

«On the Side of Girls» Who «Throw Like Girls»: Embodied Education and Gendered Embodiment

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Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of Embodied Education and Gendered Embodiment Theory, examining how differential bodily socialization from early childhood shapes the relationship between body, identity, and power. Drawing on Elena Gianini Belotti's *Dalla parte delle bambine* and Iris Marion Young's *Throwing Like a Girl*, it argues that the systematic restriction of girls' bodily expressivity constitutes a profound pedagogical harm—producing the conditions of vulnerability that gender-based violence exploits. In response, the paper presents *Autocoscienza Combattente Femminista* (ACF—Fighting Self-Awareness), a psychocorporal methodology developed at Roma Tre University and the Academic Network UN.I.RE, integrating martial arts, intersectional sociocultural analysis, mythopoiesis, and trauma-sensitive pedagogy within a feminist and decolonial framework to transform the body from a site of oppression into a ground of liberation.

Keywords: Embodied Education; Gendered Embodiment; Feminist Self-Defense; Gender-Based Violence; Autocoscienza Combattente

1. Introduction: The Body as a Pedagogical Site

The body is never merely a biological fact but a pedagogical product—shaped and constrained by social and cultural forces from the earliest years of life. The experience of moving through space, occupying or yielding territory, trusting or distrusting one's physical capacities is never gender-neutral: it results from a largely invisible process of differential socialization beginning in infancy, through which the systematic restriction of girls' bodily expressivity constitutes a profound pedagogical harm. The inhibition of physical agency in girlhood creates what can be called a "self-fulfilling prophecy" of female inferiority—not written in biology, but inscribed through repeated social interactions and institutional arrangements that teach girls to make themselves small and suppress expressions of strength deemed "unfeminine." Iris Marion Young (1980, 2005), in *Throwing Like a Girl*, demonstrates that the modalities of feminine bodily existence—"ambiguous transcendence," "inhibited intentionality," "discontinuous unity"—are not expressions of anatomical difference but of women's situation in patriarchal society: the girl who hesitates before throwing a ball is not exhibiting biological weakness but performing a learned corporeal grammar of self-limitation.

Recognizing that gender-based violence is systemic and structural also means understanding how its logics become literally embodied in people's habits and behaviors—how stereotypes become *habitus*, in Bourdieu's sense. For this reason, serious pedagogical intervention must engage the body not merely as object of analysis but as agent of transformation. The contribution is best understood as a



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theoretically grounded methodological essay: it proposes a pedagogical reading of gendered bodily socialization and presents the theoretical foundations of ACF. It also argues for the importance of including feminist self-defense in educational contexts, in synergy with the many other prevention and response measures already better known. The methodology of *Autocoscienza Combattente Femminista* (ACF—Fighting Self-Awareness)—whose history, methodology, and results have been documented in the book *Muoversi nello Spazio senza chiedere permesso. Autodifesa e Autocoscienza Combattente Femminista* (Chiricosta 2024)—represents precisely such an approach: drawing on martial arts, somatic psychology, feminist consciousness-raising, narrative practices, and trauma-sensitive pedagogy.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Embodied Education and Gendered Embodiment

2.1. Embodied Education

Embodied Education challenges the Cartesian mind/body dualism dominating Western educational theory, recognizing the body as a primary site of knowing, experiencing, and becoming (Stolz, 2015; Shusterman, 2008). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty (1962), it emphasizes bodily intentionality: the body is the first locus from which space, time, and meaning are constituted, and learning is never purely cognitive but a process of developing "motor intentionality"—a pre-reflective bodily know-how. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) provided a foundational contribution to enactivist thought that informs the broader "4E" framework—cognition as embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended—though this four-dimensional articulation represents a later systematization (cf. Menary, 2010) integrating traditions not entirely reducible to that single volume. Grounded cognition theory (Barsalou, 2008) converges on the same conclusion from cognitive psychology: all higher cognitive processes—from perception and action to language and social understanding—are grounded in bodily states and perceptual simulations, confirming that the restriction of bodily experience has consequences extending far beyond motor development. Forms of learning that restrict bodily agency can significantly constrain cognitive and subjective capacities—a connection best understood as a pedagogical interpretation rather than an established empirical law. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1990, 2001) socializes these insights: durable dispositions inscribed in the body through early social experience make social necessity appear as nature, organizing gender inequality so as to make it seem inevitable.

