialists paid a fee to be trained and certified. Abandoning a volunteer-based democratic model in favor of a profit-based business model allowed founder Helen Groom Stevens to keep her 1966 feminist self-

¹ There were internal divisions among instructors about how much “feminism” should be taught in the feminist self-defense class. The guiding principle that classes should be available to all women not just those who identified with feminist politics was highly contested.

² After the National Women's Self-Defense Council dissolved in 1983

defense doors open in the market realities of the 1980s. No longer reliant on volunteer labor, the new organizational form sought to correct the plaguing issues of instructors dealing with inconsistent payment and widely varying class practices. Several organizations copied this format and studios that offered self-defense multiplied.

An early advocate for empowerment self-defense, Carol Middleton had been training in marital arts for years when a stranger followed her into her apartment one evening, and she remembers feeling powerless (2016). She noted that her marital arts training did not prepare her for the type of victimization she might experience that night in her home. Middleton realized women's self-defense would have to align better to the kind of assault women are likely to experience, if they wanted to remain relevant. The *feminist* self-defense would form from the different ways women are vulnerable compared to men. Before learning to fight, feminist self-defense addresses both physical and psychological barriers to women's self-preservation.

National certifying agencies for self-defense instructors³, are mostly white, mainly from the middle class. Most of the students were also white. The women of color that did take the class found a misalignment between the focus of the class and what they hoped for. They had very little use for the psychological component of assertiveness training. They preferred to be trained solely on the physical front. They had little difficulty turning fear into anger and channeling anger into effective practical maneuvers. The instructors reported the women of color were "energetic" and "feisty" and good role models for the other (white) students (Jackson, 1993:72). While women of color were "good role models" for the white students, there was a disconnect between their needs regarding self-defense and the main instruction seemingly targeted at white women (DeWilde 2003).

A decade earlier in France, the groundwork for embodied feminism was already laid, most famously in the work of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952). Beauvoir finds the period of adolescence to be the most turbulent and alienating period for a girl, as this is when the total weight of cultural prescriptions of femininity descends

³ Women's Self-Defense Council, National Women's Martial Arts Federation, Thousand Waves Martial Arts & Self-Defense Center, IMPACT Chicago (there are others, these are major organizations that have input into what empowerment self-defense does and should do).

upon her. Until adolescence, girls are encouraged to explore the world, engage in physical activities, and satisfy their curiosities. The body's ability to manipulate the physical world; by exploring, investigating, and acting upon one's physical environment, a person comes to recognize herself as agentic.

The position of women in a sexist culture is a contradiction Beauvoir says. According to Young (1990), as girls learn to perform adult femininity, they learn to restrict their movements, withhold their strength, and approach other people and things with timidity. The feminist frustration with socially prescribed feminine roles as a learned embodied phenomenon would form the groundwork of a uniquely privileged interpretation of gender violence and how to protect oneself from it.

Applying this concept to women's physical tasks like throwing a ball, lifting something heavy, or twisting an object with force, she finds that women tend to duck from a ball being thrown toward her rather than move her body to make contact with it (as a man would). Also, when twisting an object, women tend to employ the hand and wrist rather than the arm and shoulder (as men do) which are not only much more powerful body locales but are also required to accomplish the task most efficiently. A girl learning femininity learns to be afraid and immobilized by her *social* position; she learns to fear violation and harm, and therefore she reins in her body for protection. This understanding of gender socialization would inform the techniques and scenarios offered in the women's self-defense class.

Liberal, Individual Self-Defense

As defined by the Women's Liberation Movement, women's self-defense fit well within the political doctrine of liberalism. It tended to "absorb the perspective of the middle class from which it is largely drawn" (Epstein 2014). It offered classes wherein women would pay to learn how to protect themselves from harm by using only their own bodies, they claimed. It was individual empowerment without society-level change,

This focus on proximate factors, potentially controllable at the individual level, resonates with the value and belief systems of Western culture that emphasize both the ability of the individual to control his or her personal fate and the importance of doing so (Link&Phelan,1995:80).

This is aligned with the focus on individuals as explanatory sites from which to learn about the social world (Mayhew 1980: 339) instead of keeping explanatory frames at the structural level. As inheritors of Enlightenment thought and Western traditions, US feminists especially those at the forefront of the second wave, operated under the assumption that equality for women was a logical and mostly legal matter, one that was objectively determinable. Benefitting from a race and class privilege that was largely invisible to them, second wave feminists sought redress from within existing political and economic power structures, which from their point of view lacked only a woman's point of view. Laws could be passed, sentences could be handed down, and injustices against women could be unproblematically reclassified as individual crimes. White middle-class women were willing to work with the carceral system which served several functions (Bernstein 2007). It helped justify the claims they were making by linking to the expanding carceral system, it stabilized funding, and it resonated well with existing narratives of white womanhood in need of and deserving protections (Stabile 2006).

Descendant from Enlightenment thought and suffragists of the 19th century, liberal feminism prioritizes the individual over the collective and linear progress through reform over revolution (Mann 2012). The privilege of this feminism was quite invisible to its bearers, at least at first. bell hooks (1984) comments on the founding of the feminist movement (discussed earlier as Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*), described as the emptiness and loneliness that college educated women experienced leaving the workforce once they get married and start families. Popular and widely considered an important part of ushering in the women's liberation movement, Friedan's book was an immediate best seller which begins,

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question- “Is this all?” (1963:57)

The remedy to this malady and the boredom which asks, “Is this all?” was the emergence of consciousness raising groups for educated middle and upper middle class white

women ruffling under the constraints of house, husband, motherhood and consumption. Friedan alludes to but does not explicitly name the whiteness of the housewife described in her opening paragraph. Women who lived in the safety of the suburbs, shopped for the household, and owned a car by which she could chauffeur her children to afterschool activities were overwhelmingly white.

The Self-Defense Movement

The way survivors of sexual assault were treated by police, doctors, lawyers, and judges, along with the callousness and victim-blaming experienced by victims in the process of holding perpetrators accountable, urged women to politically agitate to have rape reclassified not as a crime of passion against an individual woman but a political crime against all women (Craft 2017). Shifting rape to a political category helped feminism and the public regard it as a socially produced crime instead of an individual harm. Public visibility and community outreach enabled the public to consider rape as not women's fault.

Frustrated from only “applying band-aids” in the form of hotlines and shelters to a problem that “required major reconstructive surgery” (Craft 2017), some radical women formed small local organizations that were more aggressive than the mainstream anti-rape movement. For example, WASP (Women Armed for Self-Protection) was one such group comprised of a handful of women from the Dallas area who blanketed their neighborhoods with posters proclaiming, “MEN AND WOMEN WERE CREATED EQUAL AND SMITH AND WESSON MAKES DAMN SURE IT STAYS THAT WAY” a poster complete with a woman carrying a rifle (Craft 2017). They attended rape trials to support victims; they recruited sympathetic journalists to cover trials of women defending themselves. WASP and similar organizations around the country galvanized a feminist response to sexual violence that urged a consciousness shift in the legitimacy of violence against women and the right of women to defend themselves.

While feminist groups were becoming more centralized and professionalized, these safe spaces for “all” struggled to meet their goals of racial inclusion (Matthews 1989). Some organizations reported that the time spent with “ethnic-minority” women was much higher than the time typically needed to organize help for white women

(Bellone & Contreras Position Paper 1983). In Los Angeles, for example, in addition to translation services, survivors in the underserved Latino community usually needed immediate shelter, childcare, transportation, and counseling services, as well as culturally sensitive material that acknowledges family-centric preferences for handling violence.

Having laid out a brief history of the Women's Self-Defense Movement- their identity, development, and professionalization. I shift away from the concerns of the white Feminist movement to provide a contrast with the lived realities of Black women. I pay attention to several broad eras in U.S. history. Yet I focus on the political and cultural movements of the 1960s-1970s.

Racialized Self -Defense?

Unknowingly, the self-defense movement failed to reach many different groups of women. Focusing on violence targeted to the individual body allowed the racial undercurrents of the feminist movement to proliferate undetected. For example, up to and including the 1960s, the forced sterilization of Black women in the South was so standard it came to be known as the "Mississippi appendectomy" (Roberts, 1999). While a major problem for the Black community, and especially Black women's bodies, the self-defense movement was unprepared for that kind of state-sanctioned, institutionalized harm. Self-defense classes or workshops would be of no help. An issue that was gendered violence but also a race issue, forced sterilization was one of many issues that Black women faced that the women's movement did not recognize as a "women's issue" due to its founders' race and class location.

The psychological and emotional work foregrounded in feminist self-defense is crucial "to disrupt these effects of traditional gender-role socialization" (Searles and Berger 1987). Teaching women to fight and yell and refuse to be nice to harassers on the street is not only a physical skill. It disrupts traditional gender norms, but they do so within a racial hierarchy that privileges their "errant" behavior (Bart and O'Brien 1985). Here, women learn to overcome learned helplessness of gendered norms, but they do so in a context where they do not need to confront race and class inequality. When Audrey Yap argues that self-defense intervenes in "*relational* bodily capacities, not just individual ones" (2016:110-111 emphasis added). She emphasizes the relational

component of self-defense rendering the individual body fighting back less important. The relationship between racial privilege and racial oppression is ever present in the self-defense classroom.

The efforts that arose in the 1980s to help women feel safe did not consider that the expansion of police and other emergency services tend to make *some* women feel safer yet render *other* women less safe. Women without race and class privilege tend to experience more harm, harassment, and violence when the police are called upon to help address a social problem (Ritchie 2017). The most marginalized folks at the highest risk of sexual assault tend not to benefit from measures developed by self-defense tactics (INCITE! 2006). Early “self-defenders” (McCaughey 1997) claimed that working with the body is uniquely suited to this problem because it can be done cheaply and quickly. They were careful to officially note that “women do not face the equal risk of criminal victimization” (McCaughey 1987:63). This statement is a crucial realization but one that was not carried forth in the practices that would come later. Battling racism and misogyny like Elaine Brown in the earlier vignette, young Black women tend to respond to sexual violence with “street smarts” acquired through a lifetime of community assaults (and the knowledge of how to “handle oneself”- how to fight) (Bart and O’Brien 1985; Arif 2015; Jones 2010; Ness 2010). Resource-deprived communities encourage women to experience their bodies as a resource instead of a liability. Women feel powerful when physically engaged with another girl, but ultimately vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence from men within their communities.

State Violence Against Black Women

An integral part of the very foundation of this country, the institution of slavery was a structural component of the wealth generated for a new and growing nation. Black women have spoken out and written about experiences of sexual violence embedded within the racist social structures and social norms of this country. The era of slavery was no exception. The wealth generated was so vast because, of course, the labor was free. “Free” labor was coerced by unimaginable violence. While slave women worked the fields just as men did, their white overseers uniquely targeted them because they were women. Because they were slaves who could not give or withhold consent, their bodies

were monetized in every sense, including the economic incentive to sexually assault enslaved women. This tortuous beginning to Black women's experience of bodily autonomy in the U.S. was unlike any other racial or ethnic group. They were the only ones to have wealth literally extracted from their bodies, part of which was garnered from sexual assault and forced pregnancies (The 1619 Project 2019). While this practice ended centuries ago, Dorothy Roberts (1997) argues that "killing the black body" has been a national goal since its formation. Black women have endured centuries of reproductive abuse. The violation of Black bodies was just as prominent in the 1960s and 1970s when federal and state agencies began policing Black mothers through the child welfare system, public assistance, and the carceral system (Roberts 2001). These systems intersect to regulate, punish, and devalue Black women at risk of violence from the very systems meant to protect them.

