

CONTRIBUTOR

Thomas A. Green earned his PhD in Anthropology from the University of Texas (Austin). After teaching at Idaho State University and the University of Delaware, he joined the faculty in Anthropology at Texas A&M University. Folklore and cultural anthropology comprise his primary teaching duties. He has conducted research among groups ranging from urban gang members and Northern Chinese martial artists to Native American political activists and African-American cultural nationalists with a focus on the ways that traditional art forms identify and manage cultural conflict. He currently collaborates with Chinese colleagues on the vernacular martial culture of the contemporary PRC. In addition to academic articles, he has published twelve volumes on these topics, including *Martial Arts of the World: An Encyclopedia of History and Innovation*, co-edited with Joseph R. Svinth. Green has served in editorial roles for academic journals in the U.S. and Europe, including the *Journal of American Folklore*.

THE FIFTY-TWO HAND BLOCKS RE-FRAMED

THE REHABILITATION OF A VERNACULAR MARTIAL ART

THOMAS A. GREEN

DOI

10.18573/j.2016.10062

KEYWORDS

Vernacular martial arts,
African-American, aesthetics,
cultural revitalization,
US prisons.

CITATION

Green, Thomas A. 2016.
'The Fifty-Two Hand Blocks
Re-Framed: Rehabilitation
of a Vernacular Martial Art',
Martial Arts Studies 2, 23-33

ABSTRACT

From the late 1980s, a cluster of related African-American vernacular fighting styles became a focus of contention among martial artists. Over the next twenty years, evidence drawn from popular culture, social science, and sport validated the existence of vernacular styles such as Jailhouse Rock and the 52s. This paper examines the recent 're-framing' of the 52s as a heritage art, a uniquely African-American expression for cultivating health, fitness, and ethnic pride, as well as the development of a structured, culturally-based curriculum which began in order to ensure its embodied preservation.

INTRODUCTION

The Fifty-two Hand Blocks (aka the 52s) is an African-American vernacular martial art (VMA) that is generally regarded as a variant of Jailhouse or Jailhouse Rock (JHR), an umbrella term for those VMAs historically associated with penal institutions in the United States ('jailhouses' colloquially).¹ According to most practitioners, the fighting style does not literally utilize fifty-two blocks, although at least one entrepreneur does a thriving online business selling DVDs on which he demonstrates the use of the fifty-two blocks of his system. A definitive etymology for the name has yet to be determined. Oral tradition suggests several sources for the selection of the number '52'. One popular explanation traces the name to the 'Divine Mathematics' of the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE), also known as the Five Per Cent Nation of Islam or 'Five Percenters', the 5% of black men who have knowledge of self. These 'gods' are male members of the group; women are designated 'earths'. The religion was established in the mid-1960s by Clarence 13X (born Clarence Smith) a former member of the Nation of Islam. The number 7 according to the mnemonic system for memorizing NGE theology ('Mathematics') has divine significance (5 'Power' plus 2 'Wisdom' equals 7; this in turn describes God, or perfection [Swedenburg 1997]).

Adherents to this theory draw evidence from lyrics of the New York hip hop group the Wu-Tang Clan, of which many members are also NGE members, which appear to allude to the 52s. Consider, for example, the lyrics to the song 'Soul in the Hole' (the title song on the soundtrack for the 1997 basketball documentary *Sole in the Hole*):

Yo, we throwin' 52 blocks at outside shots to bubble up the snot box / No penalties or shot blocks, its similar to Comstock kid / You catch an elbow in this hell Hole of concrete.

These lyrics not only reference the fifty-two blocks, but also Comstock (a New York State Correctional Facility) and the use of elbow strikes (a technique favored by many 52s fighters). Although the NGE connection is intriguing, the most widely accepted explanation associates the name with the prank game '52 Card Pick-Up'. Like 52 Card Pick-Up, the Fifty-two Hand Blocks entails trickery and demands the spontaneity and creativity to 'play the hand one is dealt' in a fight [see Green 2003, 2012].

