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SEEKING A NEW 'NORMAL'

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It seems that everywhere I turn, someone is saying that it is time to get back to normal. As a social scientist, this word makes me a little nervous. Designating certain behaviors, ideas, and ways of being as normal implicitly constructs others as being abnormal. Of course, I know what the people saying this mean. They want life to return to the way it was before 2020. They want to travel and socialize freely, they want to attend in-person classes and events, and they want to be done wearing masks. I share these desires, and indeed it feels like a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders as my family has started to resume the activities we enjoyed before COVID. And yet, there are some aspects of 'normality' that we would do well to question, both in general and as martial arts scholars. Many of the pieces in this issue do just that, either explicitly or implicitly. Contemplating what was taken for granted in 'the before times' and what we want to take forward into our 'new normal' presents us as researchers with interesting opportunities not only to flesh out the ethnographic record and develop new theory, but to put these ideas into practice.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

It has been just over a year since George Floyd was murdered by the police after allegedly making a purchase with a counterfeit bill at a Minneapolis Cup Foods store. As a U.S.-based scholar, this anniversary may be at the forefront of my awareness to a greater degree than it is for readers based in other geographic locations, particularly as I have been researching the overlap between capoeira participation and social activism. Still, the outrage over Mr. Floyd's death was not confined to the U.S. and last summer witnessed an eruption of protests over racism and abuses of power in several countries. Within my own social circle, I observed many people who had never before expressed an interest in activism trying to educate themselves about issues like systemic and institutional racism. As someone who studies an Afro-Brazilian art whose practitioners often connect its origins to the resistance of slavery, I sometimes take for granted that our spaces are inherently integrated and 'woke', for lack of a better term. Yet white supremacy often appears in subtle ways that are not readily apparent, especially to those of us who benefit from it.

In the wake of Mr. Floyd's death, my interlocutors were calling upon their fellow capoeiristas to reevaluate taken for granted practices like who they invite to headline big workshops/events and how those individuals are paid. Inequality is perpetuated when martial artists of color are asked to volunteer their time and expertise where others are offered remuneration. Similarly, in an art that claims to have originated as an outcry against slavery, it is ironic that more groups don't interrogate the labor practices of the companies from which they source t-shirts and other merchandise. No doubt, such issues appear in other martial forms as well. If these things are 'normal', perhaps it is best not to return to them.

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Anti-Asian racism has also been on the rise over the last year, at least within the United States. This is of little surprise when public figures not only allowed the spread of misinformation about the novel coronavirus, but laid blame on the shoulders of foreign Others by using such inflammatory language as 'the China virus' or, more pertinently to us as martial artists, the 'kung flu'. Hate crimes like the massage parlor shootings in Atlanta, Georgia as well as microaggressions like a person of Asian descent being asked where they are 'really' from or being complimented on their English even if they are natural born U.S. citizens are all evidence of how far we have to go in terms of respecting diversity in all its forms. To what degree do these attitudes manifest in our martial arts communities? How are our teaching and training partners affected by the racist rhetoric that is circulating in society at large and how can/should martial artists show up as allies when members of our communities are targeted?

Standing up against racism is necessary but insufficient for creating truly inclusive spaces. When I look at the composition of my son's karate class, it does not reflect the demographics of the community in which we live. As practitioners and scholars, it is worth considering why this might be. The price point of classes is an obvious place to start. Is it possible to make training more accessible to students from lower-income families without undervaluing the significant labor being done by the teachers? Why is it that in a class of a dozen children, there are only two girls? At what age do children internalize a gendered understanding of martial arts and how might this be different in various parts of the world? If we believe in the power of martial arts to instill positive values in the students who practice them, more equity is needed.

POLARIZATION

Writing from the positionality of a scholar in the United States, I am distressed by the increased polarization in nearly every aspect of social life. Regrettably, it has become normal for many people to disregard evidence and critical thinking in preference of siding with whatever their chosen political party says. Choosing to wear, or not wear, something as simple as a face covering has somehow become a declaration of political allegiance. Anyone who expresses an unpopular opinion is at risk of being 'cancelled'. I don't think this should be normal. As we seek to heal from more than a year of fear, grief, and anger, we need to find a way to resolve disagreements in a more respectful manner that compassionately addresses complex issues.

