



INTRODUCTION

‘Hit me,’ I tell her. ‘It’s okay. I won’t break.’ Asking someone to punch a stranger in the face without anger or provocation is like administering an on-the-spot personality test. The young woman across from me is in her late teens. She’s soft-spoken and has a look that is both earnest and apologetic. This is no seedy back alley or mid-life crisis. This is just a drill. We are wearing boxing gloves and mouthguards and we’re both here to learn. Despite her reticence to strike, I know there is some part of her that wants to do it. I’ve been to every class since the day she joined the gym; for weeks now, she has kept coming back.

While many of us are socially programmed *not* to fight, there’s *something* that leads a person to a martial arts dojo or combat sports gym. It might be the workout, but you can get exercise a lot of ways. Sometimes people try it once and never come back. But as a regular at an MMA gym and an assistant kickboxing coach, I have seen a lot of new people come through. I can’t necessarily predict the ones who will stick around, but I will say this: in many cases, regardless of how a new student reacts to their first taste of training – from learning fighting stance, to taking lessons on how to throw the first basic punches or kicks – they show up again the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that. Sometimes a person gets hooked immediately, even if on the outside they seem uncomfortable, insecure, uncoordinated, or psychologically incapable of crossing the line to punch someone else on command (at the beginning, anyway). I understand this compulsion. I was one of those people.

As is so often the case, I make my way here standing on the shoulders of women who came before. Writers like Katherine Dunn and Sarah Deming began tracking (started writing about, and in

Deming's case, also competing in) boxing decades ago. At well over two hundred Muay Thai fights, Sylvie von Duuglas-Ittu has competed the most of any westerner in Thailand and has been thoughtfully chronicling her training and her place as a woman in martial arts. There are many others who have lent their bodies and their voices to the discussion, both historically and today. L.A. Jennings and Wendy L. Rouse have done an admirably thorough job of fleshing out comprehensive histories of women in combat sports training and competition. This book veers away from a strict historical account, however. I am starting with one close, limited, subjective history (my own) as a gateway to asking questions about other fighters and other stories. How do fighters – of all genders – navigate training, and the spaces of combat sports, now?

A fundamental question lingers throughout. What is a fighter? The more I seek the answer, the more disappointing the responses appear. Even in many of the most interesting and thoughtful accounts of and reflections on combat sports and martial arts culture, the concept of a 'fighter' is not male by default but male *by definition*. Maybe this isn't a surprise, or maybe I should have seen it coming. Regardless, it doesn't ring true. In what follows, I go beyond the stories and themes I see so often repeated in narratives about fighting and competition. Instead of simply asking what fighting shows us about being a man, as so many others have done, I'm changing the terms of the conversation in order to more accurately reflect reality, rather than popular – or some people's preferred – perception. The two terms, *man* and *fighter*, are not synonymous, no matter how many people try to tell us they are.

I have wins, and losses. But even a win isn't an end, and like a lot of people, my fight is as much outside of the ring as in it. This is why I have chosen to explore different questions, not only those applicable to women but those asked with a wider range of social and embodied experiences in mind. How do assumptions about femininity and masculinity shape cultural assumptions about fighting and self-defence? What does the often-repeated phrase 'mental toughness' mean to fighters and coaches? What's really behind the preoccupation with worrying about women getting cut or bruised in the face? How does self-defence signify when the lines between inside and outside

the ring get blurred? How do we negotiate being ‘coachable’ as students, given the dangers of being submissive to authorities and institutions that don’t necessarily have our best interests at heart? What are the verbal, psychological, and physical languages with which fighters and coaches communicate? How are different bodies regulated in combat competition and training? How do we both learn from and fight against the systems that form us? What does it mean to have – or lose – empathy in order to fight? And if it’s okay for men to cry all the way to, from, and in the MMA cage or the boxing ring, then why do I feel like such a failure if I get frustrated and tear up in training?

When I first stepped into a gym to try a kickboxing class, I had no idea where it would lead. As an academic in my thirties, emerging from the all-consuming project of completing my PhD, I was weak and out of touch with my body after years of physical inactivity. I had no experience with anything resembling a martial art and I disliked group exercise as a rule. An introvert in a public-facing career, I thought taking a kickboxing class would help me learn to be more assertive and I might get some exercise in the process. I got a lot more than I bargained for. The process of learning to fight has changed who I think I am, and what I feel I am capable of. In fact, it shows me how much and how often both of those categories can shift. I was holding the bar too low.

I am a planner. I rarely act rashly; it feels unbearable when I say or do the wrong thing. I want so badly to be in control, to have some power over the world around me and my place in it. And yet, as a woman, I am also constantly told how vulnerable I am. Combat training is, in many ways, about controlling both ourselves and others. We train to be perfect. We use mirrors, coaches, training videos, and exhaustive repetition in order to gain mastery over ourselves. But all of that work is necessary because when you step into the ring, you give up control. No matter who you are or how well you prepare, anything can happen in a fight. I did not think I would like that uncertainty, that letting go, and yet I have found that stepping into that intense situation offers a rare presence, focus, and immediacy – a kind of freedom. Coming to terms with my own power (which includes negotiating and challenging my own limitations) changes the way I move through the world, both inside and outside the ring.

This book is about how fighting changed my life. Though women have trained in martial arts for hundreds of years, combat sports are becoming increasingly popular with women. For many, this kind of training represents more than a fitness trend; it is part of a process of empowerment. This is not, as some detractors suggest, a loss of femininity. If fighting causes the erosion of some mythical womanly 'goodness,' then so be it. That fictional woman is not a model of gender or sex I would want to subscribe to anyway. In my life (for better or worse), I seem to have sought out historically masculine spaces, from the academy to the ring. I consciously and unconsciously mine these cultures to find elements I can adapt for myself. I want to take on these challenges, but I want to do them *my way*, and on my own terms.

Women who train to fight have to find their own ways to negotiate these spaces, ideally with their eyes open. Gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability all play a central part in determining a person's relationship to violence, and they inform the ways we respond to training, from self-defence to combat sports, with all the blur and overlap that connects them. There is a very real tension between practice and life outside the gym. Women live with the seeming inevitability, the constant looming threat, of violence or rape. This fact, among others, means that we move through the world differently than the majority of the men who teach and train beside us. When we bring our embodied histories and experiences into male-dominated combat sports and consider what it means to be there, however, our very presence has the potential to shed new light on notions of control, boundaries, and conflict.

By offering a look at the people, spaces, philosophies, rituals, and challenges of fighting sports like kickboxing, Muay Thai, boxing, and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu – combat sports that commonly feed into what we know now as MMA – I talk about the world that female fighters of all disciplines, ages, and experience levels are stepping into, and (in the best cases, I think) how women are remaking these spaces and the culture around them.