

EMISFÉRICA

Desch Obi, T.J. *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Art Traditions in the Atlantic World*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. 376 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

by Yuko Miki | New York University

Frederick Douglass remembered the day he finally resisted the abuses of his overseer Covey as the transitional moment in his life: “I was changed after that fight. I was nothing before: I was a man now. It recalled to my life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a freeman” (119). While African-based religion, dance, and music in the African Diaspora have long engaged the attention of scholars across the disciplines, with *Fighting for Honor* Africanist historian T.J. Desch Obi offers illuminating insight into the rich, but still understudied martial arts traditions spanning West and West Central Africa, North America, the French Caribbean, and Brazil. Central to his analysis is the concept of honor, whose pursuit through the practice of martial arts enabled the enslaved to claim both their bodies and spirits, and withstand the dehumanizing violence of slavery, as Douglass’ own words suggest.

In the first section of the book, Desch Obi focuses his attention on early modern Africa, discussing the martial arts traditions of the Kunene of southern Angola and the Igbo of Biafra, providing detailed discussions of their social, economic, and historical significance. This is a welcome intervention both on its own and in light of the second section focusing on the Diaspora, given the relative paucity of scholarship addressing the influence of these regions on the cultural life of the larger Atlantic world. Particularly engaging is the author’s discussion of engolo, a Kunene martial art characterized by acrobatic kicks, sweeps, and head butts that could be performed for amusement but harbored the potential to become a deadly contest when rivalries were on the line. Much of engolo’s techniques (depicted in several sketches by a witness in the 1950s included in this book) consisted of inverted kicks by fighters who supported their weight on their hands, a practice that reflected the cosmological concept of kalunga, which describes the “threshold between the lands of the living and the lands of the dead,” (39) at the other side of which the ancestors walked in an inverted position. Desch Obi’s historical analysis of the “body [as] the text of the common African” (226 n.18) works best here.

Shifting his attention to the Americas in the second section, the author inserts combat into the performative dueling practices that were central to the rituals of the enslaved. Notwithstanding his discussions of the Igbo martial art of mgba in the first section, Desch Obi clearly places greater emphasis on the legacies of Angolan martial arts, whether it be in knocking and kicking in the U.S. lowcountry, ladja in the French Caribbean, or capoeira in Brazil. Excellence in the combat arts could win a bondsman the community’s respect, a woman’s heart, or in a rare occasion, even manumission. He argues

convincingly that the practice of martial arts in these slave societies allowed bondsmen to affirm their masculinity and sense of honor both in the eyes of their community, and sometimes in defiance of their oppressors.

Those familiar with the polemic surrounding capoeira's "origins" can expect another round of verbal martial arts provoked by Desch Obi's contention that capoeira is a continuity specifically of the engolo tradition. The author's heated engagement with these debates is reserved for a lengthy endnote in this highly enjoyable chapter. Whatever one's conclusion, approaching martial arts as "living traditions" that could thrive outside of their original demographic is a valuable method that enables scholars of African Diasporic societies to move beyond the creolization-versus-cultural retentions approach. Examining the history of capoeira in relation to martial arts in the larger African Diaspora (and not confined to Brazil and Angola) moreover suggests new directions in its study.

An excellent source for the numerous little-known martial arts in the black Atlantic world, with a thorough bibliography and notes, the book is at its best when exploring these various traditions in relation to cosmologies, community rituals, and practices of resistance. Little is said on the music and songs that accompanied them, and detailed discussions of specific combat techniques will probably be of interest only to serious practitioners. Given the male-gendered nature of martial arts and the honor attained through it, women are virtually absent from this work except in fleeting mentions. That being said, Desch Obi's work, which draws on the imaginative use of various sources in the face of archival reticence—whether it be interviews with elders, historical linguistics, ethnography, or personal training—opens up new possibilities for understanding a vital performance tradition in the African Diaspora.