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## USING DISEMBODED MEDIA TO POSITION ONESELF IN AN EMBODIED COMMUNITY

# VIRTUALLY LEGITIMATE LAUREN MILLER GRIFFITH

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research on *capoeira* suggests that face-to-face training is the ideal mode of learning this art. However, there is a robust corpus of capoeira tutorials available on YouTube. This paper asks what the function of these videos is. I analyze six comment threads taken from YouTube that exhibit a common pattern, concluding that beyond the video's utility as a source of information, the comments shared by community insiders serve as an invitation for aspiring students to join the embodied capoeira community, paving the way for their adoption of the underlying ethos of capoeira by socializing them into the 'anyone can do it if they work hard enough' discourse that is common in capoeira academies. And while this discourse itself is somewhat deceptive insofar as not everyone can do all of the moves of capoeira – even if they work hard – it is actually the mediating link between technical mastery, which could theoretically be achieved from watching videos, and embodiment of capoeira's generative grammar, which must be learned in an embodied community setting.

## INTRODUCTION

I am envious of those people – you know who you are – that can so confidently march into a new class without any background whatsoever and jump in alongside more experienced students. You aren't embarrassed by your white belts. You aren't bothered when you trip over your own feet. That is most certainly not me. Perhaps it is the academic in me, but before trying something new, I like to read about it and gather as much information as possible. I study videos. I try things out in the privacy of my own home. It turns out, I am not alone.

In 2008, I joined a *capoeira* group in Brazil as part of my research on how non-Brazilians acquire legitimacy within a social field associated with a foreign culture. Although capoeira classes have become quite common in many parts of the world [see Downey 2005; Joseph 2008; deCampos Rosario, Stephens and Delamont 2010], there are still significantly fewer training opportunities outside of Brazil than in a Brazilian city like Salvador, popularly considered the 'cradle' or even the 'Mecca' of capoeira. Within this context, many aspiring capoeiristas – including those who are actively taking face-to-face classes – turn to supplementary resources like the Internet, instructional books, videos, etc., to enrich their learning experience. My *mestre* (master) in Brazil, however, frequently denigrated such sources, claiming that they would result in someone playing 'robot' capoeira (i.e., stiff and lacking fluidity). In other words, learning from a standardized source like a book or video results in a standardized style, something that is antithetical to the very essence of capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art that originated with slaves resisting and reclaiming agency in the face of their dehumanizing circumstances. My *mestre* also liked to talk about *sentimento* – feeling – which he said you cannot learn from a book.

In the course of conducting my fieldwork in Brazil, I concluded that travel to the source of an art or sport – something I call an apprenticeship pilgrimage – is one way for individuals to claim legitimacy within a foreign cultural art [Griffith 2013]. The implications of this conclusion are far reaching, and can be seen not only in visits to the source of an art, but also at local and regional levels [Griffith and Marion forthcoming]. In addition to physical pilgrimages, it is also worth considering whether or not it is possible to make virtual pilgrimages, using Internet-based resources to approximate the learning experiences one might have if one *could* travel for more advanced or specialized training opportunities. Based on my Brazilian fieldwork, I was skeptical that the Internet would be a viable source of legitimization for capoeiristas. I turned to YouTube in order to understand the discourse surrounding the legitimacy of online tutorials as a tool for learning capoeira. I expected to find repeated disavowals of the legitimacy of online tutorials or exhortations to find a 'real' teacher.

Although there were a few comments of this nature, by and large I found there to be a supportive community of viewers that repeatedly expressed gratitude for the material that was being posted, encouraged novices to keep training (without specifying the ways in which that training needed to be conducted), and tended to shut down 'trolling' (unprompted or excessive negativity or hostility) relatively quickly.

Typically, when viewers search for capoeira tutorials online, they are looking for information about how to do a particular movement or for general training routines that they can practice on their own or with a partner or small group. Some viewers do 'stumble upon' the videos after following a series of links from other videos or sites, or out of general curiosity as to what capoeira is after encountering it in another arena like a video game (e.g. *Tekken*) or television program (e.g. *Bob's Burgers*). However, of the users who intentionally seek out the tutorials, they are most likely in pursuit of knowledge about the form of capoeira. For example, I found comments left by several individuals who seemed to feel inhibited by their lack of knowledge and wanted to learn at least a few moves before taking face-to-face classes. Yet, there is something more than just information exchange at work within the comment sections of the capoeira tutorial videos available on YouTube.

