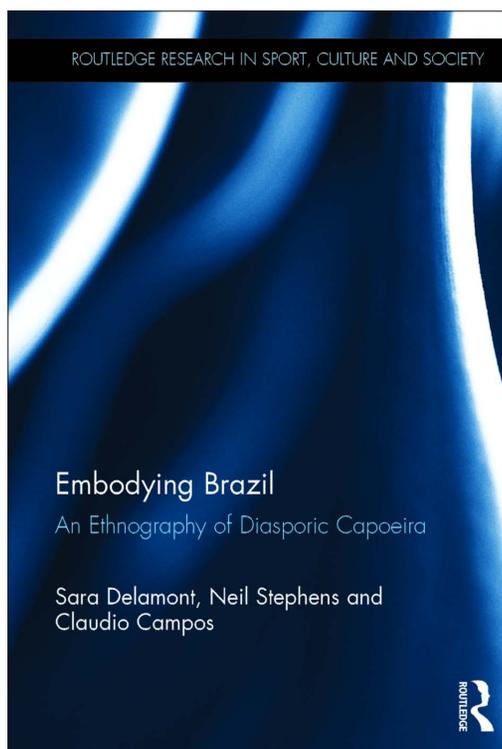# BOOK REVIEW

Embodying Brazil:
An Ethnography of Diasporic Capoeira
Sara Delamont, Neil Stephens and
Claudio Campos (eds.)
Routledge, 2017
244 pages

REVIEWER

Craig Owen is a lecturer in psychology at St. Mary's University, Twickenham. His PhD research focused on the performance of masculine identities in capoeira and Latin and ballroom dance classes. Currently, he is collaborating on new research projects that explore the negotiation of gender identities in different social contexts.

Searching for fieldwork sites to explore the performance of embodied masculinities, I found a video (Fig. 1) on the website of the capoeira group led by Claudio Campos (one of the authors and central informants in Sara Delamont and Neil Stephens' *Embodying Brazil*):

Figure 1: Beribazu Capoeira Bristol
[Rosario, 2006 Video File]

Mesmerised by the athleticism, the acrobatic moves, the smoothness, and the playfulness exhibited by the men in the video, I instantly chose capoeira as a subject for my ethnographic research. During the subsequent four years, as I attended classes and learnt to play capoeira, my developing ethnographic understanding was supported by the growing academic literature on capoeira, of which the work of Sara Delamont and Neil Stephens was fundamental.

With a total of fifteen published journal articles and book chapters exploring various aspects of diasporic capoeira, Delamont and Stephens are leading scholars in the field. *Embodying Brazil* represents a culmination of their fifteen years of ethnographic research, and the authors should be lauded for producing the first full-length monograph exploring the culture and practice of capoeira outside of Brazil.

The authors locate their study as a 'traditional people-based' ethnography, built on a two-handed approach with Neil Stephens as participant, who learned to play capoeira, and Sara Delamont as observer, who attended 951 capoeira events and produced 196 A4 notebooks of field notes. The research primarily focuses on the classes and teaching practices of one capoeira master – *Mestre* Claudio Campos. His authorial role is to offer 'expert' commentary and to play the lead character in the text, alongside a handful of other masters who were observed or interviewed and play supporting roles.

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The authors admirably balance the interests and requirements of different audiences. They provide a wonderful entry point for academic readers with little or no knowledge of capoeira. They eagerly introduce the reader to the histories and trajectories of the people, places, rituals and movements that make up typical capoeira classes and the more spectacular capoeira festivals. The book is rich in data, depicting everyday details of capoeira movements, interactions, music, dance, songs, culture, history and language. In the appendices, the authors also provide an extensive glossary of capoeira terminology and provide a comprehensive list of capoeira media that readers can explore at their own convenience.

Embodying Brazil will also be of value for lay capoeira practitioners. The integration of clear, succinct and accessible summaries of relevant sociological theories and concepts will offer them valuable tools to reflect critically on their own personal understandings of and engagements with capoeira. Readers seeking more in-depth engagements with theory are directed to the authors' previous publications.

As the title would suggest, processes of embodiment provide the central theoretical focus of the book, specifically how capoeira acts as an embodiment of Brazilian virtues and histories and how capoeira teachers enculturate students into the habitus of diasporic capoeira. Focusing primarily on the changing bodies of male students, the authors document the various strategies teachers employ to encourage male capoeiristas to acquire a more relaxed, self-confident and performative style of 'Brazilian' embodiment.

For academics well-acquainted with capoeira and the authors' previous publications, the authors 'freshen up' arguments outlined in previous publications, deploying primarily unpublished data from more recent fieldwork. The authors also explore a number of new issues including teachers' journeys as transnational migrants, the much-debated history of capoeira, and the opportunities offered by the mobilities paradigm to make sense of multiple movements in capoeira practice. The authors also identify pertinent avenues for future research, namely, to explore capoeiristas' experiences of injury; the transnational travels of esteemed capoeira masters to capoeira festivals across Europe; the experiences, challenges and role models of female capoeiristas; and the bourgeoning digital and multi-media engagement with virtual capoeira.

From my own perspective reading *Embodying Brazil*, I frequently experienced empathic embodied sensations, what Stake [1978] refers to as 'naturalistic generalisation'. Drawing on my experience as a capoeirista, I could clearly picture in my mind the complex series of movements and activities being described; I laughed aloud at the instances of capoeira *malicia* and trickery; in my ears, I heard the 'twang' of the berimbau; I heard the distinctive 'Brazilian' voice of the teacher instructing his students to 'make your *ginga* big and beautiful'; and I sang the capoeira songs the authors included in the text. That I experienced these embodied reactions is a testament to the vibrant and engaging writing style employed by the authors.

Readers new to capoeira obviously will not have this embodied knowledge and experience to draw on to help them comprehend, visualise or empathise with the 'unusual' bodily and cultural practices explored in the text. This leads me to question the limitations of *Embodying Brazil* as a traditional print-based ethnographic monologue, and to consider affordances digital dissemination might offer in terms of enabling the authors' written accounts to be supported and enhanced by different forms of multi-media. The affordances of photographs, video, audio soundscapes, or active hyperlinks to YouTube videos and websites, for example, might help readers more easily visualise images of capoeira bodies, movements and performances, hear the sounds of the instruments, the rhythms of the songs and the pronunciation of Brazilian Portuguese capoeira terminology, and even gain a mediated insight into the tacit elements of *axé*, *malicia* and *mandinga*.

The introduction of more multi-media forms would provoke challenging ethical issues, an obvious one of which is anonymity. This is not an insurmountable problem, however, particularly because the authors take

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an innovative approach to anonymity which can work well with multi-media ethnographic representation. As such, the authors challenge the prevailing orthodoxy in qualitative research according to which anonymity is axiomatic [Walford 2005; Tilley & Woodthorpe 2011]. They include the real names of those they observed who had given their permission along with the real names of the core research sites and capoeira groups. The authors note that this move towards a more 'publicly open' form of ethnography becomes more viable and necessary with increased teacher and student visibility online and with the dissemination of locally produced capoeira media on various social media platforms.

These representational and ethical musings aside, *Embodying Brazil* unequivocally demonstrates how the increasingly popular bodily practice of capoeira can provide a rich and productive empirical site for social theorising about the body and performance.

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