

# **POP GYM**

## **THE ZINE!**

**FEATURING STORIES/ART ABOUT:**

**SELF-DEFENSE  
ACCESIBILITY  
BODY POSITIVITY  
SAFE SPACE  
AND MORE!**



**#2**

# **Forward**

## **(March 2019)**

### **Hello!**

I don't know if this is the your second issue, if this is your first time picking up our zine, your second read-through of the second issue, your first time reading both issues backwards (I don't know your life), but we are so happy to have you here on this page our second-ever zine!

As we mentioned before, this zine is filled with stories and art from a bunch of folks who do martial arts, self-defense, health, and more!. Not so much a "how to" guide, but more a collection of narratives from folks who have found and made a place for themselves within the Martial Arts and Movement world, and how their practices have changed them. We hope that this zine (also featuring some cool resources) will inspire folks to pick up some self-defense of their own, even if it means going to your local self-defense workshop whenever you have a free moment.

As we go into our third year of existence, we just can't wait for all the cool events we have coming up: new spaces, new friends, old friends, new opportunities to share self-defense skills with folks and communities we love to work with. We're crossing our fingers because of some big plans we have coming up that could take this project to the NEXT LEVEL, and we can't wait for all the cool things this can bring.

In any case, hope you enjoy the works in this zine. Wherever you are in your life (or wherever we are in the future) hopefully this zine can be of some use to you in some way.  
:)

## Table of Contents

<b>Mission Statement.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Three Measures.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Untitled.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Aikido and Inclusion.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Dreams and the Abolition of Capitalism.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Re-Appropriation of Boxing After a Traumatizing Assault.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>These Things Do Not Measure Your Worth.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Fighting Notions of Toxic Masculinity in a Trans-Inclusive Mixed Martial Arts Class.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Interview with MMA Fighter, Echo.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Healthy Is Not A Body Type.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Pop Jams.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>About the Authors.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Self-Defense Resources.....</b>	<b>40</b>



*Maeve Norton*

## **Pop Gym Mission Statement**

Pop Gym is an open gym where folks can come to jump, run, punch, roll, sweat, and dance together; a place where people can meet to learn from and build strong bonds with one another; a place where our neighbors can come and learn skills that we hope can help them to feel empowered and to navigate the world with confidence and security. We seek to add to and expand upon the rich tapestry of New York community spaces, through a rearticulation of the recreational facility; we wish to develop a communal skill space.

Pop Gym has a variety of programming that acknowledges our always transforming bodies, meant to meet folks at their individual educational needs. Education in our workshops is derived from the individual experiences and curiosities brought into the room. We have neither rankings, nor masters. We strive to make Pop Gym a safe and secure environment, where we can work both from an understanding of the conditions that divide us and toward an intercommunal solidarity. We wish to engage in the process of community building while simultaneously understanding the need for practices that allow marginalized communities to discuss and develop in privacy. We try to meet people where they're at.

Toward athleticism without commodification or patriarchy to strengthen ourselves and our communities.

I use three measures for effective training:

Body,

conditioning and movement skill,

Mind,

environment awareness and response, and

Spirit,

the ability to maintain composure under pressure.



Any chance to improve any of these betters me.

*Three Measures- Mike*

## Untitled

### by Sarah Duell

Anger and conflict used to make me so uncomfortable that I would rather ignore any issues completely or resolve arguments as quickly as possible. Disagreements seemed like problems that needed an immediate solution, and I saw it as my job to make them go away. I even had a hard time letting people complain or vent without trying to put a positive spin on their distress. I realized how annoying my cheery disposition could be; I was told multiple times to “stop being such a diplomat!” At the same time, I was also told that my upbeat attitude was an example to live by—that positive thinking was some sort of key to happiness.

I loved this gentle image of myself so much that whenever it was impossible to avoid conflict, I would just fold, letting things slide so an agreement could be reached faster. My sister used to say I was like a goose: things just slid off me, as if nothing ever bothered me. Though I liked being described as easygoing, in reality, I was in a hurry to get to the point where everyone got along.

It wasn’t until I got an astrology reading that I realized I needed to balance out my soft, diplomatic tendencies. After a long reading on the Upper East Side full of talk about ascendants, horizons, planets, and elements, the astrologer, Astro Anne, interrupted herself to ask what kind of exercise I did. “Swimming? No, that’s no good—you already have too much water in your chart,” she said. “And biking? Bike-riding is good, but it’s not grounding. You need to do something physical and in contact. Something where you punch

or hit one another with sticks—a martial art like kendo, Krav Maga, or kickboxing.”

The thought seemed outlandish. Why would I, who had identified as a pacifist my entire life, start hurting people for fun? I looked up the three martial arts she suggested on YouTube, and they all looked worse than I had imagined: kendo looked like something from Star Wars (although I could maybe have gotten into it for the fancy robes), Krav Maga seemed way too intense, and kickboxing was just swollen noses and blood everywhere. I wasn’t convinced any of these sports would be suitable for me. But, as a committed astrology enthusiast, I was still willing to try one out—just once, so I could say I had tried it and could legitimately dismiss it. I settled for kickboxing, but only because a gym had opened less than a block away from my house.

