"GENDER-JUTSU": GRAPPLING WITH GENDER IN MARTIAL ARTS CONTEXTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This is a critical, explorative thesis examining how ten female martial artists were attracted, challenged and empowered through their chosen martial arts training. Meanings and benefits of martial arts in the lives of participants were investigated through interviews, and the particular challenges encountered by females acting within largely male dominated sporting / martial arts spheres are situated within contemporary feminist sports theory analyses. Foci include gender constructs, practitioner agency and personal empowerment. Data gathering was conducted by recording and transcribing semi-structured interviews throughout 1996-97, and was inspired by conversations with female participants at martial arts seminars, special camps, training sessions and tournaments. Guiding the interviews were themes of initiation (how these women became involved in martial arts); motivation (the perceived benefits and reasons for years of continual training); and power dynamics (including the specific challenges of being a female in martial arts contexts, and how martial arts aids individual empowerment). Experiences are woven into the larger discourse on women in sports: how bodies are gendered through sports practices. Chapters explore the potential for martial arts as a transformative activity enabling self-knowledge and development both within mainstream male dominated martial arts organizations and alternative women-only or feminist dojos (training clubs). Advantages of both contexts are discussed. Martial arts are transformative sites on contested ideological terrain (Messner 1988: 66), wherein personal empowerment and the partial transcendence of cultural gender constructs are possible.
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INTRODUCTION: KIME (JAPANESE) = FOCUS

Technically, a strike may possess all the correct components: initiated from a solid stance with good footing and firm contact with the floor, energy moves from the feet, up the legs into a quick rotation of the hips and a twist of the torso that generates more power; an engagement of the shoulder extends outwards to the elbow in a straight, efficient line that activates torque in the forearm, and with a final thrust, the first two knuckles of the clenched fist charge the target—yet the impact is insignificant. At times, body dynamics alone are insufficient: the board is not broken; the heavy bag remains motionless; an opponent unflinchingly walks through the punch. The explanations are heard: “No heart... Lack of spirit... No kime.”

Why do notions that involve belief, confidence and even faith, enter into the concentrated effort of what may be textually described as a completely physical, technical series of body motions? Why is there more to such body dynamics than simply going through the motions? Though we may not completely understand why, we do make such qualitative distinctions. There are common variations of the phrases: “One’s heart must be in it; You have to believe in yourself; Visualize; What you can imagine, you can achieve”. There is described an emotional, mental and physical unity of faith so focussed that the feat seems already accomplished. There is “spirit” in your purpose. Without such total concentration and focus, a painter may fear the white canvas rather than engage in the process, writers may block at a blank page or screen before words can flow, and a dancer may suddenly become conscious of the audience and lose her centre of balance, or immobilize with stage fright. Similarly, in tameshiwari (breaking techniques), cement bricks, wooden boards, or baseball bats will not shatter if there is fear for one’s knuckles,
or a preoccupation with potential shin pain. Finally, graduate students can't begin to write a thesis if they are prematurely anxious about the finished product or its defense!

Focus, discipline, perseverance and the confrontation of fears are commonplace in martial arts. They are essential threads that link the ever-increasing plethora of styles and schools of contemporary martial practice. Within the following thesis, I pick up these threads, found within the articulated experiences of ten female martial artists, and I weave them together with strands from feminist sports theory, colouring all with my own experience and perspective as a female martial arts practitioner. The technical requirements of a conventional thesis shall be found, but because pure technique alone does not impact significantly—I add a little "spirit" to avoid a dry read.

About qualitative work, it is said, "although our topics often are riveting and our research carefully executed, our books are under-read" (Richardson 1994: 517). Qualitative research depends on people reading the text, otherwise our efforts go stagnant outside our own self-knowledge and growth. The bland, homogenized academic style occurs through the suppression of individual voices. My voice enters this text—not as the omnipotent controlling analyst, but as a situated, inquiring, self-reflective and involved researcher: a graduate student combining her academic interest with the discipline of martial arts practice.

Here are my intentions:

1) Create a research document that is acceptable within academic realms and simultaneously accessible and relevant to a more general readership, thereby bridging a gap between theory and practice, between the academic discussions and analyses
taking place in journals, and the sweat and energy expended while actually participating in the sports spoken about.

2) Discuss, describe and interpret martial arts contexts and unique practices that require a more informed, in-depth analysis than that generally given when martial arts is immediately classified under the combat sports category.

3) Focus on practitioners of martial arts because all too often their experiences and words are left out of research texts, with an exclusive focus on female practitioners because they are a minority in the marital artist population and studies tend to overlook the female participants or subsume their presence under the central male focus (see Donohue 1991). By investigating and detailing the benefits and meanings women experience from physical engagement (specifically martial arts), I aim to help reconstruct the processes whereby female bodies become moving, active, physical and powerful (Hall 1996: 64) and contribute to the knowledge of women’s bodies and sporting practices.

4) Highlight some pertinent discussions taking place in feminist sport and body theory. Male and female sports theorists who adopt a feminist lens to critique gender constructs make excellent historical and contextual analyses of the body when they examine representation, movement and power relations in multiple sports arenas. Feminist theory makes visible the processes whereby women’s bodies and activities are negotiated, constructed and often constrained through sporting ideology, history and structure. Insights of feminist sports theory (applied to specific martial arts spheres and situations) link interpretations and interview discussions in this study.
STATEMENT OF THE FOCUS

Designed to investigate the perceived benefits and challenges of martial arts training in the lives of ten selected females, this research uses a phenomenological, feminist approach. Here, the phenomenological aspect means investigating the subjective viewpoint, documenting the articulated perspectives, meanings and lived experiences of practitioners; the feminist perspective means listening to the perspectives and experiences of women while attending to gender as a relational category (like race or class). Exploring the dynamics of gender constructs as relations of power in sport (the contested sites of power, instances of agency, and experiences of empowerment) enables discussion of the transformational potential of martial arts activity for women.
CHAPTER ONE: READINGS UNDER THE CANOPY (LITERATURE REVIEW)

In this chapter, I orient readers to selected literature on martial arts history and research, and feminist sports theory research, which together provides the context and rationale for this study. I must qualify: history here is but a drop on the tongue—so scant it isn't yet a taste into the socio-political context and philosophical infrastructure of a single martial art. Significant volumes explain martial arts history (Corcoran 1988; Draeger & Smith 1981; Kauz 1977). This chapter is simply a backdrop for the central spotlight on contemporary practitioner contexts. Why is an historical backdrop of any kind necessary, given my research questions surround contemporary practitioners? If we look at an international scholar who made traditions and history of Japan accessible and understandable to the west, Nitobe Inazo (most noted for his book, Bushido: The Soul of Japan), we notice that he was a product of his time when he evaluated an Oriental code of conduct from a Western standard:

The flaws in Nitobe's work, then, are that he did not place bushido in its historical context and chose to justify it by drawing parallels between its virtues and those of medieval Europe, instead of providing a systematic description of the cultural context from which it emerged. (Kiyota 1995: 93).

Therefore, when examining the contexts of contemporary martial arts practice in the western world outside of Japan, it may be best to ask what martial arts means to the speaking and training practitioners, rather than automatically imposing an Asian historical code of conduct and philosophy onto western practitioner experiences. It would be erroneous to assume that all contemporary martial artists are knowledgeable of martial history or that their actions and beliefs are shaped by past philosophies of Japanese bushido. Nonetheless, because it is necessary to distinguish how martial arts
philosophies and practices differ from other sporting activities and perspectives (regarding competition, aggression, violence, fighting and force), a brief look into martial arts history and philosophy is warranted. Moreover, since the personal perspectives of some contemporary martial artists (interviewed) are modern interpretations or twists on the ancient philosophies and ideologies that influenced martial arts development, an understanding of martial arts history can hone our awareness to present contexts.

A MARTIAL ARTS TREE

When the vast array of contemporary martial arts styles are imagined as an overhead canopy of flourishing tree branches, each with their own historical lineage and growing number of practitioners, whilst all attached to a main martial arts trunk, then the founding roots of this tree are usually credited to the fertile soils of India and China. But it is a fictional task to attempt a singular, unified history of martial arts. Like the unique Banyan tree, the evolutionary process is complex: old, outstretched branches may descend from the treetops and hang, reaching the ground and growing thick, forming new trunks, until eventually one looks at this old tree with a multitude of trunks and hesitates to guess which was the original. The evolutionary history of martial arts are similarly complex: knowledge of fourteen-hundred years of Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Okinawan history, plus a fluent familiarity with Taoism, Shinto, Confucianism and Buddhism still yields scholarly controversy (Nelson 1989). Though it may be argued that methods of fighting developed naturally in every societal corner of the earth, beginning when humans learned how to trip another person, or used a stick and their body parts for attack and defense, fighting systems are not homogenous; the similarities and differences of
movement, technique, strategy, philosophy and equipment are used as evidential clues to distinguish if and how human fighting knowledge diffused from one part of the world to another.

Martial art evolution remains a highly controversial and politically charged activity. Strong nationalistic pride exists in the way a society remembers its past, and in the way it conveys and sustains this memory through ritual performances and bodily practices, including fighting arts of war and conquest (Connerton 1989). We must be careful not to subsume the vast range of fighting disciplines under one generic martial arts term, for this would risk overshadowing regional histories. Countries such as Burma, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand all have unique regional martial arts histories, techniques and styles. Just as Olympic length swimmers, high board divers, synchronized swimmers and underwater hockey players all share an element, so do martial artists of all styles, despite their diverse developments.

ROOTS

Perhaps the most popular theory and legend that traces the roots of martial arts begins with the Indian monk, Bodhidharma, visiting China during the Liang Dynasty (around 520 AD). Having traveled to a monastery in the Kingdom of Wei (the now famous Songshan Shaolin Temple and monastery), Bodhidharma is believed to have spent nine years staring at a cave wall, "listening to the ants scream", and instructing other monks in a new approach to Buddhism that involved long hours of static meditation, breathing techniques, and exercises. The roots of Zen Buddhism evolved
from his teachings, along with the fighting art of Shaolin ch’uan or Shaolin Temple boxing (Reid & Croucher 1983).

The significance of Bodhidharma’s teachings is explained by the notion of martial virtue, wu-te, which he is credited with having cultivated into Chinese martial arts. It emphasizes spiritual development and health, not fighting. Qualities of discipline, restraint, humility and respect for human life are underlined. That is where martial arts significantly differs from other learned fighting systems: such an underlying martial arts philosophy (more or less emphasized by specific styles and clubs) goes deeper than the rules, restrictions and discipline involved in other combat sports and systems. Indeed, without Zen and Budo (way of the warrior), it is said there is no martial art at all (Deshimaru 1982).

Martial arts are historically related to traditional philosophical theories and class struggles based on anti-imperialist and anti-landlord movements of peasants and the philosophical motive forces of doctrines associated with Taoist and ch’an (zen) sages. Whereas the ruling elite monopolized the development of military technology and means of production, the exploited classes developed highly technical (though technologically undeveloped) means of self-defense utilizing bare hands, feet, and farming tools (Halbrook 1974). Medieval Japan had a mythical strategy of culture wherein nature and the supernatural are seen as one, with no sharp distinction between subject and object (Pieter 1989). Martial arts followed katas (pre-arranged forms), and teaching was based on intuitive methods with the objective to kill an enemy.

Martial arts developed into “martial ways” with the objective to attain enlightenment during pre-modern Japan, when the objectified view of the human body
had grown stronger within an ontological strategy of culture and a distancing of people from their environment (Pieter 1989). The Tokugawa period in Japan (1600-1750) brought crises, as the previously established order began to break down and the traditional bases of the Bushi (warrior) class (which were concerned with a martial way of life) became unsuitable under the newly implemented political objectives of peace and tranquility throughout the land (Fukushima 1984). Efforts to reestablish order placed considerable emphasis on monolithic unifying structural forces: Bushido (the ethos of the professional warrior class) exhibited a close association with dominant cultural values and acted as a unifying force in Tokugawa Japan (Fukushima 1984). Bushido, the way of the samurai, was codified in the late Heian period and through the Kamakura period. During the warring states years it was faithfully observed and then institutionalized as the code of the samurai by Confucian scholars and Buddhist monks during the Tokugawa period of peace. Although the code varies by historical periods, the basic components of this code are personal honor and a willingness to uphold it even at the sacrifice of life itself (Kiyota 1995).

During military rule, the ideal of the warrior mentality permeated the entire culture, including Japanese higher educational institutions (Hamada 1984) and continued up to the present as a viable form of self-defense and personal development (Barde 1984). Within this modern era (1867-present), the development of martial sports changed training methods: target area restriction and rules limited techniques and curbed the combative use of martial arts, practice with partners became possible because no longer was every blow meant to kill. Although the analytical instead of intuitive methods of training now emphasized are reflective of a more objectified view of the body and a
functional strategy of culture (Pieter 1989), the aim to “become one with one’s environment” persists in some modern martial sports and appeals to many western practitioners.

**BRANCHES**

Defined as a fighting discipline designed to promote combat skill (Reid & Croucher 1983), martial arts make a vast canopy of internationally linked branches that shelter an expanse of lineage systems. Disciplines include: aikido (and its various styles), arnis (also known as estocada or estogue or fraile of the Philippines), bando (from Burma, with Chinese influences), bersilat (Malaysian), capoeira (African / Brazilian), hapkido and hwarang-do (Korean), iaido and iaijutsu, jojutsu, judo, various forms of jujutsu (Japanese origins), kalaripayat (southern India), karate (and its many styles), kung-fu or wu-shu (China), kyudo (Japanese archery), lua (Hawaiian), muay thai (Thai kickboxing), naginata-jutsu, ninjutsu (Japan), pentjak-silat (Indonesian), sambo (Russia / Soviet Union), savate (French), sumo (Japanese), taekwon-do (Korean), and tai chi ch’uan (Chinese). In turn, these discipline divisions exponentially divide. In China, for example, the government recognizes approximately three hundred eighty-two named systems of wushu (Nelson 1989). Because this canopy encompasses such a range of disciplines, each with recent records as well as historical and legendary origins and claims, to speak generically of martial arts is to risk being caught in the rainstorm of essentialism and bombarded with universalist accusations.

The early days of martial disciplines required the knowledge of any opponent’s maneuvers and practical fighting efficiency necessitated the borrowing and stealing of an enemy’s techniques. With the advent of modern martial arts disciplines, the utilitarian
purpose (of martial arts used in battle) is shared or replaced with a modern emphasis on tradition and stylistic patriotism. The earlier tendency to adopt, change and evolve the "core" martial teachings (a matter of life and death) is now not as essential and encounters resistance within certain schools of martial arts. Styles cross and split, sharing certain roots, and then turning in new directions as deaths or political disagreements influence the martial arts organizations at international and personal levels. Conflicts may emerge between the traditional and eclectic viewpoints: traditionalists stress that martial arts are a way of life that reaches beyond the learning of physical techniques; eclectic views consider traditional approaches restrictive by limiting students to patterns with non-functional elements (Staley 1983). Eclectic martial arts (kajukenbo, nippon kenpo, taihojutsu, mu-tau) amalgamate martial arts systems and techniques, explicitly adapting and continuing the evolution of fighting systems. Bruce Lee's jeet kun do is a famous example of an eclectic martial arts style that aims to stay open and undefined, tuned to the individual. Whereas some associations take pride in their traditional style (of kata, kumite, basic techniques and rituals), other clubs are proud of their flexibility and undogmatic approach to training. Several participants in this study have instructed all-female clubs wherein structural and philosophical innovations exist within their traditional discipline.

In fact, distinct labels and categories become futile when debates continue over what qualifies as a true or traditional martial art, or what distinguishing factors differentiate one martial art from another. Instead, one may find satisfaction in the abundance of blurred genres. These blurred genre boundaries are apparent when discussing whether a martial art is martial at all (as compared with its historic purpose
and our contemporary advanced fighting technologies) or more of a sport (rule-bound rather than practical fighting); whether the martial art emphasizes kata (with an imagined opponent) over self-defense and fighting with “live” opponents; and whether it is non-contact, or full-contact, hard or soft. In short: one may question whether a given martial art is more “art” or “martial” (or vice versa). Definitions within such a debate are equally diverse and opinionated as the practitioners.

If we return to the tree metaphor, branches that emanate from the main martial arts trunk primarily divide into two categories: internal / soft, and external / hard martial arts. These distinctions are important, for they denote differing perspectives regarding the use of force, technique and purpose. For instance, aikido in its purest form doesn’t use techniques designed to injure an opponent because it is a soft style that is purely defensive, aimed at neutralizing and redirecting aggression and harmonizing energies. (Ueshiba 1969). Thus, principles of aikido have been adopted for linguistic strategies in the “art of verbal self-defense” in educational texts (Aikido for Everyday Life). Soft martial arts have been defined as those that emphasize “two main principles: first, the mind dictates actions; second, the opponent’s own force is used to defeat him or her” (Reid & Croucher 1984: 229). Hard martial arts emphasize “first, physical reactions precede mental reactions; second, the opponent’s force is met with equal and opposite force”. “Hard” and “soft” may also refer to two different ways of using energy: internal (ki / chi), or external, analogous to strength. (Payne1994: 24). Related to these ways of meeting force is the emphasis on linear or circular techniques: “linear energy being direct, piercing, angular and abrupt; circular energy being more tangential, sweeping, continuous and wave-like” (Payne 1994: 23). Again, the differences are important
because they encapsulate how force is utilized and how aggression and violence are determined, defined and deterred in martial arts as compared to other sporting spheres involving physical contact. The style and purpose of evolved fighting systems influences the utilization of techniques, strategies, tactics, and the practitioner’s perception of confrontational situations. What visually appears as a very violent, aggressive activity may be experienced quite differently physically and philosophically.

For instance, incorporated into grappling systems (such as judo, jiu-jutsu, wrestling, sambo, chin-na) are principles of throwing, gripping, ground wrestling, hold downs, joint locks, chokes and strangles. Hitting systems (such as karate, Thai kick-boxing, White Crane kung-fu) emphasize principles of punches, strikes, kicks, blocks, parries, deflections, and evasions—bobbing, weaving, ducking and footwork. (These categories of differentiation are only primary and arbitrary—most fighting systems are an amalgamation of styles, combining aspects of other systems into their core teachings). What is important to remember in the context of this study, is that the interpretation behind aggressive force may have significance, or may be experienced differently than its outside appearance of combative sport violence.

BARK AND LEAVES

As we extend from the historical, cultural and legendary roots of the martial arts tree, up the main generic trunk of martial arts disciplines, and into the branches of different lineage, styles and systems, we examine the bark and leaves of the tree—the individual coating each practitioner brings to their martial arts practice, their personal outlook, emphasis and participation. Whether one believes in the “warrior”
mentality and conduct to be a true martial artist (Morgan 1992), or whether one chooses
to adopt an extreme non-violent stance to the point where one decides not to initiate an
attack even in practice (Siegel 1993: 56), today there seems to be a suitable branch of
martial arts for everyone’s personal philosophy. For some martial arts followers, this is a
source of lament—for it seems that now, everyone is a master of their own style. After
all, martial arts are not free from commercialization: it too has become a commodity
(Featherstone 1982) fueled by and fueling fitness fads, riding the waves of popular
cultural portrayals in film, video games, magazines and cartoons.

Much research has attended to martial arts practitioners and any related factors of
aggression, martial arts training, and violence. Attitudes of practitioners have been the
central focus of measured studies wherein martial arts training with psychological and
philosophical components has been shown to help delinquent youth (Trulson 1986, Egan
1993) and measured lowered aggressiveness was associated with longer training
(Nossanchuk 1981) and traditionalism of schools (French 1993). Personality types of
martial artists have been scrutinized: the power value orientations of practitioners
(Anyanjor 1980) and their personality traits (Zambo 1993) were studied in an attempt to
understand and predict personality and motivational factors with practitioner selection of
martial art (Beard 1982; Knoblauch 1984)—which yeilded that particular personality
types may be attracted to certain martial arts styles over others (Regets 1990). Instructor
teaching behaviours (McBratney 1994) and instructor’s personality traits (Wiese 1995)
have also been examined. Even the dialectical relationships between dominant social
presuppositions, alternative knowledge, and language use in females’ spontaneous speech
when discussing their martial arts experiences was scrutinized (Crowdes 1990). However,
little research on the martial arts has highlighted the articulated experiences of particular martial artists. Rather, survey data by means of questionnaires, after a little observation and participation in the field have formed the basis for most inquiries.

Of those studies that gave substantial attention to practitioner’s viewpoints, Catherine Wingate’s (1993) study looked at the function of karate training in the psychological lives of participants and observed the relationships amongst coping resources, reasons for training, and commitment. A focus on the meanings attached to exercise was emphasized in as much as it may deepen our understanding of the exercise process as it pertains to psychological well-being (Wingate 1993: 242). Wingate’s findings were that karate training could contribute to general psychological well being by promoting discipline, self-respect, self-confidence, persistence and emotional stability. Martial arts were found to be both a coping response and coping resource. She recommended that future research should explore the potential contributions of martial arts’ practice to personal enjoyment, personal growth, social integration and social change. The role of karate training as a social experience needs more study because group cohesion, acceptance and other social processes are significant aspects of the karate experience. Wingate also recommended that further research should refine and expand on her present findings (the benefits encountered), to explore the possibilities of karate training as a resource for promoting psychological well-being and as a vehicle for self-transformation (Wingate 1993: 254).
PHILOSOPHICAL SAP: “LIFE BLOOD” OF MARTIAL ARTS

In the beginning, the martial arts were a way to kill people... Later they came under the influence of Zen. Miyamoto Mushashi, for instance, who was Japan’s greatest kendo master, also became a sage... At that point, the way that taught how to cut one’s enemies in two became the way that taught how to cut one’s own mind. A way of decision, resolution, determination. That was true Japanese kendo, true Budo. Strength and victory flow from decisiveness. One moves beyond the level at which most people stop, one transcends the conflict, transforms it into a spiritual progress. There was nothing sport-like about training in those days; the samurai had a higher vision of life (Deshimaru 1982: 72).

Visualized as the core within the trunk of the martial arts tree, a philosophical “sap” runs through the majority of martial arts schools, and may be considered as the deep lifeblood of martial practice. These connections with philosophical teachings are the most differentiating aspect of martial arts from combat sports. Whereas sports such as boxing, fencing and wrestling are also fighting systems, Chinese wushu, kung fu, Okinawa karate and Japanese bujutsu are intricately related to Zen Buddhism, Shinto, neo-Confucianism, Taoism, and the philosophy of the I Ching Book of Changes (Halbrook 1974; Vercammen 1993). Classic martial writings by Sun Tzu and Miyamoto Mushashi reflect philosophical influences enmeshed in martial practice which go far beyond that of rule-bound sport. Just as their respective classic books, The Art of War and The Book of Five Rings are now commonly adapted within corporate business self-help literature, so too the ancient I-Ching Book of Changes by Lao-Tzu has been interpreted into “Taosports” for extraordinary performance in athletics, business and life (Al Huang & Lynch 1992). These classic philosophical writings are constantly being adapted and reinterpreted into modern contexts and applications.
Looking back to pre-modern Japan, when martial arts developed into martial Ways with the objective to obtain enlightenment, the martial Tao was regarded as an end in itself, a means of unifying the mind and spirit. Martial arts (bushido) were but one way for this cultivation of spirit. "Do" (michi) is a suffix meaning the path or way (the Japanese transliteration of the Chinese word, "tao"), a lifelong learning experience fundamental to the dissemination of the traditional arts of Japan. In fact, it is not totally correct to isolate martial arts (Judo, Karatedo, Kendo, Kyudo...) from other contexts of Kado (Flower Way), Shodo (Brush Way), Chodo / Sado (Way of Tea), Zendo (Zen Way), Shinto (Way of the Gods)—because all are meshed together within a Japanese cultural fabric (Traction 1992). The scrutiny of a thread isolated from the weave makes us miss the holistic design.

_Budo_ means: "the way of war"; _bushi_, "warrior"; _do_, "path" or "way"—but the Japanese character _bu_ also means "to cease the struggle, to sheathe the sword... so the emphasis in Budo is not on _bu_ but on _do_. Even _do_ has a flavour, a deeper meaning, that is hard for the Westerner to grasp; for _do_, the way, is essentially goal-less, and we of the West have long been seduced by goals, by getting ahead, by winning (Deshimaru 1982; 2).

A martial way or path is a fighting discipline whose aim is to promote the spiritual development of its practitioners through training to fight, with or without weapons (Reid & Croucher 1983: 228). For some, a martial art without this martial way tradition is empty. Aspiring towards absolute strength and absolute wisdom, Bushido, the "way of the warrior", is the combination of budo (the practice of the martial arts) with the way of Zen:

Zen and the martial arts have nothing to do with keeping fit or improving health.... People in the West always want to use things; but the spirit of Zen cannot be always squeezed into so narrow a system. And _Zen_ is not some sort of
Martial arts branches in North America make innovative interpretations of martial arts philosophy. In western contexts this means balancing a goal-orientated incentive approach (colours and levels of belt and rank) with the ideas of long-term development, introspection and refinement of self. Generally it is frowned upon to "collect belts" or switch styles aimlessly because it takes decades of practice to become proficient at any one discipline, and one is expected to persevere through all the difficulties of training. But in the realities of many contemporary karate class contexts, the religious and philosophical connotations of martial arts often remain only in ritual. Moreover, ideals of traditionalism and philosophy are used as selling features that intrigue western populations towards "the exotic and mysterious" martial arts as portrayed in popular culture, where martial arts are the secret means to attain the goal of incredible fighting skill. Certainly, club memberships and book publications that cater to this approach and segment of the population are numerically and monetarily successful.

