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Flipping the Script: Inversion as Subversion in *Capoeira* and Breakdancing

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Abstract

Grounded in literary, performance, and race theory, "Flipping the Script" is a critical examination of capoeira and breakdancing. I posit that in these historically Africanist, fundamentally acrobatic expressive forms, the performer engages her oppressor-opponent both skillfully combining style and subversive combat. The biomechanical revolution, or flip, I ultimately argue, rehearses and thereby sets up a potential real social revolution ritualized by the b-boy/b-girl or *capoeirista*. The potential to turn oneself, and/or society, upon its head and back again in these paradoxically subtle and spectacular ways, particularly when the practitioner invokes the timeless underdog-turned-trickster trope of West African folklore, is the literal reference to the article's title, the contemporary parlance of American blacks who use the vernacular phrase "flipping the script" to signify essentially the same. Accordingly, this article is a critical study of hope through performative possibility.

> Down in the jungle near a dried-up creek
> The signifying monkey hadn't slept for a week.
> Remembering the ass-kicking he had got in the past
> He had to find somebody to kick the lion's ass.
> Said the signifying monkey to the lion that very same day,
> "There's a bad motherfucker heading your way.
> The way he talks about you, it can't be right,
> And I know when you two meet there going to be a fight."
>
> *The Signifying Monkey*

The trickster trope may be found in the mythology the world over, including but not limited to ancient Rome's Mercurius and Greece's Hermes, but is particularly applicable to the imaginations of Africanist peoples since the 1600s. Accompanying enslaved Africans who traversed the expanse of the Atlantic to arrive in the Americas were, among others but most famously, *Esu Elegbara* and *Kwaku Ananse*. These West African trickster figures are/were represented as anthropomorphized animals of diminutive size yet larger-than-life personalities, and understood as agents of hope for the violently displaced and dehumanized.

Esu (Elegbara) and (Kwaku) Ananse, of the Yoruba and Asante peoples respectively, uniquely bring into being what the former group identifies as *ase* (*axe, ashe*), the notion of "pure potentiality." This is the at once natural and supernatural source of the trickster's (unanticipated) power; it is the power of what could be vis-à-vis what is. Rooted in this conception of limitless possibility, the humans who imagined these characters assigned tricksters vulnerability without the inevitable accompaniment of vanquish.

Drawing upon cultural linguistics, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. offers up a particularly useful take on the trickster. In his classic 1989 *The Signifying Monkey*, the linguistics scholar identifies Esu Elegbara, specifically, as the "ultimate copula," that which connects, resolves, and ultimately dissolves distinctions between two (always a dualism) competing ideas or individuals. In linguistics, the copula connects the predicate to the subject of a sentence; Esu, analogously, and according to Gates, connects "truth to understanding" (Gates, 1998: 6). In Yoruba mythology, we learn that Esu is a messenger between the gods and humanity, a "divine linguist" (ibid: 7). Through his linguistic manipulations and plays on words, Esu "tricks" the gods and the humans into the connection between them that had always been there but up to the moment of trickery-induced realization, denied. Thus we see the Yoruba trickster as an intermediary, an arbiter. His/her heroic nature lies in his/her supernatural ability to bridge, to resolve, to carry out the will of God/gods "on earth as it is in heaven."

The tricky aspect of the trickster lies in articulation, his delivery of the message that ultimately connects and reconciles. The tools by which it carries out this important, even sacred work, according to Gates, are those of the sometimes scary, vengeful, cruel, angry gods. It recalls Du Bois' startling yet poignant statement: "Progress…is necessarily ugly" (Du Bois, 1995: 105). There is indeed collateral damage in the outbreak of the trickster's godly work; there are casualties of the war that leads to peace. Through its little body, big things happen, by resorting to the least laudable qualities our human story-telling minds can conjure. The example presented in the epigraph illustrates the apparently poor character of

this sacred hero who provokes a physically powerful yet wholly manipulated third party into doing his vengeful bidding. Even for ultimately positive aims, the Signifying Monkey deploys what we humans perceive as negative behaviors. As a liminal figure, at once spiritual and natural, godly and mortal, neither here nor there and both everywhere and nowhere, this actor "signifies" the paradoxical, relentlessly contradictory nature of life itself.