It turned out Astro Anne was completely right: kickboxing was the sport I had been waiting for. Not because it took me from sensitive flower to ultimate fighting champion overnight (or at all), but because it has helped me see the point of aggression and assertiveness. At the gym, I’m in a space where dominance is considered a positive, necessary attribute. My coaches have compared fights where two people just go punch-for-punch to a polite conversation; what you want to be doing instead is constantly interrupting the other person, not letting them think or see the patterns of your movements. I found that there was no room for diplomatic compromise; if I didn’t assert myself during sparring, even my smaller classmates would bulldoze me. One woman, who was much lighter and shorter than me, was able to boss me around because she was so much less compromising in her ways. “One day you’re going to realize how tall and strong you are, and you won’t let me push you around any-

more,” she told me between sparring sessions.

This made sense logically, but it was so far from my natural way of doing things. Aiming a punch at someone’s face was hard enough for me; to also try and assert my dominance over them was even harder. I was constantly told I was too nice, that I needed to kick with more intention, and to not forget to aim for the face. Kickboxing was an hour of two of pure discomfort, and I couldn’t cheat my way out by avoiding contact or hitting too lightly. Though we were never actually angry with each other at the gym, through training, I started to realize that anger and conflict served a purpose. In the same way that my partner’s legs couldn’t get conditioned unless I kicked at them, or how they wouldn’t learn to parry or block a punch if I didn’t aim at their face, I would never get used to anger unless I faced it head-on. If we didn’t help each other out by being intentional and accurate, neither of us would be prepared for the harder, faster punches and kicks that would come in the more advanced classes.

The transition from regular drill class, where we did punch-and-kick combinations determined by the coach, to the advanced class, where we would be paired off and lightly spar with each other, was monumental. I couldn’t have anticipated how hard it would be to stay relaxed, remember to breathe, and keep my eyes open when I didn’t know what combination was coming. If regular class was uncomfortable, this was next-level painful. I never really got hurt; the worst that happened, physically, was some bruises and soreness the next day. The pain was primarily psychological. Not moving your head in time to evade a punch and being hit right on the nose did not hurt so much as it was stressful and a bit embarrassing. I started crying in class twice

because I was so overwhelmed by my partner's speed or technique. It was different from crying outside of the gym, where it could be a cathartic release from built-up pressure. At the gym, I wanted nothing more than to hold it in and make it stop. I knew the gym was a safe space and that my partners were experienced enough not to actually hurt me, but my body refused, and I had to sit it out until my tears dried and I got my shallow, rapid breathing back to normal.

Just as Astro Anne had predicted, kickboxing was grounding. I grew a lot, both in class and outside of the gym, as I became more assertive and less bothered by conflict. I would actively miss training when I had not been able to go on a regular basis, looking up at the gym windows longingly as I walked past it on my way home. Yet another part of me still did not get the attraction of punching your friends. I watched mixed martial arts fights on TV to learn how the sport was practiced on a professional level. I would also go to live fights to support competing fighters from the gym. But when I saw a fight that was too unequal—where one person just dominated the other completely, or when, in MMA, they would keep punching their opponent when they were down, or macho dudes in the crowd would start chanting, "Kill him! Kill that pussy!"—my stomach would turn. What was I doing there, watching this brutality? Why would I support this kind of violence? It was interesting to continue to practice, watching and exploring something that instinctively felt both so wrong and so right at the same time.

I have felt comfortable continuing, in part, because of the exceptionally un-macho environment of my gym; though my classmates are not especially varied in age or ethnicity, there has been a fairly balanced mix of genders. Some

people have come to class with something to prove, but the gym is small enough, and the coaches smart enough, that they would recognize them and intervene. It has always felt like a safe space to me. Over the years, I have sometimes lost momentum, missing classes due to travel or sickness. Even though it takes a lot of courage and humility to get back into sparring and that place of discomfort, I have always returned.



*Emily Ringel*

## Aikido and Inclusion

### by Andrew Dangelo

I began Aikido training when I was 12 years old in a small town in Massachusetts. I wanted to start training because I wanted to learn how to use my body. As a young queer kid in the middle of nowhere, the culture surrounding athletics, which I was bad at, only highlighted my small-town alienation. I didn't have an interest in fighting, or even in being tough or defending myself (Not to say that being able to do so didn't come in handy later on). I wanted to learn about this body that I had. It was a kind of serendipity that put me at the dojo. My mother knew the instructor, and I had dabbled in it for a very short time when I was a younger child. I went to the dojo and watched class and immediately felt it was something I could do. It looked like a lot of fun, rolling around and moving rhythmically while throwing people. In addition to that, the presence of the teacher attracted me. He would later become one of the most important people in my life. The Aikido that I started training in was not very advanced or martial in its technique. However, this was a dojo that focused quite a bit on Zen training. The Aikido movements were really there to supplement the Zen practice. My teacher was a very intense and very sharp Zen practitioner. The personal attention that he gave me was really what caught me. I don't think I knew this at the time, but immediately the depth of what was being studied there sucked me in. I knew almost right away that this practice would supersede most things in my life. As the years progressed, I dove deeper and deeper into the martial aspects of Aikido while my Zen roots remained at the heart of my practice. The pursuit of something technical and refined led me to a prolonged relationship with the technique of Aikido in particular. Because of this background in Zen, Aikido

always remained a human being practice to me. That is to say, a way to understand that you are human being first. Aikido is a Japanese martial art classified as a Budo. Budo is a kind of training in martial arts that focuses on the development of the human being. It is a “Do,” the Japanese syllable meaning “way.” It is not just a system of self-defense or fighting. That is why the focus is generally on the quality of techniques, the purest movement, the most beautiful form. Sparring and tactical applications are things that exist on the periphery of the training.

At its heart, Aikido is about purifying form in order to purify the mind. Aikido practice is set up as a partnered training. Therefore, communication and non-verbal physical dialogue are paramount. Of course there’s always the pleasure of getting exercise, community, and the benefits of discipline.

