**Becoming a Capoeirista: A Situational Approach to Consuming a Foreign Cultural Good**

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**Abstract:** In this manuscript, I examine an understudied mechanism that shapes audience reception and reinterpretation of foreign cultural objects -- local interactional situations. I present a case study of how this situation of interaction shapes how one group of students in the United States constructs the meanings of capoeira – a Brazilian martial art. Participant observation data reveal that neither students’ personal motives nor appeals to a broad base of consumers redefined capoeira culture in this group. Instead, capoeira students in this group reinterpret capoeira though a strict style of interaction, which produced a “preservationist” capoeira culture -- hierarchical, conformist, and rigidly bound as “Brazilian.” This also contributes to literature on cultural reception.

**Keywords:** Capoeira, Consumption, Cultural Reception, Meaning, Interaction
Becoming a *Capoeirista*: A Situational Approach to Interpreting a Foreign Cultural Good

Global culture consists of a topology of differences established through cultural objects\(^1\) such as food, architecture, dance, and music (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Wilk 1999). Rather than simply conveying dominant ideologies, receiving audiences reinterpret the meanings, styles, and practices of foreign cultural objects (Hebdige 1979; McDonnell 2010; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). This process can result in anything from highly essentialized objects to complex versions perceived as "new" forms that have broken from their place of origin.

As much past work finds, both properties internal to objects, as well as the broader cultural context of reception shape this process of meaning-making (Berezin 1994; McDonnell 2010; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). These factors are clearly important, but they do not fully explain the puzzle of why similar receiving groups can interpret a single object -- such as yoga (Strauss 2004) or Latin American music in the United States (Firmat 2008; Peña 1999) -- differently. I argue that the immediate situation of interaction that receiving audiences encounter can also become an important factor shaping the meanings that foreign cultural objects assume in new contexts. I present a case study of how this situation of interaction\(^2\) shapes how one group of students in the United States constructs the meanings of capoeira – a Brazilian martial art. How does this group give capoeira meaning, and what explains that outcome?

Participant observation data reveal that the rigid interactional style of this capoeira group prioritized the formal properties of the object over its symbolic content. This created a – as a rigidly bounded and hierarchical preservationist version of capoeira -- not because of broad
“American” cultural codes, students’ personal motives, or properties inherent to capoeira -- but because preservationist meanings reinforced the group’s "meaningful, shared ground for interaction" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003: 737). In this case interactional style made form “arguably a more cogent communicative practice than the specific content of an action” (Berezin 1994: 1278).

Interpreting Foreign Culture: Reception, Reception, Glocalization, and Tourism

Reception, localization, and glocalization perspectives theorize how audiences articulate the meanings of cultural objects they encounter, view, or consume (Crane 2002). Globalized objects become reinterpreted at the local level, gaining new meanings (Watson 1997) or the global and local create new hybrid objects beyond the sums of their parts (Hannerz 1996) or “glocal” (Robertson 1992). Interpretation is central to this process. Russians, for example, reinterpreted standard McDonalds food as domestic food (Caldwell 2004) and innovations introduced into jazz in Japan became interpreted as a new form – “Japanese Jazz” (Atkins 2001).

National level differences in audience reception of television and literature are influenced by societal level cultural codes (Griswold 1987; Liebes and Katz 1990; Snow 1993; Watson 1997). For example, Griswold shows how romance novels are interpreted differently in the US, the West Indies, and Britain. Even something as seemingly standard as Coca-Cola is interpreted differently around the globe (Foster 2008). Many tourism studies also find that culture is reworked to align with tourists’ cultural knowledge (Dawson, Fredrickson, and Graburn 1974; Grazian 2003; Smith 1977).

Audience status characteristics such as race, class, and also gender influence which elements of cultural objects audiences adopt and reject (Griswold and Wright 2004; Hunt 1997;

In addition to societal level cultural codes and group level status characteristics, properties internal to objects also shape how audiences interpret them (Griswold 1987). For example, Wagner-Pacifici Schwartz (1991) show how that the mixed genre model used in the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial allows audiences to use and give meaning to the monument in ways never intended by its designers.

These broad cultural codes and status distinctions certainly shape the reception process, but few studies analyze how local situations of interaction also influence audience reinterpretation of foreign objects. Wherry (2008) argues that tourists interpret certain places and people as most authentic when ritual interactions between tourist and artisan are successful. Consumer studies also find that the meanings of consumer experiences and goods often emerge in specific sites of interaction (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002; Peñaloza 2001), making this an important and under examined factor in reception. Condry (2006) argues that sites of performance are vital to the process of negotiating meanings and practices of global culture. In his study of hip hop in Japan, consumers and performers as a group negotiate the meanings of hip hop in specific nightclub interactions. This study builds on this approach, examining how group interactional style is an important situational factor in the reception process.

**Interaction and Situation in Sociology**
Despite the scant attention that situations receive in work on cultural reception, sociologists have developed theories of situational interaction and its effect on meaning making (Collins 2004; Goffman 1973). Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003: 737) theorize that situations of interaction act as mechanisms that filter abstract collective representations into concrete culture. Groups interpret collective representations in ways that reinforce their shared ground for making meaning, or their style of interaction. The meanings and practices that emerge in groups do so precisely because they best allow the group to maintain their common ground for interacting. The authors show that a reserved style of interaction in an activist group transformed the collective representation of individualism – commonly viewed as destructive to civic involvement – into a platform for civic participation.

