Ungendered Interactions and the Practice of Aikido

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1 Although the martial arts are often understood as fundamentally patriarchal and male-dominated activities, it has been our experience that in the Japanese martial art called Aikido (pronounced, eye-key-dough) because of the unique philosophy and conditions of practice, gendered norms can be challenged. Our initial aim was to interrogate and depict the manner in which the gendered structure of a martial arts dojo framed and limited the experience for both women and men. However, during the course of writing this paper, we came to realize that, in fact, something unexpected and unanticipated regarding gender was taking place when we practiced Aikido. We have labeled this experience an "ungendered interaction." We define ungendered interaction as a noncompetitive experience shaped by cooperation rather than domination that facilitates and depends on an awareness of the connection of energy (ki or chi) between participants that, in turn, leads to power that is neither masculine nor feminine. In such an interaction, the gendering of self that is enforced and structured on multiple levels of self and society becomes secondary while an experience apparently beyond gender can occur. In the process of examining the critical attributes of this concept, we challenge important assumptions regarding gendered bodies, opening new avenues of inquiry into the meaning and manifestations of "gender."

2 Gender theorists from Judith Butler (2004, 2005) to Bonnie Zimmerman (1987) remind us of the all-encompassing nature of gender. As Judith Lorber (1994)) has summarized,

> gender is a social institution, it establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself. (p. 3)

We are born into a particular culture with particular constructions of what "male and female", "masculine and feminine" mean and, more importantly, go on to reproduce these expectations in our own behavior in order to be comprehensible in society (Connell, 1995; Ridgeway 2009). As Butler (1988) points out in her early argument for the performativity of gender,

> because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. (p. 522)

For Butler, we are all complicit, but not fully responsible, for the reproduction of gender's comprehensive and inescapable presence.

3 Gender necessarily varies across cultures and historical periods, but in any society there are accepted gender categories and all members of society are expected to adapt to them (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is experienced at the level of the individual through an embodied understanding of what kind of person one is, male, female, transgender or a complex variant thereof. But, the power of gender is its pervasive and pernicious hold at the societal level that structures and shapes individuals who feel themselves to be gendered in particular ways (Butler, 2004; Ridgeway, 2009; Fenstermaker and West, 2002). Without those broader expectations, assumptions, and norms, the individual experience of gender might be much less powerful and devastating. And, yet, as we discuss in this paper, a particularly interactive, fundamentally social and physical practice in an unexpected location (a martial arts dojo) may offer an opportunity to experience the self as ungendered, if only fleetingly. This article has grown out of a series of conversations, conferences, and practices during which we interrogated how gender norms/expectations have affected us during the many decades in which we have trained in Aikido. We have both earned the rank of black belt, yet we have experienced Aikido in very different ways, training in different kinds of dojos, coming to the martial arts in very different bodies, and having different genders.

4 White began her Aikido training in Japan. Her first instructor, an American woman, taught an all-women's class shaping White's sense of the feminist potential within the tradition. White soon moved to a traditional Japanese dojo led by a well-established Japanese male instructor and has primarily trained with male teachers ever since. In the Japanese dojo, the pedagogy common to many traditional arts applied. There was little questioning of the how or why. Rather, silent observation of the teacher's demonstration and then continuous repetition of techniques in order to eventually embody the form was the expected behavior of a serious student. After three years of training in Japan, White returned to the United States and over the next two decades trained in New York, Colorado and then back and forth to Tokyo for three more years of training in the same dojo before moving to New England where White and Miller-Lane currently train together.

5 Although White's training has been primarily conducted by male teachers, Miller-Lane's most important Aikido teachers have been female. Miller-Lane had his formative Aikido training in the United States under the guidance of a female instructor who was also trained as a therapist. Unlike the traditional and quiet setting of a Japanese dojo experienced by White, in the American dojo, instructors often provided verbal explanations of the

techniques along with the physical demonstration. The Aikido instructor talked with individual students during class and provided verbal feedback to students during training. This instructor encouraged conversations about Aikido and learning Aikido included an intellectual as well as a physical engagement.