Physically, and this aspect provides further insight as well as a splash of irony and humor, Esu is represented with an enormous penis. As a liminal, ambiguous, and potential figure, Esu is not, however, necessarily or at least only male. *Ashe*, again and this time in regard to physicality, is operational. Interestingly, it is not creation that is articulated, whereby Esu might more suitably possess a uterus. It is a penis, that which is outward (in the natural world) and facilitates or insinuates rather than *is* creation. The penis here is the outward and the outcome. Its size suggests hyperbole, exaggeration that is performative rather than the performance itself. Esu's big-dick swagger communicates subversively and stylistically as lying and conniving. They are rendered as stylized word play (performativity or creativity) more than direct deed (performance/creation). This is potentiality, pure and sweet in what it could do and be. Ultimately, Esu's big penis and the Signifying Monkey's big words are as presentational as they are representational.

The Subversive Script

Taking leave of make-believe and entering that of reality, we know that ostensible physical disadvantages manifest in the real world as social disadvantage. Sub-alternate identificatory markers such as (non-white) race, (non-male) gender, (non-wealthy) class, and (non-hetero) sexuality that register specifically as black, female, poor, and gay, respectively, are just a few. The trickster-underdog rarely triumphs in real life, but in the realm of hope where fiction and folklore lie, s/he invariably does.

The "script" to which such underdogs are proscribed turns out to be both mutable and penetrable. *Ashe* assures such. In his 1983 exegesis, African art historian Robert Farris Thompson calls *ashe* "the power to make things happen". The generation of power for the acrobatic artist is mechanical as well as psychical and cultural. Acrobatic *ashe* comes from groundedness with soft knees or even a squatted position, the alternating arched-hollowed torso, and the pure biomechanical potential such preparatory moves facilitate. Counterbalance rather than balance becomes the mechanism for harmony. Analogous to the symbiotic relationship between the bow and arrow, the farther one pulls the latter back, the farther

the projectile potentially flies. This is basic physics that operates in the flipping body as it does in the social world.

Africanist performance scholar Barbara Browning opens her 1995 book, *Samba,* with the declaration that the skilled *sambista* (he or she who dances samba) "is able, and obliged, to 'dizer no pe'—speak with the feet" (Browning, 1995: 1). "The feet" can be extended to the whole of the body, that vehicle of articulatable consciousness that communicates opinions, ideas, information, and emotions. It is not a coincidence that Browning's subject of study is African. The black and brown feet of the *sambista*, which effectively symbolize the whole of a body-being, recount the narrative of the coercively dispersed people of the Diaspora. Sterling Stuckey echoes Browning's proposition with respect to Americans to the north, proposing that the (black) body speaks, and writes even, in the physical space within which she dances. He further implores that the "inscribing body," like Browning's articulate feet, collapses any distinction between consciousness, memory, and dance. Of dancers of the ring shout and other worship-based movement techniques, dance historian Stuckeyg states, "the body is mind, and is capable of inscribing in space the language of the human spirit" (Stuckey, 2002: 41). This "language" of the human spirit is, effectively the *ashe*-imbued dance, song, story, or flip of the trickster-underdog. Thus, *sambistas,* shouters, and anyone else operating within this performance paradigm are/represent the modern-day, real-life tricksters who co-opt the tools of acrobatics, dance, combat, and play of their oppressors, and refashion them into those of defiance and prospectively defeat. Exploiting *ashe*, tricksters re-write the stories of their bodies and potentially the societies within which they live.

