

Analysis Draft

Martial Arts and Masculinity

Despite practicing Taekwondo for 13 years, I only competed in two sparring tournaments, once when I was seven, and another when I was 10. Neither experience was particularly harrowing, or especially exciting, I was just not drawn to it the way my peers were. I was able to keep up with them in practice, but my instructor could see that I was not nearly as motivated, so he suggested I spend more time training the registered forms. While my peers found them immensely boring, I was drawn to the meditative experience found in the choreographed sequences of kicks, blocks, and punches. By the time I was 15, I learned the first 10 registered forms and was performing demonstrations at local tournaments a few times a year. So, when my instructor approached me about presenting in a tournament one day, I was quick to accept his offer.

On the day of the tournament, I sat on a set of dusty, red puzzle mats and went through a short warm-up sequence as I watched one of my friends take a round kick to the head. He and his sparring partner exchanged a few more blows before the end of the match, which ended in a loss to our team. After an intermission, the announcer's voice echoed through the gym, "before our next set of matches, we have a short demonstration from a student, and she will be doing the Poomsae, Koryo". I looked around for a minute confused as the announcer didn't mention my name, but that was the form I was supposed to demonstrate. Initially, I thought he was introducing someone else, but my instructor tapped me on the back, letting me know I should make my way to the mats. I assumed I misheard something, or the announcer misspoke, but I was introduced with my name and she/her pronouns before the 2 other demonstrations I did that day as well. By the end of my last demonstration my instructor was furious with the announcer's blatant disregard for my introduction as one of his students, and I was left confused, unsure why

Commented [SM1]: Poomsae: Form Koryo: The title of one of the registered forms I was demonstrating

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I was singled-out with she/her pronouns in a space of predominantly men as there was no women's category in that tournament.

Examining my attitude towards the practice of sparring reveals a distinction between my intentions with Taekwondo as a practice and that of my peers. Martinez suggests that the sanctioned combat found in martial arts creates an atmosphere of masculinity where the practitioners gain honor through their ability to hide their pain (Martinez 447). My practice of the registered forms over sparring connotes my desire to avoid this embodied performance of masculinity. However, choosing that method of training when I was perfectly capable and had the potential to excel in combat suggests a more antagonistic attitude against this performance of masculinity. So, by choosing to train forms over sparring, my practice of Taekwondo antagonizes this performance of masculinity as I continued to exist in that social space.

An analysis of how I was misgendered during the tournament affirms this notion of the creation of a masculinized space within the practice of Taekwondo. At the tournament, I was dressed the same as every other participant there, a typical Dobok (a white two-piece uniform with black and red stripes that run along the neckline), and my belt. However, my hair was longer, and I did have it tied back, which is unusual for Ugandan men, but since I was typically coded as foreign in public, I had never really had any strangers question my hair before.

Reconsidering my practice of forms in the tournament outside of my usual practice space reveals how forms are not just "boring", they were seen as useless in the broader spaces that I inhabited. As a sport martial art, this notion of utility is often brought up in Taekwondo. To earn points, it's more about how many kicks you can land on your opponent rather than their force. Force is used tactfully, but it is not a necessity. This fact leads other martial arts practitioners to believe that Taekwondo is a useless combat sport to train because it is not functional in real life.

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This assumption leads to an insecurity in the minds of many Taekwondo practitioners, who feel they need to justify their chosen martial art by being the best they can be in combat. Therefore, by resisting the dominant urge to affirm my chosen martial art by honing my combat skills, I antagonized the masculine ideal in Taekwondo. My rejection of this ideal leads to my feminization in the binary gender system. This experience gave me a clearer understanding of the different ways the body is gendered outside of stereotypical ideas of expression.

Re-identification



Maganda, Shawn, Fig 1, 2020

After altering my training to include more intense flexibility work over the first few months of the pandemic, I began posting photos and videos to Instagram in November of 2020. Although I used a different name to hide the existence of my page from my friends and former classmates, I enjoyed the process of posting as it was the first time, I was able to look at images of myself without cringing.

