

RECENT SCHOLARLY AND POPULAR WORKS ON CAPOEIRA

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LEARNING CAPOEIRA: LESSONS IN CUNNING FROM AN AFRO-BRAZILIAN ART. By Greg Downey. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. 288. \$49.00 cloth, \$20.95 paper.)

CAPOEIRA AND CANDOMBLÉ: CONFORMITY AND RESISTANCE THROUGH AFRO-BRAZILIAN EXPERIENCE. By Floyd Merrell. (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005. Pp. 360. \$69.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

THE LITTLE CAPOEIRA BOOK. By Nestor Capoeira. Translated by Alex Ladd. (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2005. Pp. 175. \$15.95 paper.)

CAPOEIRA: THE HISTORY OF AN AFRO-BRAZILIAN MARTIAL ART. By Matthias Röhrig Assunção. (New York: Routledge, 2005. Pp. 224. \$150.00 cloth, \$43.95 paper.)

CAPOEIRA: THE JOGO DE ANGOLA FROM LUANDA TO CYBERSPACE. By Gerard Taylor. (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2005. Pp. 560. \$24.95 paper.)

The last few years have seen a minor surge of books on capoeira. This small boom follows decades of growth for the art and is likely the beginning of a steady stream of publications. Apart from its much debated origin as a martial art and cultural form of the Black Atlantic, capoeira's contemporary globalization dates back to at least 1966 when the incomparable master of Capoeira Angola, Vicente Pastinha, took his students to the *First International Festival de Artes Negras* in Dakar, Senegal. The next decade saw a wave of teachers settle outside of Brazil, sparking general interest, commercial attention, and catching the eye of academics from other countries. Today, unidentified fragments of capoeira pop up in movies and video games, capoeira-as-exercise products are marketed, and respectable instruction is increasingly available across the world and away from major urban centers. Keeping pace in its thoughtful way is an increase in scholarly and popular writing on capoeira. This has included a number of impressive studies in Portuguese during the 1990s

and recent books in English, the focus of this essay. This is an opportune moment to reflect on these works, as their range and variety indicates that future inquiries may pursue radically divergent paths, rendering a survey like this difficult. For the present, however, the perennial concern with capoeira's history provides a common thread.

The first work to consider, if only out of respect for the author, is the revised edition of Nestor Capoeira's *The Little Capoeira Book*. As might be guessed from the name, he is a *mestre*, or master, and has made a lifelong commitment to the art. While a number of mestres have written on capoeira, only Nestor and Bira Almeida, or Mestre Accordeon, have published in English.¹ Nestor, who has formal academic credentials, takes a more grounded approach to his topic than the spiritually minded Almeida, though his longer book *Capoeira: Roots of the Dance Fight Game* does include a startling range of associations.² The first edition of *The Little Capoeira Book* was a lucid, brief text for people interested in learning capoeira and a bit of the relevant history. The revised edition keeps close to the original. It begins with a survey of capoeira's history from its appearance in Brazil to the 1990s and considers the central debate about whether the art was developed in Africa or Brazil, though Nestor does not offer a decided opinion. The following chapters, "O Jogo (The Game)" and "The Music," describe the art and explore its meaning. Nestor discusses the inadequacy of "dance" or "fight" to describe capoeira and outlines the game's multiple levels. Reflecting on capoeira's world role he concludes:

1. Bira Almeida, *Capoeira: A Brazilian Art Form. History, Philosophy, and Practice* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1986). He has also written *Água de beber, camará: Um bate-papo de Capoeira. (Em memória de Mestre Bimba, capoeirista, educador e uma das mais expressivas manifestações do pensamento afro-brasileiro na Bahia)*. (Bahia: Empresa Gráfica da Bahia, 1999). Almeida often describes his path of learning capoeira in almost mystical terms. Almeida's influence goes beyond capoeira instruction, a reminder that a double flow between this culture form and academia as more scholars are influenced by the art's instruction and philosophy. See for example Elizabeth W. Kiddy's thanks to Accordeon in the acknowledgements of *Blacks of the Rosary. Memory and History in Minas Gerais, Brazil* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005). While the book does consider the nature and history of Afro-Brazilian culture there is no explicit link to capoeira, yet the author leaves little doubt about Almeida's influence.

