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Professionalizing Capoeira

The Politics of Play in Twenty-first-Century Brazil

by
Katya Wesolowski

The global expansion of capoeira has radically transformed the practice and reach of the Afro-Brazilian fight/dance/game known as capoeira. Once a weapon of the weak, informally learned by male slaves on the streets and outlawed by Brazilian authorities, capoeira today is taught to men, women, and children in schools, health clubs, dance studios, and community centers throughout Brazil and around the world. Accompanying the global commodification and consumption of capoeira as an exotic, hip, multicultural activity is a trend within Brazil to professionalize its teaching. Recent debates around the institutionalization of capoeira offer a revealing window onto the contradictions of nationalism, citizenship, and democracy in Brazil. While the increased emphasis on pedagogy and professionalism is transforming the actual “play” of capoeira, the practice remains, albeit in new ways, a mobilizing agent in the struggle against social inequalities and uneven citizenship in Brazil.

A expansão mundial da capoeira transformou de uma maneira radical a prática e o alcance dessa luta/dança/jogo afro-brasileiro. Antigamente uma arma dos fracos, aprendida pelos escravos nas ruas e banida pelas autoridades, a capoeira de hoje é ensinada a homens, mulheres e crianças em escolas, academia de ginástica, estúdios de dança e centros comunitários em todo o país e no mundo inteiro. Junto com a comercialização e consumo da capoeira em escala global como uma atividade exótica, estilosa e multicultural, verifica-se no Brasil uma tendência de profissionalização do seu ensino. Os debates recentes sobre a institucionalização da capoeira nos oferecem uma perspectiva reveladora das contradições do nacionalismo, da cidadania e da democracia no Brasil. Enquanto a ênfase cada vez maior na pedagogia e na profissionalização vem transformando o “jogo” real da capoeira, sua prática continua sendo, ainda que revestida de novas formas, um agente mobilizador na luta contra as desigualdades sociais e os desníveis de cidadania no Brasil.

Keywords: Brazil, Capoeira, Play, Sport, Nationalism, Democracy, Citizenship

*Before capoeira he could not read, write, or speak properly.
He had no teeth, no documents, no citizenship.*

—A capoeira master in Rio de Janeiro

The global expansion of capoeira in the past several decades has radically transformed the interpretation, practice, and reach of this Afro-Brazilian fighting art. Created by enslaved African men in Brazil and outlawed for part of the nineteenth century for its association with street gangs in Rio de

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Janeiro and other urban centers, capoeira today is taught to men, women, and children in schools, health clubs, dance studios, college campuses, and community centers around the world. Capoeira movement history and philosophy, once transmitted in the streets through close master-apprentice relationships, can now be accessed through how-to manuals, workout DVDs, and web sites. Googling “capoeira” brings up over 6 million hits, up from 3 million in 2004 and 4,000 in 1998. Capoeira as spectacle also increasingly makes cameo appearances in Hollywood films as diverse as *Catwoman* and *Meet the Fockers*, Japanese video games such as *Tekken*, advertising such as Mazda car commercials, and, most recently, popular American television shows such as *Survivor* and *America’s Next Top Model*.¹

The global commodification and consumption of capoeira as an exotic, hip, multicultural activity has influenced the tone and direction of the internal politics that have long been a part of this practice. As a growing number of Brazilians and foreigners now not only learn but teach capoeira, they have become part of a transnational debate over authenticity of style, expertise, and authority. The right to the title of *mestre* (master) is a particularly thorny issue. During my fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro from 2001 to 2004, “*Mestre do Varig*” (Varig master) became a popular, scornful designation among capoeiristas for the unqualified practitioner who called himself “mestre” when going abroad (literally in flight on Varig, the now defunct national airline) to make a living teaching capoeira. As measured by its winning bid to host the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, Brazil’s economy and global clout have greatly expanded in recent years, and yet it is still hard for many to make a living wage in the country. The numbers of traveling mestres, qualified or not, reflect the challenges of earning a living from capoeira in Brazil and the sometimes lucrative opportunities abroad for top teachers.