Beginning in slavery and continuing throughout Reconstruction and Jim Crow, Black women were largely without recourse against the sexual violence of white men. The bravery of Mrs. Recy Taylor would help turn this abusive tide. In the 1940s, The NAACP found it was responding more and more to the testimonies of Black women under assault by white men in the Jim Crow South. In 1955, a longtime volunteer for the NAACP, Rosa Parks, was dispatched to Abbeville, Alabama, a small town where she grew up. Sent to investigate the sexual assault of sharecropper and churchgoer Ms. Recy Taylor by six white teenagers (McGuire 2010), Rosa Parks knew this town. An especially depraved crime, Taylor's attack lasted several hours where she could hear the rapists contemplate her murder once they were "finished" with her rape, mutilation, and torture (Smith, 2018). Relieved to escape with her life, Taylor recollects, "The Lord [was] just with me that night." ("The Rape of Recy Taylor" 2017).

Although the assailants admitted their guilt to local law enforcement, no indictments would be brought against the rapists. What happened instead was her house was firebombed, and her husband and infant were threatened after she reported the assault to local law enforcement and to her local NAACP chapter. This case drew national attention not only due to the flagrancy of the attack and the easy admissions of guilt, but the absolute unwillingness of local law enforcement to make any of the assailants accountable for their crimes. The gross miscarriage of justice evident in this

case helped bring national attention to the plight of Black women and their combined struggles with racism and gendered violence. The Recy Taylor case mirrors the trials of a great many other Black women who experienced racialized sexual violence, a different set of experiences than the sexual violence white women feared. These cases were so numerous and avenues of justice so slow that the NAACP began forming vast networks of activists, tapping into church leaders, and reaching out to business leaders, building the necessary “infrastructure” of folks that could mobilize quickly to combat the vast amounts of violence suffered by the Black community in the South. The help that Black women had access to was community bound, an entire network of Black folks that would contribute what they could. Some folks could recommend an attorney, others could help a woman and her family find a place to stay for a few days, some members of the community could arrange for money to be donated, others could provide protection – literally stand outside her house with a gun because retaliation was common. It was within this kind of community context that Black women came to their political consciousness.

To restrict the physical movement and thus the political enfranchisement of Black people, Jim Crow laws were in effect in the South from Reconstruction until the Civil Rights Movement. Jim Crow laws codified racial apartheid most effectively and thoroughly in the South, but their effects could be felt well into the North and West. These dehumanizing racial codes were lived through and imposed upon bodies that were racialized and gendered.

Black Liberation Movement

Sexual violence was a technology to establish and uphold the gendered racial caste system, white men sexually assailing Black women with almost impunity, an abuse marks the gender order (men have dominion over women’s bodies), and it also keeps the racial hierarchy (whites have power over the bodies of Blacks). As one organizer put it, referring to racial codes that both limited the movement of Black women and exposed them to harassment and violence on their way to work, “if you cannot walk down the street unmolested, legal and civil equality means little” what women were fighting for was “bigger than a hamburger” (McGuire 2011). Black women were pointing out that

sexual harassment and violence were omnipresent in their daily lives like the civil rights activists of entering establishments and ordering at lunch counter, as student protesters in the Civil Rights Movement did). For Black women, they would need protection from sexual violence as well.

After the Civil Rights Movement, the Black liberation movement was considered the next generation of social movements with a new strategy and new leadership to protect Black lives. For women in this movement, safety and community looked differently from the previous generation. Black women's experiences in the civil rights movement helped frame political involvement and risk as collective instead of individual. These women were ambivalent about whom to hold responsible for sexism, as they saw first-hand how Black men suffered under white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism. It did not appear to them to be an individuated problem. They were also inhibited from asserting their rights as women for fear of how this might adversely impact struggling Black communities. They remembered Black women activists of the civil rights era,

Women were regularly clubbed at [civil rights] demonstrations or beaten in jail. The homes of women activists were regularly shot into . . . it is misleading to think of reprisals as being directed against merely the individual who was involved. Anyone who joined the movement placed his or her whole family at risk (Payne, 1990:4)

Not only risking one's personal and family's safety, but spiteful evictions were also another form of retaliation that obviously effected the entire family. Finding or keeping a job or applying for credit would affect the entire family of a known civil rights activist. "The most popular forms of violence in that period – arson, drive-by shootings into homes, and bombings- were reprisals against family units, not individuals" (Payne, 1990:4). As racial violence directed at families and neighborhoods, racial terror did not engender a private, individualized response, rather it was a community problem. Paramilitary police responses to nonviolent marches and sit-ins, the targeted killing of young Black radical men, organized white supremacists or lone vigilantes instilling terror in black communities, were all regular occurrences in Jim Crow South. The disrespect they felt was experienced as neither a purely individual encounter nor an individual violation; rather, they understood that such constraints were shared with those who were

similarly positioned. They joined together for recognition and inclusion – collective action helped change their sense of powerlessness.

Similarly, in the 1970s, women of color took insights from the previous generation that were active in nationalist movements, anti-violence movements, community-based movements, and countless others. Newly, the Women of Color Caucus, the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and the YWCA found that the rape crisis centers that served racialized communities were more effective at delivering services than the more established and better-funded white organizations, as women are more likely to respond to outreach programs when originated “*of the community*” (Matthews 1989: 524). All organizations that were community based had more success in mobilizing folks around any number of issues facing the Black community, from access to healthcare to better-funded schools to welfare rights. However, they struggled for funding, unlike the more established white groups linked to state and federal funding.

The fact that women had a variety of needs seemed difficult for the (white) organizers and administrators of rape crisis and domestic violence shelters to handle. Coming from a community service framework, women working for Black communities came to see their work through the lens of the needs of a community, instead of the violation of a body. As one director said:

A woman may come in or call in for various reasons. She has no place to go, she has no job, she has no support, she has no money, she has no food, she’s been beaten, and after you finish meeting all those needs, or try to meet all those needs, then she may say, by the way, during all this, I was being raped. So, the immediate needs have to be met. So that makes our community different than other communities. A person wants their basic needs first. It’s a lot easier to discuss things when you’re full. (Matthews 1989:537)

In the words of this director, when a woman accessing resources from a shelter is “full”, she has her first, most basic need met - access to food. Once that happens, she can talk about the reason she came to the shelter. The compounding of needs is what sets this community and others like it apart from shelters that serve more privileged communities. The variety and depth of the needs faced by unsupported, abused, insecurely housed and hungry women presented such a complexity of needs that single-axis shelters focused on

the battering and engaging law enforcement. The complexities of underserved communities posed a significant challenge.

Black Feminist Politics

The historic procession of gender-specific patterns in the experience of racial segregation and discrimination in housing, education, and employment brought about a collective experience sometimes called Black Feminism, womanism or Critical Race Feminism (Collins 2000). This praxis arose as many Black women report feeling unwelcome or being accused of being divisive or off-topic when they raised racial dynamics and class inequality as subjects that needed simultaneous attention within feminist groups. As they filled in the spaces in between other groups (like racial justice groups and feminist groups) with their lived experiences, because of this, they tended to see the places where other groups of people were excluded.

For example, the civil rights movement was arguing against racism, while the women's movement was arguing against sexism. The social position of Black women revealed the exclusionary nature of each model as captured by the 1982 publication of Hull, Scott and Smith's edited anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. The lived experience of Black women laid the foundations for the theoretical assumptions and political nature of intersectional analysis. It holds that all dimensions of lived experience collide to produce something qualitatively new – knowledge on account of all axes, not just one. Intersectionality understands social identity as simultaneously infused with domination and subordination where all axes of identity act within and through each other. Emphasizing multiplicity and simultaneity, the “Combahee River Collective Statement” coined their own personal experiences as “oppression” instead of “oppressions” rendering each dimension inseparable from all others (Smith, 1983:265).

The Combahee River Collective (C.R.C.), a group of Black lesbian feminists laid out the necessity of a multi-issue politics. The interlocking systems of race, gender, heterosexuality, and class together formed “the conditions of our lives” (C.R.C. 1986:9). And it was from these conditions that they could see their freedom required the destruction of each of these systems of oppression. Once poor Black sexually

marginalized women were free, everyone would be free, they reasoned. The women of the C.R.C. were not interested in a politics that relied on a “sisterhood” as this collapsed too many differences that separated women. For women to organize *as women* did not resonate for most Black women marginalized by class and further marginalized by sexuality.

Black Women’s Self-Defense

Black women finding anti-racist politics and feminist politics inadequate for their lived experience found intersectional theorizing a necessity. In cases of sexual assault in particular, police officers are more likely to be unsympathetic to Black women and calling the police might put herself and her family in danger. Hotlines, shelters, and self-defense classes might put Black women defending themselves during this era at risk, Recall the case of Ms. Recy Taylor whose rape and torture in 1955 was met with threats of violence to her family and threats of revictimization to her personally. This was all after she reported the crime to the police. Not quite twenty years later another Black woman would find herself facing sexual violence, how she defended herself would also become a source of national attention.

While sleeping in a North Carolina jail cell for breaking and entering, 20-year-old Joan Little was startled awake by the night jailer wearing nothing other than his uniform shirt and socks, holding an ice pick. Joan wrestled the ice pick away from her jailer and stabbed him 11 times. She fled the jail in fear of her life, while the man bled to death on the floor. Joan was re-arrested and charged with first degree murder in only 48 hours. Facing the death penalty, her case sparked the “Free Joan Little Movement” highlighting that while escaping an actual rape, Little was nevertheless caught within a system that faulted her (criminally) for acting in self-defense. Rallying in her defense, Angela Davis spoke of a different kind of rape by the web of power that rendered Black women especially vulnerable to sexual violence and disenfranchisement and separated them from their support systems. Little had “truly been raped and wronged many times over by the exploitative and discriminatory institutions of this society.” (Davis 1975).

As historian Ashley Farmer writes, the Joan Little case provided a necessary galvanization to call attention to the vulnerabilities faced by women of color as they

interact with intersecting systems of racism, misogyny, and the criminal justice system, all working together to place poor women of color in truly dire circumstances (Kaban.d.). Called “the trial of the decade” by the *Chicago Tribune*, Little’s case brought attention to the sexual violence suffered by women of color as they are positioned differently than middle-class white women, the architects of the women’s movement (McNeil). Did Black women have the right to defend themselves with violence if necessary? This remained an open question. While Joan Little was eventually exonerated, she had countless contemporaries that were not.

In 1979, the same year Joan Little was exonerated, events in Boston would prove Black women had yet to be recognized as both the raced and gendered citizens that they were. As self-defense classes were solidifying in middle-class white neighborhoods, something different was happening within the Black community. In 1979, Boston had a series of brutal murders of women that the police were not terribly interested in investigating, nor was the media too keen on reporting. Of the media coverage that did occur, the murders were defined as (only) racial attacks, and the fact that they were also all women was ignored. By June of that year, 13 women had been murdered, 12 of whom were Black. The C.R.C. circulated a pamphlet in the communities hardest hit by the crimes and made clear, “Our sisters died *because* they were women just as surely as they died because they were Black.” (1979:44). They held self-defense classes, they organized marches and rallies and established neighborhood networks to help get the word out about the violence that was happening. The murders were not only racial crimes, they pointed out, because Black men and boys were not targeted. The women of these communities were urged to stay in their houses (ignoring the fact that the fifth victim was found dead in her own house) and Black men who spoke out on these crimes relied on familiar paternalistic tropes like “We have to protect our women”. The collective rejected both courses of action urging that being told to stay in the house “punishes the innocent and protects the guilty” and ignores that women must go to work, pick the kids up from school, shop for food and so on, as they have always done (45). “We know that we have no hopes of ending this particular crisis and violence against women in our community until we identify *all* of its causes, including sexual oppression.”

Domestic violence shelters tend to emphasize bringing charges against perpetrators, an institutional priority necessary to justify federal funding streams but also deaf to the hesitancy of women of color to engage with the police and court systems that have traditionally been hostile to their communities (Crenshaw 1991). The feminist priorities of establishing domestic violence shelters and rape crisis hotlines and centers required working relationships with law enforcement and local prosecutors. Working closely with the police helped cement the seriousness of the crimes of battering, rape and sexual harassment. the population of women that agitated for them. Namely, elite women with both race and class privilege that did not fear the police. For these reasons, sexual violence would also become separated from the struggle for racial justice. We see this as we examine how “violence against women” becomes distinct from police brutality, forced sterilization attempted rapes in jail, murder in Black communities and other concerns of women of color, as this paper has laid out. It holds that racism and misogyny reside inside the core logics of American politics and policy rather than being sporadic and idiosyncratic. (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012).

