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Insurrectionary Womanliness: Gender and the (Boxing) Ring

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Abstract

Integrating sociological theory on sport with Judith Butler's concept of insurrectionary speech, the author explores why and how womanliness is produced and problematized. In particular, this article investigates how participating in combat sport violates conventional womanliness by foregrounding physical capability and aggression. Using her identity as a female fighter as a starting point to engage the cultural construction of womanliness, the author connects a critical/cultural look at gender and sport with autoethnography.

Keywords

Sport, Gender, Identity, Femininity, Autoethnography

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Insurrectionary Womanliness: Gender and the (Boxing) Ring

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Integrating sociological theory on sport with Judith Butler's concept of insurrectionary speech, the author explores why and how womanliness is produced and problematized. In particular, this article investigates how participating in combat sport violates conventional womanliness by foregrounding physical capability and aggression. Using her identity as a female fighter as a starting point to engage the cultural construction of womanliness, the author connects a critical/cultural look at gender and sport with autoethnography. Key Words: Sport, Gender, Identity, Femininity, Autoethnography.

“That’s not for ladies.” This is what my mother said when I told her I was taking a Muay Thai fight, and it remains the one and only time my mother told me an ambition was out of reach because of my gender. My mother approved of my martial arts training as long as it focused on self-defense and remaining fit. Engaging in physical combat was a different matter entirely. A woman who encouraged me to go to graduate school, cheered when I completed a marathon, and who has consistently rolled her eyes at my grandmother’s (her mother’s) emphasis on marriage as the ultimate social achievement for a woman, my mother is not a loud proponent of traditional female roles. Thus for me, my mother’s concern over, disapproval of, and high degree of discomfort with fighting signified a clear boundary.

Women aren’t supposed to want to hit somebody until they bleed, they aren’t supposed to draw a sense of satisfaction from the way an opponent’s body crumples when you land a solid hit, and they certainly aren’t supposed to feel unapologetic about knocking out an opponent in 19 seconds. In the rare case when women want to do these things, it is assumed they will not want to take part in traditional feminine activities like baking, home decorating, and pedicures. Though I never expected to be a fighter, and will only have a small amateur career, what I expected even less was that being a woman and being a fighter would prove to be a near-oxymoronic conundrum. My identity as a female fighter, and my surprise at how very much and how very consistently this identity problematizes social standards of femininity is my starting point from which to engage womanliness, a way to explore the promise and problems of insurrectionary speech.

Insurrectionary speech is a concept developed by Butler (1997) in *Excitable Speech* which she defines as expressing “conventional formulae in non-conventional ways” (p. 147). In so doing, insurrectionary speech destabilizes a standard way of being or relating to one’s environment, thus “stripping” traditional or standardized frameworks of their position as a norm (Baez, 2001, p. 146). Insurrectionary speech is typically discussed as a positive opportunity for empowerment, a way to rewrite a disempowering stereotype—and there is no doubt that insurrectionary speech can do this—but what happens when one wants to lay claim to the traditional as well? What happens when one wants more than what is left behind after the conventional has been stripped away, or

when one wants to fuse the conventional with the unconventional? How does one negotiate a post-insurrectionary identity?

I set the stage for my exploration of insurrectionary womanliness by exploring gender and sport with particular attention to the way combat sport is constructed as a male preserve. As I discuss below, physical activity remains more generally connected to masculinity than femininity (though this varies to greater or lesser degrees depending on the sport in question), but intense physical challenge coupled with minimal protective gear render combat sport close to something of a conservatory (if not an asylum or wellspring) for hegemonic masculinity. Moving forward, I explore how my identity as a female fighter violates conventional womanliness by foregrounding physical capability and aggression. This autoethnographic exploration of how womanliness is culturally produced and negotiated connects a critical/cultural look at gender and sport with the liminal space between “selfhood and social life”, what Reed-Danahay (1997) describes as the space of autoethnography (p. 4).