A focus on interactional style is well suited to reception studies. It is applicable to a wide range of global cultural phenomenon practiced in group settings, such as Yoga, martial traditions, dances, sports, religious movements, and musical genres such as hip-hop. It also distinguishes dominant cultural representations of foreign objects – available, but abstracted concepts – from the concrete ways in which people enact them in specific contexts.

**Situating Capoeira Practice within Work on the Reception of Foreign Culture**

Capoeira is an established member of the global culture repertoire. Capoeirista.com lists over 2000 formal capoeira studios in 99 countries as of July 2011. Capoeira diffuses via formal organizations opened within a market context, aligning it with many globally popular objects.

Capoeira is a game to practitioners, but outsiders refer to it as a Brazilian martial art. Like sports, capoeira combines adherence to norms and rules of conduct with creative enactment to outplay an opponent. Practitioners form a large ring (the *roda*) with their bodies and two
practitioners play within the *roda*. This play is a call and response of dance, fight, gymnastics, and martial arts movements, in which practitioners improvise combinations of movements and observe a set of rules and ritual behaviors. Practitioners are also musical performers; a *bateria* – or musical ensemble – plays Brazilian instruments, practitioners sing and clap a call and response, and the rhythm of the music determines the play in the *roda*. In studios, students train for years, doing flexibility training, learning to embody movements (Downey 2010), and playing innovatively with opponents.7

Ambiguities over the origins of capoeira and the lack of an official rule system created a cultural field characterized by factionalism among practitioners who trained under different masters. Though initially practiced by former slaves on the streets, today a broad base of Brazilians practice it in formal groups and in impromptu street gatherings, in folkloric shows, and in health clubs. It can be a serious career and lifestyle, a hobby, or an exercise routine. It has many styles, meanings, and narratives of origin (Downey 2005; Lewis 1992; Travassos 1999).

Capoeira moved abroad beginning in the mid-1970s when a capoeira dance troupe traveled to New York City to perform. By 1979, the group’s Brazilian organizer opened the first studio in the US. Put simply, capoeira is an abstract and collectively available set of representations institutionalized in Brazil and in global culture. Studios quickly spread throughout the US as working and middle class Brazilian instructors arrived to capitalize on the new market of American students,8 and “in subsequent years capoeira practice virtually exploded, to the point that today the art is taught in every single state of the union” (Assuncão 2005: 191). These studios offer daily classes to mostly young adults and children for a monthly fee and do not require students to begin in cohorts, making them similar to gymnastics and dance studios, open to anyone willing to pay for classes.
Empirical work in the UK and Canada finds that capoeira practitioners in these countries construct authentic capoeira as Brazilian rather than local (de Campos Rosario, Stephens, and Delamont 2010; Delamont and Stephens 2008). Joseph argues that Brazilian practitioners market themselves and their product as authentic Afro-Brazilian culture to appeal to students desire to “escape the everyday, that is, the artificiality of mainstream Euro-Canadian culture” (2008: 501). Delamont and Stephens (2008) argue that the strong presence of Brazilian capoeira instructors abroad (rather than local non-Brazilians) makes it a diasporic practice. Assuncão (2005: 212) claims that capoeira is a “globalized subculture of protest”, which resonates with marginalized populations.9 I find that Brazilian instructors remain a strong force shaping how capoeira is interpreted outside of Brazil.

I also find, as Anderson (2001) found in Denmark, a strong collective capoeira identity. Capoeira requires repeated training to learn specialized bodily skills, but it does not necessarily require students to embrace group identity and ideology. Groups within Brazil vary in both the meanings they promote (Travassos 1999) and the strictness with which they convey those meanings. Complex bodily forms can be reinterpreted less rigidly. For example, Aoyama (2007: 111) found that while Flamenco in Japan follows a rigid commitment, “classes in the United States are far more consumer-driven, oriented toward customer satisfaction than mastery of skills... Most classes can be taken on a ‘drop-in’ basis, and neither regular attendance nor commitment to a particular instructor is expected.” Given the importance of market driven meanings, I ask what explains the rigidity found in the US capoeira studio?

Methodology: Studying Interaction and Meaning-Making
In order to observe interactional style and the meanings it produced, long-term participant observational data was necessary. Because my purpose was to theorize a type of reception that likely applies to many cultural objects instead of explaining the reception of capoeira in a population of groups, an in-depth focus with one group was the appropriate choice. A capoeira studio in the US provides a strategic site in which to examine the proposed mechanisms of group style. Capoeira is interactional and embodied (Delamont and Stephens 2008; Lewis 1992), I can observe the meanings which emerge through repeated interactions among practitioners.

An American who has trained for over twelve years with a prominent Brazilian master (in the US) founded the studio. It was a member of a network of groups – twelve in the US and two in Brazil – founded and run by an immigrant Brazilian who operated a studio in another US state. The group rented time in a large generic space in a mid-sized US city and offered classes three times per week for a fee of eighty dollars per month. They competed with a profit-making university group open to university students, a profit-making community group, and other martial arts and dance studios in the city.

