

# EMISFÉRICA

Talmon-Chvaicer, Maya. *The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008. 248 pages. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

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Capoeira, according to its scholars, instructors, and countless Internet fans, is confusingly many things at once: a dance, a martial art, a game, a philosophy. Nowhere in *The Hidden History of Capoeira* is Maya Talmon-Chvaicer more definitive about this vexing taxonomy than in her epilogue: “It [capoeira] was a complex interaction among people, encompassing their physical and spiritual essence and involving the gods and spirits of their ancestors. It was a synthesis of symbols, rituals, and traditional customs” (176). Through five chapters depicting the two centuries in which capoeira evolved from a slave pastime to the Brazilian national sport (now popular all over the world), Talmon-Chvaicer deftly parses out how capoeira can have meant so much to so many.

In this “historical-cultural-social study,” Talmon-Chvaicer’s main objective is to uncover “narratives that have been repressed and excluded” from previous analyses of capoeira (3). She examines the various Kongolese, Yoruban, and Catholic Portuguese influences on the form using primary written sources and a wealth of illustrations, paintings, photographs, and charts. In each chapter she first presents how capoeira was understood by Europeans and their descendents within a given era, and then explores what she alternately labels as its covert, hidden, and secret aspects – the particulars of each culture’s religion, music, costume, and symbols that collided, fused, and evolved into the host of practices that make up capoeira. Talmon-Chvaicer eschews theory in favor of detailing her deep archival work. She never finds extensive descriptions of the form by its earliest practitioners, largely because most were slaves and illiterate. Yet her accounts of the meanings of capoeira’s disparate parts is a mostly agreeable and effective counterpoint to the narratives imposed by those in power who stigmatized and criminalized it, only later to co-opt it into a symbol of Brazilian national identity.

Talmon-Chvaicer’s historiography smartly mirrors capoeira’s difficult history. That is, because capoeira itself is so multifaceted, contested, and resistant to simplification, she similarly refuses to tell a linear story or offer an easy narrative. Although the first part of each chapter is roughly confined to a thirty to sixty year period of time, the second part of each chapter jumps backward and forward in history to expose a specific theme or element. For instance, the first part of chapter four covers the continuing legitimization and professionalization of capoeira in the mid-20th century, especially as it became codified and taught in two divergent styles: Capoeira Regional and Capoeira Angola. But in the second half of the same chapter, Talmon-Chvaicer explicates capoeira’s spiritual aspects, going back in time to describe Kongolese and Yoruban traditions and rituals before leapfrogging forward to her own ethnographic work with some contemporary teachers of capoeira. Such unconventional storytelling is a canny choice that gives

readers the sense of how the form was continuously being reinvented – how its many components were ever being altered or obscured, remembered and forgotten.

Curiously, in her focus on capoeira's hidden history, Talmon-Chvaicer neglects to outline early on in her book in any thorough detail the game's embodied practices. Readers with no prior knowledge of what it looks like may become frustrated that she reserves her own thick description of the aesthetics and structure of modern-day capoeira for the final chapter. The effect is slightly jarring, as readers are forced for much of her study to conceive of capoeira's movements via the limited and prejudiced viewpoints of early 19th-century European tourists and Portuguese authorities. Though a methodology more common to dance historians and performance scholars than historians, even just a brief evocative example in the introduction might have alleviated the problem.

In the best sense, *The Hidden History of Capoeira* will leave its audience wanting to know more. It is a compelling portrait of the intricacies of race and performance in Brazil, and a worthy contribution to the growing number of books, manuals, articles, and dissertations about various aspects of this *jogo da vida* – “game of life.” Talmon-Chvaicer suggests that many Capoeiras (those who “play” capoeira) today continue to follow traditions and rituals without any knowledge why: “an ongoing process in which the imitation is done without insight or understanding” (148). As such, she hopes that scholars, laymen, and practitioners alike will make use of her book. Talmon-Chvaicer's study offers a nuanced cultural history, one that rightly articulates capoeira – much like samba or carnival – as a complicated nexus of race, nation, and class that has much to reveal about Brazil's dynamic past and present.