Perhaps the most relevant aspects of this kind of practice to someone who identifies with a subculture, or minority, is the balance that it gives people who focus most of their lives on their unique identity. Being queer governs most of my pursuits. My love life, my creative endeavors as an artist and my politics. But when you’re on the mat you’re training with every kind of human being. People from all over the world, people of all sorts of identities and political orientations. You’re all there wearing a uniform and practicing with each other as equals. Everyone is there in order to study their humanity within this martial dialogue. To injure someone else is to injure yourself. To disrespect someone else is to disrespect yourself. To help others grow is to help yourself grow. To dedicate yourself to your training is to dedicate yourself to your fellow practitioners. To listen to your teacher and take everything they say sincerely, is to be sincere with in yourself. Being a human being first, before you are a specific “kind” of human being makes you a stronger advocate for your particular corner

of the world in your daily life. To me, this is the real aim of inclusion. Tolerance is a weak word for me. Tolerance suggests that we maintain the division between our “kind” and everyone else. Division breeds conflict. Budo is about dissolving dualistic thinking, and eroding division and conflict. I think inclusion is about respecting the worldly differences between people because you understand that underneath it all, we are the same. It’s wonderful when you’re able to bond with someone you would otherwise never connect with, because you’re sweating it out together on the mat. What you have in common becomes clear. You are both human beings training through your tension, your struggle, and looking for freedom and refinement in your movements together. Training in traditional martial arts not only gave me physical confidence as a bullied teenager, but it allowed me to connect and communicate with people who walk very different paths than I do as an adult. Moreover, it is given me the ability to see training in every aspect of my life.



*Baily Crawford*

## Dreams and the Abolition of Capitalism

### Cindy Samantha

*History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.  
Lift up your eyes upon This day breaking for you.  
Give birth again  
To the dream.  
Women, children, men,  
Take it into the palms of your hands.  
Mold it into the shape of your most  
Private need. Sculpt it into  
The image of your most public self.  
Lift up your hearts  
Each new hour holds new chances  
For new beginnings.*

-From “On the Pulse of the Morning” by Maya Angelou

*He who is reluctant to recognize me is against me.*

-From “Black Skin, White Masks” by Frantz Fanon

As we continue to face the indescribable nightmares of daily life, in particular for incarcerated people, black people, brown people, immigrants, queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming people, people living and fighting daily under colonialism...we can't help but have other types of dreams as well. Capitalist society forces us to live in a day to day reality that is an inversion of what we need to thrive. The way our society is currently organized takes the best aspects of humanity---intelligence, collectivity, creativity, empathy, ingenuity, relationship to plants and animals--and turns them against us. Our creativity is used

to create machines that exploit us, our ingenuity to make systems that destroy the environment and our bodies. Our collective reliance on others is manipulated as a form of punishment when we're ripped from the arms of our families at borders, prison waiting rooms, and create dependence and alienation. This form of organization of society--capitalism--is not necessary. In fact it's the opposite of what humans tend towards. That our society is full of prisons, psychiatric institutions, and full of people suffering from illness and pain is testament to the constant fight capitalism has to make to force people into its organization. White supremacy and patriarchy are examples of social structures that capitalism requires to maintain its alienation and order. Without these hierarchies reinforced by people every day, the union of the working class and oppressed against capitalism would force it to crumble immediately.



Despite attempts-- often carried out directly by the state, but also by bosses, international organizations, and sometimes even our neighbors--to extract every bit of our humanity and leave us with nothing, our will to live our fullest lives in ways that disrupt exploitation and oppression is also present on a day to day basis. The need to be our full selves and live in cooperation with others is so strong,

in fact, that it often pervades our sleep. Dreams reveal that which is inverted under the restraints of capitalism. We can't help but to dream truth, our desires, our fears, and our selves. Sometimes in dreams, we see ourselves overcoming a difficult situation. Other times we connect with those we have lost. Still other dreams seem to be an amalgamation of images, memories, pieces of songs. But what all dreams have in common is that our subconscious takes all the material it has access to and brings it into relation. Dreams are always an effort to reconnect what has been disconnected, to make sense of our history and future, even when we wake up confused. And dreams always deal in what is hidden in our waking life, the parts of ourselves and the universe that are kept at bay by work, illness, alienation, and poverty.

While it is easiest for most of us to dream at night, it is crucial for us to also dream while we are awake, and to dream together. It is necessary to take all the material we have before us--our resources, our pain, our trauma, our communities, our health--and see it take shape in new configurations. Dreams are so powerful because they are rooted in the every day. They are by necessity grounded only in what is already part of us, even if it's not always accessible in consciousness. Dreams bring together memories, emotions, intuition, empathy.

Dreams show us where we are now in a panoramic view, and how what exists in this moment can unfold into the future. They allow us to see an entire picture of our society, and to take snapshots from different locations and reconfigure them. Dreams can find the aspects of our lives that have been obscured by the day to day drudgery of the hustle, and the moment to moment protection of ourselves from trauma. Because of this dreams lead us to vision. By getting rid of restrictions and allowing seemingly disparate components of our lives to meet in ways we

haven't yet experienced, we are able to think of living in a world that we have only experienced in bits and pieces. One of the biggest challenges facing the world of humans today is being able to imagine a society created by those who are currently the most exploited, where everyone has equal access to meet their needs and desires, to total freedom of creativity and association, to full health and wellness for every living being. In a world full of suffering, these seem like childish fantasies. But in a world driven by dreams, we can see that the possibility of this reality exists all around us. We have moments where we can see these aspects of a new reality shining in the present, revealed in the sound of a man's voice singing in the subway, the eyes of a baby, or the reflection of leaves in a stream. Vision is created by allowing these moments to take on their own meaning and life, and build a new reality that crumbles the veneer of our current situation, revealing the possibilities for every being to live fully, healthily, complexly, and in connection.

