



Understanding Capoeira through Cultural Theories of the Body

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by

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Capoeira is a kinaesthetic practice developed by African slaves in colonial Brazil. It is at the same time a game, a fight, a dance, a ritual, an art, even a philosophy. Due to its inception in slave circles, it has a long history of marginality. After the abolition of slavery in 1888 it has been declared illegal until the 1930s, when it was included in a consensual national culture under populist president Getúlio Vargas. From then on, capoeira has contributed to celebrate Brazil's African cultural heritage. In the past few decades, capoeira has been exported all over the world by Brazilians who managed to make a living out of a practice that is still relatively stigmatized in their own country. Capoeira's circulation in transnational networks has nevertheless given a renewed value to the practice, which becomes a new form of cultural capital both for its foreign practitioners and for Brazil as a nation. As a cultural form now circulating transnationally, capoeira can be understood simultaneously as a commodified product that is exchanged in a capitalist market and as the cement of a transnational community providing networks of solidarity and reciprocity for its participants in a globalized world. What is more, the exportation of capoeira beyond the borders of Brazil generates a cross-cultural context where non-Brazilian practitioners come into contact with a socio-cultural life strongly related to Brazil. Indeed, capoeira – both the physical practice in and of itself and the immediate environment surrounding it – remains in many ways closely tied to its country of origin. Capoeira thus constitutes a complete cultural field where diverse elements of Brazilian culture are communicated, shared and ex-

ported. Now, because capoeira is before all else a kinaesthetic practice, the body and its movements are central to this circulation of these meanings. Understanding capoeira thus requires a previous understanding of how the body as a cultural phenomenon can convey concrete cultural meanings and values. This is why this paper sets out to review and assess diverse theories addressing the body in order to see how these latter can help access and shed light on the diverse meanings circulating transnationally through capoeira; ultimately allowing an understanding of the specificities of Brazilian culture being represented in the practice.

If traditionally, the study of the body has been consigned to biological and medical sciences, consequently excluded from the social sciences and humanities, it is now widely accepted that the body is also a socio-cultural phenomenon as much as it is a 'fact' of nature. The body is both natural and cultural; it fluctuates and constitutes an elusive object of study as well as a malleable concept. In such a context, we inevitably and still constantly ask: how should we study such a complex object and access its cultural meanings without disregarding the specificities of its material existence nor the commonality of its condition? Dominant approaches in cultural studies would suggest that the body, performances and other embodied practices should be read as cultural texts. The body itself is seen as a system of signs constituting a 'bodily discourse'. Although compelling, this approach might also sound paradoxical. Should we not precisely develop new analytical tools adapted to the body and its own knowledge? This paper examines both the value of seeing the body as text and how such an approach could be improved. It argues that anthropology and dance studies offer some promising avenues to address and access the embodied knowledge that the

body also entails. Ultimately, cultural studies constitute a valid approach to help the researcher address the body as the socio-cultural phenomenon that it is. Hence, without abandoning the textual approach that they legitimately offer, this paper suggests they would benefit from a more balanced combination of semiotic analysis and embodied research.

In turn, this proposed combination of approaches will prove to be particularly relevant to address the specificities of capoeira. Indeed, while textual approaches can address the many stereotypes and representational meanings affixed on capoeira as it travels in the transnational cultural field, an attention to embodied knowledge can in turn help circumvent one of the major difficulties in studying the practice: the aura of secrecy and deception that surrounds it as a consequence of its inception in the slave circles. The marginal context in which the practice was born has contributed to make of capoeira an ambiguous form – is it a dance, a game, a fight, a ritual? – and to make capoeiristas, its practitioners, wary of any outside intrusion that might contribute to the oppression they were trying to resist. After all, capoeira is the art of deception and trickery and any researcher dealing with capoeiristas thus needs to be aware of the potential discrepancies between what practitioners say and what they do, what they present capoeira to be and how they in turn enact and perform it. In sum, capoeira is as elusive an object of study as the very body that is central to it. This is why a combination of approaches is necessary to get at its conflicted and malleable meanings.