Alternatively, many martial arts schools maintain that technical skill attainment is only one aspect of training, because the development of spirit and knowledge of self is essential and integral to the refinement of bodily skill. This "lifelong study" approach is reflected in the commitment and dedication expected from students. "One thousand days of training, a beginner; ten thousand days of training, a master" (Mas Oyama). Some disciplines strive to maintain aspects of martial ways or martial paths within the contexts...
of our capitalist sporting society wherein martial art "as commodity" is a common condition.

Kendo, iaido and iaijutsu may be more resilient, maintaining the spiritual, almost religious aspects of self-development more easily than commercialized versions of karate and taekwondo. Discipline in kendo means, "the taming of the ego and the means to realizing a vision beyond that dictated by the ego. Ego refers to the agent which makes the self the measuring stick of the world" (Kiyota 1995: ix). Competitive karate tournaments and taekwondo Olympic games are not the most conducive place for the taming of egos. But "dojo kun", oaths or ethics of conduct, are still common to many styles of karate. These ethics are memorized by practitioners and usually recited at the end of a martial arts class while sitting in seiza (kneeling position) before a short mediation at class cessation (zazen). Values such as respect, modesty, justice, perseverance and humility are promoted. (See Appendix for examples of karate dojo-kun).

Nonetheless, in most modern contexts, the "philosophy of martial arts" is up to individual interpretation: one can choose to do martial arts purely for cardiovascular exercise alone (and probably reap "extra" benefits); or to learn self-defense and fighting techniques; or to train one’s heart, body, mind, soul, memory and coordination ——or the myriad combinations thereof. Martial arts activity may be as "deep" or as "shallow" a practice as the practitioners. Most important is how the practitioners perceive their activity. And much depends on the skill and methods of instruction: even the most internal art can become nothing more than an execution of memorized movements under the name “tai chi” when poorly instructed, whereas the most sport-orientated introductory
tournament class or "boxercise" class might, with a gifted instructor, become an exercise of "moving meditation". Moreover, if one aims to "cultivate spirit" or to work on "mastery of the self", perhaps the only activity really required is introspection and will.

According to a highly respected and accomplished Zen master, Deshimaru Taisen, born of a samurai family, who taught in France as missionary general at the Soto Zen School (1967-1982), genuine martial arts have essential, vital depths. Many people practice the martial arts in Europe, the United States and Japan without really practicing the way of Budo or the way of Zen, and the general feeling in contemporary contexts is that the principles and philosophies of Zen have nothing to do with the practice of the martial arts as sports—to which Deshimaru responds:

People who do not want to follow the teaching of Zen, the true foundation of Bushido, do not have to do so. They're simply using the martial arts as playthings; to them they are sports like any others. But people who want to live their lives on a higher dimension do have to understand.

Nobody can be compelled and nobody can be criticized. The first lot is like children playing with toy cars, while the second drive real automobiles. I have nothing against sports; they train the body and develop stamina and endurance. But the spirit of competition and power that presides over them is not good; it reflects a distorted vision of life. The root of the martial arts is not there.

The teachers are partly responsible for this state of affairs; they train the body and teach technique, but do nothing for consciousness. As a result their pupils fight to win, like children playing war games. There is not wisdom in this approach and it is no use at all in the business of managing one's life. What good to them is their technique in everyday life?

Sports are only amusement and in the end, because of the spirit of competition, they wear out the body. That is why the martial arts should strive to recapture their original dimension. In the spirit of Zen and Budo everyday life becomes the contest. There must be awareness at every moment—getting up in the morning, working, eating, going to bed. That is the place for mastery of the self (Deshimaru 1982: 38).
FERTILE SOIL ERODED? THE MARTIAL ARTS VS. SPORTS DEBATE

Has the rich philosophical soil surrounding the complex root systems of the martial arts tree become leached, depleted of its nutrients? When a tree is transplanted to a new yard, it cannot take all of its surrounding soil; it must now grow from nutrients of the new ground. Martial arts in North American is different than European and Asian contexts—tournaments, television, film and magazine industries manufacture the desire for, and construct a particular appreciation and expectation of martial arts.

The martial arts are not theatre or entertainment. That is not the true Budo. Kodo Sawaki used to say that the secret of the martial arts is that there is no victory and no defeat. You can neither win nor be beaten. It is not the same as in sports. In sports, time exists. In the martial arts there is only the present. In baseball, for instance, the man at bat has to wait for the pitch, he has time; his action is not instantaneous. The same is true of rugby or football or any other sport. Time passes and there is time, if only a fraction of a second, to think about something, while waiting. In the martial arts there is no time to wait. Victory or non-victory, life or not-life, are decided in no time. You have to live now, it is now that life and death are determined, wholly (Deshimaru 1982: 23).

The principle feature of martial arts, for observers, is the body, the physical ability and skill of the practitioners. All of the kicks, punches and sparring stamina seem hinged upon the outward strength of the body. But body and mind cannot be separated:

In reality, shin—spirit—is what matters first; technique and body come afterward. In other sports, especially in the West, physical strength is the most important factor, but this is not so in the martial arts... In a fight between a strong technique and a strong body, technique will prevail. In a fight between a strong mind and a strong technique, mind will prevail, because it will find the weak point...

Training must not aim only at developing the body. In present-day tournaments, of course, people are not fighting for life or death but for points, so physical strength and technique are enough, whereas in olden days things were very different because life was at stake, and then, ultimately, intuition decided the outcome.
It should be that way today: every fight should be fought as if life were at stake, even when you’re fighting with wooden swords. Then martial arts would find their rightful place again, and become the practice of the way. Otherwise, they are only a game (Deshimaru 1982: 30).

Martial arts may be designated as sports (they contain competition with some opponent, and are structured physical activity with established rules), but the lifeblood of the martial arts tree has more to do with the suppression of ego, growth of self, integration of mind and body, and the control of emotion, rather than “winning”.

Whereas the foremost concern in Western sports is to respond to an external challenge and to defeat the opponent (or to break an existing record), the foremost concern in kendo is to tame the ego by internalizing challenge. Why is it necessary to tame the ego? Taming the ego prevents the mind from being swayed by external distractions, enables the practitioner to develop concentration and alertness, and provides the reflexive mechanism necessary to develop sword skills. It also enables the practitioner to channel that discipline to realize personal growth. Personal growth, in this instance, refers to the absence of ego-based arrogance and of emotional swings (Kiyota 1995: 3).

UNCOVERING FEMALE ROOTS OF THE MARTIAL ARTS TREE

Tracing women in the roots of martial arts is complex. The involvement of women in the early anti-imperialist and anti-landlord movements in Japan is certain, and the development of karate is one example: fathers, daughters, mothers and sons alike needed to protect, defend and fight during upheavals, agricultural instruments and bodily techniques were learned by all during these periods (Nitobe 1989). Originating in China, and introduced to Okinawa during medieval times (and spreading throughout mainland Japan in the 1920’s), Okinawan karate developed when the people were prohibited from carrying weapons, and used fist-fighting techniques in defense from the Japanese Satsuma
samurai of the early Tokugawa period. “Gendering” the martial arts tree is difficult because female involvement remains mostly unrecorded, since most martial arts lines traditionally traced patrilineal master/student generations for the textual record. But legends of female founders and martial arts heroines do exist.

Practitioners tell oral narratives and legends are retold in popular martial arts texts which together create sightings into a past wherein women used martial skill. Whether or not such “herstories” are accepted as legitimate offspring of the “history” record, they persist. Shuen Guan, “Little Tigress” was a thirteen year old female whose heroic deeds were honored by the emperor of China: she saved her town from attack by fighting her way through bandits, returning with a neighbouring general and his troops (Cardoza 1996: 25). Ng Mui (Jicboloclowto), is another legendary female figure more frequently referred to by select martial arts literature: she was a Buddhist nun from a Shaolin monastery in southern China during the Ching Dynasty, who specialized and perfected her martial skills. A crucial founder of what eventually became known as wing chun (which Bruce Leanne made popular through jeet kun do), Yim Wing Chun, is documented as a student of the nun Ng Mui, and is credited as the key founder of wing chun kung fu system (Corcoran 1988: 164). Ng Mui studied movements of a crane and snake fighting and developed her fighting system from the movements of the snake. Samurai women battled alongside men and were trained in the use of daggers, spears and the naginata (long pole with curved sword at the end), which came to be known as the “women’s sword” (Reid & Croucher 1983). Popularized readings tell of famous women warriors: “Hagaki”, who lead three thousand warriors to battle in 1199; “Tomoe”, a legendary master of the naginata; and a battle in 1877 Japan wherein five hundred women fighters were engaged
alongside men (Cardoza 1996: 26). Rather than exulting female fighters of this era as complete subjects of historic importance, writings on the training and position of women samurai (Nitobe 1989) wrongly compares Bushido to the Precepts of Knighthood, chivalry and western Christian virtues of femininity, domesticity and self-renunciation (Nelson 1989: 329). Consequently, researching records of women’s martial activity is consistently difficult work, especially when one does not have access to original archival texts and poignant translations.

As the need and favour of the samurai class declined, so did women’s explicit involvement in martial arts. Replacing the battlefield, martial arts were introduced into the scholastic system by 1890, and official training was established in martial ways: naginata-do for girls, sumo, judo and kendo for boys (Hamada 1984). Although judo, sumo and kendo were introduced into the Japanese school system for boys, female participation (though not officially sanctioned) did occur. Sueko Ashiya became the first female student of Jigoro Kano (the founder of judo) in 1893, and in the 1920’s a whole women’s section of his school was opened so that the women could train properly (Corcoran 1988).

Martial art styles continue to differ in female practitioner acceptance and activity: in some styles, women have trained alongside men since inception; in other countries, women and men train separately. Some associations allow women to compete in forms (kata) and not fighting, whereas in other associations and countries it is acceptable for women to actively train and compete in both spheres. Informed by an invited instructor at the 1997 Pacific Association of Women Martial Artists summer training session, I learned that traditional Muay-Thai boxing did not allow females to even touch the ceremonial
equipment (particularly the headgear) of a fighter. This instructor was an excellent female Muay-Thai fighter who practiced, sparred and trained male peers. She simply purchased her own ceremonial equipment (LaTanya 1997). Sometimes the very presence of women in the male preserve of martial arts is evidence of “leaky hegemony, or the inability of dominant groups to exercise total control over subordinates” (Birrel & Theberge 1994: 367).

Rather than a smooth progressive process, the documented punctuation of females into the historic record is uneven and complex, as is the whole evolution of women in sports (Hargreaves 1994: 144). Specific physical activities are more acceptable for females of particular classes and races at various points in history and this acceptance and participation changes over time and culture. Naginatado and kyudo are martial arts that have a long history of female participation, in contrast to other art styles that have only recently allowed explicit female participation, particularly in kumite (fighting). Like the histories uncovering the participation of women in culturally masculine sports such as wrestling and boxing, class and ethnicity are significant factors in the relatively nonexistent female martial arts participation record. Because it was considered a low-class activity, female boxing and wrestling received little respect as a mainstream sport. As wrestling gained popularity in European and World Championship events, boxing remained underground. During the 1920’s and 30’s, women wrestlers became popular as an attraction in “gimmick matches” and mud-wrestling contests—always outside the conventional female sporting circles (Hargreaves 1994: 143). In Britain, women’s judo participation was tainted by this reputation surrounding early women’s mud-wrestling
and did not gain Olympic acceptance until 1992—although it was recognized as a men’s event since 1964.

Female activity in contact sports is still marginalized. Even modern academic studies with an international analysis of boxing and society lack a significant look to female professional training and as a result do not forward women’s boxing from the margins of sport, “the historical freak shows, travelling circuses, and male-orientated pub entertainment” (Sugden 1996). Jennifer Hargreaves notes the early history of women’s boxing as an underground sport, “characterized as disreputable and dangerous, and self-contained in working-class venues” (Hargreaves 1994: 144). Although female contenders still are not an everyday find in the local gym, pockets of female participation in combat sports now occur internationally, albeit on a micro scale, relative to male participation and with very little media coverage.

Despite the marginalization from mainstream sports and the lack of official recognition, female athletes are active in a variety of combat sports and martial arts. On the internet, high school and college level female wrestlers and martial artists of all styles and ages are actively networking, making WebPages, telling their stories, exchanging information about schools, instruction, experiences, injuries and seminars, and are encouraging women’s’ sparring, testing, training and groundfighting involvement (see Pleiades Locker Room on the Internet). Women’s self-defense demonstrations are still a more common public event than women’s international competitions in fighting. However, female contact sports are gaining momentum. The first Women’s World Kyokushin Kumite (full contact, knockdown continuous fighting) karate tournament was held in New York in 1996, with participating female athletes from over twelve countries;
the second will be held in Japan, November, 1998. The International Sumo Federation has recently held its first all-women competition in Osaka: the All-Japan New Sumo Federation Championships (Conde Nast Sports for Women 1997). Judging from the turnout, quality, and enthusiasm of these female athletes, the growth of such contact events and forums is likely to continue.

SPORTS AND GENDER: GRAPPLING TECHNIQUES

Despite the training hall being regarded as sacred space and open to any gender, age, race or "hyphenated" identity, martial arts practice does not occur in a vacuum. Human cultural gender expectations tend to follow us into the dojo, adhered to our bodies—or rather, are actively reproduced because of them. Simultaneously, there is always the potential to dissolve, escape or transform such gendered attitudes and constraints or confrontations of power. I outline techniques with which to "grapple" these concepts before delving into the specific training circumstances from participant interviews.

Sports and gender research has grown rapidly sophisticated within its relatively young life span. The early study of women in sport during the 1970's was dominated by psychological over sociological studies of women's place in sport (Birrel 1988, Hall 1996) and emphasized stereotypes, the "feminine image", and the concern to increase female participation rates. A decade later, we realize these were methodologically primitive attempts to measure complex psychosocial constructs which conceived of women as not fitting into sport; flawed because they subtly assumed that the problem behind women's low involvement lay within, so such research tended to blame women
for their own lack of participation (Hall 1996: 6). Research at this early stage did not recognize the historical production, social construction and cultural definition of sporting practices which serve the interests and needs of powerful groups.

Feminist social scientists brought attention to the androcentric bias of research and scholarship literature, although the application of feminist theory to sports study was slow. Recognizing the relevance of feminism to sports theory, popular social psychological research that focussed on sex roles and sex identity was in need of critique, especially since it:

... continued to perpetuate the very stereotypes we wished to eradicate. Within the context of women and sport research, social psychological research needed to be replaced by a gender and sport discourse that treated gender as a relational category just like class or race (Hall 1996: 7).

However, the tendency to consider particular sporting activities as sex-typed wherein masculine or feminine activities are a source for role conflicts or gender-deviancy persists in current research formulation and language, especially in the area of psychology. The main trouble with such research perspectives is that “there is still the unavoidable reification whereby behaviours become real when in fact they are abstract concepts”, which in turn, “...hinders political attempts to critique and change the pervasive gender ideologies of our culture” (Hall 1996: 20). Sex-role identities are now realized as an assumption involving two separate sex roles –another controversial idea.

Sex role notions are problematic because:

a) They are sociologically illogical in that we do not speak of race roles (or age roles or class roles) because we do not attempt to explain differential behavior patterns on the basis of race, age, or social class alone, but we do explain them in terms of a power differential that certainly coincides with race, class, and age distinctions;
b) The notion of role focuses attention more on individuals than on social structure and de-politicizes the central questions of power and control in explaining gender inequality;

c) Terms like 'sex role stereotyping', 'sex role socialization' and 'sex role orientation' are used as if they exist concretely rather than being analytical constructs, in other words, they become reified; and

d) Role terminology is not fully applicable to gender because sex or gender, like age, race, and social class, infuse the more specific social roles one plays (e.g., teacher, athlete, coach, university professor) (Hall 1996: 21).

Conceptions of sex and gender roles neglected to theorize femininity and masculinity as practices which are socially constructed, historically influenced, and dependent on social class, race, ethnicity and global differences. Because of this, a majority of early research on women and sport focussed upon the explanation of such things as gender role deviance and gender role socialization wherein socializing agents (such as peers, siblings, role models, instructors), and socializing situations (the influence of family, school, country) explained the differences in sports participation rates of girls (Greendorfer 1993; Hall 1996: 22). "Imperfect" socialization was presumed to result in tomboys and the research on female athletes often centred around the role conflict problem, assumed to inevitably exist when a woman became athletic.

Relational analyses and feminist critiques within the cultural studies paradigm, or feminist cultural studies applied to sport are now recommended, with attention to

the importance of more historically grounded studies; a sensitivity to difference, especially difference among women; the relationship of feminist theory to the study of men, sport, and masculinity; the significance of the body; and feminist cultural politics and sport" (Hall 1996: 37).
Sport organization and practice constructs and perpetuates constraints on the female body, yet it also provides a site where there is the possibility of transforming culturally and historically imposed barriers. Documentation and description by feminists sport theorists over the years has revealed how masculine hegemony,

a form of control which is persuasive, rather than coercive... embodies a sense of culture as a way of life involved with systems of meanings and values which are actively created by individuals and groups in different social settings, such as families, schools, the media, leisure and sports (Hargreaves 1994: 22)

Hegemony is constructed and reconstructed within the definitions of sport, the control of women’s sports, and can be perpetuated through media coverage (Bryson 1987; Hargreaves 1994; Messner 1988; Theberge 1987; 1991). Attitudes and practices surrounding female sports participation are recognized as components in the social construction of femininity and heterosexuality (Lenskyj 1987), and gender is found to be socially reproduced within physical education programs and used to explain the performance gap between male and female athletes (Dewar 1987).

At the same time, biology and physiology are now acknowledged as not essentially fixed and should be seen as transformative—especially when scientific representations of the human body are recognized as historically situated within economic, class and racial ideologies (Vertinsky 1995). Gender itself has been problematized by feminist sports theorists for its biologically reductionist baseline (Bordo 1989) and is better understood as gender relations (Hall 1985; 27) or the “gender order” (Messner & Sabo 1990). Conceptualized now as a process, (not a thing people have), gender is understood as historically influenced and patterned relations of power between
men and women and between ideologies of masculinity and femininity (Connel 1987 in Messner & Sabo 1990: 12).

Feminist sports theorists now work to deconstruct the masculine control through sport (Bryson 1987; Hargreaves 1994; Theberge 1987, 1991) and critique masculine sporting experience that entails power, control and domination over an opponent. Messner and Sabo (1990) published a collection of articles using feminist analysis to examine the history and nature of sport and masculinity, and the significance these relations have in the lives of men. The idea of power, conceptualized as domination within the ideology of masculinity in sport (Hargreaves 1986; Dunning 1986), has moved beyond a focus on role conflicts said to be experienced by female athletes (due to sport’s masculine values and imagery) to consider the meaning of the ideologies of masculinity and femininity in gender relations. Because power is about domination and subordination within the masculine sports model, it controls female sexuality (Lenskyj 1987) at the same time it controls the sexualization of physical activities (Theberge 1987). But Nancy Theberge speaks to the challenge of reconceptualizing power as “energy and capacity” rather than domination. Women can find empowerment in sports through an alternative notion of power, one that stresses energy and creativity and thereby expands opportunities for women to experience their physical strength (Theberge 1987).

SYNOPSIS: TREE CLIMBING

I believe martial arts may well be automatically subsumed under the combative sports (hence male hegemonic) category thereby ignoring the many female practitioners who experience personal empowerment through their training. Guided by current feminist
theory that seeks to understand the relationships and meanings attributed to the vigorously active female body engaged in competitive sport, this thesis documents some challenges and discusses the transformational potential of martial arts for women including their empowering experiences of martial arts practice. Theberge (1987: 391) warns, “seeing competition as a male value that is associated with aggression, power and dominance, feminists turn away from sport while ignoring the creative possibilities in the experience”. Despite the overtly confrontational, combative, and often competitive outward physical aspects of some martial arts practices (rather “un-feminist” features), there exists within and during these activities (sparring practice, drills, kata, self-defense, weapons training) the potential for a “reconceptualization” of power (Theberge 1987). Power here is not necessarily felt as domination and submission, but seen more as a mutual exchange of roles and energies, a blending (for which aikido is well known)—where bodies are powerful not because they are big and intimidating, but because they move in controlled awareness, with efficiency and focus. Feminists can look closely at martial arts’ combative, competitive and hierarchical elements and listen for participants’ experiences of creative and empowering possibilities.

Simultaneously, there exists a tension when the social structures and ideas of the dominant culture (especially relations of power / gender) are reproduced in some martial arts contexts. Examples of how practitioners resist, transform, or perceive these tensions are discussed. Expanding on Catherine Wingate’s findings (1993) and following her recommendations, this study looks to the experiences of female practitioners and highlights how and when gender constructs (expectations, constraints, plays of power) arise and make a difference within martial arts context. Attention to participant
perceptions and the meaningfulness that martial arts have to its practitioners are of great importance.

Although other studies have focussed on reasons male practitioners are motivated to join martial arts (Donohue 1994), research attending to the rising female participation is lacking. Research conducted on particular styles of martial arts has analyzed the ritualistic components (Baudry 1992, 1995; Donohue 1987) and structural aspects of everyday training (James & Jones 1982), but there is no attention to contemporary changes and innovations taking place in training contexts—particularly the decisions that have motivated women to start their own clubs and the deliberate changes they make (or do not make) to traditional training regimes. Women martial artists do transform structures and attitudes through their solid participation within (and outside) male dominant organizations. It is necessary to investigate the reasons why some women prefer to train in combative activity, because if the basic feminist agenda is to emancipate women, then all practices which empower women must be critically examined and encouraged in a multitude of arenas, simultaneously.

Guiding the way in critical embodiment literature, is the area of women's bodybuilding, a topic that is receiving full-length study and analysis. Bodybuilders and academics such as Marcia Ian, Laurie Schulze and Anne Bolin point to the complexities and contradictions of this sport as they show how women's bodybuilding is always a negotiation between resistance and containment, defiance of dominant cultural ideas about gender and compliance with them. Pamela Moore edited a collection of essays that "strive toward constructing theoretical models in which power, bodies, discourse and subjectivity interact in a space we can call the built body, a dynamic, politicized and
biological site.” (Moore 1997). Leslie Heywood has written a cultural analysis of women’s bodybuilding that reads bodybuilding as an activist practice and an effective response to abuse. She examines the contradictory ways that photographers treat female bodybuilders, and she also writes how women bodybuilders find themselves both trapped and empowered by their sport (Heywood 1998). Maria R. Lowe recently published her observations of women’s bodybuilding, based on over one hundred interviews; she writes of the paradoxical and contradictory meanings that surround women’s bodies, particularly muscular women’s bodies. Ideally, studies with women in the martial arts should follow this research vein, analyzing resistance and containment, the defiance and compliance with dominant cultural ideas about gender and exploring women’s empowerment through physical movement. This thesis is a steps towards a critical embodiment study of martial arts contexts; it bridges a gap between the excellent scholastic sport and embodiment literature and the more general, yet equally excellent books about women in the martial arts (Atkinson 1983; Hoppe 1998; Siegel 1993; Wiley 1992)
CHAPTER TWO: THE BASICS

Titles linking this section are from a general martial arts terminology: we start with the basics (methodology) and gradually begin footwork (formative questions) and recognize the space we can cover (delimitations and limitations), then we refine our stance (participants and procedure) so that our grounding is strong. From here groundwork starts (interviews) and interaction with partners commences, building on skills until an opportunity to apply practice arises and we begin to analyze and interpret.

METHODOLOGICAL MOVES

Just as in karate, there are the basic punches, kicks, blocks and stances which must be learned, practiced and utilized, so too in research, the tools of the trade must be made explicit. Encountered here is a paradigmatic hybrid: not a conflicting jumble of mixed puzzle pieces from different boxes, but rather a layering of perspectives that creates a multi-dimensional, situated knowledge-scape, with reflective layers of meaning. Here, the mixing of metaphors cannot be helped: rather than adopting a singular, bounded, established and constricting theoretical lens (a paint-by-number paradigm), I have chosen lenses on manual mode, exploring combinations of zoom features, shutter speeds and apertures. This may be labeled a “messy text” (Van Maanen 1988).

Feminist lenses are chosen because I believe it is a salient dynamic at this time, to focus on gender relations, power conceptions and agency. Such a lens does not become fogged with a political problematic (a proclaimed lack of objectivity), because in this camera there is not an objective “real” world that one may “correctly” observe and
theorize detached from the human body's tools. Humans are (and have) measuring, sensing devices that construct, historically situate, influence and create our knowledge.