2. Capoeira. *Roots of the Dance Fight Game* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002). Nestor Capoeira was originally a student of Leopoldinha and an early, though not original, member of Grupo Capoeira Senzala the single most influential association of Regionalistas. North Atlantic Books' dedication to publishing on the martial arts in general and capoeira is notable. They have published many of the general interest books in English and have more on the way. In addition to the book by Gerard Taylor discussed below, its sister press Frog Ltd./Blue Snake Books published another book by Taylor, *Capoeira Conditioning: How to Build, Strength, Agility, and Cardiovascular Fitness Using Capoeira Movements* in December of 2005.

Capoeira can be a tool in the First World, a tool against the forces that tend to turn people into robots that do not think, do not wish, do not have any fantasies, ideals, imagination or creativity; a tool against a civilization that increasingly says one simply has to work and then go home and sit in front of a TV with a can of beer in hand, like a pig being fattened for the slaughter. (37)

The book's second section, more than half of the original edition, is a guide for learning capoeira. It is difficult to assess its utility for autodidacts as many readers come to this book after receiving instruction, but there are two elements worth noting. The first is his reliance on drawings to indicate posture and movement.³ Intended to convey what cannot be explained with words, Nestor uses symbols. As always the written word is limited in representing this "art in motion," and part of the solution involves diagrams, a tactic often used in works on capoeira. Second, this section includes eight training sequences devised by mestre Bimba who, along with Pastinha, was one of the two most influential capoeiristas of the twentieth century. When Bimba opened an academy in the 1930s, one of his innovations was the development of this new pedagogy. Here Nestor has given the reader and student primal texts, presented to those with the skill to read them.

The sections written for this edition follow under the title, "Appendix: Capoeira Trends." Here Nestor summarizes points from his longer book and includes reports from seminal capoeira encounters, one in 1968/1969, and the other in 1984. The context for the first meeting, which was sponsored by the Brazilian Air Force, is an example of the ambivalent relationship between capoeira and the state. One goal of the meeting was to create a national federation that would regulate capoeira as a sport, bringing uniformity to creative heterogeneity. The effort failed. The second meeting was organized by the young mestre Camisa, from the Capoeira Senzala Group. Nestor frames this discussion in his own very useful historical periodization. During the first period, stretching from 1965 to 1985 when capoeira moved toward a sport modality, "Regional-Senzala style was hegemonic and undisputed." He labels 1985 to 2000 the era of "Capoeira as art" defined by the reemergence of Capoeira Angola. Finally, he identifies the period since 2000 as one of globalization. Nestor's report on the conferences includes critiques of racism, sexism, and other communal fissures that make fascinating reading, particularly because the participants included legendary "old guard" members from Bahia and noted members of Senzala. Slightly gossipy, these accounts scratch the capoeira itch for tracking lineages, pedigrees, and retelling who said what and who did what. The reports are valuable because they reflect

3. An early manual of instruction by Lamartine Pereira da Costa, *Capoeira sem mestre* (Rio de Janeiro: Ecições de Ouro, 1962) contains similar diagrams reproduced in Nestor Capoeira's other book *Capoeira Roots of the Dance Fight Game*, 206.

the mindset of both the tyros of Senzala, who are now living legends with great influence, and the old guard masters from Bahia. When the sociology of capoeira networks in the twentieth century is written, these accounts will prove invaluable. Toward the end, Nestor offers the second most striking irreverent observation in English works on capoeira, assessing the place of academic conversations and reminding readers of an important point:

those who value this [academic] path will look down at players who do not have access to orthodox Western education. The shitty “academic talk” will try to make itself more important than the body-dialogue (the Game) itself. And probably I will be one of the main “shit talkers,” a dinosaur who know Mestres Pastinha and Bimba and was part of the genesis of the Senzala group in the 1960s (155).⁴

Offering a good example of this sort of talk, though with honor, is Greg Downey in his book, *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*. An anthropological inquiry into meaning and experience, the study follows in the path laid out by John Lowell Lewis' in *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira*.⁵ Lewis has already used the best metaphors, equating capoeira's physical inversions with resistance for example, and Downey's study makes a good case for the rewards of pressing beyond fundamental observations. His focus is not on what capoeira is, “This book, then, is emphatically *not about* meaning,” but the changes students undergo as they learn the art (19).⁶ The results are striking. Using phenomenological analysis, exploring physiological memory, and the tried and true personal anecdotes, Downey offers testimony that academia's shift to the personal has benefits.⁷ Capoeira is well suited for postmodern subjectivity because understanding comes through experience, not empiricism. It is no accident that most writing on the art is by people that have gotten capoeira under their skin and Downey explains how

4. The best is Barbara Browning's report on a conversation on the topic of the ‘Dance of the Zebra’, which is often referenced as the African root of capoeira, where a master observed, “The only ‘dance of the zebra’ I ever saw was in the zoo, and it was two zebras fucking.” *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 123.