It is these tools to which Gates makes specific reference as we turn again to his exegesis on the Signifying Monkey. The literary theorist analogizes the Middle Passage between Africa and the Americas to a liminal space within which a liminal figure like the trickster comes into being. The Signifying Monkey and all trickster figures are spokespersons, literally, advocating through the stories, songs, dances, and flips on behalf of those who can neither, fight nor flee. He does so in a language (still read, Gates' "tools") that are not his own but those adopted and adapted from his oppressor. Creatively and performatively, the trickster hero articulates resistance, revolution, and homeostatic resolution in ways that are not conventional but resourcefully created out of less-than-ideal circumstances. His performative resistance is a comment on society as it is, and a potential creation of a society that could be. The acrobatic act, the speech act, and the dance operate thus. When conventional (colonial) words are insufficient for authentic articulation, the unconventional yet game-

changing move enters into the conversation representing the underdog's audacity to hope and potential to win.

Confronted with opposition, the adrenaline hormone unleashes in human and non-human animals alike, the fight-or-flight response. Aerial-acrobatic movement puts an alternative spin on the polarized reactions of fighting and fleeing, offering up a third biomechanical choice by which some can resist harm or its threat. Phenomenologically, there is nothing sweeter than this style of subversion. Like the Signifying Monkey from the lion, running down lines of instigation and provocation per the opening epigraph, she is also known for running up a tree to a branch too small to bear the jungle king's weight, and executing a flip or two for good measure in the most spectacular, arguably supernatural way.

While the spinning earth insists upon pinning his feet to the ground, i.e., gravity, another impediment is at work, one that resists this insistence and soars above rather than beyond his pursuer. For keeping with the fight or flight dichotomy, it appears that for the underdog-trickster, to run would mean to be overtaken, and to fight would mean an assured beat-down. To flip, well…this third option, the acrobatic escape, is successful not only because it is unexpected, although the element of surprise is integral to subversive rebellion and resistance, but it is also ironic, inverting the hierarchy of physical beings and thereby the status quo in which each party is assigned a prescribed role. The acro-aerial subversive act is literally invertive, flipping the very script that attempts to subdue her.

Fundamental to the genius of the trickster is that the defeat comes as a complete surprise to the tricked. It is done swiftly and unceremoniously, leaving the defeated as flummoxed as he is vanquished. Not knowing what has happened, or how but certainly why, is key, and all of the planning and preparation that leads to the surprisingly successful attack occurs likewise undercover. A primary instrument purposed accordingly is the encoded messaging that transpires between those involved. Morse code, SOS, as well as double entendre lyricism in Africanist spirituals and talking drums in Africanist instrumentation, all operate in this way. Functioning similarly are Africanist peoples moving their racialized, enslaved, colonized, and/or ghettoized bodies in the sacred/secret formation of the (secret) circle.

The Circle

The circle as a site of social and political congregation is a global phenomenon; from conference-table meetings to powwows, grad-school seminars to rings around the roses, the configuration creates an ideal

setting for bringing people together to achieve a specified objective. Inside the circle, this convening transpires among people who identify with each other in some way, perhaps as colleagues, as family members, or as athletic teammates. The complication arises when we consider the relationship with "insiders" and "outsiders," those who dis-identify on superficial grounds but on some level see their difference as the illusion that it is. From here we may accept the Muñozian theory of "disidentification"—that there exists between insider and outsider an agonizingly relentless dialectic of acceptance and rejection (Muñoz, 1999: 11-13). The disavowed yet fully engaged interplay between circle insiders and outsiders is evidence manifest of a trick of the eye/I in effective operation. Without this "play"-ful aspect, interface, confrontation, even rejection would not hold itself out as the alternative that it is. It is a choice to deny the other side of the coin which the weaker, browner, feminine, queerer, and otherwise other-ed entity iterates. For those outside the circle, it is more than a notion to know what is unfolding within it; for those inside, they are fighting, fleeing, and flipping to ascertain what is transpiring outside it. True disavowal could not care less.