Listening to the experiences of Black women within the (2nd Wave) feminist movement does not merely render new points of view visible. Instead, it renders some of the central tenants of current feminist theory unusable. . . . white women want to rewrite ‘herstory’ from a lens they believe is universally about women but is actually about imperial women and always relies on the colonial and neocolonial paths that informed where we are today. (Amos & Parmar, 1984:19)

The work of Black women within the feminist movement, sought to expand outreach to include issues of homelessness, police brutality and incarceration, (as well as poverty and racism more broadly) which are all factors known to increase a women’s risk of sexual violence. The view from Black lives were “new points of view” as Amos & Parmar state, they also shed a kind of light on the feminist movement that renders some tenets of theory unusable. Unfortunately, they were met with resistance from white founders and most members who found these tactics a diversion from the real struggle of sexual violence against women. Calling attention to “racist structures that force more black women to live in insecure housing, work late-night jobs, and use inadequate public transportation” (Friedman 1978), their concerns went mostly unheard. They clashed also

in the appropriateness of bringing men into the fight for freedom from sexual violence. Black women wanted to incorporate men as community stakeholders and responsabilize them as equal defenders in keeping women safe. In general, white feminists wanted to keep the women's movement an all-woman space.

Perpetually exposed to the structural forces of racism render Black women's experiences qualitatively different from what white women experienced in this period. This difference is delivered through a childhood of growing up black-and-female (Garfield, 2005). As the women of the feminist movement struggled against sexism⁴, Black women struggled too but differently. As she participated in a peaceful protest Sara, a Black woman recalls,

The National Guard was rolling through the streets in trucks and tanks, and they fired tear gas at us. . . I didn't feel the violence coming back at me personally from those guys in the tanks as much as I felt it was the violence of the system against me. You know, that it wasn't personal with those white guys even though they may in fact have been racist and have been more than willing to just shoot us. But I really did feel like it was the society, the institutions, the broader society that was coming at us, that was committing violence against us. (Garfield, 2005:136).

In this recounting, Sara finds institutionalized racism at work even as it is carried out by individuals. The violence was not "personal" coming at her from tanks rolling through her street. She felt the full enormity of *society*, the *institutions*, "coming at us". Even peaceful protests could produce such an intimidating show of force that one protester, Sara, could recognize an institutional aggression instead of an individual one.

All systems of self-defense could be described as fine-tuned to any given community's circumstances. Women's understanding of what violence is and how best to remedy it is dependent upon her position in the social fabric. Within the cultural and political turmoil of the 1960's, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (their original, full name) emerged as a community response to racist police brutality. Founded by poor

⁴ I do not intend to homogenize all white women's experiences as middle-class and all black women's experiences as poor or working-class. The second wave women's movement in the U.S. was predominantly comprised of middle-class white women, a problem to which it would later have to answer. There were middle-class black women in this movement who may have felt alienated but joined for practical reasons like access to better and more consistent funding or the language and policies of the movement resonated with their middle-class backgrounds.

and working-class young Black men in Oakland, California who were part of the Great Migration of Black families moving out of the racist South, looking for opportunity and safety North and West, many found that their new cities were no less discriminatory and the local police no less violent. Growing tired of constant police harassment and brutality, the Black Panther Party (BPP) was initially a small group of young men who decided to educate themselves on California penal code, take up arms and in essence, “police the police”. They were a visibly armed group of young Black men that followed police officers responding to calls. They hoped their presence would diminish the amount of police brutality suffered by the Black community. They also had a practice of immediately bailing out any Black person arrested on bogus charges. As an organization dedicated to both racial equality and gender egalitarianism, at least formally, the Black Panther Party “viewed sexism as bourgeois behavior”. ““In a proletarian revolution’, two anonymous Panther women told *Quicksilver Times* (underground Washington D.C. newspaper) ‘the emancipation of women is primary. We realize that the success of the revolution depends upon the women.’ (Balk, 2008:127).

The infamous Watts riots in LA in 1965 helped set the stage for the BPP, garnering support among marginalized youth to collectivize. With tensions growing between men in poor urban centers and the police, the sentiment grew, “we don’t see you as the police. You are an occupying force. You don’t protect us and serve our interests” (Pulido, 2006:47). While not limited to the West Coast, the mass rioting helped served as a political awakening and call to arms for the poor young Black men of southeast California. “Black Power” became not a single ideology or strategy but came to stand in for a collection of long-standing issues and their intersections. It was a demand for an end to oppression on several fronts.

Familiarizing themselves with open-carry laws on public property and being careful to maintain specified legal distances away from police to not interfere with police work, the Panthers let their presence be known to the extreme consternation of the local Oakland Police Department. Initially highly successful in defending the lives of their community members, the leaders of the Black Panther Party would eventually be met with the full force of the F.B.I. Each one of the original six founding members would either be murdered, imprisoned, or exiled by local or federal law enforcement. Co-

founder and leader Huey Lewis denounced the “limited fashion of what you would think of self-defense groups” and instead placed the BPP with the likes of the revolutionaries in Cuba as well as revolutionaries further afield. Lewis calls the BPP an “educational group” teaching people what they need to know to bring about the revolution themselves (*Black Panther* 1968). Replacing the (white, middle-class) notion of rugged individualism with an ethic of collective responsibility, the BPP keyed in on both the needs and the strength of the community.

The Black Panther Party re-focused its image away from a hypermasculine paramilitary organization toward a women-led organization with a commitment to community service in 1969 establishing a free breakfast programs for schoolchildren and free medical clinics, among other community outreach programs. Referred to as “survival programs”, at its height, 20,000 meals were served weekly in 19 different communities, “the efforts were intended to address the immediate needs of the black community” (Alkebulan, 2011: xiii) and ultimately, to spread the word about their radical aims for self-governance. The Party advocated for community control of police, education, economics, and politics. In addition to gender equality, Panthers drove elderly citizens to the bank, organized buses to visit local prisons to keep families in touch. Their publication’s famous 10-point plan for freedom and the self-determination of the Black community did not mention women specifically, they mentioned poverty, war, incarceration, and the right to self-determination, all of which directly affect women.

Cast outside of these constructs, many women in the Black Panther Party did not consider themselves feminists in the sense that white women who organized the women’s movement were using the term. Black women felt that white feminists were trying to access the rewards of capitalist exploitation and did not see race and class issues as fundamentally linked to their own gendered struggles for justice (Hull et al. 1982). This was always a central issue for the BPP that intersecting issues needed to be addressed concurrently – food, housing, education, police brutality and no single issue could trump any other. They saw their counterparts in the women’s movement as practicing single-issue politics, a political position that never made sense to them (Collins 2000).

The women’s movement’s version of self-help crystallized into an altogether different “embodied-social politics” (Cheney, 2005) in the form of feminist self-defense

classes. Once nonviolence was determined to be an ineffective political strategy, the next question face by the BPP for self-defense was what is self-defense? Would it mean meeting “machine gun with machine gun, hand grenade with hand grenade” as advocated by former NAACP head Robin Williams? (Spencer, 2016:36) Would it be framed in terms of survival as evidenced by the government’s inability to protect black bodies and black property? The defense the Panthers came to argue for was gun possession for self-defense from their most immediate brutalizers, the police.

Black Feminist Epistemology

When Black Feminist Epistemology came to bear on the feminist movement, it revealed some foundational problems. Speaking from their own lived experience, scholars such as Higginbotham 1992; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Smith 1982; Dill 1983; Davis 1989; hooks 1984; Audre Lorde 1984; and Patricia Hill Collins 2000 have firmly dismantled the women’s movement claim that oppression shared by women under conditions of patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism was universal. Instead, the divergence of the lived experience between Black and white women proved that gender oppression was quite particular. The experience of Black women in the Black Power Movement, specifically the Black Panther Party found community service, community organization and community survival to be a large part of their self-defense. This is in line with what Elaine Brown said of the attempted gang-rape she suffered as a teen. While the women of the BPP were armed and felt guns were a necessary part of self-protection, they also considered service to the ailing community to be of equal value. When Elaine Brown became the President of the BPP in 1974, she, like most of the women in the party both carried a gun and continued the community outreach programs without contradiction. When Judy Juanita, a Panther member, was asked in an interview about these practices of the party, she replied, “we came to campus armed with our theories and our pieces. So guns were both literal and metaphoric.” (Hix 2016) Here, a Panther woman links her ability to carry a gun in public spaces with the philosophy that she had the right to do so. Not only was the right to self-defense a core component of the BPP, the right to community survival was also core, even intertwined. Co-founder and

leader of the party had an unwavering stance on the rights of Black people to their freedom,

The only way to win freedom was to meet force with force. At bottom, this is a form of self-defense. Although that defense might at times take on characteristics of aggression, in the final analysis the people do not initiate; they simply respond to what has been inflicted upon them (Newton, 2009:116-117).

If armed self-defense was a simple response to violence, perhaps Black women had more in common with white self-defenders than it may seem? Perhaps not, as the following accounts will make clear.

Could they address women's specific concerns without betraying the Black community? Women of the BPP comprised the majority of membership for the majority of the party's existence. They often took a back seat to the men who were widely recognized nationwide for their politics and praxis. Popular images of stoic men in black berets with guns hides the work the women were doing, which included writing most of their newspaper (The Black Panther: Black Community News Service) and drawing most of their widely circulated images. Women also were arrested along with men, they were threatened, harassed, and assaulted in police custody along with men. Along with men, they developed a community consciousness, a recognition of the importance of the collective to the revolution they were trying to begin.

Panther and F.B.I. fugitive Angela Davis was reported by various media outlets as likely armed and dangerous, wanted for murder and kidnapping, among other things. In her memoir she writes of the randomness that she was the revolutionary in this position. It could have easily been "another sister or brother" facing persecution and death (Davis 2013). She almost did not write her personal narrative, she confessed, not wanting the vicissitudes of her individual life to "detract from the movement" (Davis 2013: preface). Feeling used by the government and the media as a tool to discredit the BPP but also all radical or revolutionary movements, she interprets this focus on her as an individual as a rouse to attack the collective, this weighed heavily on her.

I realized how much I needed to find a collective. Floating from activity to activity was not revolutionary anything. Individual activity – sporadic and disconnected – is not revolutionary work. Serious revolutionary work consists of

persistent and methodical efforts through a collective of other revolutionaries to organize the masses for action. (Davis 2013:162).

Her lived reality was evidence to her that working alone can only get one so far, and is, a disconnected exercise. Real action she argues, happens with “organiz[ing] the masses”. Organizing fellow compatriots because your politics require self-defense and likely a revolution, Panther sisters weigh in during an interview (BPP Interview) that autonomous feminist groups are misguided because their struggle is not separable from the socialist revolution, nationalist liberation and other struggles. They make a point to find inspirational examples abroad of men and women fighting colonialist struggles against the United States. They settled on the actions of Vietnamese women during the United States war against Vietnam as a gripping example,

We feel that the example given us by the Vietnamese women is a prime example of the role that women can play in the revolution. The Vietnamese women are out there fighting with their brothers, fighting against American imperialism, with its advanced technology. They can shoot. They're out there with their babies on their backs, as the case may be, and they're participating in the revolution wholeheartedly. (Black Panther Party Interview 1969:22)

From this, we see the political view of Panther is that women's liberation is not separable from the people's liberation, at its various intersections. And that self-defense, in the form of free access to guns is an unquestionable part of this pursuit.

Findings

When CRC founder Barbara Smith comments that, “I always feel that it's the collective mind that has the most insight and sharpness . . . The intelligence of the group speaks” (Smith 2014) she elevates the knowledge contained in the social mind as having much more insight than any individual ever could. Reading first-person accounts and "hearing" directly from prominent social movement members allows insight into the thoughts and experiences of women in two self-defense groups in the 1960s and 1970s. Both individually and collectively, prominent women within these groups had different histories and relationships to institutions that led to different ideas on what sexual violence was and if self-defense could serve them, and how?

