

The 12th Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University
Co-sponsored with the Council on Latin American and Iberian Studies at Yale

American Counterpoint: New Approaches to Slavery and Abolition in Brazil

October 29-30, 2010
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Capoeira: A Creole Martial Art

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Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/brazil/papers/assuncao-abstract.pdf>
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For many Brazilian nationalists, capoeira was invented from scratch by runaway slaves imitating movements of wild animals. Afrocentric scholars and capoeiristas in the United States, in contrast, usually claim that capoeira derives from a single African form, the Angolan n'golo. Although evidence from the time of the slave trade is very sketchy for Brazil and hardly exists for Angola, a comparison between formal aspects, social contexts and cultural meanings of twentieth-century combat games on both sides of the Atlantic suggests indeed that capoeira borrowed extensively from various Central African traditions. Yet the new social context induced important changes in form and meaning, which intrinsically link capoeira to the history of slavery and post-emancipation in Brazil. Change did not only mean fusion, but also involved convergence, juxtaposition and rearranging. The paper argues that the dialectic of continuity and change in the formative process of the art is best subsumed under the category creolization.