Being able to hold this vision and articulate it is crucial for healers and revolutionaries. To be able to say something or touch somewhere that sparks someone's self-recognition is an actual materially significant healing act; to be able to pull a curtain up that reveals underlying liberatory social relations is the root of revolutionary activity. However horrific the world we live in is now, it is rooted in a great deal of power for survival, beauty, cooperation, and healing. To look at the world as a revolutionary is to see that the very basis of your exhausting wage labor job is the creativity necessary to make something that goes beyond meeting your own individual immediate needs. To look at the world as a healer is to see the migraines, nausea, back spasm, toothache...as health in the process of becoming. And of course, vision only exists in relation to collective struggle. It is a reflection of and projection into the work we do every day for liberation--whether it's stuffing en-

velopes, barricading a street, pulling a comrade from the cops, washing someone's eyes from chemical weapons, or giving encouraging words. But struggle without vision is a losing battle.

I invite you all to dream, vision, and allow what is seeping in your subconscious desires to come to the surface. We need to reveal the truth of our strength and resiliency now as ever, and to be carried away by the power underlying our every day.



*Maeve Norton*

## Re-appropriation of boxing after a traumatising assault



*The «Tiger Yant» symbolizes power and strength due to the tigers. Furthermore, the tiger is considered fearless and is therefore especially popular among Muay Thai fighters\*.*

This short guideline has been elaborated by the support group of a person (a white cis-man – let's call him Alex) who, in a complicated case of domestic violence, has been physically assaulted by a close friend of his (also a white cis-man). For many years, Alex has been an ardent lover and practitioner of Muay Thai (Thai boxing). During the assault, Alex was not able to – and did not want to – fight back. After the assault, and the concomitant trauma, Alex did not feel capable to go back to training.

The support group observed that Thai boxing was a constitutive part of Alex' identity and should therefore also be

productively included in his healing process. The guidelines are suggestions to re-appropriate the beloved sport and to work through the trauma.

The support group hopes that the guideline can be helpful and empowering for other people as well.

In solidarity and love with all survivors of violence  
Alex' support group, Summer 2018

## **Re-appropriation of boxing**

**Important principles in the re-appropriation of a beloved activity that has become difficult due to an assault / a traumatic experience**

1. Have control over what happens (as a loss of control occurred during the assault)
2. If the activity normally involves more than one person: enjoy support from more than one person in re-appropriating the activity (as the trust in other people was destroyed in the attack)
3. The process of re-appropriation has to pay respect to your feelings and your speed, no pressure (in the assault, there was no respect for you)
4. If the activity involves your body: first establish a positive relationship with the body / physical activity, e.g. through other physical activities such as massage, yoga, Pilates, fitness, etc.; if possible with a supportive person (as your positive relationship to body / physical activity was disturbed in the assault)

## In terms of Thai boxing, this can include:

(These are all just suggestions, they may or may not fit.  
Don't worry :))

### 1. Control

- You determine when, where, how, with whom you train and/or box this includes among other things:
  - you choose your boxing partners (maybe you feel better with people of a different gender than the one of the person who caused harm? maybe not)
  - you determine the place where you feel comfortable: a park, a room, a gym... it can also be a new place
  - you decide when it starts and when it stops (you can interrupt/cancel the training at any time)
  - boxing will be done according to the rules you suggest
    - you determine the techniques (e.g. only low kick-exercises? only elbows? etc.) and hardness (e.g. no sparing, only technique)
- (of course you can also define all this together; but it is important that your needs are not ignored)

### 2. Support

- your boxing partners know your story and/or know what is necessary to support you in this process of reappropriation
  - your boxing partners take into account your needs, feelings and pace, need for breaks, stop etc..
  - your boxing partners give you full control over the situation
    - you don't have to explain/justify yourself or be ashamed in front of them

### 3. No pressure; respect for you

- you advance in a process that respects your feelings and your pace, your "training schedule" gives you room

for your recovery

- you find yourself in your own self-determined process, there is no external pressure and no schedule to follow (unless you give yourself one)

#### 4. Positive relationship with the body / physical activity

- Since boxing is difficult for you, the negative link can be broken and the positive link can be re-established “indirectly” via other physical activities. For example, via:

- other very body-focused activities such as massage, yoga, Pilates

- fitness exercises that prepare you for boxing and increase your fitness level for future training (so you can reduce frustration at restarting): rope jumping, crossfit, jogging,...

- combine these exercises with something that gives you confidence: For example, listening to your music at the same time; training in a place where you feel safe, etc.

- other very different martial arts? e.g. Aikido?

- Building/maintaining theoretical relationship to boxing (Start to break the negative connection by confronting the positive side of the sport without having to practice it yourself); can you imagine watching a fight on YouTube? Go to the gym and just watch the training? Read reports about it? Talk about techniques / fights with other boxers?