Methodological Groundwork

Autoethnography is deeply connected to postmodernist perspectives on knowledge “in which no one right form of knowledge exists and multiple viewpoints are acknowledged and valued” (Duncan, 2004, p. 3). In this context knowledge is understood as both subjective and (culturally) constructed, not as immutable, fixed, or objective. For this reason Goodall (2004) characterizes autoethnography as a form of applied communication research that overlaps strongly with the principles underwriting feminist standpoint theories (p.187). Hayano’s (1979) classic essay outlines the foundations of this methodology: autoethnography is a way of making known the experience’s of one’s “own people” (Hayano, 1979, p. 99), a way of exposing or revealing the interior of an experience or subject position, making it available as a point of understanding for those unfamiliar with a particular identity or subject position. Such translation requires a tacking “back and forth” between personal knowledge and critical evaluation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), a negotiation between close examination of what we know because of who we are, and framing that experience within broader social and cultural contexts. Autoethnography thus lies at the nexus created by overlapping insider and outsider perspectives. As such, this methodology encourages scholars “to explore more fully the implications and, perhaps, misguided uses of this dualism” (Reed-Danahay, 2009, p. 43), a way of contextualizing or complicating knowledge so that it cannot be neatly tidied away into categories like insider or outsider, objective or subjective.

Autoethnography’s rejection of distance as a model for scholarly engagement combined with a corresponding investment in reflexive writing practices means that autoethnography is often disparaged because it refuses claims to universality or objectivity—the typical foundation for what we consider knowledge. Instead of a detached observer, in this framework the researcher’s role is best described as “writer-as-interpreter” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 23). Within this critical paradigm there “is no such thing as ‘getting it right,’ only ‘getting it’ differently contoured and nuanced” (Richardson, 2000, p. 10). The epistemological payoff in autoethnography is that it makes it possible for researchers to discover “that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytical procedures” (Richardson, 2000, p. 10). As Goodall (2004)

explains, “for those of us who practice it, [autoethnography] is all about using the material of our personal backgrounds and lived experiences to explain why and how we see and interpret the meanings of persons and things the way we do” (p. 187). Following the autoethnographic approach described above, in this essay I use my insider position as a female fighter to explore how and why we construct gender and sport in a manner that renders female fighters as trespassers in combat sport communities.

Femininity, Feminism, and Fighting

Describing his late 1950s childhood, sport theorist Messner (2007) writes that “the few girls who were athletically inclined were often stigmatized for their interest in sport: maybe, it was whispered, they weren’t real girls?” (p. 1). The belief that women cannot successfully and competitively engage in high-level sport is so strong that it is not uncommon for female athletes to need to prove their identity as such: between 1966 and 1996 the International Olympic Committee required all women competing in the games to subject themselves to scientifically suspect and often humiliating medical procedures to prove their womanhood (the recent scrutiny endured by Caster Semanya brings this legacy to mind). The strong tie between manhood and elite athleticism has meant that female participation in competitive sport has been slow to grow, in large part because of the corresponding lack of opportunities and funding for women’s sport. American women’s involvement in institutionalized sport did not reach significant levels until the 1970s—a boost very much tied to Title IX. In 1972, American colleges had an average of two women’s sports teams; by 2004, American colleges averaged eight (Acosta & Carpenter, 2004). Funding and opportunities for girls’ and women’s participation in sport have risen though significant gaps still exist. However, while women’s involvement in sport has climbed, the social construction of athleticism nonetheless marks sport as a predominantly male activity.

Taking media coverage as a sort of cultural shorthand, it is clear that in today’s world to be an athlete is still very much to be a man: between 1989 and 2004 only 2% of ESPN’s SportsCenter program and 3% of Fox’s sports coverage focused on women’s sport (Duncan & Messner, 2004). Over the 6 weeks of 2004 television coverage Duncan and Messner analyzed, not once did SportsCenter or Fox sports programming lead with a story about female athletes or women’s sports. Further, barely more than half of the examined sports highlight shows (52%) included stories on female athletes or women’s sport (Duncan & Messner, 2005). Sport, then, remains an activity that both connotes and is connoted by masculinity. Boys and men are presumed to be more physically able and aggressive, girls and women to be less adept and more cooperative. Despite scientific studies to the contrary, the assumption that men are athletically proficient and women are not remains a hard-wearing feature of Western perspectives on gender (Roth & Basow, 2004). As a result, men are encouraged to be in the heart of the athletic action and women are encouraged to stay on the sidelines. Messner’s (2007) description of football highlights this concept: “In contrast to the bare and vulnerable bodies of the cheerleaders, the armored male bodies of the football players are elevated to mythical status, and, as such, give testimony to the undeniable ‘fact’ that here is at least one place where men are clearly superior to women” (p. 104). Supporting this claim, Messner offers a quote from a study participant: “A woman can do the same job I can do—maybe even be my boss. But

I'll be damned if she can go out on the field and take a hit from [a 200-pound linebacker]" (p. 37).

