

Comparative and International Education Éducation comparée et internationale

Griffith, L. M. (2023). *Graceful Resistance: How Capoeiristas Use Their Art for Activism and Community Engagement*. University of Illinois Press

Emily Dobrich

Volume 53, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111813ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v53i1.17277>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Western Ontario

ISSN

2369-2634 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dobrich, E. (2024). Review of [Griffith, L. M. (2023). *Graceful Resistance: How Capoeiristas Use Their Art for Activism and Community Engagement*. University of Illinois Press]. *Comparative and International Education / Éducation comparée et internationale*, 53(1), 65–67.
<https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v53i1.17277>

© Emily Dobrich, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale

Volume 53 | Issue 1

March 2024

Book Review of *Graceful Resistance: How Capoeiristas Use Their Art for Activism and Community Engagement*

Emily Dobrich

University of Toronto

emily.dobrich@mail.utoronto.ca

Recommended Citation

Dobrich, E. (2024). [Review of the book *Graceful Resistance: How Capoeiristas Use Their Art for Activism and Community Engagement* by Griffith, L.M. (2023)] *Comparative and International Education/Éducation comparée et internationale*. 53(1). 65-67. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v53i1.17277>

Book Review

Griffith, L. M. (2023). *Graceful Resistance: How Capoeiristas Use Their Art for Activism and Community Engagement*. University of Illinois Press.

Reviewed by Emily Dobrich, *University of Toronto*

Graceful Resistance is the third scholarly publication by Lauren Miller Griffith on the Afro-Brazilian martial art of *capoeira*. The book's theme centres the relationship between social justice and *capoeira*. *Capoeira* is historically associated with the African Diaspora and slavery, and contemporarily connected to social and racial justice movements. The book's premise is that *capoeira* potentially abets social justice work when practitioners emphasize the martial arts' origins as an art of resistance.

Griffith, an anthropology professor in the United States, has an established reputation in martial arts studies and personal experience in *capoeira*. Compared to her previous books, Griffith focuses solely on the U.S. context in this book, where she positions *capoeira* as a serious leisure activity. The pedagogical significance of leisure activities is often underappreciated. Presenting *capoeira* as a serious leisure activity, Griffith challenges this assumption, contending that a liminal space is created for learning and consciousness raising outside traditional academic settings which is refreshing. A strength of this book is how Griffith consistently brings to life the learning practices and community spaces. For instance, learning from embodying the words of songs during practice times or through discussion in after-class spaces. Consequently, Griffith's research is valuable in understanding how learning is life wide and life deep.

Griffith uses an expository style to explain and analyze her ethnographic experiences and interactions with *capoeiristas* from interviews, attending *capoeira* events and rallies, and close reading of literature. In line with the book's title, Griffith "gracefully" shifts between different methods of presenting her data and arguing her points with personal vignettes and academic engagement with history, theory, and literature. Her tone is eloquent, informative and engaging, particularly in the sections that describe the educational practices and their impact.

Graceful Resistance consists of an introduction and nine chapters. The first three chapters provide background on *capoeira*, including the modernization, institutionalization, and globalization of the martial art. With this foundation established, Chapter 4: *Capoeira's Pedagogies of Resistance* onwards present examples of strategies used by *capoeira* groups and *mestres* (*capoeira* teachers) to illuminate *capoeira's* hidden curriculum and creatively compare teaching methods. Griffith effectively conveys the diversity in pedagogical approaches, which captured my interest as an educational researcher. Examples include songs and stories performed within *capoeira* training sessions, community engagement and improvement strategies initiated by groups, public performances and attending protests. I was particularly moved by her discussion on structural diversity and strategies for improving diverse participation in learning contexts, which I consider highly pertinent for educational discourse.

Griffith concludes that the potential of *capoeira* to support social justice varies because learning outcomes are influenced much by instructors and contexts. For instance, she discusses some *mestres* holding class discussions on political issues and giving written assignments, and others keeping their *capoeira* spaces apolitical. A potential weakness in her argument for *capoeira* as a

global resistance art is that the text only examines U.S. contexts. Framing learning through the hidden curriculum may also be limiting. If the social justice education in capoeira is not necessarily apparent to practitioners, how transformative is it for society? By acknowledging these points in the text, Griffiths avoids making claims of ultrarelativism. Her critical analysis and examples remind us of the impact even one educator can make and the need for ongoing reflection and attention to pedagogy and praxis.

Although Griffith writes in first-person at times, I felt she was always in the shadows, a potential limitation given the social justice focus of the book. I anticipated a more robust and prominent statement of her researcher positionality, yet finished her book not fully certain of her personal investment and what was at stake for her in writing on this topic. An absence of her own politics and investment creates a feeling of disjuncture within work on social and racial justice and serious political subjects. Moreover, her potential biases as a White woman with U.S. academic privileges pose a limitation to her overall approach for studying an Afro-Brazilian martial art, as they may cast her as an outsider doing research on a community and raise concerns about her legitimacy in telling these stories. Accordingly, Griffith acknowledges, by citing Tuck and Yang's (2012) concerns for "settler adaptation fantasies," the need for caution, and that White researchers do not assert their interests on communities. This could explain her withholding from being more assertive in her positionality. Considering power and privilege differentials is important for researchers interested in working internationally in different countries, cultures, and communities for decolonizing research and practice and Griffith does well to acknowledge it. This consideration connects to sentiments that "dominant onto-epistemologies and methodologies in comparative and international education (CIE) need to be unsettled" (Manion, 2019, p. 18), and recommendations in anthropology to recognize "colonial politics that underpin our theoretical categories and ethnographic practice" (Faier & Rofel, 2014, p. 364).

Although writing for anthropology, Griffith raises some timely and relevant issues for education, specifically social justice work and decolonization, making this book relevant for CIE scholars. There are issues she is unable to tackle, due to lack of space and literature, which allude to futures lines of inquiry. For instance, she does not substantially address gender justice within capoeira groups. By neglecting to discuss the issues women encounter in capoeira, the book misses an opportunity to challenge male dominance in capoeira spaces and diminishes capoeira's overall potential for social transformation.

Two recommendations for future scholarship relevant to CIE include the need for research on capoeira and social justice in countries other than the United States and comparing capoeira with other practices and educational contexts. These proposed directions provide encouragement for educational research and affirm the need for CIE scholarship. Overall, despite the minor weakness that findings are exclusive to the United States, limitations from the author's positionality, and lack of attention to gender justice, Griffith's presentation and analysis are impressive resulting in a text that is extensively researched, meticulously written, and theoretically sound that could provide a point of departure for future CIE research.

References

- Faier, L., & Rofel, L. (2014). Ethnographies of encounter. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43, 363–377.
- Griffith, L. M. (2023). *Graceful resistance: How capoeiristas use their art for activism and community engagement*. University of Illinois Press.
- Manion, C. (2019). Onto-Epistemological frontiers in CIE research: Exploring the problematic. In C. Manion, E. Anderson, S. Baily, M. Call-Cummings, R. Iyengar, P.P. Shah, & M.A. Witenstein (Eds.), *Interrogating and innovating comparative and international education research* (pp. 17–28). Brill.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 1(1), 1–40.

Emily Dobrich is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Adult Education and Community Development program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto doing collaborative specializations in Comparative, International, and Development Education; Women and Gender Studies; and Diaspora and Transnational Studies. Emily's doctoral research combines adult education and community development with feminist perspectives to understand embodied learning to contribute to solidarity work and community building amongst diasporic women.