The body as text: cultural narratives on/of the body

In a nutshell, the textual approach in cultural studies stems from poststructuralists

such as Derrida and interpretive anthropologists such as Geertz, who consider culture itself as an ensemble of texts to be read (Schechner, 2002: 192). The task of the cultural analyst is to construct an interpretation of said texts. Extended to the body, this approach asks scholars to read the body as a system of signs. Cultural critic and dancer Jane Desmond (1997) suggests that just like we have developed tools to analyse written texts, we should develop a ‘kinaesthetic semiotics’ that would allow reading the ‘bodily discourse’. This approach has been successful at revealing how bodies represent social categories such as gender or race, for example, and how they are common receptacles of social meanings (Desmond, 1997; Sklar, 2000).

The body is indeed a privileged space where meanings, often stereotypes, are inscribed discursively. This social practice can be understood by turning our attention to how the “Black body” has been socially constructed and how the meanings attributed to it play out in many widespread understandings of capoeira. The historical conditions of slavery help explain, in great part, why ‘Blacks’¹ have been equated with their bodies. From this historical condition, however, a whole series of stereotypes have been affixed on the ‘Black body’. Authors like Paul Gilroy (2000), Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2003) and bell hooks (1992) show that a discourse of race has been affixed on the bodies of African and African diasporic people through a particular way of looking at their bodies, a special gaze conveying

¹ Using the term ‘Blacks’ is problematic for it seems to perpetuate the stereotypes it seeks to address. However, I use it here to refer precisely to the idea of the ‘Black body’ that the social and cultural discourse has created. This is why I always use it in inverted comas, especially when the contexts make it problematically and indistinctively refer to a whole people.

cultural meanings, but also by a fragmentation of the body and a focus on certain parts of that body. Dixon Gottschild eloquently structures a whole section of her book *The Black Dancing Body* with chapters titled “Feet”, “Butt” and “Skin/Hair”, showing how certain physical characteristics have become the siege of meanings about race and racial difference.

Common understandings and popular representations of capoeira often draw on this conception of the ‘Black body’. The physical skills required to perform the explosive movements of capoeira bring the body to the fore and seemingly naturally associate the art with the physicality with which long lasting racist tropes associate “Black” art forms. The agility of capoeiristas’ moving bodies constantly associates capoeira with ‘Black’ physicality. Now, representations of capoeira are all the more informed by these racist narratives once capoeira is exported and also practiced by “White” foreigners. In such a context, “Black” Afro-Brazilians and their bodies become the holders of the smooth quality of capoeira’s movements, while “White” practitioners struggle to make their ‘stiff bodies’ move the same way. These affirmations, of course, refer to the stereotypes and indeed show the very binary way in which these work. Reading the body as a system of signs can address these powerful meanings embedded in fixed signifiers that are inscribed onto the body. Deconstructing the body and interpreting it as a problematic text can indeed, as Bryan Turner argues, reveal “a fleshy discourse within which the power relations in society can be both interpreted and sustained” (1996: 27). But one main pitfall of this approach also stems from its very advantages. Indeed, as Gilroy also argues, focusing on the body parts as signs might contribute to the attribution of essentialist meanings to them. Concentrating merely on the bodily signs

might contribute to fix and naturalize meanings.

In order to move beyond the fixedness of stereotypes, it might be useful, then, to examine not only the static body but also look at the body in movement. Early in the 20th century, anthropologist Marcel Mauss (2007 [1935]) was already suggesting that a body movement, a gesture, or indeed, a “technique” can convey cultural, social, even national meanings. More recently, dancer, choreographer and scholar Susan Leigh Foster coined the term “bodily writing” to address how bodies’ movements *create* a kind of writing that has no verbal equivalent (1995: 9). Foster’s “bodily writing” is clearly rooted in the body’s movements in and of themselves and grants the body the ability to write its own narratives. The following example can shed light on this abstract idea. One day, I was attending an international capoeira encounter in Spain, and when I saw one unknown capoeirista playing, I could tell without a doubt that he was the student of one senior capoeirista I had met in Brazil. Somehow, the whole genealogy of his capoeira training was written on his body and, in turn, the way his body was moving conveyed his whole capoeira history. This anecdote speaks to the ability of the body in movement to reveal precise and specific information.