The freedom of expression that prevails in the 52s typifies VMAs. Herein lies one of the major differences between VMAS and codified

martial arts that pursue continuity and claim to avoid deviation from traditional (i.e., received) solutions to conflict scenarios (solutions that are commonly embodied in pre-arranged formal exercises such as kata in Japanese martial arts and the *bunkai* drawn from these choreographed routines). VMAs, by contrast, do not rely on structured curricula to establish common levels of progress from basic to more complex skills. In fact, it is common for at least a portion of one of these fighting methods to be learned solely through observation of actual street fights as distinct from instruction isolated from the flow of authentic combat in which a martial arts student is shown a technique. Thus, knowledge usually is transmitted face-to-face and in a casual fashion.

Teaching, meanwhile, often takes the form of an experienced fighter passing along techniques in a random fashion to a favored novice. This transmission, as suggested above, should not be characterized as inheritance in the traditional sense; when attribution is noted, individuals credit teachers because the mentor was influential, out of the student's respect for the teacher, or to enhance a protégé's own reputation by association with a locally prestigious fighter. The ubiquity of bricolage, the appropriation of physical bits and pieces that are consistent with the prevailing habitus of the local movement traditions (e.g., dance, games, and motor habits acquired through work) that informs VMAs, further militates against static continuity. Finally, while demonstrable proficiency matters to practitioners, and contesting for status and prestige within the social group is pervasive, this differs radically from a mastery of a physical canon to attain rank as developed in standardized, globalized, bureaucratized martial arts. These factors combine to make VMAs ephemeral phenomena.

The Fifty-two Hand Blocks is best characterized as a regional style of JHR associated with one of the boroughs of New York, most often Brooklyn, although this may be the result of media attention in the early 21st century. New York martial arts teacher, professional fighter, and former hip hop club bouncer Novell Bell [personal communication, 2009] describes the following local variations of the 52s:

Brooklyn cats was known for they aggressive, fast, crazy, wild attacks. These cats were mostly face hunters, always throwing wild blows to the face trying to knock a person out, and most times they did, because of the fast, aggressive attack. Many brothers from Queens didn't like Brooklyn cats, because they were the kind of people that if you beat one of their boys in a one on one fight in their 'hood, they still jump your ass!

Queens 52 Blocks practitioners utilize more strategy, generally Queens 52 was more of counter fighters, they like to evade, redirect and catch opponents off balance then finish their

¹ Additionally, the 'Jailhouse Rock' designation is likely an allusion to the famous Elvis Presley film and title song.

opponent. Queens cats were more of showmen. When a Queens cat fought using the

52 style they like to look good kicking your ass, and some Queens cats was so nice with their hands that they would talk shit [to make an opponent lose his cool] at the same time kicking your ass.

Bronx 52 style in my opinion was more kickers, sweeps and grappling. I say this because every God I saw and met from the Bronx that fought using the 52 always try to apply low kicks to attack the legs of their opponent. I think the Bronx 52 style use their legs more because of all the hills they have to walk up in that area.

[Bell, personal communication, 2009; see also Green 2012]

In general, the African-American VMAs such as the 52s exhibit principles that Robert Farris Thompson identifies in West African dance aesthetics [Thompson 1999: 72-74]. In this aesthetic, opposites are brought together to form a sense of balance and order. In terms of the interplay of the opposing elements of the 52s, the 'sick' ('good', in this case because of a capacity to inflict damage) is balanced against the 'sweet' (controlled virtuosity). Roger Abrahams' notion of the tensions between sweet talk (sensible, decorous, harmonious) and broad talk (aggressive, intrusive, contentious) in creolized African Caribbean performance also sheds light on the 52s [Abrahams 1983].

The 52s is characterized by 'a particular mindset, a collection of strategies, techniques, rhythms, and attitudes learned in the heart of the fight. On this issue, everyone who has actually been exposed to the 52s agrees' [Green 2012: 291]. The system is dictated not by adherence to a structured curriculum, but rather, by the application of an aesthetic similar to a disk jockey's freestyle or a jazz musician's improvisation; it is a riff, a variation on a theme which may be derived from the available kinesic repertoire [Wilson 1999]. For example, oral tradition suggests that there is a connection between the 52s and urban dance (uprocking and break dancing). The aesthetic, then, is the 'sweet' frame into which the martial bricoleur fits his 'sick' techniques. This is quite different from those standardized martial arts in which one learns a canonized physical repertoire.

