

Introduction

This book examines the emergence and development of a women's self-defense movement during the Progressive Era as women across the nation began studying boxing and jiu-jitsu. The women's self-defense movement arose simultaneously with the rise of the physical culture movement, concerns about the strength and future of the nation, fears associated with immigration and rapid urbanization, and the expansion of women's political and social rights. However, the meaning and transformation wrought through self-defense training varied from individual to individual. Women were inspired to take up self-defense training for very personal reasons that ranged from protecting themselves from stranger attacks on the street to rejecting gendered notions about feminine weakness and empowering themselves. Women's training in boxing and jiu-jitsu was both a reflection of and a response to the larger women's rights movement and the campaign for the vote. Self-defense training also opened up conversations about the less visible violence that many women faced in their own private lives.¹

At first glance it appears that the majority of women who participated in this Progressive Era self-defense movement were white women from the middle and upper classes. An interest in physical culture was especially popular among society women in the early twentieth century. The national obsession with physical culture at this time was somewhat linked to larger racialized and gendered concerns about the future of the Anglo race and indeed the future of the nation.² Women's athletics were promoted as essential to ensuring the health of the nation's future wives and mothers, with educated, native-born white women enjoying greater opportunities to learn jiu-jitsu and boxing through physical education courses in high school or college. After graduating from college, some women organized their own athletic social clubs where they continued their physical pursuits. Wealthier women could afford to hire professional boxers and wrestlers to give them private instruc-

tion. Japanese jiu-jitsu instructors also marketed their services to eager men and women desiring to learn the Japanese art of self-defense. Increasingly, women took classes in self-defense at gymnasiums. A few women became experts in self-defense themselves and began teaching other women.

The women who trained in boxing and jiu-jitsu were predominantly middle- or upper-class, native-born, and Anglo. However, working-class, immigrant, and nonwhite women also learned self-defense. Some of the interest in self-defense spread from the top down as reform-minded upper-class women advocated on behalf of women of the working class. Anne Morgan, for example, insisted on the necessity of self-defense for the protection of workingwomen and organized jiu-jitsu classes for shopgirls in New York City.³ Similarly, a department store in Newark, New Jersey, hired former boxer Charles Weiner to teach its female employees self-defense against men who might harass or assault them on their way to work.⁴ Upper- and middle-class women saw this work as a natural extension of their role as members of the civilized Anglo race. Casting off the notion that they themselves needed male protection, these women assumed the role of protector of women of less civilized races and classes. In so doing, they were able to gain some degree of authority and power within the confines of existing gender and racial boundaries.⁵

Yet boxing had emerged from and was a large part of the culture of the working class.⁶ Lower-class women, therefore, most likely learned self-defense in less formal and less public ways than their upper-class counterparts. Young women growing up in the working class may have learned boxing from relatives or friends in their own homes. Some of the working-class women who learned boxing in the early twentieth century went on to train more formally, with a few even pursuing careers as exhibition or competitive fighters. These women were motivated perhaps more by economic motives than simply by a desire to learn self-defense.

Whether the participants were rich or poor, the self-defense movement appears to have been overwhelmingly an urban movement. Most of the formal classes were held in large cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. The impetus and demand for self-defense courses seemed to be partly inspired by concern for women's safety in the urban jungle. Anxiety over the presence

of more women on the city streets led to concerns over their physical safety. Self-defense training seemed essential to protecting women from attacks by the strange men they might encounter as they navigated through public space.

The fact that the majority of women who studied and advocated self-defense were urban, Anglo women from the middle and upper classes is significant. These women were trapped in an oppressive legal, economic, and political system that ignored white men's violence against them. Anglo men were depicted as women's natural protectors and as exemplars of morality and civilized behavior. Immigrants and men of color were more often stereotyped as dangerous kidnappers, rapists, and murderers. However, this only obscured the reality, deflecting blame for violence against women onto nonwhite, nonnative men. But the truth was that native-born Anglo men were the primary perpetrators of harassment and violence against women on the streets. Recognizing this and rejecting the notion that women needed white men to serve as their protectors, some women rebelled against the constraints of white femininity and trained to defend themselves against attackers. Unable to fully accept the notion that women would be capable of fighting back and unwilling to relinquish their view of themselves as women's natural protectors, white men reenvisioned and justified self-defense as a way for white women to protect themselves from potential attacks by nonwhite men only when they were not present to do so themselves. Thus, objections against women studying boxing and jiu-jitsu dissipated as long as women's self-defense was framed as a means of protecting white women's sexual purity from threats by nonwhite men and therefore in effect preserving white women's bodies for white men. The potential masculinizing effects of women's athletic conditioning were mitigated through the creation of less intense, sanitized versions of boxing and jiu-jitsu lessons for women that focused primarily on preserving their feminine beauty while promoting normative cultural conceptions of heterosexual, white femininity. The objectification and sexualization of female self-defense practitioners served to minimize fears about the potential disrupting influence of women's training in the fighting arts on traditional gender and sexual norms. Outward displays of normative femininity and the construction of female fighters as objects of heterosexual desire further minimized critiques of women's self-defense.

