

Book Reviews

Dance Lest We All Fall Down: Breaking Cycles of Poverty in Brazil and Beyond.

Margaret Willson, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010. 320 pp.

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Baianos of different social classes, colors, and origins will recognize themselves in *Dance Lest We All Fall Down*. Anthropologists of all backgrounds will also find themselves appreciating the reflections at the heart of this example of the discomfiting art of crossing frontiers. North Americans, black and white, will confront the ways they view and experience the world. And social activists and the ranks of young, educated, and often idealistic participants in NGOs directed at alleviating misery may come to believe they have experienced situations similar to those Margaret Willson describes: There is room in this book for deep truths, for verisimilarities, and for many types of reader, even those who do not fit neatly into any of the above-mentioned categories. A curious person, or one who may have been seduced by the Bahian capital of Salvador but remains indignant at the city's glaring inequalities, will find precious clues in this book; they may even come to believe that it

is still possible to hold out some political hope through education. However, an overly proud Brazilian nationalist (205), who does not want to be forced to recognize the racism, violence, torment, and exterminations that exist in Salvador's slums should avoid reading this book. Nonetheless, a careful engagement might reveal significant landmarks and truths to all those who would like to participate, as Willson's subtitle announces, in "breaking cycles of poverty in Brazil and beyond."

The author divides 30 chapters into three parts: (1) Learning to Dance; (2) Treading Water; and (3) Laughter Lessons. In Part 1, Willson tells of her arrival as a tourist invited by a woman, a native of Bahia, she met in Amsterdam. Intrigued, she returns to study the Afro-Brazilian dance/martial art *capoeira*. Willson describes these developments, and their contexts, in a flowing, realistic style. The reader will experience the smells of open sewers and the alleyways the author frequented. She will bump into rats and experience the stifling heat of spaces in which the impoverished inhabitants of this "City of All Saints" are piled together without compassion. The reader may recall Pedro Juan Gutierrez's *Dirty Havana Trilogy* or Aluísio Azevedo's *A Brazilian Tenement*.

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However, the reader will not encounter the sarcasm of the contemporary Cuban or the moralism of the 19th century Brazilian chronicler of urban ruin. Nonetheless, nausea, sadness, and melancholy will assault. And readers will become spellbound by the world described before Willson, exhausted by Bahia and its excesses, decides to leave.

In Part 2 Margaret returns to Seattle where she reacquaints herself with her nation's systems of race, gender, and class. Experiencing loneliness and depression, she needs to talk to Rita, a black woman, born and bred in a Bahian slum, and a photographer with a degree in sociology who Margaret had met at *capoeira*. Rita dreams of doing something to fight Salvador's illiteracy and inequality, and a phone call from Margaret provides an opening: Between glasses of beer and transatlantic journeys, the two wage many battles in order to found "Bahia Street," an organization aimed at tutoring girls from low-income families. The two women's indignation fuels them and the students' successes reward them. And by Part 3 (209) the reader is privy to a Bahia Street that walks on its own, that seems to conquer the world, but that survives on "butterfly wings" (293).

This book's viscera appear wide open as Salvador exhibits its ruins and postcard views. The author discusses internal organizational disputes and describes in frank terms the hurdles involved in maintaining an organization anchored in three countries. Without flinching, she discusses racism in Bahia. And she is not afraid to talk about herself; in fact, she reveals herself in full color, intense detail, and with no apparent embarrassment. This almost Romanesque travel report thus describes

many journeys between different worlds, both personal and public, without ever forgetting the delicacy of friendship and the triumph of overcoming barriers.

As for me, I have written this essay as an anthropologist and a *baiana* who has witnessed certain episodes Willson recounts (38, 93, 95, 200, 268). Some of the characters are familiar to me (43, 58, 78). And Rita and I passed each other in the corridors of the same university where Margaret gave a lecture and became entangled in the intricacies of Brazilian Portuguese (78). I was in the audience; I shared in the laughter of an erudite, Bahian public surprised by a foreigner's lower class, colloquial speech. She went home crying and her roommate, Luzia, an actress and capoeira player, explained to her about the discrepancy between ostensibly sophisticated thoughts and those expressed in street or "lower class" Portuguese, as the author prefers. I agree with Luzia's explanation (78), especially because Willson is undeniably a sensitive and brilliant anthropologist; for this reason she should be aware of the social constraints imposed by language. Differences exist between different registers be it in Seattle, London, Canberra, Papua New Guinea, or Bahia.

Throughout the book Willson represents or recounts the voices of other characters in order to interweave brutally honest points about herself with pointed political commentary. For example, criticism of the Afro-North American visitors' ignorance of Bahian social relations and universalization of US racial ideologies is attributed to Fernando, her research assistant, a black, Bahian *capoeira* player (56). Likewise, she borrows Rita's words to criticize the black *baianos* who improve them-

selves economically and assume middle-class values instead of what pass as black or mixed-race values (58). Yet she rarely makes use of this stratagem when she talks about Bahia's middle class. This is interesting because it allows the author to put forth fascinating criticism but, in a sense, to argue that those views are not simply her own, but those of actors whose identities permit such criticism.

The text is marred by a number of editing errors and minor difficulties with Bahian history and geography. It is also less than clear that, as Willson states, Europe presents the best way "out" for the poor women of Bahia (224). Nevertheless, these quibbles do not take away the merit and the brilliance of this book, a text written passionately, sincerely, and sentimentally; all in the very best sense of all these terms. To understand Bahia, one needs *mandinga*, mischievousness, and the ability to interpret the true meaning of a smile. It is thus necessary to be flexible, to learn to dance, and to open and close oneself to the point of responsiveness. *Capoeira*, a form of combat that is also a dance, is a fine metaphor for Willson's struggles to feel, to change, and to represent Bahia. Capoeira is an art and it is also hard work. It is a performance and a representation. And it is a means of surmounting adversity: Over the course of the years narrated in this book (1998-2010), Margaret Willson, Rita Conceição, and the girls of Bahia Street became experts in how to learn and how to teach such lessons. At the end of these 320 pages, it is difficult for any of the myriad of readers described in this review's first paragraph to remain indifferent to the politics and passions described and analyzed in this remarkable ethnography.

Fixing Men: Sex, Birth Control, and AIDS in Mexico. *Matthew Gutmann*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 265 pp.

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Do prevailing stereotypes about Mexican masculinity bear any resemblance to the lived experiences of Mexican men? Matthew Gutmann has devoted his professional career to unpacking the preconceptions and setting the record straight through detailed ethnography, and I'll confess a personal interest in his findings. When my Mexican grandfather left Jalisco for *el norte* in the 1920s, he bid *adios* to his 17 siblings, his *mujer*, and their four young children. He sired seven more children in Iowa before dying there 40 years ago. While my mother remembers him as a gentle father, I also know that he beat my grandmother and refused to acknowledge an eighth child as his own. Which "Mexican man" was he: tender or cruel?

Gutmann's first book, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, offered a fascinating analysis of how men understand and experience masculinity in the sprawling megalopolis of Mexico City. It achieved landmark status as gender studies grew to include masculinity studies, and Gutmann has been regarded since as a leading theorist in the field. In *Fixing Men: Sex, Birth Control, and AIDS in Mexico*, Gutmann directs his gaze to men living in the smaller, poorer, heavily indigenous southern city of Oaxaca. He conducted research in two vasectomy clinics, an AIDS-treatment clinic, and among men who worked in a local ethnobotanical garden, and he interviewed midwives and