The role of globalization has become an important theme in the growing scholarly literature on capoeira.² Like any cultural and political form, capoeira has been transformed or at least modified in the process of its export from Brazil in ways both big and small. But, as scholars of globalization remind us, the spread of new forms of identity, culture, and expression always has repercussions at the point of origin in the back-and-forth of transnational interconnectivity (Gilroy, 1993; Matory, 2005). In Brazil, capoeira’s globalization has intensified questions around authenticity and authority to teach and helped to generate a new discourse of “professionalism” that I focus upon in what follows.

Neither globalization nor its resulting tensions, contradictions, and struggles are recent phenomena in any event. Capoeira, created in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, was “global” in its very origins. Most likely born from an amalgamation of West and Central African fighting arts in the particular context of Brazilian slavocracy, from its inception capoeira was also inevitably embedded in the politics of social and racial hierarchy and oppression. This history of oppression contributes to capoeira’s popular image as a weapon of the weak, a form of cultural and physical “resistance.” Yet it has also generated schisms and factions among practitioners, reminding us that resistance is never a monolithic or unproblematic category (Ortner, 1995; Abu-Lughod, 1990). The indeterminacy of its exact place and time of origin, its schizophrenic relationship to the Brazilian state (first outlawed and

then celebrated), and now its rapid expansion have only contributed to the intense identity politics among practitioners and scholars.³ Paradoxically, it is also capoeira's malleability and multivalence—a dance, a fight, and a game—that has kept it alive, adaptable, and eminently attractive to so many for so long. Summing up the myriad definitions offered me during my fieldwork—martial art, dance, play, game, art, self-defense, sport, culture, physical education, corporal expression, resistance, liberation, education, history, identity, energy, health, philosophy, gathering, dialogue, vice, way of life—one mestre suggested the metaphor of a prism. Capoeira, he remarked, refracts different characteristics depending on the angle from which it is viewed. Capoeira is also a lens through which capoeiristas view the world around them and likewise an analytic lens through which the anthropologist can better understand relations of history, power, and race in Brazil and beyond.

In this instance, current debates over the regulation of capoeira instruction provide insight into the contested nature of nationalism and the unevenness of citizenship in Brazil. The new discourse of “professionalization,” I will argue, incorporates dimensions of familiar nationalist and counternationalist narratives while simultaneously reshaping arguments over authenticity, ownership, and representation of capoeira. On the one hand, these latest developments mark another instance of state co-optation and regulation of capoeira and the “corruption” of a previously “free” form of play. On the other hand, they can be read as a moment of increased struggle and mobilization, albeit in new ways, against enduring social inequalities and uneven citizenship in Brazil that have been at the heart of this practice since its inception.

SPORT OR PLAY?

Polemics over capoeira's professionalization and regulation crystallized during the Third National Capoeira Congress, held in São Paulo in August of 2003.⁴ Organized in part by the Lula administration's Ministry of Sports and the Communist Party of Brazil and supported by other national political parties and local capoeira groups, the congress brought together politicians, academics, and close to 500 capoeira mestres and instructors from across Brazil to discuss plans and proposals for regulating the teaching of capoeira. At one especially charged moment during three days of intense debate and heightened emotion, Mestre Pinatti, a distinguished capoeira mestre in his seventies, climbed onto the stage out of turn. Reaching the microphone, he raised a clenched fist and cried: “Capoeira is culture, not sport!” Encouraged by cheers of support from the crowd, he went on to criticize the political sponsors of the congress, admonishing his fellow capoeiristas to recognize that politicians were responsible for the “big mess the country is in.” To even louder roars of support, Mestre Pinatti closed his impassioned speech with “At times I am prouder of being a capoeirista than of being a Brazilian!”