6 We come to Aikido with different bodies. White is five foot two inches and Miller-Lane is six feet tall and weighs approximately 100 pounds more than White. Until we began discussing gender in Aikido neither of us had identified the phenomenon we are analyzing here. Indeed, the concept of an ungendered interaction only emerged through our discussions as we struggled to explain to each other how gender both mattered and did not matter at the level of our bodies during Aikido practice, and why we continued to engage in this practice that sometimes seems sexist and often draws too much attention to gender and body differences. Ironically, through our discussions about the problems of sexism and male privilege in Aikido dojos, we found ourselves describing moments of training that seemed to exist "outside" or "beyond" our gendered bodies. We discovered that we had each experienced such moments of interaction when gender—both our own gender and that of our training partner—was irrelevant or forgotten.

7 We examine through our analysis here, how this male-dominated and male-created martial art, founded in Japan in the mid-twentieth century, might be a site for a genderless physical experience of self. We ask if there is something about the structure and practice of Aikido that allows individuals to experience their bodies as ungendered. In the pages that follow we offer our responses to this questions organized in four sections. In section one, we describe the setting where we practice, the dojo, and provide a brief background summary on the martial art of Aikido. In section two, we describe and define "ungendered interaction" using our separate voices in the form of two distinct narratives to more effectively communicate the nature of our experiences. In section three, we analyze the meaning of "ungendered interaction" within the context of gender scholarship. Finally, in section four, we discuss the implications and limitations of our analysis.

8 To be clear, we make no claim that Aikido is the only place where an ungendered experience may be possible. Rather, we argue that the unique philosophy and nature of Aikido practice make it a particularly fertile arena in which to explore the very possibility of such an experience. We have sought to explore this possibility by beginning with a question/injunction: Does Aikido foster ungendered interactions? We then followed up with data collection, namely, the careful recollection, description and analysis of our training experiences. The past forty years of feminist and gender theory have changed the way we

understand power and difference (gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, etc.) in society. In accepting the conclusion that gender norms are hegemonic in any society and shape invisibly and constantly each subject in society, we are prepared to assume that gender truly matters. Still, we use this opportunity to consider the possibility of getting beyond, or at least very close to an edge, of that systemic reality.

Section One: The Art and the Setting

9 Aikido encompasses three concepts, Ai-Ki-D. The three Chinese characters that make up the name can be translated as, "the way of meeting/uniting ki." Stated simply, *Ai* means harmony; *Ki* refers to energy or the life force; and *Do* refers to a road, a path, or a way. While Aikido training develops effective self-defense skills over time, competition and sparring are forbidden in this martial art. One cannot "win" anything in Aikido. The only battle to be "won" is that taking place inside the practitioner to overcome the habitual fight or flight response to conflict (Saotome, 1986; Stevens, 1993, 1996; Ueshiba, 2002). Unlike the world of Mixed Martial Arts, in which the ability to make another person submit defines a practitioner's ability (Spencer, 2009), in Aikido skill and effectiveness is more commonly determined by a practitioner's ability to connect.

10 The place where one practices Aikido is generally referred to as a dojo 道場. The word "dojo" means "the place of the way/path." This formal meaning is important as it emphasizes that the physical practice that is taking place in a dojo should always be in the service of a greater ideal or path. In the case of Aikido, the goal of training is the process of learning to harmonize energies (Stevens, 1984; 2001). The notion that a martial art might foster harmony may seem strange given the current dominance of violent images of martial arts that permeate Hollywood movies and martial art competitions on YouTube. Yet, for those who are serious students of the martial arts, it is not surprising. As Levine (1989) wrote in his essay, "The Liberal Arts and the Martial Arts," while many students may begin a martial art for reasons of self-defense, people stay with a practice because it becomes a "path" to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human being. Aikido's emphasis on non-competitive training is fundamental to achieving this deeper understanding. Thus, when one is in the place where the way of harmony is studied, an Aikido dojo, one is studying/practicing how to blend and connect with another's energetic attack in a manner that turns a potential conflict into an opportunity for non-violent communication and connection. One is not studying how to win a fight.