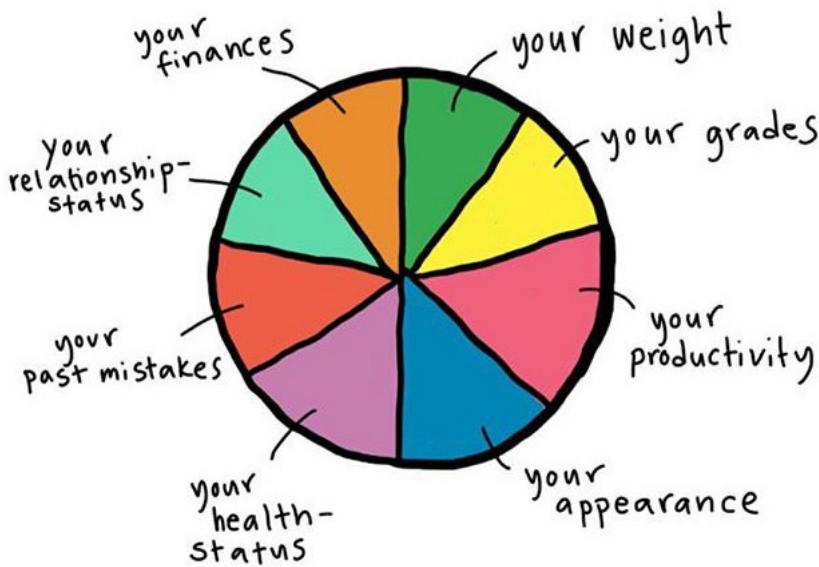
Interesting article on martial arts and people affected by (sexualized and/or physical) violence

<http://www.budo-inochi.com/10-ways-martial-arts-training-can-help-survivors-of-abuse/>

Another motivating article on how one can carefully take up martial arts again (yet, the article does not consider the experience of violence/trauma)

<https://evolve-mma.com/blog/heres-how-to-get-back-into-training-after-a-long-break/>

## THESE THINGS DO NOT MEASURE YOUR WORTH



crazyheadcomics

# Fighting Notions of Toxic Masculinity in a Trans-Inclusive Mixed Martial Arts Class

I used to practice MMA to prove that I was a masculine cis man. Now, I'm returning to classes as a trans woman, and redefining the sport for myself.

BY LARA AMERICO  
(originally featured in *them* magazine)



*Image by Lucy Kirk*

When I first approached an abandoned-looking building in New York City in hopes of attending my first MMA lesson, I found myself circling the area, searching for other people who may have been heading to the same free class for women and nonbinary people. It was getting dark. My palms started to sweat and my heart started to race. I double-checked the address on the flyer. This was it.

I ran through my internal defense checklist — I'm a trans woman, and I've been confronted in public about my gender before, so I'm always on guard and aware of my potential vulnerabilities. I held my bag close to my body to decrease the amount of area one could grab onto. I

pushed my chin down to protect my neck and leave less of my face open to an attack. I looked straight ahead and prepared to spot any sudden moves in my periphery. I then realized I was tapping into self-defense skills to get myself to a self-defense class.

I was facing a fear by going to Pop Gym's free, weekly MMA class for women, trans, gender-nonconforming and nonbinary students. It wasn't traveling alone while queer that I was afraid of; I was going back to an environment that was never welcoming to me or to other queer people, to a sport that re-enforced the internalized transphobia that I am still working through today.

Finally, someone showed up with a gym bag and a book I recognized from the LGBTQ+ section of the bookstore. I was in the right place. Another person arrived with Muay Thai shorts. They greeted us, taped a sign on the old weathered door, and we were in.

From the outside, I had assumed we were walking into an abandoned warehouse, so I was surprised to enter what looked like something between a scene out of Paris Is Burning and the ending of Enter the Dragon. There were mirrors, chandeliers, walls painted with murals. I could feel the queer magic everywhere. I started to imagine I was in an LGBTQ+ version of a Bruce Lee movie. Already, I was sold.

The instructor introduced themselves as Grey, using the pronouns they/he. I was stunned. This person, wearing martial arts clothes, holding a bag full of boxing wraps and Muay Thai kicking pads, wanted to know my pronouns and introduced themselves with their own.

This was a culture shock. It wasn't too long ago that I was attempting to convince my friends and family that I was

happy with the male gender I was assigned at birth. In my mind, there was a checklist of everything I was taught to be in order to be accepted as a “normal” cisgender man; for me, that meant creating an aggressive, hypermasculine persona. Mixed martial arts was my preferred method to achieve this.

Just looking the part of a trained fighter was a leap into the hypermasculine appearance I trying to sport. A shaved head, defined biceps, a thick wrestler’s neck, and facial hair was the baseline. My tone of voice was similar to a drill instructor without a platoon. I left most people with the impression that at some point we would end up in a fist fight. It was perfect.

I spent most of my 20s trying to be the strongest, fastest fighter I could be. I would ride my bike for miles to the gym. Once I got there, I would full-contact spar with multiple opponents. I was a master at Bas Rutten liver kicks, Georges St. Pierre double-leg takedowns, and the Eddie Bravo rubber guard.

Being a fighter was a way to convince myself and the rest of the world that I was a masculine person, a cis man who belonged in mainstream society. My ultimate goal was to fight in the UFC, believing no one would be able to question my masculinity if I fought my way to facing people in the Octagon.

Fast-forward to the fully actualized, feminine person I am today. I don’t need an outlet to prove my gender. My unique blend of femininity and masculinity is more powerful than any submission hold or right hook I could ever throw. My authenticity in the face of constant adversity is more fearless than challenging the toughest opponent in the cage.

At most, an MMA fight lasts 25 minutes. Fighting oppressive cultural norms is a lifelong battle. In the cage, all you have to do is tap out. There's no way to tap out of discrimination.

