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Review/Reseña

Maya Talmon-Chvaicer. *The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance*. University of Texas Press, 2008.

The History and Rituals of Capoeira, from Inside and Out

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Studies of *capoeira* can be grouped into two schools: the first emphasizes long continuities of practice and symbolism, searching for African roots and connections to slave culture. The second emphasizes historical transitions, concentrating on the twentieth-century consolidation and expansion of capoeira as an organized martial art taught in its own academies. Where scholars in the second school analyze the nineteenth century it is mostly to explore police persecution of *capoeiristas* under the

empire and the connections between groups of capoeiristas and political parties in early republican Rio de Janeiro. There is no strict disciplinary boundary between these two schools, but the first relies primarily on methods of anthropological upstreaming, and the second on archival digging. Maya Talmon-Chvaicer makes a valiant and generally successful attempt to bridge these two schools. The result is a rich work of research offering a thorough investigation of the form, but one occasionally beset by ambiguous interpretations of the evidence.

To her credit, Talmon-Chvaicer recognizes this ambiguity, and seeks to make it explicit in the design of her book in a way that will give capoeira in all its guises its due. Each chapter of her book is divided into two unequal parts. In the first, she offers a historical account of a key period in the development of the game, basing her work primarily on historical documents, including police reports, traveler's narratives, newspaper articles, and iconography. In the second part, she explores the meaning of specific aspects of the form to the participants themselves, at various stages in capoeira's development. These second parts of each chapter are in most cases shorter than the first parts, and rely on memoirs of capoeiristas, comparisons of the form with West and Central African practices, and anthropological interpretation of apparent continuities.

The first parts are much better than the second parts, for they have direction and firm evidence, whereas the second parts are comparatively circular in their logic and impressionistic in their substantiation. Talmon-Chvaicer has done an extraordinary amount of research, and this shows in her precise and telling descriptions and analyses of capoeira in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, for example: she cross-checks accounts from numerous sources, emerging with a detailed and fascinating portrait of the evolving form. Talmon-Chvaicer argues convincingly that the best capoeiristas, far from being generally disdained, were celebrated by a wide range of inhabitants of the city. This explains why capoeira remained prominent despite police persecution—which, for its own part, was inconsistent and arbitrary.

The second parts of each chapter are undermined by assertions of symbolic meaning that cannot be substantiated. Capoeira consists of an

intricate weave of rituals and variations, and Talmon-Chvaicer demonstrates that these rituals often evince continuity with practices important to slaves in nineteenth-century and colonial Brazil, or to their African forebears. When she plumbs the cosmological meaning of these rituals, however, she separates action from significance in a way that seems foreign to the art of capoeira. For Talmon-Chvaicer, a circle is never just a circle, it is a symbol of the world, the village, or the community. Many current capoeira *mestres* share this will towards symbolism. Talmon-Chvaicer cites, for example, the influential Bira Almeida, Mestre Acordeon, on his spiritual reading of capoeira's structure and elements. But when these symbolic readings are imposed on nineteenth-century capoeiristas, they often ring hollow.

There is a signature capoeira move called the *meia-lua de compasso*, or half-moon compass. To execute a left *meia-lua de compasso* the capoeirista spins his right leg forward and plants it so that he is perpendicular to his adversary, tucks his head between his crouching knees, plants both hands in a line that bisects the line of the feet while shifting body weight onto the right leg, and kicks his left heel in a mortal arc just over his adversary's ducking head. The force of the kick comes from the propulsion of the twisting torso, which then carries the capoeirista around in a complete circle. Performed correctly, it is graceful, dangerous, and deceptive. Although it spins the body in a circle, that circle carries no symbolism that can be separated from the motion itself. A *meia-lua de compasso* means a *meia-lua de compasso*: duck or get knocked out. In trying to find hidden meanings, Talmon-Chvaicer occasionally loses sight of the immanence of capoeira, its conveyance of a rich body of physical, spiritual, and musical knowledge that inheres in the form and cannot be divorced from it.

Talmon-Chvaicer is excellent, however, at illuminating the general context of capoeira, particularly in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro. If she cannot convincingly demonstrate that the scarves worn by capoeiristas had a symbolic meaning other than their indication of affiliation with a particular group, she can tell us what color they were and how they were tied. Each chapter includes extensive quotations of original sources and

reproductions of visual evidence. This accretion of details conveys a rich sense of the texture of the world of capoeira and its transformations.

In addition to her thorough primary research, Talmon-Chvaicer draws on the complete historiography of capoeira, as well as on a broad range of secondary sources on related topics. As a result, its bibliography alone makes this book an important contribution to further study of the form. Perhaps true to her inspiration, at times Talmon-Chvaicer bends over backwards in an attempt to reconcile these diverse sources. “There is still no conclusive evidence as to whether capoeira was in fact imported from Africa or evolved in Brazil,” the author writes at one point (30), and “Where capoeira began is a moot point,” at another (154). But in fact there is abundant and incontrovertible evidence that capoeira is Brazilian—there are similar battle dances in Bantu traditions, but nothing with the codes, rituals, songs, and rhythms of capoeira.

This point is not moot, but central to understanding the twentieth century evolution of the form—the attempt to fix and preserve a purportedly African tradition at risk of disappearance speaks to modern Brazilian anxieties about African cultural inheritance. This is particularly true of the *capoeira angola* style codified by Mestre Pastinha in Salvador da Bahia in the 1940s and 1950s. The claim made by *angoleiros* that their style is more African than the *capoeira regional* codified earlier by Mestre Bimba and his followers is itself a very Brazilian claim, shaped by the increasingly popular understanding of Salvador as an African outpost in Brazil after the 1930s. As Talmon-Chvaicer demonstrates, there is a real anthropological basis to that popular understanding, but its uses over the past century have been shaped profoundly by politics. The expansion of capoeira in this period is itself part of that political process. At the same time, capoeira provides for its practitioners a coherent universe of movement, music, myth, and ritual that only appears to function independently of its surrounding context. As a result, capoeira not only can be practiced in strikingly different ways, it can be studied from multiple perspectives.

This book goes farther than any other single volume on capoeira in trying to see the form from several of those perspectives at the same time.

It is not completely successful at reconciling them, but in the process it provides an illuminating analysis of capoeira's evolution and of its key rituals. It is enriched by a satisfying accretion of detail, and makes a key contribution to the growing body of capoeira studies, one that will be of great interest to capoeiristas and scholars alike.