But some knowledge is better than others; feminist standpoint epistemologies offer contributions to knowledge that are timely, necessary, ethical and just. Research always has political and ethical extensions and consequences. Without making essentialist claims, standpoint epistemology makes visible and audible the perspectives of particularly positioned women; thereby informing action, improving analyses, correcting and adding to more informed theory and policy. Adding the multiple reads and (by extension) realities of constructionist or postmodern critiques need not mean being shot with a paint-ball of relativism. One picture is not as illustrative as another is; the human lens is more complex than a technical camera and is capable of moral and ethical envisioning. This makes certain perspectives better to paint, capture or create at particular times and places in our lives.

Visualize the reflectively positioned researcher: one foot here, sinking toes into scholarly pools of debate, and one foot there, combatively kicking in the martial arts sphere, the hands composing creative camera shots, testing lenses, depths of field and foci that different perspectives render informative, and presenting those that spark the imagination, those that "click". This framed thesis picture I create might not be correct tomorrow; it shall definitely transform. But it is a snapshot of this time and space, a modest sampling of martial arts contexts against the critical collage and discourse of feminist sports theory and practice.
FOOTING: FORMATIVE QUESTIONS

One motivation for this research was an answer to the question “where are the women in martial arts?” And why are women martial artists not highly visible or well known through the media? Although Jackie Chan, Steven Segal, Bruce Leanne, and Chuck Norris have become household names, most consumers of popular culture find it difficult to name a single female martial artist. Cartoon figures of strong females are a little easier to name: WonderWoman; Isis; Zena—Warrior Princess; the Pink PowerRanger—so it seems powerful women are more readily digested when fictionalized for entertainment! This relative invisibility is not because of a lack of talent. Women athletes who do receive media attention (and the ones who make it into history books) are usually of the elite, top caliber: women tend to enter the discourse of sport reports only when they are world class (Klein in Theberge 1991).

I questioned how “everyday” women were drawn to martial arts. There certainly are not many visible role models, and I do not believe women can just be stirred into Donohue’s (1994) functional theory, wherein the male American imagination is captured by the “warrior hero image”, as represented and reinforced through mass media narratives and popular culture stories and plots. Rather than realistic aggressor, the more typical portrayal of women in the media is that of victim—therefore, are women joining for self-defense purposes? If this is so, what makes them continue training for years beyond a self-defense repertoire? What are the benefits? What is particularly empowering about martial arts activity? Is it “just exercise” for them, or what does it mean when practitioners say that it “becomes a way of life?”
Additionally, I wanted to focus on the particular challenges females faced in their practice. Does gender make a difference in the dojo? What are the expectations, constraints, stereotypes and power dynamics encountered while training? How and when are gender constructs reinforced, challenged or transformed through training experiences?

Martial arts may be lumped into the category of “male hegemonic sport”, which emphasizes combat, competitiveness, aggression, violence, domination and submission. But a deeper look uncovers complexities and subtleties, which are not realized from this quick categorization. Despite the surface features of some combat arts, women feel empowered by these activities, even when they are the only female in male dominated clubs. I wanted to document these experiences “for the record”.

DELIMITATIONS

1) Reliability and Validity / Adequacy and Credibility

In positivistic inquiry, reliable (repeatable and generalize-able) methods were valid ones. With more awareness of the social construction of reality and recognition that all knowledge claims are based on assumptions, the purpose of and criteria for research has changed (Altheide & Johnson 1994: 487). Feminists seek ways of merging their own and other women’s experiences into practical research contexts, to inform thought and action. Since experiences require analysis and interpretation, feminists recognize the need for responsibility and accountability when speaking for or about those with whom she is conducting research. A feminist methodology starts with, and remains grounded in the experiential “data”—the lived experience of women—then turns attention to the theoretical assumptions and the methods used to approach the issues. Criteria for
adequacy in qualitative feminist research may ensure that participants' voices are heard, that researchers' actions are accounted for, and that the conditions of the research process (contradictions, ethical concerns, assumptions, etc.) are made explicit. Reflexivity is key. So-called researcher bias in such work may become a resource that guides data gathering and constructing, and aids in understanding interpretations, so long as the researcher is sufficiently reflexive in her project (Olesen 1994:165).

2) This research focussed on the subjective experience of martial artists, relying on self-report data as articulated through interviews. No attempt was made to observe actual behaviour and compare formal observation data with interview data. I explicitly draw upon my own thoughts and experiences of some martial arts contexts.

3) I note here that I have been involved in martial arts for the past ten years (Shito-ryu Itosukai and Kyokushinkai karate). My own experiences and reflections motivated a desire to conduct this research and certainly, my perspective as a practitioner influences this work. Though it may delimit this study (insofar as I may fail to realize the influence of my own experiences, values and beliefs), my personal involvement simultaneously provides a valuable insider perspective which generates unique questions and interpretations.

LIMITATIONS

1) Those who participated in this research volunteered to do so after a brief introductory letter describing the study. There may be differences between those who were willing to participate in this project and those who were not. The participants are in no way
representative of any generic category of “women” or “female martial artists”, nor are they representative of their particular style of chosen martial art.

2) This study does not aim to make universal claims. It seeks to explore shared and different specific experiences of females in an array of martial arts. I believe the diversity of participants (women who differ by age, race and sexual orientation) and the diversity of martial arts styles (aikido, karate, kempo, taekwondo, tai chi ch’uan, ju-jutsu) enrich this exploratory study and serve to create a distinct, situated knowledge (Haraway 1995) of women’s sporting practices.

STANCE: PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

This study involved interviews with ten selected female martial artists who responded to an introductory letter and short description of the research focus. I was acquainted with most of the participants through local tournaments, martial arts seminars and organizations (Pacific Association of Women Martial Artists, Women’s Martial Arts Festival ’96 & ’97) or they contacted me through a notice of the study posted at the 1996 Tiger Balm International Tournament held at U.B.C.. Financial and practical constraints limited the scope of this research to the elicitation of female martial artist volunteers from the local community. Participants granted their informed consent and the interviews were conducted, usually at the participant’s home, dojo, or at a local café. Almost all the participants contacted agreed to participate. One of the interviews was conducted by a combination of letter, email and telephone, because conflicting schedules rendered our meetings next to impossible. Enthusiasm for the proposed research has been high. Participants attending the Women’s Festival of Martial Arts, in Squamish, B.C. and the
20th annual Pacific Association of Women Martial Artists in Hawaii 1997 have been very interested in hearing about other female martial artists’ motivations and experiences. I hope to share and summarize the research results with members at the 1998 PAWMA / WFMA conference on British Columbia’s Sunshine Coast this summer.

Interviewed participants received a typed transcript of their interview and were invited to give feedback and to make clarifications, additions or both, to the text. I explained to the participants that themes and quotes would be extracted from the transcripts, then incorporated into the final thesis document. Several participants read over their copies of the transcripts, made changes and clarified meanings, and told me what parts of the interview they found most interesting (and I included the excerpts they specified). I did modify transcriptions by editing and clarifying repetitious or unnecessary words typically found in conversational speech, since it made reading difficult when transcribed verbatim. No participant asked that interview portions be deleted.

GROUNDWORK: INTERVIEWS

A question roster was used as a guideline for interviews (see Appendix), but because the women had different experiences and were from different martial art styles or clubs, their emphases were unique and I allowed flexibility within the interview foci. Because the purpose of interviews is to elicit information by asking questions, the process becomes one in which both the researcher and participant share information and contribute to the research, the interviewer being more than an instrument of data collection (Oakley 1981: 48) and the interviewee not simply a passive participant that talks of her experience (Kirby & McKenna 1989). The interaction in interviews becomes
a dialogue that continually informs and guides the interview itself, leading to the discovery of more information. Because the meanings of participant experiences were sought in this study, the interview process allowed individual emphasis to emerge and questions were posed to expand dialogue (Mishler 1986). I held one interview with each participant. The interviews lasted from one hour to two hours in length. More than one interview with each participant would have been ideal (because new questions and areas of interest always arise through the interview and transcription process), however time and financial constraints made this impossible. Pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions and excerpts appearing in this study.

CONFRONTATION: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In sparring scenarios, one cannot begin with a singular, rigidly determined technique in mind and adhere to its execution regardless of what or whom one faces. One has to be light on one’s feet, flexible and open. Similarly, an interview transcript should not be regarded as a static text from which interpretations are picked out and single correct analysis made. Instead, it is a performative act (Mishler 1986: 119) constructed through interactive dialogue. Focus changes and continues to evolve throughout the textual transcription process, on through the act of isolating themes and creating narrative presentation, and ultimately to each context of a reader’s readings.

The themes I extract and isolate today may not be those I would wish to highlight tomorrow. I only can strive to take the most salient snapshots of this presently situated context — just as every sparring match is different: one must enter into it aware, not too
focussed on any one spot; peripheral vision honed and sensitive; ready to seize an opening
and engage.

Four topic areas guided the development of the question roster: initiation (how
women got involved in their martial art); motivation (changing reasons for training,
factors that continued their training, the benefits experienced and the continuing
challenges of training); power dynamics (empowerment, challenges encountered as a
female, significance of gender) and ideology (personal philosophies about what martial
arts meant to the practitioners). After interviews and transcription, my ideas for analysis
and the extraction of chapter themes stemmed from 1) my curiosity of other women's
martial arts experiences as compared with my own, combined with 2) my growing
familiarity with feminist embodiment literature, 3) my own observations and memories of
martial arts practices, and 4) the articulated experiences and emphases of participating
women.

Themes resulted from the process of submerging myself in the data, coding the
transcripts with keywords based upon the topics women spoke about and looking to the
literature for scholarly perspectives about those topics. Sometimes I used my own
experience of participating and observing martial arts for ten years. Choosing themes was
both a difficult and straightforward process. Themes that jumped out of a majority of
interviews (about power dynamics, challenges to power) were clearly identifiable. Other
themes were more embedded, but I believed they were important to uncover and discuss
(Black Belt Barbie). Included were themes wherein participants held conflicting opinions
(for instance, the female-only clubs). Themes also derived from topics that the women
emphasized in the interviews. I would have loved to use every paragraph of the interview
transcripts. Ultimately, time and space restricted my choices. Through the construction of themes derived from interviews, my own experience and readings feminist sports literature, I blended three different sources in a unique exploration of the topic under study, a "messy text" (Van Maanen 1988) that uses several lenses for viewing.

PARTICIPANT SKETCHES: INITIATION AND MOTIVATION

"Flora" is kung-fu artist in her fifties, who became inadvertently involved with martial arts while seeking therapy for her neck pain. She has children, a husband, and lives in the Lower Mainland. While undergoing her herbal treatment, Flora observed two women doing soft style kung fu (Needle in Cotton) and she was awed by their grace. She wrote in her journal: "I don't know what they're doing, but if I weren't such a klutz, I'd love to do that". During our interview held in the hall where Flora trains, we laugh with the entry—because now Flora helps to teach the style at her instructor and herbalist's school.

I came to a Chinese herbalist to get him to fix my neck, which took about 3 ½ months, but after about one week, he taught me some exercises which I didn't know at the time, but they were kung-fu exercises. So I did those everyday for the three months, but I didn't actually start any other training... except for those fifteen exercises. When my treatment was drawing to an end, I said: "Oh, I'm going to miss coming here", and my herbalist said, "Well, you can come to class and learn kung-fu". And I thought, "I'm too old"—I was forty-eight at the time, and, I thought,"I'm a woman, I've never—it doesn't really interest me—I could never keep up with all these guys". And he said, "There's no age in kung fu,
you're strong, you could do it, and you learn slowly, one or two movements at a
time, there's no competition about it.” ...So that next week I started coming to
classes for both styles (three a week) because I had the feeling that if I didn't start
right away and waited even one week, I probably wouldn't go back there again.

Flora hasn't stopped attending classes to date, and she has drawn the attention of local TV
news coverage and martial arts newsletter features. Friends who knew her before joining
kung-fu now scarcely recognize her because she has had such a healthful physical change.

“Claire” and I held our interview in her new martial arts facility (still undergoing its
finishing touches) in the Lower Fraser Valley, where she teaches karate throughout the
week. She has been doing karate for about fifteen years, has instructed her own women’s
karate club and then changed it to a co-ed club. When asked why she began training, she
replies:

To focus my eldest daughter’s raging hormones! Yes! Well, actually, I had always
wanted to do it, but never really did—it was sort of a passing thing in my life, I
wanted to do martial arts, it looked neat, cool... when martial arts started
becoming known, I guess I was around sixteen... but never did it... And then I
found myself almost thirty-five —— and my daughter just driving me crazy, and I
thought “I've got to focus her with something” and it took me awhile... but I
joined up two of us (for the price of one) —— and I thought, “well, there's a way of
focussing her raging hormones and it's something we can do together as a mother
and daughter situation”
Claire’s youngest daughter has since joined karate, her eldest daughter may get back into training again soon, and Claire has continued with karate ever since.

I watched a class, and I thought “I’ll think about it” (the exercises scared me away, I still don’t like exercises, but I do them), but my daughter looked at me and said, “Mom, if you think about it, you won’t do it”—so I said, “You’re right”. And it was hard work.

Now Claire instructs classes, officiates at competitions and continues her own training; her daughters, although not as active as their Mom, are still interested in karate.

“Dee”, a fourth-degree taekwondo instructor, is thirty-eight, lives and works in Whistler, and is originally from Montreal. When she first became involved:

I was fourteen... my cousin was taking taekwondo and she asked me if I could take her. Meanwhile, my brother was in judo, so I saw him doing it and I took a class...

So I thought, well, if I take my cousin there, I might as well take it. So I did. I just continued—she dropped out when she started looking at boys, and I just stayed, I wasn’t interested ... I didn’t get my black belt until I was in my twenties. It took me a long time because I was doing so many other things, involved in all different sports. But I always kept with it —my heart was always in taekwondo.

Dee became a taekwondo national champion and almost went to the Olympics in Seoul, if it wasn’t for illness at the most inopportune time—due to an overly rigorous training schedule. Dee now has a successful taekwondo school, and is an active hockey player.
“Regina” and I conducted the interview in her lovely cabin beside a crackling fire, with snow falling onto the evergreens outside. She said,

_The very first time I got involved in martial arts was right after high school, it was an eight week course and the fella called it “kung-fu”—I didn’t specifically know what type it was, I was just impressed that it was pronounced “gung-fu”, yet spelled with a “K”. And he was very complimentary to my boyfriend (now husband) and I. He really encouraged us to keep going with it, but we were planning a trip, so this was impossible—we were off for our grand adventure...We travelled for a couple years, came back to Canada... and travelled again, to Japan this time. And while I was in Japan, in order to get a study visa, you had to study something. So it was either a martial art, a tea ceremony, or the language—and the language seemed like too much work to me(!)... I went to my girlfriend’s aikido class... Fell in love with aikido, just loved it! I killed my back for about the first six months. (We had to walk up quite a few flights of stairs, and many, many times over the three years I was there it was really hard to get up those stairs because you’d be bruised from all the tumbles, and the mats were not very forgiving)... Pretty much that whole time I did the aikido, about five or six times a week, sometimes twice in a day...

Regina got heavily involved in tai chi upon returning to Canada, and she continues giving instruction in both aikido and tai chi ch’uan, plus yoga and also finds time to try other martial arts (such as capoeira) and organize special training seminars—namely, the annual Canadian “Women’s Festival of Martial Arts”._
“Magda”

Magda is thirty years old and runs an all-female karate club in Vancouver. We spoke sitting on the floor of her training hall while her dog energetically ran around the tape recorder:

I was eighteen, started going to college and decided to take karate for self-defense—because I knew I’d be moving away from home. That’s how I got started, at a local club in the valley, Mission. It was exciting—just the feel of power too—I was 102 pounds, a very, very shy person, and the comradeship—at that time it was a really good group. It was actually a very male chauvinistic dojo, but I didn’t know it at the time—you don’t find out about the politics until you’re higher in rank... so at that point, at the peak of the club, it was really good... seven days a week—I just loved it, I just took to it... Plus, the self-defense was always a feature. I lived alone for years and basically, as a college student, it’s like you live alone and no one notices you’re not there, unless you’re not in class, and that’s it. So I really believe in that (the self-defense aspect).

Magda and her husband run a karate club jointly, and Magda independently instructs the women’s club, in addition to organizing seminars and supplementing her martial arts knowledge by participating in judo classes on weekends.

“Joyce”

I interviewed Joyce in her home one afternoon over a cup of tea in her kitchen. She remembered,
When I originally started training, it goes back to 1979 in something called WENDO (women’s self-defense course). At the end of it, the instructors had you break this board and usually the instructors would sign the board and you would take it home. And at the time I thought “this was nothing, this is a very small step I’ve taken, I have much farther to go with this”. And I did Wendo training, became a teacher, and did that for five years—I used to travel around the province teaching self-defense courses. And then I became interested in karate, because after years of being in Wendo, teaching the small amount of skills I learned from the other women there, I felt I wanted to know more. So, I started training in karate and became quickly very hooked, and then got into this time conflict where I was actually earning my living as a self-defense instructor, but the classes were at night at the same time as the karate classes—so eventually I stopped teaching self-defense because it was more important for me to train in karate. And then I had to find a way to make a new living.

Joyce now juggles home and work with her own women’s karate club instruction. She also trains at her style’s main (co-ed) karate club in Vancouver, officiates at tournaments and has somehow managed to find time to currently organize the Pacific Association of Women Martial Artists annual training session 1998, an international, cross-discipline martial arts event. She has been practicing karate for about fourteen years.
"Karla"

At a coffee shop in Richmond, I interviewed Karla who, amidst the sounds of traffic and shoppers, answered my questions and explained to me how she became an active member of a karate organization at thirty-four years old, and why she has kept with it for over a decade:

I had my kids enrolled in martial arts, and actually Kyokushin was the only one that would take them at six years of age at that time... So I went to watch them all the time, decided to quit smoking and join it. I went to a few aerobics classes and it didn't do too much for me, so I started karate. This was ten years ago, January '87... Instead of going through the aerobics thing, you know—I learned self-defense and I could see the conditioning, the self-defense, and everything was just what I wanted... The physical aspect, the emotional, the mental—you get everything out of it—the self confidence... To begin with, it is just physical, but through the constant training, the self-confidence you get, the discipline; the main thing for me was the confidence. People don't believe it, but as I say—when I first joined karate, I was "just a housewife". I mean, I had "no mind"—I didn't know anything of my own, but the confidence of trying new things, finding that I am my own person, and that I control my own actions—whereas before, whatever my husband said, went... When I first started, it was purely physical. And with everything now, the way I handle things, the way I meet problems —instead of backing down and ignoring them and thinking they'll go away, I meet them sort of head on, and I deal with it all.
Karla continues her active training and instruction at the black belt level, participating and organizing much of the karate events for her karate organization year round.

"Leanne"

Leanne is a forty-four year old woman who has earned her black belt in karate. One weekend, in her North Delta home, with her husband and son occupied in the next room, Leanne told me the story of how she first started training:

My son started training in '88, and then they had a self-defense class for the women in the community and also for the Moms—it was free, for four weeks or so, and he gave us a certificate at the end (I still have it). It was really nice, and I thought, "Well, geez, I can do this" and my son started bugging me that I should go. And I said, "Tell you what. If you get your blue belt, I'll go." He got his blue belt in June, and in September, I went. There were no women there—the next week, K started, and a few weeks later another woman started, so it was cool—but I hadn't exercised in fifteen years or more, so my first goal was not to throw up and not to pass out! I don't even know why I first started, but the reasons for staying and continuing with it—it's something that just becomes part of your life, it's become a part of my life, and being part of the organization, the people—they are part of what has made me stay. It would be like losing part of your family to leave...
“Tasha”

Tasha is thirty years old, works in the metals industry as a secretary and continually trains kenpo / karate, which she has been doing for about fifteen years now. We talked in her Burnaby apartment:

I started as a teenager in Europe and my brothers took karate — which is very popular over there. They would try to use it on me, so I started learning the moves from them (out of necessity!) and it rubbed off on me—I suppose I had to learn! Then, when I came over here I got involved with this karate club, through a friend—and I just kept going. I liked the challenge of getting better, improving. And I had a few bad relationships, so the training really kept me on track, it helped me through it all. Now I find it hard to dedicate the time—I’m working so much, but I’ll always keep it up. I can’t stop training, it’s part of me now, like it or not!

“Becky” is a student originally from Toronto. She has tried a few different martial arts over the past ten years, starting with karate and judo, dabbled in wushu, and now jujutsu. We corresponded by phone, email and one meeting at the Vancouver Public Library:

In the beginning when I started—I remember watching a couple guys I knew from my school in the class and thinking, “hey, I could do that better—I’m more coordinated and could punch and kick in combinations better than that!” So I gave it a try... Now I might be a Jill of all trades, expert at none—but it doesn’t matter, this training is for me, and I don’t have to jump through all the hoops of any particular club. I’ve done different martial arts—styles for years at a time —
I did ten years of karate, with judo on the side, a good friend taught me wushu (we trained together, I couldn't afford taking a class regularly with their club) and now I regularly train with a handful of different people at different martial arts schools... it's perfect for me. I'm learning at a rapid pace, and I get to train exactly what I need and want. When I go back to Toronto in the summer, I have a friend who teaches aikido and I train there too... The mix of different attitudes and ideas and faces is perfect... I'm not after some golden belt covered in patches.

Becky is at a time in her life when she can dedicate much of her spare time between seasonal jobs and course sessions to martial arts and other cross-training activities (running, weightlifting, swimming) because she has yet to “settle down”:

I'm putting marriage and pregnancy off for as long as I can. Perhaps permanently! What's the rush? I love being active and mobile! (Becky)
CHAPTER THREE: THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS

“GENDER-JUTSU”

With grappling (or any martial art), one has to learn by doing, by being in specific circumstances, confronted with particular opponents, attacks and situations. Books, videos and explanations are informative for the mind’s knowledge and illustrate moves to make in specific circumstances, confronted by particular opponents and attacks. But true knowledge of these arts comes through the body, and one must engage over and over in the activity to really know it. So too, within feminist sport theory, many articles, books and authors have their own moves, techniques and perspectives on gender and sport. When combining the two (theory and sport), I find it necessary to begin with and keep the activity as the basis of discussion, the experience and reactions of martial artists are the active picture around which are layered textual and theoretical dimensions. Personal records and interview excerpts are the starting snapshots on the page, the grounded practice that anchors and guides us, preventing a loss of purpose in the path through theoretical literature.

“Gender-jutsu” has then become my fictional phrase, a tongue in cheek creation to connote gender—as—art; the art of gender; the skill of using gender constructs and the weapons of gender (wielded against oneself or another). Here we have relations of power (gender) as a true action-word. Imagine the metaphors—“gender joint-locks” where the body is the fulcrum for immobilization, or “pressure-point power manipulations” that take place when gendered bodies encounter each other in a dynamic
struggle of power. *Gender-jutsu* is an appropriate wordplay to instigate an investigation of gender "grapplings" taking place on martial arts mats.

**POWER PLAYS AND REACTIONS**

Relations of power, the challenges encountered by the female black belts interviewed and their initial and ongoing experiences of gender dynamics in their training contexts are the topic of this first section. I include participant opinions on how or whether gender makes a difference in their training contexts and how women responded to these circumstances. Most women expressed at some point that "gender doesn’t matter" (we all train hard, regardless of our sex), and at other points in the interviews it was clear how being a woman did "matter" during training. I think such contradictions occur because of the tendency to interchange sex (the physiology of being female or male) with gender (the power dynamics involved with being a certain sex). Notice a common thread throughout several articulations wherein the challenges and difficulties these women faced made them "more stubborn" and willing to "dig in”.

Claire recalls the time when she first started training in karate, long before she set up her own martial arts school:

*There were only probably four women in a class of twenty, and only two of us ended up getting our black belts. I mean, there were women that came, but they didn’t last very long... so it became a challenge because the attitude about women in the martial arts was very poor there, and I guess out of stubbornness I thought, “No, you’re not going to kick me out of this”. I was a bit arrogant and stubborn,*
so it was "No!"—the more they tried to push me out of it, the more stubborn I became. There were many nights when I left there with tears and I said, "Okay, fine. I’m not going to do this." And my husband booted my butt and said, "don’t let them get the better of you". So I’d go back and come home the next day in tears and “oh, I’m not going to do this again”... But I survived it, and I’m glad I did... (Claire)

Leanne’s beginning was also difficult because of the stereotypes she encountered while training (for example, the idea that women would worry about their nails while doing push-ups):

*Sensai ** was such a male chauvinist! And this other young male fellow was terrible, he was so mean to us as women, it was terrible! But I thought, “there’s no way they’re going to make me quit”. Otherwise, I might have—but I thought: “Forget it. They think that a woman can’t do it? Just watch!” (Leanne)

Karla remembers the attitudes she faced upon entering the dojo to train:

*I was thirty-four when I started, so I was the only woman as such. There were younger girls... But for me coming through [the ranks], I think it was a little harder because there was no one for me to follow, and I was pushed quite a bit to set the standard for women. And it’s really come around—the chauvinism when I first started was unbelievable. You know: “She’s a woman, leave her alone—she’ll drop out soon enough”. The confidence was the major thing for me. I keep going back to that because—I knew I could do it and it was more of a challenge*
when these guys said, “oh she’s a woman, leave her be”—and then I dug in and thought “To hell with you!” It was harder then. But they’ve come around a lot.