5. The four page foreword in this study by Robert Farris Thompson alone is worth reading where he sketches the wider culture context before ending with fitting eloquence, “of all the martial arts of the Black Atlantic world, capoeira is supreme.”

6. An admirable choice considering that Downey is quite capable of plumbing the historical record as demonstrated in his article, “Domesticating an Urban Menace: Reforming Capoeira as a Brazilian National Sport,” in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 19 (4) (December 2002): 1–32, one of the more insightful inquiries into capoeira's simultaneously marginalized and celebrated history that is not cited in other works often enough.

7. Downey has explored this approach before in his Ph.D. dissertation and an article, “Listening to Capoeira: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and the Materiality of Music,” *Ethnomusicology*, 46 (3) 487–509.

this feels.⁸ In undertaking this task he has the benefit of fieldwork that was a lived capoeira fantasy, training in the art's holy city, Salvador da Bahia, with the prestigious Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho, and engaging with GCAP's clearly articulated views on history, meaning, and politics. Downey explains these views and their implications, offering his nuanced opinions, even contradicting GCAP positions. Publicly airing disagreements with one's masters is no small matter, as student scholars will eventually face the subjects of their inquiry in the *roda* where capoeira is played, where old scores are settled and, if violence is normally only implied in Angola rodas, public humiliation is the coin of the realm.

The book is divided into five parts: "Learning," "Remembering," "Playing," "Habits," and "Changes," though historical awareness informs the whole book. Downey explains capoeira's different histories and why questions involving origins are so charged. In considering this issue, Downey articulates the experience of how playing capoeira embodies a method of historical memory that locates capoeiristas in a history simultaneously imagined, remembered, lived and venerated. Songs celebrate old masters, groups are named after key symbols, and for every hour training there is an hour spent telling stories. Oral histories are fundamental complements of the lived experience and authors like Downey are aware of the hierarchical relationship between this experience and books. On conducting research he elaborates, "Verbal explanation often seemed to be another game with the same cunning playful tactics as capoeira, like an improvised song composed to suit the circumstances, rather than the eternal "truth" about the art" (52). In assessing these issues, and the dynamics involved in the shifting understanding of the art's origins, Downey writes plainly even as he avoids simple solutions. What he is concerned with is how these arguments resonate in daily life. For example, in the chapter "Closing the Body," he explains how a capoeirista feels protected in certain postures and vulnerable in others, often in a manner counterintuitive to the uninitiated. This concrete discussion moves into a consideration of *corpo fechada*, the closed body, which touches on Candomblé and how it feels to pursue this state. The end result is a sense of how capoeira works.

Matthias Röhrig Assunção takes a different approach in *Capoeira: The History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art*. Driven by a desire to arrive at definitive understanding, he presents a complete history of capoeira

8. The one author writing on capoeira in English who has not trained as far as I know is C. Daniel Dawson whose work includes, "Capoeira Angola and Mestre João Grande," in a collection sold by the International Capoeira Angola Foundation of Washington D.C., and liner notes from Capoeira Angola from Salvador, Brazil, compact disc, Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings SFW 40465.

and a critique of what has been said and written on the topic.⁹ Where Lewis simply noted that these issues involved epistemic differences, and Downey explained how understanding impacts perception, Rörhig follows the logic of historical analysis and privileges textual evidence.¹⁰ To this end he has written a detailed chronological narrative that includes a comprehensive discussion of source material. After a brief introduction, the chapter “Competing master narratives” contains a taxonomy of “six paradigmatic discourses or master narratives,” of capoeira, ranging from nineteenth-century liberal views that condemned the practice to equally politicized modern understandings based in race and class. Chapter two, “Capoeira in the context of the Black Atlantic” lays out the relevant literature of the field and then surveys African cultures in Brazil. This is followed by a fascinating discussion on martial arts in Africa, the Black Atlantic, Brazil and other parts of the Lusophone world. Here Rörhig favors the thesis of capoeira’s New World genesis and argues against African origins. He is not intentionally polemical, but his fidelity to conventional historical inquiry, and impatience with other approaches, will prompt pointed counter arguments. He concludes the discussion by