At the MMA class, Grey made sure to include people of all gender identities. I couldn't hear the first exercise instructions because one of my classmates was asking me for transition advice about hair removal. I followed the other students' lead in a circle where we duck-walked around the portable wrestling mat. I couldn't help but practice my voguing under the giant chandelier.

This was a far cry from the toxic MMA environment that I was used to. I was waiting to be misgendered, or for my femininity to be seen as a weakness. My mind replayed transphobic comments from Joe Rogan's interviews about Fallon Fox, a transgender MMA fighter. I thought of Dana White, the president of the UFC, giving a speech in support of Donald Trump at the Republican Presidential Nomination. I remembered the existence of the alt-right MMA fight clubs that are increasingly popping up worldwide.

None of those things were present at Pop Gym. Grey, who reminded me of almost every member of the original Power Rangers, led us through different Muay Thai and Brazilian jiu jitsu techniques and practical self-defense escapes for different situations. I found myself teaching my training partner ways to gain the upper hand while scrambling with an attacker on the ground.

I hadn't stepped on a wrestling mat in eight years. I've always loved the chess match that happens between two opponents who are similarly skilled in MMA, and I had missed the bonds that form after challenging your body

and skill with someone. It's hard for me to find it in any other sport. I didn't realize how much I yearned for it. Going to Pop Gym gave me a chance to face my fears and revisit a sport that has been a source of physical and emotional trauma for me. It gave me a chance to prove to myself that MMA doesn't have to be toxic or transphobic. More importantly, the classes allow queer and trans people to feel safer.

As strange as it sounds, it helps to be reminded that a sport where the goal is to render someone unconscious isn't necessarily gendered, at least in theory. A right hook isn't masculine and a gogoplata isn't feminine. They just are, the same as skin, hair, and halter tops. Taking this class helped me to realize that I had been projecting gender onto MMA. I was creating a problem before I even walked into the gym — each time I did so, I carried the cisgender normative ideals I was trying to escape with me. I wanted to hurt people and I wanted people to hurt me. I wanted someone to choke out the gender roles that were forced upon me. I saw every person who hurt me on the other side of my fists. Being assigned male at birth, this was the only way I knew how to let out pain: with violence. But not anymore.

I plan to go back to Pop Gym to practice the martial arts moves that I once used as a badge of masculinity. I'll return to the sport without the toxicity I previously used to hide my queerness. You can find me locking on a rear naked choke without gender and throwing the queerest liver kicks you've ever seen. I can be as feminine or as masculine as I want, and redefine what it means to be physically strong without regard for social norms.

One punch and kick at a time, I will overcome toxic masculinity.



fem foundry  
x  
POP GYM

Grace Robinson

## **Interview with MMA Fighter, Echo**

**Pop Gym:** To start, who are you (name/pronouns), and what history do you have with martial arts (i.e. styles, how long you have trained)?

**Echo:** My name is Echo and my pronouns are They/Them. I have trained martial arts for about 12 years. I started with Krav Maga, then Muay Thai, Jiu Jitsu, Judo, Dutch Kickboxing and MMA. I'm a purple belt in Jiu Jitsu and brown belt in Judo.

**PG:** Why do you like martial arts? What does it give you?

**E:** I like martial arts because it's practical, enlightening, challenging and humbling among other virtues. It's the most honest of art forms. You either win or lose in fighting, it's not subjective, it's materialist.

**PG:** Do you see martial arts as a space for community-building?

**E:** Martial arts has always been a space for community building. It's internationalist. My teammates, coaches, krus, senseis, professors and students are from all walks of life and backgrounds. It's a unifier for those seeking to challenge themselves and test their abilities in some of the most counter intuitive human experiences one could be subjected to willingly : pain, violence, fear and anxiety, fight or flight, submission et al. You grow from it and respect your fellow fighters understanding their journey through your own experience.

**PG:** What are your feelings on what people feel to be the toxic machoness of martial arts and fight sports?

**E:** It's understandable, however it generally comes from people who have little to no in depth experience in martial arts. I know plenty of non toxic people, women, youth, trans, gay and gender non conforming people who train hard and compete and it's an insulting and erasing narrative to the people who exist in the community of combat sports and martial arts. The history of combat is rooted in a culture of men and warfare but it's been a long time since they've had exclusivity or monopoly ,and raising people up and highlighting people who challenge these norms is a lot better than erasing their existence for the sake of a hot take narrative.

**PG:** If you feel that the narrative of toxic masculinity is not representative of your experience of working with folks with diversity of genders in martial arts, where do you think this narrative comes from, and why is it so prominent?

**E:** Like all grand narratives I think it's rooted in the dominant cultural tendencies. Capitalist-patriarchy promotes the idea, the dominant images/media that fighting, martial arts and combat is something reserved for cis men. The dominant culture benefits in people believing it to be so. The reality is most people don't personally know dedicated, full time martial artists/fighters/athletes. I do. We do. Most people don't know they are capable of being a martial artist because it's implied that they can't.

**PG:** Do you have thoughts on what a feminist martial arts practice (i.e. queer friendly, body positive, etc) would look like?

**E:** Martial arts is for all people. The techniques are based on science, history, and body mechanics that are true for all people. Bad gym culture exists but isn't reflective of martial arts as a sum or most gyms. I've trained for over a decade with all body types and plenty and queer people. The culture of martial arts could always use work towards more positivity, but you could say that about your job or school for example. Maybe I'm misunderstanding the question.

**PG:** Are there groups/orgs/opportunities out there that those who have been traditionally excluded from martial arts should know about?