Following Geertz [1972], it has become commonplace to discuss a multitude of cultural expressions as texts that can be read and interpreted. And while there is merit in this perspective, especially in its validation of interpretive anthropology and attention to the construction and circulation of symbols, its overuse – especially in discussing the moving body – has some troubling implications [Marion 2007, 2013]. These critiques notwithstanding, the circulation of moving images on YouTube is accompanied by the circulation of literal texts, creating an interesting opportunity to explore the creation of intertextual links in a multimedia environment. Within the disembodied context of YouTube, intertextuality represents a different kind of emplacement, one that does not rely on physical location or even on the simulation of place as we see in virtual worlds like *Second Life* [see Boellstorff 2008]. Rather, capoeiristas' experiences – translated into texts – become part of the web of meaning that supports their engagement with the physical art. Their comments often cross-reference other videos, well-known capoeiristas, and other comment threads. For example, in response to a query about two moves – which were spelled phonetically, suggesting the poster's lack of knowledge about the Portuguese language (which incidentally marks him/her as an outsider or novice) – another individual provided the proper spelling of the movements, the English translation of the movements, and included a link to another YouTube video in which those movements were demonstrated. This media itself provides ample opportunities for individuals to create intertextuality by linking to other multimedia

content both on YouTube and hosted on other websites. Within this context, most individuals – even those who live in areas where no face-to-face capoeira classes are offered – can access information about capoeira provided they have an Internet connection. What is less clear, however, is how access to this information factors into an individual's trajectory as a capoeirista, which has implications for the study of enskillment and belonging within many different martial styles.

In the remainder of this article, I argue that, beyond its utility as a source of knowledge about the form or even the history of capoeira, the comment sections provide a space for capoeiristas – or aspiring capoeiristas – to express vulnerability regarding their practice and receive support from fellow capoeiristas who perpetuate the idea that anyone can learn capoeira provided he or she works hard enough. It is this discourse, as well as other conversational moves, that identify individuals as insiders within the capoeira community, giving their words of encouragement more weight to the struggling students than those of the 'trolls' who prey upon their vulnerability or other outsiders whose lack of genre-specific knowledge render their comments largely irrelevant. So, while the YouTube comment section is in some ways a free-flowing communication space in which anyone can say just about anything, there is a subtle metacommunicative process of identification and legitimization happening in conjunction with the information exchange facilitated by the video and question/answer format of the comments. This suggests that there is a virtual capoeira community visible within the disorderly assemblage of commentary associated with YouTube videos if one just knows how to find it. Furthermore, the particular piece of capoeira discourse that is being shared online (i.e., anyone can do it if they train hard enough) is actually the mediating link between technical mastery, which could theoretically be achieved from watching videos, and embodiment of capoeira's generative grammar, which must be learned in an embodied community setting.

## METHODS

To build a sampling frame for this project, I ran six searches within YouTube using the following phrases: (1) capoeira instructional video, (2) capoeira instruction, (3) how to play capoeira, (4) capoeira tutorial, (5) capoeira basics, and (6) learn capoeira. These search terms yielded an extraordinary number of results, so to narrow my sampling frame, I only considered the first five pages of results for each search. Then, I selected the individual videos that had at least 150,000 views, but excluded those that were specifically geared towards children as well as capoeira channels that compile multiple videos because (a) there was no data available regarding the number of times channels had been viewed

and (b) these same videos also tended to appear in the main listing of search results. I also excluded video clips like a mestre performing on Conan O'Brien's television show or an individual's highlight reel because they are not actual 'how to' videos despite appearing in the search results. Duplicates were also eliminated from the sample, as were videos for which the owner had disabled the comment function.

For each video that was included in my study, I analyzed the first 10 threads that appeared when comments were sorted by 'top comments' rather than 'newest first.' I omitted comment threads that were in a language other than English (though the vast majority of comment threads were indeed in English and only one video in the sample contained a significant number of comment threads in Portuguese). When Portuguese comments were mixed into an English-language thread, those comments were included in the analysis. I omitted comments that advertised businesses other than capoeira classes or instructional materials like DVDs or capoeira books (e.g., 'Hello! I'm Nicole. I did -40 lbs in 2 month. Visit hawght.so\#YAHp'). Given the length of some comment threads, I only analyzed the first 10 exchanges in each thread (meaning a single video *could*, but in actuality did not, yield a maximum of 100 different entries).