Women who more dramatically stepped outside the box, pursuing a rigorous course of self-defense training, fully acknowledging women's capacity for violence, or rejecting the notion that women were inherently vulnerable and requiring male protection, were marginalized by mainstream society as nonconformist physical freaks, masculinized deviants, or deluded by unrealistic feminist notions. Yet these women who transgressed the boundaries of normative gender relations paved the way for future generations of female athletes and embraced a model of women's self-defense that in some ways foreshadowed the empowerment model adopted by second-wave feminists.

The first two chapters of this book examine how women came to study boxing and jiu-jitsu, respectively, and the larger cultural and political debates about those two fighting systems. The remaining three chapters focus specifically on the significance of the first women's self-defense movement and its ability to transform the individual lives of women on the street, in the political arena, and in the home.

Chapter 1 surveys the roots of the women's self-defense movement in the physical culture movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Justified as a way of maintaining a healthy, younger-looking physique and preparing women's bodies for motherhood, women's athletics became increasingly popular around the turn of the century. Women across the country eagerly began practicing a range of sports, from tennis and cycling to the more controversial sport of boxing. Eugenics contributed to the craze by raising the specter of race degeneration and by pointing to declining birthrates among elite Anglo families, the expanding population of nonwhites, and increasing miscegenation between the races. Ensuring the survival of the Anglo race included a commitment to improving the physical health of middle- and upper-class men and women. The physical culture movement became a national obsession that was promoted by the nation's leading academics and politicians as necessary not only for the health of the nation but also for the perpetuation of the Anglo race. Pioneering women used the new obsession with the nation's health to justify their participation in traditionally male sports. This chapter explores aspects of race, masculinity, and boxing to set the stage for women's entry into the male world of combat sports. Female boxers challenged notions of masculinity and femininity through their training in the quintessential "manly

art.” In the process, they broke down gender barriers and shattered preconceptions about feminine frailty. Enduring personal attacks, some female boxers chose to emphasize their femininity in an effort to deflect criticism about the masculinizing effects of boxing. Female athletes who exhibited outward displays of acceptable white, heterosexual femininity found more social acceptance. The physical culture movement encouraged the transgression of class boundaries as men and women of the upper classes studied sanitized elements of working-class fighting sports, and working-class men and women found a degree of fame and upward mobility in exhibition boxing or prizefighting. Working-class female exhibition fighters, however, found their bodies objectified, sexualized, and commercialized by promoters who often were more interested in turning a profit than in promoting equality in athletics for men and women.

Chapter 2 turns to jiu-jitsu by exploring the history of how American men and women came to train in the Japanese martial art. This chapter considers the broader historical context of American jiu-jitsu training within the framework of the larger debate about imperialism, manliness, and the future of the white race. The rising military power of Japan and an increase in Japanese immigration to the United States combined to create a fear of the Yellow Peril. This fear led to a national debate about boxing and jiu-jitsu in an attempt to determine which fighting system (and by extension which race and nation) was ultimately superior. The debate played out in the popular press as well as in gymnasiums across America as Japanese jiu-jitsu experts literally battled it out against American boxers and wrestlers. A variety of responses to jiu-jitsu were evident in the discourse that followed, ranging from exoticizing, vilifying, and feminizing the art to an eventual appropriation of aspects of jiu-jitsu. As American men wrestled with jiu-jitsu’s effectiveness in relation to Western styles of fighting and its meanings for American manhood, American women seized opportunities to justify their own experimentation with jiu-jitsu.

