

Headspin: Capoeira's Ironic Inversions

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Capoeira is a game, a fight, and a dance, composed of kicks, acrobatics, and traditional Kongo dance movements. One doesn't speak of "dancing" or "fighting" capoeira but rather of "playing": *jogar capoeira*.¹ Or one can eliminate the substantive and use the simple verb *vadiar*: to bum around. And yet capoeiristas universally take the game very seriously. Most, when asked to define it in a word, call it an art.² In New York I once saw a capoeirista wearing a button that said "Doing strange things in the name of art." And it's true, they will go to extremes.

While some people will tell you there are two basic styles of capoeira,³ there are in fact as many as there are great capoeiristas. But certain generalizations apply. Capoeira is always played in a *roda*—the same circle formation that delimits all traditional Afro-Brazilian dance. Two players enter the *roda* at a time, and their focus remains on each other, while they may pivot either clockwise or counterclockwise throughout the game. Motion is generally circular. Kicks and sweeps are more often than not arched or spinning, and they loop together in a series of near misses. The ideal is to keep one's eyes fixed on one's opponent. At times this necessitates having eyes in the back of one's head. But the relative placement of body parts or facial features seems to be constantly ridiculed anyway. The capoeirista spends a good deal of time inverted, with hands planted firmly like feet on the ground, feet slapping happily like palms in the air. The upside-down face, like those magical cartoons from our childhood where

the hair became a beard and the creased forehead a smirking, lipless mouth, grins at your attempts to fix it. And still, those eyes are on you.

How do I reconcile this silly picture with what I want to communicate of capoeira's elegance and even gravity? The game can be humorous, but it is not self-ridiculing—at least not simply so. This is partly because of the obvious physical prowess involved, but even more because of the understanding of the role of capoeira in popular histories.

As usual, a linear history of capoeira is far from satisfactory. The popular histories which circulate most commonly seem to pit forces of influence against each other in a struggle for control of the game: African versus European or Asian values and gestural vocabularies, ruffianism versus links to the military police, tradition versus corruption, chaos versus discipline. Depending on one's perspective, these influences may seem to be playing out a struggle between good and evil. But capoeira, whatever one's style or perspective, always ironizes the notion of Manichean extremes. Just when you think you've determined who are the good and the bad, it all suddenly strikes you rather as an aesthetic issue, excepting that you can't tell anymore what is ugly and what is beautiful. And an upside-down mug is grinning at you, pug-ugly, gorgeous.

Nobody generally "wins" a game of capoeira—although in recent years there have sprung up various tournaments and other events—but that's all part of the story. There are takedowns, and certainly the abil-

ity to apply them effectively adds to one's prestige as a capoeirista. But gratuitous, unprovoked violence or even humorless humiliation of one's opponent (or partner?) is never admired. The question is at what point provocation occurs. In a tight, "inside" game (*jogo de dentro*) when the players are interweaving spinning kicks, the agility and precision of one opens a precise space for the elegant partnering of the other. But there may be a moment imperceptible to a spectator when somehow synchronicity shatters and there are in fact two opposing forces. Someone provoked. Someone sprung malice, which was always inherent in the moves.

However they have developed, the question of where these moves originated is one that inspires impassioned arguments from most capoeiristas. Capoeira is decidedly an Afro-Brazilian art, but which half of this term should be weighted? The simplest little narrative in circulation is something like this: prior to their captivity and enslavement in Brazil, the people of the Kongo-Angola region practiced certain kicking games for sport and recreation. In Brazil, the games were prohibited for all too obvious reasons. But the Kongo people continued practicing their games in seclusion. The *roda* was formed as a protective circle, and the choreographic elements—as well as music—were added to disguise a fight as a dance. Repression of the practice continued even after abolition. The players invented a special rhythm, *cavalaria*, an imitation of the sound of approaching horses' hooves, to warn each other of police surveillance, and on that cue the capoeira became an "innocent" samba. In other words, capoeiristas generally acknowledge that a martial arts technique and choreographic and rhythmic vocabularies were brought from Africa. But the strategic blending of fight and dance occurred in Brazil, under specific pressures. And while this strategy appears to have been directed against forces outside the *roda de capoeira*, it became the fundamental strategy *within* the game. Dance—as seduction, illusion, deception—became dangerous, and kicks became elements of choreography. The Portuguese tolerated the *roda de capoeira* because it was

merely dance—perceived as motion without purpose or effect, other than aesthetic. And within the circles Africans in Brazil trained like fighters in the art of dissimulation—how to grin upside down.