**E:** In Boston I worked with Level Ground MMA which gave access to Jiu Jitsu, Muay Thai, MMA and more to underserved communities. Jiu Jitsu and Judo for all in NYC seems to have a similar model, although I have yet to connect with them. There's numerous DIY groups in cities across the country I've seen pop up offering more access to people as well.

**PG:** What would you say that martial arts can bring to those who are uncomfortable with the idea of "fighting" or "violence"?

**E:** It will bring confidence. It will bring a higher awareness to your body, your health and your soul. It will bring you material tools to defend yourself that have been tried and true through decades and even centuries of experience.

**PG:** What has teaching martial arts given you?

**E:** Purpose more than anything. I can't imagine my life

without the gifts and blessing my teachers have given to me. I'm happy to share my love, my joy and history with others.

**PG:** Could you describe your “toughest moment” within your martial arts career, and what you did to face it?

**E:** Probably cutting weight down to 125 lbs from 150+ lbs. my coach didn't time it well and I just follow orders so I had to lose about 7 lbs the day of weigh-ins when I was already a skeleton. it was too much weight with only 6 hours to go but I did it and fulfilled my duty. Had to go on the scale a couple different times, I was over still by a 1lb 1/2 first go. I suited up again in the sauna suit, went back in the car with the heat on and moved around/punched the air to sweat more. This is what I did on the drive to the venue earlier as well. I suffered, but probably the proudest day for my spirit.

**PG:** What can spaces/organizations do to make their martial arts practices inclusive to a wider array of folks from a variety of class, race, gender, and/or accessibility backgrounds?

**E:** I think open dialogue and communication is all one can do against a mountain narrative that is martial arts is only for some people and not most. Also having good, quality instructors because I've never met one that's said to someone they shouldn't or couldn't do a martial art or fight.

**PG:** Are there any general thoughts, ideas you would like to leave the readers with, concerning your time as a martial artist, rad politics, and/or empowerment?

**E:** It's never too late to do something worthy.

**HEALTHY  
IS NOT  
A BODY  
TYPE**



@BoPoLena  
 @LenaDirscherl

# POP JAMS

by Kirsten

Beyoncé ~ GET ME BODIED

Cerice ~ WEARY

Gouge Away ~ ONLY FRIEND

Limp Wrist ~ THICK SKIN

G.L.O.S.S. ~ OUTCAST STOMP

Public Enemy ~ SHUT EM DOWN

The Distillers ~ BEAT YOUR HEART OUT

Blue Cantrell ~ BREATHE

Xylitol ~ IT'LL SLIP

Metric ~ HELP I'M ALIVE

Kendrick Lamar ~ PRIDE

Santigold ~ DISPARATE YOUTH

X ~ BREATHLESS

Janelle Monae ~ WAY YOU MAKE ME FEEL

Night Witch ~ DRESSES

Hirs Collective ~ FEMME FOR FEMME

TORSO ~ BUILD AND BREAK

Rihanna ~ RED LIPSTICK

The Cramps ~ INSIDE OUT AND UPSIDE DOWN

X-Ray Specs ~ I CAN'T DO ANYTHING

A Tribe Called Quest & Faith Evans ~ STRESSED OUT

Exotica - IT'S NO REVOLUTION

<https://open.spotify.com/user/1221105571/playlist/51HShozV5T46x869KMel02R?si=Lx6u-2p-Qp>

230pHaFP2Kjw

## About the Authors

**Sara Duell** is a designer living, working and training in Brooklyn. [saraduell.com](http://saraduell.com)"

**Andrew D'Angelo** is the chief instructor of Wickwood Aikido in Bushwick Brooklyn. He has been practicing for 22 years under some of the worlds leading Aikido masters connected with the main dojo in Japan. He began his training at the age of 12, and since opening the dojo in 2017, travels regularly to receive and teach seminars. He began engaging with the queer community in New York hosting parties and organizing events. As an adult, he moved into fashion and contemporary art as an artist focusing on queer identity in aesthetics and subcultural platforms.

<https://m.facebook.com/aikidoofwickwood/>

@wickwoodaikido on instagram

[Www.wickwoodaikido.com](http://www.wickwoodaikido.com)

**Cindy Samantha** is a queer parent, bodyworker, herb student, and organizer in New York. She can be found at [cindysamanthalmt.com](http://cindysamanthalmt.com) and organizes with incarcerated workers organizing committee NYC ([Facebook.com/iwocnyc](http://Facebook.com/iwocnyc)). She is interested in meeting other revolutionary healers and parents/child caretakers.

**Alexs' Self Group** is part of an anarchist, queerfeminist, antiracist collective based in Basel, Switzerland. We raise awareness about societal power structures and support individuals and communities in processes of transformative justice. You can reach us via [awareness-basel@riseup.net](mailto:awareness-basel@riseup.net)

**Lara America** is a trans feminie artist and journalist who enjoys getting swile and submission grappling, living in New York City. Check her stuff out at [laraamerico.com](http://laraamerico.com)

## About the Artists

A number of works in this zine come from **Fem Foundry**. Fem Foundry is a Brooklyn-based artist collective. What started as a need to create a space for female-identifying artists in Brooklyn has grown into a community and space for all female-identifying, queer, gender non-conforming creatives of all age, race and culture. Through different mediums, we've drawn together a vast range of artists by using a common theme or mission. Our goal is simple: to make cool things and inspire others to join. Whether that be a collaborative book, a sticker pack, or a hosting a workshop, we aim to connect artists through shared creative experiences and open a dialogue about our position in the arts and the influence it can have outside of the art world.