IN SEARCH OF THE 'LOST ART'

Africanists claim that there is a direct line of development from Continental African systems to JHR and the 52s. [Marks, personal communication, 2005; Newsome, 'Jailhouse Rock']. These methods survived into the present due to their being taught in prisons, where they remained a black method of defense, in a country in which racist courts and penal laws have created a system of de-facto slavery. There is in fact compelling evidence that the roots of African-American martial culture are deep. A close examination of the historical record hidden in biographies, newspaper articles, court cases, and similar venues reveals the survival of creolized African-descended fighting styles. One such case is the autobiography of escaped slave Henry Bibb in which he gives an account of the practice in 19th century Kentucky of forcing bondsmen to fight on Sundays and holidays for the entertainment of their masters. In the distinctive fighting style described by Bibb, 'the blows are made by kicking, knocking, and butting with their heads; they grab each other by their ears, and jam their heads together like sheep' [Bibb 1969 (1849): 68; see also Wiggins 1977]. This African-American fighting method is often identified as 'knocking and kicking' [Kouri 1992, Desch-Obi 2008], although the art has been given other regional labels such as 'pushing and dancing' as described in a 1733 South Carolina newspaper notice (the notice offered a reward for the capture of a runaway slave who was a 'famous Pushing and Dancing master' [Rath 2000: 109-111]).

A Reconstruction era court case (1868-1876), also from South Carolina, featured the prosecution of African-American Paul Harris, who was charged with assault and battery for a 'knockin' attack consisting of strikes to the eyes, kicks to the shins, and a head-butt to the belly of the plaintiff [Gonzales 1922]. An article in the *Brooklyn Eagle* dated November 23, 1902 describes several episodes involving an African-American farm worker who achieved notoriety in rural Louisiana as a street-fighter by use of his skill at head-butting. The art persisted well into the 20th century as demonstrated by a passing mention in John Gwaltney's *Drylongso*, in which he wrote that Jackson Jordan, Jr. 'still gives occasional lessons and demonstrations [of] knocking and kicking' [Gwaltney 1981: 94]. Ten years later, Yale student Christopher Kouri, through interviews with Gwaltney and new field research, added additional credibility to the existence of knocking and kicking [Kouri 1992]. Most recently, historian Thomas J. Desch-Obi's *Fighting for Honor* (2008) offers an extensive account of Gullah (the descendants of enslaved Africans who lived in the Lowcountry regions of Georgia and South Carolina) fighting methods, one of which is knocking and kicking, in the contemporary Southeastern U.S.

Debates regarding the origin, name, and differences between local variants notwithstanding, there is a consensus that the 52s evolved from prison styles mentioned above under the blanket label of Jailhouse or JHR [Green 2003, 2010, 2012]. Evidence of such a style has appeared in print from time to time. In 1974, a former inmate reported in an article published in *Black Belt* magazine that ‘the different [New York state] prisons ... have their own fighting styles’ [Darling and Perryman 1974: 21]. In the same article, poet and playwright Miguel Piñero, who was incarcerated repeatedly from the age of eleven through his mid-twenties, identified fighting styles he had learned while imprisoned:²

The first thing I did in the joint was to check out the style and learn to fight with a home piece – somebody from my neighborhood on the streets. I learned the Woodbourne shuffle, an evasion technique that first was used in the joint at Woodbourne [New York State Correctional Facility] and got passed around. Then I learned wall-fighting, and somebody taught me the Comstock [Great Meadow Correctional Facility in Comstock, NY] style.
[Darling and Perryman 1974: 21]

Thirteen years later, Terry O’Neill briefly documented the prison fighting style JHR in a popular article about the film *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and its star Mel Gibson [O’Neill 1987]. Gerard Taylor also references an interview on the Warner Brothers website with Gibson in which the actor discusses his introduction to JHR by Dennis Newsome, one of three fight choreographers for the film along with Cedric Adams (capoeira) and Rorion Gracie (Brazilian Jiu-jitsu) [Taylor 2007]. In the years following the initial publicity campaign for *Lethal Weapon* (and as recently as this year [Kurchak 2016]) Gary Busey, the film’s antagonist, has made numerous statements about JHR, including one on his IMDb biography where he makes the puzzling claim that he is a JHR black belt. The conversation revolving around JHR, and often debating its existence, continued for a short time, primarily in martial arts circles. Dennis Newsome maintained a media presence, but this most often focused on capoeira with JHR as a secondary topic.