This story is typical of those recounted in the capoeira community—although there are variations placing greater and lesser emphasis on tradition or change, on Africanness or Brazilianness. Ethnographic narratives of origin also vary, although the most powerful arguments come from scholars who view themselves as advocates of African diasporic culture. Righteously countering centuries of European dismissal of sophisticated African traditions, scholars like Robert Farris Thompson, Kenneth Dossar, and Gerhard Kubik,⁴ have given a strong case for the ever-fresh inscription of Kongo cosmology in capoeira's designs. I find these arguments powerful not simply because of their convincing "evidence" but because of their commitment to the principles of resistance which are at the heart of capoeira.

More politicized capoeiristas in Brazil also tend to emphasize African sources. If the seeds of the game existed in Angola but the intention or strategy developed in Brazil, then it would appear that capoeira must be acknowledged as an authentically Afro-Brazilian form. But when black nationalist Brazilians regard capoeira as an African form, their argument is strong. If one recognizes that Bahia, the capital of capoeira and Afro-Brazilian culture generally, resembles a West African port city much more than it does any city in Latin America, the gap of the Atlantic begins to seem quite incidental. The historical fact of forced migration is not forgettable, but the racial and cultural constituency of Bahia is overwhelmingly African. The dance forms which developed there were influenced by Europeans and indigenous Brazilians, but they developed in a culturally African metropolis.

Gestural vocabularies, as I noted, are difficult to trace, so arguments regarding the history of capoeira frequently rest on linguistic etymologies. The etymological debate has been characterized by one historian as "a linguistic version of antiquarian disputes over em-

irical details in history.”⁵ There is something oddly literal-minded about this line of research, considering that capoeira’s own strategy is founded on irony: saying one thing and meaning another. Capoeira, like samba, is an alternative language to the dominant one. Gerhard Kubik⁶ suggests a Bantu derivation of the term, and given the general acceptance of the largely Kongo-Angolan roots of the game, it’s surprising this argument hasn’t gained greater currency. But etymological hypotheses are also narratives, and they have political significances.

In contemporary usage, the word *capoeira* refers most often to the game, but there are two other meanings in standard Brazilian Portuguese: bush and chicken coop. The latter meaning derives from the Portuguese word *capão*, which means rooster and is related to the English word *capon*. Some suggest that the game resembled a chicken fight, the scrambling of two birds in a cage. Whether the term would have been applied in this case by Portuguese observing the practice or ironically by capoeiristas themselves is not clear. Another suggestion is that the chicken coop label was attached metonymically rather than metaphorically: it was the Africans taking fowl to sell at the markets who practiced the game in public plazas, transferring the name of their merchandise to their pastime.

Capoeira as “bush,” or wild space, is said to derive from Tupi roots (*caá*: forest, *puêra*: extinct). Again, the etymology may be “true” or “false”—although its accuracy is less interesting than the association of a term for wildness with the indigenous-Brazilian. The figure of the “Indian” or *caboclo* absorbs wilderness from both Portuguese and African imaginations in Brazil. While no explicit connection is indicated between indigenous games or dances and capoeira, the *caboclo* figure bears certain similarities to the capoeirista. The *caboclo* is an emblem in Afro-Brazilian culture of the refusal to be or remain a captive. One popular conception of capoeira is that it was developed as a means of self-defense for slaves hoping to escape to independent black communities in the backlands of the agricultural states. These communities, *quilombos*, have been documented as re-

markably developed urban centers with organized political and market systems.⁷ The best known was called Palmares, in the interior of the state of Alagoas. Capoeiristas insist that it was the art of capoeira which defended Palmares against repeated attempts to dismantle it and return its residents to captivity.