The distinction between the fixed and moving body can now nuance our understanding of stereotypes. As mentioned previously, the fragmented body’s limbs read as signs can sometimes attribute essentialist meanings to certain body parts and perpetuate [racial] stereotypes. In turn, these become powerful because they fix things (Hall, 1997; Root, 1998). That is why postcolonial thinker Homi Bhabha (1994) insists that humans can escape or resist stereotypes by acting on

and in the liminal and fluid spaces that they always inevitably contain. The body in movement helps the researcher move beyond stereotypes and develop a more nuanced understanding of the processual and performative dimensions of life as well as the fluidity of meanings as posited by Bhabha. Moreover, focusing on the body's movements can acknowledge processes of training and physical education through which individuals acquire the skills and "techniques" that characterize their bodies. Acknowledging that certain body features can be acquired unsettles the essentialist meanings fixed by stereotypes. We can now understand that some aspects of how Afro-Brazilians play capoeira might not be essentially inscribed in their 'explosive muscularity' (a common stereotype affixed on the "Black body" that Dixon Gottschild's book, amongst other works, reveals) but might simply be due to learned and acquired skills.

Reading the body as a system of sign is thus a useful approach that can account for the multiple social meanings affixed on the body. The stereotyped meanings attributed to the 'Black body' in turn influence the popular representations of capoeira circulating globally, and reading these semiotically can help address some powerful assumptions about the Brazilian artform. However, the body is not a mere receptacle for social meanings; it is also the producer of other types of meanings. There is a constant back and forth, in the study of the body, between seeing this latter as a container and/or as a source of meanings (see, amongst others, Shilling, 2003). If the textual approach helps getting at the representational meanings, we also need to recognize the meanings produced by the very own body. For this, we need to start moving our attention from the body towards embodiment in order to access what is now recognized as embodied knowledge.

Embodied knowledge, *malandragem*, and situated performances

One of the most direct solutions put forward to account for embodiment is the exploration of the experiential body central to embodiment. A phenomenology of the "perceived body", to borrow Susan Leigh Foster's (1997) term, recognizes the body as a crucial source of meaning. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]) is a key figure whose work on perception suggests that existence is ambiguous and full of discontinuities, and that it can never be grasped entirely or with absolute certainty. In this sense, he is positioned against Descartes's vision that the independent mind is able to establish truths about the world. For him, things rather appear in consciousness through the body's perceptual capacities. A phenomenological approach to capoeira is useful to access the socio-cultural meanings that exceed the practice although they are embedded and produced in it. In his study on the experience of learning capoeira, anthropologist Greg Downey (2005) draws on phenomenology to prove that perceptions can be trained and that playing capoeira can indeed produce certain values, meanings and ideas in the practitioner's body. For example, he explains that the process of learning, experiencing and constantly performing the basic capoeira step, called the *ginga*, instils into the capoeirista a knowledge that exceeds the movement as such and concerns values, attitudes and strategies proper to Brazil's broader social life. He asserts: "One becomes malicioso [a common personality trait shared by capoeiristas] by doing the *ginga* because to do the *ginga* correctly, one must become more cunning, treacherous, playful, supple, artistic, quick witted, and aware of the body" (131). Focusing on the actual bodily experience that playing capoeira procures to

the practitioner brings us closer to the very knowledge produced, which can then be extrapolated and related to broader social contexts. Any research on the body would benefit from an attention to the realm of perception that opens up with phenomenology.