9. It does not seem coincidental that Rörhig Assunção and Gerard Taylor, who both confront issues of history directly, are coming from traditions outside of the United States. The influences of the U.S. discourses about identity have influenced this discussion in Brazil but those working in other settings seem freer to engage the topic directly. In particular Rörhig Assunção’s challenges to stories of African origins which Taylor discusses in an appendix are the kind of point that U.S. progressives phrase very carefully if they make them in public at all. Scholars from other traditions are less bound by these concerns. There are for example the points made by Livio Sansone, a scholar of Italian origin, in his study *Blackness without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) on the nature of racial identity in Brazil, with reference to Suriname and the Netherlands. It is hard to imagine a scholar from the U.S. academy making a comparison between ethnic relations in Brazil and Europe. For a look at thoughtful work by a U.S. scholar engaging with this dynamic, see France Winddance Twine’s ethnography, *Racism in a Racial Democracy: The Maintenance of White Supremacy in Brazil* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

10. A large part of the literature on capoeira from the last decade is by historians. An article by Maya Talmon Chvaicer, “The Criminalization of Capoeira in Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82 (3) (August 2002) offers a nuanced examination of how the practice of capoeira changed in the nineteenth century. An influential article documenting the link between capoeira and defined criminality is Thomas Holloway, “‘A Healthy Terror’: Police Repression of Capoeiras in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 69:4 (December 1989). The most extensive use of judicial records for examining this history is found in two books by Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares examining topics ranging from the ethnic origins of African Capoeiristas to the neighborhoods of various malts or gangs, to the links with politicians, first in *A negredada instituição. Os Capoeiras no Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Coleção Biblioteca Carioca, 1998) and *A capoeira escrava. E outras tradições rebeldes no Rio de Janeiro (1808–1850)* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da Unicamp, 2001). The second of these works is discussed in the essay by Hendrick Kraay, “Transatlantic Ties: Recent Works on the Slave Trade, Slavery and Abolition,” *Latin American Research Review*, 39:2 (178–195).

explaining that his view is based on the fact that the relationship between music and movement in capoeira, “is entirely different from the way combat games were embedded into wider social and ritual practices in Africa. The close association between music bow (*berimbau*) and combat game in Bahian capoeira illustrates to what extent capoeira is more than a simple derivation of a single African practice To place the *berimbau* at the heart of capoeira was clearly a New World invention” (69).

Chapters three and four examine capoeira in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador da Bahia, followed by two chapters on Bimba and Pastinha. Though they fit together as pairs, the relationship within these dyads varies significantly. Densely written, these four chapters comprise the most complete description of capoeira’s development and survey of source material available in English. The chapters on Rio (1800–1930) and Bahia (1860–1950) are meticulously crafted stories that follow chronology while assessing the veracity of different sources. This pairing suggests that different understandings of capoeira’s origins can in part be traced to thinkers privileging the history of one city over the other, which may explain the stark dichotomy between various schools of interpretation. The discussion on capoeira as the terror of the Empire in Rio draws from various works, particularly recent studies by Eugênio Líbano Soares, and includes seminal illustrations by Juan Maruicio Rugendas and Calixto Cordeiro. Many readers will be familiar with some of these points but other sections, like that on stick fighting as related to both African and European practices, will be new to most. The following chapter on Bahia moves forward in time and has a different emphasis. Bahia is where capoeira survived the fierce repression during Old Republic, while it was largely suppressed in Rio, to emerge in its twentieth-century glory. In this chapter the discussion shifts from capoeira’s place in urban politics to cultural considerations: the nature of capoeira as *vadição*, and its growing relationship with other Afro-Brazilian practices.

Chapter five focuses on Manuel dos Reis Machado, Bimba, and his development of an explicitly martial style that he named *Luta Regional da Bahia*, now dubbed Capoeira Regional. Practitioners of Regional revere his innovation and cast themselves as his heirs. Others criticize Bimba’s introduction of certain movements, the elimination of more ludic aspects of the art, and his training of white and middle class students. Worse, Bimba is accused of allowing Getúlio Vargas’s authoritarian populist government to claim the art as Brazilian patrimony, thereby using it as evidence of its racial democracy. Rörhig lays out the well known elements of the story and the overlooked later stages of Bimba’s career, notes Frede Abreu’s point that he was not as accommodating to power as critics claim, and details the Mestre’s association with African cultural practices. The following chapter is a similarly nuanced examination of