The belief that women are not—or should not be—physically competitive has deep roots in American sport culture. Mrs. Lou Henry Hoover (1923), president of the Women's Division of the National Athletic Foundation, argued against women participating in the 1928 Olympics, pushing instead for what she saw as a feminine model of athleticism—one without competition (National Amateur Athletic Federation, p. 286). Self-identified feminists calling for women's greater involvement in sport, despite championing women as physical beings, have deepened the divide between womanliness and (physical) aggression. Sixty-five years after Mrs. Hoover called for non-competitiveness as a model for women's physical activity, the well-known legal activist C. Mackinnon (1987) made the same point in a speech arguing for the positive connection between self-possession and women's involvement in sport: "Physicality for men is about force and domination, for women, about pleasure in movement and cooperation" (p. 121). Parratt (1994) similarly heralds a feminist turn to sport as a cooperative, inclusive endeavor (p. 9). Even for some feminists, it seems, to be a woman is not to be physically aggressive or competitive.

Many feminists frame women as competitive and do not structure aggressive sport as antithetical to feminist principles (see, for instance, Boxill, 2006), but competition and sport raise complex issues for women's studies scholars. Cultural feminists, who see men and women as fundamentally (biologically) different and profoundly emphasize caretaking and cooperation, resist valorizing aggressive sport because of its adversarial structure (Gilligan, 1982; Roth & Basow, 2004). Radical feminists similarly decry competition (especially as it is manifested in full contact sports) because it emphasizes domination and oppression (Roth & Basow, 2004)—the same reasons leading some feminists to argue for invitational, rather than persuasive, discourse (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Radical feminists are also loath to embrace sport because it is too similar to, and perhaps because it encourages, violence as it is practiced on personal and political levels (Davion, 1987; Theberge, 1981). Many feminists recognize physical activity as an important and oft-liberating practice (Christien, 2004), but women's participation in violent sport remains contentious both within feminism and broader social structures.

Messner (2007) points out that although female athlete bodies are increasingly constructed as high-functioning machines (as male bodies have been for generations), cultural constructions of women's sport are much less likely to frame the bodies of female athletes "as violent weapons to be used against other bodies" (p. 5). With respect to mixed martial arts (the type of physical combat popularized by the Ultimate Fighting Championship), Gargiulo (2010) asserts:

At first glance, it can be kind of hard to watch women compete in MMA. Seeing a woman drive her elbow into the nose of another girl or smash another girl in the eye with her fist can be a bit shocking. However, it doesn't take long to appreciate the skills that the ladies bring with them into an MMA ring. (np)

Interestingly, Garguilo does not find it shocking that men should do these things: his difficulty lies exclusively in the gender of the participants. Though Garguilo ultimately frames women as valued competitors in combat sport, reconciling women and martial arts requires some significant work on his part. That Garguilo must work to reconcile gender and combat can, in large part, be attributed to longstanding cultural traditions, which set sport apart as a space for the reification of masculinity (Burstyn, 1999).

But why is modern sport such a strong battleground for the display of masculinity? In short: the post-industrial labor-free workplace (Messner, 2007). Recorded in tales from ancient Greece, sport has a deep historical connection with the formation, expression, and maintenance of male identity. As the nature of earning a living transitioned from tilling the land to pounding a keyboard, sport became the arena to demonstrate masculinity through physicality and aggression: the rugged frontier has been replaced by slick urbanization, increasingly mechanized modes of production, and an active female workforce. Faced with these changes men have embraced sport as a site for expressing and affirming hegemonic masculinity. Scholars trace the 18th and 19th century rise of violent male sport to a reaction against the more civilized (read: soft) nature of industrial society (Dunning, 1986; Rembis, 2003); scholars similarly tie the present-day popularity of violent male sport to its ability to assuage male anxiety over women's social power (Dubbert, 1979; Kimmel, 1987; Nelson, 1994). The move away from physical labor has meant an increased turn to sport as a forum to demonstrate male capability.