As discussed above, in the 1990s, references to the Fifty-two Hand Blocks appeared in the lyrics of the hip hop group the Wu-Tang Clan. However, one frequently referenced phrase from the album *Liquid Swords* [Geffen Records 1995] – ‘Your fifty-two Hand Blocks was useless [against guns]’ – supported the contention that the firepower and rules of engagement of urban gang warfare had made the unarmed fighting methods of the 52s obsolete. As the decade was drawing to a close, 1999 saw the publication of a book titled *Street Kingdom: Five Years inside the*

Franklin Avenue Posse in which author Douglas Century documented the Brooklyn hip hop scene of the late 20th century through the life of aspiring recording artist, former convict, ex-boxer, and 52s adept Kawaun Adon Akenhoten VII, aka ‘Big K’. Two years later, Century published an article in *Details* magazine titled ‘Ghetto Busters’ [2001] in which he documented and included photographs of techniques demonstrated by Brooklyn practitioners whose names had become legendary during the 1970s-1980s.

In 2001, Century’s primary resource on the 52s remained incarcerated and anonymous; therefore, Dennis Newsome, by virtue of the publicity surrounding *Lethal Weapon*, continued to be regarded by the general public as the most valuable source of knowledge on prison-based martial arts styles. Newsome’s reputation was enhanced in 2001 when John Soet published *Martial Arts Around the World, Volume 2* featuring him demonstrating JHR techniques. Newsome’s appearance in this context is puzzling. Although he offered instruction in the Brazilian art of capoeira, an African-descended martial art that continued to ride on a similar media-driven wave of popularity generated by *Only the Strong* (1993), he remained closed to requests to do the same with JHR, especially to non-African-Americans.

By the end of the 20th century, the internet had generated innumerable new avenues for communication and debate. Forums devoted to martial arts provided the venue for heated debates regarding the existence of the 52s and, if they existed, their etiology and characteristics. Douglas Century and martial arts practitioner-scholars such as Jason Couch, Daniel Marks, and ‘Stickgrappler’ (only known by this screen name) proved to be key figures in the debate. While Couch and Stickgrappler conducted non-academic research at a very high level, their investigations had no larger agendas. On the other hand, Daniel Marks, like Newsome, believed that African-American VMAs represented not only effective fighting methods but unique cultural treasures, as well. He has often used the term ‘gems’ to refer to the African-descended arts. Marks’ agenda sought to promote the 52s as a martial art and as a heritage art to serve as a vehicle for self-actualization and community self-esteem, an agenda he advanced when, in 2003, Century facilitated contact between Marks and Big K, his primary resource for 52s information and the protagonist of *Street Kingdom*.

² Piñero was also photographed for the article in a Comstock defensive posture.

'CLIMATE OF THE TIMES'
SOCIAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE
POPULARITY OF THE 52S

Diverse social factors contributed to the rise of interest in the 52s early in the 21st century. Influences date back to the 1960s Afrikanist movement which promoted the martial arts as means of community self-defense by training in Asian arts, both individually and as members of groups such as the Nation of Islam's (NOI) self-defense branch the Fruit of Islam. For example, notable African-American martial artists Moses Powell (Musa Muhammad) and Lil' John Davis were associated with the NOI. According to oral tradition, Powell's Asian-derived Sanuces Ryu system was influenced by 'Jail House Boxing' [Daniel Marks, personal communication, 2004].