I attended class three times per week (two hours per class) from September 2005 to March of 2006 and continued to attend classes in order to refine analysis of this data from April to July of 2006. I actively participated, training the movements, kicks, and acrobatics with my classmates, and “playing” in the roda. I also followed students to social events and engaged in numerous informal conversations with practitioners.

Approximately sixty students attended classes during my research. Ages ranged from eighteen to fifty-five, just under half were female, just under half were non-white, and just less than half were college-educated. All students were Americans.
Data took the form of extensive field notes written after each class. All names, including capoeira nicknames, used below are pseudonyms. I focused observations and analysis through my theoretical interest. This included how students constructed capoeira meanings, practices, and context and how they included or excluded interpretations during interactions. I first coded data to identify dominant and subordinate practices, objects, and meanings. I next used Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) guide to identify the features of interactional style: members’ responsibilities within the group, norms of speech and action in group settings, and how perceptions of the group’s relationship to the wider world influence members’ interactions. I then recoded data through the lens of the identified group style, to align the emergent culture with this style. This revealed that dominant meanings and practices aligned with and reinforced group style. I could then revise the concept of reception, showing how group style overrode individual motives and market appeal.

I conducted several strategic interviews near the end of fieldwork. I used these to gain background information on the studio and practitioners and to follow up on specific events, observations, and conversations. Practical cultural enactment can diverge significantly from the justificatory language used by individuals to explain action (Lizardo and Strand 2010). Thus, rather than serving as representatives of a population or providing in-depth access to “culture”, interviewees (the instructor and seven students) provided missing data. Each was roughly one hour and was recorded, transcribed, and coded along with field notes.

Because hierarchy was central to the group, my status as a novice granted me special insights into certain aspects of the site and excluded me from others. Novices were most thoroughly subject to the teachings of the advanced students and to their scorn when one failed to demonstrate adequate enthusiasm for or interest in capoeira. Both were informative. Beginner
status also barred me from direct participation in advanced students training when I was segregated with beginners for training (though this took place in the same workout room and part of each class included all skill levels, allowing me to make observations). The strict style of interaction and silencing of individual motivations minimized the impact of my status as a 26-year-old white American female. These statuses offered little value in a group culture that demanded students leave their personal lives “at the door.”

Analysis: From Foreign Object to Preservationist Local Culture

*Group Style Summarized: Strict Conformity and Uniformity*

The group ranked practitioners in a hierarchy according to skill and commitment to capoeira. Authority to talk, teach classes, and make decisions followed this hierarchy. Interactional norms demanded that students defer to Brazilian practitioners above all and then to advanced students. Everyone was responsible for participating in the group and socializing new students. The instructor expected conformity to group norms, practices, and beliefs from all members. He and his advanced students publically rewarded conformers and reprimanded violators. They also silenced dissenting views in classes. This strict style of interaction provided the means for members to make meaning and, as we will see, filtered capoeira into an inflexible and singular meaning system of conformity to group ideology of identity and Brazilianness, uniformity of practice style, and a strict hierarchy of authority from novice to Brazilian master. Some degree of hierarchy and conformity may be necessary to get on with the business of learning a complicated bodily form involving many students, but the inflexible elevation of these factors to absolute necessity defined the group’s interactional style.
Capoeira Culture as Preservation of Form

The hierarchical and conformist style of interaction filtered capoeira into a culture that valued hierarchy of skill and uniformity of that enactment among students. A group of roughly thirty students, dressed in white pants, t-shirts bearing the studio’s logo, and belts of various colors, gathered for evening classes in a large generic-looking dance studio. There, they trained capoeira movements, learned sequences, did drills, played in pairs, and held a short thirty minute roda at the end of class in which students took turns sparring with an opponent. During these rodas, students played the berimbau and sang capoeira songs in Portuguese, while others entered the roda in pairs and engaged in capoeira games. Skill level varied widely among the students who had been playing capoeira between a few weeks up to ten years. Beginners struggled to improve their strength and flexibility in order to master gymnastics movements and play the partnered game correctly. Advanced students shouldered much of the responsibility to lead classes and rodas and teach newer students the intricacies of complex sequences of movements.

Esquiva, the American instructor, and his advanced students insisted that all students enact physical movements, reproduce music, and deploy objects in the space in conformity with strictly prescribed norms. Instructor and advanced students also demanded all members carry out kicks and defensive movements identically. Esquiva repeatedly scrutinized the distance from the floor of students’ legs during kicks, the bounce of their ginga (a basic swaying step), and their level of aggressiveness. “This is capoeira!” advanced students yelled repeatedly as they demonstrated various movements, with their arms closely protecting their body - one stylistic version of capoeira. “This is Bimba’s style,”12 they said, moving as if they were engaging in hand-to-hand combat. They monitored students’ bodily positioning, making minor adjustments
such as moving an elbow up an inch. They chastised students who violated stylistic norms, rather than encouraging them to develop personal variations or create new movements.¹³