Pastinha's career. A self-conscious traditionalist, Pastinha responded to Bimba's reforms by opening an academy where he taught Capoeira Angola. Angola now not only thrives, after some years where its survival seemed precarious but, in claiming greater cultural authenticity and blackness than Regional, occupies the intellectual and moral high ground in disputes over history and authenticity. Rörhig brings his slightly revisionist approach to the history of Pastinha's career before he opened his academy. These chapters show the career parallels of these great innovators, with both drawing on African traditions and reflecting the influence of contemporary Brazilian trends, a view very different from the common understanding.¹¹ Without settling matters this discussion shows how capoeira was grounded in a particular Brazilian place and time. The following chapter "Contemporary Capoeira" is uneven. Sections on Sao Paulo and Pernambuco, though of interest, remain sketches that should spur further research. His points on the implications of capoeira's globalization are also interesting, but too broad to be summed up quickly in a chapter. Certain points will not be received enthusiastically by all, but by academic standards the book provides insight and brings order to capoeira's innumerable stories and histories. For capoeiristas it contains a wealth of tales and sketches of seminal figures often remembered only in song.

Joining Rörhig's effort in grappling with capoeira's history and covering much of the same ground, if in a very different fashion, is Gerard Taylor in *Capoeira: The Jogo de Angola from Luanda to Cyberspace*. It is inviting to compare the two works. They are similar in intent, they are both written by Europeans deeply involved in the practice of capoeira, and at one point Taylor takes issue with some of Rörhig's conclusions and methods. Yet there are significant differences. Rörhig is a professional historian, moved by concerns shaped by the academy where Taylor is an author moved by passion to include every conceivable piece of information relevant to capoeira's history, reflecting two very different senses of history. Further, despite the title, Taylor's study ends in 1930, the year commonly given for Bimba's creation of Regional and the fall of the Old Republic, with a planned second study slated to examine the subsequent history. Taylor's wide ranging interests and passion have produced a book of innumerable short sections that frequently jump from events in Europe, to the regions

11. A bit of context on Bahia in this era shows that capoeira was far from the only cultural practice that was being made new with an emphasis on original practices and with the intellectual guidance of figures like Edison Carneiro. For a discussion of these events, and a reminder of how much distance the literature on capoeira has to travel to equal the literature on its sibling practices see Luis Nicolau Parés, "The 'Nagôization' Process in Bahian Candomblé," in Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs, eds., *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

of Brazil, to parts of sub-Saharan Africa without a clear framework or transitional discussions. While this may not endear the work to academics, it gives the work an accessibility that, in concert with the edition's attractive design, draws the reader in, an important point given the encyclopedic nature of its roughly five hundred pages. Taylor maintains this peripatetic rhythm throughout the book, eschewing chronology and conventional narrative.

At times this structure and style provides rewarding insights, as when he discusses the Muslim revolt of 1835 in Bahia in close association with the history of the Islamic kingdoms of West Africa. Other examples of intriguing discussions include chapter three, "The Rise of the Quilombo dos Palmares," where a running discussion on the architecture of defensive structures in sub-Saharan Africa takes on a particular resonance in the history of Brazilian maroons. In the same fashion "O Berimbau," about capoeira's main instrument, is of great interest. In these moments Taylor's apparent lack of organization provides surprisingly satisfying intellectual connections and the single work seems rather like an unorganized shelf of good books; poking around yields fascinating points. Whether this is a strength or a weakness is a matter of taste and will reflect the intent of the reader, but it serves as a reminder of the enormous challenges inherent in rendering complete Atlantic histories, though Taylor's thoughtful prose and analysis are at times up to the effort. Even when they are not, his reasoned approach, as when he discusses the limitations of the debate over various details in Rugendas' famous engraving, "*Jogo da Capoeira*," hold the book together (222). In the end, it is clear that a sharper organization would enhance the book, and though it contains excellent illustrations, it has no maps. Given the detailed discussions of Brazilian regions and numerous references to political and ethnic groupings in sub-Saharan Africa in different centuries this is a glaring omission. Further, the bibliography does not include some important works. Perhaps Taylor's second volume will provide a more focused consideration of the issues mentioned above; his capacity for engaging with a wealth of material and working it into his discussion promises great potential.