11 Dojos, created as ritual places for training, are gendered through a variety of arrangements, practices, and photographs. As with many martial arts dojos, an Aikido dojo has a "place of honor" at the front where a picture of the male founder of the practice, Morihei Ueshiba (b.1883 – d.1969) is usually displayed. Japanese calligraphy of the word Aikido or a word that stresses the meaning and purpose of the practice is often included in this display. In the particular dojo where we both now train, there is a photo of the founder of Aikido with Terry Dobson (b.1937 - d.1992), an American teacher who is one of only two non-Japanese students who served as senior-live-in-student/assistant with Ueshiba during the 1960's. At the back of the dojo, there is a handcrafted board on which the Black Belt certificates of the instructors are hung. Above these certificates are two photographs of the senior female instructors under whom Miller-Lane, who founded this dojo, studied: Mary Heiny and Kimberly Richardson. Both Heiny and Richardson teach at the dojo annually. Their photographs, proudly mounted on the wall, reveal the female lineage of the dojo. Although their student and the dojo founder, Miller-Lane, is male, the framed photographs of Heiny and Richardson remind everyone on the mat that women have helped to shape Miller-Lane's practice and understanding of Aikido. In the case of our dojo, Aikido does not look solely patrilineal.

Section Two: Descriptions Of an Ungendered Aikido Interaction

12 In this section we describe a particular kind of interaction that we have independently experienced during Aikido training: an ungendered interaction. An ungendered interaction is the moment when one is training with another person and one's awareness of this person's gender, and, indeed, of one's own gender, is replaced by an experience of a *ki* connection that renders irrelevant socially constructed conceptions of self. An Aikido class generally begins with an introductory warm-up period. These exact procedures vary depending on the dojo, but, importantly, the purpose of "warm-ups" is not simply to stretch the muscles, but also to warm up one's "*ki*." It is considered as real as the nose ion your face or water coming out of the faucet. Whether one is training to learn how to break ten boards with a single kick in Karate or learning how to blend with an attacker's strike in Aikido, the ability to draw upon the power of one's *ki* is fundamental to practitioners of the martial arts.

13 The word *ki* in Japanese is written with a Chinese character that represents a lid covering a pot full of steamed rice. The image symbolizes the nourishing vapors within the pot that, while invisible, are capable of vigorously rattling itslid during cooking. The image also symbolizes the ability of *ki* to be dense and heavy like wet, freshly cooked rice or as light

and burning hot as the steam itself (Maciocia, 1989). The term *ki* is used in various ways to refer to an organic force such as the climate, a person's health or personality type. In Chinese medicine, the term is used to denote "both the essential substances of the human body which maintain its vital activities, and the functional activities of the [body's] organs and tissues" (Deng et alia, 1987: p. 46). *Ki* is both energy and matter. An extended discussion of the place of *ki* in Japanese and Chinese medicine is beyond the scope of this paper. However, physicians trained in these traditions speak of a person being '*ki* deficient' or showing 'excess *ki'* as a sign of ill health. For trained practitioners of 'Eastern' medicine, *ki* evaluation is an important diagnostic tool that has been effectively used for centuries (Beinfeiled and Korngold, 1991; Connelly, 1994; Porkert, 1982). Developing one's *ki* is central to the practice of Aikido. The founder of Aikido understood *ki* to be a powerful force that exists within nature, society, individuals and interactions. As the name of the art implies, Aikido is the way of harmonizing the *ki* that is in us and all around us, whether in nature, our own body, or in the bodies coming at us in Aikido training.

14 In a typical Aikido class, following the warm-up period, the instructor usually demonstrates a technique with a student that will serve as a model for what students then practice in pairs. The standard protocol is for each person to be the "attacker" four times and then the "defender" four times. In Japanese, the term "nage" (thrower) is generally used to refer to the defender or one who executes the defensive technique and "uke" (receiver of throw) is used to refer to the attacker. The word uke has complex meanings. The pictographic kanji expresses the idea of the "conveyance of goods from one person to another" and over the centuries it has come to signify the act of receiving something from another person (Lowry, 1995). Thus, in Aikido practice, the person who initiates the attack is called *uke* because she is the one who will receive the response from the defender. *Uke* must first initiate an attack to his or her partner, as modeled by the instructor, and then receive the response from the defender. *Uke* thus switches from giver/aggressor to receiver within the process of the technique. The speed with which this occurs increases with an individual's experience and skill. Practitioners must become sufficiently strong and pliable to be able to absorb, without injury, the defensive techniques that they are receiving in response to their own attacks. Indeed, the word *uke-mi* is used to refer to the art of receiving the defensive technique. While planned attacks in a non-competitive dojo setting are hardly the same as actual, unpredictable fighting, Aikido practitioners are expected to behave and train with sincerity and sharp focus, as if the attacks were real.