If sport is socially constructed as a stronghold for hegemonic masculinity, then to participate in sport as a woman is a form of insurrectionary speech, a way of rewriting the performative code. And if fighting, as the most overt display of physical aggression, skill, and endurance is the ultimate expression of what it means to be a man, to participate in combat sport as a woman and as a peer is an even stronger embodiment of insurrectionary speech.

Cultural Combat: Insurrectionary Speech and Identity

Insurrectionary speech is founded on an interpellated subject. Interpellation, notably defined by Althusser (1971) as that which “can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” (p. 174). It is a two-part process: a speaker identifies (hails) a person as a particular kind of subject; by responding, one acknowledges oneself as a particular kind of subject. Insurrectionary speech can thus be understood as a constitutive rhetoric that pushes back against oppressive social structures like homophobia and racism. Rhetorical scholar M. Charland (1987) characterizes constitutive rhetoric as persuasive social narrative—how discourse functions to form collective identity and create an audience for a message. By responding to a message one assumes the identity invoked by the speaker, which means that one also assumes the subjectivity connected to this identity—a lens through which to organize experience and a basis from which to act.

To deploy insurrectionary speech is to take up a social utterance (the word “queer,” for example) and turn the utterance's power back on itself by recoding it, by using it in a new context. In so doing, insurrectionary speech supplants the subjectivity invoked by the term's original usage, replacing enervation with empowerment. Turning to an example of insurrectionary speech from the gym, when male training partners give

another guy a hard time about the lack of force on a punch (usually in a spirit of camaraderie), they habitually attempt to demean their partner by telling him he “hits like a girl”. My response when overhearing this type of motivation is to invite the guys over and offer to show them what it feels like to get hit by a girl.

Butler (1997) explains the power of insurrectionary speech this way: “To take up the name that one is called is no simple submission to prior authority, for the name is already unmoored from prior context, and entered into the labor of self-definition. The word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance in the redeployment that destroys the prior territory of its operation” (p. 163). Butler’s language here is both evocative and powerful. However, I contend insurrectionary speech is better understood as an instrument of resistance that troubles the prior territory of its operation, preferring Butler’s concept of unmooring over destruction. To destroy a prior territory of operation would mean that the old usage was fully expunged or superseded. Thinking of the cultural operations of “queer,” it is clear that even as there are instances in which “queer” operates as insurrectionary speech, there are many contexts in which the term holds a hateful resonance.

A “risk taken in response to being put at risk” (Butler, 1997, p. 163), insurrectionary speech is a Foucauldian use of power that reveals the constructed character of social beliefs and renders them malleable by dislodging them from conventional moorings. For Foucault (1980), “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (p. 193). Put differently, Foucault (1990) argues that power is not located at the top of a hierarchical structure, but is found “everywhere” (p. 93). This is not to say that hierarchical structures (like government) do not have power. They do. But the reason they have power, the reason such institutions are able to create and enact laws, for example, is because individuals have given them the power to do so and act accordingly. Thus for Foucault (1980), power can promise both subjugation and liberation: if power exists throughout the system, not simply at the top, then individuals—circulating in a “net-like system of power”—are able to act and determine their own course, including changing a system of power which they may have previously enabled (p. 98). By exposing the socially constructed nature of a term or category, insurrectionary speech takes back the power of definition and redirects it. Insurrectionary speech thus makes a label, for example, available for reconstruction and is a means to render ways of being more open or fluid—a means of making a way of being open to (re)construction.