In March of 2021 I woke up to a notification stating my account had been tagged in someone else's post. I didn't think much of it at first, assuming it was one of those bots that automatically tag accounts for engagement, but when I clicked on the notification, I realized that it was an account that I followed. Joining All Movement (JAM) is a brand that runs parkour, tricking, and freerunning gyms in Los Angeles and Atlanta. They serve as a community hub for movement athletes. One of the co-founders Travis Wong, a stunt coordinator and consultant for Cirque du Soleil, has hosted a variety of interviews with popular movement athletes and a show where he and a guest react to popular training clips posted during that week (JAM).

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This notion of re-identification as a process is highlighted by my presence on JAM. The show featured clips primarily from tricking athletes. Tricking is this amalgamation of martial arts, gymnastics, and break dancing inspired by the more contemporary demonstrations found in Sport Karate, Taekwondo, and Wushu. It basically actualizes every fantastical hand-to-hand combat scene you might see in an action movie. My performance in this virtual space, that supports tricking as an interdisciplinary practice, reveals how my video they reacted to represents the intermediary stage of my transition from martial artist to contortionist. In my analysis of this video nearly 3 years after its creation, I noticed elements of my Taekwondo training that persisted through my movement despite actively trying to deviate from them. For example, in my first transition from stag (fig. 2) to split (fig. 3), there is this speed I approach the extension of

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Maganda, Shawn, Fig 3, 2021

my leg that is reminiscent of a front snap kick. The pacing of this movement connotes an embodied impulse to portray this sense of strength and power that I would in Taekwondo. This embodied urge to convey a sense of strength and power in my performance of flexibility alludes to this notion of



Maganda, Shawn, Fig 4, 2021

safety that I still clung onto despite the assumption of anonymity.

Commented [SM6]: Again, still trying to think of a better word

Returning to the host's commentary on my video, their analysis of my movement highlights this confusion surrounding how I am perceived. The first skill they identify in the

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video is “skin the cat” (Wong 10:29), which is a skill typically used in calisthenics and gymnastics. However, as the clip progresses, they lose the ability to track where my movement is inspired from acknowledging my flexibility, but unable to place where it comes from.

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Inhabiting Implicitly Gendered Spaces

This confusion surrounding my identity leads to my first experience with a space designed for the practice of circus arts. In the summer of 2021, I had come to the US to prepare for university. With ample free time, I wanted to find a place to train with proper aerial acrobatics equipment, as it was something I had dabbled in, but had no access to when I was in Uganda. After a quick google search and a 10-mile bike ride, I arrived at my first circus training space.

I tried to find a class that taught single-point trapeze or aerial straps, but all the classes were at an advanced level, so I settled on an all-level aerial silks class, as there are a lot of transferable skills between straps and silks, the latter is just a bit more forgiving pain-wise. Aerial silks are an apparatus where two strands of polyester-lycra or nylon tricot are hung from a rigging loop attached to the ceiling (Quynbi) (Fig 5.). I arrived at the gym a little early, so I spent some time warming up and talking with the trainer. She asked about my prior experience with aerial acrobatics, and I said I had none, but had a solid foundation for it with my training in Taekwondo and contortion. She was about to respond but at that point the other members of the class had begun to file in, so she excused herself to make sure all the equipment was ready.



Maganda, Shawn, Fig 5, 2021

Commented [SM9]: Definitions? I don't talk about them any more so I didn't think they were important

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The class consisted of 5 women who had been training there consistently for a few months so I was a little worried if I would be able to keep up with the class. The ground warmups were familiar, but a lot of the terminology the trainer used originated from dance so there was a slight delay in my responses as I figured out what I needed to be doing. Working with the silks was an interesting process as there were some skills that came to me naturally and others that I struggled with through most of the class. By the end of the session, I was praised for my ability to keep up with the class despite my lack of experience. Leaving the class I felt fulfilled and excited to be training in a new discipline, yet I had these conflicting feelings of displacement as well.