2.2. Gendered Embodiment Theory

"Gendered Embodiment Theory" is used here not as the name of a single unified model but as an interdisciplinary frame bringing together contributions from phenomenology, interactionism, performativity theory, intersectional feminism, and decolonial thought. Goffman (1977) identified "institutional reflexivity" as the complex of social arrangements confirming gender stereotypes; West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that gender is an accomplishment performed and reproduced through concrete social interactions. For Butler (1999, p. 43), gender is constituted through «the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance»—what appears as natural weakness is the sedimented

effect of contestable norms. Butler's later work (2009) insists that vulnerability is not a fixed property of feminine bodies but a differential social distribution—an enforced precarity that pedagogical practice can contest.

Gender never operates in isolation: as Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates, gendered embodiment is always intersectional—shaped by the simultaneous action of race, class, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and colonial history. The concept of *body-territory* (*cuerpo-territorio*)¹—elaborated within Latin American Indigenous feminist traditions (Lugones, 2008; Millán, 2014) and developed in ACF as *corpo-realtà*² (Chiricosta, 2024)—frames the body as the very terrain of existence: to colonize a body is to colonize a territory; to liberate it is to decolonize it.

3. The Mechanisms of Gendered Bodily Socialization

3.1. Belotti and the Pedagogy of Weakness

Elena Gianini Belotti's *Dalla parte delle bambine* (1973) offers a lucid account of how female weakness is manufactured through educational practice. Her central argument is devastating: the inferiority of girls in physical strength, spatial confidence, and bodily agency is not a natural fact but the outcome of a systematic pedagogical process beginning in the cradle. The restriction of movement is the founding mechanism: while boys are encouraged to push boundaries and explore space, girls are taught to contain themselves—to sit still, be careful, avoid rough physical play. At the neuromuscular level, this limits motor coordination, spatial awareness, and physical confidence: a body not permitted to climb, wrestle, or run remains forever provisional, tentative, easily intimidated. At the psychological level, the prohibition communicates a message—certain activities are not appropriate for you because of what you are—which, repeated across thousands of interactions, consolidates into the self-fulfilling prophecy. These dynamics vary considerably across cultural, class, generational, and disability-related contexts; what remains structurally comparable is the underlying logic of differential bodily permission.

3.2. Young and the Phenomenology of Inhibited Intentionality

Iris Marion Young's *Throwing Like a Girl* (1980, 2005) provides the phenomenological complement to Belotti's analysis, identifying three fundamental modalities of feminine motility. *Ambiguous transcendence*: feminine bodily existence remains "overlaid with immanence," pulled back even as it reaches outward—the woman who extends her arm but keeps her legs still, concentrating force in one limb rather than mobilizing her whole body. *Inhibited intentionality*: reaching toward a projected end with an "I can" while withholding full commitment in a self-imposed

¹ The concept of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) is a feminist and communitarian interpretive framework, developed primarily among Indigenous and Afro-descendant activists in Latin America, establishing an indissoluble link between the human body and geographical space. Violence, exploitation, and extractivism directed at the territory are understood as reflected and reproduced on bodies—particularly those of women and marginalized communities. The concept asserts the right to self-determination over both one's own body and one's own land, proposing the simultaneous care and defense of both spaces as practices of resistance.

² The term *corpo-realtà* (body-reality) designates an integrated and thinking corporeality—not divided by the Cartesian split between material body and thought, but conceived as a conscious, experiencing, and sensitive material organism in constant interaction with its environments and contexts.