Though originally developed and applied to speech acts, Schauer (2005) illustrates how visual practices can function as insurrectionary speech. Schauer asserts that women’s internet pornography finds insurrectionary potential by combining images from “previously mutually exclusive genres: gay and hetero-male pornography,” creating viewing pleasure for women through a both/and imagistic formation (p. 48). I similarly use Butler’s (1997) concept of insurrectionary speech to explore the insurrectionary potential of representation—the ways in which my identity as a female fighter rehearses conventional gender (femininity) in nonconventional ways (physical combat), fusing an either/or binary (feminine or combative) into a both/and construction.

Gender Identity as Combative Tour De Force

By fighting, I take up the definition of woman and deploy it in a different context, thus troubling the prior territory of its operation. Women are typically understood in Western culture not only as the gentler, weaker sex, but as the less aggressive, less assertive, nicer, more cooperative sex. This fact is strikingly made clear on some of the occasions when a new man joins the class—and heaves a sigh of relief at my presence, because he knows that at least there will be someone he is better than. Watching the consternation on their face once they discover their presumption is wrong, that just because I am a woman does not mean they are automatically better at combat, is sometimes comical, sometimes frustrating. As a fighter, I make it unmistakably clear that I am neither gentle nor weak, that I am aggressive, assertive, highly competitive, and not particularly nice when I am in the ring. The fact that I can hit harder than some of the men that I train with and that I both know and can competently deliver a range of elbow strikes designed to slice open or knock out an opponent (depending on the placement of the hit) violates nearly all traditional conceptions of what it means to be a woman.

But here lies the rub: by unmooring established context, I have broken apart the basis on which I found much of my identity: my femininity. Almost without fail, men who find out that I fight respond with some variation of “Wow, I’d better make sure not to get you mad at me,” in attempt to humorously fend off a perceived attack on their masculinity (this stands in strong distinction to the common response I get from women, which usually runs along the lines of “Cool!”). My identity as female and a fighter is also widely problematic for many of my male sparring partners. In order to work with me, virtually all of the men I train with have to see me as a “not girl.” A process I sometimes encourage by hitting them hard enough to make them want to hit back. I have discovered that a male training partner’s willingness to hit me often rises in direct correlation to how much I can “manhandle” him in the ring.

The martial art I practice is Muay Thai. Muay Thai, known as the “science of eight limbs,” is the national sport of Thailand. Like boxing and kickboxing, Muay Thai takes place within a ring, though unlike these other arts Muay Thai is deeply influenced by Buddhism: Muay Thai evolved out of an ancient battlefield art taught and practiced by monks. Muay Thai integrates elements common to boxing (like punches) with kicks, knees, and elbow strikes. In particular, the knee and elbow strikes are what distinguish Muay Thai from Westernized kickboxing, elements which also mark the sport as an unmistakably aggressive form of combat. When I started training, I never imagined that I would fight: indeed, I couldn’t watch a mixed martial arts match without covering my eyes. Over time, as I trained with partners (primarily men) whom I valued and respected, I learned to see the strategy behind the force, the critical thinking beneath the combat: no longer raw violence, I understood combat sport as a physical chess match.

I started out in a women’s only kickboxing class thinking it was a fun way to void dissertation angst. Having enjoyed the physical activity and wanting to continue developing the skills I had learned over the 6-week session, I signed up for an advanced boxing class. What had not been apparent in an all-female environment—the instructor’s sexism—became markedly obvious in a mixed-gender setting. After enduring twice-a-week classes in which men received the only technical instruction and indeed the only conversation with the instructor, the disparity had begun to wear on me: if a female

student was speaking with the instructor and a male student approached him, the instructor would quit speaking to the woman—frequently mid-sentence. There is only so much one can endure or dismiss by rolling one's eyes or sharing an exasperated sigh with a fellow female student.

The last straw was the instructor's 'advice' on strength training. Arriving an hour early for class I dropped off my gear, explaining I was going to work out in the weight room: to land heavier punches I needed to strengthen my core and develop the muscles in my arms and shoulders. Nonplussed, the instructor gazed at me for a moment, then smiled in amusement and said: "Well, just be careful. Don't go hurting yourself, now." Tired of the dismissive attitude born from his assumption that as a woman I was both feeble and frangible, I quit and joined a mixed martial arts gym: my sense of self was worth more than the \$60 I forfeited by paying for classes I did not attend. I would later quit that gym, and another, because they would not treat or train me as an equal. Despite the clash with my kickboxing instructor it had not occurred to me his viewpoint was anything other than an anomaly, a conflict I could dodge by changing gyms.

