

“Raging Bull:” Contesting Masculinity in Joyce Carol Oates’ *A Book of American Martyrs* (2017)

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Abstract:

Dawn Dunphy in Joyce Carol Oates’ 2017 novel *A Book of American Martyrs* is used to women’s bodies being controlled and defined by men: she has grown up with an image of female sexuality as impure and contemptible, and as a teenager she has been raped by a gang of schoolboys. However, Dawn is not simply a victim, but from her early teenage years struggles to regain control over her life and body. In fact, her rape provides a cathartic moment for her: she rejects stigmatization and takes violent revenge on her rapists. Driven by the wish to fight men, her hammer-wielding vengeance leads Dawn to go into women’s boxing – where, however, she immediately finds herself the object of male assessment again, as female boxers have to play certain, sexualized roles for the eyes of the predominantly male audience.

Female masculinity, my essay will argue, provides the means for Dawn to reject male claims of control over the female body: through her performance as a boxer, Dawn challenges notions of femininity and masculinity and lays claim to an almost gender-neutral identity. She chooses a new, gender-neutral name, D.D., and in an echo of her rape revenge she picks the boxing name “Hammer of Jesus.” What is more, D.D. refuses external ascriptions and to don the sexualizing attire other female boxers wear. Instead, through representation of her body by means of clothes, tattoos, and hairstyle she uses the body itself as a marker of power, to “transform mechanisms of masculinity and produce new constellations of embodiment, power, and desire” (Halberstam 276). The disgusted and negative reactions of the men around her show how successful her attempt at defying notions of gender indeed is. Thus, female masculinity becomes the means for D.D. to reassert control over her own body by rejecting the objectifying male gaze. She challenges masculine power by messing up what masculinity means and who has a claim to it: “The boxing ring, obviously, has become the arena for the most public contests over the meaning of masculinity and its relation to male embodiment” (Halberstam 272).

“The boxing ring . . . provides a nice metaphor for the power of dominant masculinities and their relations to subordinate masculinities. Although the battered white male boxer takes massive amounts of abuse in the ring, he also manages to emerge triumphant every time. . . . This is not unlike the structure of white male masculinity, which seems impervious to criticism or attack and maintains hegemonic sway despite all challenges to its power.”

Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 275

1 If the boxing ring provides a metaphor for the power of white male masculinity, it can also be the space where dominant hegemonic masculinity is challenged and contested. The male boxer’s body and American identity and power became so intrinsically connected in the nineteenth century that both marginalized masculinities as well as women had to be excluded from boxing in order to maintain this identificatory symbol of white male power (Bederman

8). Joyce Carol Oates' 2017 novel *A Book of American Martyrs* provides an illustrative example of how a woman can challenge the notion of masculinity in the boxing ring. Her novel traces the lives of two women: Naomi Vorhees, daughter of an abortion doctor, and Dawn Dunphy, daughter of the man who assassinates him. Dawn, who has grown up in a restricted, Christian-fundamentalist community, later manages to break free from the limitations and regulations imposed on her by her environment, and for the young woman who struggles with her gender, boxing becomes an essential means to assert her "female masculinity" and regain control over her life. The term was coined by Judith Halberstam in her pioneering study *Female Masculinity* (1998), in which she showed that, far from being the privilege of men alone, masculinity can also be found in women. Her partly historiographic, partly literary study covers a wide range of examples, from the variety of genders that already existed long before the twentieth century, to the example of the tomboy, the drag king, or the butch. By having a butch boxer challenge male domination in the world of female boxing, Oates' novel makes "[t]he boxing ring . . . the arena for the most public contests over the meaning of masculinity and its relation to male embodiment" (Halberstam 272), thus exhibiting a "genderless attitude" also shown in some of her previous writings (Cologne-Brookes 234). This paper explores the ways in which the boxing ring as metaphor for male power is shaken by a woman consciously displaying her female masculinity. It will first look at Dawn Dunphy's past and the experience that prompts her decision to go into boxing. It will then continue to assess the literal 'roles' female boxers act out in the novel, and then analyze in what ways Dawn challenges the male gaze in the boxing ring and develops a liberating masculine identity.¹