(Karla)

Flora had a supportive instructor, but male peers who were not so confident in a woman’s capabilities:

There weren’t many women at that time, it was mostly guys [and still is], but when I took class, it was fine. I never felt ill at ease. That’s one of the things about my teacher, he is always very accepting of women. It’s like there’s no difference. For example, we began to learn the Lion dance, and someone said “Oh, women can’t do it, they’re not strong enough” and my instructor said, “they don’t know—they don’t know how strong you are”... (Flora)

Resisting stereotypes made some women more determined in their training. They sometimes felt pressure “to prove” a woman could train just as hard as the men could. Amidst these efforts, their actively training body was still seen as “female” (tied with all the inherent relations of power) and therefore treated differently. Karla explains:

Chauvinism was there. I was ignored at times. When I fought, they didn’t fight me as an equal—it was “oh, we can’t punch to the chest’ and we can’t do this or that”—and I would say, “Yes you can—you can punch me to the head, why can’t you punch me to the chest?” With me, at the beginning, the fighting [and] the stamina aspect—they didn’t think a woman could do it. And it certainly has changed since I first started. This was ten years ago. (Karla)
Joyce, however, experienced no challenges to her training as one of the few women in class:

I started karate... It was a referral from a friend of mine. She was a punk musician and a dyke with a funny haircut— and she liked him [the sensai], so I thought, “Well, if she can handle it, it’s probably an OK place to be!” And I liked what I saw. The sensai was immediately respectful, there was a nice atmosphere there and there were lots of people, really good, really hard workouts, lots to learn, and it was fun right away. Self-defense, that was my original intention. At the time, I was doing rape crisis work, so it kind of went all together. (Joyce)

But evident gender expectations in the dojo arose later in the interview, when asked why she eventually set up an all-female dojo of her own. Joyce:

Well, because there’s a different thing you can do with the women’s club. I must say I tremendously enjoyed training in the mixed club; I really got a lot out of that. And at times, they just really pissed me off—the prejudice; we had to fight for the right to be just treated ordinary. Up to the time that my friends and I landed at that dojo, the expectation was that female karate practitioners were there to provide husbands for the black belts. And we broke that rule, we didn’t get involved with any of the black belts and we didn’t marry anyone and it became clear that we were there for karate. And that was seen as unusual. Whereas I wanted a club where women come in and it’s known that we’re doing karate. That’s why we’re here. (Joyce)
Although martial arts clubs open their doors to everyone and inside the dojo every person is "a body" that is present to train, relations of gender also continue to operate. Practitioners find themselves grappling with constructions of gender when they face their partners. Participants in Wingate's (1993: 194) study felt that karate was very frustrating in a male-dominated setting; they felt weaker than the men and not capable of keeping up in exercises (push-ups), and sparring was especially said to present a disadvantage for women. A common complaint from some women encompasses male partners not giving realistic attacks, or as Magda states, they "treated her like glass", difficulties mirrored in Wingate's female interviewees (1993: 195). Often women must say, "You can hit me", or "harder, it's OK," because their male partners hesitate and don't want to hit or hurt a female. They "don't know how much she can take" and are reluctant to train as intensely as they would with a male partner. A rather common argument is that a man's social conditioning inhibits his ability to train seriously with a woman because men aren't (culturally) permitted to hit or fight women. The argument insists on a no-win situation: the male will seem like a bully, training "too hard", or will "go easy" and either "look bad" (losing to a female, thereby "losing his masculinity") or come across as "not trying". Lost in this scenario is the fact that training is about control of an individual's own bodily actions, reactions and control of one's ego! In most instances, such a socialized gender pattern is discarded when partners realize that energetic exchanges and realistic attacks are essential in building realistic defensive skill.

Tasha stated her perspective strongly:

*Whatever people do, there's one goal—to win within yourself. We are all human beings. Gender doesn't matter. You have to fight, and you fight, that's it. That's*
karate. Guys might not punch women as hard in the dojo, but it is just a place to train. It’s all about confronting difficulties and having mental strength. Because through the physical part, you work on the psychological, mental and emotional. A guy in dojo won’t hit a guy hard either—the aim isn’t to hurt another person in the dojo—or shouldn’t be. So it’s the same goal and same principle: to make your opponent realize you’re better in dojo, to demonstrate this, use one’s abilities—not overdo it... but it doesn’t stop a woman from hitting a guy just because he’s a guy... so it shouldn’t stop a guy from training with a woman. (Tasha)

Of course, there are extremes. Karla recalled one of several instances when a male partner went “overboard” during training:

This is it: I’m an adult and I know what I’m getting into. When I step into the ring or whatever it is, I do it knowingly. I still think they hold back a little. Although some guys don’t—some guys have an attitude. One guy was a policeman. When he had a rough day he came in and just beat on me. Whereas with the other men he just cowered. There have been several such instances. You see with these guys, I guess the catch 22 is that they’re not going to let a woman beat them; at the same time, they don’t care if they beat up a woman. (Karla)

The above example may be a more extreme illustration of what happens when females infiltrate “the male preserve of sport”(Dunning 1994), particularly combative sports where domination and competition are paramount. Instances like this can happen to women in martial arts. As Whitson (1994) states,
Body contact sports are now one of the few areas of public life where force and intimidation are still allowed to triumph, where men who love to hit can still enjoy doing so, and others will celebrate their toughness and willingness to pay the price. (Whitson 1994: 359)

But participants were quick to state that martial arts are not necessarily about that kind of power. At least, it isn’t supposed to be: of course one encounters individuals who become wrapped up in such power plays, but they are understood as the exceptions, the ones who have missed the point and haven’t matured in their attitude. Martial arts aren’t supposed to be about domination and competition, but instead are more focused on self-discipline, suppression of ego, growth of self, integration of mind and body, and control of reaction and emotion (Kiyota 1995).

Rather than discourage their participation, the instances of sexism and chauvinism made these particular female practitioners feel more determined. They felt a sense of accomplishment and strength having participated under such conditions and persevering through obstacles. This need not mean they were adopting the power values of dominance and submission in an aggressive activity; instead, their perception of martial arts practice went deeper than a focus on the outcome of a sparring match. When asked if she thought of martial arts as an aggressive sport (especially because of the above mentioned hostile experience), Karla explained:

*I never really thought of karate as a sport. It is a way of life. It had such a hold on me. I loved it, and I couldn’t stop learning. It just opens up a whole new world. So I was quite intent, even though my daughters quit. There’s more out there than punching and kicking. Sparring is the least of it. You learn different things about yourself, your body, what you can do, what you can’t do. I wouldn’t*
say it's really a combative sport at all. ...It is about dealing with things without violence—but the end result is that you can physically handle yourself if need be. Learning how to control your aggression. To really simplify it: Knowing what you can do and walk away from it, unless your life is threatened where you really have to use your skills. And you become a bigger and better person if you can turn your back and walk away. You don't have to use violence to solve a problem.

(Karla)

As a karate practitioner, Leanne typically commences and closes each class in a queue according to rank and ritualistically bows to superiors and each other. Most karate clubs are explicitly hierarchical in this way—the ritual and formal components underline expectations of rank and correct behaviour in accord with what is called a "sempai / cohai" relation (a senior / junior relationship that dictates proper respect, acknowledgement and terms of address). One accepts critique graciously and would never "speak back" to a higher belt. Therefore, short of physically disproving stereotypes (by training "just as hard"), it seems there would be no opportunity for resistance of sexism or chauvinism. But there is room for resistance everywhere, and despite these restrictive parameters, women in Leanne's male-dominated club made an outlet to voice their rejection of some gender dynamics taking place in their dojo, strategically.

Leanne recalled:

There was a time in my training when only women were allowed to fight together in class, and there were [gender] differences, but now we've made sensai change.
I used to tease him really badly about these things in order to work him through them. But now it’s not even necessary. That was his perception of women—that we would worry about breaking our nails. We ended up doing a skit for one of the dinners. It was all his perceptions. We wore spandex in colours and the gis [karate uniforms] were coloured pink and purple and yellow, and there were high heels—Oh! We were really rough on him. He was able to laugh at it because he knew—he knew at that point that it just wasn’t true. We trained just as hard as the guys did and we didn’t worry about push-ups “because we would break nails”. Every now and then, the comments will still come out, but there’s no way that he would do that to us now. He’s sixty-five, so I guess it’s hard for him, coming from a different era, training for thirty years. Maybe he did encounter women like that, who knows? (Leanne)

Participants said numerous times that being a woman shouldn’t matter in martial arts, although it often did matter, simply because the women were treated differently than the men. The perspectives regarding gender making a difference in training contexts are interesting because what is expressed as gender making a difference may be understood as sex—since it refers to physical bodily difference in size and strength rather than relations of power surrounding a sexed body. But even this assumption is problematic, because size and strength do not evenly split along sexual divisions. Leanne (who found a way to strategically critique the gender stereotypes in her karate context) said:
I don't see that there's differences, or that there should be. In terms of divisions for fighting, I believe that it is important, yes—because of the reality that women are different, physically. There are some women who are (exceptional), but other than that... No, from what I see in terms of moving through the organization, there's no differences made for training or advancement—if you want to put the same amount of time and the same amount of effort as the man beside you, I don't see that your opportunities will be any different. We're lucky here. (Leanne)

Above, Leanne emphasized "the reality that women are different, physically" and some women are "exceptional"—physically (and thus the differences in fighting divisions for males and females make sense and are not regarded as impeding opportunities for training or advancement in her organization). Zooming in on the perception of physical difference as natural, I must magnify several areas of caution.

First, there is a risk of reifying or "naturalizing" differences between the sexes by overlooking sociocultural factors that contribute to physiological differences. For example, Jennifer Hargreaves (1986) points out how muscularity is made through cultural practices and contexts such as weightlifting, drug-taking and maintaining a regimen at the gym; muscles are made, not inherently linked to one's sex, yet the illusion persists that sex differences based in physicality are natural and inevitable. True, there are physiological differences in (absolute) body strength of males and females, but a major factor accounting for this difference is not any inherent incapacity, but women's lack of training (Freedson 1994: 177). Muscularity is ideologically linked to masculinity—and viewed as a natural difference between the sexes. Second, viewing certain physical
differences between males and females as "natural", sport serves to reinforce those particular differences between the sexes at the same time it skips over other similarities. This process (taking place through media coverage and lack thereof) reinforces some dominant norms of physicality that favour male bodies and value particular sports and ways of moving over others—and even uses distinct sets of verbs and adjectives for male and female activity (MacNeill 1994: 273). Sport representation often highlights sex differences and consequently portrays women as unnatural athletes (at risk of reproductive injury) or female athletes as unnatural and exceptional women (Birrel & Theberge 1994: 347). Thus, what is often regarded as natural difference between the sexes may in fact be a set of constructed norms.

In contrast, Becky didn't emphasize the physical at all when talking about gender. She seemed to express that gender is more of a "cultural performance" for her than a natural fact (Vertinsky 1994: 149) because her state of mind (particularly her confidence projected outwardly) influences her experiences:

*Now it feels for me that gender is in the mind moreso—like if I walk into a room full of male practitioners [at a jujutsu club we were doing grappling practice with a mix of different people and clubs, strangers getting together]—I know I walked in and felt OK with it, being the only female. I felt like it was no big deal and I belonged. I was there to train, and it was projected. Nobody had a problem—nobody showed any—I trained with everyone. It's when you start feeling inhibited or lacking confidence that the "gender thing" crops up. Guys are awkward training with you sometimes as it is. Some have real problems seriously treating you—giving realistic chokes or attacks. But that inhibits your practice. So*
it’s good to get through that. They see you want to train seriously and you can handle the challenge—better than some men—because you’re an individual training, not representative of some sex. When you train seriously, your partner has to take you seriously and train hard too—otherwise he’ll find himself in a bind. Plus, you know, both sexes have to get over that “sex” thing when training with each other, because there’s always particular stretches or partner exercises or positions and whatnot that would totally embarrass the average person. But if you don’t have a problem with it, it usually rubs off on your partner and they don’t have a problem either. If they do—it’s their problem! (Becky)

Becky has confidence in her presence as a martial artist amongst male practitioners. Physical presence and power is in part, socially constructed because it is often something that people ascribe or fail to ascribe to others:

The conception of physical presence as a power that is projected and associated with males is, significantly, socially constructed. At the same time, the failure to ascribe a sense of physical power to female presence is also socially constructed. Moreover, it is very easy to accomplish this failed ascription of physical power when one’s subjectivity has been objectified, reducing it to that of an object that can be acted upon through various practices—clearly the case for women living in a patriarchal society. (McDermott 1996: 22)

Although Becky was very much aware of being watched in the described practice context, she responded to this objectification in a way that assumed her control and ownership over the sporting experience. Thus, she did not feel objectified under a male gaze, even as she was the sole female in a room of male practitioners.

Tasha also emphasized the individual practitioner’s focus:
To me, personal motivation, that's what keeps people back—guys and girls—
gals—women—Some just don't have the drive, the desire to learn something really hard, practice day in and out. Boredom! You can't get bored or you quit—you have to stay interested and keep learning to improve. You always come across dud instructors and people you train with, but you've got to keep sight of the whole purpose, the big view, not just some belt at the end of the road—because that's not the end! Like the saying, "your biggest enemy is yourself"—your fiercest opponent is yourself and your own obstacles. That's the challenge.

Now, my challenges are different from yours, which are different from his and from hers. So! That's the difference between him and her, you and I, male and female, I'd say. It's not so much the body, some guys have smaller bodies than some women... (Tasha)

Claire summarized an idyllic individualistic perspective, hard to manifest in most professional sport and leisure contexts:

*What I have noticed is that it still ends up back to just what martial arts is about, it keeps coming back to that, so I think it shows that it's not just women and men in martial arts, it's martial artists themselves. (Claire)*

Although males and females are martial artists, ranked according to belt rather than a sexual hierarchy (although traditionally in some karate schools in Japan, women train at the back of class, regardless of rank), power issues do manifest, particularly in teaching contexts. No matter if one perceives an individual (philosophically) as a martial
artist (neither male nor female), power dynamics do visibly erupt along sexual lines. The following female instructors emphasize the challenges to power they faced, being black belt female instructors of male students and having to "prove" rank and their ability. Note that these women eventually decided not to play the power games—they realized they did not have to prove their ability to anyone.

Dee is 38 years old, and has excelled in national level competitive taekwondo circles. She directs and instructs her own school:

*Now the challenge is more... [for me] to gain wisdom and knowledge... You have to deal with a lot of people in certain situations and all the personalities that come to the school. I'm learning how to treat an individual that comes in with their attitude and with such a big ego, that they want to take control. And I'll let them get a little bit, and then I'll take control back. I watch and think, "Let's see what they're going to do; do they respect me and do they respect the class that I'm teaching? Or, do they have that attitude of 'I'm better'?" So I have to learn how to take them and say "No. It goes like this". Wisdom! For a master you need a lot of wisdom and knowledge. It's not just about taekwondo; it's life in general.*

[You have to] know how to deal with people outside taekwondo, too. (Dee)

Dealing with new students, Dee finds her skills are often challenged because she is female, teaching fighting skills:

*I'm a woman—and you get: "What can she teach me?" You get that all the time. I don't prove to them, or kick as hard as I can, just to show I can do it. It's not about that, having that big ego. [I don't have to start] walking around showing
that I’m a girl and I can do it...you don’t have to walk with your head high for people, or show off. You don’t have to prove. But, when the time comes in a sparring situation, you show it. (Dee)

For Magda, physically demonstrating her skills on another person was an obstacle. But she quickly learned to master this approach when confronted with demanding teaching circumstances:

A hard thing for me to get over was actually learning to hit people, [it was] very hard...But once I started teaching guys, I started having to hit. There was no choice, you had to hit them or they wouldn’t listen. Not hurt them, but you know. So I gradually learned how hard I could hit without damaging and I learned to control what I had. Now I’m comfortable hitting—I know exactly how hard to sting, or how hard to tease—because I had to. Working with guys, there was no choice. They didn’t really challenge me—they just treated me like glass. They blocked so gently, and I’d say: “Look, I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t conditioned!” you know, “quit treating me like a baby or a little tiny girl”. And I was the instructor at this point! But once you thump them, they listen. After that, I had no ego problems at all. The nicest people I’d still have to thump. They just think I’m a weak little [girl]—but I can out-lift them! So yeah, that’s where I started learning to hit, having no choice because the males wouldn’t respect you unless you did... But I was dealing with college kids, so there were definitely attitudes. But after that, once it was done, it was perfect, no problems
whatsoever, they'd ask me anything, everything. It wasn't an issue after that.  
(Magda)

Claire skips over the trials of accelerating through the hierarchy and instead emphasizes that gender shouldn't make any difference in a practitioner's training, although it did present difficulties for her:

*Although it was really hard for me to go up through the ranks— and it is still hard at times (I still have to constantly prove to other people and I shouldn't, but I have to), what I've found is that there really is no difference between men and women in martial arts. You're a martial artist and it doesn't make any difference in your gender. And that's the way people should think about martial arts— I'm not female; I'm not male; I'm a martial artist. I know my first male student actually joined when I still [had an all-female club], but he wanted to take it... I remember him sitting across from me, and I said, "Well, I'm the head instructor, I'm the sensei; do you have a problem being taught by a female instructor?" And he looked at me and said, "The way I see it, is you're not either a man or a woman, you're a teacher. I don't see you as female or male, I see you as a teacher". That was the right attitude. Good answer. And he stayed, actually he was my very first black belt. (Claire)*

Whereas when Magda was the female co-instructor in partnership with her husband, she experienced obvious differential treatment:
At the co-ed club, the guys are great, their personalities and attitudes towards women—at college the guys were younger, but once you dealt with it, it was fine. Still, you get people that come in, “Oh, female”, you know. They’d look at Johnny, look at me, and go talk to him, although we’re both black belts. But I don’t run into that now, and part of it is because I take the initiative—I go up to them. But there was that: they automatically take the male seriously. They just did, every time they took him seriously, but not me. Until I had to prove myself—and it got to the point where I said “that’s it, I’m not proving myself, I don’t have to” and I stopped it. If they don’t want to believe me, I don’t care. And that gave me quite the empowerment, too. That was really good, when I stopped worrying about [it]—I’d let them walk out rather than trying to prove myself to them. I don’t need to. I think that was a big step for me. I don’t have to play their game, only mine. (Magda)

The authority of females wearing black belts is not taken automatically. Despite these women earning their rank, achieving the level of instructor through years of hard training, practice, testing and physical trials, their status as head instructor was sometimes rejected or challenged. That martial arts and fighting is a “natural” or legitimate realm for men is reinforced when the authority of a male instructor was sought over a female instructor. The unstated comment is that women do not really belong in a class teaching men to fight because women don’t know how to fight, they shouldn’t be fighting, and they can’t really teach a man to fight anyway. These assumptions are based on the designation of certain sports as masculine, and have ideological implications. “In
Patriarchal societies, the role of aggressor and protector is assigned to the male, and female participation in sports that involve aggression is seen as an unnatural role reversal" (Lenskyj 1986: 142). The argument follows that men, being “naturally” bigger, stronger, faster than women who are “weaker, smaller, slower” couldn’t possibly learn fighting skills from a female instructor. The examples of power plays women confronted were various, and it is notable that these women successfully resisted the stereotypes, double-standards and challenges to power through non-aggressive means (not playing the power games, knowing they don’t have to prove their ability to anyone) that nonetheless enabled ownership and control of the situation, their bodies and their reactions. Some participants articulated the challenges they faced as female practitioners (chauvinism, being ignored) and at the same time believed that gender doesn’t matter in martial arts contexts—rather, that it shouldn’t matter because practitioners are individuals inside the practice hall, and bodies aren’t to be treated differently because of sex. Even so, each practitioner who recalled instances of differential treatment precisely because of being female found a way of meeting and overcoming the presented challenge, because:

...though the female “body” is already socially positioned within gendered social structures, complete closure does not occur. And it is potentially through her physical agency that a woman learns to resist (or accommodate) the dominant structural constraints circumscribing her physically active, bodily experiences. Doing so enables her to create subjectively meaningful ones within these constraints (McDermott 1996: 20).

EMPOWERING ONESELF

Empowerment may be an overused word, but it is still the most suitable when we are lacking language to express a strengthening experience of body and mind, emotion
and spirit. Through participants’ training, their sense of self developed in strength—not necessarily from domination over an opponent, but from their sense of achievement and their cultivation of trust in their body and whole self as capable, competent. Women enjoyed martial arts for a variety of reasons, and the social element is mentioned more than once as an important feature and benefit. Along the way, motivations changed as their training progressed. Enduring and excelling to the black belt level(s) served as a continual marker and reminder of accomplishment for the women who obtained that goal. Having reached the level of instructor, the women drew great satisfaction from seeing the change martial arts brought about in their students’ self-development. Power in this context is not about dominating an opponent to submission, winning a tournament or fight. Instead:

Empowerment in this alternative discourse, means learning how to move in coordinated and increasingly skillful ways and often how to coordinate your movement with others (Whitson 1994: 360).

Monique Deveaux, in an article addressing feminism and empowerment through a critical reading of Foucault asserts that,

what feminist theory does, and what Foucault does not do, is look closely and critically at the issue of freedom where it concerns women’s responses to structural inequality and male violence...Feminists need to look at the inner processes that condition women’s sense of freedom or choice in addition to external manifestations of power and dominance... Women’s ‘freedom’ does not simply refer to objective possibilities for maneuvering or resisting within a power dynamic but concerns whether a woman feels empowered in her specific context (Deveaux 1994: 234).

Sometimes freedom entails choosing to put oneself through hardship. Tasha emphasized the hard physical and mental challenges she confronted while training; her
opinion almost echoed the “no pain no gain” motto, except that she also underlined the self-knowledge that resulted from pursuing her goals:

*You make yourself go to these harsh conditions in this separate world—willingly!*  
*Skill determines your rank—you tell yourself you can do it. Sometimes you don’t believe it... And you push yourself to defeat your blocks. I end up learning so much about myself—how much I am willing to push and how much hard training I can or should take. [I] overcome fear and learn not to give too much pain to others. And I think it builds mental strength being able to take physical pain—a marker for other feats, a reminder. (Tasha)*

Achieving black belt may serve as a marker for oneself and become part of one’s identity.

Dee illustrates it can also shape behaviour:

*I try harder—I accomplished getting my black belt, and I’ll try anything. I try to do a good job at work and not slack off—anything I do, any other sport, I try and work hard and not say “oh I can’t do it” or, ‘it’s too hard’. I just keep in mind that I did [achieve black belt level]. And sometimes people remind you too. It’s a big part of my life. (Dee)*

Women in this study (and in Wingate 1993), frequently mentioned the social aspects of training as important. Social relationships that developed over the years of hard work were definitely an added feature:

*I have a great love for the art. It’s the best physical conditioning, it gives you flexibility, strength; it challenges you. Getting a black belt is one of the most*
challenging things that I’ve ever done. I mean, it’s hard! It’s not an easy thing to do. I expected it from the minute I walked into karate—I wasn’t ambivalent about where I was going—I saw I was going to black belt and there would be a women’s club eventually, so I knew I would do that, but it was very, very challenging. Also, a lot of my friendships revolve around karate. My strongest women friends are associated with the dojo. There’s a real strong connection that way. (Joyce)

Although it may seem at odds with Leanne’s initial experiences of chauvinism in her karate club, the social element of belonging to the martial arts group continues to be an important factor:

The reasons for continuing—I don’t even know why I first started—it’s something that just becomes a part of your life. It’s become a part of my life. Being part of the organization, you know, the people—the people are part of what has made me stay. It would be like losing part of your family to leave... Our club is really close, too. There’s just so many people I’ve met that I care about, I just couldn’t stop...

The stereotypes of gender she encountered early in her training, instead of depleting her self-esteem, served to build determination ("They think a woman can’t do it? Just watch!"). Ability to endure such hardship made Leanne feel more capable and stronger. Karate was also a physical and mental focus for her during difficult times:

Everyone who knows me, knows I really hate exercise, so that’s not what’s kept me going—but it’s been really good for my self-esteem. At the time I started, I
was going through the end of a rocky marriage. That was the last year of my marriage, the first year of my training, and it was absolutely extraordinary. I don't know that I would have made it through without karate. It gave me something to focus on, and it gave me a feeling of self-worth. I look at some of the white belts now and I see this look of despair that says, "I'll never be able to do it", and I'll say to them, "If I can do it, you can do it". I remember that feeling.