There are some obvious disadvantages to this approach. Namely, given my strict parameters, I did not have the freedom to chase some interesting comment threads to see how they developed. I also lost some context that could have been useful for understanding certain comments, especially in cases where a newer comment referenced an older one that had – in the interim – been buried by other comments. However, I implemented this strict protocol to systematize my data collection, and anyone who has spent much time on YouTube can appreciate how easy it is to become sidetracked by following interesting comments and links to other material. This also helped me avoid 'cherry picking' interesting videos or comments that were already in keeping with my hypothesis.

A few additional caveats warrant mentioning here. Not all capoeiristas visit YouTube and the majority of viewers do not leave comments. Therefore, although my selection protocol was robust, I can only comment on the subpopulation of capoeiristas who both reference YouTube and participate in online dialogs about capoeira. This may help explain why I did not find more disparaging remarks directed towards the very notion of learning an embodied art online. The people who search for YouTube capoeira tutorials have likely already bought into the notion that it *is* possible, at least theoretically, to learn from them. However, this methodology is appropriate given my interest in how online forums like YouTube contribute to a sense of belonging within a geographically dispersed performance community.

Another limitation of these data is that there are no *capoeira Angola* videos included in the sample. If one searches specifically for capoeira Angola, there are some videos available; however, they typically have less than 10,000 views, far under the inclusion threshold I established for this study. There are likely multiple reasons for the relative paucity of videos (and viewership) for capoeira Angola tutorials. Globally, capoeira Angola has far fewer practitioners than its rival style, *capoeira regional*, or the modern, hybrid style known as *capoeira contemporanea*. It is also possible – though this is conjecture based on my participant observation experiences with capoeira Angola rather than any objective data – that teachers of capoeira Angola more vocally denigrate learning from videos. This was certainly true of my experiences training with an international capoeira group headquartered in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil.

My final corpus of material to be analyzed included 29 videos. Despite one video – posted by the world-renowned Mestre Barrão – lasting nearly 35 minutes, the vast majority were less than five minutes in length. Although the full search results included videos from a very diverse set of presenters, the majority of the videos in the corpus that was analyzed were posted by the same three teachers, suggesting that they have somehow tapped into the ‘magic formula’ that yields a high number of views (most likely by keeping their videos short and by using frequently searched key words in their video descriptions). Using MaxQDA to assist in managing these data, I created a codebook that reflects an inductive analysis of the prevalent themes in these particular videos. My codebook had 30 categories, but in this paper, I focus specifically on the themes of doubts, encouragement, and identification of background. I have used pseudonyms throughout this paper despite the fact that these comments are all visible to the public. When known, pseudonyms and pronouns reflect the commenters’ genders; in all other cases, pseudonyms and pronouns are gender neutral and reflect the spirit of the commenters; online identities as expressed by their usernames.

## EXEMPLARY CASES

As is the case with many communities of practice, the online and actual sites of capoeira practice interact in interesting ways. While some capoeiristas only engage with the art and other practitioners in embodied, face-to-face venues (e.g., academies, *street rodas*, social gatherings, etc.) and others only engage with capoeira online (e.g., watching YouTube videos, discussing the art in chatrooms, reading blogs, etc.), many people engage in both ways. Given the deterritorialized nature of the Internet, the virtual capoeira community is multinational, multilingual, and multiracial, encompassing more

diversity than one commonly finds in any single place-based capoeira group. Yet, while it is easy to connect with capoeiristas online that one will likely never meet face-to-face, it is also quite possible to – either intentionally or unintentionally – engage with individuals that one knows and sees regularly in the ‘actual’ world. In such cases, an individual’s online and offline self are situated in a dialogic relationship with one another [Jordan 2009; Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2012].

Although it is certainly possible to create an alternate version of oneself online, qualitative studies of the virtual reality environment *Second Life* as well as interviews with bloggers suggest that it is more typical that people present a version of themselves online that is relatively close to the persona they project in real life, even if they do emphasize certain traits over others or showcase just one facet of their identity in the online environment [Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2012]. When one’s offline social network is aware of his or her online activities and has access to those virtual spaces, the individual is even more likely to construct an online persona that closely matches ‘reality’ [Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2012], keeping in mind, of course, that what we experience as reality is always culturally mediated [see Golub 2010]. While there is always some degree of artifice in anyone’s presentation of one’s self outside the most private of back spaces [see Goffman 1959], there are ways for capoeiristas to get a feel for one another’s degree of belonging in the capoeira community even when they lack visual cues about the individual’s identity or mastery of the formal requirements of the genre. Take, for instance, the following exchange between Gatinho and Pham Binh:

