

# BOOK REVIEW

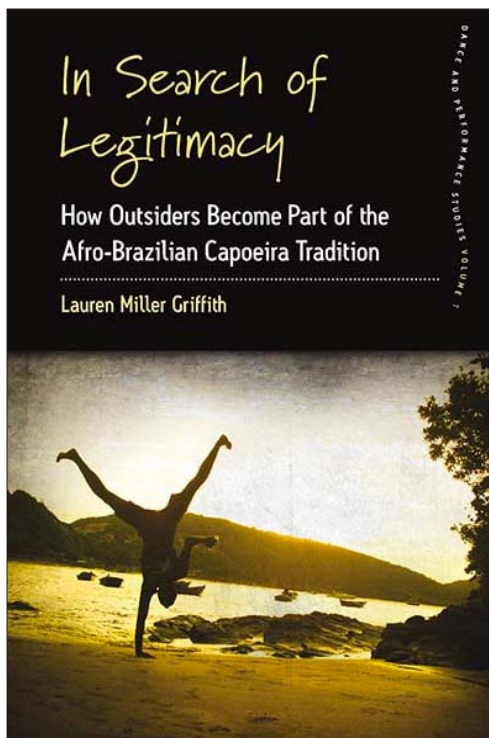
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## In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of the Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Tradition

Lauren Miller Griffith

Berghahn Books, 2016

248 pages



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## REVIEWER

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## DOI

10.18573/j.2017.10189

Lauren Miller Griffith's *In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of the Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Tradition* is an ambitious ethnographic study of tourists and pilgrims journeying to Bahia, Brazil, the sacred birthplace of capoeira. In each chapter, Griffith employs a methodological and analytical approach that celebrates the complexity of capoeira rather than seeking to reduce it through a single theoretical framework. It is this ability to provide insight while avoiding simplification combined with an insistence on raising difficult questions that could serve as a model for scholars of martial arts, physical practice, identity, cultural flows, and appropriation.

In following the comparatively affluent men and women from Western nations who seek cultural authenticity and martial art expertise through their capoeira pilgrimages and apprenticeships, Griffith takes us into a site of tension and constantly shifting meanings. Capoeira is presented as existing in a space of in-betweens – simultaneously a martial art, a dance, a game, and a sport. To be a capoeirista is to be confined by a structured set of moves, but it is also to celebrate and master an art of improvisation and trickery. The practice is at times a painful, and even violent, exchange, but the goal is also to share a performance with a partner. Yet, capoeira is also an exoticized performance for tourists, an increasingly accepted source of cultural pride for the nation, and a site of resistance and celebration of black identity. Perhaps most challengingly, the practitioner traveling to Brazil to train is both tourist and pilgrim, both insider and outsider, both accepted and shunned, both a necessary source of economic revenue and implicated in the essentialization and commodification of culture.

To complicate matters even further, Griffith seeks to answer two related but difficult classic anthropological questions – why and how – each implied in the title of the book. First, *why* would someone invest significant amounts of money, time, and energy into a practice that will not provide monetary reward or lead to future success? Second, *how* does one become a member of the capoeira community? Here attention is shifted to the negotiation that takes place as someone seeks an identity that is not their cultural heritage in a land in which they were not born. Together, these two questions do much to highlight the ambitious nature of the work. To even partially answer these two questions is a considerable accomplishment.

Griffith's decision to train alongside the participants seems to place her, on the surface, as one of a growing number of sociologists and anthropologists studying martial arts and physical culture through use of the body as a methodological tool [see Channon and Jennings 2014]. As the book concretely demonstrates, her participation provides her access and entry into sites and activities that would simply not have otherwise been possible. In doing so, she gains a fuller appreciation of both the

appeal and the complexities, as people from an array of social and geographic groups come together to share a physical and cultural practice.