The efficiency of capoeira in defending a community against mounted, armed invasions is questionable, and this part of the story may well have been inflated over the years.⁸ Brazilian director Carlos Diegues’s 1984 film, *Quilombo*, showed highly romanticized scenes of young boys practicing cartwheels in training for the defense of their society. But to return to the etymological significance of the bush, the wild place, the *caboclo*’s terrain—one thing should be mentioned. Capoeira is an urban phenomenon. It has always flourished in high-density areas: Salvador, Bahia; possibly Palmares; New York City. The urban bush. The notion of its wildness, even the animality of its motion, doesn’t mean it came organically from an uncivilized, un-Europeanized space. It was constructed specifically to counter European pressures.

Most capoeiristas and historians are in agreement on most of the details of this account of capoeira’s origin. But its consequent developments are contested. The *roda de capoeira* ostensibly began as a protective circle enclosing the capoeiristas who were in training—in the process—of an organized transmission of techniques of resistance. But capoeira’s bright image as a system of righteous defense becomes confused in the eighteenth century with boundless, undirected, or uncontrolled violence. In the major cities, gangs known as *malta*s, largely composed of mixed-race, impoverished free men, we are told,⁹ used capoeira technique in general looting and gang fighting. Under such circumstances, they dispensed with the *roda*, as well as the dance.

This is the beginning of capoeira’s association with ruffianism—an association which continued to have currency, to varying degrees, over the years. But the idea of breaking out of boundaries, of getting out of control, is not only figured in the broken circle, the

shattered roda where dance explodes into class unrest and violence. Ostensibly, racial borders as well were being broken. The so-called *mulato* capoeirista is a figure moving between categories. He exists at the anxious point of contact between blacks and whites. And while that point of contact was sexualized in the body of the *mulata* sambista, it is made violent in that of the capoeirista. In fact (as is the case with the crack sambistas as well), while they may be narrated as embodying the mixture of races, capoeiristas are in the majority black. But in the period immediately preceding and following slavery's abolition in 1888, they absorbed some of the racial fears of a society in transition.

The music stopped—at least on the soundtrack of the romanticized, cinematic version of the story. But there is something suspect in the suggestion that the intention of capoeira had essentially changed. Was it a black dance when contained within the roda, when it expressed self-irony, restricted to black-on-black aggression? Even on the quilombos, the roda de capoeira as a training ground for defense seems ultimately unthreatening to white authority, because it is isolated. The quilombos were remarkably successful, but basically self-contained. That may be what allows for their romanticization in retrospect: Palmares has come to represent a never-never land where racial injustice didn't have to be dealt with as long as there was minimal contact with white society.

During the "ruffian" stage, it's said that capoeira was still occasionally played in the "old style"—as a dance, a game, a diversion. But this qualitative difference may not have been so much a change in style or form as a change in perspective and context. Capoeira, however dissimulating, has always held violent potential. It has also long maintained an ambiguous relationship to white authority. In the early nineteenth century, at the start of Dom João VI's monarchy, the first official police force was instituted in Brazil, and the head of the Royal Guard, a Major Vidigal, is supposed to have been a powerful capoeirista. He is also supposed to have been charged with keeping the ruffian capoeira contingent in line.

Capoeiristas were absorbed into the order during the brief war with Paraguay in 1865. They were forcibly recruited and are said to have fought valiantly. A number of traditional capoeira song lyrics refer to this event. The capoeiristas returned to the cities of Salvador and Rio with renewed prestige, although the situation was short-lived. When the roda, the circle of control, could not be maintained, capoeira was again perceived as a threat. The Penal Code of 1890 legislated corporal punishment or forced exile for the practitioners of capoeira. Even early in this century, according to the great fighter Master Bimba,

the police persecuted a capoeirista like you chase after a damn dog. Just imagine, one of the punishments they gave capoeiristas that were caught playing was to tie one wrist to a horse's tail, and the other to another horse. The two horses were sent running toward the police station. We even used to make a joke, that it was better to play near the police station, because there were many cases of death. The individual couldn't support being pulled at high velocity along the ground and died before arriving at his destination.¹⁰

But it was Bimba, in fact, who initiated certain changes so that, in time, capoeira began to be tolerated as a game—under certain circumstances. It was more or less institutionalized. And you still find in Brazil the popular conception that street capoeira is for trouble-makers, and the only respectable place for the game is in the capoeira "academies."