**Gatinho:** does someone know how that music track is called?

**Pham Binh:** Capoeira’s Traditional Music, just Google it like that and search, man :)

**Gatinho:** Hi Pham Binh! Thanks, but of course I know that it is traditional capoeira music (I’m portuguese) and I also know what Google is ;-). But I was searching for especially this track. Finally Shazam made it and I found this track :-)

**Pham Binh:** is it ? Sorry if my idea was wrong man

In the initial comment, Gatinho asks if anyone can identify the song being played in the video. Pham Binh responds, telling Gatinho that it is traditional capoeira music. In the next comment, Gatinho identifies as a Portuguese capoeirista who, therefore, is familiar with traditional capoeira music and then clarifies that he or she was looking for more specific information about the particular song used in the video, not the genre of capoeira music in general. Gatinho appears to take

issue with Pham Binh's recommendation to 'just Google it', pointing out that he/she knows what Google is and therefore such simplistic instructions are a bit insulting. The winking face adds some levity to what could otherwise be a terse exchange. Pham Binh adds the final comment to this exchange, posting a seemingly genuine apology for misunderstanding the initial query or perhaps misidentifying Gatinho as a novice/outsider when that was not the case.

In the next example, the commenter's identification of his/her standing within the embodied community is less subtle. This comment is in response to a thread in which some 'trolling' (e.g., 'i am sorry for saying this but 99% of the views are boys waiting for a hot brazilian girl') is interspersed with comments expressing genuine gratitude for the video as well as one individual's doubts about his/her overweight body being able to do capoeira. This individual is explicit about his/her qualifications for making authoritative comments about the diverse body types that can succeed in capoeira.

**ImaLibra:** Jesus, what is up with all the hate spewed here? Seriously, a few of you guys need to learn some respect. I've been doing Capoeira for 2 years now learning under a pupil of mestre Santiago from Seattle, let me tell you some of my experiences. There's a guy in my class who's about 5'6' and weighs almost 300 lbs. He knocked my ass out with a beija flor to the temple. My instructor has been all over the world, found rodas from many different cultures. Many street rodas, he has related, are a lot more lenient in their code of conduct. If you think Capoeira isn't a viable martial art, find a street roda. They most assuredly aren't dancing. Lastly, this guy is obviously just doing videos for the basic moves. I can tell simply by the fluidity of his movements and his flexibility that he is definitely capable of much more. For those of you chastising him for not incorporating an attack into his au, ask yourself: how did I learn Au? I bet anyone who actually practiced this art didn't even lift their feet off the ground while learning the hand positioning for the flips. Hell, even after two years I still get nervous when trying Au sem mao. This art is all about being deceiving, there's even a term for it, 'malandragem' which alludes to trickery.

After admonishing people for trolling, ImaLibra indicates his geographic location, the length of time he has been training, and the name of his mestre. Although he does not indicate that his group practices the capoeira regional style, those who are knowledgeable in the art can infer this from the comment about being kicked in the head (the regional style is more upright, making kicks to the temple more likely than in the lower, more strategy-based capoeira Angola style) as well as the mention of flips, which are discouraged in the Angola

style. While not defending his mestre's legitimacy per se, ImaLibra nonetheless highlights it by referencing his mestre's international travel. Having participated in rodas 'all over the world' suggests that the mestre is in high demand as an instructor who gets invited to give workshops around the world and/or the mestre has taken it upon himself to increase his knowledge by seeking out training opportunities around the world. Either activity contributes to the mestre's legitimacy within the social field [see Griffith and Marion, forthcoming].

By establishing his own legitimacy as an experienced student of a known mestre with international experience, this individual is then in a position to – or presumes to be in a position to – comment on (a) the efficacy of capoeira, (b) the progression of students within capoeira, and (c) the essential habitus required in capoeira (i.e. malandragem, which is discussed below as part of the underlying ethos of capoeira). ImaLibra does not use pedagogical terminology to describe this, but when he explained how a novice could build up to doing the movement by keeping his or her feet on the ground while learning the hand placement, he was essentially talking about the discipline-specific scaffolding that supports a learner's execution of advanced skills [see Downey 2008]. In saying, 'even after two years I still get nervous when trying to Au sem mao', which is a hands-free cartwheel, this individual uses the weight of his self-assessed legitimacy in the field to encourage novices to keep trying the moves, to use scaffolding as needed, and to not feel bad about incremental progression.