Interaction between the Brazilian master and students occurred at several weekend workshops throughout the year and secondarily – for newer students – when advanced students’ recapped lectures from these encounters. The Brazilian master enforced Bimba’s style when he visited and conducted spot quizzes on “Bimba’s sequences” (choreographed sets of movements). The group’s batizado¹⁴ was one important event where students had access to the Brazilian master. Over one hundred practitioners, including three Brazilian masters and numerous students from out-of-town groups, attended the event. The festivities, however, carried on over a three-day weekend that included an opening ceremony and several workshops with visiting Brazilian masters. Several times during the batizado, visiting Brazilian masters scrutinized students’ skills at reproducing movements and playing in the roda. In one grueling session at the annual batizado, the master repeatedly drilled two blue-cord¹⁵ students in front of the crowd:

The Brazilian master had the group of over sixty American students sit on the floor in front of him, and then began a lengthy speech about capoeira. He motioned to Giraffa and Espirro, two blue-corded students from the group, and told them to stand in front of the group and then said, “Let’s play a little Regional. I don’t want kicks too high, not too much fighting, just play.” The two went forward and, facing each other, started to slowly ginga to the rhythms the master was playing on his berimbau. After they did the basic movements and threw a few kicks, the master stopped them and announced that there was no dialogue between two students – they were each moving independently, just kicking. He asked them to try again and began playing the berimbau. Repeatedly he stopped them after only a few seconds to insist that they were still not “getting it.” He then handed his
berimbau to another master, got up, and began demonstrating the ginga himself. He motioned for the two Americans to step aside and said, “Let’s have two fresh ones.” Two other blue-corded students went forward, and the master began playing the berimbau again. The two faced each other and began to ginga, then to throw kicks back and forth. The master immediately stopped the music and chastised them for kicking when he had asked for the ginga. They began again, doing the ginga steps repeatedly for several minutes before the master stopped the music and ended the spectacle by saying “close, but no cigar.” (Excerpt from field notes.)

Practice was strictly enforced and evaluated. Esquiva and the advanced students publically evaluated everyone, chastising people for not knowing the rhythms, movements, style of ginga, or history of capoeira. Advanced students publically chastised novices for minor violations:

At the start of our end-of-class roda, a new student – he could not have been to more than four classes – walked through the center of the roda before play had started. As he cut across to the opposite side, Boca – an outgoing advanced student and administrative assistant – said loudly, in a serious tone, “oh no, go back across and walk around the outside. I mean it. You never cut across a roda.” She went on to explain to the embarrassed novice that no one walks through a roda except masters. (Excerpt from field notes.)

Speaking was the role of Esquiva and the advanced students, and they used talk to teach, not to socialize. This limited complaints and alternative interpretations, which when discussed, occurred only outside of class, in private conversations.

Esquiva evaluated all students with random written evaluations, assessing students on their ‘game’ – their ability to maintain a call-and-response of appropriate movements – and on their
execution of movements. He also verbally quizzed students’ knowledge of music, history, and philosophy irregularly, asking, for example, about the lyrics of a particular song and reprimanded those that had not learned about the practice on their own. Esquiva quizzed beginners about their knowledge in front of the class. Juan, a Latino graduate student, told me after only a few weeks with the group: “I was evaluated once on my knowledge of it [capoeira] pretty directly in the roda… uh and I didn’t answer any of the questions acceptably… but since then I have done my research so I won’t find myself in that situation again.”

An occasional class was dedicated to music practice with berimbau, tambourine, and atabaque. However, Esquiva lectured in nearly every nightly class on the importance of learning to play the berimbau and to recognize the basic rhythms of games. To advance beyond intermediate status, he required that students master these various rhythms. Any student who could play the instrument could be called upon to play during the nightly roda. When the Brazilian master visited for several days, he called intermediate students to the front of the class and quizzed their berimbau skills, calling out the names of rhythms and critiquing their skill. “You should all be able to play these basic rhythms at any time,” he chastised, when two intermediate students incorrectly played the three rhythms he had named. The master expected students to purchase the berimbau and practice at home or with advanced students. During my time with the school, the group never held a roda without music.

According to much past work on reception, language often changes in the process (Condry 2006); however, Esquiva expected all students to master traditional capoeira songs in Portuguese, which the group always sang during rodas. The instructor gave new students a songbook of lyrics to study at home and occasionally used time during classes to review and translate lyrics. Only advanced students had mastered the more complicated lyrics. As with
movement style, rigid conformity to prescribed lyrics was expected. Brazilian practitioners often improvise songs during *rodas* to communicate with practitioners or invent new songs about their group, their master, or specific capoeira games. However, this group’s students relied on memorization rather than innovation and stuck to a small repertoire of songs with basic repetitive lyrics.

Singing in Portuguese and clapping the song rhythms were also vigilantly monitored responsibilities of all students, and good members knew and showed enthusiasm for these things and taught them to others. Advanced students shouldered responsibility for leading and maintaining the music making during the *rodas* and for ensuring that newer students participated. Blue-cords always began the *roda* with a song, to which they expect the remainder of the *roda* to sing response lyrics. Boca and Cana – another outgoing advanced female student and hairdresser, continually yelled for everyone to “Sing! Clap!” The students and Esquiva did not tolerate beginners standing in the *roda* and observing while the rest sang and clapped.