When I arrived for my first mixed martial arts class I felt awkward and out of place. The male friend who had told me about the gym and suggested I try it out wasn't able to get free from work, so I came alone. At first my presence didn't occasion more than a brief glance from the guys joking with each other as they warmed up before class. But the moment I sat down on the mats, clearly intending to take class with the collection of 20-something fighters sprawled out in a rough circle around the training space, it seemed as if all the oxygen left the room as the men fell silent and stared. I felt, for a moment, like a strange new species, an alien intruder. Apparently my presence was unremarkable insofar as the men assumed I was there to watch my boyfriend: a not uncommon occurrence, I learned, over the year I trained there. Uncomfortable as it was, I made it through the first class. I spoke with the guys who ran the gym and signed a contract to train there for a year: they knew my former instructor and agreed with me that he was both sexist and unprofessional. They would train me how to fight, they said. And at first they did. But as the months went by and I began to develop some skills it became clear they would never advance me beyond the beginner-level classes, nor would they encourage my training partners to treat me as an equal, capable of weathering punches and able to defend myself.

For a number of weeks I attempted to remedy this disparity by voicing my concerns to the instructors, only to spend more time in classes with training partners who would not engage me in the ring the way they engaged other men. Unbeknownst to me, the instructors told my male training partners to "take it easy" with me. After all, I was a girl. It was impolite to actually try to hit me in the face. Following repeated requests for improved coaching I realized neither the instructors nor my training partners could see past my gender and I stopped attending mixed martial arts classes, choosing to train full-time with my Muay Thai coach. A version of this experience would be repeated when I took my first job as a full-fledged academic and searched for a new gym in a new city.

Notwithstanding the frustration engendered by well-meant chauvinism my mixed martial arts adventure provided me with a decent foundation and some important lessons. Perhaps the most essential of these was that it is always a bad idea to tell your mother you get punched in the face as a hobby. But beyond basic skills and negotiating parental expectations, my time at this gym is important to me because it introduced me to Muay

Thai. Every Friday a trainer (who seemed roughly the size of a doorway) taught an afternoon class on Muay Thai. I looked forward to these sessions all week, in part because they were usually the only striking class with another female student (martial arts tend to separate into stand-up, or striking, arts like boxing or Muay Thai and groundwork like wrestling or Jiu Jitsu). Training with a woman was liberating: when she clocked me, and she did, she didn't feel bad and she didn't tone it down. She simply told me to keep my hands up. For more months than my mother would care to think of, I measured my training progress by how decidedly I got beat.

My first Muay Thai coach was the first (but not the last) trainer to take me seriously, the first to expect me to perform on an equal footing with the men he trained, the first to suggest I could fight. My Arjan (his Thai title, denoting rank) was also the first—and remains the only—coach to spell out that if I wanted to train with him and train to fight I would need to make peace with the possibility of having my nose or ribs broken. Whether it was a sign of personal fortitude or a personal failing, I was hooked by the challenge he set before me—here was a man who believed I could compete with the same passion and forcefulness as the male fighters I trained with. Here was a man who saw a fighter—not a woman, not a female fighter, but a fighter. Gender-free. Until he asked if I wanted to fight, followed closely by questions gauging my willingness to endure physical injury, it had never occurred to me this was a credible option: I was in my early 30s, in the midst of a PhD, and not gifted with innate athletic talent. Intrigued, I began training in earnest. It was a provocative lifestyle counterpoint to my dissertation on Martha Stewart exploring domestic style and design. To date, my first coach's advice has proved mostly accurate: I have broken one toe and jammed nearly all the others, badly sprained two ankles, banged up (but not broken) my nose, been so covered in bruises that a stranger in a supermarket assumed I was a battered spouse and wondered if they should seek police intervention, and was almost knocked out by a headkick from a female training partner six inches shorter and 30 pounds lighter than me.