To learn the kata—oh, it was so hard! To learn anything—the combinations for me, still, a lot of them are really hard. I have to take them home and practice and practice so that I don't look like a total dud when I'm at the front of class. Because it is very difficult for me to learn and retain these things. [Karate] has been really good for me to learn patience. And humility. It's done things for my personality: before I wouldn't take criticism as easily, whereas in karate, you have to—you just have to, that's all. And I don't take criticism personally, whereas before I would be reduced to tears. So it's followed through in my life and made me better able to handle situations. It helps me look at myself and see the kinds of things that I have to do to make things work in relationships or anything else. (Leanne)

Claire's motivation changed over the years of karate training. Here she mentioned the challenges of gender (earlier she emphasized that gender didn't matter, all practitioners were martial artists), and then spoke of the rewarding aspect of training when her classes reached students in tangible ways:

At the beginning [the motivation] was, "No, I'm going to prove you guys wrong, martial arts isn't for men, it's for women too", and that's what really kept me
going. Then, when I started helping out teaching, and you watch a grading and see how good they are and how they've grown within the martial arts—whether they were shy and intimidated when they came in, to being up there with self-confidence and believing in themselves; or somebody who was right out of hand, who has calmed down and become somebody who controls their life—that's where the self-satisfaction came in. (Claire)

Flora originally sought kung-fu for health reasons and soon found benefits and bodily reactions that surprised her while practicing this form of exercise:

At first, it was health. I wanted to get better. Then, these exercises felt like more than just physical exercises, you could feel energy when you did them. I wanted to pursue that... I always felt so much better and I felt really different after I trained. I had gone to the odd aerobics class before, but... it felt different than mere physical exercise and endorphins kicking in. I could even see more clearly when I went outside after training. Then it got to the point where I was always wanting to do this, I always felt like coming... Initially health was a major one, and memory, focus and concentration—that really improved. It's hard to put into words, but certainly I've become more assertive, better able to stand up for myself...

She reflects:

The inner feeling I get when I'm doing it, that's what makes me come so much... (Flora)
Mind and body are not separated in practice; both are affected. For Karla, training in karate continued beyond the practice hall, where it filtered into her everyday life:

*When I first started, it was purely physical. And with everything now, the way I handle things, the way I meet problems—instead of backing down and ignoring them and thinking they'll go away, I meet them sort of head on, and deal with it all. To begin with it is just physical, but through the constant training, the self-confidence you get out of it, the discipline, the realization that you can accomplish these things if you set your mind to it—it goes into everyday life. Things you would never try (I would never go out and hit somebody), but you find you can take a hit. It definitely goes into other spheres of your life. The main thing for me was the confidence.* (Karla)

Regina experiences internal aspects of tai chi during her practice:

*For me, I think it just started out the physical, and it becomes such a focus. I mean you have to have intent, focus, and awareness to make everything work, so that become a built-in meditation. You're meditating and you don't even know it. It's really good that way, teaches you to focus without just sitting still, a moving focussed meditation. And then spiritually, I think that with the emotion there, every so often you get a really good feeling, like a connection with yourself or a movement goes really smooth and it was effortless...*(Regina)
Physicality is about embodied experiences, so when we examine how women live their bodies from the inside, in terms of kinesthetic sensations, pleasures, pains, and so on, it may ultimately offer new insights into the ways in which women can be empowered (McDermott 1996: 25).

TRANSFORMATIVE ASPECTS

Participants changed as they reaped an array of benefits through their years of practice. They also saw change in their students. Sometimes it was not only others’ perceptions that changed, but also the participants’ own self-image as different aspects of their personalities came into being through their martial arts training. I have grouped the following excerpts thematically as “transformative” because they include participants’ sources of satisfaction and perceived change—whether it was change in self-perception, stereotypes, or change in philosophy, outlook and approach to life resulting from their continual practice.

Flora knows kung-fu turned her life around and she feels totally different than two years ago. Particular kung-fu exercises (especially with a weapon) brought out characteristics of her personality, not normally exhibited:

*When I have a weapon, usually when I’m doing a pole form, I can’t look at myself in the mirror. I look too intense. I never see that part of myself. And then—the other night, my husband came to pick me up and he’s never seen me practice the weapon. So, I... grabbed my pole and showed him... and asked, “What do you think about that?” And he didn’t like it, he said it was too masculine. But you have to do both—I knew exactly what he meant, and he’s not used to seeing that*
fiery side. I think that's why I like it here, it's a side of myself—some would call it a shadow side, that gets developed, which was probably suppressed all those years I was "Mom". You know, Brownie Mom, and Scout Mom, doing all those things: baking, looking after the house, working and looking after the kids. And it was all necessary. And then suddenly I found this—and—Wham!—I'm full force into it. Sometimes I wish I had discovered it back when I was twenty and had the physical body that I could still do all this, but then I realize when I was twenty I didn't have the time and I wouldn't have done it. I had too many other interests, demands and responsibilities...Strength and power, I guess I've been exploring that side of myself. What I'm doing gives me a strength and makes me feel powerful, and that's part of why I like it. (Flora)

In addition to the benefits Claire has derived through karate training, she recalled the transformation of a particular female student:

It's helped me grow as a person. [Noticing] how I've been able to help others, has really kept me going, seeing the result of helping people. We had a lady who phoned and thanked me for the self-defense courses with her daughter, who had been raped at ten years of age. She had done one of the courses with me, and the first thing [the parents] noticed was that she was finally walking tall again. [This was] nine years later, after the rape. Apparently not only did she walk with her head down and then [after the course] start walking tall, but she actually went out and got a job, left home, and became her own person. They said thank-you because she wouldn't leave home or even go out at night or anything [before]. So
when you hear stories like that—how you've helped somebody, that's what keeps you going. (Claire)

The course provided a means for the girl to rebuild her self-image from a sense of being weak, defenseless and a victim, to a self-contained, capable person in control and with a growing sense of self-esteem, able to make decisions and take hold of the responsibilities in her life.

Tasha does not teach martial arts, but she realized the difference it has made in her life:

I don’t know who I’d be without having done it for so long—it’s made me who I am—body and mind. When I stand, I feel strong—emotionally too. And I think it comes across when people meet me. I’m not very big, but I’m sure they don’t get the impression that I’m a fragile thing. I hold my own. When I look at friends of mine who aren’t that strong mentally, who aren’t assertive at all, I know that the martial arts has something to do with the difference. I’m not overly aggressive, most people don’t know that I take [martial arts] at all, but it is a strength inside that stands up. (Tasha)

Tasha’s physicality is what sets her identity apart from the other women she knows, yet she emphasizes it isn’t size or visible muscularity (as in the case of female bodybuilders) that creates her sense of “holding her own”. She feels, her inward strength, the way she carries herself and projects her confidence makes all the difference. Her assertiveness and mental strength are credited to her persistence in training and has cultivated her inward knowledge that she is a strong, capable woman.
Taekwondo is definitely part of Dee’s identity, and she is also aware of how others may perceive her accomplishments (she is a fourth degree black belt), which in turn, shapes her actions (more than, in her opinion, another sport or exercise):

*Taekwondo is more a lifestyle. If you do aerobics or some other sport, your life is just kind of wild and free, but in martial arts—for myself, people are looking at me. They’re respectful because I learned an art that took such a long time to develop. You have to carry yourself in a certain way... You can’t be out there drinking and doing drugs and wild—I think it tapered my personality, made it more reserved in that sense. Whereas in aerobics, a girl just does what she wants to do, nobody looks at her differently—It kept me more focussed on how to act... You’ve got to have something on your shoulders. People will respect you for that, for doing the art.*

Dee’s identity as a martial artist is like a self-regulating eye on her behaviour. Because of her achievements in taekwondo and the public knowledge and visibility of Dee as an instructor, she feels people look at her expectantly, that she must live up and uphold the image of a respected martial artist. Achievements in taekwondo have brought Dee respect from people, respect that her behaviour must not betray. Other exercise activities such as aerobics, she feels, are free of this demand. There is a sense of honor and responsibility here, “something on your shoulders” which demands proper behaviour of herself as a teacher of the town’s children.

Psychological aspects echoing philosophical components mentioned earlier in the “sap” of the martial arts tree were emphasized by Claire:
It becomes not just the physical, but the personal, the spiritual, the mental development of one's own self. That's what it's all about, the constant search for self-improvement. It paves the way in your whole entire life the way you look and perceive at life in itself... It teaches you a different perspective: those downs aren't necessarily downs... they are making you become a better person because you learn from them, especially when they're mistakes, you learn from them. Instead of saying, “I've had a tough break” you look back and say, “out of this situation, I've learned that this is how to handle it”. Not to dwell, because it's over, done, and you can't change it, so you go onto the next stage. A lot of people live in the past and we have a tendency of remembering the rotten things... Whereas now I look at the positive things... (Claire)

Such a martial arts philosophy doesn't influence every practitioner. And Claire isn't overly optimistic about such a message reaching all of her students:

Very few people really make it through to the end of it where it's not self-defense, it's the mental training and the right attitude you should have towards life: become the best people you can be. Some of them pick it up. (Claire)

Clair believes the right attitude is something that she can teach through her classes: a positive outlook, the philosophy to “try your best”, to believe in oneself and strive to achieve personal goals. She affirms the components of training that motivate her school philosophy and sustain her outlook on martial arts:

I find that it has not only helped me, but I've been able to help a lot of people get through a lot of negativity in their lives, a lot of co-dependency, a lot of abuse to
women. It has really helped them start believing in themselves, and that’s [given me great self-satisfaction]. People who don’t understand martial arts—a lot of people consider it a low-profile sport, they consider it violent, and it’s so totally different. Our philosophy is to become the best person you can, through constant self-improvement: believe in oneself. We teach respect and it’s important to have self-respect. We teach positive self-esteem, self-motivation, goal-setting.

Sometimes you get schools that don’t do that... (Claire)

Dee is very adamant about teaching her students:

What I’ve learned, give them back what I got out of it—because I got so much out of [taekwondo]. [I became] really balanced, focussed, knowing what one wants.

Regina explains how doing tai chi is an introspective experience for both the teacher and the student:

What keeps me going is the teaching, the desire to spread this around so other people can find out if it’s what they want. It instills so much confidence in people, even if they take a short set, they’ve learned something about themselves that they will carry on into whatever else they go into...I think it’s really helped me to be aware of my emotions. Especially the two person exercises (tai chi) and the little bit of fighting that I did in the shorin-ji kempo, it was like I had certain things in my personality that maybe were hidden before, but could come out when you were in a fight. Or—the attitude towards people when you are teaching—you could go along fine and then something happens and then you get irritated. And then you
find out or you start to look into that and you think, “Oh, ok...” What my martial
arts has done is just keep pushing back to me, “take a look at who you are” and
“why are you doing this”? (Regina)

Karla, is forty three years old and has practiced karate for the last ten years. It has
made a considerable difference in her attitude and lifestyle:

For me [karate] is more a way of life. In everything you do: the way you treat
people, the way you treat yourself, your body, everything’s changed. I quit
smoking to join karate, so I’ve become healthier—it’s something that spills over
into the way you live your life... I used to be very introverted I guess—and
[karate] became a way of life so I’m aware of things around me. I’m more
confident and it becomes a way I want to live. I want to be physically fit. I want
to be mentally fit. Emotionally—that no one controls me. I control my own
destiny. The ideals of karate—everybody has their own, but if you look at the
dojo-kun, it talks of the spirit of perseverance, that even under troubled times,
whether it’s karate or everyday life, that you can deal with it and look at both
sides.

Becky is very introspective regarding the ways martial arts practice influences the
spheres of her life —and her martial art manifestations are definitely unique:

It’s odd how training influences my life—I’ll be standing there—let’s say I’m
having an argument, and the person is really drilling me, furious all worked-up—
well I won’t jump into it, most of the time I won’t bite anymore and can distance
myself on purpose, stay calm. Once—I was watching [him] all furious, boiling over at me, and you know it’s rather funny, but I just pictured myself kicking him in the head! I didn’t intend to do it. Just the thought was enough. And it made me laugh in my mind! Because I knew I could do it easily—just Bam! It felt good knowing—it was humorous, not vicious, but you need that break now and then, you know?—especially when somebody’s stomping all over you verbally. Maybe that isn’t the best example, but it’s one that surprised me. It stopped me from slouching anyway! (laughter...) So in a way, that’s applying what you know in martial arts to everyday life: you don’t have to confront someone head-on. You can be soft during a hard attack and it’s probably more effective, it works better than fighting back the same way blow for blow. I try and remember that when I get into arguments now. And winning isn’t everything...In sparring matches, what counts to me is that I’ve tried my best—I “felt the fear and did it anyway”, worked through my own blocks, stayed open—I aspire to that attitude in those verbal conflicts I get into all the time. (Becky)

Becky stated she often had verbal arguments with her partner. The fights were never physical, but they were long and exhausting mentally and emotionally when she argued energetically and loudly back and forth, not giving an inch, insisting on continuing, maintaining her ground until one of them admitted the other was right, or that their opinion was incorrect, or whatever the argument was. But Becky realizes now that she doesn’t have to meet a hard verbal attack with a hard counterattack. Although her visualization (the kick to the head) is not passive, this humorous outlet (in her mind)
reasserted her strength without physical exhibition. Moreover, she credits her ability to "give and take", to not worry about winning an argument all the time, to her training in sparring exercises. Sparring exercises don't focus on the actual winning, but the placement of the kicks and blocks, or the learning about how your partner moves; it trains you to recognize an attack and think of the various ways of responding, and the results that your movements will achieve. Such exercises changed Becky's perspective on verbal "attacks".

Karla ascribed karate practice as spilling over into the way she lives her life, instilling confidence, becoming healthier and better fit mentally and emotionally so that she "controls her own destiny". Regina felt the internal benefits (emotional awareness, confidence and focus) that tai chi and aikido made in her life and she wants to spread this to her students so that they too may feed their introspection and have hidden things in their personality rise to the surface.

In order for feminist reconstructions of sporting and physical practices to have a broader effect,

... popular understandings of empowerment and the powerful body must move away from the traditional masculine preoccupation with force and domination toward a new emphasis in personal experiences of skill and pleasure in motion and a sharing of these experiences with others (Whitson 1994:363).

Therefore, we might learn from these women martial artists' experiences taken from the heart of combative activity. Although one might expect their articulations to be all about physical domination and submission of another person, they instead emphasized the internal mastery and growth of self as equally important and inseparable from their physical experience and development.
THE ROLLING PIN: TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Last year, when my grandmother, who makes amazingly delicious apple pie, gave me a heavy, solid marble rolling pin for Christmas, I was elated—but she didn’t sense that my delight stemmed from a somewhat unconventional motive. You see, I have yet to use the marble pin for pastry; it makes an excellent conditioning tool for my shins. Until then, I had been rolling up newspapers with duct tape and methodically hitting the front of my legs, but now I could simply and smoothly roll the marble pin down the length of my shins to slowly “kill nerve endings”—in order to eventually kick and block harder with less pain, using my toughened shins! Surely, this isn’t what Grandma intended, and admittedly, I have neglected to inform her of exactly how I use my rolling pin—but she’s nonetheless happy to know “I use it all the time”, even if it is with a great twist on a symbolically feminine kitchen tool.

In this section I delve into “the trade” of martial arts (with a couple of boxing examples), and some “tools”—media stereotypes, expectations and assumptions that surround (or construct) the engaged, active, female body. Like my rolling pin, sometimes the conventionally “feminine” image is twisted for a new purpose.

Martial arts are not immune from commercialization. Ideally, far removed from the fashionable trends of the fitness world and the commodification of sport (Featherstone 1982: 18-73), traditional martial arts practice is not concerned with how one looks, but whether one is moving in awareness of one’s body and using the body, mind and spirit to full capacity. As such, there is not an explicit “feminization of fitness” (Theberge 1987: 183) taking place wherein women are targeted buyers of workout fashions and products
for bodies in consumer culture, because most martial artists are men. Nor is there an obvious marketing campaign that uses female sexuality to sell martial arts classes—or is there? Martial arts attire, accessories, equipment, body products (protein powders, energy food and drink, recovery remedies, etc.) are marketed through magazine photos and features, at booths in competitions, retail outlets and through the Internet. Many female models in these advertisements are not martial artists, although they may be (un)dressed for the part. Women martial artists in glossy martial arts magazines are statically posed—typically in stretch positions with immaculate hair, make-up and attire. Most newsstand martial arts magazines follow conventions that sexualize images of females and female athletes with photos that emphasize heterosexual attractiveness, and submissive or passive body positions. Rarely printed are dynamic action photographs of females training. Christine Bannon-Rodriguez (a world Karate Champion and Black Belt Hall of Fame personage) had to compile her own press kit photos that demonstrated her strength and power “so often denied by the media’s portrayal of the woman athlete” (Cohen 1993: 175).

The appeal to the ideal body type that underlines aesthetics over athleticism is prevalent in martial arts, as in other sport marketing spheres. Bridges between martial arts and fitness fads exist in the new phenomena of “fitness taekwondo”, “fitness kickboxing” and “boxercise”, with an emphasis on toning, body shaping and cardiovascular workout over defense and attack situations or sparring. These hybrid (and some say watered-down) activities arise due to the financial benefits; often martial arts instructors provide these recreational classes in order to keep their clubs afloat, by appealing to a wider public spectrum, and a larger purse. Boxercise may trivialize the sporting
experience of boxing by bringing it into the sexual marketplace (notice the sexy billboard advertisements of Ron Zalko) rather than developing athletics in boxing as a sport. However, just as aerobics may be an empowering activity for many people and cannot be dismissed despite the commercial and sexual undertones (Markula 1995: 424), fitness-focussed martial arts classes are similarly popular, appeal to a wider public sector and share a focus on sculpting a body (which may indeed empower individuals in the process).

Boxercise is a commodity that targets women to get the great workout that boxing entails (complete with a new line of exercise equipment and clothes), without the physical contact of hitting or being hit. Since the main marketing emphasis is on toning, firming and beautifying (hard-body) features, this exercise becomes an acceptably feminine activity, since it is safely devoid of the “terror” of females hitting each other and displaying aggression. This could become a stepping stone to more vigorous participation (or at least awareness) of females in boxing; through imitation and simulation, boxing might become less feared, less foreign, and perhaps more understood.

However, boxercise maintains a safe distance from “masculine” boxing through non-aggressiveness, non-competitiveness, the use of music to soften the activity and the isolation or objectification of body parts that are “sculpted into shape”. Together this reaffirms the dominant hegemony that, like aerobics (and even female bodybuilding, which enforces a “safely feminine” aesthetic) sells and reaffirms a certain female sexuality, physicality and all of its associated diet regimes, food, fashion, beauty aids and social behaviour (MacNeill 1994: 273).
In contrast, women who truly box do not meet such mainstream acceptance. Female boxers are often viewed as descending into the world of male brutality. Fighting is seen as an unnatural and ugly activity for women to partake. Even the book, A Woman's Guide to Martial Arts (Cardoza 1996) perpetuates the idea that fighting is not natural for women. The author contributes to a certain naturalization of physicality because she emphasizes the "biggest fear: sparring" and underlines the potential difficulties and unpleasant experiences of learning to spar for women—all the while accepting wider cultural norms that define feminine behaviour as less aggressive and more fearful of getting hurt. She gives a mere passing reference to exceptional women who visibly compete in tournaments and enjoy sparring.

The idea that fighting is unnatural for all women is a biologically essentialist idea. Here is an example from anthropological literature: despite years of critique from feminist anthropologists, it took a long time for "man the hunter" syndrome in anthropological projections (where woman the gatherer was cave-wife at home cooking, tending children and the hearth, while the boys were off on a hunting trip for days or weeks at a time), to finally de-escalate. Popular journals are finally recognizing this bias and depicting strong, capable women in their projections into the past, so that we can finally forget the image of passive little "cave-mates". The women were out hunting and slaughtering and getting food on the table (Discover, April 1998, cover story).

In sporting spheres, this "active male and passive female" bias persists, and translates into constructed, cultural expectations of physicality: namely, females are disadvantaged, weaker, less mobile and inferior. Biomedical and sport scientists historically have emphasized and assumed the biological inferiority of women—women
were claimed as less capable than men in vigorous, aggressive and endurance sports, and as more prone to injury, particularly reproductive injury. Patricia Vertinsky's research on women's health and exercise in the 19th century reveals how physicians' biological and medical understanding and attitude towards exercise (seen as unnatural) and women (seen as inherently weak) was a powerful way of controlling women's reproductive, sexual and sport experiences (Vertinsky 1994: 63-82).

The pattern of inferiority is perpetuated today by means of media representations that continue to focus on sex differences and construct women as unnatural athletes, or female athletes as unnatural women. (Birrel & Theberge 1994: 347). Susan Birrell and Nancy Theberge examined how media representation controls the image of female athletes and exerts ideological control through processes that include:

1) the underrepresentation of women athletes in the media and thus their "symbolic annihilation"
2) the trivialization and marginalization of women athletes
3) the objectification and sexualization or, more properly, the heterosexuality of women athletes
4) the hidden discourse of homophobia in sport
5) the depiction of women's involvement in sport as tragic
6) the construction of women as unnatural athletes and of female athletes as unnatural women (Birrel & Theberge 1994: 347)

Mediated images of female athletes make gender difference and female inferiority appear natural. These gender beliefs reinforce socially acceptable sports for women that demand aesthetic qualities—despite all of the new sporting opportunities for women, it remains "inappropriate" for women to engage in contests in which: the resistance of the opponent is overcome by bodily contact; the resistance of a heavy object is overcome by direct application of bodily force; the body is projected into or through space over long distances or for extended periods of time (Gill 1994: 271).
But women’s meanings of discursive practices (Hall 1985: 59) must be understood. Unfortunately, empirical research on women’s experiences in previously male-dominated sports remains limited (Young & White 1995: 48). This research is needed, because what may seem a brutal and violent descent into male sporting activities for one observer or analyst may be experienced and expressed in an entirely distinct mode by a female participant. For example, on CBC Radio One (September 15, 10:15am, 1997), Rachel Gieza, a freelance contributor from Toronto submitted her story (about joining a boxing club) from which I took notes. She noted: “Women’s boxing is not about being a victim, it is about fighting back, it is an antidote to fear”. Gieza found that through boxing, she works through her fear of fighting and discovers she “knows she can take this”, knows she can stay calm, take pain and punches, and also give them: “Aggression, fighting ability, it’s a side that lies dormant in women...The subversive part of boxing—most don’t like to see women boxing because they feel pity for the woman who gets hit and feel terror of the woman who hits.” Gieza yearns to use her skills at times—not to back down, to “pop” someone who hassles her. She recognizes such conscious thoughts. But she hasn’t used it outside the gym.

*Overcoming the fear of hitting someone is greater for women than the fear of getting hit themselves. They don’t want to hurt someone. But the vulnerability is emotional, not physical—it is terrifying to find that one enjoys hitting, being strong and fighting!*

Gieza found she enjoyed punching another person, learning to use her whole weight of her body behind the punches, sinking it in. “*Learning to fight is the most subjective activity: it is just you alone. You must use your body to act. Boxing gives me a sense of*
self as active, not reactive. It gives me that ability to find my strength and voice.” (Gieza 1998).

In contrast to this first person description of what it feels like to learn how to box, the author of Boxing and Society: An International Analysis (that devotes an entire two pages to female boxing) reports women’s boxing as very controversial:

Whether or not this movement in the direction of sexual equality represents a progressive movement in civilization or merely offers women an opportunity to share in the uncivilized barbarity of men is an issue which requires future debate (Sugden 1996: 194).

Violent, aggressive crime so prevalently reported in the media (with the majority of perpetrators being male) makes the idea of females fighting and “cultivating” aggressive behaviour particularly unfavourable. Perhaps this is partly because women are still implicitly and historically deemed the “saviors” of human nature, wherein female morality is expected to balance male temper and aggression with compassionate nurturing. But such ideas are steeped in essentialist beliefs of female and male having exclusive, dichotomous, and static traits. Instead of women’s appearance in traditionally male sporting spheres loosening this association of innate traits with two sexes (in opposition) it only heightens fear. Consequently, we question if women are becoming more violent and are co-opted into male physical power struggles.

Women’s participation in combative sports may also be a threat to “the male preserve of sport” (Dunning 1994)—fighting somehow loses its manliness when women skillfully participate. The flip side of this perspective, is that women lose their femininity whilst participating in combative sports.
During an interview, one participant argued that female martial artists can be excellent black belts, excellent fighters, and "still be feminine":

_Even though you're a woman, you don't have to prove you're strong and tough. You don't have to be you know, butchy, to do taekwondo. You're feminine outside, and when you're inside you do what you have to do in the gym, train hard, and outside you're more feminine, you don't have to be tough and rough._

_(Dee)_

I wondered why she needed to emphasize this—why underline that females can be as good as males in martial arts and still be feminine, as though the two were in contrast? Proving the femininity of female athletes is a convention that has a lengthy history in sporting practices and research. When research in the 1960's focussed on gender role identification, it questioned whether sport competition "masculinized" female participants psychologically or behaviourally and the assumption was that athleticism and femininity were (socially and physically) in opposition (Hall 1996:18). Though analyses have changed, research that focusses on deviance, cross-sex types and gender role orientations continue, despite critiques that such perspectives perpetuate an ideology of two (and only two) sex "roles" in opposition. I think it is understandable that women are (still) defensive regarding their sport and their femininity—they continue to feel the need to explain their position and action, due to the prevalence of such role conflict ideology. It is seemingly necessary to emphasize that a female can be an athlete, and (still) feminine—as though the two were in opposition—because excellent female athletes, if not exhibiting overtly feminine physical features (heterosexually attractive appearance,
mannerism, clothing) have traditionally been stigmatized as homosexual, especially if their area of expertise is a nontraditional sport for women. Homophobia pressures all women to conform to a dominant image of feminine athleticism:

Homophobia acts as a means of social control, which not only keeps women out of the male preserve of sport but also invokes a fear of association that separates women from one another, effectively undercutting the potential for female solidarity and empowerment (Theberge and Birrel 1994: 338).