"I cannot"—women who underestimate their capacities and experience their bodies as burdens rather than instruments of agency. *Discontinuous unity*: locating motion in a part of the body while the rest remains immobile, producing fragmented rather than integrated engagement with the world. Young insists these modalities are not rooted in anatomy but in the situation of women in patriarchal society—a situated analysis, open to transformation: «Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified» (Young, 2005, pp. 42–43).

4. From Bodily Inhibition to Gender-Based Violence: A Pedagogical Analysis

The connection between the processes documented by Belotti and Young and gender-based violence is structural: the same pedagogical processes that teach girls to restrict their bodies and defer to masculine spatial authority contribute to conditions of vulnerability that gender-based violence can exploit. This connection is pedagogically important without being the sole or determining factor: international frameworks locate violence against women in structural inequalities and gender stereotypes, alongside institutional and cultural strategies. The limitation of women's movement functions as a *dispositif* of disciplinary control: when bodies have been trained to inhibit their own force, domination becomes largely self-sustaining. ACF identifies the "myth of virile force"³ (Chiricosta, 2019) as operating through the same logic Fanon (2001) identified in colonialism: the oppressed internalize the colonizer's criteria and accept their subordination as natural. The self-fulfilling prophecy operates at this level: the girl who has been trained not to use her body may find it significantly harder, in a moment of crisis, to mobilize its capacities—not because of any biological limitation, but because her body has been pedagogically shaped toward restraint. This *dispositif* also reinforces and naturalizes a binary division of genders, training body-realities to respond to a rigidly binary code distinguishing "bodies of force" from "docile bodies." What has been observed in girls' motor education resonates with many other inferiorized corporealities organized along multiple intersecting lines of oppression.

5. Feminist Self-Defense: History, Theory, and Pedagogy

5.1. Historical Overview

The history of Feminist Self-Defense (FSD) is intertwined with feminist political organizing from the outset. Its earliest institutional manifestation appears in the suffragette movement, which combined the demand for political rights with physical self-defense (McCaughey, 1997; Schettini & Feci, 2024). The *ju-jitsu-suffragette*—a term merging the name of the practice with the political identity of its practitioners—refused the bodily confinement of femininity, demonstrating that women's bodies were capable of force and resistance. The encounter with *ju-jitsu* opened a different conception of corporeality: effective force can operate through

³ The *mythos* of virile force is a narrative that literally becomes bodies. In this androcentric paradigm, force is understood as the capacity to oppress and inferiorize—masculine and muscular, opposed to a weak and submissive feminine—establishing a kind of 'natural right' to its exercise. From this perspective, gender-based violence appears as a process of subjectivation through oppressive virility, inscribing its logic in the bodies of those who exercise domination and those who suffer it.

redirection and the intelligent use of an attacker's energy rather than requiring size, weight, or aggression—a bodily refutation of the myth of virile force. The modern wave of FSD emerged in the 1970s, when the anti-rape movement brought bodily autonomy into feminist political analysis: drawing on *ju-jitsu* and *judo* traditions, these practices shifted emphasis from military efficiency to political empowerment and from individual self-protection to collective analysis of gender-based violence.

5.2. *Empowering Self-Defense as Pedagogical Practice*

Empowering Self-Defense (ESD) is distinguished from conventional self-defense by its explicit feminist orientation and attention to the social structures producing vulnerability. As Thompson (2014) argues, ESD situates individual experiences within structural frameworks, challenges victim-blaming narratives, and centers the body as a site of both injury and recovery. Feminist self-defense is not primarily about equipping women to fight off attackers; it is about transforming their relationship to their bodies, their confidence in occupying space, and their capacity for self-assertion.