The standing circle that is also in motion operates like a wheel, proportional, cooperative, and always on the move so that balance is maintained. The Brazilian-Portuguese concept of the *roda*, the basic configuration-locomotion in *capoeira*, translates into English as "wheel." In circle dances as well as *brincar de roda* (to play in the round), capoeira participants are constantly standing in and/or moving around the circle. As social-political contexts have shifted over its five hundred-year history, so has the *roda*.

Capoeira was created and practiced by people from disparate ethnolinguistic groups who were bought, stolen, or traded by the Portuguese in primarily Angola, southern West Africa, and shipped to Brazil to live and work against their will. The so-called "game" of capoeira came into being under circumstances hardly playful. Serious business indeed, as these captured, totally disoriented and dehumanized people were thrown together speaking different languages and practicing different cultures, *capoeira* functioned as much as a linguistic, cultural, and performative unifier among the enslaved as it did as a mechanism for rebellion against their enslavers. As well as an enemy, Afro-Brazilians of all backgrounds who played capoeira suddenly shared a new language and a new culture, for inside the sacred/secret *roda*, conflicts were put to rest, plans were put to action, and much fun and recreation was and continues to be had.

Within the post-slavery, post-colonial Brazilian setting, impediments to true freedom and fairness still persisted, thus did much of the form and function of the capoeira *roda.* Conflicts changed, plans adapted, but

the fun of "playing" *capoeira* remained the same. Today, *capoeira* is mostly play and violent only rarely; violence is more often simulated than real. The competitive nature of the acro-artistic sport, however, is still present, as is the cultural significance to its practitioners. *Capoeiristas* honor the art form's past and those individuals whose legacies live on through it, and accordingly continue to sing the Portuguese songs and play the African instruments as their enslaved ancestors did. Still remaining as well, as it probably forever will, is the circle that spawned the craft of subversive fight in the first place.

Capoeira, as a descendent of the African "circle dance" techniques, shares its parentage with many other such forms, including several in North America and the Anglophone Caribbean, namely Jamaica and Trinidad. Rather than the wheel, its circle concept is the ring, thus the "ring" designation that signifies this family of forms. Likewise hundreds of years old, Africans of different backgrounds were this time enslaved by the British and taken to Southern American and the Caribbean colonies. The circle operated similarly to the *roda* in its communicative and celebratory ways, but without any physical training technique for engaging their enslavers in hand-to-hand combat. Ring shouts were and continue to be fundamentally religious worship; they still are in many churches in the South and the islands today. They facilitate fellowship, momentary escape, and sustained hope, but not a direct means of physically confronting practitioners' oppressors. In the ritual, participants shuffle or stomp their feet locomotively in a counter-clockwise direction, sometimes clapping their hands, and enter the ring intermittently with movements and vocalizations of divine ecstasy or spirit possession. They "shout" their praise at once as individuals, but also as a racial, cultural, and religious collective, reflecting the circular as well as communal character of most Africanist expressive forms. Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin have all painted the most reverent and poetic pictures of this dance-praise called the ring-shout, highlighting the simultaneity of hope and sorrow articulated in those hundreds of thousands of black and brown feet. Of the solo "shout" aspect of the genre, Baldwin provides exquisite description in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*:

> …his [Elisha's] hands closed into fists, and his head snapped downward, his sweat loosening the grease that slicked down his hair; and the rhythm of all the others quickened to match Elisha's rhythm; his thighs moved terribly against the cloth of his suit, his heels beat on the floor, and his fists moved beside his body as if he were beating his own drum. And so, for a while, in the center of the dancers, head down, fists beating, on, on, unbearably until it seemed the walls of the church would fall

> for very sound; and then, in a moment, with a cry, head up, arms high in the air, sweat pouring from his forehead, and all his body dancing as though it would never stop". (Baldwin, 1953: 15-16)