"Something about her body:" Challenging binary gender divisions

2 Dawn Dunphy is used to women's bodies being controlled and defined by men. She has grown up in the small town of Muskegee Falls, Ohio, where her parents attend the conservative and strictly pro-life St. Paul's Missionary Church of Jesus. Gender roles are divided traditionally: her father works as a carpenter while her mother stays at home with the children, doing only volunteer work. The man of the house is considered head of the family, and women do not get to say or decide much. Sexuality and all things physical are disapproved of, and especially female sexuality is considered taboo. Although this has happened before she was born, her father attacked and almost raped a woman when he was in

¹ Due to the limited scope of this paper, other interesting aspects that influence Dawn's boxing experience, such as the role of religion, her suppressed (bi-)sexuality, or the her father's fate, cannot be regarded in detail here but may prove insightful topics for further research.

his twenties, and the novel makes clear that his hatred for and fear of female sexuality pervades and conditions his entire family. Dawn has no one to provide some form of sex education to her, and thus cannot develop a healthy relationship to her body. Generally, the community expects girls to behave much more modestly than boys, and while her brother, growing up confidently in the image of him being head of the family in his father's absence, freely speaks his mind, she cannot as she has to be a good Christian girl. No one ever asks Dawn what she wants, nor does anyone believe in her: when she first hints that she might like (and possibly even be good at) women's boxing, she is immediately put down (Oates 342).

3 As a result, Dawn has developed a complicated relationship to her body. What seems to bother her most is the decidedly feminine aspects of it: her breasts, her vagina, and she is "frightened and disgusted" by menstruation (Oates 396). From the moment she reaches puberty, Dawn's body equally repels the people around her, both those disposed towards her and those who dislike her:

there was something about her that made them angry, jeering—something to do with her body that was a female body yet carried like a man's, with rolling gait, a way of bringing her feet down hard on her heels, pushing herself forward as her arms swung free. Her eyebrows grew heavy above her deep-set eyes. Her forehead was low, and often furrowed. Her shoulders and upper arms were strong. She wore clothing that might've been a man's clothing, dark, or khaki-hued, without color – corduroy trousers, flannel shirt, dark cotton T-shirt beneath, polyester jacket and frayed running shoes. (Oates 392)

Her gym teacher in high-school allows Dawn onto the team not because she is good at basketball, but because she is intimidating to opposing players, and although she seems to be a good team player, the other girls get her removed from the team (Oates 391). Similarly, the person who is interviewed at the end of the chapter "Mud Time," possibly a former teacher of hers, asserts that "you could see in her face she's be trouble" – despite the fact that she hadn't caused any trouble at the time, and despite the fact that her siblings were good students (Oates 399). Even after she has become a successful boxer, her trainer and her manager still look at her as a homely, clumsy girl, if they acknowledge the fact that she *is* a girl at all (Oates 553, 609).

4 To the other children her age, themselves caught in the difficult teenage years and trying to define and shape their own gender identities, Dawn's looks render her gender so ambiguous that it poses a threat:

In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments

both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. (Butler, “Performative Acts” 528)

Thus, while the girls on her basketball team only get her thrown out in order to avoid having their own vulnerable and unstable identities questioned, some of the boys rape Dawn, using her body in an attempt to force a straight, heterosexual, feminine sexuality onto her. Rape can be understood as what Catherine MacKinnon has termed a gender- rather than a sex-crime: certain crimes, like rape, are linked up with notions of masculinity and femininity, they are embedded in a gendered social context that is structured by a hierarchy of power (MacKinnon). Rape is a “gendering” crime, as it essentializes gender through the inherently gendered act of male penetration, enforcing the paradigmatic norm of male power that posits the male as aggressive, powerful, and hard and the woman as passive and vulnerable. As Sanyal observes in the context of male-to-male prison rapes, rape is a means for perpetrators to make their victims “social” women (128). The fact that the boys never address Dawn by her name, but only as “cunt” and “dyke” before they torture her underlines this: she is not an individual with a name, but representative of something that must not be, she has dared to cross the boundaries between man and woman and needs to be punished for it. Drawing painful attention to her physical ‘cunt’ through rape is supposed to turn her into a ‘real woman’ and to assert their male power over her, while simultaneously showing how unsettled they are by Dawn’s absent femininity: “Something about her body maddened them” (Oates 394). By asserting their male dominance and control of the female body, these boys hope to re-establish by force hierarchies of power threatened by Dawn’s ambiguous place in the gender order. What is more, Oates emphasises the ordinariness of the boys: she is at pains to make clear to the reader that their assault on Dawn is not the deed of sick minds aiming at torturing just someone who happens to cross their path, but of *ordinary* boys in whom such horrible ideas and the need to assert themselves over women resides. Oates thereby underlines what Sanyal has called for in her 2016 study *Vergewaltigung (Rape)*: an understanding of rape not as an identity rooted in the sick psyche of malicious sociopaths, but as a crime; a crime that can potentially be committed by anyone (Dworkin 45-6, Sanyal 153-4). What they do to Dawn is the result of their own “vacuousness” and “emptiness,” not of cruelty (Oates 392).