While I had a positive experience with the class overall, this ambiguous feeling was reminiscent of the internal conflict I felt in martial arts spaces. I was able to enter the space of aerial acrobatics and perform at a level that kept me in sync with my peers. However, there was this underlying assumption that my presence there was unusual. This is alluded to in my inability to recognize the terminology used by the trainer, while all my peers followed along without question.

This idea of “displacement” is heightened through the analysis of the aerial acrobatics gym as an implicitly gendered space. Unlike my experience in Taekwondo as an explicitly masculinized practice, class sign ups at this gym were separated by skill level and apparatus, suggesting that there was no gender distinction. However, my existence in the space after discovering all my peers were women reveals the training center as implicitly gendered with femininity. Although there are less gender stereotypes in the practice of contemporary circus, there’s still some discourse surrounding who gravitates to what apparatus based on gender. I attended a few more classes at this gym specifically and other gyms in the years after and have

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noticed that this gendering of apparatus has been present across amateur spaces (where people train but don't earn money from performing). Examining the circus training center as an implicitly gendered space of femininity reveals how my performance of advanced flexibility granted me access to the space, yet my expression as a masculine-presenting person invokes these feelings of displacement that question how the expression of my gender shapes my gender identity.

Embodying Gender through Contortion

By the time I started university, I was training primarily in hand balancing and contortion and one of the first classes I took was a theater class titled 'Feminism and Performance'. Over the course of the semester, we read a variety of works in the disciplines of queer theory, gender studies, and performance theory, to better understand the ways that culture constructed the performance of gender on stage and in the media. Our midterm assignment was to develop a monologue about our experience of gender to gain a more embodied understanding of how an actor's gender identity and expression influenced the portrayal of their character on stage.

As one of the two cisgender men in the class, I was unsure how to approach this assignment in a manner that effectively addressed the intersections between feminism and the performance of gender we had discussed to that point in the semester. I began my draft focusing on this notion of what it means to identify with a specific label and what that implied for my expression of those labels (race, gender, sexuality, etc.). I worked through the conflicts of intersecting identity labels and how those relationships changed my understanding of the labels themselves and my identity as a whole.

Commented [SM10]: This is the scene that I want to lead into my final conclusion but I've been having a hard time trying to figure out how to analyze it

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As an assignment, the first draft of my monologue was satisfactory, but I still felt like it was missing something. I looked back through our assignments with the gender studies theorist Kate Bornstein, who examined the ways in which everyone embodies gender regardless of whether they identify with what they were assigned at birth. Returning to this notion of embodiment, I was inspired to write about contortion as an embodied performance of my gender. This resulted in the final draft of my monologue depicting a character examining the feedback they received on a show that they were rehearsing. Their standing split was critiqued for being too masculine, but their handstand sequence was critiqued for being too flowy and feminine. As they contemplated how to fix these issues with their performance, my character tries to train their aerials, a cartwheel where you increase the power in your takeoff, so your hands don't touch the ground. Each time they failed to complete the trick, weighed down by the earlier critiques. Before their final attempt, my character resolves to accept the feedback, but not let it influence the confidence they have in the quality of their performance. This results in them being able to complete an aerial and walk out of the dressing room feeling more confident overall.

Experiences that seem relevant, but I don't know how to include/if they're worth including:

- Choreographing my first performance with more advanced flexibility outside of a martial arts space to metal
 - Metal invoking an atmosphere of masculinity that hides the feminization of contortion
- Getting hit on by a drunk guy who watched me train/Being sexualized on social media
 - Sexualization of flexibility
- Performing at a drag show but not in drag

Commented [SM11]: The more I think about it I'll probably bring up similar ideas that I analyzed in the JAM section so I probably won't add it

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