In *capoeira*, an alternatively secular form that does, however, incorporate elements of spirit in dance steps and song lyrics of the (religious) *candomblé*, players much like ring-shout parishioners hold the circle by swaying rhythmically, singing refrains, playing instruments, and/or dancing a samba around its perimeter. If individuals in the *roda*, or wheel, are not executing big combative or counter-combative moves, they are in constant motion with the *ginga*. The *ginga* is *capoeira's* basic step in which the practitioner takes a large lateral step, raising the opposite-side arm forward to simultaneously protect the face, distract his opponent, and create a counterbalance his considerable shift in weight requires. Maintaining intense eye contact throughout, the ginga interpreter alternates these "swings," as it translates from Portuguese, to lull her opponent into a defenses-down complacency and gear herself up for her next attack. It is in the performance of this refrain of repetitive movement, that the athletic, acrobatic, and martial subversion is rendered possible. Thus a moving target is really none at all, and when those movements take leave of the ground, and proceed in flight to invert, that movement transcends human, let alone dehumanized (enslaved, colonized, ghettoized) human capacity.

The straight line and the still body are, in the context of capoeira, easy targets as well as counterproductive to the trickster who uses the protective circle and constant motion of the *ginga* in this complex African-Brazilian martial art form. The straight line and still body are physical phenomena attributable to their Western counterparts in both combative and in artistic performance. Troops arrange themselves to form a line, creating a human wall through which their enemies attempt to penetrate with head-on military might. Visual and performing artists prioritize the still, straight line as well, privileging symmetry and straightness in the forms of codified positions and poses that better lend themselves to uniformity, conformity, and "repetition without difference." Ballet, diving, figure skating, and gymnastics offer up some of the clearest examples of this preference, the latter most relevant to breaking and capoeira with its basis in acrobaticism. The continuous circular shape and movement that features fragmentations and fluidity is alternatively a hallmark of Africanist bodily expression. Among other things, it rather facilitates action on the sly, surprising opponents with sudden changes of intensity, direction, level, and speed. Always adapting, always evolving, this tradition originating with circle dance techniques such as the ring-shout, *capoeira*,

and breakdancing as well, persists in black performance, even in instances where the circle itself has not.

Content and Classification

To be sure, (African American) breakdancing and (African Brazilian) capoeira are inter-disciplines, in that neither fits neatly into one category of physical expression. Both capoeira and breakdancing are competitive, artistic, confrontational, and recreational, and thereby classify as sport, dance, combat, and play, respectively. Both have their own institutional histories, choreographic repertoires, and stylistic tendencies. Their subversive character, something these forms fully share, lies in their resistance to classification as well as the "'breaking' from" nature to which earlier mention was made. They break from artistic forms, from martial forms, from athletic forms. They break from the rhythm laid out for them by the deejay, the *berimbau*, the singer, and the emcee. They break from their closest counterpart gymnastics, Asian martial arts, and the more "dance-like" dance forms around the globe, traditional and contemporary. The breakin' battle and the capoeira *roda* alternately (simultaneously even) delight and defeat their observer-opponents in ways ancient and current. They are bringing in new steps, new moves, new choreographies, and even new constituents, and to this evolution I shall return shortly, where women and girls are finally further integrating into these performance communities that had heretofore offered them limited access.

What does that mean, to literally break dance? Does it mean to break (the) dance apart, break through, break it into simpler units, fewer codes, rules, and restrictions on what dance is and what a dance and its interpreter look like? Perhaps. For the codified acro-art of breakdancing proper, I further submit a meaning along the lines of breaking from Western dance institutionally, stylistically, and culturally. In the very least, it is breaking from the same conventions to which the likewise dance-oriented acro-art of gymnastics, that is, the modern Olympic sport, is beholden—linearity, symmetry, metronomic rhythms, and normatively white interpretations.