This chapter traces the lineage of the Black community's interpretation of sexual violence as primarily a *community* problem. Similarly, the history of the white community and how they have come to understand sexual violence as an *individual* problem. This beginning will pave the way for the later part of this dissertation that dives into hyper-individualized self-defense classes – the outgrowth of the mostly white women's movement. Thereafter, we will see how self-defense classes emerge as the heralded solution to the social problem of sexual violence.

Using a comparison of personal narratives written by women of The Women's Self-Defense Movement and women of the Black Power Movement, this chapter sheds insight on what politically active women in race and gender liberation movements thought about their social position relative to violence. This dive into the background of feminist self-defense and Black Liberation and Black Power self-defense statements including interviews, memoirs, and novels, the vicissitudes of an individual's life help shape their social and political selves.

Conclusion

Tracing divergent lines from separately racialized communities allows us to understand more fully the present, and how answers that might seem normal or natural (like in self-defense – using one's body to protect one's body) are imbued with racial (and class) undertones. Women in collectives are likely to layer a particular narrative over the techniques they practice or tools they use. If, as the epigraph that begins this chapter says, experiences are ambiguous, and actors are left to fill in meaning, this gap is often filled with the “narrative” (Somers 1994). Meaning-making activities that individuals do to recognize themselves in the collective should give insight not only to the participants of social movements but to the tools and practices that they grasp, as necessary.

When I began research on this chapter, I thought I would be looking at how these women imagined themselves placed within the Black Panther Party, what their political convictions were, as well as their ideological disagreements with the (white) feminist movement. But what I found to my surprise were much more personal narratives of lives restricted, assaulted by growing up Black and female and usually but not always poor.

Haunting memories of abuse and violence and how things could have been differently. I did not find a tidy archive that could hold the experiences of Black Panther women, less still a reflective memoir set that could produce each social movement as a reflection.

CHAPTER III

‘WHAT CAN A BODY DO?’ THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF WOMEN’S SELF-DEFENSE

Critical philosopher Judith Butler describes “going for a walk” with her wheelchair using friend Sunny Taylor⁵. During this walk, they discuss an essay by philosopher Gilles Deleuze who grappled with Spinoza’s famous question, “What can a body do?”⁶ This question is posed in opposition to earlier theories that ask, “What should a body do”, “What should a body look like” and so on. Butler points out that the question of what *can* a body do is an entirely different question that presumes an entirely different set of capacities, assumptions, and expectations. It invites us to explore, what a body can hold, how it can move, how does it relate? *what can it do?* is a question taken up by feminist theory in general and self-defense classes in particular, albeit indirectly.

If what can a body do is the question, then women fighting back against physical and sexual violence is at least part of the answer. Born of the intersection of feminist theories and self-defense practices, women's self-defense classes bring together learned embodiment and apply new embodiments to the body. Women's self-defense classes offer to right the wrong that is the self-imposed vulnerability of gendered socialization. In this view, protecting women from violence requires a physical reprogramming, a purposeful calling out and undoing of gender socialization.

When we remain with the question of “What can a body do?”, self-defense classes offer a unique and promising solution. In class, women are taught to yell “NO!”, they can practice walking in ways that bestow confidence, they can learn how to “shrimp” out from an assailant on top of them, they can learn to choke someone until they lose consciousness. The women I interviewed for this chapter learned all these tactics and more. In doing so, they unlearned the gender norms of not taking up verbal or physical

5 “Examined Life - Judith Butler & Sunaura Taylor”

6 While this is well outside my comfort zone to provide commentary, I offer only my reading of this complex ontological puzzle. Deleuze’s proposition was the unit of understanding should not be the person or how they “are” but how they relate to others. “What can a body do?” builds on this type of question. How can a body relate to others and the environment? (Deleuze 1988)

space, not causing a scene and not fearing men's physicality. Despite the significant and growing literature on the efficacy of women's self-defense classes, how women navigate racial and class differences within gender-empowerment spaces is empirically and theoretically thin. This study attempts to close the gap between race and class analysis in feminist endeavors. Feminist self-defense is an ideal place to begin.

Methods

To access women who take self-defense classes, I researched women's self-defense in my immediate geographical and academic location. I came to learn that women's empowerment self-defense differed quite a bit from women's traditional self-defense [empowerment self-defense (ESD) and traditional self-defense (TSD) are a distinction I take up in the next chapter]. Empowerment self-defense, the subject of this study, was a much narrower category that required instructors to incorporate elements of feminist praxis into the class. There were far fewer classes available than their traditional counterparts. I actively recruited from the largest class which was the one offered by a local university. The class was advertised in the course catalogue as "Women's Self Defense: Supportive, empowering class focusing on verbal and physical skills for avoiding and resisting assault. Includes boundary-setting, de-escalation, assertiveness, healthy relationship skills, and effective fighting techniques." Like most other undergraduate women, the participants' ages ranged from 18-24 years old. Demographics of respondents included 6 women of color – 3 Asian, 2 African American, 1 Biracial and 5 women who identify as Caucasian. The Asian women indicated that their families were from India, The Philippines, and China.

Interview questions ranged from factors that led them to take a self-defense class, reactions to scenarios within the class, the other students and the instructors, and the positive and negative aspects of the classes. Interviews were recorded and inductively coded. Initial coding gave way to more focused secondary coding which allowed me to focus on the common elements across interviews and realize what reactions were shared among participants. I asked about emotions, physical asks, class expectations, and scenarios offered in class, but received far more information in return. All names are pseudonyms to protect respondent's privacy.

This study utilized in-depth semi-structured interviewing. Interviews were conducted in person at a location of the respondent's choice. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into Otter Transcription Software by the Principal Investigator while extensive notes were taken. Interviews lasted an estimated 60 to 90 minutes. Given the nature of what self-defense classes teach, many subjects might be uneasy discussing sensitive scenarios learned in class that involve disabling an attacker with kicks to the groin for example. Therefore, a longer interview was frequently the result.

The interview schedule follows a well-established organizational structure for responsive interviewing (Rubin and Rubin 2012). The schedule begins with a scaffolding of main orienting questions, which will be asked of all respondents. Follow up questions and probes, will be used as needed throughout the interviews to elicit further description or clarity from the individual respondents.

The focus of this study was on women's experiences *during* the empowerment self-defense class (as before and after has already been well-scrutinized (Hollander 2018; Wanamaker 2017). This research aims specifically to ask women what precisely they make of the bodily training, scenarios, and simulated violent encounters that comprise the women's empowerment self-defense class. This specific focus of the study is in service to larger questions of my dissertation which is what is the role of the body in emancipatory politics?

Findings

The findings of this study revolved around what I call "contradictions". There were contradictions in why students signed up for the class, contradictions in the violence learned and the violence most women are likely to experience, and contradictions in the climate of each class. There was a delivery of serious material in a silly or jovial manner or tone. The theme of contradiction was manifested in three ways. The first, I call "A Gendered Solution to a Racial Problem" in this section, I highlight how the racial harassment and fear of violence suffered by women of color have led several of them to take this class. The white women that I interviewed did not experience or even know about racial violence, but they did know about sensationalized accounts by national

media of white women being abducted and killed by strangers. This was what led several of them to take the class. The second, I call "Lighthearted & Fun, & Serious" this refers to the physical (and at times verbal) violence that is necessarily learned but diluted with an atmosphere of camaraderie, joking behavior, over the top acting out. The third I call "Unrealistic Maneuvers in Unrealistic Settings", the tool learning and tool use of verbal and physical maneuvers are examined in this section.

Differences along racial lines that would develop into an individualistic or community-based answer to sexual violence, a problem I set up earlier in this dissertation, was not immediately apparent among respondents. Statements about racial violence or abuse or sexual and physical violence would tend to surface at the interview's end, usually after rapport had been established. Respondents defined their experiences in class relative to their own embodied capacities and not to structural or institutional inequalities which erases the structural supports or lack of support that renders women vulnerable to, or protected from, violence and its racial implications. The women of color that I interviewed all either reported racial harassment or feared it. All women of color reported racial violence (or fear of it) as the catalyst that brought them to a women's self-defense class. This brings us to our first contradiction.

1. Contradiction – A Gendered Solution to a Racial Problem

My respondent, Dongmei, an international student from China, describes two incidents of racial harassment that led her to sign up for a women's self-defense class. I have edited for clarity. As we begin, Dongmei recounts trouble she has experienced on the bus that she rides into town. She rides to get from home to school and vice versa but also to take in the landscape that is new to her,

I had two encounters on the bus, which made me feel that I might need to know some more than I did at the time, just in case something came up, specifically targeted at me. I did not know, but I didn't feel I have the tool or know what to say. There are several regulars that ride - if you take a bus at that particular time - So there was only a few people and I sat at the back. And he came up, and then I moved so I can give a seat to someone else. But he picked a seat on the other side of me and next to another guy and that guy was focusing on his phone. And he started talking with that person about phones, and then it was weird. He wanted to start a conversation, but that guy didn't seem to follow up. [The phone guy] got

off the bus and he's still sitting there, and he started talking to the person sitting in front of me. . . . He said he went to a Chinese restaurant one time, and they fed him human liver.

In this encounter, Dongmei shared a story that she reluctantly overheard about eating at a Chinese restaurant. The passenger tells them how he went to a Chinese restaurant and they fed him human liver. In keeping with the precepts of the "new" colorblind racism, the man on the bus that verbally assaulted Dongmei did so without using any direct racial epithets (Bonilla-Silva 2008), therefore he was able to racially assault her without using any overt signs of racism. Unlike the de facto racism of the Jim Crow era, a new racism has emerged that is paradoxically, formally, and legally colorblind⁷. In the following recounting, Dongmei relates a second encounter while riding the bus,

And then I went, went back to the back of the bus and sat down. And then that person who was talking to the driver said *really loud*, he said, 'No English, No jobs!' very loud and then I . . . I was looking away doing my own thing I didn't pay attention, but I could hear everything.

This time the bus driver apologized to her after disembarking at a bus station. He did not want her to think that he allowed that type of thing on his bus. She appreciated the apology. She continued,

But these two incidents, made me feel okay there's some kind of racist thing going on. And I really enjoy (bus) riding. So I want to continue to enjoy it instead of being afraid, with more uncomfortable things happening. I felt I felt just that there's a gap in me that if someone really like . . . What do I do, what do I say, what do I do and just, I didn't know?

After these encounters, Dongmei is feeling vulnerable. While her experiences were both technically verbal harassment, she questions what if it went farther? Would I know what to do? "What do I do?" she asks. The empowerment self-defense class was recommended to Dongmei by a faculty member that is a part of an empowerment self-defense research and teaching team that the faculty member felt would help Dongmei. Even though

⁷ In Bonilla-Silva's book *Racism without Racists, Chapter 3 "The Style of Colorblindness: How to Talk Nasty About Minorities without Sounding Racist"*, he says, "the language of color blindness is slippery, apparently contradictory, and often subtle" (2006:53) he studies whites avoidance of direct racial language with a turn toward indirect racial language to signal their racism. This definition characterizes Dongmei's experience on the bus.

Dongmei was subject to racial violence and not specifically gender violence, the empowerment self-defense class was held up as an answer to racial harassment and violence. Dongmei was excited to get started.

Others in the class mentioned race when asked about taking a class on gender violence. Trinity, an African American woman, mentioned feeling intimidated at how many white people there were on campus compared to people of color, and the high percentage of men there were compared to women. When I asked her if she would recommend this class to a friend, she said “most definitely, my roommate is a tiny little African American girl so she's like afraid all the time. I tried to teach her a few things from class so yeah I would definitely recommend this to people it's fantastic." Here, Trinity names the race (and size) of her friend as the explanation for her constant state of fear. Yet she recommends a gendered solution in the form of a women's self-defense class that did not according to the accounting of the six women of color interviewed mention racial violence or even race at all.