The next exchange between Ariel, Frank and Pericles429 is interesting because of the way in which Frank, the instructor from the video, draws out specific information about Ariel's degree of experience, allowing him to position her within his understanding of the physical capoeira world and give feedback that is appropriate to her level of development. Note that all of this diagnostic work is happening *without* him being able to watch her perform the movements, which is such an important source of information for teachers in face-to-face environments. In response to Frank's demonstration of the au (cartwheel), which is one of the longer tutorials in the sample (four minutes and 24 seconds) and has the word 'beginner' in the title, Ariel asks, 'This is for beginners?' It is not clear whether her statement is an indication of disbelief, frustration, or genuine curiosity. The teacher from the video then responds to her query.

**Ariel:** This is for beginners?

**Frank:** Yep. Are u a pro?

With his comment, Frank – who posted the video – is asking Ariel to identify her degree of experience with capoeira. He may be doing this to figure out whether or not he is communicating with a beginner



who is looking for basic information or a seasoned veteran who is critiquing his selection of material for beginners. Ariel then identifies her experience level.

**Ariel: No I have no training, this looks hard. I was interested in this as a new workout.**

**Frank: well, you will be awesome if you be patience and take it step by step. i'm sure u will pick up very fast and easy. keep trying.**

Having received the information he needs to situate Ariel within the community of practice, Frank is able to give her advice that is appropriate for her stage of development. Although I have found that many people within the capoeira community are dismissive of people who start training solely because they want a 'new' or 'different' workout, subordinating this motivation to the more highly esteemed quest for cultural enrichment, the teacher does not express any of these qualms and indicates his belief – based on nothing more than her disembodied comment – that she will be 'awesome' if she has 'patience' and keeps working. After Ariel expresses her gratitude to Frank for his encouragement, a third individual – Pericles429 – enters the conversation, giving Ariel additional encouragement.

**Ariel: Thank you for the encouragement,**

**Pericles429: This isn't as difficult as it may seem, you just have to repeat each and every movement many times and master it, and it will be like a reflex.**

At no point in this exchange do any of the commenters address the issue of body-type, the physical fitness of Ariel's body, or the question of innate skill. Instead, hard work and dedication are the only things that seem to matter. Although this optimism may seem like an artifact of the disembodied environment in which Frank and Pericles429 are unable to evaluate Ariel's potential for advancement, this discourse matches well with what I have encountered in the face-to-face capoeira community in which students are told that everybody and every body is unique and can progress along any given path provided that the student is willing to work hard [see Griffith 2016].

Despite the prominent discourse in capoeira that anyone can play as long as he or she is willing to work hard, many practitioners – especially novices – do have concerns about whether or not their bodies can perform the amazing feats they see being done by experts, whose virtuosity makes the movements look easy [see Royce 2004]. In the next two exchanges, the body is the specific focus of the discussion. The two exchanges should look similar, because they were both started

by the same individual who – presumably – copied and pasted his/her comment from one thread to the other. In the first exchange, Ad Astra starts the thread by mentioning a specific difficulty he/she is encountering, links it to an immutable characteristic of his/her body (having long legs), and then asks whether or not it is likely that he/she will be able to learn capoeira. This is within the context of a video that includes 'advanced moves' in the title, suggesting that Ad Astra is viewing videos that are above his/her current level of achievement, which may contribute to the anxiety expressed in the following comment.

**Ad Astra: I can't do a simple cartwheel, maybe because of my long legs. My cousins can do it naturally. Is there a chance I will learn capoeira?**

The next two conversational moves involve inflammatory language that reinforce the virtual capoeira community as being a straight, male space. It is not entirely clear why Hiphop or Die is making fun of Ad Astra – perhaps for showing vulnerability, for being unable to do a cartwheel, or maybe even for wanting to do a cartwheel if he/she is not familiar with the use of the cartwheel in capoeira. Vadik comes to Ad Astra's defense, but does so in a manner that denigrates women. Whether intending to do so or not, this conversational move marginalizes female capoeiristas, who still struggle for equal treatment in the roda and in capoeira academies [see Griffith 2016]. Regardless of the vulgar language used, Ad Astra expresses gratitude for Vadik's defense of him/her.

**Hiphop or Die: Ha!! Gayyyyy!**

**Vadik to Hiphop or Die: stfu cunt**

**Ad Astra to Vadik: Thanks.**

At this point, a fourth individual enters the conversation.