Mestre Pinatti's opening and closing statements are both deeply revelatory for the discussion at hand. I begin here with his claim that capoeira is culture not sport, which is more than a question of semantics because, as mentioned above, capoeiristas take great pride in the myriad definitions and interpretations

of capoeira. Rather, what Mestre Pinatti and others at the congress were protesting was the institutionalization of capoeira—in essence, its transformation from “play” to “sport”—and, more specifically, a recently enacted law to regulate capoeira as a profession under the state or federal council of physical education.

The larger question of play, sport, and their relationship has long been a matter of debate among scholars. As early as 1938 the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga argued that the increased routinization of modern societies was diminishing the play element in social life. Building on Huizinga’s work and agreeing with his premise that play was crucial in the early formation of cultures, Roger Caillois (2001 [1958]) posited that play had not so much died out as changed in form and function. Critiquing Huizinga for failing to account not only for the wide array of games but for the variation in “ways of playing” (53), Caillois suggested that play oscillates between two poles: *paidia*, characterized as “turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety” and best captured in children’s play, and *ludus*, best represented in professional sports, as bound by “arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions” (13). In other words, *ludus* is a disciplined and institutionalized form of *paidia* in which “rules are inseparable from play” (27). In this vein, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano (2003: 2) laments the professionalization of soccer (the only game, I might add, that capoeiristas consider more popular in Brazil than capoeira):

The history of soccer is a sad voyage from beauty to duty. When the sport became an industry, the beauty that blossoms from the joy of play got torn out by its very roots. . . . The technocracy of professional sport has managed to impose a soccer of lightning speed and brute strength, a soccer that negates joy, kills fantasy, and outlaws daring.

There is certainly an element of this same thinking in the complaints of the capoeira mestres about the sportification of capoeira. By the reasoning of Mestre Pinatti and others, the creation of new regulations and institutions to manage capoeira was a kind of corruption, or falling from grace, of a more beautiful, joyful, imaginative, and free form of play. The language of “play” is, after all, at the heart of capoeira—a capoeirista does not “fight” or “dance” but “plays” (*jogar*) capoeira, and a match between two “players” (*jogadores*) is a “game” (*jogo*). Demanding physical prowess, mental strategy, and aesthetic and musical sensibilities, capoeira shares as much with a game of chess as with a soccer match or a break-dance “battle.” While the main objective is to outmaneuver and destabilize one’s partner in the space of the *roda* (ring) in which capoeira games occur, there is equal emphasis on maintaining the flowing movement in time with the percussive music and call-and-response singing. The use of “escapes” rather than blocks as in other martial arts and the seamlessness of games—players replace one another without formal acknowledgment of a winner or loser, with the result that a *roda* (which refers to the “play event” as well as the “play space”) can go on for hours—creates a “to-and-fro movement which is not tied to any goal which would bring it to an end . . . [but] rather renews itself in constant repetition” (Gadamer, 1975: 93). Gadamer’s definition of play or Huizinga’s—“a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (1950: 13)—beautifully

captures capoeira's physical qualities and the way in which it is engaged by and engaging to its players.

It is reasonable enough, by this definition, to see why capoeiristas might be skeptical about attempts to bureaucratize their art. But what distinguishes capoeira from other types of play? What, in essence, makes capoeira *Brazilian* play? If we are to believe anthropologists' claim that "the way people play is perhaps more profoundly revealing of a culture than how they work" (Turner, 1987: 76) or that play is a cultural text, "a story they tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz, 1973: 448), then what does capoeira tell us about Brazil and Brazilians?⁵