6. Autocoscienza Combattente Femminista: A Methodology for Embodied Liberation

6.1. *Origins and Institutional Context*

Autocoscienza Combattente Femminista (ACF) is an integrated psychocorporal methodology for feminist self-defense and bodily empowerment, developed over more than a decade of research and practice. Originating in workshops at Roma Tre University—first in the *Sensibili Guerriere* laboratory, later in the *Forza* module of the Gender Studies Master's program—it has been refined through the ADV center at the University of Milan-Bicocca and the Academic Network UN.I.RE, connecting researchers in Italy with partners at the University of Buenos Aires and the Autonomous University of Puebla. Through exchange with Latin American feminist and Indigenous feminist scholars, ACF has integrated explicit attention to the colonial dimensions of gendered bodily oppression.(inserire nota su muoversi nello spazio)

6.2. *Theoretical Foundations*

ACF's most fundamental commitment is the rejection of Cartesian mind/body dualism, beginning from the premise that any serious approach to gender-based violence must engage *corpo-realtà* (Chiricosta, 2019)—conscious, experiencing organisms in constant interaction with their environments. From European phenomenology—particularly Merleau-Ponty and Young—ACF inherits the understanding of the body as the primary site of intentionality and agency. From Angela Putino (1987, 1992), it inherits the practice of collective bodily work as feminist political engagement. From East Asian traditions—particularly *yin-yang* philosophy—it inherits a relational, dynamic understanding of force: the Taoist body conceived as an inner landscape (*neijing*), a living territory of energies in constant dialogue with the exterior. This resonates with the Latin American feminist concept of *corpo-territorio* (Millán, 2014; Lugones, 2008) and with enactive cognitive science: the body emerges not as a container of experience but as its very medium, the dynamic site from which agency and transformation arise. The integration of practices from different cultural traditions calls for ongoing reflexivity regarding the

risk of extracting them from their original contexts: ACF's decolonial orientation is the frame within which this mediation is pursued.

6.3. Methodology and Practice

ACF is structured as an integrated laboratory combining five mutually reinforcing dimensions of practice, interwoven throughout rather than following a linear sequence.

The first dimension is *psychocorporal awareness and trauma-sensitive accompaniment*. ACF begins with non-judgmental attention to one's own bodily experience—sensations, tensions, impulses, inhibitions—inseparable from a trauma-sensitive orientation recognizing that many participants carry the marks of past violence in their bodies. As van der Kolk (2014) demonstrates, trauma inscribes itself somatically as altered patterns of movement and muscular tension. The gendered bodily inhibition documented by Belotti and Young can share structural features with cumulative, socially induced trauma, though differential socialization should not be automatically equated with clinical trauma, and ACF does not constitute a therapeutic intervention: its trauma-sensitive orientation ensures attentiveness to vulnerability and respect for each participant's pace. This dimension draws on somatic psychology and Chinese therapeutic exercises derived from *Daoyin* (導引)⁴.

The second dimension is *martial arts practice*. ACF draws selectively on *Taijiquan* (太極拳), with its harmonization of internal and external forces; *ju-jitsu*, focusing on using the attacker's force rather than opposing it; and *Muay Thai*, developing whole-body power. These practices are integrated with care for their cultural origins and reframed within a feminist perspective.

The third dimension is *sociocultural contextualization*: throughout the laboratory, bodily experiences are connected to the broader social and political structures that have produced them. Bodies thus prove to embody relations of power that unfold along multiple intersecting lines of oppression—of which the binary reduction of genders is one operative *dispositif*, alongside class, race, ethnicity, and colonial position.

The fourth dimension is *mythopoiesis*—the critical reworking of narrative and mythological traditions. ACF works on the stories through which dominant culture has naturalized masculine force and feminized passivity, placing these two human dimensions in a structural contrast that sustains binary gender division, as well as on the recovery of alternative narratives across Mediterranean, Asian, Indigenous, and African repertoires, engaging critically with what Lugones (2008) theorizes as the "colonial/modern gender system." Particular care is taken not to trivialize or decontextualize the complexity of these narratives: the aim is to explore traditions different from dominant ones as a path out of the colonial *ratio* still pervasive in so-called Western societies.