**Mista Marx to Ad Astra: hey im fatter than your average guy but i can do a cartwheel so keep it up man**

**Ad Astra: Thanks for the encouragement man. Someday I will be the very best cartwheeler like no one ever was.**

Mista Marx also references one of his physical characteristics – his weight – which he implies could be a limitation to doing capoeira, but argues that, even being 'fatter than your average guy', he can nevertheless do a cartwheel. Seeming to take solace in Mista Marx's words, Ad Astra again expresses gratitude and makes public the intent to overcome the obstacle he/she identified in the initial comment.

The second video in which Ad Astra inquires about whether or not his/her long legs and inability to 'do a simple cartwheel' will be a serious impediment to his/her ability to do capoeira shows an even *more* advanced sequence – though it is not labeled as advanced – in which the instructor has his assistant perform a macaco (an off-kilter, one-handed back-handspring).

**Ad Astra:** I can't do a simple cartwheel, maybe because of my long legs. My cousins can do it naturally. Is there a chance I will learn capoeira?

**Small Knight:** training

**Ad Astra:** Wow things just got dumb by that reply...

**Marcos Santos to Ad Astra:** Well hes just seems like a dick dont worry about it bro anyone can learn

**Ad Astra to Marcos Santos:** Thanks bro!

The comment by Small Knight could be taken in one of two ways: either it is a sarcastic response that implies the original commenter should stop worrying and just start training or it could be taken as a genuine, albeit terse, suggestion that training will help the commenter succeed. Ad Astra seems to have interpreted it in the first manner, as does Marcos Santos, who dismisses the seemingly rude comment by Small Knight and deploys the by-now familiar trope that anyone can learn if they work hard. Just as he/she did in the previous video, Ad Astra concludes the exchange by expressing gratitude for a third-party's encouragement.

Beyond the fact that both comments start with the same opening line, there is another similarity. In both threads, an opening query that exposes the commenter's vulnerability is met with a dismissive retort followed by a third party intervening to first undercut the sting of the unkind remark and then reinforce the idea that anyone can do capoeira if he or she works hard. By trolling, Hiphop or Die (in the first example) and Small Knight (in the second) have broken an interactional norm within the capoeira community, even if it is common practice in social media and on YouTube. Conspicuously absent in their short and rude comments is any mention of how they articulate with the capoeira community. Viewers of the thread have no basis for judging whether or not they are members of the community at all. However, Mista Marx (in the first example) and Marcos Santos (in the second) both provide some clues as to their positions as insiders by explicitly or implicitly referencing the 'anyone can learn' discourse.

Lest one think that I am presenting an overly tidy argument that the virtual capoeira community is perfectly harmonious, I conclude by presenting this potential counter-example. The video in question is significantly longer than most of the tutorials considered here (seven minutes and 12 seconds). It has two instructors whereas most only have one instructor. Both of the instructors are male, which is typical for this corpus of material. What is unusual, however, is that both are Afro-Brazilian, a point that does come out in the comment thread.

**Johnny Dunn:** some seriously ugly capoeira, modern capoeira looks much nicer than this

**Bonnie Rose:** this is a training for beginners. .fast forward to more advanced techniques and videos if this is too slow or 'ugly' for you.

**Johnny Dunn:** This is terrible training for beginners. I would NEVER recommend this to ANYONE because its so bad. If you go to any capoeira group you'll quickly see that no one plays like this

**Bonnie Rose:** Oh ok. It's all new to me and i was able to follow these movement. Im still searching the tube, looking for beginner classes. But thanks.

**Johnny Dunn:** If you look at some stuff by group cordao de ouro (the style I do) its contemporary capoeira that is really nice to watch, or if you're up for something more aggressive and fast (personal taste) then Group Capoeira Senzala or Muzenza are pretty good. There are lots of different styles out there, guess you gotta find the right one for you (and hope they have a group in your town)

**EternalQuest:** Do you have to go and leave the same comment on all of the videos?

**Sawyer Hunt:** This is real Capoeira. The Muzenza and 'modern' stuff is NOT better. I watched the videos you recommended and they are alot sloppier, slow, and mostly uncoordinated Euro kids.

Given the argument that I have presented thus far – that insider status can be gauged in part by the degree of supportiveness a commenter expresses towards novices – it bears asking whether or not Johnny Dunn is an insider. His first comment does not make this clear. In his third comment, however, he explicitly identifies himself as being part of the Cordao de Ouro group, which is an internationally known

organization with a distinctive aesthetic. He also identifies two other groups as being 'pretty good'. Although he does not indicate where he lives, who his specific instructor is, or how long he has been practicing capoeira, he presents himself as someone who is in a position to advise a beginner and also subtly suggests that he has enough experience visiting capoeira groups other than his own to know that 'no one plays like this'. Although he does not provide much specific information, it is enough to position himself as an insider – a claim that Bonnie Rose seems to accept.