Early women in sports had to maintain respectability by having proper attire, only mildly exerting themselves and not appearing “rompish” or aggressive. For example, the early formal physical education of girls at public schools and colleges taught teamwork, self-control, fortitude and persistence in working together—so long as it was without stressful anxiety or loss of female decorum in serious sporting activity (Vertinsky 1994: 76). Susan Kahn’s work (1994) explores the history of how gender and sexuality have been culturally constructed within and through twentieth-century women’s sport. Early texts provide us with clues to the gendered attitudes surrounding proper martial arts purposes for women. For example, one of the “bibles” of martial arts, This is Karate by Mas Oyama (founder of Kyokushinkai), illustrates self defense tactics for women (the use of an umbrella, handbag, and defenses possible while in a skirt and heels). Karate is proclaimed as beneficial for women because it will enhance grace, poise, posture and beauty.

Today’s martial arts prospects go further, encouraging women to push their limits and surpass social and personal expectations, experiencing coordination, strength, speed, power, agility, physical contact, perseverance and calmness in the face of challenge. Enabling women’s bodies and minds to perfect fighting skills is a drastic change from the
early contexts of female physical educators who sought to "correct the female form and provide appropriate discipline to fit women better in their work and home" (Vertinsky 1994: 16). Then again, if we consider domestic violence, we see fighting skills are a modern educational response that does provide appropriate physical discipline to fit and better equip modern women in their homes. Instead of learning how to set a correct table for dinner, today she may learn how to use those household items in defense from home invasions or physical abusers within her domestic scene.

But perceptions of appropriate female activity and sporting capacity are still bound to the expectation that if women dare to participate in non-traditional conduct (masculine labeled activity), they must compensate for this "unfeminine act" with enough historically acceptable feminine traits to counterbalance—else risk non-acceptance into the (heterosexual) gender relations of power. Female fighters must balance athletic fighting ability with enough feminine traits the same way female bodybuilders do: they must not look too masculine—equated with muscularity, nor be "butchy"—one must evoke heterosexual connotations, but rather, maintain a "nice and feminine" image (Holmlund 1994). Otherwise, they may not win the competition or may not gain sponsorship to big ring events. These fascinating constructions of gender take place and are articulated inside the fighting ring (where females may be relegated as "emotional" fighters) and outside the ring (the surrounding sports commentary and judgments) wherein gender becomes publicly encoded and enforced.

For instance, the quality and quantity of women's sport coverage is scant and often serves to "denigrate and trivialize women's sporting experience" (Theberge 1994: 182). Researchers have scrutinized gender stereotyping in televised sport (Duncan
and reported a distinct pattern of women's sport as under-represented, having a poor quality of production, containing trivialized coverage (versus men's coverage as high quantity, quality and framed as dramatic spectacle) and the broadcasters of women's sport tended to infantalize and demean women athletes (and female spectators).

I can't forget the commentary of two male sportscasters who covered a women's boxing match on television: while the women were exchanging powerful blows, the commentators snickered about one female fighter's "bad hair day" as her braid came rapidly apart each time her opponent struck her head. September 10, 1997 TNN coverage of the "Coalminer's daughter" (a currently popular female fighter, always dressed in pink) who is known more by this name than her own—yet another example of naming practices which "publicly diminish females as athletes by representing them as diminutive forms of male athletics" (Eitzen & Baca Zinn 1989: 349)—referred to the fighters as good female athletes, rather than "girls"—but the two male commentators repetitively pronounced that the two women were "really such nice people" and exclaimed, "It's amazing to see two women as nice and feminine as they are outside the ring...so war-like inside". Although they were obviously aggressive and powerful inside the ring, they were described as "very feminine and pleasant on the street—you would never know they were fighters...It is hard to believe it is the same two women".

Of course, sports watchers do individually interpret the media coverage they hear, but when commentary is framed in a way that emphasizes the female athlete fulfilling traditional female gender roles (wife, mother, femininity), this dialogue guides the audience's interpretation (MacNeill 1994: 280). Judging from such sport commentary, we
understand importance is designated to female boxers being nice and feminine in real life. Athletic activity inside the ring is designated as outside the realm of femininity. This is deemed acceptable so long as it is known that when the gloves are unlaced, the fighters can successfully don the correct gender robes—and roles. Thus, part of the commentary included how many children the female fighters had and how supportive their husbands were. (These details are interesting; however, I have yet to hear the equivalent questions and coverage of male fighters. How do they juggle kids’ school schedules with training, and how much work and support do their wives contribute towards their husbands’ fighting career?) In parallel, we might ask if a male boxer should be a gentleman outside the ring? (Of course, the reputation of Mike Tyson answers—his public masculinity may well have been reinforced by sexual assault charges, and the consequent jail term, which served to enhance his marketability as a fighter.).

In sum:

Media coverage of sport today does not simply exclude and ignore women, trivialize or marginalize women, deathleticize or deny power to women; it constructs women and men and the difference between the two in such a way as to present gender differences as an important and natural feature of social life. Moreover, it constructs women who transgress the boundaries as “unnatural” and thus “denatures” them as athletes and women (Birrell & Theberge 1994: 354).

Media representations of women in sport thus can be seen as ideological sites for the production and reproduction of relations of gender that undermine women and privilege men through reference to the “natural” differences between them. Because sport is a physical activity that features apparently unassailable biological and physiological differences between the sexes, it works as a natural site for the production of such relations (Birrel & Theberge 1994: 356).

The internet of course, is a new and vibrant medium where discussions about women and sport take on, or lose a whole new dimension. Identities of gender and
sexuality can be hidden, emphasized, or disguised. Commonly, in women’s forums the appearance of the devil’s advocate materializes: the person who interrupts women talking about their favourite sport or training technique, to claim that “women shouldn’t be doing sports. They should wear high heels, stay at home and leave sports for men”. Fortunately, everyone generally ignores the intruder and hopes “he” goes away. In the martial arts forum, this materializes as “women can’t fight” arguments and propositions for women readers to fight with male challengers who don’t believe women can fight effectively at all, that they are “all talk”. (see e.g. Pleiades Locker Room site.)

Although ads for karate classes no longer depict a man wearing the traditional martial arts uniform instructing a woman clad in leotards (Lenskyj 1986: 132), nowadays the equivalent portrayal of the beautiful female in a sports bra, boxing shorts and big, new boxing gloves is used to draw attention. Sexuality of female athletes is still emphasized, partially to make up for their traditionally unfeminine behaviour of exerting themselves through manly exercise, especially aggressive contact sports, and partially to exploit sexual images that will generate attention and money. The sexuality exploited of course, is a heterosexuality. Women are told not to worry, they won’t get “big and bulky”, but will tone and build sexy arm muscles, just as the expert advice in the early 1970’s emphasized the enhancement of femininity through sport and reassured women that their calf muscles would not become bulky through jogging (Lenskyj 1986: 104). When the aesthetics of femininity are constantly emphasized when talking about sport, the strength-related dimension of women’s sport is lost. “When women’s sport is limited to aesthetically pleasing ‘feminine activities’, it perpetuates the deceptive emphasis on femininity as beauty, masking its ties to female subordination ...it says that muscles,
aggressiveness and competitiveness are neither feminine nor beautiful in a woman" (Kahn 1994: 224). To actively pursue a so-called masculine sport is to attract a stigma of the mannish athlete. Susan Kahn, in her book, Coming on Strong, analyzes gender and sexuality that both suppressed and constructed the changing female athlete in twentieth century women’s sport. She explains how fear of lesbianism has operated for decades to police women’s behaviour within the world of sport.

Female athletes and their supporters accurately perceive that acceptance and rewards depend on a willingness to prove their heterosexuality or deny their homosexuality. Whereas in the past, all women athletes were viewed as stepping over a border into masculine terrain, today that boundary line has shifted. Women can compete, even excel in sports as long as they demonstrate that they are sexually interested in and accessible to men. Anything short of compliance, however, marks an athlete as masculine and sexually aberrant. (Kahn 1994: 268).

The persistent stereotype of the mannish lesbian keeps alive the masculine symbolism of sport, “while within athletic culture lesbian athletes are shunned as secretive figures whose dangerous sexuality could topple all the painstakingly won achievements of women’s sport” (Kahn 1994: 268).

BLACK BELT “BARBIE” (WHAT A DRAG!)

Hegemonic processes of control (such as the manipulation and presentation of female athletes in the media) are never total. However, rather than actively challenging, resisting or transforming the dominant ideologies that constrain women’s bodies and images in sport, some female athletes choose to exploit gender relations.

At an open martial arts tournament, several years ago, I was at the registration desk and noticed prominent posters and pamphlets featuring a female competitor. The flyers contained fan mail addresses (for $25 U.S. you could be on a mailing list), and a
series of colour pin-up style photos of the young, white, blonde, tanned woman in
different martial arts outfits (non-traditional, flashy pants, tops, colours). She was also
featured in shorts, sequined pants, gym gear, and a mini-dress while getting out of a
limousine. “What’s all this?” I asked myself. I was, admittedly (since I am writing in the
“confessional” ethnographic vein [VanMaanen 1985]), skeptical. Wasn’t this just the kind
of activity that perpetuated females being looked upon as merely sexy bodies? Wasn’t this
trivializing the techniques and talents of hardworking, serious female athletes (not to
mention the tradition and purpose of martial arts) into shiny pin-up poster girls, devoid of
depicted martial arts skill?

Then, the reflexive critic who monitors reactions piped up: be wary of yielding too
readily to the perspective of women “not having their consciousness raised”, of “buying
into” and perpetuating the very gender relations that constrain women. Instead, one must
acknowledge the possibility of resistance in every act, that power infiltrates through every
capillary, she may not be a passive dupe of male hegemony, blindly accepting gender
constraints. What if I looked at this young woman as an active agent? Couldn’t I view
her as being very aware, conscious and clearly acting on and using those very cultural
constraints, those very gender constructs, to her own advantage in order to get herself
ahead?

She was very successful at this tournament. She knew the rules of competition
and entered multiple divisions (Hard, Soft, Traditional, Creative, Weapons, Korean,
Okinawan), obtained as many points as possible each year by attending all the “triple A”
(highly rated) tournaments. While she was reapplying make-up in the washroom between
divisions, I spoke with her and learned she was attending acting school in California,
hoping to generate enough publicity and notoriety through the PanAmerican circuit so as to gain write-ups in select martial arts magazines and ultimately leap into the movie industry. Knowing this, her marketing strategies made sense: she would never get her foot in the door of the male dominant film industry by actively challenging the (hetero)sexual gender expectations within the sports and movie scenes. She could not bite the hand that feeds her into the industry; this was her leg up—and if she had to display that leg to get over the hurdles, so be it! It was taking a lot of time, effort and money, but she was actively marketing herself for success, spending a fortune traveling to tournaments, purchasing all the right clothes for each division (special tye-dyed gis) and entering every division (at $35 each)—with the exception of fighting divisions, because of the physical injury risk. Small successes were appearing—she had two European magazine features to date, and more were pending.

Active agent, she definitely was: she knew her reasons for pursuing martial arts, knew the procedure for succeeding in her particular tournament field, and may very well achieve her movie industry goal. Technically, she was a very proficient competitor and won most of her divisions—in fact, most of the male judges seem to have found her more than acceptable, judging from the high scores. Did it matter whether she bought into, created, or perpetuated stereotypes and power relations of gender by giving out sexy pin-ups, wearing lipstick, make-up, flashy “designer” gis and turning the tournament into a fashion show? After all, she used the open circuit for exposure towards her own ends as equally as the tournament organizers used her to draw crowds.

As with female bodybuilders, female martial artists who choose to delve into the open circuit scene may well have to balance any traditionally “unfeminine” physicality
(strength, muscles, ability to kick and punch) with more readily acceptable conceptions of
femininity—even "hyperfeminine" images (Mansfield and McGinn 1993: 49). "Barbie"
in a black belt has an advantage: sexiness sells.

In an alternate reading, I must attend to the fact that this kind of exposure does
trivialize women’s activity in the martial arts domain, equating females with fashion and
aesthetics, where images of sexiness dominate over their technical skill, and proficiency
seems but a garnish to an entertaining feast for the (male) gaze. No gender relations were
challenged because the image of femininity constructed through the clothing, make-up,
and photographs maintained dominant gender expectations and compensated for any
"unfeminine" martial ability that may otherwise have been transformative.

Nonetheless, "Barbie" is friendly, colourful, encouraging and interactive—she is
like the Pink PowerRanger, non-intimidating and approachable. Young boys and girls are
eager to take her photo, get their pamphlet signed, and even join her fan club. In short,
she is accessible: a young girl may not so freely approach a twenty-five year old male
competitor. Visibility, accessibility and acceptability go a long way towards becoming a
role model. She is the equivalent of the martial arts-world "Spice-girl"—an icon of "girl
power" that from the outside appears as an empty slogan, undermining power in a girl by
reifying an aesthetic, commercial femininity: power in a girl is counterbalanced and
accompanied with frills and fashion. Concurrently, young female fans do express modern
articulations of "girl power" relating to their lives and inspired by Spice Girls, so the
perception of fans, how girls feel, is equally important.

During this tournament, another female competitor lamented the innovations
taking place in the U.S.A. (and now Canadian) context of martial arts, particularly the
creative divisions with music and costumes. She professed to be of the “traditional” school, where such accessories (flashy costumes, rock music) are not appropriate to martial arts. At present, traditional does not translate into “win” at particular tournaments where image and points are important. Those who call such open tournaments a “circus” choose only to attend the officially sanctioned events of their particular martial arts style, where strict rules of conduct and attire adhere to both sexes.

Jumping away from the stereotypically feminine Barbie black belt image, I will retell a stigmatizing example of gender politics, told to me by a male martial arts instructor and judge, concerning a female competitor in a kata division. The woman performed “sanchin no kata”, a very controlled, powerful deep-breathing kata, where all the muscles in the body, especially the chest, abdomen, biceps, arms, legs and pelvis, are alternately relaxed and contracted, tensed and released, while breathing is forcefully inhaled and exhaled. In some styles, it is traditionally done without a shirt to exhibit those working muscles more clearly. Of course, this usually isn’t the norm for women, given our cultural context and attitude towards breasts. However, this female competitor chose to do the kata as the male competitors did—topless. According to this informant, “this totally turned off” the spectators, because she was “a big dyke with ugly tits”. I regret repeating his vulgarity, but could the (hetero)sexualization of an athletically active female body be more concise? Needless-to-say, the woman didn’t win the division. And her technique and skill as a martial artist performing this very difficult kata went unmentioned because the storyteller, like the judges, could not get past the underlying sexual and aesthetic demands of the female athlete. Would she have “won” if she were “Barbie” in a black belt?
In this section, I wanted to illustrate that there is more taking place in sports contexts of martial arts (especially in competitive contexts) than the talents and techniques of practitioners. The socialized expectations of gender and the inherent relations of power construct feminine aesthetics, movement, and bodies. Gender ideology and historical habit dictate how women in sports are judged, supported, or condemned. Equality of opportunity and equal access of women in sport does not ensure "equity" in these areas. As more female martial artists enter the upper echelon of judging in the tournament realm, the bias may change. The latter female kata competitor's solo acts, though originally told to me in a disapproving manner, may in contrast, be read as a courageous act of resistance. Judges and spectators reacted. Most likely, those who watched did not get past their initial feelings of discomfort and anger to question their disrupted expectations on a deeper level. And although the final judgments rendered her "unsuccessful", the very act of competing on par with the males without a shirt magnified unequal gender expectations and made explicit some invisible sporting criteria.

FIGHTING FEMALES: COMBAT AND COMPETITION

[Now] we can begin to see why combative sports and aggressive players have been celebrated among many men. The devaluation of physical work and the ascendancy of intellectual and interpersonal skills in a service and information society, the entry of women into many workplaces and the increasing economic independence of women, and the gradual willingness of the law to intervene in domestic violence: All of these contribute to the erosion of a world in which a powerful male body could translate into social power. Body contact sports are now one of the few areas of public life in which force and intimidation are still allowed to triumph, where men who love to hit can still enjoy doing so, and others will celebrate their toughness and their willingness to pay the price (Whitson 1994: 359).
David Whitson analyzed the "embodiment of gender: discipline, domination and empowerment" (1994: 353) and described the traditionally masculine way of embodying power. Power here means the capacity to achieve one's ends by force if necessary, in the face of opposition. His quote explains why there is such controversy over women entering the "last bastion" of male sports. What of the women who take part in such a sporting sphere? They are seen as a threat to the "male preserve" of sport, but are they adopting values of force, intimidation, toughness and a "willingness to pay the price"?

Women who take part in contact sports are not just docile bodies taking part in male sporting culture. It is important to pay attention to the activities that women find empowering—no matter what the activity is, no matter how aggressive, seemingly violent or male hegemonic the overtones may be, these areas can be sites of resistance where there is a subverting of cultural constraints. We must pay attention to the processes of empowerment and women's specific instances and experiences of power, even if, especially if, the activity appears very "un-feminist". "Feminists need to look at the inner processes that condition women's sense of freedom or choice in addition to external manifestations of power and dominance" (Deveaux 1994: 234). Subtleties of women's agency and expression take place within contexts that seem highly unlikely. If women find competition, contact and combat as empowering experiences for a multitude of reasons, we should look closely at those reasons, think twice about designating fighting arts as anti-feminist and male hegemonic sports. These activities provide various women ways of knowing their bodies, minds and wills as strong, capable and powerful. In these areas, the complex ways gender is constructed or subverted is most interesting—in how women feel about their bodies, reactions and movements.
Simultaneously, it is important not to exaggerate:

...although it may be useful to celebrate the spirit of such actions [resistant practices in sport], it is important not to romanticize them, for resistance is not transformation...resistance is never wholly successful, nor does it always, or even often, result in transformation” (Birrell and Theberge 1994: 371).

Full contact martial arts practice can take place in an atmosphere that doesn’t promote force, intimidation, toughness and a willingness to pay the price. Injury risk in Muay-Thai boxing is undoubted—this is enough to shy most people away from participation, so instructor “LaTanya”, was ecstatic about teaching a group of female martial arts enthusiasts at the Pacific Association of Women Martial Artists summer session in Oahu, August 1997. Women in this class caught on quickly, and soon we were bruising and bashing each other with hip thrusts, knee jabs, thigh gauges, elbow strikes, neck grabs and kicks and punches of all angles—nothing fancy or flashy, just effective. Such classes weren’t for everyone, but some women genuinely loved to learn and practice these aggressive fighting skills, especially in such a positive and supportive environment. Practice was not done in the spirit of domination. Partners helped each other get the correct moves, informed each other which movements were working and which were not, and then experimented with why some techniques were better than others. Women tapped out during a choke (at their personal pain threshold), acknowledged good strikes and kicks and took turns being both aggressor and target. By the end of the weekend sessions, a friendly “hug-good-bye” was always accompanied by a knee thrust to the thigh for good measure. In this all female context, heavy contact activity was accomplished with an “ethic of care”.

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In contrast, competitive spheres have the potential to discredit female fighting and fighters. Last year, at a fighting competition, for good luck and as advice against my competitor, I was told by a male karateka to “kick her in the nuts”. Despite my competitor being female, attractive, tall, blond and athletic, she was so well built that many males said she “looked like a man”. Additionally, she was a very good fighter—which in sum, elicited commentary that questioned her sex and sexuality. Women’s sport participation is stigmatized by the “lesbian label”, and when female athletes are accused of being male or masculine. Homosexuality shouldn’t be a stigma. However, “lesbian” is used in this (male-hegemonic heterosexist) context as a derogatory label. Ironically, female fighters are simultaneously complimented for transcending their gender: “they fought like men”, meaning they were powerful, strong, fierce, competitive and highly skilled.

A male instructor of a national team warned me during tournament training that women’s fighting divisions

*unfortunately turn into a brawl—they get very emotional. They try to fight like men, but women should really be better fighters, technically—women’s fighting should be beautiful to watch because they are usually good technicians and have good stretch and ability. Too often this gets thrown out the window and it turns into an ugly brawl (male sensei **)*

An old equation exists in the backdrop here, where women equal emotion, chaos, and men equal aggression, discipline (order). We also have the additional factor of aesthetics: women shouldn’t look like men, women shouldn’t look like men fighting—
women shouldn’t be fighting! The sum of the equation is that women should be beautiful, and their fights should be clean and technical, illustrative of their flexibility and grace. Forget the fact that both sexes can easily abandon control and clear technique in the wave of adrenaline during a match and sacrifice their focus and strategy. The only difference is that for men, this often is described as overly aggressive, and for women this is described as an emotional, undisciplined “cat-fight”.

Worries about women involved in contact sports persist. Although the same precautions and worries should arise with male participation, there is a myth that contact sports pose a greater risk for women than men. There is a continuity between current biomedical concerns regarding modern female athletes and the warnings of 19th century physicians, especially concerning amenorrheic conditions (Lenskyj 1986), but we must be cautious that such research doesn’t serve as a means of controlling women’s sexual, reproductive and sport experiences and limit our understanding of women’s abilities (Costca & Guthrie 1994: 140). Birrel and Theberge (1994: 341) discuss the ideological control of women in sport, a site where the struggle over control of women through control of women’s bodies can be publicly observed. Even today, “Fears that women may lose their reproductive abilities account for both explicit and implicit restrictions on female involvement” (Birrel and Theberge 1994: 345). Yet, “warnings regarding the vulnerability of the female body in contact sports are not well founded and rarely consider the social construction of such vulnerability” (Costca & Guthrie 1994: 140).

When relative (not absolute) measures are used, measuring strength in relation to body mass and composition, gender differences in strength are significantly reduced (Freedson1994: 177). Lower body strength of women actually is greater than male lower
body strength. Socio-cultural factors explain many differences in upper body strength—women don’t train their upper bodies as much as men and therefore tend to be weaker, but this is not an inherent physical incapability. We must “examine the social messages behind supposed biomedical facts” (Costca & Guthrie 1994: 140). If women automatically believe in these social messages, the ideology that their bodies and physical capabilities are inferior compared to male bodies (and that this is natural, there is nothing they can do about it), this can curb women’s physical potential and personal expectations may lower. Dangerously, they may render themselves a victim immediately when confronted by a male aggressor.

Karla, who found martial arts to be personally empowering because of the confidence she gained, discovered she was her own person—“whereas before, whatever my husband said, went”. Recalling her first experiences learning how to fight in karate class, it may seem that Karla embraces the “no pain no gain” mentality of dominant sport, especially since she is involved with Kyokushin karate, a full contact martial art with “knock-down” tournament rules. But Karla discovered she loved fighting, she loved to spar—it was with reluctance that she “retired” from fighting in tournaments at age thirty-five. She believes training is equally hard for males and females in Kyokushin karate—“I think it takes a special—not kind of woman, but a special mentality to do Kyokushin because of the contact”, and she says perseverance is the key.

At the very start, it was a little awkward because I had never hit anyone before. But I love it. I really don’t have a problem with that. Mind you, the first time I got punched in the face, I had a problem with that! (laughs) I remember the second class I was there, I got punched in the face and I wanted to “become a
woman” and just go cry in the bathroom, but I wasn’t allowed. I had to finish the fight and then go get cleaned up. Which, again, nothing happened: I didn’t die; I really wasn’t hurt. So it instilled this: “I can do this; I can take this and still keep standing”. But as far as kumite goes, I think it’s individual. I think a lot of women were brought up the way I was—old fashioned, that the men are breadwinners and you dote on them and this and that—and so we are “the nurturers” and we find it hard to go out there and (not intentionally) hurt someone (but that’s what we’re doing). So I can see where a lot of women would find that hard. But that’s what I’m there for. (Karla)

About the “competitive drive” she said:

I never knew I had anything—I came from a family of seven girls and I was always the peacemaker, I never fought with anyone. I was the middle child, the peacemaker who always sorted everything out. And yet I found I loved to compete, in tournaments as well, and I never knew. (Karla)

Karla feels no discrepancies with her love for full contact karate, she knows she is going against the grain of her “old fashioned” upbringing and she mocked the emotional stereotypes of women in sport in her quote (“wanted to become a woman and cry”), but at the same time she did wonder about how she is influencing conventions of gender within her own family. Her family is proud and supportive of her karate, and Karla’s main hurdle to overcome is the stereotypical limitations associated with age:
I guess with my upbringing, to me a woman up there with grey hair, that's grandma! I competed in tournaments—all the ones I was allowed to enter [because eventually] I was retired—I didn't stop on my own. And I've got videotapes of them and I hear my kids yelling: "Kick her Mom! Hit her!" And I think, Oh geez! But they're very proud of me, being this old woman and doing karate. But that's another obstacle I have to overcome too, within myself, is this thinking—I'm forty-three, and to be there fighting with people is—well, could I picture my mother doing it? (Karla)

Karla calls herself old at forty-three, yet she recognizes it as an obstacle she can overcome, this thinking that there is something wrong with being out there, publicly doing karate at her age. Karla illustrates how age is a limiting factor for women's sporting activities. Precisely, it is the image of age, the idea of an older woman doing sporting activity, especially aggressive sporting activity that is the rule-breaker. The dominant requirements are that if a woman's body is to be seen doing sports, it should be a physically fit, heterosexually attractive and young female body. When women are breaking these rules, defying the limitations of age and discovering that they feel good doing it, it extends their sense of boundaries by breaking them. Unfortunately, the desire and ability of Karla to compete did not stop those above her from using their silent authority and "retiring" Karla from the events. Additionally, there are very few women of similar age for Karla to compete with in karate tournaments.