5 Dawn’s first response to the rape is not unusual for rape victims and exemplary of her general lack of a sense of agency: she blames herself and hopes that no-one witnessed her “shame” (Oates 396). However, this does not last long. It does not take her more than a few hours to decide that she will not be shamed, but take revenge on her assailants. Calculating

and with consideration, she lies in wait for them, a claw hammer she has found in her aunt's garage hidden in her pocket. Her attack is more than just revenge, though: it is an attempt to reverse what has happened. Her hammer-wielding vengeance is the first time Dawn experiences a sense of power and agency that leaves her "excited, exhilarated:" having smashed her assailants to the ground with the hammer, she can use the power of her hands, thereby turning her violated body into a deadly weapon and reverse what has happened by "blacken[ing] the hurtful eyes that had seen the lower part of her body naked" (Oates 398). Dawn does not allow the experience of being raped to dictate her life choices and reduce her to the position of helpless victim. In fact, her rape provides a cathartic moment for her: she rejects stigmatization and takes violent revenge on her rapists. The sense of power she experiences in doing so will eventually lead her to go into women's boxing.

Boxing as gendered performance: Gazing at the fighting female body

6 In professional women's boxing, however, it is a sexy physical appearance rather than boxing skills that sells tickets. Women are supposed to bring revenue, and as both audiences and trainers and managers are mostly male, it is the men who decide what the women should look like. The sight of two women fighting is intrinsically connected with sex, as their urge to fight can be presumed to somewhat equal their sexual drive. Thus, fighting women gain approval only if, to the eyes of the male, heterosexual observer, they are sexually desirable. "To be sexy, in this ordinary sense, is to satisfy a set of standards for appearance and behavior that are the outgrowth of a specific, societally shaped heterosexual male gaze" (Lintott & Irvin 468). The term "male gaze" was coined in 1975 by the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey to describe how films visually treat women as objects and "coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order," implying a male viewer and offering women up to what she terms their "male gaze" (Mulvey 835): "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey 837). The male gaze is even interpreted by some as a metaphor for the penis: "the male eye penetrates the outside world, and especially the erotic female body," which can be understood as visual rape (Reeser 110).

7 A central effort in the world of women's boxing is on keeping women and masculinity apart from each other: female boxers are not fully taken seriously as 'boxers' but regarded only as 'women' in the (male) world of boxing. Trainer Ernie is surprised at any woman entering the gym, assuming that entering such an utterly male environment, a "place almost

entirely male,” “and everyone in sight male,” full of male voices and images of male boxers, must in itself be a challenge for any woman (Oates 557). As a “male” environment like the boxing studio threatens their femininity, the other women at the gym willingly cater to the male gaze and exaggerate their femininity, showing up at the studio in tight clothes, wearing make-up, and concerned more with their effect on the men present than with actually working out:

Fleshy bodies, not muscled. Sexy-fleshy-female bodies displaying themselves at the machines, pummelling the heavy bag with sixteen-ounce boxing gloves until within a scant minute or two they were breathing through their mouths, panting. Red mouths, mascara, makeup beginning to run with sweat. A man’s nostrils picked up their special smell – perfumy sweat. Their fingernails were glossy, perfect. Nothing mattered more than the perfection of their fingernails. (Oates 554)