The final book to consider is Floyd Merrell's *Capoeira and Candomblé*. Merrell, a professor of Spanish and Semiotics, is the author of dozens of monographs usually following the works of Charles Sanders Peirce and semiotic theory. After beginning to train capoeira, Merrell has embraced the art and, as is common for academics, sought to incorporate his new passion into his scholarly work. The book considers both capoeira and the religion of Candomblé, another Brazilian cultural practice with African roots, and then seeks to use them to consider semiotic theory. At points the discussion echoes some of Nestor Capoeira's works, drawing parallels between capoeira and practices from a wide range of cultures,

but the end result is not as impressive. Merrell's control over the history of capoeira is not as strong as the other authors discussed here, and his knowledge concerning Candomblé is weaker still, meaning that the explanations of these practices is not particularly strong. The book is marked by sloppy editing and oblique writing. For example, there is the explanation of his term *kinesomatics*, "I inevitably fail when I attempt to articulate kinesomatics. Nevertheless, I would suggest that your own feelings for kinesomatics can complement what I am trying to put in words. In this manner, my words and your feelings and sensations can perhaps somehow get close to the mark." Further, Merrell's translations of capoeira song lyrics, a vitally important issue given the strength of oral traditions and his use of a pseudonym for his Bahian master, seem a little wooden. In one case "*tocando berimbau*" is rendered "twanging the berimbau" (62). While subtle, observations of points like this eventually shape the entire text. For example, in a section on Candomblé Merrell passes judgment on a point of cultural authenticity after admitting such judgments are inappropriate. The issue concerns the place of Christian practices into the rituals of the African based religion, "I might add that even though Hermes remains quite aloof from the mainstream Terreiro communities and their debates, I have seen no indication of corruption due to syncretism in his practice. Rather, I sense that he intuits the nature of Candomblé for what it should be, with no need for debate and no desire to take sides with any of the political issues" (174). Given the complexity of these issues terms like "corruption" are highly charged and phrases like, "what it should be" are not words to use idly.

The last sections of the book concern how capoeira changed the author's long concern with Charles Sanders Peirce and semiotic theory. Here the tone and style of the book shift dramatically and my own limitations make me a poor judge of this discussion. At one point Merrell admits that explaining the link between capoeira and semiotic theory is "crunch time" (207), but neither the question or the answer are clear to the uninitiated reader. The subsequent discussion, wrapped around musings on homogeny, hegemony, heterogeny, yin/yang, references to Buddhism, and a figure on "Culture: Flows and Counterflows," is a little bewildering.¹² While part of the rich promise of work on capoeira is

12. Here Merrell adds to the tradition of nonverbal representation like Nestor's historic pictures or Thomas J. Desch-Obi's provocative representations of Angolan ritual symbols. In spirit they seem closest to Lowell Lewis' intimidatingly technical drawings of movement and play. Merrell explains figure 18 on page 241 by differentiating between "A," "not-A," "A-lessness," and "Not-A-lessness." Desch-Obi's article, "Combat and the crossing of the Kalunga," is a forceful argument for capoeira's African origins based in part of field work in Central Africa, in Linda M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 253–70). This work is also reviewed in Kraay, "Transatlantic Ties," LARR 39 (2).

that new studies will examine different issues, some grounding remains necessary. Merrell's enthusiasm and passion are commendable but the book does not do them justice. Hopefully his willingness to move in new directions will inspire others.

When proposing this cluster to the editors of *LARR*, I anticipated that as a whole the recent burst of publications, those reviewed in English here and earlier studies in Portuguese, would indicate a forming field that would move capoeira beyond its status as a quirky area for the obsessed. In retrospect I believe that the latter has happened but that the former has not. Read together these works suggest that a single field might never coalesce despite the inclination, in scholarly and popular works, to return to questions of history and historic meaning. What is evident is that this single urge will serve as a point of departure for inquiries that move in different directions. While these diverging interests will make an easy survey of the literature increasingly difficult, it should lead to greater integration between works on capoeira and other areas of Brazilian and African Atlantic history, a welcome development. Capoeira will prove a more rewarding topic the more varied the scholarly and popular efforts to understand it become. The debate over origins will not, nor should it, disappear as a major theme, but there is no reason for scholarly works or popular texts to await a final and false resolution before pressing on with fresh questions. This may mean monographs on capoeira in the city of Recife, or the changes in capoeira during the military dictatorship of the 1960s, or some unforeseen and completely refreshing new question.