The fifth and foundational dimension is *collective practice and the care of the collective body*. The laboratory group is itself a body—a collective *cuerpo-territorio* developing

⁴ *Daoyin* (導引) is an ancient Chinese health cultivation practice, considered the direct ancestor of modern Qigong. The term literally means 'to guide the energy and lead the body.' It rests on three pillars: physical movements (stretching and torsion exercises), controlled breathing (to regulate the flow of vital energy, or *qi*), and mental concentration (to free the energy meridians and calm the mind).

shared capacities, mutual recognition, and collective self-care. What begins as individual empowerment opens into collective agency.

6.4. *The Concept of the Inaddomesticato and Bodily Liberation*

A central concept in ACF's theoretical vocabulary is Angela Putino's notion of the *inaddomesticato* (Putino, 1992, p. 7)—the "untamed": a nucleus of resistance in the female body-reality that, despite immense pressures, maintains its centeredness. Not a romanticized pre-social nature, but the residual capacity for self-assertion surviving even the most thorough processes of gendered socialization. Accessing the *inaddomesticato* is a central aim of ACF: participants discover what their bodies can do, experiencing directly the falsity of the prophecy that told them they were weak. This discovery is somatic, embedded in new bodily habits—and is understood here as a form of political action: to inhabit one's body more fully, to trust one's physical judgment, is to resist the structures of gender-based domination.

7. Broader Pedagogical Implications for Embodied Education

The observations reported here—participants' transformations in physical capacity, spatial confidence, and emotional relationship to anger and fear—arise from reflective practice accumulated over more than a decade of facilitation, and resonate with a growing body of evidence on Empowering Self-Defense (Thompson, 2014). A pedagogy committed to gender justice would need to create conditions in which girls, women, and non-binary people are actively encouraged to develop physical confidence, occupy space, and engage in physically demanding activities without shame—recognizing embodied habits of self-limitation as socially produced rather than naturally given.

Such a pedagogy must also attend to the plurality of corporealities it encounters: people with disabilities, transgender and non-binary people, and all those who have internalized dynamics of self-limitation—who have learned to ask permission to move through space. Bodily liberation does not coincide with any single corporeal model: it encompasses the legitimacy of withdrawal, prudence, and collective modes of resistance. ACF's trauma-sensitive orientation reminds us that the expansion of bodily repertoire cannot be forced but must be invited, supported, and accompanied by a community whose presence is not merely supportive but constitutive of the practice itself.

8. Conclusions

This paper has argued that the systematic restriction of girls' and women's bodily agency constitutes a fundamental pedagogical harm—both a consequence and a cause of gender-based violence. Drawing on Belotti and on Young's phenomenological account of inhibited intentionality and spatial constriction, it has shown that women's bodily self-limitation is not a natural fact but a pedagogical product—and therefore one that can in principle be addressed. Any serious pedagogical response to gender-based violence must engage this bodily dimension directly, offering the possibility of reworking the corporeal script inscribed through years of differential socialization. ACF represents one developed and institutionally grounded attempt to do so: combining psychocorporeal awareness, trauma-sensitive accompaniment, martial and healing arts, intersectional sociocultural analysis, mythopoietic narrative work, and—foundationally—the cultivation of a collective

body and its practices of mutual care. The concept of *cuerpo-territorio* provides the political and ontological horizon: bodies are not passive surfaces of inscription but active territories of resistance, simultaneously colonized and capable of liberation.

If gender hierarchies are reproduced through embodied pedagogical processes, they can be addressed through different ones. The body shaped by self-limitation can, through sustained collective practice, expand its repertoire toward greater self-assertion; the body that has learned to ask permission before occupying space can learn to move with less constraint—while acknowledging that this beginning will take many different forms for many different bodies. This requires sustained practice, careful facilitation, attentiveness to trauma, and a supportive community. A pedagogy of liberation can begin with the body: with the demanding act of learning to move as if the world belongs to you too.

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