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The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance

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The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance.

By MAYA TALMON-CHVAICER. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. Photographs. Illustrations. Maps. Tables. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. xi, 237 pp.

As capoeira erases the dichotomy between dance and martial art and its history unites stories of resistance and appropriation, Maya Talmon-Chvaicer has written across disciplinary divides to elucidate the history and meaning of this “battle dance” as a product of Central African, Yoruba, and “Catholic Portuguese” culture. She brings her concerns as a devotee to the art and a trained historian with an ethnographic eye to this inquiry into the art’s origins and practice. To accommodate the diverse and salient perspectives involved in this telling she weaves together two complementary narratives. In one she relies on a wide range of primary sources and historical studies to explain how capoeira was understood by outsiders or “strangers,” meaning nonpractitioners, whether from Brazil or Europe. In the other she explores what the art meant to its practitioners, the capoeiras, drawing extensively on ethnographies of Brazil and the regions that supplied its enslaved population. She acknowledges the direct Congolese and Angolan roots of capoeira but with a historian’s succinctness argues against an African genesis: “I believe that, through the Atlantic slave trade, the West Central African fighting techniques, war dances, and combat games reached Brazil to form the basis of capoeira” (p. 19). By moving quickly beyond the epistemic morass that is the debate over African or Brazilian origins, Talmon-Chvaicer turns what is too often a conclusion into a point of departure.

Chapters 1–3 detail capoeira’s rise in imperial Rio de Janeiro. Here she uses her own and others’ research to present the most rigorously supported discussion yet published in English of capoeira during the Empire. This is a valuable service as the survey draws on unpublished theses and works that are not widely available outside of Brazil, especially the monographs of Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares. This is not to say that these sections merely synthesize existing works; Talmon-Chvaicer has succeeded in writing a historicized account incorporating the multiple currents of capoeira’s mercurial history. There are moments when the review of myriad perspectives slides into confusion, as in the discussion of the capoeiras’ role in suppressing a mutiny of foreign mercenaries in 1828. Talmon-Chvaicer corrects mythic renditions of the episode, which celebrate the patriotism of these capoeiras, by highlighting how they were repressed by authorities after the rebellion. Discussions of events like this one and the analysis of their significance, both at the time of their occurrence and as symbols in the present day, provide the study with much of its richness. While at times the systematic surveying of these multiple perspectives obscures Talmon-Chvaicer’s conclusions, this method provides a base for charting the multivalent changes that occurred as capoeira was transformed from an African social activity to a public menace practiced by an array of ethnicities, professions, and classes. Set against a richly elaborated ethnographic backdrop, this account centers the work and leads to sections on who practiced capoeira, where it was

practiced, the symbols of the art, and its place in society. One notable discussion charts the changing relationship between music and the game of capoeira as it evolved from a social activity accompanied by drums, to a violent practice with little tie to music, to the twentieth-century cultural activity wedded irrevocably to the *berimbau*, a tonal percussive bow. The treatment of such topics is made more immediate by dozens of intriguing photographs of cultural artifacts and historic illustrations documenting related practices in Brazil and Africa.

Less satisfying is the treatment of historical questions set against the narrative of capoeira's transition from Rio, where it was repressed during the First Republic, to Bahia, the art's twentieth-century Jerusalem. One intriguing, but ultimately frustrating, example is a discussion that runs through several chapters on symbols and practices that were expressed in dress and decoration. The topic begins with points on the fashion among capoeiras from West Central Africa for hats decorated with yellow and red ribbons. When the theme is taken up again it is in a section on the Yoruba practice of decorating with white and red, but the important issue of intra-African cultural interplay and Brazilian regional variation is indicated rather than explored or explained. Rather than pursuing such questions or grounding the discussion in the literature of African Brazil, the book shifts from its dual narrative to a general consideration of capoeira symbolism and practice. The last two chapters are based less on archival sources than on published works and conversations with living capoeira masters. The result is an introduction to the art elaborated with contemporary photographs and extensively cited song lyrics. This section offers neither a fully realized scholarly inquiry nor a general history that surpasses several solid books already written on the topic. That criticism aside, the book is both welcome and notable for the carefully constructed, excellent sections on what capoeira was and how it was understood as it emerged into the world's view in the nineteenth century.

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