But how are researchers to achieve that concretely? Here, anthropology might provide some promising methodological entries. A growing number of dance ethnographies have raised attention to the importance of reintroducing not only the abstract concept of the 'body', but more precisely, to reintroduce the researcher's very own body in the research process (Browning, 1995; Ness, 1992; Novack, 1990; Sklar, 2001). On the one hand, this focus on embodiment helps rectify anthropology's visual bias as discussed by James Clifford (1988). In his essay "Partial Truths", Clifford points out that classical anthropologists rarely accounted for smells, sounds or perceptions, what has created the false impression that what one sees is true and contains all the information needed to interpret a situation. Embodied research goes beyond the visual markers and attends to other channels of knowledge. On the other hand, access to embodied knowledge through the researcher's body can help reduce the gap between scholarly work and the studied practice. As Cynthia Novack (1990) cogently relates, one day she had to go directly from an academic conference to a dance class: "The contrast alerted me to what was present or absent in each circumstance, enabling me to take at least a partly critical stance. I could not forget the absence of 'body' in academia, the stubborn denial of the physical self. Nor could I become immune to the potentially problematic skirting of sexual/emotional boundaries in contact improvisation." (21) The researcher's own involvement can help bridge, at least individually, the Car-

tesian dualism, for he/she becomes the siege of both rational interpretations and embodied perceptions. Besides, as some have already pointed out (Fraser and Greco, 2005; Foster, 1995), disembodiment is most likely a powerful illusion for all ideas are always already embodied. Recent literature on the body and technologies (Balsamo, 2007; Lupton, 2007; Stone, 2007) has powerfully proved the resilience of the body even in an increasingly virtual world. We cannot escape our bodies, and paying attention to the researcher's body is not adding a new element to the research process, but merely acknowledging something that has always been there.²

Here I would like insist on the benefits of embodied research in the particular case of capoeira by drawing attention to a central feature of the game called *malandragem*. Inherently difficult to define, *malandragem* is, in the words of anthropologist Roberto DaMatta, "the Brazilian

² When evoking a connection between phenomenology and embodied research, it seems necessary to mention the insightful comments of dance ethnographer Sally Ann Allen Ness (2004) who precisely qualifies the value of phenomenology to address the cultural dimensions of movement. Ness suggests that although the shift towards what she calls "participation-driven descriptions" – what I have just referred to as embodied research – might evoke phenomenology as a supporting theoretical framework, the cultural meanings they access might in fact come from other factors of the research process; namely, an attention to the embodied environment, issues of execution of movements, relations of one's body with other surrounding bodies, etc. – many issues that will come up later when we address performance studies' theories. Ness's account is good and valid to put nuances in the invocation of phenomenology as an all powerful means to study embodiment. However, Ness does not disqualify phenomenology in and of itself. She clearly acknowledges phenomenology as an important ground on which developments in embodied research have built, but from which they have also somehow departed.

art of using ambiguity as a tool for living” (1991 [1979]: 64). This attitude finds its historical origin in the Afro-Brazilian circles and is thus central to capoeira, but it has slowly come to permeate many spheres of Brazilian society, becoming one of its main characteristics according to DaMatta. The anthropologist’s in depth analysis of Brazilian social life sheds light on *malandragem*’s close relationship to the very structural functioning of the country. More specifically, I have also argued extensively, in my Master’s thesis (2007), how *malandragem*, capoeira and Brazilian society are all closely related. There is no space here to delve into the details of this relation; for now, I would nevertheless like to underline that although *malandragem* describes an overall attitude and spirit of capoeiristas, practitioners generally define it in extremely practical terms, referring to precise situations in the *roda*³. For example, Mestre Cacau asserts that *malandragem* “is pretending you go and not go”; for Mestre Amen, it is “when you think that he’s here he’s behind you” (my translations).⁴ *Malandragem* is thus the attitude one adopts when facing concrete situations. The reason for these very practical definitions might be found in Mestre Nestor Capoeira’s quote. Referring here more precisely to *malícia*, his quote can nevertheless also be applied to the close concept of *malandragem*. He asserts “it [*malícia*] is not something that can be rationalized. It is not something that can be understood with the use of the mind” (cit. in Downey, 2005: 124); hence the impor-

tance of embodied research and an embodied understanding of capoeira.