The answer to this question lies in *malandragem*. Well known in the Brazilian context (see DaMatta, 1991) and glossed as "cunning" or "deception," *malandragem* incorporates a whole range of characteristics, among them intelligence, foresight, improvisation, opportunism, and self-preservation. For many capoeiristas *malandragem* is the defining ethos of the game.⁶ As expressed to me by one mestre in Rio and echoed by many others, "Malandragem is the center of capoeira. Capoeira without *malandragem* is not capoeira but just movement. The spice of capoeira is *malícia* and *malandragem*. *Malandragem* is the provenance of the *malandro*, the con artist. But *malandragem* is survival, it is surviving the fight that is everyday life." Capoeira without *malandragem* is just a show of physical agility. Embodying improvisational spontaneity, strategic cunning, and even theatrical humor, *malandragem*, capoeiristas say, adds the *tempero* (spice) to the game; it is capoeira's *dendê*, the hot palm oil that distinguishes Brazilian food. But, as expressed by the mestre above, there is a darker underbelly to *malandragem*. As a tactic for surviving "the fight that is everyday life"—an expression I heard repeated by all sorts of Brazilians but particularly those of the lower classes—*malandragem* expresses the difficulty of a life constrained by the conditions of a corrupt, inegalitarian, and unjust society. As a type of cultural agency, *malandragem* is the art of bricolage in confronting societal constraints that range from grueling underpaid jobs to extreme poverty and violence. And, more often than not, it involves bending the rules and taking advantage of others in the interest of self-preservation.

As the king of *malandragem*, the *malandro* is an artful dodger, a hustler, and a trickster who presents himself as a man of leisure, a lower-class flâneur, yet who depends on *malandragem* to survive; he deploys street smarts, charm, and opportunism to take advantage and get ahead of others. As a kind of folk hero historically tied to a particular socioeconomic and racial identity, the *malandro* has come to occupy a central place in the Brazilian and particularly the *carioca* (referring to inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro) social imagination that crosses class and ethnic lines: the *malandro* (a label that can just as easily apply to a politician as a drug lord) is the person who has learned to game the corrupt Brazilian system. *Malandragem* is a response to a highly hierarchical, inegalitarian, and paternalistic society in which getting things accomplished requires working one's social connections in creative and not always honest ways. As such *malandragem* is ambiguously valued: on the one hand it represents innovative resourcefulness and on the other hand it represents dishonesty and exploitation. The *malandro* fights an undemocratic and corrupt system with corruption.

Malandragem and the malandro, it would then appear, are the antitheses of bureaucratically organized, fair-play sports and the rule-conscious, disciplined athlete. The sense of losing this more unruly dimension of capoeira may be part of the fears around the art's being institutionalized. At the same time, however, it would be simplistic to say that capoeira is losing the "free improvisation and carefree gaiety" of Caillois's *paidia* or the "joy, fantasy, and daring" of Galeano's street soccer, because from another angle capoeira play was never really those things. Capoeira may be "free," "daring," and "fantastic" in the sense of allowing its players to imagine, if only momentarily, "liberation from slavery, from class domination, from the poverty of ordinary life, and ultimately even from the constraints of the human body" (Lewis, 1992: 2). However, capoeiristas continue to be constrained and continue to innovate new ways to survive "the fight that is everyday life." As one capoeirista in Rio half-jokingly and half-provocatively said to me, "Today's malandro is honest: he tricks everyone's expectations by *not* being dishonest." A paradox of capoeira is its simultaneous freedom and constraints.

BRASILIDADE, DEMOCRACY, AND CITIZENSHIP

The overwhelming response—deafening cheers and grown, macho capoeiristas weeping with emotion—to Mestre Pinatti's closing statement about sometimes being prouder to be a capoeirista than to be a Brazilian evidences the continuing strength of the capoeira identity. Even in the thick of debate, the capoeiristas in the room shared an experience that at moments seemed to trump even nationalist pride, and this in a country where nationalism runs strong. Yet Mestre Pinatti's claim was also a direct critique of the nationalist discourse that framed the congress: emblazoned on huge banners as well as the hats, T-shirts, and pens distributed to the delegates was a map of Brazil superimposed with the image of a virile, mulatto capoeirista and the words "*Capoeira é Brasil!*" (Capoeira is Brazil!).