If the joke was that it was better to play near the police station, the academicization of capoeira in some ways realized such an approximation. The academy became the controlled space. It was a structure of containment, not a protective circle like the roda. And yet ostensibly the academy serves the function of an educational space. Politicized black parents today send their children to capoeira academies to learn about their cultural heritage.

As an initiate in the U.S. "academy," I am always particularly interested in notions of pedagogy in the

to Brazilian context. The "alternative" pedagogical institution may appear to be a simple ironic response to dominant, repressive, or exclusionary institutions: the capoeira academy in opposition to the police academy or the samba school in opposition to an educational system which denies the cultural validity of one's African heritage. But it isn't that simple. The phrase *roda de samba* is popularly held to derive from the schoolyard location of the first group's early rehearsals. That metonymic explanation doesn't preclude irony, for the Rio samba schools can't really be held up as shining examples of antihegemonic, popular education.¹¹ The twitching white soap-opera star who owns a Rio carnival float is the same schoolmarm as the character of the national broadcast which portrays whiteness as desirability. The lesson is the same. The capoeira academies also reiterate, sometimes, rigid, linear pedagogical technique which seems bought wholesale from the police academy. Still, there are valuable lessons of African history and aesthetics. I take all this to heart as an educator who attempts to transmit non-Western culture through historically Eurocentric institutions.¹² It is mainly the *way* we read, teach, and write about culture that is as important as the particular manifestations of it, considering. The capoeira academies demand that we rethink inclusion and exclusion, cultural commitment and liberational pedagogy. In a world of ironic inversions, which way is up? Perhaps the most beautiful *ladainha*, or extended, plaintive solo lyric of capoeira, was sung by Mestre Zumbina:

Already I'm fed up
of life here on the earth.
Oh mama, I'm going to the moon,
I talked to my wife about it.
She answered me,
we'll go if God wills it.
We'll make a little ranch there,
all full of greens.
Tomorrow at seven o'clock,
we'll have our breakfast.

I really can't abide
people who tell unbelievable stories.
Eh, the moon comes to the earth.
Eh, the earth goes to the moon.
All this is just talk,
now let's get to work. . . .¹³

Upside down, the sky is the ground beneath your feet, and the only heaven is the earth to which you are bound. It's an unbelievable story, but true. The plainness of the *ladainha* is that that upside-down world is a better one than this one. It is a world where there will always be food to put on the table. But the song stops itself: all this lyricism is just talk. And the call to get to "work" is a call to action—a call to begin the game, to come back *through* the game to the ground of significance, of political reality, and of the fight.

That doesn't mean the music has to stop, nor the dance. The fight is in the dance, and the music itself, even this kind of lyricism, can be a weapon, and can be pointedly, politically significant. The *berimbau* is a hauntingly beautiful instrument. It consists of a curved wooden bow strung with a single wire cord, and with a resonating gourd attached at the base. The gourd pressed against his belly, the player strikes the cord with a small stick while simultaneously varying the pitch by manipulating a small stone or coin near the base of the instrument. Effectively two notes are achieved, although variations in pressure allow for a much wider spectrum of sounds. The sound emitted is an eerie twang. There is something deeply sad and mysterious about *berimbau* music. It is said to be an instrument of communication with the dead. There are various rhythms played for capoeira, and in this century they have been classified and categorized ad infinitum by different masters.¹⁴ But unlike most of the highly sophisticated rhythmic patterns of African Brazil, capoeira music doesn't dictate stepping on a certain beat. Rather, the music dictates the emotional tenor of the game and its intent. The moves themselves move in and out of synchrony with the *berimbau*.