It could be argued that *malandragem* presupposes a special state of mind that would enable one to see certain situations and act strategically with wit and cunning. However, an attention to embodiment in capoeira can reveal that this state of mind is not a previous disposition but that it is rather the concrete situations of the game that instil the practitioner with this way of facing the world. Downey’s previously mentioned analysis of the *ginga* demonstrates how the very physical experience and performance of capoeira can contribute to this state of mind. It is now clear how many social, cultural and symbolic meanings inherent to capoeira cannot be understood without participating physically in the *roda* and becoming aware of them through one’s body. Personally, many things I know about capoeira I have learnt through my body and it took me years to be able to articulate them into words. I believe that certain dimensions of *malandragem* and how they apply to the practice and transnational circulation of capoeira can only be understood through embodied research. Moreover, if, as I argue following DaMatta, *malandragem* is central to Brazilian society and if playing capoeira allows an embodied understanding of *malandragem*, then we can suggest that playing capoeira allows foreigners to embody a central value of Brazilian society. This opens a rich path of reflection as to why capoeira remains so closely associated to Brazil even if it is now practiced and performed by so many foreigners.

Finally, in a universe so thoroughly permeated by ambiguity and by the use of deception as a privileged strategy, it is important to find research tools that can help address some discrepancies arising from these very features of capoeira. Throughout my practice and re-

³ The *roda* is the actual circle where the game of capoeira physically takes place.

⁴ These quotes are taken from interviews conducted by Brazilian director and photographer Lucia Correia Lima for the production of the documentary film “Mandinga em Manhattan” (2005), but my own experiences also corroborate that *malandragem* is often defined very pragmatically.

search, I have found many inconsistencies between what mestres say and what they do. Depending on who they are talking to, they will put forward different versions of what capoeira is, or of what they are teaching their students. The variability in their very discourse is then complicated by another layer of information coming from their attitude in the *roda*. What they say they teach might not be exactly the same as what they – or their body – actually teach while playing with their students. Similarly, their actions in the *roda* might challenge the verbal definitions they give of capoeira. It is important to understand that all these different versions – verbal and embodied, representational and experienced – end up constituting the overall practice of capoeira, and this is why a combination of methods and theories is necessary. Here, however, I want to insist in embodied research as one powerful tool that can shed light on both the discrepancies and continuities between practice and representations.

Now, it is important not to newly essentialize the body by turning our attention to embodied practices. What I am suggesting here is not to see embodied knowledge as more “authentic” knowledge, but merely to recognize it alongside more analytical or semiotic ways of approaching the world. Moreover, a focus on embodied practices is not enough if the binary – and underlying hierarchy – between reason and embodiment remains. If Western hegemonic assumptions on mind and body remain, then an attention to the body might not help debunk but might on the contrary reinforce the binaries, further marking embodied practices as ‘Other’ or ‘non-Western’ (see Taylor, 2003: 22-25). Power relations are present in embodied knowledge as much as in other forms of knowledge (Fabian, 1990; Foucault, 1976). This is why it is impor-

tant to pay attention to all the forms of knowledge, discourses and meanings at play in special embodied practices. Some are present in forms of stereotypes, others are enacted by the very bodies in movement, while yet others might be found in the relations between the practice and the environment in which it is performed. To illustrate this last assertion with capoeira once again, it is clear that the meanings of this cultural form are not the same when performed on a stage for the public of a summer festival in New York or on a street corner in Brazil – and even there, it is not the same if practiced in Salvador in front of passing hordes of tourists or in some more remote *favela* of São Paulo. Here, it becomes clear that the whole performance has to be included in our studies – the actors, the spectators, the setting, the choreographies, narratives and plot, and finally the shifting interactions between all those elements. This is why by way of conclusion, this paper will argue that a combination of all the above mentioned approaches, textual and embodied, is necessary to address the full complexity of the body and its practices, in our case capoeira.

Conclusion: combined approach for an elusive object

In their introduction to their reader on ‘the body’, Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (2005) argue that the study of different aspects of the body require different sets of tools. The different approaches that have been mentioned in this paper are thus all valid and necessary. Moreover, they should be used in constant interaction and combination rather than in isolation. In fact, even if she is a clear advocate of performance studies, Diana Taylor still convincingly demonstrates that “the archive” and “the repertoire” – the conceptual pair she uses to describe textual material and embodied practices – are in a dia-

lectual rather than diametrically opposed relation. The same applies to meanings of the body and embodied practices. There is a constant interplay between the meanings affixed on the body that can be read semiotically as texts, and the embodied knowledge enacted, conveyed and accessible through performance and embodied research. Texts and practices, representations and experiences all co-constitute the cultural forms that circulate in the global world. This will become clearer when exemplified by capoeira.