While they are carefully shaped and styled, these women boxers’ bodies are not actual boxing bodies, though. Dawn (who has started calling herself D.D. by this time) is surprised to find that Lorina Starr’s hits are weak and forceless, and Jamala Prentis, “all dazzle, display,” is “slack-armed and dazed with fatigue” after only one round (Oates 584, 602). These women, it seems, are infinitely scared of being seen as masculine: “Even women who are involved in the most masculine of activities, such as boxing or weight lifting, attempt to turn the gaze away from their own potential masculinity” (Halberstam 270). Thus, they are not interested in boxing or real fitness, but in shaping and toning their bodies so that they will comply with female beauty standards, thereby voluntarily affirming the male gaze: “Their care was for how they looked, in the eyes of men” (Oates 553).

8 What is more, the professional women boxers all act out sexualised, feminized and often also racialised acts, performing roles for the eyes of the – predominantly male – audience. Dawn’s first opponent is Lorina “The Cougar” Starr, a woman slightly older than thirty and rumoured to be of Chickasaw Indian extraction (although this might equally well just be the role assigned to her, as her friend Mickey suggests even to Dawn that she might claim “Indian blood” [Oates 591]). Only the amount of make-up she is wearing and her “sexy boxing attire” turn Lorina in the “sexy-glamorous young woman” as which Dawn sees her. Lorina’s body has been shaped to match her role:

Her features were Caucasian except for very dark eyes and very black straight hair which had been cut short and streaked with platinum-blond highlights. Her skin was coarsely made up with red-tinged beige powder. She wore sexy boxing attire—a sequin-spangled red sports bra, Spandex-tight blue trunks that fitted her shapely buttocks tightly. Above her left breast was a tattoo of a red boxing glove and on her right shoulder, a snarling cougar with a curving tail. (Oates 582)

The other women she fights are alternatively Canadian, adorned in white and red clothes decorated with maple leaves and looking like “a tall graceful bird,” “savage and beautiful” or play the role of “wildcat” (Oates 559, 594-5, 600). The boxing ring thus becomes a symbol of male control in which women are put on display for the male gaze: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle” (Mulvey 837). Watching these women, Dawn comes to realise that a female boxer will always be assessed in terms of her sexual appeal: “that is how a boxer knows *she* is doing well. *She* is not just scoring points – *she* is arousing the crowd” (Oates 586, my emphases).

“Hammer of Jesus:” Shattering Gender Expectations

9 Having entered the world of women’s boxing, Dawn equally finds herself the object of male assessment. The “Hammer of Jesus,” which will be Dawn’s boxing name, is Halberstam’s “raging bull (dyke)”: Ernie often compares Dawn to cattle, her “body [being] solid as a young heifer’s,” her “thighs were large as shanks of beef,” and she is “weighed like a steer” (Oates 553-4, 563; Halberstam 267). A body like Dawn’s can be sexually appealing only under extreme circumstances and only if it is overwhelmed by the power of traditional femininity. Her “homely and stolid” body can only be considered attractive as a fetish object to “a certain set of boxing fans who’d get off seeing a female of this type . . . pummelled, knocked down, humiliated and bloodied by one of the rising stars in female boxing—that’d be some kind of sexual charge” (Oates 555). Just like the other female boxers at the gym, Dawn is expected to conform to the standard of sexiness desired of female boxers, and when they find she does not, her trainer and her manager try to push her into a more feminine role. They set up Ernie’s former protégée Mickey Burd to turn Dawn into less of a “female orangutan,” and pay careful attention to what she is wearing in the ring (Oates 583). It becomes clear that an androgynous sexual identity like Dawn’s is only acceptable insofar as it has to be presented as irony, as a joke to the audience: Mickey suggests, for example, that the role of “butch, but in a fun way” may be the one for Dawn (Oates 591).