The rhythm isn't the only thing hard to pin down

about the berimbau's sound. Pitch, too, is neither here nor there. Lewis describes this accurately:

For some time I assumed that the interval between stopped and unstopped strings on the *berimbau* was in fact a whole tone, but upon closer listening, and comparing several bows, I realized that the interval was usually somewhat less than a whole step but more than a half-step. In Western musical terms this kind of pitch is sometimes called a "quarter tone" or (more generally) a "micro-tone," and the effect in this case is that the interval can be heard (by Western ears) either as a major second (whole step) or a minor second (half-step). In practice this means that *berimbau* music can be used to accompany songs in various modes or scales, with either a major or minor feel, but always with a slight dissonance.¹⁵

Lewis suggests that this indeterminacy might be a way of explaining the "call" of the berimbau—that quality which seems to summon a listener to participate in its musicality. As in my own earlier discussion of "bent" rhythms in the samba, the "micro-tone" explanation—enlightening as it is—is probably not quite as satisfying as the acknowledgment of *axé*, or spiritual energy.

A capoeira song says, "the berimbau is an instrument / that plays on just one string. / It plays angola in C-major. / But I've come to believe, old pal, / berimbau is the greatest / comrade." The simplicity of the berimbau is misleading. Pastinha said:

A lot of people say that it's an instrument—berimbau berimbau berimbau, it's music, it's an instrument. Berimbau, then, is music, it's a musical instrument—it's also an offensive instrument. Because on the occasion of happiness, it's an instrument—we use it as an instrument. And in the hour of pain, it stops being an instrument and becomes a hand weapon.¹⁶

The use of the thick wooden bow as a weapon is not taught in capoeira academies. But if the wood is in hand and the occasion for violence arises, it is not diffi-

cult to imagine that uses other than musical might be made of the berimbau.

In capoeira, apparent musicality always contains violent potential, and all aggression is transformed into dance. That is why the simple opposition of categories seems to me clearly unsatisfactory. Regional and angola styles strike me rather as in dialogue with one another, and speaking, finally, the same double-talk, whether or not you call it "up-to-date." And while most scholars of the art have come down on one side of the fence (with Lewis an exception), the majority of capoeiristas, at least until very recently, did not necessarily ally themselves with one camp—including "atual." How do you make rigid alliances in a world where you must trust everyone but can't trust anyone?

How could you classify capoeira as a dance or a fight? One seldom strikes a blow to hit—more often to demonstrate the beauty of the movement, and to harmonize it with the movements of the other. And the most powerful players are those who incapacitate their opponents by doing some stunning trick of pure gorgeousness: a flip, a slow, twisting cartwheel, a headspin, or just a graceful *ginga*, the swaying dance step that comes between blows. A capoeirista can have such a pretty *ginga*, arms twisting in impossible beautiful waves, that it *confuses*.

It was my first master who taught me the philosophical implications of the beauty and illusion of capoeira. That's why I came to syncretize, in my mind, Boa Gente with Nietzsche—and, of course, Exú. In the Catholic context, Exú has defied syncretism. His pairing with the devil is misleading. Exú is more playful than evil. Jorge Amado says he is "just a deity in constant motion, friend of fracás, of confusion, but, in his heart of hearts, an excellent person. In a way he is the No where only Yes exists."¹⁷

Exú, Boa, Friedrich: they make up a trinity. They are the No in the Yes, the Falsehood in Truth, the big mixup, the good laugh. It's an inverted trinity, just as the sign of the cross is inverted in the *roda*.

Many of capoeira's maneuvers are inversions, whether literal or ironic, physical or linguistic. One of

the most basic blows is called the *benção* (blessing or benediction).¹⁸ But instead of giving a good word or extending a pious hand, the capoeirista “blesses” with the sole of his foot, shooting it forward toward the other player’s chest. The move is at least physically perfectly straightforward. But the response to it is usually an exaggerated pantomime of getting clobbered: part of the defense actually might be to fake getting hit, although that rarely happens. The one receiving the blow may even issue an ear-piercing shriek, snapping back his head in mock deflection of the kick. Sometimes this kind of defense is more dramatic, more satisfying than the blow itself.

Capoeira defensive moves are not so much blocks or even counterattacks as they are ironic negations of the offense.¹⁹ The basic defensive position is called, in fact, the *negativa*. The player squats, one crooked leg extended, and leans forward and across this leg, pressing the side of his head toward the ground. To the uninitiated, it feels like an almost impossibly uncomfortable, impractical, and vulnerable position. But it is the ground zero from which a vast number of deep maneuvers can be deployed.