The ultimate authority resided with the Brazilian master, always referred to as “our master.” Esquiva often ordered students to attend events at other member studios. The Brazilian master organized workshops several times per year, at which attendance was required for all but beginners. Through years of practice, advanced students attend many of these events, learning how to reproduce this Brazilian’s vision of capoeira. Esquiva promoted to blue cord status only students who did capoeira according to the master’s criterion and demonstrated their commitment to the practice. Esquiva regularly mentioned how Brazilians’ scrutinized students at these events and told his blue-cords that they needed to represent the group well by following their Brazilian master’s teachings. He felt pressure from the larger Brazilian-run organization to maintain these traditions in order to legitimate himself and his group, and he evaluated his
advanced students’ commitment to their Brazilian master and lectured them about their responsibilities: “you guys need to remember what you said to Master Brazil when you got your cord.” He said that promising to teach was a part of having a blue cord and if they did not want the responsibility, they should not become blues:

A few days before several students attended a workshop with the Brazilian master, Esquiva sat the group down for a talk about how he expected them to behave at the event. He asked who was going to the workshop and five students raised their hands. He told them to watch what Master Brazil’s students and everyone else does before they thought of going into the roda. No one should be trying to show off or do things that are not part of the call and response of play. He said, “They will send a hit squad after you if you go acting like you are hot stuff.” He said that it was better to hear it from him than from the Master who won’t mess around but will just step into the roda and hit you over the head with a berimbau if he doesn’t like how you are playing. Boca chimed in to say in her usual authoritarian way that there is a reason that she and the other advanced students play the way they do… “because that is what we’ve been taught.” (Excerpt from field notes.)

Capoeira Culture as Preservation of Group-Level Meaning

The group’s style that demanded all students share responsibilities equally and conform to group ideology filtered capoeira into a culture of collective identity construction. By socializing novices into this culture early – including the acceptance of collective identity and material goods – the group reinforced acceptance group style and commitment. Commitment to group culture was expected, and students demonstrated this by becoming a capoeiristas rather than
simply someone who practices capoeira as an occasional hobby. Students became *capoeiristas* by adopting the stylistic and cultural competency that the master demanded. This included technical perfection of movements, memorization of songs in Portuguese, and learning to play and recognize certain rhythms on the *berimbau*. Rather than subtle cues, explicit verbalization established the importance of this identity. The advanced students and Esquiva maintained this identity in classes:

Boca, who taught classes often, had the group of around twenty students assemble in “formation” – straight rows of students arranged with advanced students in the front and novices in the back – in the workout room and assume a squatting position with our arms extended to the front, called the *cocorinho*. Boca was holding the position easily and after a few minutes, noticed that several students were beginning to stand up straight or let their arms fall to the sides. My thigh muscles were burning. Still in position, Boca yelled out, slightly annoyed, “come on Vento, you can do it,” to an intermediate student who had released the position. He began to squat again. Several minutes had passed and many students were wavering and struggling to hold the now painful position. Boca then said, still holding her original squat seemingly without difficulty, “You can’t come here and expect to do the same thing every time, to stay at the same level. You have to keep improving. Try to be the best *capoeiristas* you can be. I know there is other stuff going on in your lives. Leave it at the door when you get here. We are here to be *capoeiristas*.”

(Excerpt from field notes.)

These common lectures trained students to see themselves as *capoeiristas* and silenced interpretations of capoeira as a means to get in shape, make friends, or socialize.
Another aspect of the capoeirista identity was the apelidos, a nickname given to each student, usually referring to students’ physical or personality traits. In Brazilian groups, it is common that only advanced practitioners adopted the capoeirista identity and apelido. However, in this group, all students adopted this identity and received a nickname within the first year of training. During the baptism event I attended, each novice entered the roda where a Brazilian master baptized them with a war name. The instructor and students used these names exclusively, and after month with the group, I had still not heard the actual names of many advanced students spoken in class.

Material objects became necessities of all capoeiristas through group interaction and established a minimum requirement for meriting guidance in the group. All but beginners were required to ‘buy’ into a capoeirista identity by purchasing several goods. The first, the uniform, consisted of a pair of white pants and a white t-shirt. Esquiva permitted potential students to “test out” the classes for a few weeks before he and advanced students began continually reminding them of the importance of these items. For all others, the full uniform was required for participation. When I arrived in my new white polyester pants, an advanced blue-cord said, “Hey, you finally got some pants. It’s official now!” All students were strongly encouraged to purchase a berimbau. Those who did own instruments were required to bring them to each class. Advanced students gained blue cord status and the right to teach classes only after a trip to Brazil. The group took a yearly trip to Brazil, organized and accompanied by their Brazilian master.

The instructor and advanced students framed these objects as students’ obligations to the group culture. Good members wore the clothes, played the berimbau, and encouraged others to buy and use these items. New students who did not purchase these goods received little guidance.
from advanced students during classes. Students remembered those who dropped out in terms of their relative commitment to the group – i.e. as the guy who “never got the pants” or who “wore old blue sweats.”