White's Narrative: Training in a Traditional Japanese Dojo.

15 Many ritualistic movements were prescribed for entering Gessoji, a Buddhist temple in the western outskirts of Tokyo where I first trained. Tada Hiroshi started his Aikido dojo there thirty years ago and the Aikido training takes place within the temple buildings. First, we take off our shoes, step up into the hallway, kneel next to the doorway of the dojo and bow. Then we stand and walk toward the window of Tada Sensei's office. Here we bow again and if Sensei is there say our greetings, *ohayo gozaimasu* (good morning) or *konbanwa* (good afternoon).

16 Next, we change into a *gi*, the white cotton training uniform common to many martial arts. There are two dressing rooms toward the back of the main building, one for women and girls, the other for men and boys. Two genders are recognized and an attempt is made to segregate and distinguish the males and females at this level of the body(training?). But soon we will all be in our training *gis*, in the dojo rendering gender ambiguous by the thick cotton fabric that obscures hips and breasts, obscures, to some extent, our gender. Soon, all bodies are moving, old and young, male and female. Some foreigners stand out through their height or hair color, but generally there is a blending and blurring of our differences as we follow the teacher's model. Warm-ups at Gessoji are a time to find our *ki*, a time to feel our breath expand the body and connect the body to the ground. It's a time to let go of the outside world. But, once we start training with partners the challenges of joining our own quieted body/self with another begins.

17 This process of re-focusing the mind from external world to the space and training in the dojo always drew my attention to the people and gender of the dojo. At Gessoji, there were usually more males than females training and there continue to be more advanced males than females. While many women have earned at least a black belt at Gessoji over the years, at any given practice there might be only one female black belt while there are always plenty of men of higher rank. As a beginner, foreign and female, I was interested in and, at times, preoccupied with the power and gender dynamics in the dojo: Why aren't there more women training? Why are so many women beginners, and so few advanced? Why don't the male teachers more fully engage with the young, eager and dedicated women in their midst? What role does gender play in the dojo? What role does gender play in Aikido? These questions were the genesis of the current inquiry.

18 At Gessoji dojo, the class format is very consistent day to day, regardless of the teacher. Classes are taught by one of three or four men, in addition to the chief instructor, there were several very advanced and loyal teachers. As in most Aikido classes, the teacher

demonstrates a technique and the students try to reproduce it. The effort comes from the body but the mind is always working to register what has been done and to assist in finding it (understand and reproduce the move) in one's own body. The concentration is intense and relatedto the practice, yet there is something expansive, bigger than ourselves in the task at hand, which is to imagine something more than merely a body to body interaction, a repetition of a fixed technique. In Japanese, the term *maai* is used to describe the (proper) distance between attacker and defender. This space can feel like a void where again and again we enter and create the interaction of the technique. As an attack comes at me, I step into that space between my body and my partner's body. Gender, personality, and identity can slip away. As the muscles relax, I step into an interaction with energy, there is another person there and our energies engage. I am not thinking about the attack, but rather join and redirect the line of the attack embedded in the technique. I am stepping into the space of the technique rather than trying to move another person (as my teachers have generously reminded me). To step into the technique requires both a deep connection to the other person, to the ground, to oneself and the willingness to trust that a proper execution of the technique embodies the fundamental idea of Aikido and, therefore, the way of uniting energies/*ki*. In those moments my partner's gender, identity, name are quite forgotten. (Sometimes, the interaction with a person who has been difficult in conversations before or after class can become fluid and connected in the silence of the technique.) For me, this moment of the technique is the time when gender can be forgotten. It is rarely at the beginning of training, rarely when I'm not tired; the experience of an ungendered interaction is more likely to happen after many throws, many falls. The sensation of a quieted mind and a focused body suggest a mind-body split that I neither intend nor have the space to fully engage with here. Still, the sensation of the constant and overwhelming awareness of living in a gendered body is at least temporarily transcended by entering into a larger conception of *ki*—that is, by entering into a connection based on energy that is neither male nor female.

Miller-Lane Narrative: Training in a West Coast, American Dojo.