The low-to-the-ground moves are the ones most often used in capoeira angola. They don’t look efficient—who would think to bend over and look through his legs in order to fight? But they are wily and sly. Many moves are named after animals, such as the stingray, an unexpected backlash, or the monkey, a lopsided back flip. The apparent impracticality of these acts has to be understood within the context of creating irony. To regard the animal references as evidence of the “natural” origins of capoeira seems to me a limited idea. Rather, these references seem to be in part ironic responses to projections on black culture in Brazil of stereotypes of incompetence. A 1980 ethnography²⁰ cited an Angolan informant who suggested that capoeira had developed from an ancient Angolan ritual called “the dance of the zebra,” in which young men imitated a mating ritual of zebras, fighting to win first choice of the young marriageable women. This document was quickly absorbed by some members of the capoeira angola contingent

who began circulating the story. It is not unreasonable to suggest that some of the maneuvers of capoeira were inspired by animal motion. But I have also heard of a dubious older *angoleiro* who, on hearing this story, shook his head: “The only ‘dance of the zebra’ I ever saw was in the zoo, and it was two zebras fucking.”

That kind of cynicism isn’t a self-wounding rejection of Africa. And maybe a romanticized version of Africa has to exist on a certain level in capoeira history. But when it is ridiculed, it is also an affirmation of the developments of black culture in urban Brazil. Regional moves are self-ironizing as well. Bimba himself had a trick of “modernizing” capoeira while simultaneously making fun of modern technologies and of Western influences. He developed a sock to the head which set the ears ringing and called it the “telefone.” That joke strikes me as remarkably reminiscent of the Nigerian “naive” (ironic!) novelist Amos Tutuola who introduces a character with a “voice like a telephone” in the middle of the wildest, deepest, most “African” bush, residence of ancestral spirits.²¹ Another of Bimba’s head-banging techniques was a knockout punch called “godême,” his phonetic transcription of the “God damn it” gasped by a U.S. marine who got busted in his challenge to the master. If people complained he was incorporating boxing techniques, he Brazilianized those blows and made them capoeira.

A friend sighed to me recently, watching a rapid-fire, exquisitely executed regional game, “capoeira has really developed into a sophisticated art over the last twenty years.” It’s true that some regionalistas are remarkable athletes. Their speed, flexibility, precision, and strength seem in perfect harmony. But for all that I will defend the validity of their modifications on the game—they continue cannibalizing gymnastics, kickboxing, ballet, and, in the ’80s, break dancing (a form that some have speculated was at least partly derived from or inspired by capoeira)²²—it is still an old-fashioned, flatfooted, earthbound game of angola that brings tears to my eyes. Capoeira angola’s wit is defter and more stunning than any feat of athleticism. I’m certainly not alone. Perhaps the most sought-after master in

New York today is João Grande—Big John—an old-guard angoleiro of Bahia, former student of Pastinha.

It isn't just a question of wit. Nor is it just that an angoleiro's play is funky with wisdom that's been fermenting for centuries. Young, politicized angoleiros have a point. It is important to reaffirm constantly the history of capoeira as an art of resistance. Hot dog regionalistas can spin so fast they sometimes lose sight of the past, and the present. The postmodern cultural critic must acknowledge that she, too, is a product of the times. We're sometimes giddy with the new language available to us for expressing our enthusiasms for cultural cross-fertilization. But in rejecting a restrictive, static notion of cultural authenticity, we risk losing some of the political potential of rootedness, of respect for deep funk, of the eloquence of an old man's body in motion.

Beyond the issue of tradition and modification, capoeira also raises the more general problem of "playing" politics. The black consciousness movement in Brazil has been hampered by conflicting strategies. But both traditionalist and syncretic enclaves might appear, to North American eyes, to fall prey to an overly aestheticized idea of activism. It's true of the class struggle as well. Every political rally in Brazil degenerates (explodes?) into music minutes after its inception. Every body is in motion—but is it progressive motion or

simply a circular dance which expends energy without changing the world? That's the familiar question asked of carnival.²³ To an outsider, capoeira may appear particularly ineffective as a martial art, since so much of its energy is expended on dance—on motion for the sake of pleasure.