Esquiva promoted students to blue cord status only if they acted according to the Brazilians’ criterion and demonstrated commitment to being a capoeirista, as the Brazilian master defined it. At one point, he announced that he would withdraw the blue-cord status of students that missed classes regularly. “I can’t have you going as a blue,” he told one blue-cord about an upcoming workshop, because he believed she was not training hard enough. A week later, he reduced another blue cord student to a yellow (intermediate level) cord.

The salience of this identity became clear to me from my own interactions with students. After buying the pants, advanced students who had previously not spoken to me began helping me with movements during class and telling me when I was doing something incorrectly. They began insisting that I enter the roda to play, as I had timidly avoided it up to that point. My instructor began calling upon me to demonstrate basic movements to students newer to the class. Then later, after my forth month of training, I realized that I was behind other beginner students. My fellow students ceased correcting me and constantly nagged me to enter the roda. I realized that the students would take me seriously only when I showed progress in skill and enthusiasm.

Students also learned, from their Brazilian master’s recurrent assertions, that all students should see themselves as capoeiristas and that “capoeira is in your soul. Capoeira is a collective activity. It should not be done alone. You must practice with the group to improve.” Esquiva and the advanced students gave beginners leeway to mastery movements and play within the roda, but demanded enthusiasm. Advanced students chastised those who missed classes and often directly told them to make more of a commitment to being in class. This established the purpose
of classes as a collective effort to become *capoeiristas* and silenced individual interests. Students considered the collective nature of this *capoeirista* identity to be natural and they said little about what it meant to be a *capoeirista* beyond interacting enthusiastically and conforming to group culture.

Though different elements of capoeira did resonate with individual students, this mechanism cannot explain how an inflexible preservationist culture emerged within the group. As seen above, many individual interests did not overlap significantly with the group’s culture. Even those who liked the music and dance practices felt the strictness excessive. Private complaints and backyard barbeques revealed a “backstage” to classes, where students mustered their own cultural tastes to reinterpret capoeira. Alta told me, “Where else are you going to find something in the US where you can do music, dance with a group like this?” Several students worked as dancers, yoga instructors, musicians, or had practiced other martial arts. Many shared her attraction; they were individuals interested in the arts or attracted to the musical, dance, and gymnastics elements of capoeira. Yet students could have interpreted the music and dance as a relaxed environment for experimenting with American music, for example. Cana, for example, was an amateur rap artist who performed at local bars, but she never attempted to incorporate this knowledge into the group’s music.

Esquiva was attracted to the movements and a historical narrative of slave resistance. He occasionally mentioned the common view of capoeira being a means to conceal fight training among slaves, which I never heard the Brazilian master discuss. He also told me that he would prefer to incorporate hip-hop music into classes, rather than rely solely on traditional music. Three students – two black males, one white female - told me they also wanted to connect with
and understand the oppressed slave population from which capoeira arose. They described it as a part of “afro-Brazilian culture,” and chose to focus of capoeira’s connection to slavery.

Yet students discussed these individual interests and interpretations only in private conversations or at other social gatherings. Students could not work through their individual understandings, discuss interpretive tensions among students, or consider what it meant to practice capoeira in other groups. Interactional style emphasized group production of culture. Incorporating individual interests into the group’s capoeira culture did not occur because doing so would have undercut keys elements of their shared ground for interacting – conformity, uniformity, and hierarchy of authority.

*Capoeira Culture as Preservation of Brazilianness*

The group’s interactional style valorized hierarchy of authority and placed the Brazilian master at the top of this hierarchy. This led the students to interpret the capoeira culture of the group as a continuance of “Brazilian” capoeira. They used explicit verbalization related to movement style, music-making, material objects, *capoeirista* identity, and cultural context. Regular references to “how it is done in Brazil” and by Brazilians taught students how to contextualize capoeira. This linked their practice to all things Brazilian, providing samba, drumming, and “afro-Brazilian dance” classes, performing at local Brazilian *Carnaval* celebrations, and performing at local ethnic festivals as a Brazilian cultural group. Continuity with Brazil was also established by comparing the hours per week the group has to train with the “years” Brazilians have to learn capoeira and the Master telling students they must practice the *ginga* one 1000 times to train “like in Brazil.” When the workout room was crowded, Esquiva said, “you have to make do, this is how it is in Brazil.” When novices showed apprehension,
advanced students and Esquiva told them to toughen up because “that’s how it is in Brazil.” Students took these connections to Brazil as natural and never debated or questioned them openly in classes.

The actual content of assertions about of “Brazilianess” was vague and shifted from month to month following the Brazilian master’s assertions. For example, after several months of encouraging students to throw their legs high towards their opponent’s head during kicks, Boca arrived after a weekend training event with the Brazilian master informing the group that the Master wanted all kicks thrown level with the waist “like Mestre Bimba taught.” For the next few months, Esquiva insistently reiterated this in classes. Even those that had not made a trip to Brazil and had little knowledge of the complexities of the practice in Brazil would repeat the master’s claim that the group’s culture was “how it is in Brazil,” and this did not provoke discussion or comparisons with capoeira in Brazil from those that had visited Brazil.