For Magda, it was the opposite: fighting was a real struggle for her to learn. In her women's club, practitioners train full contact on the bag only, not on each other.
I loved kata. It took me the longest time to spar because I don’t hit people, I don’t lose my temper. That was the hardest thing I had to go through. I ended up sparring for hours a night with one teacher just to get me over that. I became good at it, but when I stopped sparring, I lost it again. It’s just not natural for me. Not natural in the least. I can be vicious, but not in a sports situation, I just can’t stand it. I grew up in an alcoholic family, and I was the one that calmed everyone down, was never the one that instigated things, ever. So an argument, or raised voices—I could not stand that. So that was a hard thing for me to get over, was actually learning to hit people, very hard. (Magda)

Magda and Karla are examples of karateka with completely different initial experiences of sparring practice. Despite their similar background of being the member of the family who calmed everyone and made the peace, Magda found fighting “not natural in the least” and at her club they save the heavy contact for the punching bag, whereas Karla discovered she loved sparring and competing and she continues to train in a full contact club.

Taekwondo is very different from Kyokushin karate (semi contact, points are scored rather than knock-down, protective gear is worn), and Dee’s perception of fighting (like a game) reflects this Olympic sport:

You have to flow with the motions of taekwondo. When you kick...all of your techniques have to flow, if they are not, you clash like cat-fighting, and that’s not what taekwondo is about. It’s more like dancing, together when you fight. And it’s a game of strategy, thinking about what the other person is going to throw so
you can counteract that attack. And always try to be two steps ahead, provoke them and then you counter, you just read them, like backgammon. Certain moves in backgammon, you should make and if you don’t you’ve screwed yourself up! In taekwondo, the same thing, there’s bread, meat and potatoes that go together, certain kicks go together. If you don’t react to that kick, you’ve lost your opportunity to score. (Dee)

In contrast, Flora’s kung fu school does not have sparring, but one day she was teaching a series of form movements and realized:

I was explaining that this was fingers to the eyes, and that’s a beak to the groin and a beak to the temple and I thought, Hey—I’m starting to like this!

She describes the feeling of kung fu:

In the beginning in kung fu you learn this movement and that movement, then how this movement eases into that one, and there’s no separation—it’s like water flowing. And with calligraphy it’s exactly the same...eventually, you don’t raise your brush off the paper, you are linking all the movements...so sometimes when I’m doing needle in cotton (soft style kung fu) I see the similarities with calligraphy, and sometimes when I’m doing calligraphy, I see it’s just like needle in cotton. (Flora)

Joyce taught self-defense training for many years and continues to teach karate at an all female dojo where influential experiences of violence against women arise when teaching and learning fighting skills. Memories and fears easily surface during such
practice. Some women have difficulties using force on one another although it is for their mutual, purposeful development of skill:

*I feel like martial arts has been a tremendous emotional journey for me. It has a way of transforming your entire being. I remember the early days, learning to spar in an all-woman situation... breaking down and crying at points because I felt like, “I don’t want to hit this woman, she’s not the one I’m mad at!” And dealing with that—I’ve seen many women going through that, it’s like they’re afraid to go all the way with their partner because they don’t want to hurt them. And so I try to encourage the idea that actually you’re helping her. If you do it for real, you’re helping her train; if you pull back, you’re not helping her. (Joyce)*

The practitioners’ quotes above exemplify some differences in participant’s experience of fighting training. Karla focussed on the competitive aspect of fighting an opponent and discovered she liked to fight and overcome the physical hardships, Magda spoke of her unnatural feeling while learning to spar, Dee likened taekwondo to a game of backgammon, Joyce emphasized how training “for real” helps woman train, and Flora found common ground between the fluidity of her kung-fu and calligraphy. These distinct perceptions are the result of five different women participating in five different martial arts, but common to all their experience is their intrigue and enjoyment of learning these fighting skills, of feeling power in their moving bodies and the feeling of accomplishment after overcoming fears and physical difficulties. They did not word their fighting experiences in terms of domination. Females who enter male dominated martial art spheres understand that they needn’t adopt male hegemonic values of domination,
aggression, and violence, common to most contact sports. Magda and Dee made it clear earlier that they no longer buy into the “power games” because they are confident of their capabilities and needn’t prove it to anyone—ego isn’t an issue, they aren’t in martial arts to dominate over submissive students or peers.

Regina provides another example of how contact interaction can be perceived in different martial arts. She described her fascination with particular forms of fighting practice found in aikido and tai chi:

...I tried a bit of shorin-ji kempo, which was a kind of free style karate fighting, but I didn’t like that—because in aikido you fought, but it was controlled fighting: you grab me and then I do these moves. It’s a soft style martial art. So I really enjoyed that...and then I started to fall in love with tai chi...for over ten years now...but as soon as I got into the two person exercises with tai chi, it’s called “push-hands”, the partner work—I started giggling, laughing, because this is what I missed from my aikido, that connection with another person....And when I worked with a partner in push-hands, that’s when I really started to understand how to move a person, physically, and follow their energy flow, make it go in circles—which I was doing naturally in aikido, but I didn’t really understand it. (Regina)

Through the participant articulations and examples in this section, I hoped to show how aggressiveness, competitiveness and contact interaction in martial arts may not be anti-feminist values, but rather realized as a “physical feminism” (McCaughey 1997) wherein women have the opportunity to discover their power, independence and inner strengths through their active bodies.
Iris Young provided a feminist phenomenological analysis of female bodily experience, building upon Merleau-Ponty’s work (1962) that looked at the body as an “intersubjective field”, a physical object and an embodiment of consciousness that engages the outer world and produces an embodied reality—this process of movement builds an individual’s identity and body image. Young analyzed how women use motility, how they occupy and move through space while doing physical tasks and sports. She found that men tend to move with more free motion and open reach than women and that these differences in movement are not biologically determined but are rather sociologically learned by girls through cultural contexts and practices that construct a kind of disability in girls and women. Following de Beauvoir (1974), Young views women as having an “inhibited intentionality” that comes from historic cultural habits of feminine movement patterns, body demeanor, and tentative use of space. According to de Beauvoir, in these movement habits,

women embody the contradictory nature of their experience in patriarchal societies, a contradiction between their phenomenal experience of themselves as active subjects and their social construction as objects for others (Whitson 1994: 355).

For Merleau-Ponty, a person’s sense of self in the world is tied to their lived bodies, how they live and move in their body, and how they master their bodies. Their intention in physical movements through space is what finally develops their sense of oneself as an active person (Whitson 1994: 355; Young 1980). Consequently, due to women’s inhibited intentionality (typical, but neither natural or inevitable), which includes “habits of feminine body comportment—walking like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl,
gesturing like a girl and so on” (Young 1989: 153), women’s embodied experience says “I cannot” in the very act of trying. As a result, the phenomenon of “throwing like a girl” is the tendency of girls not putting their whole body into a movement.

Punching like a girl, to paraphrase Young and shift to the martial arts setting, is the same tendency for women not to utilize their whole torso, hips and shoulders, while throwing a punch—they don’t commit their whole body to the action. Of course, this changes with practice (and men must learn to punch properly also, it is not a birthright knowledge, contrary to popular stereotypes). In the introductory martial arts classes that I have instructed, the tendency for women to initially take up less space by constricting their movements, minimally utilizing their arms or legs while learning to block or strike is common. Moving arms and legs in a strong way with conviction is a foreign feeling for many women:

For many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space...Women tend to wait for and then react to its approach, rather than going forth to meet it. We frequently respond to the motion of a ball coming toward us as though it were coming at us, and our immediate bodily impulse is to flee, duck, or otherwise protect ourselves from its flight. (Young 1980: 144)

Women who learn to spar change any tendency to cower and overcome any impulse to duck or flee because they learn to recognize those punches and kicks that are coming at them (and which ones are not) and they learn how to use their own movements and limbs to avoid, block, or neutralize an attack. The tendency to wait for and then react to an approach soon drifts away as women gain confidence in their own body movements and abilities. Soon they are going forth to meet motions that come towards them, with their own counter-motion. Additionally, the practice and importance of targeting vital
areas in martial arts and self defense classes helps women develop aim and use their fists, fingers, elbows and legs with directness—rather than tending to aim or hit in a “general” direction (Young 1980: 144).

Becky recalls how methods of martial arts instruction influenced the movements and embodiment of women in the class. The instructor created a means for women to break their habits of movement by invoking an emotional response to a self-defense situation and then further built on the women’s reactions with more precise techniques that could eventually become habits of movement:

*I think it has a lot to do with how women are taught. I had classes where the instructor [approached] a self defense situation by building up a scenario—she described a hostile situation that made the women mad, angry at what was done—and did that light a fire! The women in the class would really feel what they’d do, how to move with strength [whereas] before [they were moving with] reluctance, unconfident. Fear is a different place—it’s harder to move with conviction if you panic, so it’s very important that women learn how to move, how to do these moves under all kinds of situations, so that when the time comes and fear comes, the moves might be automatic because of habit. (Becky)*

Tasha recalls an instance in her martial arts class that illustrates some women’s’ initially inhibited intentionality: learning to yell (kiai) at the same time that one delivers a forceful strike is strange for many people.

*I never really found it difficult to kiai—I grew up yelling at my brothers to stop teasing me—but I’ve been in classes with so many women who had a block.*
They'd get embarrassed, they couldn't shout or yell at first. It was a real hurdle for them to make a guttural yell of some kind—not just one that came from the vocal chords—and to do it as they punched. (Tasha)

The transformational potential of martial arts for women exists in the possibility of changing how a woman utilizes and regards her body. This may involve a transformation from feeling and acting with one's body as weak, contained, alienated, uncontrolled and objectified, to a feeling, perception and knowledge of one's body as capable, strong, skilled, powerful, effective, dynamic and trustworthy. A transformation wherein one moves from feeling relatively powerless (compared to other people and the outside world) to a feeling and outward projection of a powerful body. While women's self-esteem and physicality benefits from exercise in general, martial arts are unique because their essence deals with issues of violence: recognition, confrontation, control and application and avoidance of violence are central. This knowledge of aggression helps women prepare, heal and become capable of identifying and dealing with violence in their everyday existence. It may mean that they need not use violent means.

Though objects such as guns, pepper spray and personal alarms may give women some confidence and options in the advent of an attack, the mental knowledge that they can also kick, strike, yell and inflict damage on an assailant, also physically and psychologically arms women. This knowledge emanates into a woman's gesture, gait and posture—which may deter an attack before it begins. "Easy victim" signals are not emitted (Hudson 1994: 153).

Martial arts are a gender-sensitive activity wherein the issues of violence against women and the association of masculinity with violence are realistically addressed. In
such co-ed training situations, the reality that a woman must be able to defend herself successfully from male assailants is underlined. Women learn "what works" for their body type. Because a female practitioner's strengths may or may not be the same as her male partner's, their strategies and tactics for self-defense may differ—her optimal methods will be in tune with her physique, ability, context and confidence. With copious practice, rote self-defense moves eventually become automatic and idiosyncratic.

Although sometimes necessary, often the separation of women from men (understood and explained for physical, psychological and social reasons), may arguably reify differences and serve to maintain a norm of stereotypical assumptions of male and female bodily capacity and inferiority. But males and females training together potentially create a context where sexual difference dichotomies may be partially transcended. Martial arts uniquely involves techniques, tactics, strategies and the coordination of personal bodily capabilities that may demonstratively be more important than size or sex of an individual. Individual bodies and minds face each other, each with endlessly different options of movement and responses.

While sport (and media coverage) helps construct the "gender order" and serves to reify and naturalize differences between sexes through generalizations that a man's body is more powerful than a woman's, that men and women shouldn't fight together, that women are physically disadvantaged—martial arts helps deconstruct this gender order because it can "denaturalize" male dominance. Through such training, men and women come to realize that masculine and feminine distinctions are stereotypical—and are deceiving. When a body is identified as smaller, perhaps with less muscle, it still has powerful potential, fully capable of controlling, redirecting and successfully neutralizing
aggressive attacks. Female practitioners confront male partners who may be stereotypically “bigger and stronger”, and the women must work through any hesitancies they experience in such a situation, find strength within themselves to draw and utilize their mental and physical knowledge of defense and attack. Moreover, roles of attacker and defender are interchanged, and male partners must face female aggressors, which is often an enlightening experience that can shatter stereotypes of the weak, passive female.

In this way, coed martial arts may help “de-eroticize” women athletes because “when women become athletes it is more difficult for men to perceive them in traditionally erotic terms”—they can’t be reduced to mere sex objects if they are obviously active, strong, capable (and recognized) in their athletic pursuits (Messner & Sabo 1993: 22). Although some female athletes are successfully eroticizing themselves, and magazine features and media coverage easily eroticizes a woman’s athletics (especially through photography), “coed sports can liberate women from narrow definitions as sex objects and diversify and humanize men’s understanding of women and sexuality” (Messner & Sabo 1993: 23).

Moreover, martial arts may counteract the pattern of physical empowerment whereby boys learn assertion and girls learn submission, androcentric language and stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity. Female practitioners cultivate self-esteem through training, especially when they come to realize that one does not have to be overtly “big and strong” (commonly equated with powerful) to be effective and skilled in martial arts. Power is reframed as energy and capacity (Theberge 1987) and practitioners learn that speed, evasion and awareness tactics are essential. Instead of an objectified self as uncoordinated and vulnerable, women develop their sense of self as
capable, their body reactions as malleable, trainable and under their control. Habits associated with “punching like a girl” deconstruct (Young 1980).

FROM CATFIGHTS TO BRAWLING WITH THE BOYS: WOMEN ONLY & COED CONTEXTS

Women-only and coed training clubs are both necessary and beneficial in martial arts environments, for different reasons. As mentioned previously, coed contexts may potentially break down gender stereotypes during practice as males and females train together and build skilled body movement in coordination. Women-only clubs are essential because they provide a place where women will not experience intimidation by males—particularly if they have endured physical abuse or assault and need a male-free space to train.

Some women participants expressed no desire to train at a female-only club. Karla instructed all female classes but found the training didn’t satisfy her expectations. She sustains a few stereotypes as she explains:

I had a women-only club for awhile. It started out great, but then most of the women didn’t want to sweat, they didn’t want to break an nail, they just wanted quick, easy, self-defense—and unfortunately, you can’t do that. I had a hard time with it myself because I took it a bit easier on them (which in my mind was not Kyokushin), but it was explained as “nurturing them into the fold”. One woman transferred over into the regular co-ed classes, but most of them didn’t want the sparring; they don’t want the contact. I even had a couple who didn’t like sweat—we’d do a grab or something, and they’d say, “Could you wipe your
"I think it takes a special—not kind of woman—but a special mentality—to do, especially Kyokushin, because of the full contact. (Karla)

Karla values the tough training, the discipline. She says:

*Attitudes play a big role in karate, especially for women because there’s a lot of women out there that would like to do things, but don’t want the hard work involved... I’ve seen other strictly female clubs, and depending on the individual, there wasn’t the discipline involved; it was just a club. And I like the discipline. In everyday life people feel—like a marriage if things aren’t going well, toss in the towel—that’s the easy way out, whereas with karate it teaches you and it helps you overcome these things. If you want something bad enough, you have to work hard for it. That’s part of what Kyokushin really did for me. (Karla)*

Karla is one of the participants for whom the obstacles, stereotypes and blatant chauvinistic treatment she experienced during her early years of training stimulated her determination to succeed in this activity.

Leanne also prefers coed clubs because she doesn’t see any reason for men and women to train differently:

*I wouldn’t want to be in a “women-only” club. It’s too limiting. Because at that point, then you say that there is a difference and there is a reason for us to be separated, and that our training is different than a man’s training. And I don’t believe it is different. Maybe in terms of self-defense there might be things that will work for a woman better because of body types and so forth, but there’s going*
to be techniques that work for a smaller man too, for this body and that body.

(Leanne)

Leanne didn’t want separation of the sexes to reify differences between males and females. Separate clubs may be at risk of perpetuating stereotypes that males and females are physically different and need different training methods or standards (which usually places female sport as inferior compared to male sport). Leanne emphasized that martial arts is about bodies and techniques that work for those bodies, therefore gender should be less important than body type and individual motility.

Joyce however, explains why her all female karate club is essential: women need a supportive environment in the process of learning defensive fighting skills, especially if they are overcoming their own memories and traumas of violence. The realism of training can be frightening and can trigger memories and emotions:

What often happens in a women’s dojo, women go through emotional processes about things that have happened to them. I remember one night teaching a hold, and putting it on this one woman, and she just dissolved into tears. She said, ‘That’s the one that my rapist used on me’. And you can’t do that kind of thing in a mixed dojo, it just doesn’t go over. When things like that happen, and it’s not uncommon whenever we do things that are heavily self-defense and really confrontational and ‘in-your-face’, someone will break down. That’s when I really know there’s a place for this, for what we’re doing. (Joyce)
Becky, who has visited many different clubs throughout her training viewed contexts of training this way:

*I don’t really care if it’s a male or female instructor or people I train with because I would just rather train with people who are stronger—who I can learn from, [who are] skilled—because when I surround myself with strong people, those who know what they are doing, I set higher standards for myself. If standards are lowered just for the sake of being a female—if they change rules or modify techniques for women just because they are women—it says to me that you aren’t expected to achieve the heights before you even know where to aim or where I want to aim! Because—I might be shooting for something far greater than expected.* (Becky)

Tasha also emphasizes the importance of aiming high or being “pushed” so that she can accomplish more than expected:

*I like to be pushed while training—or in weight lifting, sparring, drills, running or writing—if I can see someone doing better, I strive to achieve more and push myself further than I do alone... So for me, male bodies training aren’t intimidating, but usually are power that I can strive towards. I can also see their mistakes relying on that power all the time, they try and use their muscles for everything and they tire quickly as a result. For guys, I am told by them that I teach them flexibility, fluid-like, to relax and move, and make their techniques better without relying on that tense strength that so many guys do. So there’s a balance, some things to learn for both sexes—Every body is so different.* (Tasha)
Joyce knows her club is the preferred place of training for many women, yet she explains why she choose to remain affiliated with the “malestream” dojos:

...It’s more comfortable for a lot of women, particularly women who are just starting out and who are very unsure of themselves, to try out those moves in an all-women atmosphere—it’s very different than trying it out with a bunch of huge grunting guys. ...And for those of us at black belt level... we can focus on what it is that we want to do and what’s useful to us, and not have to negotiate with the male hierarchy around that. At the same time, I have no wish to not be connected to those people. To become an isolated group with no input from the outside, I think that is a real mistake. I may fight with these men from time to time, about certain things and I think that’s a useful influence, but I still respect them as teachers and I respect their knowledge, and I want that. I want to stay connected to that. (Joyce)

Magda points out:

The necessity for the women’s club is that for some of these women that have been abused, they can’t work with males yet. They cannot handle the fear. So, if you want to reach the women that really need [martial arts], you can’t have a man around, until they’re ready. At which point they can choose to go to the coed and try it out to see how they feel, at their own pace. (Magda)
Women's dojos provide an alternate space, a site free from male bodies that may reinforce dominant notions of physicality and gender relations of power. These clubs may hold a greater promise for the realization of alternative and resistant sport forms because, being outside the mainstream male dominated martial arts spheres, they may therefore be more experimental with instructional practices and structural organization. At the same time, the existence of separate schools for women martial artists, since they are distinct schools with special programs, will inevitably confront what Deirdre Kelly describes as the "dilemma of difference" (1996: 294). The dilemma necessitates posing two questions:

when does treating people differently emphasize their differences and stigmatize or hinder them on that basis? and when does treating people the same become insensitive to their difference and likely to stigmatize or hinder them on *that* basis? (Minow 1990: 20 in Kelly 1996).

As documented in the opinions of two participants, some women preferred coed training contexts, and even voiced stereotypical notions regarding women's training in an all-female environment. These women liked the challenges of discipline and hierarchical structure, and the satisfaction of overcoming power struggles—the "gender-jutsu" involved in coed practice. They viewed separate clubs for women as unnecessary conditions for training because, in their opinion, the existence of women only clubs meant admitting that women must train differently than men, which was equivalent to admitting gender differences in ability and approach to training.

The two women instructors of all female clubs instead emphasized the recognition of different women's needs, especially meeting the needs of women who have
experienced violence from men and the ways in which their clubs meet these special requirements.

On a personal level, women can experience empowerment through physical activity in martial arts—for women to master and strengthen their bodies and sense of self is physical and emotional empowerment. More broadly, martial arts practice can transform or upset stereotypical assumptions and limitations of male and female bodies. Coed training forces male and female interaction, differences and similarities are discovered individually and generalized stereotypes may be expelled or transformed through the new gender relations created through the rules and routines of training practice. Female clubs provide a space where women can cultivate their physicality away from male bodies. Additionally, these contexts can be sites for innovative structural and educational reorganization, as discussed in the next section.

FEMINIST PRAXIS IN OUR FIGHTING PRACTICE

Praxis is action and theory working together. How do we encourage girls to push their efforts beyond the gendered notions of (in)capability and (dis)ability? "Sport for women" and the "women in sport" methods dualistically tend to support a separate "women-only" approach or an "integrated" approach—yet both risk creating an "other" sphere where sporting women are not the norm. There is danger in reifying the myths of the female body as less physically capable than a male body. So, we must do more than deconstruct and articulate the oppressive formations that exist in sport and leisure practices. What makes our work feminist is that it is about developing practices that enable us to challenge and change oppression in sport and leisure. (Dewar 1993: 215).
Dewar also warns, "as academic feminists we have tended to write about our experiences as theorists... rather than as activists working in coalitions to change sport or leisure..."

How does one mesh feminist praxis and fighting practice? Female clubs and feminist ideals are actually mixing in the martial arts world. The politicization of women in martial arts can be detected. Many female martial artists do see the connection between participation and politics, violence against women and the relation and relevance to practice. After all, how can a woman not confront the issue of violence against women when one constantly enacts the emotional, mental and physical experience of being attacked, being the attacker and defender?

Women martial artists are coming together, creating their own associations and clubs, organizing international women's martial arts festivals, seminars, and training camps, and consciously transforming aspects of martial arts practice to fit their ethics and lives. Rather than seeing feminism and sport as marginal (and mutually exclusive with their own prioritized agendas), they are enmeshed within organizations such as the Feminist Karate Union, the Pacific Association of Women Marital Artists, the National Women's Martial Arts Federation, and local "women-only" martial arts clubs, where females actively construct and maintain alternatives to the male preserve of sport (Hall 1987). These practitioners consciously transform their clubs to be inclusive, supportive, less hierarchical, and process-oriented.

At the same time, women martial artists training within the "malestream" martial arts clubs (where women's participation is the definite minority), equally experience personal empowerment amidst all the challenges arising within the gender relations of power that take place in such contexts. These women's perspectives must not be
dismissed as co-opting, conforming, or unwittingly adopting patriarchal values by “uncritically participating in this institution rather than attempting to transform it or construct alternative feminist sports structures” (Messner & Sabo 1990: 4). The very presence of women in these organizations helps deconstruct stereotypical feminine images. Although every act of resistance may not transform ideological patterns that constrain women’s bodies and images, women who experience a mastering of their own bodies as capable and powerful are evidence that control of women’s bodies are not total—it remains contested terrain.

The following are some examples of feminist praxis taking place in martial arts practice through the innovative initiatives of female martial artists.