When asked if she thinks about violence more or less after taking the class, Kei an Asian-American woman answered with the postcolonial violence that persists in her house from her grandmother having lived through the Japanese invasion of the Philippines,

I grew up super paranoid and thinking about violence all the time. I think of it all and it's just a lot of violence . . . and my Nana grew up in the house with me and she would watch the cops and stuff. She grew up in the Philippines and she was there when the Japanese attacked. So she has like horror stories. I have terrible vivid violent dreams.

Kei recounts her grandmother's memories of colonialist violence when I asked if she thought about violence more before or after the women's self-defense class that she took. Remarkably, she describes her Nana's childhood as temporally the same as her own. She frames what happened to her grandmother as having happened to her as well. The “terrible, vivid, violent dreams” that Kei suffers from are her Nana's “horror stories”. This example of intergenerational trauma where both trauma survivors and their progeny might mark a typical path to signing up for a self-defense class (DeAngelis 2019). Future research is needed.

Ahaana, an Asian-American woman brought up having been choked by a friend a few years prior. It was an incident that resurfaced when Ahaana was practicing a maneuver called a “rear naked choke”⁸ in class. Learning the choke hold brought up previous trauma, when I asked her why she pushed through, she replied “I decided to go through with it because I didn't want it to haunt me my whole life”. Her exposure to previous violence was from a former friend and when it happened, she noted that the skills she learned from a high-school self-defense class did not help at all.

Ashley remembers the same choking technique demonstrated and joked about by the instructor; a choke hold held until passing out will only “kill a few brain cells which if you think about it is just like a night of drinking”. Ashley remembers her instructor framing it this way and found it funny and reassuring. It would be much easier to practice a maneuver that was like “kill[ing] a few brain cells” than a potentially fatal one. Ashley did not mind learning the rear naked choke because coming to college increased her “risk of being assaulted or being in an abusive relationship”. She felt her odds of encountering violence now that she was at college were pretty good, and so learning some jujitsu (a common component of the ESD class) was not necessarily uncomfortable for her. Her willingness to learn and practice it however was greatly helped by the instructor talking in this way which downplayed the seriousness of choking someone to unconsciousness. Comparing it to drinking, the instructor transforms a purposeful act of violence into a non-violent leisurely get together. Samantha remembers the last day in class with her instructor recommending bear repellent spray to the class,

it's kind of weird but there were times [he said] about how having like pepper spray or mace is so useful and that he has bear repellent in his car, and he was like, yeah it's illegal to use bear repellent on a person in the state of Oregon. But if I'm being attacked, I'd rather use bear repellent and face legal ramifications later than die. And we're like okay, okay.

Her instructor was preparing students to use their bodies and voices in situations of danger. Yet he confesses to carrying bear spray, an illegal substance because it is so

⁸ An advanced technique, the “rear naked choke” involves approaching an attacker from behind, quickly sliding your right hand (assuming right hand dominance) and arm closely across his neck and grabbing his left shoulder. Once the crook of your elbow is in front of his throat, your other arm locks behind his head, creating an arm configuration that only requires you to squeeze your arms together for a few seconds to render your opponent unconscious.

powerful in defend himself or his children, he said in the event of an actual attack. Immune to the legal ramification that might follow an illegal act of aggression, the whiteness of the instructor is insulated from the racial undertones of that joke. Possession of an illegal substance would be received differently across racial lines. Samantha also recalls,

I remember Derek was very very explicit and making sure we understood that there are legal implications . . . if I put them in a choke and I took them out I cannot like continue to choke that like once they're passed out I need to remove myself from the situation because anything further than that I could face legal implications.

The implication in Samantha's class was such that a choke hold is such a severe act to visit on another person, legal implications may result. Once her target is "neutralized" or made unconscious, it is wise for her to leave the scene for two reasons. One, he will wake up in 8-10 seconds and she does not want to be there while he figures who did this to him and second, if the police are alerted, she does not want to explain why she committed an assault (a possible interpretation). Mya is also comfortable using the choke hold and other techniques of last resort, she confided in me, "because as a kid and growing up, there's been a lot of people in my life that have abused me". Mya shares her past trauma with me to explain why she would not use the steps as they were taught exactly. Rather, she would "us[e] all my efforts, all at once, just trying to, like punch and scratch a way out . . . take them down, and then I can punch them in the face and run away." While stranger danger does occur, where punching and scratching one's way out might work, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center maintains that eight out of ten rape victims know their attacker, making a sequence of moves that Mya describes much more socially complicated, in the likely event that she did know her attacker. A reality that self-defense classes including the one that Mya took do not address.

As a young woman of color, Imani is "hyperaware of my surroundings", raised by a single mother, her mom "taught me about racism, to be afraid and never let your guard down" – their house has gates, alarm systems, locks and Imani had a strict and early curfew. Even with these precautions, Imani felt that she would be safer if she enrolled in a women's self-defense class. Similarly, Trinity's (African American woman) Dad felt a self-defense class was almost a requirement of his daughter going away to college. As the

recipient of abuse throughout his childhood, as the youngest kid, he felt he got the brunt of harm from a dysfunctional family. He strongly encouraged her to enroll in a self-defense class once in college. He equated learning self-defense with learning basic CPR and learning how to change a tire, overall actions one should know how to perform to keep themselves and those around them safe.

2. Contradiction - Lighthearted & Fun, Technical & Serious

When asked about the class climate – Serious? Social? Funny? Mechanical?

Militaristic? Mya (a biracial woman) replied,

A lot of people laugh because it's awkward. Things like if you bump into someone you go ha-ha sorry. I think it was awkward, like climbing on top of each other, and like doing the motions of violence but us knowing that like, Oh, we don't want to hurt the other person we would always say, we would usually ask if something's okay or am I hurting you or something like that. And I think a lot of the giggling comes from . . . we're all beginners, and we might do it wrong or we might do something like accidentally like scrape their face or something. Um, I think a lot of giggling comes from just kind of knowing, we're safe.

Mya continues to describe the environment in the class, “me and my partner pretend and make it super like comical like pretending to scratch your face. And it'd be kind of a little bit funny, [Interviewer: Why funny?] I guess because it's not real." She elaborates,

I would do it in like a silly voice like say, like, one of her things [the instructor] was like, ‘You're drinking at a bar and then some guy comes up to you and you talk and have a good time and then he invites you back to his apartment, but you don't want to go’. And I would make it like, “*HEY GIRL*, do you want to come?" Yeah, I make it really kind of stupid I go so over the top.

Mya here has isolated an effective strategy that was not mentioned by the instructor. She allows herself to go through the verbal motions of this encounter and let her partner practice the strategies of getting away, but she does so in a way that is such an exaggerated performance its non-threatening.

"But while we were doing things like techniques on each other it was, I think it was mostly fun and kind of exploring and learning [Interviewer: Tell me what you're exploring] just how our bodies might move in certain situations, and also retraining what's natural to what would be efficient in a self-defense situation". This respondent has nicely articulated what instructors wish for students to practice – physical techniques that

are not laughed at – that could stop an attack, thwart an attacker, but to practice verbal defense saying no is difficult for women especially without apologizing. The women mentioned in this section have found a way to overcome the contradiction of learning serious techniques but using humor and silliness to signal that no one was under threat and the violence being learned and practiced was nonthreatening.

3. Contradiction - Unrealistic Maneuvers in Unrealistic Settings

Kei, an Asian-American student discusses the relative merits of each component of the class. The physical component is where students are taught a mix of martial arts along with boxing and wrestling, usually by a martial arts teacher. There is a second component to this empowerment self-defense class wherein an “empowerment” instructor (a yoga teacher, a fitness teacher, a scholar-researcher) dealt with verbal strategies to defend oneself, as well as practicing saying “NO!” without laughing, practicing walking around the room meekly and then powerfully, talking about common scenes young women were likely to encounter (bars, parties, fraternity houses). Kei elaborates,

I found both of them very useful, like. . . like, I felt like the discussions were more like to, encourage you and like empower you and was more about like how you can defend yourself not using physical movements like using your voice to defend yourself and such and like using confidence in the way you stand right, whereas like the part that this course was [physical] were like, more into the physical side of things, which was really fun. But I'm kind of weak. So, I think that maybe the discussion parts [empowerment instructor] were maybe more helpful to me because like I don't know if I . . . if I would really be able to, like fight someone with the stuff that [physical instructor] taught us but like I definitely feel more confident, after taking the class that I could I possibly could have the ability to, like, hurt someone if someone were to attack me.

Here, Kei recalls the empowerment component being a better fit for her but learning physical techniques would not be forgotten and she is considering using some physical techniques if she were physically threatened. Many respondents reported that they were grateful to have learned the physical techniques, but there was a discomfort in applying them, as Ahaana (Asian-American) makes plain,

“Some tools I would leave behind like biting someone or eye gouging them – I'm not that into - having blood on my hands”. Marni (white) reveals "I didn't grow up in an environment where I needed to know things like that". Marni points to her past to suggest

these maneuvers might not apply to her life, while Emily (white) imagines the future as containing scenarios where the things she learned in the class would not apply, "Like these classes are totally beneficial to take. But I don't think I'd remember any of this stuff like in the moment of anything actually happening, like I feel like it was totally just like all out the window." Emily's case was rather unique because she was the only respondent to have taken three separate self-defense classes – one as part of her high school curriculum taught by the volleyball coach. The second was by two police officers that her sorority hired to come to their house and train them, the last self-defense class she took was the one through the university, where I met her for an interview. Of her extensive experience with self-defense, she said "I think it's interesting that I've taken three, and that like it really hasn't changed my opinion of like violence or like what I would do in that scenario". Emily's unique experiences allowed her to compare across styles of self-defense. What the police offered (2 hours of making sure everyone has a proper knee to the groin and elbow to the face) was quite different from the condensed version of empowerment self-defense through the school. Which itself was different from the 10-week long class that was able to go more in depth. Yet for her, they were more alike than different. Emily's experience reveals the sheer variety in self-defense classes. Some, like the one offered by the police department focus on keeping women's bodies safe, while the other two "empowerment self-defense" classes focus on the social environments that keep women from leaving, talking back, or using their bodies to defend themselves. According to Emily, each class was more similar than different, a valuable observation for empowerment-based self-defense practitioners who seeks to differentiate what they offer from more traditional styles of self-defense. The violence that these women endured in their empowerment self-defense class was much more than some women expected. Samantha, a white woman describes the awkwardness of advanced physical training. She details the lengths she went through to make her partner not actually feel attacked.

so, it feels kind of weird to like, push somebody and like put your arm like in their neck like a conveyor belt." Very strange. And so there was a lot of like, Is this okay? Am I doing this right? This is kind of awkward.

The final contradiction between what is practiced and what is learned is illustrated by Kei and Ahaana. Ahaana feels quite empowered by the class and the learning of techniques through repetition,

Muscle memory is kinda like dancing "the more you practice, the more you get better at it and the more you can remember oh I can do this move and just pretty much learned, know the mechanics" "you don't have to think about it. It's just that like you've practiced enough, such that it seeps into your body, and then you don't need to think too much about it it's just an, it's automatic.

“Muscle memory” discussed more in Chapter 4, is the goal of empowerment self-defense, it introduces mechanisms that are usually uncomfortable for their clientele, like they were for Kei and Ahaana. The only way through discomfort and inexperience is through repetition, this how it “seeps into your body” as Ahaana points out. Kei is the contradiction to Ahaana’s experience and the class. Kei recounted in our interview how she was sexually harassed at her sister’s wedding a few weeks after the class ended. She described being pulled on to dance floor by a much older man and forced to dance with this stranger. She was so uncomfortable that after the song ended she “fast walked away [and] he liked slapped my ass”. Kei was so distraught that it happened and not sure if she should tell someone, she ultimately did what so many women do – she kept it to herself so as to not disturb the wedding festivities or upset her sister. She felt enormous guilt about not deploying the skills she had just learned, "it's just weird that it didn't come through" - - “Just weird that I have all these skills and it didn’t come into play”. Kei is upset with herself on two fronts: first, she believes she should have said or did something to call out her assaulter, second, she is disappointed that her “skills” did not “come into play”. Both verbally and physically, she felt she let herself down. Muscle memory’s place in the class and the reason so much repetition is necessary, is that it will deliver when scenarios arise that are dangerous, scary, and overwhelming. Because it did not, Kei is left wondering what she did wrong. An outcome that is the opposite to the feminist principles that founded empowerment self-defense.