Though it may not sound that way from the above description, it has all been great fun. Not, perhaps, in the moment (getting punched in the face or kicked in the head is nobody's idea of a great time), but I enjoy the challenges and struggles of learning this art, and value both the adrenaline rush and the learning opportunities offered by competition. I have as yet to find an activity as deeply and viscerally satisfying as kicking a heavy bag, listening to the dull thud my shin makes as it sinks into a leather-encased mixture of rags and sand, the struggles of the day leaking away as I focus on nothing more than the moment, nothing beyond the will to align my shin on a precise angle, nothing outside the space between my body and my target. Fighting may not be everyone's idea of a great way to spend a weekend, but it is mine, and along with writing and teaching and yoga it channels my hopes and desires into material benchmarks.

As a female fighter, my identity is complicated by the fact that I refuse to surrender my femininity. Like women are socialized to do, I take great pride in my appearance. I love couture haircuts, high heels, and edgy fashion. In addition, I enjoy slip-covering window perches for my cats, am addicted to decorating my apartment, and glory in making homemade ice cream (or, if I am dieting for a fight, low-sugar, non-fat, high-protein frozen yogurt). Were I to reject those markers of obvious femininity, my socialization as a fighter would perhaps be smoother: though insurrectionary, I could sort of become one of the guys. But because I refuse to yield to the binary structure

underwriting many identity positions (male or female, masculine or feminine, gay or straight, black or white), because I insist on holding on to some of the trappings of femininity while rejecting others, I am seen to inhabit the gender equivalent of the demilitarized zone—a nonspace space between two warring factions which neither side cedes nor conquers.

Epilogue

In 1987, Catherine MacKinnon asserted that women “get to choose between being a successful girl and being a successful athlete” (p. 120). Nearly 30 years later, MacKinnon’s observation rings lamentably true. Conceptions of, and perhaps more importantly, places for, conventional masculinity have eroded over the 19th and 20th centuries: the traditional habitat of the patriarchal male now labors under the stresses of extinction. If we take the premise that sport (especially in its most aggressive instantiations) is a way to establish male superiority, women’s ability to compete on an equal footing is a deep incursion onto hallowed ground. As perhaps one of the last great bastions of hegemonic masculinity, sport will remain a contested battleground for some time.

Noted above, Schauer (2005) portrays insurrectionary speech as a moment of positive promise because it illustrates the constructed nature of social categories and opens them up to resignification. Describing the insurrectionary potential of women’s internet pornography, Schauer states that the fusion of homo- and heterosexual images on these sites “juxtapose[s] homo- and heterosexual male pornographic conventions in such a way as to make their mutual exclusivity appear vulnerable” (p. 59). In such a figuration the full extent of the insurrectionary potential is found in its both/and configuration—not an oppositional clash between traditional either/ors, but a fluid concatenation forming new ground. On the face of it, Schauer’s analysis suggests similar positive promise for the both/and identity I inhabit. It may be that over time both/and identity configurations will come to shape more welcoming social ground, but the present experience of holding such an identity often feels more maddening or wearisome than promising.

My call here is simple, similar to the call offered by autoethnography itself: to explore more fully the implications and uses of cultural dualisms. Not to open up space for competing gender identities in a dialectical struggle over norms and subjectivities, but to push for more flexible frameworks and cultural constructions. The cognitive appeal of either/or frameworks is readily understandable—tidy arrangements of clearly bordered categories. The resignifications that lead to cultural change are a progression composed of messy, sluggish shifts. There are deep gulfs between traditional perspectives on femininity and the idea that women are the physical equal of men. Seeing women as physically capable and competent, able to defend oneself (in the ring or elsewhere) will require significant cultural change. Much of our understanding of womanhood is premised on the idea that women are soft and gentle. Thus rewriting conceptions of womanhood to include physical competence demands more than framing sport-related capability and aggression as the province of women as well as men. It demands that we no longer understand women qua women as submissive, compliant, or as cultural quarry. Though it is academically satisfying to call for new forms of cultural identities and though there is certainly need for such change, both/and identities are inhabited by people

living in largely either/or worlds. Illustrated through this short foray into rhetorical ethnography, the stakes raised by insurrectionary speech pose positive promise at the same time as they raise new questions about navigating nontraditional identities.

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