Here, I think about Daniel Jaquet's piece in this issue on duels. Contrary to how the movies might have it, there were entire codes of conduct governing duels including procedures to even the playing field between men and women. Not to detract from the main thrust of his argument, which questions the disappearance of women from fight books, the

aspect of his article that stuck with me after reading it was the time granted to the parties involved for them to prepare. I'm not suggesting that we return to honor duels, of course, but it might be wise to consider new rules of engagement for the digital age that encourage reflection and deliberation before hastily causing more harm.

When I think about Syd Hiskey and Neil Edward Clapton's article in this issue on visualization as a path to peaceful conflict resolution, the thing that stands out to me is the importance of investing in preparation for conflict, even if that conflict never materializes. By mentally rehearsing the different ways in which one could respond to a confrontation, including both verbal and physical responses, he or she is more apt to remain composed if/when unpredictable situations do arise. All training should really provide this benefit, but it occurs to me that as a relatively privileged white woman, my fights are much more likely to happen over email or social media than they are in real life. How might we translate this idea of preparing for confrontation so that it serves us well in these non-physical settings?

ABUSES OF POWER

In many ways, our martial arts communities are microcosms of what is going on in society at large. The #MeToo movement has had a profound influence in the day-to-day experiences of women and others who do not identify as cisgender men. Increased awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and abuse, along with the sense that their claims will be believed, has empowered many people to share their own stories. Despite how common these abuses are, it should not be normal.

Many, if not most, martial arts have a hierarchical structure in which extreme deference is paid to the teacher. There are cultural and historical reasons for this, and the teacher-disciple relationship has proved beneficial to many people. At the same time, however, extreme deference can lead to abuses of power. Sexual harassment is not the only kind of abuse that takes place, but it is a significant one that should be guarded against. In the ethnographic context I know best, female capoeiristas and their allies are starting to come forward to condemn individual mestres (masters) and other high-ranking individuals who have used their power to manipulate and violate students who should have been able to trust them. In response, some groups have started asking attendees at their events to sign codes of conduct. One teacher I know makes time at his events to have a large conversation with all participants about what it means to consent to a romantic or sexual encounter with a fellow capoeirista. These interventions are notable because they are not yet the norm, though in time they may be.

NEW HABITS TO KEEP

I do not want to engage in 'toxic positivity'. Over the last year and a half we've witnessed a staggering loss of life as well as economic devastation that was exponentially harder on vulnerable and marginalized populations than it was on those of us with more privilege. This, of course, includes many martial artists who make their living from teaching in-person classes and about whose survival we should be concerned. At the same time, however, there are some things we may not want to leave behind as the risk of COVID recedes. Capoeiristas might call these *jeitinhos*, which literally translates as 'little ways' but might also be thought of more colloquially as 'hacks' that people, particularly the disenfranchised, find to make life more livable. These are the things we might bring forward with us into a new post-COVID era.

Having my physical mobility restricted so severely during 2020 and much of 2021 helped me realize how much I value social connection. Many of us have benefited from the Martial Arts Studies podcast¹ that Paul Bowman started during this unprecedented period. I can only speak for myself but being isolated unexpectedly opened up a new world of connections for me. No longer able to casually chat with colleagues I happened to bump into on campus, my intellectual engagements with others became more intentional. Scheduling may have been a bit tricky at times, and on at least one occasion we mixed up our time zones, but I began interacting with people because of our shared interests rather than geographical coincidence. This is something that I would like to make part of my 'new normal'.

Being forced to work at home and conduct meetings via online platforms like Zoom has also opened a wealth of new possibilities for martial artists who cannot participate in face-to-face classes. In this issue, Vasiliki Kantzara and Martina Loos have shown that with some careful planning and modifications, students can achieve many of the same learning objectives they would be expected to master in person. Perhaps even more importantly, they have shown that moving instruction online during such fraught times is one way to provide continuity and care for those in our communities. Most of us are probably eager to resume our face-to-face interactions. In this issue, Martin Meyer, Andrea Molle, Benjamin Judkins, and Paul Bowman provide evidence of just how keen many martial artists are to return to face-to-face training, even if they had to push the boundaries of the law to do so. At the same time, however, we know there will be situations in the future that prevent people from training together. Hopefully, these situations will not be as extreme as what we have just experienced, but even in the best of times people do move away from their training groups and experience other interruptions. Hybrid learning environments – with some people together in an academy and

1 <https://martialartsstudies.podbean.com>

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others training online – might allow for people who would otherwise stop training to continue. These online platforms also allow people to benefit from the knowledge of teachers in far off locations without having to expend the resources necessary to get there or take time away from work. While few among us would want virtual training to entirely supplant face-to-face training, intentional use of Zoom or similar platforms might allow for a more democratic exchange of ideas and skills between geographically distant peoples.