Material goods also positioned the group as using the same items as used in Brazil, establishing it as a legitimate member of the category “Brazilian capoeira.” They were especially important when students attended training events with Brazilian masters. Thus, material items established their inclusion in the capoeira community at training events.

The group compared itself to other groups almost exclusively in terms of its connection to Brazilian capoeira rather than through comparisons to the style of the University group or to groups that students had visited in other states. The advanced students and Esquiva had each made at least one trip to Brazil. Yet repeatedly, they referred to this philosophy of Brazilian capoeira as a unified whole. Though they celebrated the importance of fight and self-defense, they never drew connections between capoeira and Asian martial art traditions. On one occasion,
a new student trying out the class mentioned that he had trained Karate and several of the group’s students informed him that capoeira as “completely different.”

Finally, elements of the group’s reproduction of capoeira could have provoked conversation about the differences between their group capoeira culture and their perceptions of “Brazilian” capoeira. Most important was the students’ inability to master the Portuguese language. Many memorized song lyrics but had little to no understanding of them. Students teaching classes regularly pronounced the names of individual movements in Spanish instead of Portuguese, as several spoke Spanish. Esquiva, well known for his inability to learn basic Portuguese despite six trips to Brazil, finally gave up studying the language when the Brazilian master decided American students did not need to learn Portuguese. Interactional style in the group thwarted students from considering alternative interpretations and ways of practicing capoeira, especially advanced students that had been socialized over five to ten years into the group's style. Alta, who had lived in Brazil for years as an adult, was the only advanced student to claim that, “This isn’t how capoeira is supposed to be,” referring to the strictness of the group. However, the norm was to avoid discussing such differences.

**Situation and Alternative Explanations of Preservationist Cultural Reception**

Above, I discussed three factors that shape audience reception: societal level cultural codes, status groups, and properties internal to objects. Because this group incorporated male and female students, as well as college educated and non-college educated students, the emergence of a rigid preservationist culture cannot be explained as the interpretation of a homogeneous status group.
Can societal level – “American” – cultural codes explain the capoeira culture that emerged in this studio? Students did not assign new local meanings to the practice by drawing on broad “American” cultural codes (Liebes and Katz 1990; Snow 1993). In a less strict interactional context, students could easily disregard the views of a Brazilian master residing in another state, wear any workout clothes, abandon the cumbersome and pricey berimbau, and replace Portuguese with familiar English lyrics or popular American music. Students in this group could have legitimated themselves by developing a unique "American style" by, for example, integrating the practice with hip-hop music as the instructor hinted at. More familiar and available instruments could be introduced. The group excluded such possibilities because of the style that demanded students unquestioningly accept group wisdom. Open dialogue or debate over the proper meaning of capoeira and style of practice would have undercut the group’s ability to interact together and establish shared meanings precisely because their means for interacting relied upon hierarchy and conformity. By interpreting capoeira culture as a space of limited talk among newer students, students silenced connections to the “local” facilitated the group’s means of interacting – or its strictness.

Much past work reveals that an important cultural meaning for American audiences is authenticity (Fine 2003; Grazian 2003). Authenticity is a socially constructed meaning, and for US audiences, it is often tied to preservation of some perceived original condition of foreign objects, including exoticism, non-commercialism, and continuity with the past (Bendix 1997; Dawson, Fredrickson, and Graburn 1974; Grazian 2003; Johnston and Baumann 2007; MacCannell 1989). Cultural objects are often marketed as “authentic” to appeal to this important meaning in the US (Lu and Fine 1995; Peterson 1997). Did these students maintain rigid preservationist boundaries around capoeira because of a preference (either at the societal or
consumer group level) for this cultural otherness (Condry 2006; Joseph 2008)? Some students had traveled to other countries on brief trips or enjoyed salsa dancing at local clubs, but the majority of students were simply looking for a way to make friends. Most beginners were new to town or were looking for friends or for “something to do.” Several were attracted to the unusual look of movements. Celia, a waitress new to town, said she and her boyfriend were looking for new art forms and “knew” immediately that they would be doing capoeira for a long time. Several saw it on a college campus and decided to try it. Because only a few students identified diverse and distant culture as one of their interests, this cannot fully account for the emergence of preservation at the group level. Further, an interest in Brazilian or foreign culture would not necessarily lead to strict conformity of practice. The vast majority of work on tourism reveals that a desire for authenticity of cultural objects leads to noticeable changes in the meanings and practices of the object in question rather than uniformity (Dawson, Fredrickson, and Graburn 1974; Grazian 2003; Smith 1977). A desire for authentic cultural practice is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for maintaining rigid “preservationist” boundaries around cultural objects in a new environment.