Perhaps it is pertinent to note that Griffith's book appears in an edited series on 'Dance and Performance'. With this in mind, it is less surprising that she does not couch her contributions or methodological approach in terms of the currently burgeoning scholarship on martial arts per se. Indeed, her work differs from the numerous scholars who have followed in the footsteps of Loïc Wacquant [2004] and his seminal 'enactive ethnography' of boxing. While Griffith shares a commitment to full participation as part of the research process, her analysis cannot be said to be centered on the sensual or on embodiment. For instance, while Griffith provides insight into the process through which participants improve their skills, the focus is not on the 'scaffolding' process (to use a term from Greg Downey's [2008] work on learning capoeira), in which the body is shaped and conditioned through repeated training to become capoeirista.

The moments in which Griffith does employ vivid descriptions of her training are enlightening, insightful, and left me wanting more. The discussion of gender in the book was particularly compelling and serves as example. Griffith makes the topic come alive with stories of interactions that take place both inside and outside of training situations. Excerpts from her field notes are rich with both descriptive and analytic value, since much of the knowledge in the site operates at a felt-level; whether it is an incorrect movement subtly being corrected within the flow of performance or the experience of having a training partner forced to kiss the author's hand as a 'sign of respect' for capoeira.

This type of writing and analysis is important when studying any physical culture. However, it would be safe to say that the importance is magnified when studying martial arts. Capoeira, as Griffith illustrates, offers a particular challenge for it demands an appreciation of one of the most difficult to textually capture qualities – movement. It is its unique movement that distinguishes capoeira from all other martial arts. And it is movement that distinguishes the expert from the novice (rather than simply the pragmatic ability to win or score points under a combat sport rule system).

For Griffith, not being completely seduced by the corporeal trend is also a strength, as she takes advantage of the additional space and time to explore the social and historical context of capoeira, and how these play parts in the constant identity work being performed by visitors seeking to belong. In looking at the ways that particular stories and pasts are invoked, the reader is given insight into the process of interpretation that ensures that capoeira is never simply a physical contest. Following Griffith, we see how performing traditional songs is never just learning the lyrics and melody but also determining what it means for a white woman from the United States to loudly sing words written by black slaves. Similarly, getting dinner after practice is never just finding a satisfying meal but also a negotiation of who eats with whom (or who gets to eat with the locals) and how cultural pilgrims differentiate themselves from cultural tourists.

For scholars of martial arts and combat sports, Griffith offers two particularly valuable lessons. First, she confirms the importance of martial arts as an object of study. In particular, martial arts offer rich examples for understanding debates over cultural authenticity and the role of the pilgrim in seeking, and even demanding, the 'authentic'. For, as scholars of martial arts are well-aware, capoeira is not the only fighting style to have a Mecca. Griffith raises important questions about the role of the outsider in policing the boundaries of the practice in which they seek meaning and the complex process through which legitimacy and cultural capital are established and negotiated.

Second, Griffith convincingly demonstrates that to understand integration into a cultural practice a researcher should take seriously both the physical integration and the meaning-making that occurs during and surrounding training. Much effort has been made to understand the conditioning and training of the habitus, focusing on the physical lessons that occur in a site. However, less work has simultaneously taken into account agents' self-definitions and identity construction. In asking both *why* and *how*, Griffith demands that the pilgrim's sense of self (and how this sense of self orients actions) must be part of the story.

Taking up these challenges is rather daunting. Even as Griffith makes it clear that martial arts offer a particularly rich site for better understanding the transmission of culture and the relationship between action and talk, she demonstrates how difficult it is to take seriously multiple questions, methodologies, and research strategies. It is easy to get stuck somewhere in the middle – neither quite capturing the corporeal nor the hermeneutic. But, as Griffith shows, such complexity and interplay is an essential part of the story. To *really* understand a fundamental capoeira movement like the *ginga*, the researcher must appreciate not just the feel of performing the movement with fluidity and style, but also how the performance is always already tied into larger understandings of race, ethnicity, gender, authenticity, and belonging.

In the end, Griffith's *In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of the Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Tradition* is a book of negotiations and questions. And, I would say, this is a good thing. Those seeking clear and final answers should look elsewhere.

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### Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

### Issue DOI

10.18573/n.2017.10182

*Accepted for publication 30 June 2017*

**Martial Arts Studies**

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

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