Joyce describes her all female club:

*We’re more relaxed, and we are kinder, less formal than the coed dojo. In the dojo I trained at there are lots of rules: you bow to black belts every time you come in the room and it’s just more formal recognition of hierarchy. You begin the class in a line and you end it in a line and it’s top rank down... What we traditionally do at the women’s club is we start the class in a line, and we end it in a circle. I like that. I like it as a symbol of what we are trying to do. (Joyce)*

Regina experimented with the structuring of her club. At first she though she would stop the belt testing:

*I originally didn’t want to do belt testing, I didn’t want this competition feeling, that “I’ve got this belt” kind of person, but I also realize here has to be a goal. (Regina)*
Regina is still in the process of determining the best solution to motivate and reward students, yet avoid a competitive ego-feeding atmosphere. She may compromise and have tests without belts, with a dinner to celebrate student's efforts. She states there is "not lot of dogma" in her classes—instead she connects exercises and feelings with words and an awareness of things, and she "lets them fill in the blanks about god, the universe, energy". Continuously, she balances the need to make a living from instruction, against a need to maintain her ethics and not commercialize her means of teaching:

Obviously I wanted to do this because I loved it, but I also saw it evolve into a job, so that I could do something I loved, plus make money to pay some bills and live. So I'm always juggling that: I need the money, I love to teach—and I'm trying to meld that so that I try not to hang onto that need of more money—yet I do need them to pay. It's teaching me how to deal with people and money issues and to realize that I'm worth the money people pay to study with me... So am I supposed to promote myself more? I don't have anybody to run ahead of me and say "oh here she comes, she's done this and that." And I don't have a lot of credentials as far as wins and medals and trophies, but I have a lot of experience, love for people, caring for people—and that's a difficult one to promote: "I love all of you and I'm going to be really good for you because I'm going to help you help yourself"—That doesn't sell your class!

Magda is also experimenting with the structure of martial arts classes. Her club takes a democratic approach to training and she asks for students' suggestions each month.
so that they will have a new focus for part of the class, stemming from participants’ needs. She said the difference between her women’s club and the coed club is:

*More equality, much more equality. Between [the women’s club members] and me, there is equality and respect. They will never cross the line, but that is because they believe in me, not because I beat them up. They know what I can do, I don’t have to prove to them—and they know because they’re capable of it—That’s the nicest thing: they know what I’m capable of because they can do it themselves.*

Magda says that physical body changes due to the aging process and emotional and physical experiences of PMS can arise without embarrassment in her club—it isn’t made into a big issue and the women are a support network for each other:

*I’m thirty now, and my whole body has changed over the last couple years, and so everything’s changed: my shape, my muscles, the way I move, the way I do karate had to be adjusted for me, for the body growing up. I have a couple students going through that as well. And all of a sudden I have stuff I never had to deal with—PMS I never had to deal with that before, you know the “I want to cry” and you’re in a room full of women and it happens to them every once in awhile, so there’s support for that. Sometimes it hurts to punch. And you can’t say that normally. In women’s karate, you say it, get it over with, you laugh, it’s out and you can get on with your life and ignore the pain after that. Whereas if you have to hold it in—a lot of men don’t understand you just want to be acknowledged—I*
find that's really different with this club. Never [is it said]: “Oh, she's on the rag again!”

On a larger organizational scale, diverse women martial artists support each other and form allegiances through organizations that bridge martial arts and feminist ethics, ideals and community action. The National Women's Martial Arts Federation has a mandate:

*Our purpose is to share skills and resources, to promote excellence in the martial arts, and to encourage the widest range of women to train in the spirit of building individual and collective strength. We will bar no woman because of lifestyle, sexual preference, race, color, creed, religion, class, age, or physical condition.*

*We cherish martial arts as a path of self-discovery and transformation and as a means of transforming ourselves and the world in which we live. We find strength in each other's challenges and promote an awareness and appreciation of our differences.* (NWMAF Website 1998)

The Pacific Association of Women Martial Artists was founded in 1978 and became incorporated as a Californian non-profit public benefit corporation in 1987. This organization is dedicated to promoting women and girls' participation in the martial arts by providing public education, role models, recognition of excellence, and opportunities to train and share ideas with an extended network of outstanding martial artists. The diversity of membership:

*includes women of all ages and physical abilities, all races and ethnic backgrounds, all social and cultural points of view They practice hard style, soft style and eclectic arts, ancient and modern systems drawn from every corner of the world. They train in mixed schools, women only schools, and schools with many different approaches. Their interests range from practical self-defense, to spiritual development, fitness, and competitive sports. Membership is open to anyone—woman or man—who supports the full and active participation of women in the martial arts.*
PAWMA members are united in the belief that martial arts training has special value for women, whether it is pursued for self-expression, self-protection, or physical health. They are committed to encouraging women and girls to train, and to promoting an atmosphere of respect and support for those who do—regardless of their chosen styles. They believe every martial artist will benefit from the full participation of women, and the arts as a whole will be strengthened by the mutual respect and understanding fostered between students, schools and styles. (from PAWMA Website posted mandate 1998)

PAWMA also supplies funds for members who organize and instruct women's self-defense or other martial arts programs for the benefit of the member's local communities.

PAWMA members put their beliefs into action in as many ways as there are individuals—through everything from simple dedication to their own training, to teaching and sharing their skills with others; participating in PAWMA-sponsored seminars, tournaments, training camps, and public demonstrations; communicating via PAWMA's quarterly newsletter... in short, by reaching out in every direction to build connections between women who train. (PAWMA Website 1998)

Feminist praxis in fighting practice may mean creatively instructing women who are in the midst of learning defense skills in such a way that not only teaches fighting and survival techniques, but also sparks an awareness to culturally conditioned gender behaviour that typically restricts women's movement and strength. When women realize how they oftentimes do not put their whole body into motion, that they confine or hold back their limbs, voice or legs and that they indeed “punch like a girl”—women can better counteract this tendency. Rather than being self conscious of their body movements (and left to wonder why they cannot punch or move the way they want to), women can become self-directed when “armed” with knowledge about habits of movement. Most important, is the encouragement and belief in the capabilities of young
girls and women. Females should be encouraged just as enthusiastically as males are, to cultivate their bodies as strong, malleable, powerful and under their own control. To curb a girl’s imagination and limit her bodily possibilities by molding her physical and mental potential towards just those “feminine” designated activities and experiences—is a crime.

There is great potential for feminist praxis to come alive through alternative cultural forms—in this case, martial arts organizations that do not mimic dominant models. PAWMA, NWMAF, the Feminist Karate Union (Seattle) and the Women’s Festival of Martial Arts, provide examples of shared leadership, a commitment to action and improvement in local communities and the continued encouragement for girls and women to have meaningful experiences in martial arts.
CHAPTER FOUR: GENDER-JUTSU IN REVIEW

You should not just train and think about the outside movement, the outside body, but you must concentrate and move from your core (hara), and bring forth energy from the inside body and mind so it fuels every movement and grounds every stance. (Kancho Matsui, head of the International Kyokushin Karate Organization, in translation at Hawaii summer seminar, August 1st, 1998)

Although technically a strike may contain all the correct components of the physical, outside body mechanics, the striker’s internal focus may be missing. The thrust may not initiate from inside their body and continue to the outside muscles and limbs, using their whole weight, connecting mind with movement, connecting a focussed “spirit” with the final strike. This is not an exotic, mysterious concept. Many people can understand what it is like to feel grounded, move solidly, surefooted in body and mind, connected to their inner energy and mental state—yet many people lead a daily existence in an unfocussed, frazzled, rushed regimen, scrambled in mind and stressed in body.

“Gender-jutsu”, my play-on-words, derives from jujutsu—a martial art full of joint locks, chokes, holds and body manipulations that pin down and immobilize a person. Gender, and gender stereotypes are manipulations, too: power manipulations that pin a person to a certain expected behaviour and immobilize them to that image-plate. But as in jujutsu, there is usually a way to counter a move, a counter-manipulation that, if commenced in time, will enable you to get out of the grab, the choke, or the hold—to free yourself. Likewise, gender constraints can be countered. Power plays meet resistance.
Relations of power that would pin a person to a gender stereotypical behaviour, movement or image can be counter-attacked through physical empowerment: the doing of martial arts, the arming oneself to be powerful. Martial arts can add a new perspective to feminist notions of resistance.

For the practitioners interviewed in this study, martial arts have been both an activity away from everyday pressures and an activity that acts as a resource for resolving or coping with everyday problems. Martial arts uniquely influenced these practitioners’ approach to their work, goals, conduct, self-perception and outlook on life. A marker of achievement that filtered into other spheres of these practitioners’ lives, martial arts practice was dominantly described as more than an exercise that gave their endorphins a boost; practitioners articulated personal empowerment and growth in (mental, physical and emotional) self knowledge on account of their chosen martial art practice.

Were I to start over with the option of using any medium through which to convey the research and explorations of this study, I would pursue film. Film could capture and communicate the energy exuded by participants in a more striking, immediate manner than words—the way a woman speaks strongly of her love of practice, the way she demonstrates movements in conversation and gesture, her facial expressions, eye depth and vocal integrity create a visual collage in my mind that loses impact on paper. Film could visually record changes as a woman develops a new self-respect, projects her confidence, learns to trust her bodily capabilities and becomes a stronger person physically and mentally. The physical transition as women unlearn aspects of a feminine demeanor that makes them easy victims could be recorded on screen. Their change in
mental, emotional and physical embodiment could be seen and heard as these women learn to defend themselves, respect their rights and ultimately learn to fight effectively.

Making do with the textual medium, I have remained true to participants' transcriptions and included excerpts that simultaneously capture the women's individual emphasis and illustrate the themes pertinent to my thesis focus. My modest intentions were fulfilled—I have: 1) made a research document that merged aspects of sports theory with martial arts practice; 2) described and interpreted some unique contexts of martial arts; 3) focussed on practitioner articulations; 4) highlighted some discussions that manifested in feminist sports and body theory and used them within the thematic explorations of this study.

RETURN TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I now turn back to answer the formative research questions posed in chapter two. First, where are the women in the martial arts? Answer: they are training, as usual! Lack of media coverage, lack of research, lack of photographs, publications, articles, documentary, television and newspaper sports coverage all render women invisible and contribute toward the "erasure...the symbolic annihilation of female athletes who participate in sports that have been identified exclusively with males" (Kane 1995).

Generalizing from the ten participants in this study, it seems "everyday women" are drawn towards martial arts in a variety of ways, for various reasons, including family, friends, curiosity, a burning desire to try martial arts since childhood, for health reasons or by default (it was simply taking place at their community centre). Five of the women initially joined for self defense purposes. Initial motivations changed and grew over the
years of practice, and women expressed their desire to gain more knowledge, become stronger practitioners, know more techniques and forms and continue with self-defense skills. Training was expressed as a lifestyle. Women used their self-knowledge, respect and confidence gained through training in their personal life outside the training hall. Participants used these strengths in relationships at work (meeting deadlines and putting effort into their projects), in marriages or partnerships (emotional control and self-ownership), and in their daily self-perception (knowing they can achieve goals previously thought impossible). They gained confidence and strength, experienced inwardly and visibly projected outwardly.

Participants described this gain in confidence as a particularly empowering feature of martial arts. The feeling of powerful movement generated by their bodies energized them. Personal capabilities expanded as their advances in mental and physical strength and stamina grew beyond which they had previously experienced. Included by several participants were their improvements in memory and concentration and determination. Training also changed some women's self image: their identity expanded to include independence, self-respect, self-ownership and personal power.

According to the testimonies, gender did make a difference in the dojo because expectations of a woman's performance and capability during training was often tied to stereotypical assumptions about the female body (as weaker, more prone to injury). All of the participants who mentioned having faced these initial constraints endured and eventually shattered such expectations (of failure) by persevering and continuing with their progressive training. Power struggles based on gender also arose in teaching situations when female instructors were challenged, questioned or assumed inferior to
their male peers. Women reacted to these situations maintaining their integrity and they didn’t buy into the challenge; they needn’t prove their skill to skeptics.

Through the examples and articulated training experiences explored in this study, we sampled instances wherein gender constructs were reinforced, challenged and transformed in martial arts contexts. The reinforcement of stereotypes sometimes occurred through the opinions of female martial artists themselves—for instance, the stereotypes expressed regarding women-only clubs, or through the actions of female martial artists such as “Black Belt Barbie” who used dominant gender discourses to her own advantage and exploited the media’s conventional focus on the heterosexual appeal of female athletes. In the same tournament context of martial arts, a female competitor went against dominant expectations of gender, crossed the boundaries and competed on par with the male competitors. These were examples of how a woman’s body can be gendered through sport practices, how there is more surrounding the active female body when doing martial arts than just the kicks, punches and techniques she executes. The structure, purpose and promotion of tournament spheres can create a competitive context that fuels heterosexualization and homophobia surrounding female athletic activity. Female practitioners in martial arts both resist and exploit dominant gender discourses.

The power dynamics women experienced included being ignored, trivialized or put-down during training. Other participants experienced a fully supportive training environment with male and female instructors and peers who encouraged and aided their development and knowledge. Most interesting here is that the women who experienced a rough start to their martial arts training did not quit, but consciously changed these barriers into a springboard motivating their determination to succeed. All of those
women emphasized that their clubs have since changed in attitude and treatment of women since the “early days”—this may be due to their presence and persistence having partially paved the way for women that followed.

Amidst such power dynamics, potentially transformational gender contexts occur when women and men train in martial arts together. Homophobic and stereotypically masculine and feminine behaviour expectations are confronted through direct physical engagement. Women and men training together learn from each other’s movements and there is the potential to overcome preconceived ideas and patterns of movement as they learn to respect each opponent and partner, regardless of sex, size, race or rank.

Adding to the transformative potential of martial arts activity is the existence of all female dojos. These are a necessary and exciting context for several reasons: 1) they provide a needed safe area for women to train and thus are an excellent place for women to regain or develop strength, confidence and support away from male bodies; 2) some female instructors experiment with the traditional hierarchical structure of martial arts classes or organizations and move towards a more democratic, openly inclusive environment; 3) teaching methods can promote a supportive environment where skill is not passed on through intimidating means and methods, but through innovative agendas that are in part determined by the specific needs of participants.

Martial arts provides a unique context for the examination of bodily perceptions and gender practices occurring through sport. Despite the overt challenges women practitioners in this study confronted because of being women (and assumed to be weaker, more susceptible to injury, less skilled, etc.), these practitioners still felt that being a female martial artist shouldn’t make a difference. Martial arts were maintained
as an activity that emphasizes knowledge of the mind and body's movements. The idea is that individuals must learn to train their mind and body in accord with their idiosyncratic strengths and weaknesses, above and beyond the dictates of sex and gender. In this way, with a focus on individual ability, martial arts is an activity that reinforces "sports as a continuum" (Kane 1995):

The acknowledgement of such a continuum could provide a direct assault on traditional beliefs about sport—and gender itself—as an inherent, oppositional binary that is grounded in biological difference. In short, an awareness of sport as a continuum of physical, athletic competence could serve as an important vehicle for resistance and transformation. (Kane 1995: 3)

Although each woman had a different background and participated in different martial arts, the intrigue and enjoyment of learning fighting skill, of becoming strong and feeling power in their moving bodies was a shared feeling. They each grasped a profound sense of accomplishment after overcoming their personal fears and physical difficulties. What overwhelmed me doing this research, was how much each woman would emphasize different aspects of their art (be it the tactics of taekwondo sparring, the feeling of doing aikido and tai chi, or the thrill of competition, and the rewards of teaching or the love of solitary practice), common within all of these articulations was the definite mastery of self, the genuinely satisfying feeling that women enjoyed from mastering movements and skills using their own body, knowing the capabilities of their body were greater than their previous expectations before encountering martial arts.

Ten women martial artists had the opportunity to discuss, think about, and record aspects of their martial arts experiences. I have documented how their personal achievements of empowerment are gained through learning physical movement of a self-
defense nature. I highlighted gender constructs as an area worthy of exploration. I have explored the power dynamics involved in martial arts spheres where hierarchy is based on rank, yet sometimes implicitly reinforces a gender hierarchy. Although everyone is in a belt, I have shown that power struggles do exist despite this explicit hierarchy of rank, and that women participants had creative and successful means of dealing with these power struggles.

When looking at all of the brilliant feminist embodiment literature on one side, and the newly published books about women in martial arts on the other (Hoppe 1998; Siegel 1993; Wiley 1992, 1995), I claim a modest contribution bridging both sides: the academic arguments and the participants’ expressions. I applied some of the major points of feminist sports theory to the martial arts settings, which is a new occurrence. Although not as extensive as the work being done on bodybuilding at present, this thesis created an awareness of complexities in the dojo—more than our gender-neutral, gi-clad bodies depict.

Martial arts are a context in which gender stereotypes and power relations may transform by means of self-empowerment, the expansion of physical and mental capabilities and confidence, and by means of women and men training together and actively deconstructing the roles and assumptions of aggressor / victim, attacker / defender, strong / weak. However, the significance of martial arts training reaches beyond the transformation of stereotypes.

The significance of this research is that it contributes towards the documentation and analysis of how women are finding their strength in their bodies and minds through physical training, specifically self-defense and fighting systems. Women are cultivating
physical, emotional and mental power through these activities. Training contributes toward a physical feminism wherein women can deconstruct those habits of movement and thought (well documented by Iris Young) which render them vulnerable. Women who have been educating themselves through martial arts training realize the change in their inner and outer self: their sense of self-respect increases, they move with strength and purpose, they have renewed bodily awareness, confidence, determination and belief in their abilities.

Interestingly, I have been asked if this cultivation of women’s physicality through martial arts participation does not result in a “devaluation of the feminine” realm, and whether my focus ultimately perpetuates a male/female dichotomy. I do not believe this to be the case. Feminine and masculine realms or habits of movement or behaviour are not mutually exclusive. A cultivation of physical power need not detract from notions of the feminine—mannerism, aesthetic, movement or knowledge. However, if the conception of “feminine” involves the inclusion of a feminine demeanor that renders women easy victims of violence, then yes—I do devalue this, and I propose martial arts as a viable means to counteract this pattern. Dichotomies are not perpetuated when we perceive ourselves as different bodies and personalities with idiosyncratic resources, challenges and lessons in our lives. Self-knowledge, introspection and self-improvement are not male or female endeavors. Martial arts as a physical means of coming to know oneself, refining oneself and developing mental, emotional and physical resources, should undoubtedly be regarded as a beneficial opportunity for males and females alike.

Benefits felt and expressed by practitioners may influence the choices that we (as parents, educators, students, athletes or recreational exercisers) make for children’s
school PE curriculum, community centre programming or our own adult education. The implications of martial arts activity designate that an activity mustn’t automatically be relegated as male-oriented because of the visible bodily power, movement or aggression involved. Clearly, martial arts are a place for women and girls, despite their minority in the martial arts realm. Moreover, martial arts exemplify that outwardly aggressive activity—the contact and combat elements of martial arts must be evaluated from the insider perspectives of practitioners, rather than judged outwardly (and condemned as overly aggressive or dangerous for women). Quintessentially “feminine” sports, such as ballet, can equally put women at risk of injury—yet because of the preferred aesthetics of grace, beauty and fluidity, there isn’t a question of whether this is a suitable activity for girls. Before joining karate, I trained for ten years in ballet (from age 8 to 18), and I do believe that ballet is as brutal on the body as some martial arts: the hammer-toes, blisters, pulled ligaments, over-stretching, over-training, excessive pointe-work, anorexic values and practices leave their mark on a girl’s body and self-image. (Of course, positive aspects of ballet training include the bodily strength, stamina, stretch ability, posture, muscle formation, rhythm and ability to perform in front of audiences). Martial arts, however, teaches practitioners to work with the body they have, to generate energy and idiosyncratic methods of becoming defensively and offensively precise—without the destructive practices of anorexic aesthetics and expectations.

Additionally, the implications of martial arts for education exist in the development of a gender sensitive physical education curriculum. When taught with critical awareness, martial arts activity is a means to counteract dominant ideological patterns of physicality wherein boys learn assertion and girls learn submission. More
precisely, physically educating the female body through martial arts potentially contributes to a girl’s self esteem through an emphasis on her agency and her realization and cultivation of female power. Competitive spheres aside, martial arts activity does not pressure girls to conform to a certain "look": when taught critically, emphases are practicality, learning to move with energy, capacity and an attunement to one’s individual bodily movements. Girls’ sense of personal potential expands when they learn, feel and know their bodies as powerful and skilled (rather than only an aesthetic object).

Finally, the way a martial art is taught is very significant. When taught with philosophical aspects that stem from the roots of martial arts (an emphasis on “bushido”), martial arts can be a blueprint for a liberal education, a holistic educational approach that underlines self-knowledge, personal improvement, refinement of character and respect for oneself and others. Alternatively, when teaching a martial art as a purely physical activity—just the memorized moves—the activity becomes devoid of the mental, emotional and spiritual challenges that differentiate and enrich martial arts over other combat or contact sports—it becomes just another PE option.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Nancy Theberge warned that “seeing competition as a male value that is associated with aggression, power and dominance, feminists turn away from sport while ignoring the creative possibilities in the experience” (Theberge 1987: 391). Competition is redefined to emphasize a more transformative potential when the object of the activity is not domination, but a process of engagement that is mutually supportive and rewarding (Birrel & Richter 1987). Martial arts philosophy emphasizes self-knowledge and
personal growth, the mastery of mind, emotion and spirit through vigorous physical engagement. Some women’s martial arts organizations explicitly aim towards supportive and mutually rewarding means of engaging in competitive martial practice. Future study could look closely at women’s martial arts organizations and individual instructors who make innovations to traditional teaching methods and class structures. Participants in this study expressed empowerment and found martial arts have “become a means to realize their energy, creativity and potential” (Theberge 1991: 129). Further research may focus on competitive spheres, and the challenge of maintaining or creating an empowering ethic of care (Duquin 1994) amidst aggressive fighting activities.

Research should be done on how different martial arts are a source of healing and an active means of recovery for abused persons, a road to recovery which is very different from traditional psychological therapy (Guthrie 1995). Physical empowerment through tai chi may be a completely different experience than a person who finds kajukempo or karate as a means of personal change and recovery—research could uncover these subtleties.

Future study should focus in depth on one type of martial art at a time and uncover what practitioners experience as unique about their practice. A phenomenological study of martial arts such as aikido or tai chi could examine bodily sensation, the feeling of energy flow, being and moving from one’s centre, staying grounded and in contact with the opponent’s energy and the emotion involved with specific movements. The phenomena of memories being “triggered” through muscle, movement and bodily contact in martial arts should be researched. Research investigations could examine the integrating experiences of body and mind, how practitioners perceive this connection and
their different modes of bodily awareness or consciousness when involved in martial arts movement.

Future research should attend to women fighters. Not all martial arts practitioners fight, and it would be interesting to ask internationally competitive women what it is about the intense physical fights that they find satisfying, challenging and worth the abuse that their bodies endure. Studies could explore the preferred conditions of competition, the ways in which women are competitive, their goals in competition and the controversial dilemma of women fighting men. Additionally, perception of pain and injury could be studied with attention to how these athletes rationalize risk and why they perpetuate the “no pain no gain” philosophy. Attention could also focus on how practitioners articulate or perceive attacks, in terms of incoming energy (providing unlimited potential for redirection) or in terms of aggression and force.

Research such as this naturally leads to creating new understandings of human conflict. Many martial artists find their knowledge of controlling, defusing or redirecting physical aggression is applicable in conflict resolution and useful in overcoming arduous personal challenges in their lives. Further research can examine understandings of the nature of human conflict and a how martial art facilitates individuals in conflict resolution and resistance.
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APPENDIX I: DOJO-KUN

Dojo-kun example 1 (recited by a Shito-ryu Itosukai karateka)

Be moderate and courteous
Be righteous and have a strong sense of justice
Be modest in words and actions
Respect Others
Karatedo is a lifelong study

Dojo-kun example 2 (source: Cyberdojo)

Gichin Funakoshi's Dojo Kun (Precepts of Karate Training)

Seek Perfection of Character
Defend the Path of Truth
Endeavor to Excel
Display Courtesy
Refrain from Violent Behavior

Dojo-kun example 3 (source: Canadian Kyokushin Karate Organization student handbook):

We will train our hearts and bodies for a firm unshaking spirit,
We will pursue the true meaning of the Martial Way,
so that in time our senses may be alert,
With true vigour, we will seek to cultivate a spirit of self-denial,
We will observe the rules of courtesy, respect our superiors and refrain from violence,
We will follow our religious principles and never forget the true virtue of humility,
We will look upwards to wisdom and strength, not seeking other desires,
All our lives, through the discipline of karate, we will seek to fulfill the Kyokushin Way
APPENDIX II: QUESTION ROSTER GUIDELINE:

1) How did you first start training in martial arts?
2) What were your initial challenges?
3) What has made you want to stick with it through all of these years?
4) Have your reasons for training changed since you first started?
5) What benefits have you experienced from training?
6) What are the continuing challenges you encounter?
7) Do you experience anything as particularly empowering about your martial art?
8) Has training had any effects on other spheres or situations in your life?
9) Do you encounter particular challenges being a female practitioner?
10) Does gender make a difference in the dojo (training hall)?
11) Why have women-only clubs? What is the reason and significance of an all female setting for martial arts training?
12) What is your personal philosophy on martial arts?
13) (I asked if they had any additional emphasis they’d like to say about their martial arts, training or experiences)