10 Dawn’s situation is further complicated by the fact that she is a *white* female boxer. The world of women’s boxing is structured both by racism and sexism. As Dawn observes early on, the boxing world is now dominated by blacks and Hispanics: “And she saw too how over the decades from the early 1900s boxing had largely shifted from white-skinned to dark-skinned, Hispanic. She wondered if it was too late for her. The best women boxers were

black, Hispanic, Native American” (566). As the male gaze is structured intersectionally, different, even harsher beauty standards apply to her: bell hooks observed as early as 1992 that femininity, “far from being race-neutral, is always already raced as white,” and as Kathy Deliovsky has shown in her 2008 study on normative white femininity, not much has changed since then: “[a]ssigning value to women's bodies, based on cultural and racial standards of beauty, is an expression of white masculine power relations” that creates a hierarchy of racialised beauty ideals in which white femininity stands at the top and non-white, subordinate and marginalised femininities are “relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy” (hooks, Deliovsky 57-8; Collins 193). Thus, as the black and Hispanic women at the gym are already excluded from the attainment of “true” femininity in the eyes of the men by virtue of their skin colour, violations of the ideal can be much more easily forgiven. Being the only white woman at the gym, with her female masculinity Dawn quite obviously oversteps the boundaries of the gender order that values white, hegemonic femininity highest.

11 Although being unable to articulate this, Dawn strongly perceives of how the boxing ring is crucial to sustaining male power. Having realised that her escape into women’s boxing has not actually brought her peace from the stigmatization of her body, Dawn begins to challenge the male gaze by asserting her own masculinity and refusing to be put on display in the same way as the other female boxers. Following her wish to become a different person, Dawn begins to craft a new, gender-neutral identity for herself. Starting with her name, she distances herself from the feminine name “Dawn” and replaces it with the gender neutral abbreviation “D.D.” (Oates 558, 589, 591): “The female boxer was not herself but ‘D.D. Dunphy’ in black T-shirt, black trunks. Tight-laced black shoes. Muscled shoulders and arms, muscled thighs, legs. . . . Her hair trimmed short and neatly shaved at the nape of her neck” (Oates 560). She also picks the boxing name “Hammer of Jesus” (Oates 563) in memory of the hammer she wielded against the boys who raped her.

12 Feeling the need to bring her inner and outer self in alignment, D.D. simultaneously begins to also shape her body and to eliminate all markers of femininity. Part of it comes naturally: as D.D. continues to work out and build muscle, her body grows harder. In a way, D.D. is steeling herself both for boxing and against fear, becoming more masculine in the process: “Her muscles were hardening, her body was an astonishment to her, a promise” (Oates 567). She consciously avoids fighting “like a girl,” meaning the superficial style the other female boxers put on in order not to appear too masculine, and determined to win, she wins fans and followers. In addition to that, she also begins to neutralize her female body with its physical realities as best she can. D.D. ties her breasts closely to her body, which is more

than just a medical precaution, and welcomes the opportunity to get rid of the monthly reminder of her femaleness, her menstruation, by skipping her period (Oates 567, 574). Outwardly, she returns to wearing black, loosely fitting clothes again and gets tattoos that are expressive of her mentality: “The Hammer wore silky black trunks, black T-shirt. Black shoes. On the hammer’s biceps, vivid tattoos: a cross festooned with white lilies, and a cross festooned with white roses. On her back just beneath her neck the words JESUS IS LORD” (Oates 595). The rose and lily, both flowers associated with the Virgin Mary underline her belief in chastity and sexual abstinence, and the words “Jesus is Lord” in capital letters emphasise that she believes in God’s approval (Cucciniello 64). Getting these tattoos and wearing her perceived inner self on her skin, for everyone to see is a major breakthrough for D.D. Throughout her life, she has been avoiding mirrors, and when she entered the tattoo parlour and accidentally caught a brief glance of her face in the mirror, “she felt a pang of loathing” at looking so “coarse and plain.” When she leaves after hours of inking, however, rather than the “rush of shame” and guilt she expected to feel, D.D. can now not only look at herself but feels exhilarated (Oates 593-4, 610).