- **Emily Ringel** is an illustrator and co-founder of Fem Foundry based in Brooklyn, NY. When not drawing, she can most often be found in the kitchen, testing new recipes. Emily is delighted by farmers markets, brownstones and Strand's rare book room.
- **Baily Crawford** is an illustrator and designer. She lives in Brooklyn, New York with her hedgehog, Smooch. She enjoys camping, open mics and wearing leopard print. She works at Scholastic Publishing, designing covers for middle-grade and young adult books.
- **Grace Robinson** is a co-founder of Fem Foundry and a Brooklyn based illustrator. When not painting, she can be found creating taxidermy art and hanging out with her cat Norwood.
- **Julie Finn** is a graphic designer, illustrator and fruit scanning vagabond. Her work is a recipe of bright patterns, curvy line drawings, textured vegetables, and/or vintage collage cutouts. Julie is a proud co-mother of Fem Foundry, and believes in the power of collaboration, travel and a good wine paired with cheese.

**Maeve Norton** is an illustrator, designer and co-founder of Fem Foundry based in Brooklyn, NY. She spends her days working as a senior designer at Scholastic and her nights creating picture books and dainty bracelets. When not knee-deep in books, she can be found sitting on her stoop in Bushwick enjoying the sunshine.

**Jan** is an artist and collective member with Pop Gym. She lives with a sweet old pug and an energetic sometimes angst cat. Follow her at @jan\_em\_dee

**CrazyHeadComics** is a Swedish digital activist, artist and mental health advocate! Follow them on @crazyheadcomics on Insta!

**Lena Dircherl** (a.k.a BoPolLena), freelance illustrator who loves video games, comic books and Netflix; you can find my work at lenadirscherl.com (Insta: @BopOLena). Body positivity, intersectional feminism, and anti-racism are extremely important to me. I always try to implement these topics into my artwork whenever possible.



Julie Finn

# Self-Defense Resources

## Physical Self-Defense-

- **Trans Boxing**- Boxing classes and resources for Trans and NB folk
- **Queer Fight School**- Follow them on Insta for updates on upcoming classes!
- **Traditional Okinawan Karate School**- Affordable karate in East Williamsburg, with classes for Queer folk and/or Women
- **Rev Fitness**- Affordable and rad fitness in East Harlem
- Center for Anti-Violence Education- Self-Defense and De-escalation classes for Femme, Queer and/or Trans folk
- **IMWISE**- Self-Defense classes against Hate Crimes, for Muslim Women, and for the General Public
- **Masterskya**- Low cost BJJ in Bushwick
- **Wickwood Aikikai**- Aikido classes in Ridgewood Queens
- **Chok Sabai**- Midtown Muay Thai/BJJ gym with Queer friendly environment
- **Overthrow**- Boxing gym with locations in Brooklyn and the LES, somewhat affordable options available
- **Bronx Social Center**- Offering karate classes twice a week in the South Bronx
- **Female Awareness**- Constant self-defense classes in Midtown
- **Feminist Self-Defense**- Self-Defense Workshops, with finance options for those who need
- **Westside TKD**- Tae-Kwon-Do training in Harlem
- **Brooklyn Goju**- “Martial Arts for Peace Strength and Justice” in Park Slope.
- **Ruckus Safety Awareness**- Self-Defense workshops, ranging from beginner to intermediate
- **Shime Waza Defense Services**- Offering private martial arts lessons on a sliding scale, contact through Instagram.
- **Elements Athletics**- Women, Trans, GNC Muay Thai every Saturday at 9:30 AM, free for members, \$25 cash or venmo
- **Spectrum Wrestling**- Queer+ BJJ group, offering free intro classes every Friday at Montgomery Gardens (104 Montgomery Street, BK) at 1 PM

## **Online Self-Defense**

- **Self-Defense Starter Kit-** Zine turned Website with a bunch a great videos
- **21 Effective Self-Defense Techniques-** Some intro to BJJ with many techniques that we teach at our own workshops.
- **Safe to Train-** List of schools round the country the promote safe spaces
- **Home Alive-** Great resources and tips on self-defense
- **Got A Girl Crush Catcalling Citation Cards** to confront street harassers with!
- **Cards Against Harassment-** Some more cards with messages to quiet street harassers
- **Stop Street Harassment-** Organization providing support and resources to those who face street harassment, including a national hotline to talk to somebody if you need to.
- **Anti-Violence Project-** Hotline and resources to those experiencing hate crimes and other forms of violence
- **Queer Fighters-** Videos and resources on Self-Defense and BJJ from the folks at Four Elements in Oakland
- **Outwod-** “OUTWOD is the largest international initiative for bringing together LGBT+ athletes and their allies to raise funds for local charitable organizations and sweat together in a safe, inclusive group fitness environment.”
- **Sisters of Powerlifting-** Resource for WOC getting into powerlifting!

For more cool self-defense resources, check out our page at  
[pogym.org/resources!](http://pogym.org/resources)

*Strength in ourselves, strength in our communities  
Free classes for fitness, defense and self care*



**POP GYM IS A NEW PROJECT, WORKING TOWARDS OPENING A PHYSICAL SPACE IN BROOKLYN THAT OFFERS FREE SELF-DEFENSE, FITNESS, AND SKILL SHARE CLASSES 7 DAYS A WEEK.**

*For any questions, comments, or inquiries for future workshops for you or your organization, email us at [info@popgym.org](mailto:info@popgym.org)*