4. Reasons for Taking the Class

White women report sensational accounts of stranger danger – assault and rape and murder and fear stoked by instructors. Students were likely to cite cases covered by

national media, including young college women who looked like them. One particular case, the abduction and murder of Mollie Tibbetts, a white 20-year-old psychology student at the University of Iowa went missing on a jog in Brooklyn, Iowa in July 2018. Women across racial categorization listed going to gym or a friend's house late at night and feeling unsafe walking home. White women however were more likely to report having heard national, sensationalistic stories about women being victimized doing similar things.

Mya says "My Dad always recommended that I take Krav Maga because he said it was something created specifically for women to escape situations". Ashley, a white woman relates her biggest fears before taking the class were "things you hear about on the news" also guys ganging up on her or her friends, carrying out groceries to her car, girls on a run you know, random instances – all random acts of violence that are rare⁹. Samantha spoke on her knowledge of the Mollie Tibbetts story,

If you remember like the Molly Tibbetts story, she was a college student in Iowa, I believe she was abducted while jogging, and she was killed. And I don't know just seeing that specific media story really kind of like freaked me out for lack of a better term. And I don't know, I kind of thought like, it really really is a terrible situation but like as a woman, you kind of almost have to kind of be considering that stuff.

For Samantha, "considering that stuff" meant equipping herself with a self-defense class and for Emily, it meant getting into her car, locking the doors immediately and "then just start driving like I don't adjust my mirrors or anything". For other women it meant keeping keys in hand, going into your car on the passenger's side [pretending you are waiting for a friend], parking a good bit away from other cars so people cannot see what kind of car you drive and so on.

5. Blind spots

Trinity, an African American woman would have appreciated some time spent at the beginning of class about how safe women are on this campus? Where are the dangerous spots? Is anything being done about that? Dongmei, an Asian American

⁹ <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>

woman commented on the lack of “recognition of cultural differences” for international students. For example, many scenarios in class took place in a parking lot which assumes students have cars. Parking lot danger may be a uniquely American phenomenon where most students have their own cars or have friends that do. Devoting time to safety in parking lots may be a culturally specific assumption.

Mya noticed that scenarios were not representative, “we should have done less with the party/bar scene”. It was an assumption that undergraduate women would be familiar with the “party/bar” scene and not all were. This left some uncomfortable when asked to practice verbal defenses against a man being too aggressive in one of these contexts. Ahanna (Asian) for instance spoke about not knowing what to say at a party so it was embarrassing to have that prompt.

Another respondent noticed that there was no mention of any racial issues in the class and maybe there should be, also she did not remember LGBT issues being discussed at all. Not mentioned by any respondent but a glaring omission was the likelihood of knowing the perpetrator. All physical techniques mentioned, respondents assumed no relationship between the woman and an attacker.

Conclusion

When asked if they had any encounter with violence before having signed up for the class, the women reported working as a camp counselor, breaking up fights between middle schoolers, working as a security guard, several took kickboxing classes, a few took taekwondo, two mentioned having an older brother which was an initiation in fighting they hadn't signed up for. While previously I had not considered these experiences as instances of violence before respondents mentioned them, there is no reason to consider them outside what empowerment self-defense should do.

How do self-defenders theorize, construct, and enact their politics? How do bodies read each other? When Judith Butler asks, “What Can the Body Do?” She takes pains to emphasize that no one moves without a supportive environment and a set of technologies that enable, recognize, and interact.

When four Black men sat down at Woolworth's lunch counter during the Civil Rights struggle and politely asked to be served, their bodies posed the question, “Why

can't we be served?" (Foster 2003:398), it was a question about which bodies belonged and which did not. What can a body do depends on many things. If self-defense is feminism made physical, learned, and expressed through the body, what can a body do links up to discursive currents that individualize harm and decontextualize answers. An individual response to collective risk cannot be the answer, even to a physical feminism (Riech 2016; Carlson 2015; Szasz 2007).

CHAPTER IV

THE BODY OF WOMEN'S SELF-DEFENSE: HABITUS, PRIVILEGE AND FIGHTING BACK

Many processes collaborate to make structural conditions of existence seem like properties of the body and of the person.

- Lauren Berlant

*The Queen of America Goes to
Washington City: Essays on Sex and
Citizenship* 1997:96

Introduction

Training women to interrupt violence has been a central concern of feminist practice for decades, if not centuries. Research has stalled however in how exactly this is accomplished. Using habitus as an analytic anchor, this study pivots the question away from *whether* women benefit from self-defense (a resounding yes) to specifically *how* this benefit is absorbed into or accrued upon bodies. “Muscle memory” is a core concept in the self-defense world, thus I will be discussing it at length throughout this chapter. For now, it is sufficient to say that muscle memory is the goal of self-defense instruction, it is the mechanism that transforms feminine bodies to fighters. The mechanism relies on repetition of physical techniques.

Self-defense is a large umbrella term that both feminists and non-feminists alike use to encompass several different pedagogical styles along with supporting philosophies. Self-defense can be learning to operate a firearm or purchasing weapons such as knives, pepper spray, personal alarms, and the like. Self-defense also includes classes that one can sign up for usually for a moderate fee. Self-defense classes are offered at many community colleges and universities for credit, they are also offered at private martial arts studios and boxing gyms. They are offered at some high schools and community centers. They are even offered online as part of massive open online courses for a fraction of the cost of in-person classes. Apart from differences that may arise across locations

and platforms, self-defense instruction also differs by the training and experience of instructors. Perhaps it is obvious that a firearm instructor would have training specific to firearm safety and use (Carlson 2015), but what may be less obvious is the training and experience of self-defense class instructors (in-person and online) differs along a specific ideological chasm.

If the content of individual self-defense training courses varies, it often reflects the martial arts style of the instructor. For example, it is likely that instructors with grappling backgrounds in judo or ju-jitsu will have a stronger focus on grappling and submission techniques, while kicking and striking styles such as karate and taekwondo will emphasize leg power and ‘soft’ target points for striking such as the throat and groin. Self-defense writ large has no national accrediting agency or consistent curricula to speak of. The exception to note is that there are certification organizations like the National Women’s Martial Arts Federation (NWMAF) that define, train, and certify instructors in “Empowerment Self-Defense”.

Self-defense instructors can be divided into two specific groups, for clarity I name them ESD and TSD. In the first style, feminist instructors teach *empowerment self-defense* (ESD) and in the second, non-feminist instructors teach *traditional self-defense* (TSD). Traditional self-defense classes derive from martial arts and boxing traditions as well as military training. They often describe themselves as “tactical” and “efficient”, offering to help the disadvantaged non-professional fighter to have a better chance of protecting themselves. Traditional self-defense classes are typically offered by police departments or martial arts studios and they teach best practices for arming the individual against a criminally minded assailant. Assailants are imagined as having caught their victim off guard, usually in public spaces and without any relationship to the victim.

The other type of class, the empowerment self-defense class (ESD) incorporates the principles of feminist phenomenology, marking them for women’s bodies only¹⁰ (Beauvoir 1949; Young 1990; McCaughey 1998; Thompson 2014). The empowerment class prioritizes women’s bodies by foregrounding gendered socialization, a kind of socialization within Western culture that forces girls to experience their bodies as objects

¹⁰ Although this is beginning to change. Many ESD studios are starting to offer classes for the queer community, disabled women, and trans women.

instead of subjects (Fredrickson and Harrison 2005). Phenomenologists and later feminist philosophers assert that “throwing like a girl” and other underutilized musculature patterns are forms of restrictive bodily comportment that inhibit a full physical experience of the body and its surroundings (Young 1990).

To qualify as ESD and not its “traditional” counterpart, classes must stipulate first that violence is not an individual problem but a social one, second that the social context matters, third, perpetrators assume all blame for attacks and fourth, solutions should center on embodiment by offering a variety of self-defense strategies for students to put in their “toolbox”, to quote an often-used term from ESD (Thompson 2014, NWMAF). Engaging the body is vital to this practice and the philosophy that guides it. One cannot read about ESD or watch it on video, one must physically do it to properly benefit from it. One founder of ESD likens the physical practice of self-defense to a “physiologically based therapy” (Thompson 2014: 355). This “physiological therapy” captures the idea that by changing one’s body, one can change their mind (perceptions of capabilities shift). As Martha McCaughey writes, what feminists argue about doing, the self-defense community actually does, which is to disrupt gender norms of female violability (1997). The re-scripting of bodies acts directly on the body, a “corporeal feminism” according to Elizabeth Grosz (1994). This corporeality is learned physical techniques that impact the body directly and targets what the body knows and holds, what it remembers. Changes in political consciousness come later. If “self-defense is feminism in the flesh” (McCaughey 1997), feminine body comportment is the target. Feminine body comportment is the embodied knowledge of a misogynistic gender order.

Drawing from martial arts, boxing, military training, as well as feminist insights from the 1970s, women’s empowerment self-defense draws from a wide variety of disciplines to re-script women’s bodies. In this study, I focus on martial arts-based courses for this study because they emerged from the feminist movement and were the initial “women’s self-defense”. For feminist instructors, self-defense should be “as realistic as possible”, should teach skills that can be learned quickly, are easy to remember and transfer across a variety of situations. McCaughey suggests learning under “high-stress, high-adrenaline conditions” is ideal (Madden and Sokol 1997:104) to best install patterns into muscle memory. The self-defense class poised to offer exactly this.

There is robust research that indicates women fare better on several measures after taking a self-defense class (Hollander 2018). There is much evidence to suggest that self-defense classes do improve women's self-confidence and likelihood to defend themselves if attacked, in addition to reporting lower levels of fear and greater confidence (Weitlauf, et al. 2000). After having taken a class, they also report feeling more physically competent (Brecklin 2008) and tend to fear crime less (McDaniel 1993), even if only temporarily (Brecklin 2008). Women who take self-defense classes are less likely to experience a sexual assault (Hollander 2014) and report not only fewer completed rapes, but fewer attempted rapes as well (Senn et al. 2015). Women who fight back are more likely to avoid rape than women who do not fight back (Ullman and Knight 1992) and taking a self-defense program leads to increases in self-protective and assertive behaviors (Orchowski et al. 2008). Self-defense training has also demonstrated effectiveness in reducing rates of sexual assault outside the U.S.; among adolescents in Nairobi, Kenya (Sarnquist et al. 2014, Sinclair et al. 2013), adolescent and high school girls in Malawi (Decker et al. 2018) and schoolgirls in New Zealand (Jordan and Mossman 2018).

Most research into self-defense training has addressed the psychological effects of training, like perceptions of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-confidence. What has yet to be the focus of research into self-defense are the changes to the body. The absorption of quick response patterns into muscles, and the installation of patterns of bodily coordination into flesh is the goal of self-defense classes - empowerment-based or not. When researchers ask whether ESD classes work, results resoundingly suggest that they do¹¹ (Hollander 2004; Hollander 2014; Senn et al. 2015; Orchardski et al. 2008). How they work, is the focus of this study.

Habitus

In the self-defense classroom, students do not gain new skills by etching new practices onto a blank slate, but by incorporating newly learned maneuvers into a variety of pre-existing competencies – already molded and marked by a lifetime of socialization

¹¹ These results suggest successful outcomes for one population (white, class-privileged, cis-gendered and hetero-presenting) but not others (Hirsch and Khan 2020).

(Bunn 2016). Capturing the internalization of social status, the term “habitus” tethers bodies to social structures while highlighting the inequities that are produced (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The body’s habitus absorbs, stores and projects the propensities generated from the material and social conditions that produced it. Importantly, it does this outside of conscious awareness. Habitus links systemic structuration with individual action (King 2000, Lizardo 2009). It refers to the “external environment as encoded in bodily practices” (Lizardo 2009:17).