The extreme measures we have had to take in order to implement social distancing have made us reflect on what is truly essential. Are martial arts essential? To many of us, they are. They sustain us not only physically, but socially, emotionally, and sometimes even spiritually. And yet if martial arts instruction falls outside of the narrow definition of what is considered 'essential' by the state, many of those who make their living by teaching martial arts are thrust into a position of precarity. In my own community of practice, I witnessed several crowdsourcing efforts at raising money to help out-of-work capoeira teachers make ends meet. Some of these funds targeted teachers here in the U.S., but many focused on teachers in Brazil whose nation has been among the hardest hit by COVID-19. Even a moderate loss of income in some of Brazil's poorest regions is disastrous and will have long-term consequences. As scholars and practitioners, it is worth considering whether or not the sharing of wealth from globally privileged martial arts students with the teachers who remain in the arts' countries of origin, particularly if those countries occupy a more peripheral position in the world system, might become part of our new normal.

When we think about martial artists as being nodes in an interconnected global network, it is important to consider how information is exchanged between them, an issue that comes up both in David Sebastian Contreras Islas's article on Mexican capoeira and in Jürgen Schaflechner's piece on the globalization of krav maga. Travel is an important way through which martial artists acquire expertise and advance within their communities of practice. This may take the form of local travel, but it is often more far ranging. People travel to regional events or workshops at which international masters offer classes or preside over graduation ceremonies. Others go even further afield, visiting the source of a martial art in order to experience the local culture that gave rise to their art, to visit key sites in their art's myths, or to train at the feet of local masters. Lockdowns, travel bans, and social distancing guidelines that were put in place during the early stages of the pandemic put a temporary stop to these activities. People are beginning to travel more freely now, but the question is, should we? I don't think I would have the same appreciation of capoeiristas' swagger without having walked Bahia's steep cobblestone streets myself. At the same time, however, I am aware that unnecessary air travel contributes

to anthropogenic climate change. What is the cost of pursuing activity-based travel, and are we willing to bear those costs? In many martial traditions, practitioners are called upon to protect those who cannot protect themselves. In the contemporary era, that would seem to include people who live in vulnerable environments and whose lives and livelihoods will be affected by catastrophic weather events.

Finally, at risk of stating the obvious, the dangers of transmitting COVID-19 have ushered in an entirely new set of sanitation protocols. Those martial arts schools that were permitted to stay open had to meet high safety standards. Personally, I've never worried much about the cleanliness of the spaces in which I have trained. I suppose I took a bit of grime as part and parcel of doing martial arts or sport in general. However, the pandemic has revealed to me how this lackadaisical attitude in and of itself is something of a privilege. There is a certain degree of intimacy and personal contact that will always be part of what we do, and many of the sanitation routines followed during the worst of the pandemic might be hard to follow indefinitely, but it would be worth considering how some small changes might make our spaces more accessible to immunocompromised people.

Some of the issues I have discussed here are matters of practicality that are most pertinent to practitioners of martial arts. Other issues might be pursued as new research questions. As a relatively young field of academic inquiry, what has transpired over the last 18 months or so has the potential to profoundly affect who we are and how we approach our work. As martial artists, we are accustomed to facing challenges head on and we will continue doing so even if our adversaries are amorphous, abstract, and metaphorical.

OUR NEW NORMAL

Being given the opportunity to reflect on where we as a field stand vis-a-vis the current state of the world has been a true honor. I was delighted that Paul Bowman and Benjamin Judkins invited me to join the editorial team of *Martial Arts Studies* this spring. I also am pleased to announce that we are being joined by Wayne Wong as Assistant Editor who brings a wealth of experience, a keen eye, and a generous spirit to our work. As an anthropologist, my own work focuses on how martial arts function within contemporary society. And yet one of the great benefits of being part of an interdisciplinary group like this is seeing the different ways in which scholars from other fields approach the study of martial arts. It probably goes without saying that the past year and a half has been hard, but as I read the articles for this issue I was inspired by the tenacity of martial artists and of martial arts scholars and I look forward to seeing what the future has in store for us all.

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