19 When I began Aikido, I had studied enough feminist literature to know that my notions of power - as physical strength paired with rigid inflexibility - were gendered. As a six-foot-tall male, weighing 225 pounds, I had learned to value my ability to be immovable. I could see that my physical stability was perceived as strength, even though I could see the benefits of being fast and moveable. Being immovable was a way to manifest power. I understood rigidity as both physical and mental and my own rigidity was linked to my

identity and masculinity. My size and physical strength had been useful—I had been praised throughout my life for being able to easily move heavy things. I understood physical rigidity as the ability to absorb pain and valued this ability as part of the idea of "taking it like a man." I thought to absorb physical pain without showing any sign of how much something hurt was an appropriate goal embedded in any physical practice. Through exposure to and study of, feminist scholarship, I was well aware that these notions of masculine power were problematic, but I still found them useful (sometimes, irresistible) supports upon which to lean. Aikido, however, rendered useless such gendered notions of strength.

20 In Aikido training, when I began to truly absorb--rather than resist--the technique that the defender was applying to me in response to my attack, I came to understand that the martial effectiveness of the technique was actually the byproduct of entering into a profound human connection. Instead of my strike being blocked and countered, it was accepted, absorbed and re-directed in a compassionate manner. The absence of a declared winner after a training session with a partner seemed initially bizarre. However, the idea of a "path" of study that was stressed by the instructor, as well as many Aikido authors, soon made sense—the focus was on the development of self in connection with another and not on the collection of wins based on domination of another. There is a sense that when you enter a technique you are dropping your egocentric view of the world. To enter the technique means that the emphasis shifts from trying to do something to one's partner, to moving oneself into proper alignment and connection with one's partner. Leaving the gendered ego behind seemed to be the critical step to being able to work on developing a deeper ki connection.

21 Stereotypical notions of "soft" female power and "hard" male power became irrelevant and unhelpful. Aikido teachers often speak of a "fire hose full of water" as the ideal physical state in training: powerful, flexible, flowing energy with the potential to be explosive. A fire hose can be directed towards a fire to eradicate danger. But, it can also be directed towards individuals with brutal effect. In Aikido, when this fire hose-like somatic state is combined with a mindful commitment to compassion, the possibility for a connection that is energetic, powerful and expansive rather than narrow and destructive opens up. In other words, when one enters into a ki connection with a training partner, conceptions of self become meaningless. In these moments, I stop feeling like a particular kind of male. The parameters of "masculinity" I have depended on for my identity are gone. I stop modulating my reaction based on my perception of who my partner is: male/female, small/big, weak/strong, quick/fast. I am not receiving a response from a person of a particular sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc. Rather, I am blending with a river of *ki* and, like any powerful

river; it requires my full attention to stay afloat. I am simply trying to stay connected with an energetic flow.

Section Three: Discussion and Analysis

22 As we examined our respective training narratives, we identified three themes relevant to gender and Aikido. First, the non-competitive philosophy and practice central to Aikido helps provide the ground for us to leave behind, for a time, our assigned gender identity. Second, leaving behind "male" or "female" gender identity, while in the service of an overarching Aikido ideal, has required different things from each of us. Third, the fact that we found it so difficult to describe an embodied experience that challenged our understandings of the constancy of gender effects was a powerful indication of how difficult it is to use abstract language to express embodied experience. While we tend to understand gender through conceptual, not embodied categories, we are exploring our gender and genderlessness through our embodied experiences in the process of constructing this paper.

1. Competition and Gender

23 Gender is fraught with power. In every interaction between men and women, and particularly between men and men, power is an inescapable element. Many authors have examined the problems of masculinity, in particular, the socialization of boys in American society as paving the way toward violence, aggression and fear of vulnerability (Hagan and Foster, 2001; Kimmel and Mahler, 2003; Thurnherr et alia, 2008). Kokopeli et alia (1983) exposed the linkage between constructions of masculinity and the oppression of women. They argued that a preoccupation with size and a fear of being small are central concerns for many boys and men making physical domination a central aspect of masculinity. The problems and effects of masculinity and patriarchy throughout society seep into all social institutions, and masculinity in the dojo in and of itself is worthy of much more study.