13 As a result, unlike the other female boxers at the gym, D.D. Dunphy does not put on a show for the eyes of the audience, but she actually wears her masculine identity, visible for everyone to see. She has physically become someone else: her body allows her to comfortably inhabit her female masculinity and be a successful boxer while defying the male gaze that seeks to objectify women in the ring. The act of looking means control, and D.D. refuses to be controlled by men and have her body evaluated on their terms. In the ring, this means ““like a viper”” she now ““rivet[s] her] opponent with [her] gaze” (Oates 583). As the reactions of the audience show, simultaneously admiring her strength and being disgusted by her body, D.D.’s attempt at defying ancient mechanisms of control is successful. Her new identity of “D.D.” is a way for her to evade the derisive comments about her body made by men and their attempts at defining what it should look like. In the ring she becomes what Donna Haraway once termed the “cyborg:” “a robot-soldier,” an asexual “*killer machine*” (Oates 583-4, emphasis in original). Her masculine body is admired by the men who look at her, but it also scares them – and D.D. enjoys having turned their gaze into fear: “The way this man was looking at her. . . . ‘She’s a killer. Christ, she scares me!’ But it was a delicious sort of scare. The hammer felt it like a cat shivering as it is being stroked” (Oates 596).

14 While D.D. grows ever more comfortably, reactions of boxing audiences to her body are similar to the reaction the boys at her school experienced: In combination with her fighting skills D.D.’s male looks turn her, in the eyes of the male audience, into a man herself.

A good fighting technique, strength and stamina are so intrinsically connected with the idea of masculinity, that a woman who shows all these and does not look feminine becomes a man in the eyes of the audience: “Because you become a man, battering the other. That is what ‘man’ is – battering the other into submission” (Oates 595). However, as masculinity is so bound up with power and the notion of winning, this changes the moment D.D. is defeated by Jamala Prentis. What makes D.D. lose her strength in the fight against Jamala “The Princess” Prentis is not her opponent’s superior talent but the fact that Jamala is so aggressively (and attractively) feminine: “Sleekly-beautiful Princess Jamala with gold-flashing dagger tattoos, shaved head, skin-tight Spandex.” “D.D. felt her soul swerve seeing such beauty . . . and so she was hit as she’d never (before) been hit” (Oates 600, 602). Jamala exerts such a force of (possibly sexual) attraction on D.D., that she cannot bring herself to smash her face. For the first time, D.D. calls for Jesus in a fight, but is still defeated. While she could be considered a man until now, representing the ideal of powerful, strong, aggressive masculinity, her defeat has now turned her into a “social” woman again (Sanyal 128) – a masculine woman. And “[t]he *boxing world*, as it was called, did not like *female boxers*” (Oates 602, emphases in original). As a male-dominated world, the boxing world prescribes women who want access to it what they are supposed to look like, and it is not unfeminine. Loosing is associated with femininity, and just like that, the men who admired her before the fight now look with “disgust” and “contemp[t]” at the ‘female boxer’ (Oates 602), thus exposing the fragile structure of the binary gender system. As Butler states, “that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 528).

Conclusion: “Raging Bull” breaking free

15 Through the character of D.D. Dunphy, Joyce Carol Oates contests the power of the male gaze. Her character’s development provides an illustrative and inspirational literary metaphor for the potential to challenge white hegemonic masculinity. She vividly shows how a supposedly male environment that asserts its maleness primarily through the objectification of women can be challenged and uprooted by a woman laying claim to masculinity. From the earliest years of her life, Dawn has experienced men who tried to exert control over women’s bodies. However, she refuses to be victimized, controlled and defined by men, and from her early teenage years struggles to regain control over her life and body. Her rape provides a

cathartic moment for her: rather than being the “soul rape,” a fate worse than death, that reduces her forever to the passive and traumatized role of victim, it awakes in Dawn a wish for revenge (Sanyal 93). Realizing that her female masculinity may indeed be a source of power rather than a weakness, D.D. gradually begins to embrace it. Just as she used her own body to avenge what the boys did to her, she also learns how to use her body to challenge the male gaze in the boxing world, shaping a new, gender-neutral “cyborg” identity for herself. By embracing her female masculinity, D.D. simultaneously inspires adoration and disgust in the men who watch her, thus successfully employing her body “to transform mechanisms of masculinity and produce new constellations of embodiment, power, and desire” (Halberstam 276). In *A Book of American Martyrs*, the boxing ring thus becomes the visual expression for the power of white male masculinity, and through the character of D.D. Dunphy the novel shows how by embracing female masculinity particularly in such male-dominated environments, dominant hegemonic masculinity can be challenged and contested, ultimately exposing the fragility of the construct called masculinity.

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