This motto was an affirmation of the image of capoeira, created in the 1930s and enduring (in various contested forms) today, as a manifestation of *brasilidade* (Brazilianness). After more than a century of persecution for its perceived threat to the social order, capoeira underwent a drastic image transformation in the mid-twentieth century. Under the nationalist agenda of the dictator Getúlio Vargas, fueled by the revisionist history of the sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1963 [1933]) that promoted Brazil as a "racial democracy," capoeira, along with other Afro-Brazilian cultural practices, was celebrated as a manifestation of a unique, triracial Brazilianness. Whereas in the nineteenth century African and European racial and culture mixing in Brazil had been viewed as dangerously degenerative, under the state's new official doctrine hybridity was celebrated as contributing to the unique strength, beauty, and creativity of Brazilian culture and people. While maintaining the familiar colonial and postcolonial hierarchy of race and class, the mulatto (such as the capoeirista depicted in the congress logo) came to hold an intermediary position that represented the pinnacle of Brazilian creativity, strength, and virility.

Whatever its other contradictions and limitations, this new political ideology did acknowledge and value the African cultural contributions to the nation.

This shift opened up a space for greater social acceptance and the initial institutionalization of capoeira. No longer viewed as a marginal street activity, capoeira began to be taught in academies and, under the notion that “we are all Brazilians of mixed heritage,” attracted students from across race and class boundaries. While opening up space for its expansion, this greater social acceptance also sparked internal racial politics over authenticity, ownership, and representation of capoeira. Some practitioners resisted the stylistic, pedagogical, and demographic changes that they claimed “whitened” and “sportified” a black art form and called for a return to a more “authentic” and “pure” African style (see Frigeiro, 1989).

Today these racial politics continue to play out in debates over authenticity of style and authority to claim expertise both within and outside of Brazil. Outside of Brazil authenticity and authority are often established through creating connections to an exotic, distant, and largely imagined homeland of capoeira (see Joseph, 2008; Travassos, 2000). Depending on the identity politics of the group, academies are adorned with murals and artifacts suggesting the land of never-ending carnival and samba or images of the *orixas*, Bob Marley, and other pan-African icons evoking the African diaspora. Similarly the racial appearance, broken English, hypermasculinity, and roguish ways of the capoeira mestre are deployed as indexes of authenticity (Joseph, 2008).⁷ Brazil itself is part of this construction of a space of multicultural difference, with a map and flag of the country not uncommon on the walls of capoeira studios abroad.

While outside of Brazil establishing authenticity and authority still largely relies on capoeira’s mythic and imagined past, in Brazil these elements are joined and often superseded by a forward-looking gaze that emphasizes professionalism and “recovering citizenship” (*resgatando cidadania*). The mission statement of one of the largest capoeira associations in Rio de Janeiro and around the world includes “diffusing Brazilian culture, promoting social integration, recovering citizenship, and professionalizing capoeira” (Abadá-Capoeira, 1997). When speaking about one of his top students who grew up on the streets, the mestre of this group claimed that “before capoeira, he could not read, write, or speak properly. He had no teeth, no documents, no citizenship.”

This new capoeira rhetoric of professionalism and citizenship speaks to the “disjunctiveness” of democracy and the unevenness of citizenship in Brazil (Holston and Caldeira, 1998). While politically democratic since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, Brazil has failed to fully adopt cultural and social values that ensure democratic rights and equal citizenship for all (Holston and Caldeira, 1998). This is most evident in general attitudes toward the rich and the poor. While the normally darker-skinned poor very often find themselves criminalized and viewed with suspicion, the wealthy often receive preferential treatment in a justice system that has tended to favor the light-skinned, the moneyed, and the powerful (Caldeira, 2001). Mistrust of the law and the legal system runs deep in Brazil’s *favelas* (shantytowns) and other poor areas. These feelings have only been reinforced by such incidents as the 1993 Candelaria Massacre, in which a group of off-duty police officers fired on and killed a number of street children sleeping on the steps of a cathedral in downtown Rio. Many prosperous cariocas supported the killing, believing the street

children to be dangerous and dirty petty criminals who deserved extermination (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman, 1998). Working with children from the streets and favelas in Rio, capoeira groups like the one mentioned above recognize the precariousness of citizenship for this population and promote capoeira as a means for avoiding the fate of the children of the Candelaria Massacre.