As an artistic institution, breakdancing is considered one of four facets of the hip hop movement, or more globally, hip hop culture. Together with graffiti artistry, deejaying and emceeing taken together, and rap music, it is/was a political movement initiated by black and Latino youth living in the late 1970s/early 1980s "urban jungle" of New York City, specifically in the South Bronx. Marginalized from mainstream society by the litany of "'ghetto' life" impediments, city kids were turning to violence and criminality in alarming numbers. It stood to reason that

choreographically, breakdance would respond with hard-hitting, aggressive rebellion against what was, but also in astute reference and embrace of what could be. Incorporating steps with names like the Moon Walk, the Robot, and the Electric Boogie into its repertoire, breakdancing stepped in as the margin's indirect and arguably subversive engagement with the modernization that by and large eluded them. With computers, space travel, and machinery increasingly replacing human labor, the latter having an unparalleled impact on poor African Americans and Latinos, breakdancing's syncopated, staccato, aerial, and acrobatic style spoke to the US's late twentieth-century technological advances, and racialized people's exclusion from, and inventive dialectic with it.

According to African American dance historian, James Haskins, it was the infamous Afrika Bambaataa who officially formalized this new style of rap-inspired dance called "break-dance." As early as 1969, the rap deejay is reported to have identified breakdancing as both a complement to this new lyric-driven, synthesizer-generated sound, and a positive outlet for and redirection of the gang activity growing increasingly violent in the Bronx borough of New York. Haskins states: "He [Bambaataa] called for a 'break' in the usual street warfare and suggested that gangs fight with steps rather than with weapons" (Haskins, 1990: 188-189). Thus unlike capoeira, a combat technique choreographed and performed without the option of arms, breaking began among weapon-wielding blacks who had voluntarily laid theirs down to confront their opponents with superior style rather than greater violence. Thus maybe one could conclude that capoeira was designed as warfare and breaking to facilitate peace. Most applicable from Haskins to this technique comparison, however, is not so much between their disparate origins or even objectives, but their resemblance as each is a stylistic response to social issues, and an unprecedented, altogether new intervention on acrobatic art.

Where the Ladies At?!

A fair number of West African, Caribbean, Latin/o American, and African American styles intersperse single-rotation flipping into their techniques. Among them include Guinean social and concert dance, Cuban, Colombian, Brazilian *maculelé*, and African American lindy—all male-dominated dance forms. Africanizing the techno-social context of gymnastic movement looks a lot like breakdancing and/or capoeira, with girls and women, however, being conspicuously concealed as "back-up" dancers, singers, and second-liners. There continue to be limits as to how much women and girls can fully intervene on these discursive dancesport spaces.

Over a decade into the twenty-first century, when and where does the female *capoeirista* or b-girl enter? Today, it does appear that more young and not-so-young women are breaking through this techno-institutional glass ceiling to announce themselves headliners rather than sideliners. They are performing the flips, the head-spins, and the hand-springs as their bodies and minds more frequently permit. Refreshingly less accommodating of the "cute" cultural norm that fixes, and fixates on, the female body as small, weak, and sweet, they are laying claim to the strength and power that has always been theirs. This claim is registering physically as muscularity, and psycho-socially as confidence, assertiveness, and sometimes, even aggressiveness.

Women and girls are flipping a gender script written out for them centuries ago and continents away. Reconstituting "the West" with the rest, they are re-defining girlhood and womanhood for the Americas and the world. We are all liberated from these confining personas within which only few could fulfill in the first place, even if so inclined. More and more girls and women are dancing, sporting, fighting, and generally behaving in non-cute ways that include force, strength, and big-time attitude. Breakers are not "cute," neither are *capoeiristas*. Confrontation offers up this distinction from gymnastics but so do the origins and objectives of each martial movement form. The relative contexts of Portuguese colonialism and slavery in Brazil, and the late 1970s and 80s Reaganomics-War on Drugs-crack-led gang activity in the US, separates *capoeira* and breakdancing from their primary circumstances. Nevertheless, the descendants of those original performers look virtually identical and have comparatively oppressive social forces over which they are compelled to fly and flip.

