4

Take a bow when you fall: A sensory autoethnography of aikido

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ABSTRACT

This article is an autoethnography reflecting on my experience as a beginner practicing aikido. It centres around the embodied experience of this martial art: how practices feel to the inexperienced body and the emotional highs and lows accompanying both strength and vulnerability. Following a disjointed narrative that combines experiences over weeks of practice, this autoethnography considers the trust, hierarchy, and gendered expectations that arise and are consequently challenged during training. Violence and the considerations of physical limitations are also taken into account in order to provide a personal description of aikido practice as a woman.

Take a bow, bodies are falling to the floor. Blurred figures in white are both lying prone on the ground and standing victorious above. The ground beneath our bare feet is stained red. The highest ranked figures take down opponents easily, hands on wrists and necks. Twisted wrists, pinned to the floor.

This is a scene of violence.

Aikido is a Japanese martial art that uses the opponent's strength against themselves, aiming to offset their balance more than overpower them (Ganoe 2019). I first discovered this activity in September 2024 while looking to try something new. I then joined the university aikido club, participating in weekly then bi-weekly trainings. I will illustrate these sessions through sensory snapshots and fragmented memories, much like the disjointed feeling of falling.

I can feel the gi[1] against my skin. It's rustling in my ears. The ends are brushing my wrists and flapping around my ankles. This uniform is comfortable. The belt digs into my sides; I've tied it too tight. The knot is unravelling; I don't have the years of experience behind me that handles this still-stiff material like it's second nature. Through this coloured stripe around my waist, I have been placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. This indication of my inexperience digs into my back as I fall.

Through aikido trainings, I have learnt how values can be embodied within a martial art. Aikido includes physical manifestations of ideals regarding community, trust, and respect. One example of this is the tangible structure of the session framed by a bow to the teacher. This is a

1 The Japanese name for the white uniform worn to practice.

physical manifestation of respect and recognition, as well as an acknowledgement of the line drawn between students and teacher within this environment that privileges rank and hierarchy.

I am kneeling on the mats; I can feel my toes digging into the floor. It is silent. We have constructed this protective flooring together, slotting the squares together like a puzzle. We are protecting each other from the violence that will soon occur. I bow.

We are taught how to defend ourselves against opponents who are physically stronger, avoiding a battle of strength that I, as a woman, would inevitably lose. This becomes a reciprocal exercise in trust between practice partners. Indeed, as we practice there must be absolute trust that one will not accidentally hurt the other. There must be a belief that one's partner will execute the technique taught to the best of their ability, only exerting enough force necessary to take down their partner and not injure them during the practice process. A large portion of trust must also be dedicated to one's practice partner to believe that they will stop as soon as they inflict pain. The message to stop is sent in the form of taps on the mats, a non-violent method way to stop the infliction of pain. This message to stop is a universalised embodied gesture that allows understanding no matter the location and illustrates trust that it will always be respected. As such, aikido training sessions prompt the rapid formation of strong relationships based on trust as people are intentionally placed into vulnerable positions.

Suddenly I can no longer feel the mats under my feet. There are hands on me. Fingers around my wrist. Fingers around my arm. I am standing, kneeling, lying with my face to the floor where my feet once were. I am at the mercy of the person above me. My wrist is twisted until I feel pain. This is a particular kind of vulnerability. One hand taps the map while the other feels pain. My body is fragile. A wrist could be snapped with a little extra pressure. This is weakness.

On Saturdays, women usually outnumber men in training. Perhaps we are subconsciously fighting against prescribed images of our weak and passive gendered bodies (Follo 2024: 51). This gender imbalance is exceptional in the face of male-dominated "traditionally hypermasculine sports" (Ganoe 2019: 592) such as martial arts, as I have experienced previously during karate training and witnessed in other university martial arts classes. Despite this, martial arts can be used to transform gendered bodily experiences which focus on women's victimhood into a sense of empowerment (ibid.).

I stand over my partner. I have used my weak limbs to incapacitate them on the floor. I have the upper hand. I feel victorious. There is pride in this achievement, an efficient enactment of a particular skill. This is strength.