The possibility of escape from marginalization and criminalization has been enhanced with the growing recognition of capoeira as a legitimate and now even potentially lucrative occupation. In an environment where the poor are immediately associated with criminal behavior, visible signs of honest and productive citizenship—a maid's uniform, the calloused hands of a construction worker, or the bible of an evangelical—are coveted commodities (Goldstein, 2003: 223). The capoeira uniform—white pants, T-shirt, and colored cord around the waist—can serve a similar purpose. In certain neighborhoods the clothes of a capoeirista, like a worker's lunchbox, protect against accusations of vagrancy and police harassment. One young capoeirista who grew up in a favela in Rio plagued with drug trafficking and police surveillance told me that he would leave his uniform on after capoeira class to ensure quick passage through the police checkpoint.

By far the symbol of respectability most desired by the poor and working classes is the hard-to-come-by *carteira assinada* (work document) provided by an employer (see Goldstein, 2003: 286 n. 6). Along with ensuring some minimal job security and benefits, this document is further proof of "productive" citizenship. As jobs for teaching capoeira become more available in the formal sector of the economy, in health clubs and schools, for example, the work document becomes within reach for capoeiristas, sometimes for the first time in their lives. To secure and keep such a job entails a new set of social skills and a work ethic that are potentially at odds with malandragem. As is implied by the capoeirista quoted above, the lower-class capoeira instructor must therefore "deceive" others by being honest, hardworking, reliable, and a direct communicator. Thus, many capoeiristas view their practice as a vehicle for transforming individuals; by learning to embrace this new code of ethics (and having the documents to "prove" it) individuals who were once perceived by society as "marginal" (delinquent or criminal) can move into the category of "citizen."

This brings me back to the protest raised by Mestre Pinatti and others at the congress that urged capoeiristas to resist the categorization of capoeira as sport. Along with an ingrained suspicion of Brazil's official institutions and politicians and what they might do if they had control of capoeira, the protests were prompted especially by a dislike for federal Law 9696, enacted in 1998, which required any capoeira instructor to be certified by the state or federal council of physical education and in possession of an identification number and card. Anyone teaching capoeira with a degree in physical education would be automatically certified; anyone else had a five-year grace period to receive certification through a year-long course for which the monthly tuition was more than many Brazilians earn in a month. In 2003 the five-year grace period was up and the congress was convened to discuss whether the law should be supported, protested, or altered. What Mestre Pinatti and others feared was that the law would effectively bar uneducated, lower-class capoeira instructors from the jobs that could lift them out of marginalization.

Ironically, at the time of the congress and thereafter it was not at all clear whether Law 9696 would actually be enforced, but in any case the debates at the congress highlighted the changing environment in which Brazilian capoeiristas operate.⁸ On the one hand, the growing popularity of their practice is creating job opportunities that can potentially transform them into full citizens. On the other hand, the increasing incorporation of capoeira into the formal economy has created an anxiety among the middle and upper classes to see that the practice is regulated. And this regulation has the potential for perpetuating processes of exclusion on which Brazilian democracy operates.