Habitus is particularly useful to anchor this research because it marks what is undone and then rebuilt in the self-defense classroom. Changed habitus marks a successful self-defender – an “empowered” woman. Importantly, we do not ever interact with structures through only one dimension of lived experience like gender. Having a gendered body is always realized through other dimensions of social life. Race, class, sexuality, and ability are among the main dimensions through which women live out gendered lives.

As women train to become soldiers, or boxing apprentices (Paradis 2012) or learn mixed martial arts fighting, they undergo a habitus change the same way they learned initial habitus - through relentless repetition. Self-defense operates in the same way, as McCaughey terms it a “reprogramming regimen” (1988). What they are reprogrammed out of is patriarchal notions of femininity and womanhood that fashion a physical internalization of the lack of social power.

While researchers such as Young, Guthrie and Castelnuovo, Kane, and Dworkin who do work on body building, fitness, sport, habitus and gender, note that while all habitus is raced, classed, and gendered, speaking of a *gendered habitus* is helpful in some instances. A gendered habitus has been identified as “an identity that internalizes and literally embodies the division of labour between the genders” Beate (2006).

The habitus that TSD classes are trying to change should not be different than ESD classes. If this is true, we might ask, why are ESD classes “physical activism” (Jamie Schultz) and TSD classes are not? If this is the way the physical becomes political in women’s bodies, TSD should achieve similar results because their physical programs are nearly the same. Focusing on the muscle memory and a physical response to a social

crime (it is social and structural inequalities that place women in a vulnerable position relative to men, not physical inequities).

Traditional Self Defense

Scholars do not yet know if traditional self-defense also helps to reduce violence against women, as this kind of class has yet to be systematically analyzed (Hollander 2018). A woman's right to fight back is now so ubiquitous it has extended beyond empowerment self-defense and been taken up in traditional self-defense classes of martial arts gyms. But these classes are different from the misogynistic martial arts classes that did not take seriously the needs of women wanting to protect themselves from sexual violence in the 1970s (a failure that helped birth the women's self-defense movement). Traditional self-defense classes today have made a 180-degree turn, even co-opting the language of "women's empowerment."

However, physical skills did not address the denigrated social position of women and the ways in which learning to fight would be more challenging for women, due not to physical limitations but to the inequalities produced through gender socialization (Searles and Follansbee 1987). Socialized tendencies toward passivity and weakness would need to be addressed because women were realizing that they were socialized into inferiority, they did not inhabit naturally inferior bodies.

Methods

This study is based on participant-observation of traditional women's self-defense classes (TSD) over a period of six months. The methods for this study rely on the premise that people often act upon what Giddens (1986:22) has termed practical knowledge, which is an incorporated physical "know-how" that guides the individual. What makes this knowledge "practical" is that it is embodied, felt rather than thought; most often remaining unspoken and therefore difficult to detect through methods that rely on the conscious reflection of participants like interviews (Pink 2009). Because of this, I decided on an immersive participant experience. As a student in self-defense classes, I did warm-ups, was a partner in practice drills, and listened to scenarios as they were brought to life

by instructors, I chatted and laughed with other students and felt physical and emotional responses to learning how to defend myself.

I deliberately turned away from asking subjects to interpret what they were learning because the success of habitus to signal accumulated privilege crucially depends on it operating below the level of conscious awareness (Bourdieu 1984; Wacquant 2004). In addition, and in line with other scholars, participant-observation is best done by the researcher as she reflects on her own transformation along with those she observes (Garcia and Spencer 2013). I was able to reflect on my own bodily transformation, not to presume that my participants were experiencing identical embodied changes but to give flesh to the scenarios offered and endlessly rehearsed in class.

Women's self-defense classes were selected through an exhaustive web-based search within a medium sized city in the Pacific Northwest. I supplemented my embodied participation by analyzing publicly available information from organizations' websites (Thompson 2014). Gyms differed in membership requirements and cost. While some gyms offered drop-in style classes (pay as you go), others required longer-term commitments in the form of gym membership. Classes ranged in cost from \$75 for a 10-class series to \$125 for 7 classes. The first class was typically free. Classes ranged in size from 2-3 students to 20-25 students.

While I did not collect demographic data, I observed the demographics of the classes largely reflected those of the region in that participants were predominately white and middle-class. This observation is consistent with previous research on self-defense (Spencer 2009). Because class sites were derived from a local city sample based on convenience, they are meant to be illustrative and explorative rather than representative of an entire population. While I cannot confirm that the students were in fact middle class, as measured by education, income, and occupational prestige (Wright 2015), each participant opted into each for-profit class and that regardless of individuals' background, they were performing a middle-class identity (re)constructed in the classroom.

While the absence of interview or survey data was an intentional component of my research design, it left me unable to confirm class identities. My study was to observe class *performance* (see Bettie 2003), instead of confirming class *location* with demographic data, my methodological design served my research interests. All data was

collected during 2015. While I chatted and interacted with participants, the claims in the paper are made entirely on participant observation of classes, website analysis, and previous scholarly research. After each class was over, I sat down to enter my observations into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative software tool. This helped systematize the open coding of field notes, where analytic categories emerged from the data (Charmaz 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Emergent codes that were most common across sites and between classes formed the bases of the themes I highlight below.

Findings

1. Fear

What these instructional classes, lessons, and practices share is the need to quickly overlay a new body comportment onto a pre-existing one. As an illustrative example, Melissa, a self-defense student, is questioning the practicality of what she is learning:

Melissa: If someone were actually punching us, we would remember to do this?
Celeste (instructor): You need to practice these moves a lot and then, you know, it becomes muscle memory.

Here, the logic of “muscle memory” is used to justify repetition and ensure compliance in enacting maneuvers. When a student questions the practicality of a scenario under conditions of being attacked, she is rebuffed with the importance of repetition to the point of automation. Demonstrations of futile fighting are often the backdrop to introduce proper technique that will become installed in students’ muscles after sufficient repetition. It is how fear can be overcome. Traditional self-defense challenges patriarchal notions by re-training vulnerable bodies into strong, fighting bodies, just like ESD. But unlike ESD, it does not adopt the critical framework of feminist praxis – practicing verbal skills, talking about emotions. They teach to engage in use of force without a conceptual structure that supports and justifies it. Nevertheless, the mechanics and practices used in ESD and TSD are strikingly similar.

Muscle memory refers to learning and retaining a physical skill, a phrase used often in playing sports, learning musical instruments, learning how to dance and martial arts instruction (Giblin et al. 2015; Garcia and Spencer 2013; Wacquant 1995; Wade

2011; Wainwright et al. 2006). From a feminist perspective, muscle memory is part of building strength which is a firmly feminist endeavor— a challenge to patriarchal notions of women as weak, vulnerable, and thus attackable.

Alongside the feminist precept of gaining and showcasing strength, a justification must exist alongside women (un)learning physical techniques that on their own would upset the gender order. Thus, the body mechanics of imitating or responding to violence with violence require a justification from the women involved in TSD classes.

The justification for “fighting back” exists in the instillation of fear or the stoking of already existent fear, both which serve the crucial function of aligning women with the practice of violence that is otherwise anathema to them. With the learning of self-defense, practices are justified through the strategic use of fear. Fear is tied to existing habitus which lays the script for the body mechanics of self-defense. This is no mere tautology. It is a calling forth and fitting together. First, habitus provides the scaffold for how the mechanics of self-defense will be learned. Second, habitus structures the body itself into muscle patterns that feel threatened or capable of fighting back. Instructors correctly assume that scenarios presented to students for practice defending oneself are easily taken up. Seamlessly incorporated from bodily capacities to scenarios offered, this is because the women who find their way to traditional self-defense classes can and do see themselves as vulnerable to physical harm and in need of protection.

On one occasion, after pointing out that a knee to the groin must be followed immediately by stomping on the foot and pushing the assailant to the ground to fully disable him, our instructor emphasizes, “you have to disable that ankle you can’t just put him on the floor and then run away because then you are taking your life in your hands that you are a faster runner than he is”. She continued, “Especially if say, you have a kid with you, forget it, you’ll never outrun him.” She says to me privately later, “say you are with your girls [I have two young daughters], you can’t scoop them up and be able to get away, *you have to* incapacitate him”. In this way, the extreme violence of “incapacitation” is reconciled with femininity via instructors’ appeal to women’s presumed roles as mothers, with children becoming the warrant for disabling force. Instead of a violation of women’s protective role as mothers, acting violently becomes the very embodiment of it.

This teaching technique was a common one used by instructors, where threatening scenarios are described in detail for students to imagine happening to them. Drawing on this, instructors created a context to warrant the use of bodily violence, as a solution to the fear called forth by imagining themselves the target of indiscriminate attacks. We were asked to envision a raft of grisly attacks, a world of menacing others that certainly amplified fears, everything from a man running toward you with knife held above his head to a man straddling you on the ground attempting to force penetration. In the classroom, danger was imminent, and violence was potentially life-threatening; all evoked to legitimate an aggressive physical response among students.

If students' fears were deepened, the instructors offered a solution: the cultivation of new muscle memory that allow students' bodies to spring into action, short circuiting conscious deliberation and hesitation. Students learned that the antidote to violence was in the unthinking, reflexive capacities of their bodies.

In TSD classes, fear is produced then offered as the justification for doing violence (DeWelde 2003). Fear once produced manifests in physical vulnerability. Vulnerability in turn presumes a certain innocence, a blamelessness which provides the mandate to execute physical violence. In this way, the violence required in learning self-defense is reconciled with (and benefits from) the presumption of a vulnerable femininity. Instructors also supply the mandate for women doing violence through repetition without reflection (also called muscle memory). The usefulness of repetition training is to remove from conscious consideration one's physical reactions to threats. The goal of technique repetition to the point of automation is precisely to remove the context of the assault from the woman's awareness, which would slow body reactions. For automation to occur, techniques must be perennially repeated in order for operations to take hold below conscious awareness (the domain of the habitus). For example, one defensive scenario was described as "a bear hug from behind". Our response was methodically laid out:

get low and heavy, two back hands to the groin, swinging wildly to loosen the predator's grip, elbow to the gut, bump your hips back to knock his hips back, back elbow to his chin, pivot around, elbow strike to his neck, get control of his head, finish with three knee kicks to the groin, stomp on foot, push him back (breaking his ankle) (Author's field notes)

While this sequence may at first glance appear complicated and difficult to remember let alone execute, we practiced the entire scenario nearly a dozen times, revisiting it over multiple days, each time beginning with an instructor “simulating”, as realistic as possible, an attack from behind. What is initially clumsy, awkward, and slightly embarrassing gets replaced by the memorization of precise hand, elbow, knee, and foot placements necessary so that we do not accidentally injure our attacker (co-students) or ourselves. Thus, even initially clumsy, and complicated scenarios, practiced many times over the course of weeks or months become effectively incorporated into our new comportment. Repetition acts as the mechanism for replacing learned hesitancy with learned violence. Emphasis on repetition of maneuvers to the point of automation of responses reorients middle-class bodies away from an ineffective femininity and toward a successful self-defender.

2. *Physical Femininity*

Instructors often imposed a notion of fragile femininity during demonstrations, which marked bodies as ineffective at delivering violence. During one particular class, I was gently scolded by Vicky, an instructor who pointed out that I tend to lean back and often have difficulty remembering to lunge forward with my upper body while in “fighting stance” (also called “boxer’s stance” – knees bent, legs under knees, shoulders in and down, hands up protecting your face). Offering correction, she remarked that I had “ballerina posture” which she performed for me by mocking an exaggerated nose-in-the-air, legs locked, back straight, arms swept up to resemble a ballerina. Vicki explained that I often defaulted to this position and needed to work on *not letting my body* do that. Nearly all scenarios call for protecting one’s face and hunching down with bent knees in preparation for slaps, punches, or kicks. Thus, being a straight-backed and exposed “ballerina” was exactly what not to do. After I apologized, Vicky said it was a problem she had seen many times, and with enough practice I would learn the correct way to stand. I was reassured that it could be overcome, my body’s mistake of defaulting to “ballerina pose”. Here we see a shared body comportment “mistake” that women tend to exhibit as they learn self-defense.