24 Representations of martial arts in popular culture stress competition and winning. In competition, every difference becomes a possible sign of weakness that one seeks to exploit. Thus, if we notice sex first and sex is gendered from the instant we notice it, as gender scholars have argued, then competition is likely to rarify gender categories. However, without competition and with the concept of *ukemi* -, the art of receiving - the conditions of interaction completely change. Connection through *ki* rather than the defeat of the other becomes the objective. As we noted above, the concept of *ki* diminishes stereotypical notions of dominance. Whether one is male or female, tall or short, burly or petite is much less

important than one's expression of *ki*. Thus differences, whether of gender or other markers of identity, no longer provide opportunities ofdomination.

25 In Aikido, winning is not an option as there is no contest to be won. To be sure, in initial Aikido training, one can feel competitive as one focuses on whether one is 'effective' in getting the other person "down." Yet, the purpose of Aikido practice, which is what we are discussing here, is to embody a type of interaction that is energetic, balanced and strong without the element of domination for the purpose of winning. An Aikido interaction is not competitive. There is nothing to win—there is no battle, no contest. There is only the practice of developing and deepening the ability to foster a deep *ki* connection. Indeed, as we noted above, the focus on the *ki* connection leads to a physical understanding of the effectiveness of harmony over resistance, of maintaining one's own center of balance, of blending rather than executing a counter strike. There is a movement towards humility and empathy in the effort to sense what one's partner is doing and respond in a manner that matches the energy received. This non-competitive context calls for deep listening (at the level of the body, a kind of somatic/perceptual listening) that creates the possibility for what we are suggesting is a different kind of human connection, one where gender is rendered meaningless.

26 The experience of a *ki* connection also sheds light on why we found intellectual concepts of gender limiting as we sought to explain and describe our experiences in Aikido. Ridgeway (2009), for example, has argued that gender provides the primary cultural frame for organizing social relations, "We need a shared way of categorizing and defining 'who' self and other are in the situation so that we can anticipate how each of us is likely to act and coordinate our actions accordingly" (p, 147). She draws on "social-cognition studies" that suggest that sex difference is noted very early in our lives to support the claim that, "we frame and are framed by gender literally before we know it" (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 148). However, we are suggesting that in Aikido, the gendered frame sometimes gets left behind. Defining and categorizing self and other - which is to say noting the differences and labeling them - impedes the move towards developing a deeper connection and, therefore, completing the Aikido technique successfully. To be sure, every interaction begins with a clear definition of who is the attacker and who is the defender. But, this is the starting point not the end point. As the paired practice continues and partners take turns being the receiver the distinction between attacker and defender blurs, the energetic connection deepens. There is nothing mystical about this connection nor does it involve a "blissing out." Again, quite the opposite--one's full attention is required to ensure both parties complete the technique safely. One is fully awake

and present in a martial arts dojo in a fully gendered society. But, paradoxically, that very setting seems to allow for something other than a gendered interaction to occur.

2. Taking It Like a Man. Gender Expectations on the Mat

27 Sexual dimorphism, the belief that physical difference is a logical basis for explaining inequality between males and females, is the foundation upon which gender structures have been established and defended and it is used to rationalize strict categories of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1988; West and Zimmerman, 1987). As a result, gender is both myth and reality. The myth, that sexual dimorphism exists in some fundamental, biological way and that it leads inexorably to two distinct genders continues to shape people's understandings of masculinity and femininity, maleness and femaleness and the assumption that gender is natural instead of a social construction. The hegemony of this myth is revealed by the fact that in contemporary society, where a proliferation of technologies and changes in the workplace have made muscle and mass differences almost completely irrelevant, distinctions of what men's at and women's specific capabilities are continue to be used to rationalize economic and social advantages for males.

28 Yet, despite the fact that changes in contemporary society reveal the myth of sexual dimorphism, the reality of gender still imposes specific norms, expectations and obligations at all levels of experience. Each of our lives is still constrained by the reality of gender norms that were built, to a large degree, on assumptions about sexual dimorphism that we know are imagined. In the context of our analysis of an Aikido interaction, we entered the dojo as inescapably "mythologised" beings in that Miller-Lane as a large male was expected to be dominant and more effective in a martial art than White who was smaller and female. We had both absorbed this myth, albeit in different ways. Yet, as we trained, such parameters of gender were contradicted at every turn. Mass and muscle (beyond a basic level of fitness) matter far less than they initially appear to matter. This upsetting of the expected advantages of sexual dimorphism - of tallmales and smaller females - which is to say of male physical dominance, is part of what may enable Aikido interactions to be ungendered.