CONCLUSION

Though the mestres reached no consensus, the Third National Capoeira Congress was a clear example of the Brazilian struggle, however fractured, unruly, and potentially ineffective, for freedom of expression and full rights to democratic participation. This was poignantly illustrated during another moment that, like Mestre Pinatti's impassioned speech, was unscripted and unanticipated. By the second long day of sitting through debates and panel discussions, the capoeiristas in the crowd began to grumble that there should have been more opportunities to *play*, not *talk* about, capoeira. When the chance finally came during the "official roda" held at the end of that day, just about all the capoeiristas in the room scrambled for their chance to play, and the roda dissolved into chaos. The young organizer became flustered and declared that he would "close the roda," designating who could play and when, beginning with the oldest mestres present. This was met by loud complaints by the younger capoeiristas in the room, and before long the twang of instruments could be heard from the other end of the auditorium; another roda had begun. The organizer's plea that participants "respect the rules of the congress" and end the "parallel roda" was drowned out by cries of "*Capoeira é liberdade!*" (Capoeira is freedom!). Eventually he shrugged his shoulders, and the two rodas—and much playing of capoeira—continued into the evening.

The tensions and fissures during the Third National Capoeira Congress illustrate not just the internal divisions among capoeiristas in defining and promoting their practice but, more important, also the fractured and exclusionary social terrain in which these capoeiristas act. Perhaps, in the end, the congress motto "*Capoeira é Brasil!*" was more appropriate than the politicians who dreamed it up imagined: capoeira turns out to be very Brazilian indeed, though not so much as the nationalist mythmakers would suggest as for what it indexes about the old contradictions and ongoing hierarchies in Brazilian society.

NOTES

1. I might here offer my own trajectory in capoeira as an illustration of its expansion: My interest in capoeira began in the early 1990s when I discovered it in Berkeley, California. What began as a physical hobby eventually burgeoned into an academic interest, and from 2001 to

2004 I lived in Rio de Janeiro conducting the ethnographic fieldwork with various capoeira groups from which this paper draws. This dissertation research was funded by Wenner-Gren Individual Research Grant #6832. Today I teach capoeira in the Dance Department at Duke University as well as at a local dance studio and at a community dance and theater school for disadvantaged youth in Durham, North Carolina, a place where 20 years ago most likely no one had ever heard of the practice.

2. The increasing popularity of capoeira is accompanied by an expanding literature in English and Portuguese by both practitioners and academics. Some of the recent scholarly work includes histories (Soares, 1994; Assunção, 2005; Desch-Obi, 2008), ethnographies (Lewis, 1992; Downey, 2005), and discussions of its export outside of Brazil (Travassos, 2000; Joseph, 2008; Delamont and Stephans, 2008).

3. For a thorough discussion of the “competing master narratives of capoeira history,” see Assunção (2005); for a scholarly study that argues for capoeira’s direct historical link to Angolan fighting arts, see Desch-Obi (2008); and for an ethnographic account of the Afrocentric politics of a particular group in Salvador, Bahia, see Downey (2005).

4. The first two national capoeira “symposia” were held in 1968 and 1969 in Rio de Janeiro. Similar in intent to the third, they were held in an attempt to universalize and standardize the nomenclature and “rules” of capoeira. As with the third congress, controversy and emotions ran high, with Mestre Bimba, one of capoeira’s most famed forefathers, allegedly storming out after disagreeing with younger practitioners (Assunção, 2005: 178; Almeida, 1986: 51).

5. For a semiotic analysis of capoeira as a form of play that takes inspiration from Geertz’s reading of the Balinese cockfight, see Lewis (1992).

6. Also known as *mandinga* and *malícia* and, in its more sinister variation, *maldade*, malandragem is often mystified by expert practitioners, eagerly pursued by novices, and analyzed by academics (e.g., Lewis, 1992; Wilson, 2001; Downey, 2005).

7. Another fascinating aspect of the globalization of capoeira is that more and more women are not only practicing it but also stepping into teaching positions in Brazil and abroad (Wesolowski, 2007).

8. For an interesting discussion of the constant cultural negotiations around how the law is enacted and experienced in Brazil see French (2002).

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