Through the active physical agency of aikido, we can improve confidence and control, redefining gender norms in a culture that normalises violence against women (Rentschler 1999). Women must believe that their bodies have the potential to and are capable of fighting on a corporeal level, which fights against the learnt behaviour of non-violence in women (ibid.). Women must be taught to use their full bodily power, thereby leaning into an aggressiveness that deviates from gender norms (Rentschler 1999: 153). I had to be taught to want to inflict violence even for the

sake of practicing a technique, as this was not an instinct I had. Indeed, the presumed inability to fight partly defines normative femininity (McCaughey 1997: 7). A resistance to these ideals and the assumption that women cannot physically challenge men (ibid.) illustrates how aikido can challenge gender ideologies embedded in feminine bodies. Multiple women in aikido, including myself, had to be reminded that the aim is to punch one's opponent and not mime the action.

I don't want to feel my knuckles against a solid body. I will pretend this time, aim towards thin air. I will not hurt. I do not want to cause harm. I must throw my weight into punching the teacher. I must prove my intent to hurt. My fist collides with his chest. I can feel cloth, the resistance of body and bone. The body is a physical entity. It is capable of violence and pain.

A less emancipatory reason why women may gravitate towards aikido is its tendency towards non-violence. McCaughey's definition of violence as "physical force exerted with the intent of damaging, controlling, or stopping someone" (1997: 10) corresponds with aikido techniques' aims, however, aikido as a martial art "emphasises non-violent conflict resolution" (Ganoe 2019: 592) as it mainly uses the attacker's violence against them, using momentum more than brute strength and responding to attacks already in motion. There is both non-violence and violence within this experience.

I am focusing on the demonstration. My hand twitches to imitate the movement. Feet shuffle. I focus on the stance. I track hand movements as they block and twist. I watch as he falls to the floor and thuds against the mats. A hand makes a sharp sound as it hits the floor. There are always two figures in white. One has blue trousers. The semicircle bows to begin.

We are taught to always get out of the line of attack first. Examples are shown, recognizing their utility or lack thereof in real situations of danger. Size differentials are mentioned, and power imbalances are taken into consideration. Certain techniques take advantage of height differences, thereby transforming weakness into empowerment (Fallo 2024). Women's vulnerability is acknowledged through these considerations, as well as the violent world that we live in. Through aikido techniques and their potential applications there is a recognition that "the body can become the reflection and expression of the world in which it lives at a particular time" (Fallo 2024: 52).

I can feel a body twist. I am resisting against muscle that will not yield. I am not strong enough. They escape my hold yet again. I am not skilled enough for this. I am incompetent. I am vulnerable yet again. I cannot compete with men's brute strength. I am no match for the expertise of those above me in the hierarchy. I cannot escape the grip of hands bruising my wrists. Brute force will be my downfall; I can feel it in my bones.

The feeling of empowerment that I experience with a successfully completed technique can easily become disappointment and defeat in the face of my inability to do so. This is a harsh reminder of my lack of physical strength, and my vulnerability to those stronger than me in everyday life. I can sense the violence around me (Spencer 2014), and I am incapable of responding.

Silence. The sound of someone falling behind me. There are low voices explain-

ing instructions again. We help each other. Tapping against the floor. Someone else falls. A giggle or two between movements. A brief moment of silence before the rustling of material and another body falling to the floor. Music starts, a shared space echoing the multiplicity of overlapping conflicting sounds. Chatter. This is the sound of community.

There are multiple rigid sensory delimitations of the aikido experience. Visually, aikido practices are defined by the bright colour of the mats and an array of belts indicating differing levels in contract with all-white gis. This is complimented by the feeling of both the mats underfoot, particularly when they are uneven, and feeling the gi. Sound also structures this experience, with the main sound being moving and falling bodies. Finally, actions frame the experience of aikido, through the communal construction and deconstruction of the mats as puzzle pieces to fit together, and the respectful bow that opens and closes the session.

Throughout these bodily experiences, the violent hierarchical patriarchal society in which we live is an underlying theme that is explicitly and implicitly recognised.

There is laughter and music. We are wearing our colours. Our muscles warm up and stretch. We are ready to begin.

Bodies are falling to the floor. Take a bow.

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