29 But, expectations of power and body size, gender and strength are still prevalent in Aikido dojos. For White, there was a sense that she had to "take it like a man" to survive the initial period of Aikido training in Japan. She knew very well that this idea was, of course, mythologically gendered—for endurance and fitness are not the sole purview of men. However, the senior students, at least the males in her dojo, encouraged her rigorous training and considered high endurance levels as a sign of her commitment, ability and significantly,

her willingness “to take it like a man.” Yet, White felt that as a woman, she did not have to find something (perhaps “masculine”) outside of herself to effectively train with practitioners/men much larger than her. Rather, she could draw on what already had been part of her. She did not have to become something else, “masculine”, to gain respect on the mat, nor let go of some “feminine” aspect. Furthermore, the emphasis on *ki* development was completely unrelated to one’s physical size or gender. Through years of training it became increasingly clear that each body, tall, short, thin, fat, soft, hard, male or female had to make its own adjustments to techniques and partners in Aikido. There was no one optimal size or gender or kind of body.

30 For Miller-Lane, the gender adjustment on the mat also involved rethinking what it meant to “take it like a man.” His understanding of masculinity and power had taught him to bear up under pain and be inflexible and immoveable in the face of a physical attack. However, in his Aikido dojo, he was encouraged to become a willow tree that could bend without breaking. For Miller-Lane, there were penalties for being rigid and immoveable and he found that he gained status by becoming soft and responsive to techniques and partners. Indeed, even when he thought he was being flexible, his instructor would laugh gently and show him the extent of his stiffness and inflexibility. Aikido required Miller-Lane to abandon stereotypically masculine characteristics of strength that were related to his misperception of the relationship between power and a rigid body. A new kind of energy, *ki*, was being offered that was accessible to men and women alike and that could equally be manifested by men and women. For Miller-Lane training under a teacher who emphasized connection, precision, effectiveness, care and responsibility, among other things, shifted the focus to put a premium on embodying a *ki* connection. He was valued for his ability to connect, become flexible and movable, and to absorb rather than being a large, immovable object. Thus, a particular teacher and particular method of teaching validated parts of his identity that might not have been validated in another dojo or another physical activity (like football or weightlifting). As practitioners of Aikido, both Miller-Lane and White have accepted and prized the commitment to harmony over conflict. However, prior to the process of developing this paper, neither had linked the achievement of that Aikido ideal with the loss of a specific gender identity.

31 The noncompetitive Aikido techniques require an energetic connection that is responsive yet directive, absorbent and potentially explosive, supple and powerful. Neither of us felt that finding and developing the ability to direct such energy was lying outside ourselves, but rather had to be drawn out from within. The kind of energy that was being

asked for in these intense attack simulations was unfamiliar at first, but not foreign to the body, whether we were male or female.

3. When the Body Challenges the Limits Of Theory

32 Gender is a construct that exists at the level of ideas even though it is expressed in the material body both ritualistically and constantly. In this discussion of an Aikido interaction, we are suggesting that while gender maps the body, it is not the body. This argument suggests a possibility that challenges many standard conceptions of the relationship between gender and the material body. Butler (2005) argues that there is no initial, ideal ungendered state of the body because at the moment of birth, sex is already recognized and the gendered implications of that sex recognition take over. We cannot escape the culturally determined definitions of gender into which we are born, she argues. Thus, Butler leaves no loopholefor the possibility that ungendered interactions between people can ever exist at some other level, in this case, at the level of *ki*. As academics we accepted the scholarship regarding the pervasiveness of gender. Yet, as Aikido practitioners, we experienced such instances for which no theory allows a space, or possibility, for what we were beginning to believe were ungendered interactions.

33 While there may be many physical activities during which one might lose track of or simply forget about one's culturally determined body due to the intensity of the experience such as running up a mountain, playing basketball, or canoeing on a quiet lake at sunrise, two elements make Aikido a particularly fruitful object of analysis within the context of gender research. First, is itsemphasis on interaction and, second, the fact that each interaction begins with a conflict--one person attacking another. The emphasis on interaction is important because it is in our interactions with one another that the gendered nature of self and society is most clearly revealed (Ridgeway, 2009). It may well be that performing a solo dance, or yoga, or other meaningful physical experiences provides moments when one ceases to be cognizant of one's specific gender. But, none of these begin with a strike atthe head, a punch, or a grab, as does Aikido—such attacks require attention to be paid to another gendered body. Thus, Aikido begins with a setting that one might assume would make the transcendence of gender unlikely.