Once again taking aim at the presumption of feminine politeness, instructor Blake demonstrates how *not* to get out of an arm hold. In a mockingly high-pitched tone he whisper-yells, “*Um . . . excuse me . . . but . . . you’re breaking my arm??!*” Using “upspeak”, a characteristically feminine vocal intonation that undermines verbal statements by tonally phrasing them as questions, Blake makes the point that he would never seriously speak in such a way, and we should not either. Blake here exaggerates his performance of ineffective and powerless femininity for dramatic effect. But with this demonstration, he indicates his assumption of our likely incompetent response to violence. This embodied femininity would hesitate to yell forcefully at an attacker (or at our partner in a simulation). Our hesitation is both assumed and mocked in this performance, a demonstration of precisely how *not* to react. With this jovial admonition, our instructor is signaling the failure of feminine politeness and deference while urging us to replace it.

The repetition of scenarios, designed to instill “muscle memory” such that our bodies would respond without impediments from our thoughts or feelings, “muscle memory” is a phrase repeated often. It marks the ultimate goal of the self-defense class. It aims to intervene in the habitus. Muscle memory refers to the self-defense class’ interruption into students embodied reactions to violence. It is specifically and purposely below the level of conscious awareness. Fear and feeling were to be replaced by action. An automated physicality is the mechanism that addresses the violence, divorced from interpretation, emotional processing, or reflection. Anesthetized action replaces careful assessment. There was no reflection on the entitlement to violence, only the pulling students into scenarios, and “practice, practice, practice” because as you train, so will you do in an actual fight.

3. Joking

Joking helps position the body as not really a risk, while paradoxically, another essential component, the stoking of fear, helps justify the techniques that are taught. Evidenced by the easy flow of instructor directives coupled with casual but incomplete student obedience, the class environment was usually a cordial and easy going one. For example, Jackie asks instructor Claire, “Now, *why* would I have my arms up (protecting

her face) if I'm kicking someone in the sternum? There would be no way he could punch me." Claire silently demonstrates how she (as an attacker) could punch her while being kicked in the sternum. "Fine!" relents Jackie, (sarcastically) "I'll give it to you!" she laughs. In this rupture of expectations, Jackie demonstrates her comfort in speaking up and demanding explanations and therefore, her claim to authority and respect, and we see the non-serious nature of learning violence. In this instance, we see women engaging in humor and other techniques specifically to maintain the feminine embodiments that the instructors both rely on and attempt to erase. As an effort to evade seriousness, joking bridges expectations to outcomes.

Adopting a jovial demeanor with warmth, friendliness, and humor are useful tools for instructors to use to connect with students and for students to connect with each other. As other scholars have noted, it is through joking that group norms can be solidified and policed (Pascoe 2007). Through joking, social actors can form a bridge in an otherwise disquieting setting, like the self-defense class. Students are trained to think about the world as dangerous but in a facetious manner that is nonthreatening and divorced from actual harm (Sherman 2017). Through joking about violence, the structural position of women in a gender order that places them at risk is simultaneously undermined and affirmed. From Foucault we can see that the practice of joking and the interactions it engenders are a node that keeps matrices of power intact, yet flexible and durable.

"Humor broadly understood, is a nuanced play of exclusion and inclusion, a dialectic of hostility (laughing at) and joyful solidarity (laughing with), riding an emotional roller coaster of shame and pride. At stake is the vital issue of who belongs to cultural, social, and political communities, and under what terms." (Uproarious 2019:17) Particular linguistic codes, joking behavior, and storytelling comprise a shared social ecology through which students imagine and then react to interpersonal combat. On one occasion,

Today we would learn how to punch someone. Blake seemed in a jovial mood as usual, playing with the tension between an easy affability and the grim nature of what he was about to demonstrate. Blake asks his assistant teacher Connor, to grab his arm with two hands which Connor does, after which Blake smiles and says, "Really muscle in there!". So Connor grabs him tighter, prompting Blake's reply "Not so tight man, there are ladies here!" (Author's field notes)

While demonstrating the performance of masculinity for a group of women, Blake references not all women in general but “ladies” in particular. Here he brings out the distinction between how ladies might act and what we were about to do - practicing grabbing arms and pushing each other. Time and again, instructors signaled gendered norms as an entrance into and mandate for the violence learned in the self-defense classroom. Synonymous with a courteous, genteel woman, the lady does important work of marking a distinction between gendered bodies that should be involved in violence and bodies that should not.

Not only learning to do violence but also *learning to have violence done to us* were equally important parts of our training. Instructors inform students that receiving “good amounts” of force and having to apply force in return is an essential component of learning. For example, we are urged to *really feel* how much pressure is needed to apply to our partners’ neck before she would begin to loosen her grip. This was repeated throughout training, if we did not “really” feel pressures, forces, and blocks we would fail in a “real” scenario, because the physical sensations would be unfamiliar. Instructors feared that our bodies would revert back to our gendered training in passivity and would fail us (Grosz 2013). While repetition in training was paramount to our success at using techniques without hesitation “in real life”, so too was using enough force to “really feel it”.

Race in Class

Structures of violence and precarity produce different femininities that render women unevenly vulnerable to the type of violence that self-defense classes offer to defend women against. This aids in calling attention to how habitus is not a single dimension and when applied uniformly (like across all women) is likely to be distorted as an analytical concept. An intersectional focus pushes the concept of habitus forward because as we have seen, habitus is an accounting for body practices that contain historical injustices, racial pain, gender inequity and so forth. Because of this, we should be careful to not mistake the empowerment self-defense class as only a space of gendered empowerment, we must remember that racial and class and sexuality components are operating as well. Traditional self-defense classes suggest that techniques learned, and

scenarios drawn are universally applicable to a gendered experience of having a gendered body. They assume a generalizability of self-defense to all women.

As researchers have found, not all girls are socialized into femininity in the same way. In fact, competence in interpersonal violence coupled with gender subordination (girls or women who fight) is usually met with racist and classist suspicions of cultural poverty, inadequate coping skills, or the rejection of norms of respectability (Fellows and Razack 1998; Ferguson 2000; Edin and Kafalas 2005; Jones 2010; Garcia 2012).

Learning interpersonal violence becomes a real survival strategy for marginalized youth in communities where state and civic institutions have relinquished responsibility for residents (Anderson 1999). Girls find that asserting authority, demonstrating physical strength, and the strategic use of interpersonal violence are advantageous in peer-controlled spaces of race and/or class marginalized communities (Jones 2010; Ness 2010). In fact, instead of being rewarded as a “nice” or “proper” girl (or lady) when they eschew fighting, some are punished for passivity and weakness (Bettie 2003). In the lives of some girls, physical safety must be defended, and effective techniques learned as part of early socialization experiences (Ness 2010, Jones 2010, Miller 2008).

Conclusion

This study looks at women’s self-defense classes because they are the site where the rapid transformation of habitus is bought and sold. Yet so far, the embodied aspect has been underanalyzed. This study finds that fear emerges in a prominent role in the student-instructor exchange. Instructors elicit strong emotion from students alongside what could be ordinary techniques taught in a relatively calm classroom setting. Fear acts as a bridge to usher women across a terrain that is discomforting, aggressive, even violent acts being done to them or that they must do to another woman. Fear is the justification for violating norms of femininity. These norms are recognizable in their ineptitude around violence and difficulty in being verbally assertive. Fear is the catalyst for shifting embodied dispositions. Fear is also gendered, racialized, and classed in specific ways.

Students learn to “skeletaliz[e] action . . . creating a new bodily mode of existence, the learning of a way of simplifying action by selecting its key muscular efforts while hiding their conceptual accompaniments” (Grosz 2013:221). When action is

“skeletalized” it is incorporated into our bodies, at a pre-reflexive level. These “accompaniments” are the mandate or justification for violence supplied by instructors. While the mandate for doing violence is the fear produced through scenarios, students are encouraged not to deliberate on this component. Instead, they are encouraged to commit action to “muscle memory” and leave conscious reflections at the door. These contortions are the ways that classes compensate to teach skills without threatening the social order.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: VIOLENCE AND BODIES

In Ta-Nehisi Coates' highly regarded book, *Between the World and Me* (2015), he describes the violences- past, present, men, women, and children that are visited upon the Black body.

But all our phrasing-race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy-serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, crack bones, breaks teeth. . . . the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. (Coates 2015:10)

If as he writes, race itself is violence visited upon the Black body, what does this mean for Black women doing self-defense? He writes that women are not equally "set out for pillage". "Set out for pillage" is an arresting and miserable phrase for what the U.S. does to women even if unequally.

Sexual assault is a threat to all women. But it is not an equal threat to all women. Memoirs from the Women's Movement and the Black Power Movement provide windows into the past lives of women navigating sexual violence and defining for themselves the parameters of the practice of self-defense. We witnessed in chapter two the difference between racialized self-defense and white-privileged self-defense. Sexual harassment and victimization are entirely different experiences along racial lines.

As I read Panther sister Assata Shakur writing her autobiography, she recalled a detailed account of a sexual assault forced upon her during the prison intake process. She reported being "finger fucked" as part of her cavity search. This assault occurred while the corrections officer hurled racial slurs at her (Shakur 2001). She considered the assault and the slur as inseparable experiences. The racialized sexual assault was a combined indignity. This is something middle-class white women, founders of self-defense could never experience as racial slurs do not exist for them.

Women who allowed me to interview them repeated that their self-defense was both lighthearted and fun, technical and serious, reporting that physical contact with

strangers left them giggling and uncomfortable, which suggested no one was in real danger. Some more advanced scenarios were so complicated and technically challenging that laughter seemed the only appropriate response, a reinforcement that women in self-defense classes were doing something other than preparing to protect their bodies against assault. The women of color reported a different experience, although they reported the laughter and unrealistic scenarios too. Additionally, women of color reported a racial incident as the impetus to sign up for a self-defense class. At the end of twelve interviews, I can report that women of color describe their bodies as more at risk than the white women did.

The students enacted physical scenarios that were least likely to happen. In stranger scenarios, women practiced gouging an eye, breaking a finger, even choking to unconsciousness. When they are most likely to be attacked by a friend, family member, boyfriend, classmate, someone they already know. Eye gouges and finger breaking are immensely harder when women have a relationship to their attacker. As they enacted verbal defenses, they did not know the receipt of their empowerment was entirely dependent on their race and class privilege. Yelling NO! or yelling anything at all in public is not a tactic woman of color, especially Black women tend to employ.

As I think of the white women who took a traditional self-defense class with me and I watched them joke about the scenarios and talk back to the instructors, I wonder if they know they are among the class of women least likely to suffer a sexual assault. These women were made to fear their surroundings and unknown men. The key offered to protect oneself from violence was repetition, repetition, and repetition, forcing “muscle memory” into their bodies. Automation of response was the goal. Unlikely scenarios, techniques that wrongly assume women do not know their attacker. Learning to break a foot, fall in a push-up position, and groin strike are unlikely choices a woman can use against a family member, a boyfriend, a friend, or some other person she might have a relationship with.

Women’s bodies facing violence are treated differently due to race. The title of this dissertation, *Politicizing Embodied Violence: Emerging and Diverging Frames of Self-Defense* suggests that embodied violence is not only already political but also a specifically racial and gendered social issue. To think otherwise is a misnomer I hope to

have upended here. This dissertation did an archival dive into movement memoirs and autobiographies, then interviews of empowerment self-defense students, finally the observation of traditional self-defense classes. With disparate lenses into a common question, I was able to ask, what does self-defense assume of the body, and what in turn does it do to the body? The one truth about bodies, violence, and self-defense is that it develops around the needs of the community whether privileged or oppressed.

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