Chapter 3 explores how women who trained in boxing and jiu-jitsu used their newfound knowledge to lay claim to public space. Increasingly, women began to recognize the usefulness of self-defense as a means of physical empowerment against potential attackers. Working-class women had already learned to negotiate the perils of the city

streets. However, the existence of more upper- and middle-class women in public, where they were subjected to the sexual gaze of men, generated anxiety over potential threats to women's respectability. Envisioning themselves as the purveyors of the advances of white civilization, some middle- and upper-class Protestant women justified their movement into the public domain as a way of civilizing and uplifting the less advanced classes and races. To these middle- and upper-class women, self-defense represented a means of exercising their right to safely walk down the street free from harassment and sexual assault. These women also advocated self-defense training for working-class women as a way of protecting them from the advances of sexual predators or unscrupulous men who threatened the moral reputation of young working women. Newspapers reported numerous examples of women successfully using their self-defense skills to thwart violent attacks on the street and in their workplaces. The sinister threats that awaited them in the stereotyped forms of the flirtatious masher, the foreign white slaver, and the black rapist endangered their physical safety and sexual respectability. Beneath the hype, however, the fact that the practitioners and advocates of women's self-defense were predominantly upper- and middle-class native-born white women, and their attackers native-born white men, revealed an undercurrent of discontent that suggested a fissure in white racial solidarity. Self-defense equipped women with the skills to fight for their rights and paved the way for other women by asserting their right to exist and thrive in the public domain.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion by examining the broader cultural and political implications of women's self-defense and considering the explicit connections between the physical and political empowerment of women during the Progressive Era. Women's self-defense training disrupted existing gender stereotypes and countered the myth that men were women's natural protectors. Women's rights advocates recognized the significance of this new bodily empowerment and linked it to larger campaigns to challenge the oppressive patriarchal structure. The radical suggestion that women were capable of serving as their own protectors in effect both emerged from and was influenced by larger campaigns for women's rights. Advocates for women's self-defense training in England and the United States insisted that all women could defend themselves and should learn self-defense not only to protect themselves physically

but also to prepare themselves psychologically for the political battles they would face in the public and private spheres. Militant English suffragettes increasingly used their bodies to convey discontent and resist oppression through marches, pickets, and hunger strikes. Self-defense training offered some women yet another way to embody the political as their bodies became vehicles for resisting gender violence. Although only a few radical American suffragists explicitly sought to emulate their English counterparts by specifically training in self-defense, the English model led to important discussions in the United States about women's use of violence and the myth of the male protector.⁷ American suffragists experienced much less physical violence than the English suffragettes. However, their own experiences with harassment and violence challenged American suffragists to reconsider their views about women's right to empower their bodies and use force when necessary. These discussions further shaped the views of women's rights activists and later feminists about the potential of self-defense training to help liberate them from their subservient status. Yet, and perhaps more important, even average women, with no direct association with suffrage organizations, expressed a newfound sense of liberation through physical training in boxing and jiu-jitsu. Although not all of the women who trained in boxing and jiu-jitsu had explicit political motives, women's self-defense figuratively and literally disrupted the existing power structure. By physically embodying the political, these women stretched the limits of the definition of the "New Woman."

Beyond the social and political implications, the self-defense movement led to conversations about the violence that women faced in their own homes. On an individual level, some advocates believed that the discussion of women's self-defense could have revolutionary implications for women who suffered in abusive relationships. Nowhere was the myth of the male protector more blatantly dismantled than in the homes of women who were subjected to violence perpetrated by the men they loved. This is the subject of chapter 5. Despite the popular rhetoric about the dangers that women faced from shadowy strangers on the street, self-defense advocates understood that women were most likely to be attacked by a relative or an intimate partner. Most often they would face violence not on the city streets but in the privacy of their own homes. The discourse surrounding women's self-defense helped pierce the si-

lence about the true sources of violence against women. The women's self-defense movement thus came to symbolize the fight against gender oppression in public and in private.

Progressive Era women who trained in and advocated self-defense found a way to make the political physical by empowering their bodies through self-defense. Few scholars, however, have specifically examined or even acknowledged the efforts of this generation of women in pursuing boxing and jiu-jitsu as a means not only of self-defense but also of expressing their personal and political power. Through self-defense training, women deconstructed femininity and myths about inherent feminine weakness, constructing instead a new image of women as powerful and self-reliant. Their bodies then become sites of resistance against an oppressive system. Whether or not women consciously pursued self-defense for these reasons, their actions embodied feminist politics.⁸ Although their individual motivations may have varied, their collective action echoed through the century. The women's self-defense movement demanded women's emancipation from the constricting barriers that prevented them from exercising their full rights as citizens and human beings.⁹