34 Other paired activities such as boxing, fencing and other martial arts that also begin with one person attacking another, are structured around competition. If one is trying to win, one seeks to identify and exploit weaknesses in the other's body. If one is trying to harmonize, then one seeks to attend to and respond to the stronger energies that the other

person is expressing. In competition, one exploits weaknesses and differences. In Aikido, one attends to *ki* in order to deepen the connection with another individual. Hence, in this process of connection the opportunity to move through a gendered identity and become aware of a larger, shared humanity emerges. We believe that without this non-competitive framework, the potential for the unique ungendered interactions would be much reduced. The effective completion of an Aikido technique requires a hybrid construction of energy that is established through the embrace of a conception of power that challenges stereotypical norms of "masculine" and "feminine" strength.

35 The difficulty of describing the experience of an ungendered *ki* interaction is due to the fact that we are trying to use words to describe an embodied experience. Ki is not widely understood in 'Western' scientific models of the body despite the fact that it is taken for granted in Chinese and Japanese medicine/culture. Ki has a material presence, but it is not the material that we commonly use in efforts to make sense of how gender shapes and determines human interactions. If there is a gender-free moment on the mat it is because the physical technique does not require our gender despite the gendered structure of the dojo.

Section Four: Implications & Limitations

36 As we stated at the outset, we accept Butler's (1990, 2004) argument that there is never a body before gender and that each new body comes into a world of gendered expectations. And, importantly, each of us experiences our self and gender uniquely despite the pervasive structure of gender in society. However, interrogating our bodily experiences of Aikido training has led to corporeal insights that are not necessarily anticipated given the persistence of gender. Gender theory seeks to deconstruct the multiple and intersecting structures of privilege and inequality at the level of the body, social institutions, and ideology. Yet, we have not found ideas in gender theory to account for what we have experienced in Aikido—moments when a form of human connection fostered through training with *ki* appears to trump awareness of our specifically gendered bodies. Our experiences as bodily beings on the Aikido mat do not fully correspond with our intellectual understandings of our gendered bodies. This is the contradiction that we have tried to interrogate in this paper by moving from the body up rather than from theory down.

37 We see two implications from this insight regarding the relationship between the physical experiences we have had in Aikido training and gender theory. First, is the idea that building theory from the body up may offer insights that inform, challenge and trouble conceptual understandings. This idea is not new and harkens back to early feminist theory that

exposed the material experience of the body (Daly, 1978; Rich, 1976; Steinem, 1978). Recent work in a wide range of disciplines has also highlighted the notion that in the 'West,' scholars often over-privilege knowing through the mind rather than knowing through the body (Benson, 1991; Gatens, 1996; Stoller, 1997). In the ongoing effort to develop theoretical constructs of the experience of gender, it is essential that we recognize the lived experience of the body as a rich source of knowledge.

38 The second implication is that if such moments of ungendered interaction are possible in Aikido, they may be possible in other physical practices as well. Given that patriarchy depends on gender norms and structures to thrive, any practice or activity that destabilizes gender is desirable. By identifying the characteristics of an ungendered interaction, and the actual set of conditions under which they may occur, we have sought to offer a means whereby other scholars might examine and challenge this concept of ungendered interaction.

39 As practitioners of Aikido, we generally avoid "intellectualizing" the practice in an effort to focus on deepening our somatic attentiveness. However, as academics, we also believe that the embodied experiences on the mat, if analyzed, may help inform academic discourse in a useful way. By using the term "ungendered interaction" we realize that we risk the reader's misperception that we believe that gender does not matter. However, in an odd way quite the opposite is true. It is the rare and uncanny experience of being momentarily without gender that reminds us of how pervasive gender is. We argue here that the three attributes we have identified: noncompetitiveness, commitment to cooperation or harmonizing our bodies, and the realization of an energetic *ki* connection that demands an understanding of power that is neither masculine nor feminine, are critical to the potential of experiencing these ungendered moments. Clearly, this exploration into ungendered interactions requires further research in a diversity of research fields. We have experienced such moments in the unique martial art of Aikido, but there may be other physical practices that provide the means to loosen the pervasive grip of gender.

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