Situation can help explain why in one group, preservation is pursued as an authenticating strategy (Joseph 2008), while in another context innovation and development of a new domestic form (i.e. Japanese jazz) legitimates practitioners (Atkins 2001). Authenticity claims emerged as a result of strict group style. The effort of this group to maintain boundaries around the foreignness of capoeira suggests that future work should take more seriously that “preservationist” reception can be an outcome of situation and interaction rather than consumer group or societal level preoccupation with authenticity.
Did a rigidly bound “Brazilian” culture make the group more marketable – something the instructor and advanced students both desired? The studio also would have had greater success in the market had it been less strict. This explanation fails because several new students reported feeling that the group was unnecessarily strict. The group also had a high dropout rate among new students, no one was particularly strict outside of capoeira classes, and individual interpretations did differ from group culture. Even Luke, a white beginner, could sense the rigidity: “They’re too focused on small details that he [the master] says are the way things should be. I don’t really know who this guy [the Brazilian master] is and I guess he is one of the experts in it but it seems … you should be able to improvise a little differently. They talk about the music and specific notes needing to be a certain way. I don’t know that it really has to be,” he told me. Though the strenuous physical nature of capoeira partially explains the high attrition rate, several students left after saying they disliked the meanings the group promoted. Adam, a waiter who had trained irregularly for two months, told me he left because it was “like a cult.”

Instead, strict style of interaction constructed capoeira as a rigid preservationist culture. It chastised those who violated interactional norms by attempting to relax or alter elements of the group’s culture and rewarding those who conformed. It elevated the assertions of a Brazilian master to ideology because he was at the top of the group’s status hierarchy. He played a vital role in the reception process not because of the content he taught but rather the form of the cultural object, or style of interaction, he promoted. This is similar to how McDonalds restaurants train Asian customers to bus trays and wait in orderly cues (Watson 1997). Such retraining of norms and meanings is scantily documented in work on the reception in the United States, as many argue that cultural goods will be altered to appeal to US audiences (Katsuno and
Maret 2004). In reproducing a rigidly defined *form* of capoeira interactions, the group created gave capoeira meaning as an object needing preservation.

While the source of this interactional style is beyond the scope of this study, I suggest that this style is linked to organizational context. The reception of a foreign cultural object is best described as a situation lacking in what Lizardo and Strand (2010) call “external cultural scaffolding”– the cultural and cognitive tools prescribed by an institutional environment. In such contexts, people cannot rely on taken-for-granted knowledge about how to interpret a cultural practice and must fall back on what is familiar in order to learn new practices. In this case, what was familiar to capoeira students was a common style of interacting within bureaucratic organizations (which told them how to interact and to view the Brazilian master as the ultimate authority on form and meaning in capoeira practice). Upper class Bostonians had to create an institutional base for their European highbrow culture in the US (Dimaggio 1982), but Brazilian immigrants brought an existing organizational structure for capoeira with them, aiding in the preservation of “Brazilian” capoeira in this group. Future work should examine how group style influences reception in other organizational contexts.

Because I argue that local situations of interaction are central to the interpretive process of receiving a foreign cultural object, my findings do not generalized to all capoeira groups in the US. However, the concept of interactional situation that I have described should be useful in analyzing reception in a variety of contexts – from other dance and bodily arts like capoeira to audience reception of media images in interactive group settings. What will happen to this group as more American students advance to instructor status is also beyond the scope of this text. However, the fact that these American students interpret capoeira as a *collective* cultural
practice, rather than as an individual exercise program or a health ideology – two trends found in Yoga practice in the US – suggests that this group may be less open to transformations over time.
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ENDNOTES

1 Cultural objects are material or practical aspects of culture. They have symbolic properties defined largely by their connections to other symbols. They exist as macro-level collective representations available to actors to adapt in concrete situations.

2 By situation, I refer to the immediate context in which individuals act to resolve the practical problem of interacting.

3 The concept of reception is used broadly by sociologists to theorize how audience receive and give meaning to the cultural objects they encounter, while localization refers to this interpretive process when the object in question is global.

4 However, the distinction between “reworked” and “new” is socially constructed rather than an objective measure of change.

5 Reception occurs in formal organizations, informal groups, and private individual practice. My proposed model focuses on a mechanism relevant to group settings.

6 Movements have also appeared in movies and music videos.

7 After years of repression, the Brazilian state began promoting capoeira as a national sport in the 1930s.

8 The majority of practitioners in the US are Americans. Capoeira is a well-known subculture in Brazil; however, we should not expect Brazilian immigrants to be present in US studios.

9 Browning (1995) and Downey (2010) examined capoeira practice in New York City, but did not focus on the reinterpretation of capoeira as a cultural object.

10 A master is a practitioner that has reached the end of the training period.

11 Neither of these groups was attended by Brazilian students.
Bimba has become a legendary figure among practitioners. During the 1930s, he opened a formal studio of *Capoeira Regional*, incorporating Asian martial arts and gymnastics movements. Another master opened a studio to preserve the original style, naming it *Angolan Capoeira*. The studio examined here called its style “contemporary,” using elements of the two older styles.

Many capoeira masters create stylistic variations and invent new movements.

A *batizado* is an initiation and testing ceremony in which students are “baptized” into capoeira and continuing students advance in cord color.

Cord colors vary across groups. In this group, a blue-cord indicated a student’s initiation to “advanced student” status.

There is an established repertoire of capoeira songs, but groups also invent new songs.

*Capoeirista* translates as someone that practices capoeira seriously.

Most groups have a standardized uniform. This group used white pants.