But the capoeiristas say that in life, as in capoeira, you have to keep doing the ginga, dancing between the blows. Maybe it's true. The political and economic situation in Brazil has been so bad for so long, sometimes it seems inevitable that these people will get disheartened. What hope would be left if there weren't that distant, exciting rumble, of the samba and the scratchy voice of Boa Gente on the air? I wish, in fact, his voice could carry across the water and make us feel watched over here in New York. I miss Loremil terribly. I feel like when he went sky-rocketing out of here, he burst a hole in the electrified firmament. It's 3 A.M. in another city that is part war zone, part ecstatic celebration.

I imagine Boa Gente could be on the air now, live from the Valley of Pebbles. And he could be saying the words of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*:

Lift up your hearts, my brethren, high, higher! And do not forget your legs! Lift up also your legs, ye good dancers—and better still if ye stand also on your heads!

Notes

1. The English verb *to play* can be translated three ways in Portuguese: *brincar* (intransitive) = to play freely, like a child; *jogar* (transitive) = to play a sport or game; or *tocar* (transitive) = to play a musical instrument. Capoeira may appear to be a physical game or sport, but, as John Lowell Lewis has pointed out, all three kinds of play are demanded of the capoeirista, who must be an athlete, a musician in his own accompaniment, and—at the highest levels—a master of childish imagination. See Lewis, *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

2. See, for example, Bira Almeida, *Capoeira, a Brazilian Art Form* (Palo Alto: Sun Wave, 1981).

3. I discuss later in this chapter the distinction between *angola* and *regional* styles, as well as the counterarguments to their division.

4. See Robert F. Thompson, "Capoeira," New York, Capoeira Foundation, 1988; Kenneth Dossar, "Capoeira Angola: Dancing between Two Worlds," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 11, nos. 1-3 (1992): 5-10; and Gerhard Kubik, "Angolan Traits in Black Music. Games and Dances of Brazil: A Study of African Cultural Extensions Overseas," *Estudos de Antropologia Cultural*, no. 10 (Lisbon, 1979): 7-55.

5. Thomas H. Holloway, "A Healthy Terror? Police Repression of Capoeiras in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 69 (1989):

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6. Kubik, "Angolan Traits," 29.
7. See Décio Freitas, *Palmares, a guerra dos escravos* (Rio de Janeiro, 1982).
8. Lewis, *Ring of Liberation*, 38, expresses skepticism about this historical narrative while acknowledging its cultural significance.
9. See Almeida, *Capoeira*, and Rego, *Capoeira Angola*.
10. Quoted in Raimundo Cesar Alves de Almeida, *Bimba: Perfil do mestre* (Salvador: UFBA, 1982), 13-14.
11. Alma Guillermoprieto recounts a disturbing history of political and financial manipulation and corruption at the leadership level of the samba schools in Rio. See her *Samba* (New York: Knopf, 1990).
12. John Guillory's considerations of multiculturalism and canon formation are most instructive on this point. He warns that limiting the discussion to what is included in or excluded from the canon can obfuscate the greater question of pedagogy: "To have drawn up a new syllabus is not yet to have begun teaching, nor is it yet to have begun reflection

- Capoeira*.
15. Lewis, *Ring of Liberation*, 159.
 16. Pastinha, LP recording.
 17. Jorge Amado, *Bahia de Todos os Santos* (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1980).
 18. See Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), chap. 1.
 19. Lewis writes that the taxonomy of "attacks" and "defense moves" is never clear. Many moves "can function either as attacks or defenses, or even as both at the same time!" Lewis, *Ring of Liberation*, 98.
 20. Jaír Moura, "Capoeiragem—Arte e malandragem," *Cadernos de Cultura*, no. 2 (Salvador, 1980): 15-16.
 21. Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 35.
 22. Kenneth Dossar, "Capoeira Angola: An Ancestral Connection?" *American Visions* 3, no. 4 (1988): 38-42.
 23. See Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion*, chap. 4.