Bonnie Rose's first conversational move here is to defend the instructor's presentation. She reminds Johnny Dunn – in much the same way that ImaLibra did in an earlier example – that beginners are not ready to perform the fast movements that would be more appropriate for an advanced student. When Johnny Dunn establishes himself as an expert, whether or not he really is, Bonnie Rose immediately backs down and identifies herself as a beginner by saying, 'it's all new to me.' She essentially ratifies his claim to expertise, after which he provides additional information that he thinks will help her development as a capoeirista.

When EternalQuest and Sawyer Hunt enter the conversation, EternalQuest chastises Johnny Dunn for his comment. Though not referencing any physical experience with capoeira, EternalQuest indicates his or her familiarity with other capoeira videos by signaling awareness of Johnny Dunn's pattern of behavior. Similarly, while Sawyer Hunt does not indicate whether or not he himself is a capoeirista, he does establish himself as someone who is aware of the intertextual network of capoeira tutorials and provides his evaluation. Most provocatively, he criticizes these other videos because they feature 'uncoordinated Euro kids'. With this comment, it can be inferred that Sawyer Hunt is at least familiar enough with the art of capoeira to know that it is an Afro-Brazilian art (or at the very least that 'Euro kids' do not represent its traditional demographic); however, this in and of itself is not indicate insider status, and it is often outsiders who know a bit about an art but are not themselves involved in its production that are most likely to operate on essentialist stereotypes [see Grazian 2004].

This example is messy in the sense that it is not entirely clear whether or not what Johnny Dunn is doing should be considered 'trolling'. In some respects, he is merely using his position in the social field to help a novice evaluate the quality of the model proffered online. Yet, as EternalQuest points out, he seems to post the same or similar comments on many different videos, which could be considered trolling. If this is an example of trolling, then this exchange runs counter to my claim about trolling being done by outsiders, as Johnny Dunn certainly does appear to be an insider. At the same time, however, it follows

my argument in so far as Johnny Dunn does encourage Bonnie Rose's training, albeit by redirecting her towards online resources more closely associated with his preferred style. Even within ambiguous cases such as this one, it is possible to see how commenters signal their standing in the field – which is at least partially based on embodied experience/expertise in capoeira – as a way of legitimizing their advice to novices. Even though Johnny Dunn does not explicitly tell Bonnie Rose that she will be successful if she just trains, by telling her to find a style she likes and then 'hope they have a group in your town', he implicitly invites her to join the embodied capoeira community and suggests that Internet-based resources alone are not sufficient for her to become a capoeirista.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Pasty, beady-eyed from the strain of viewing a flickering screen in a dimly lit room, chatting online with strangers because he or she lacks the social skills to engage in 'the real world'. If this was once the stereotype of the hard-core gamer or chat-room user, it is making way for a new understanding of how online forums and participatory media like YouTube represent just one node in complex networks of social interaction. Recent scholarship in media studies as well as anthropology and related disciplines has revealed that there is an active social dimension of Internet usage, especially in the way that individuals produce and circulate discourse [see Boellstorff 2008; Haridakis and Hanson 2009; Coleman 2010]. New media, like YouTube in particular, has been celebrated for its participatory potential, enabling individuals to become active content generators rather than passive recipients of pre-packaged content created, vetted, and circulated by others [Spencer 2014; Scott 2016]. At the same time, however, its detractors argue that it can be a distraction 'from democratic processes' and accelerates the spread of the surveillance state [Scott 2016]. According to the 'uses and gratifications' theory of media viewership, individuals choose to engage with media based on a host of factors including their idiosyncratic goals and needs [Haridakis and Hanson 2009]. YouTube is ideal for this because viewers can search for specific content that meets their needs, view it on demand, spread it by sharing it with others, and participate in the discourse surrounding specific content by contributing to the comments.