Capoeira is now a cultural form that circulates transnationally. It has been exported in many countries in the past four decades and it is no longer practiced solely by Brazilians. Many foreigners are becoming increasingly involved and skilled in the practice of capoeira as well as responsible for its circulation in transnational networks. However, capoeira also retains a strong association with its 'home-land' of Brazil. In many settings, it is often represented alongside Brazilian flags and alluring samba dancers in foreign countries where Brazil evokes an exotic land of sensual and embodied pleasures. In these cases, capoeira becomes a symbol of Brazil – capoeira is used to brand Brazil just like its Brazilian origins become the trademark giving it sign-value in the market-driven cultural field. Hence, capoeira can be conceptualized as a valuable commodity in a global capitalist market where cultural difference sells. For foreigners, capoeira becomes a prized cultural capital in Western societies where cosmopolitan selves and identities are increasingly valued. Now, all these uses and meanings of capoeira circulate mostly through its representations – in the media, in film, in festivals, on stage. The image projected by capoeira and the meanings embedded in the tropes, stereotypes, and signs contained within its representations all make the practice a symbol of Brazil, a valuable

asset for the construction of identities; in sum, a powerful tool to 'brand' both Brazil and oneself. The various uses of capoeira in the capitalist market of cultural forms partly determine what capoeira is and a lot of the meanings at stake in this dynamic can be analysed through a semiotic readings of the capoeiristas' bodies and their movements.

Now, the previous account somewhat reduces capoeira to a mere sign-value used to increase a country or an individual's cultural capital. Without denying this aspect and use of capoeira in the global cultural market, it needs to be acknowledged that capoeira remains a powerful community builder as well as a means of individual empowerment, not so far from what it was for slaves seeking a – mental, physical, spiritual – liberation. In the immediate context of the game, practitioners learn strategies and skills that can also be applied outside the *roda*. Individuals might feel empowered by the control they acquire of their bodies as well as the mental strategies they learn to use to their advantage. For example, women in North-America might feel empowered by playing capoeira as equals to men and being able to use wit and cunning to defeat physical force in a game that plays with both. At a broader scale, capoeira practitioners around the world also constitute an original transnational community where capoeira's meanings go beyond those put forward to market the practice within a capitalist logic. Many mestres now define capoeira as an encompassing practice that can create cross-cultural bridges around the world. People from diverse backgrounds are united inside the space of the international capoeira school. The group of capoeira is presented as a family where everybody is welcomed, independently of their race, class, gender, age or nationality. Similarly, when a capoeirista is travelling in another country, he can find a "home"

in foreign capoeira groups. Somehow, capoeira is working locally against the solitude and isolation prevailing in global cities. Certainly, all those meanings of capoeira are more likely to be accessed through an embodied involvement in capoeira.

The challenge is, however, to see how these two versions of capoeira influence one another and come to constitute the cultural form as a whole. Surely, the representations of capoeira in the consumer driven market influence the practice in capoeira schools around the world. Foreigners who first come into contact with capoeira on the stage of a festival or in a TV show where acrobatic moves and the rhythmic value of the practice are emphasized will come to the capoeira school with certain expectations in mind. The experience of the transnational capoeira community might challenge or not these assumptions, but they will nevertheless remain one source of understanding of the practice. In turn, practitioners who have acquired an embodied understanding of capoeira might personally fight and take on themselves to challenge the external representations and personally harmonize these latter with the values physically present in the *roda*. The interrelations between the meanings of capoeira in different moments of its circulation are complex, and this is why they call for the constant interaction of methods and theories. In every case, the body as a central signifier of the practice and representation of capoeira is both a source and receptacle of socio-cultural meanings and the methods we chose to analyse it must reflect the complexity of these interactions.

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