

BOOK REVIEW

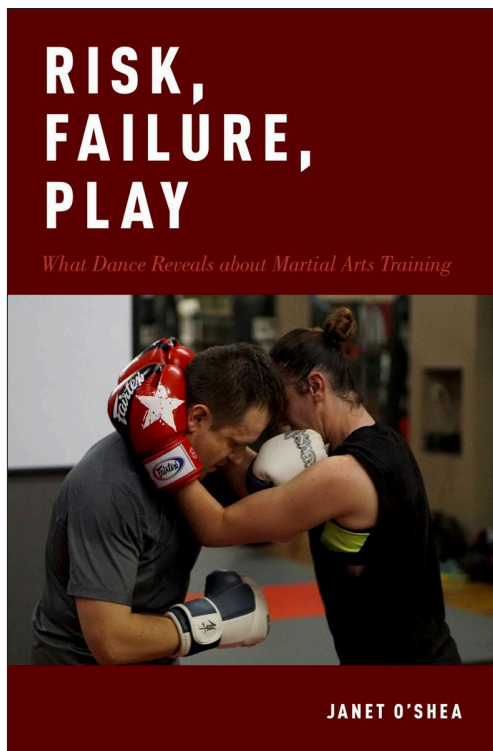
Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals About Martial Arts Training

Janet O'Shea

Oxford University Press, 2019

248 pages

£22.99 (paperback)



REVIEWER

Alex Channon

Senior Lecturer in Sport at the University of Brighton

DOI

10.18573/mas.86

In *Risk, Failure, Play: What Dance Reveals about Martial Arts Training*, Janet O'Shea addresses the question of 'how and why sport fighting feels so profoundly different from real-world violence' [5]. Seeing as this is a question that I have grappled with myself [see Channon and Matthews 2018], I was intrigued by the premise of O'Shea's book, and I thoroughly enjoyed reading the discussion she engages in by way of an answer. As a practicing martial artist and scholar, O'Shea brings a personally reflective, theoretically informed perspective to resolving the paradoxes that arise around and within combat sports, principally as they pertain to the issue of 'violence', and in so doing offers an argument that should be of great interest to practitioners and researchers of martial arts alike. The book's eight substantive chapters present a comprehensive engagement with the 'stuff' of these activities – their meanings, spaces, rules, core practices and so on – to flesh out the author's central premise: That through engaging in the risky 'kinetic play' of martial arts we can build skills needed to develop ourselves as human beings in ways which may be conducive to tackling some of the core political problems of our times. In this sense, O'Shea's text not only addresses the intriguing question of what makes sport-based fighting different from 'real' violence but also seeks to connect this discussion with much wider concerns.

Key to grasping O'Shea's analysis are a series of conceptual points, each of which highlights an apparent paradox of martial artistry. These are all neatly argued throughout the text, illustrated principally through the use of vignettes and personal reflections. The first of these points is the 'distinction between sign and meaning' [28] within the action of combat sports, whereby fighters in sport settings typically do not attach the same meanings to sport fights as they (and others) do to other types of fights. Alternative meanings from those typically imagined for these activities – punching, kicking, and so on – are socially constructed via rules, spaces, and norms of etiquette in martial arts settings. In particular, rather than punches and kicks signifying hostility and intentional harm, they take on the quality of devices that are used to test oneself and others, such that the opportunity to exchange pain-inducing blows becomes something fighters actively seek out.

The construction of such meanings places the experience of fighting in a completely different sphere compared to that associated with interpersonal violence, leading into the second core concept of O'Shea's analysis. That is, fighting in this way, rather than premised upon conflict with another person, actually becomes a form of pleasurable self-discovery, achieved through playful sparring exchanges which nevertheless involve vigorous confrontation in order to deliver a desired type of introspection. Such learning is, O'Shea argues, typically configured around the experience of failure, itself brought on by exposure to the (superior) abilities of others. She writes that 'without the constant reminder of the abilities of others human beings, we can

grow in our imagination to superhuman stature. It's easy to envision ourselves as undefeated in contests we never participate in' [64]. With such valuable learning at stake, the experience of sparring or competition fighting therefore means that, as fighters, we actually 'confront ourselves through our confrontation with others' [68].

Thirdly, O'Shea's attention to the political implications of such practice draws primarily on the notion of 'oppositional civility', a quality that, when practiced, is conducive to the formation of 'agonistic, respectful community' [34]. In short, by submitting ourselves to the regimes of martial arts training that regularly involve being beaten by others, we learn to explore our own as well as our partners' vulnerabilities in a context framed by trust and mutual respect. This requires sustained effort to support and take care of one another while maintaining an interaction that is fundamentally built around forceful, physical confrontation, carefully managing risks to ourselves and each other as we do so. Instead of being a means to conquer or destroy another person, then, fighting together in this way can give us the means to build meaningful bonds of trust and friendship with them, whilst also teaching us how to manage interpersonal conflict in a dignified, restrained, and respectful manner. Ultimately, one would hope, such personal and relational transformations creates fertile ground for more civil forms of discourse in cultural contexts increasingly defined by polarising, socially divisive politics. In addition, although not the core focus of her analysis, O'Shea discusses how such processes hold particular value for the enfranchisement and empowerment of socially marginalised groups, noting the significance of these phenomena for contemporary forms of structural inequality.¹