Even when watching YouTube videos is a solitary activity, viewers often engage in follow-up behaviors – like sharing links to favorite videos or discussing videos with others – that are quite social [Spencer 2014]. Although Haridakis and Hanson [2009: 330] focus more on the 'post-viewing social activities' associated with YouTube videos, their observations about it being 'a unique social resource' nonetheless



hold true for the individuals who commented on the videos in my sample. While the content of the videos is important, of equal or greater importance is the way in which the YouTube comment sections solidifies and disseminates a discourse of equal opportunity, regardless of whether or not this matches with actual practice.<sup>1</sup> This is similar to the way in which Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) practitioners use YouTube as a stage for ‘practitioner identity-formation’ [Spencer 2014:1].

Spencer [2014] argues that YouTube operates, in part, as a forum for people to share their narratives about how they became BJJ practitioners. Spencer’s work on BJJ practitioners’ usage of YouTube suggests interesting parallels for how capoeiristas engage with this medium. In neither case is there a formal kata to learn – thus no set sequences that one trains and performs individually. Rather, each movement is meant to be trained with a partner. In this context, there is little point to even learning the art unless one has face-to-face opportunities to practice/play with others. Yet, both arts have a large corpus of tutorial videos available online. While some people may be using these to guide their training with other practitioners (e.g. small study groups that do not have a local master), others are viewing them in isolation. What, then, is the point?

Spencer [2014] argues that YouTube is not a replacement for face-to-face BJJ training, but is a complement to one’s progression from novice to expert. I concur, and as the data show, many of the people who comment on capoeira tutorial videos are trying to build up their confidence before taking a face-to-face class [see Griffith and Marion, forthcoming]. Indeed, Downey has captured the frustration of many novices who ask their capoeira mestre for clarification only to be told to watch and mimic [Downey 2010], making it understandable why some might turn to the Internet or other sources to augment their teacher’s instructions. However, there is also an important social function of these YouTube videos.

According to Spencer, BJJ has a ‘douchebag filter’, meaning that the way one is manhandled as a beginner serves to separate those who can be humble and learn from the experience of being dominated by another competitor from those whose egos cannot suffer this reflection of their own fragility [Spencer 2014]. It is the on-the-mat experience that accomplishes this work, but it is the online environment in which the discourse is nurtured, circulated, and appropriated by individuals in the larger community of practice. A similar phenomenon is at play

when comparing the embodied and virtual spaces of capoeira. To be recognized by the community at large as a legitimate capoeirista, an individual has to master the form. This involves not only the proper execution of specific movements but also an embodied understanding of the underlying value system of capoeira (e.g. being tricky and playful, adopting a rogue’s swagger to channel the original founders of the art, breaking the rules when doing so will either make the other players/spectators laugh or highlight your knowledge of the art’s history, etc.). While movements can be learned in isolation from other practitioners provided one has the right resources (e.g., videos, books, etc.), this latter element is almost impossible to learn without the support of others in a face-to-face training environment.

The virtual words of encouragement offered by individuals who either subtly or overtly identify themselves as capoeiristas online bridge the divide between just mastering the mechanics and embodying the true essence of this art.<sup>2</sup> By shutting down the ‘trolls’ and encouraging novices, they implicitly extend to these novices an invitation to join the capoeira community. Yet, there is something else at work here too. These comments are priming the recipients and any other potential capoeira students who may be ‘lurking’ (reading posts without commenting) for a lesson that they will not learn until later, and even then, they may only know it at a subconscious level.

It is simply not true that anyone can become a technical master of capoeira – which seems to be implied in many of these comments. But the *malandragem* and *malica* (terms used to describe the sneaky, win-at-all costs ethos that informs the habitus of capoeira) that one comes to embody after years of practicing capoeira enables one to cleverly and beautifully navigate the roda even if he or she is unable to perform the full range of movements in a master’s repertoire. I have seen a man in his 70s outwit a much younger and stronger opponent and a young man whose physical disabilities made walking difficult foil the capoeira instructor he was playing with his unpredictable gait. With this understanding of the underlying ethos of capoeira, it is possible for anyone to learn – even a long-legged guy who can’t do a cartwheel – provided they keep training *and* accept the implicit invitation to join the embodied capoeira community in which they will learn the generative grammar of the art form.

1 At the level of discourse, capoeiristas tend to promote a ‘color blind’ and ‘gender blind’ discourse of equality in which anyone can get ahead through hard work. In actuality, however, interactions in the roda and in class sessions perpetuate a hierarchy in which Afro-Brazilian men are often granted the most legitimacy [see Griffith 2016].

2 See Royce [2004] for more on the distinction between virtuosity – mastery of form – and artistry, a level of accomplishment that includes technical mastery but also transcends it, making each performance seem like an inevitable interpretation of the source material.

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