What the underdog-turned-trickster reminds us of is that nothing of the physicality or personality signals or belies that which the body can and will do. Thus such bodily actions can transpire "under the radar," without anticipation, an ideal condition for subversion. The racialized woman or girl inverting at all subverts the stereotype of aerial acrobaticism being an exclusively white domain in gymnastics, and a male one in breaking and capoeira. Making room for "others" in this country, in our military, in matrimony, and on the pavement, grass, or mat, creates the condition of possibility to keep these forms rooted in the community, the people. Like any other human endeavor, they must operate at the service of the people, not the other way around.

Broadening the conception of breaker or *capoeirista* broadens, and thereby strengthens, the communities they comprise. In these African Diasporic movement societies, technical characteristics follow their cultural ones, not vice versa as in the case of (cute, white) gymnastics wherein a

codebook is law and judges are, well, judges. African American elite gymnasts like the reigning Olympic champion Gabby "the flying squirrel" Douglas as well as Dianne Durham, Betty Okino, Tasha Schwikert, and Dominique Dawes before her, are subverting the white imperative as the myriad women breakers and capoeiristas are subverting the male standard in their acro-artistic communities. Fittingly, in each and every instance of physically artistic expression, the body is understood as both an encapsulation and representation of the community, and its physical attributes and kinetic tendencies are the author(ity) on the rules of the game. Despite what a technical manual, an assessment rubric, or even a more organic tradition of evaluation declares, there will always be those who slip, or preferably break through the cracks of the utter nonsense of social exclusion. This is what Esu and Ananse promise as they circumvent convention by adapting tricks of trades that endeavor to elude them, only to use them in ways unanticipated by their tormentors.

Subverting the gender imperative is yet another challenge which practicing and potential female acrobats, black or not, still face. Something about capoeira and breakdancing summons forth the underdog, be she gendered, racialized, poor, gay, or otherwise relegated to the margins of these acro-artistic techniques. This is the alliance between form and function, between performer and performance, and between history and the perpetual, *ashe*-infused present where possibility uniquely lies. Who can forget the 1980s images of wheelchair-bound break-dancers, spinning in their seats rather than on their feet to the rhythm of the beat? These dance-sports have inclusion built into them, and that is precisely why they are fertile ground for acceptance and adaptation, as well as the surprise attacks that squash enslavers, colonizers, bullies, and bigots. In the acrobatic attack, what was down is suddenly up, and who knows what could happen overhead.

Ghettoized in the 'hood or favela, the fact of Africanist acrobats' ascension above ground demands that we look up at them, and (reluctantly) *to* them. Raising our eyes to these individuals of color and/or gender, rather than lowering them in contempt or pity, challenges the historical narrative written centuries ago and iterated since. No longer on the bottom, however, these rebels against gravity rehearse the rebellion against society as it is structured. Black and female acrobats subvert the human standard of Newtonian groundedness as they subvert hierarchies of race and gender. The stylized beauty with which they perform such tricked-out acts of courage affords viewers a visually amazing frame within which break dancing and capoeira playing, as well as other forms of "protest art," flourish. Called "tricks" in gymnastics parlance, the bigger the acrobatic move, the greater the return. Thus, the racialized and/or

gendered inversion, particularly when it transpires in the air, is the trick of the trickster, the ideal modality of indirect yet spectacular confrontation. Thus when you look up and see a black and/or female body, neither confined to a city ghetto nor a state prison, to a cyberbully's tirade nor a repressive relationship, she has effectively flipped the script of both sport and society, for it is in the break that opportunities, as well as healing and reconciliation, arise. In looking up at her thus, you and I are bearing witness to one beautifully irrefutable fact of which black performance scholar Fred Moten reminds us in his aptly titled book, *In the Break*: "The history of blackness is a testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" (Moten, 2004: 1).

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