While there is much in O'Shea's analysis that I agree with (and, if I'm being honest, wish I'd written myself), there are some criticisms to make as well. One of these is a relatively minor stylistic complaint that nevertheless holds interesting conceptual relevance for debates over the place and meaning of 'violence' in fighting sports. Despite arguing several times that 'play is (not) a rehearsal for real life ... rather, play is itself a real situation' [48], O'Shea regularly uses terminology that frames sport fights (noted as 'play' in the quote above) as 'simulated' [29] versions of 'real' fights – those wherein form (e.g. punches) and function (e.g. causing harm) are 'reunited' [33]. To me, this risks implying that the true, original, perhaps *essential* function of fighting always remains that of causing harm to another person, such that the actions of fights need to be transformed or 'reconstructed' [90] before they can mean anything else. I read this as something of a theoretical inconsistency, having otherwise seen in O'Shea's discussion a proposition that sport fighting and so-called 'real' fighting fall within completely different paradigms of human interaction which, although they can collapse into one another, nevertheless exist separately.²

Indeed, for many if not most practitioners of the combat sports O'Shea is writing about, their only encounters with fighting are likely to be within the sporting contexts she describes; such practitioners' experience of punches and kicks (etc.) should not, therefore, need to be transformed into something else, if it has only ever existed for them with the meanings associated with play, learning, and so on that are mentioned above. Although I am talking about relatively minor uses of words and phrases here, which might come off as a

1 I was particularly pleased to see an entire chapter dedicated to discussing empowerment-based self-defence, which is too often overlooked by martial arts studies researchers. O'Shea argues here that the 'understanding of comparable vulnerabilities and strengths (of male and female bodies) is radically equalizing' [162] vis-à-vis the gendered politics of (male-to-female) violence, aligning her analysis well with much of the literature on this phenomenon.

2 Although I am certainly willing to admit that, given my own interest in this topic and sympathy with this particular conceptualisation of fighting/violence, my reading may be a little preferential here.

pedantic criticism, it actually highlights something important about the book's subject matter. That is, it seems as though the difficulty of perceiving fights outside of the paradigm of violent confrontation – a problem that O'Shea has set out to resolve – has actually left its own mark on her analysis, suggesting that such widely-held conceptualisations are difficult to shift in practice despite the best efforts of theoretical analysis. This issue probably deserves more explicit handling than is given on the pages of *Risk, Failure, Play*, potentially opening further research questions regarding the place of 'violence' as a reference point within the experience of combat sports participants; and particularly those for whom 'actual' or 'real' violence is an entirely unfamiliar phenomenon.

Terminological quibbling aside, a further criticism is that at times I felt that the book might've benefited from a more thorough engagement with previous empirical research literature on themes such as risk and institutional violence in sport, especially when discussing professional combat sport athletes, as these topics felt a little under-theorised compared to others. Also, literature on the phenomenon of healthism and self-objectification, a growing interest in sport sociology, might've been useful to consult when briefly discussing contemporary fitness culture as an example of the tensions between work and play – an important moment in the development of the book's thesis. While I definitely enjoyed the style of writing, which is both accessible and entertaining, O'Shea's tendency towards using theory largely in conjunction with self-reflection, rather than prioritising empirical research literature and systematic data gathering on given phenomena, left me occasionally wondering if engaging more directly with a wider range of previous studies might've opened further avenues for analysis of her own material. That said, O'Shea does explain in the prologue that her focus is on theorising personally meaningful experiences through a phenomenological lens, rather than conducting a formal ethnographic study *per se*. And, as I noted above, the end result remains a powerful and engaging narrative on a key contemporary issue for martial arts studies, despite (or perhaps even because of) its relatively narrow methodological focus.

In sum then, *Risk, Failure, Play* offers a compelling discussion of the social value of combat sports, foregrounding their personally edifying potential and the role such processes may play in building more civil, respectful, and egalitarian approaches to conflict and disagreement. O'Shea carefully avoids overstating her analyses, reminding readers that 'play' fights can themselves become violent and that positive, transformational outcomes of sports are never guaranteed. She ultimately argues that, while socially supportive risk-taking and failure-embracing play can't cure all of our personal or social ills, they provide the chance to learn skills that might help us do so. In this way, O'Shea brings her engaging, insightful and neatly-written analysis to a fittingly optimistic conclusion.

REFERENCES

Channon, Alex and Christopher R. Matthews. 2018. 'Love Fighting Hate Violence: An Anti-Violence Program for Martial Arts and Combat Sports'. *Transforming Sport: Knowledges, Practices, Structures*. Edited by Thomas F. Carter, Daniel Burdsey, and Mark Doidge. Abingdon: Routledge, 91-104.

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Martial Arts Studies is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



Cardiff University Press

Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Martial Arts Studies is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers. cardiffuniversitypress.org

Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/mas.i8

Accepted for publication 30 June 2019

Martial Arts Studies

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

MARTIALARTSSTUDIES.ORG

TWITTER.COM/MASTUDIES

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

EDITORS

Paul Bowman
Benjamin N. Judkins

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

Kyle Barrowman
Qays Stetkevych

To discuss publication or to submit
a paper please contact:

martial.arts.studies@gmail.com

EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch *University of York*
Stephen Chan *SOAS*
Greg Downey *Macquarie University*
D.S. Farrer *University of Guam*
Adam Frank *University of Central Arkansas*
Thomas A. Green *Texas A&M University*
T. J. Hinrichs *Cornell University*
Leon Hunt *Brunel University London*
Felipe P. Jocano Jr *University of the Philippines*
Gina Marchetti *Hong Kong University*
Meaghan Morris *The University of Sydney*
Daniel Mroz *University of Ottawa*
Meir Shahaar *Tel Aviv University*
Dale Spencer *Carleton University*
Douglas Wile *Alverno College*
Phillip Zarrilli *Exeter University, Emeritus*