More aligned with the cultural missions of Daniel Marks and Dennis Newsome are those Afrikanist martial arts that sought to bridge the cultural gap imposed between African-Americans and Continental Africa by the New World Diaspora. Some of these are eclectic martial arts, such as Kupigana Ngumi grounded in African philosophical systems [Shaha Maasi, personal communication, 2008] used to promote pan-Afrikan solidarity. Kupigana Ngumi drew on karate, kung fu, and bando and was created by Nganga Tolo-Naa (born Raymond Cooper) and Shaha Maasi (born William Nichols) during the late 1960s [Hinton and Rahming 1994: 94]. During the 1970s, Kilindi Iyi, a boxer and practitioner of Asian martial arts, turned his attention to African martial culture; as he observed, 'if all people around the world have martial arts, well, Africans must have martial arts also' [Green 2004]. He eventually developed what he characterizes as a blend of African martial arts which he continues to teach from his Ta-Merrian Institute in Detroit, Michigan [Green 2004]. This list of African-inspired martial systems is far from exhaustive, but it suggests the strength of the desire on the part of African-Americans to reclaim a martial heritage that had been obscured by the rigors of bondage in the American Diaspora. This quest is one of the influences that served as a catalyst for the '52s fever' at the turn of the 21st century.

In 1975, Jelon Viera introduced capoeira to the US as a dance form. Over the next decade, African-descended martial culture increasingly drew the attention of mass audiences. Even before Viera's tour, television audiences in 1973 had been introduced to the martial dimensions of capoeira in the *Kung Fu* series (Season 1, Episode 13) in which African-American actor Moses Gunn portrays a Brazilian capoeirista. During the 1980s, the popularity of capoeira grew as its martial characteristics were featured in films such as *Brenda Starr* (1989); *The Mighty Quinn* (1989), a film which, like *Lethal Weapon*, relied on Cedric Adams for fight sequences; and the major commercial

success *Only the Strong*. In many cases, the capoeiristas were distinctively Caucasian. Adams and Joselito Santos (capoeira name: Mestre Amen), who portrayed protagonist Mark Dacascos' mentor in *Only the Strong*, were notable exceptions.

Dennis Newsome provides an important historical link in the causal chain from capoeira to the 52s. Perhaps because of his JHR/*Lethal Weapon* connection, his African Reconnection Project in San Diego, California has been particularly high profile. According to Newsome (capoeira name: Mestre Preto Velho), his capoeira training, when combined with training in African dance and related ethnic traditions, 'reconnects the youth to their African Cultural past, modifying thought processes and recapturing their African sense of morals, ethics, and artistic Aesthetics' [World Beat Center 2002a]. Newsome characterizes the adult portions of the program as an 'entity' conceived to train African-Americans, who in turn will train others. This intent also informed the 'each one, teach one' philosophy of Moses Powell [Muhammad, Final Call 2-12-2014]. Newsome adds: 'The motivation behind this program is to restore and maintain the moral and cultural heritage and strength of African-American communities through the practice of Capoeira Angola Sao Bento Grande' learned from Antonio Oliveiro Benvindo (capoeira name: Mestre Touro) [World Beat Center 2002b]. Besides capoeira, Newsome's curriculum incorporates Caribbean and African stick fighting systems and an African system of head-butting that he learned from Ethiopian, Joseph Tewolde [Planet Capoeira 2002; personal communication with Dennis Newsome, 2002 and 2016].

These influences created conditions that generated an appreciation for African and African-descended martial systems. Along with the appreciation for this martial heritage came a perception of the loss of this heritage among African-Americans. This led in turn to efforts to fill the lacunae in the historical record imposed by the repressive conditions of bondage.

Of course, other factors contributed to a wider-than-East Asian view of the martial arts in the closing decades of the 20th century. Exposure to and a growing interest in Filipino martial arts arose in the late 1960s and 1970s due to the careers of Florendo Visitacion (instructor of Moses Powell and Lil' John Davis) in New York, Dan Inosanto in California, and Bruce Lee (with whom Inosanto exchanged information) globally; the popularity of *Bloodsport* (1988), which helped launch the career of Jean-Claude Van Damme and stimulate further cinematic explorations of exotic martial arts; and, in 1993, the debut of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which led to the explosion of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and which served as fuel for the continued search for the fighter's Holy Grail – the ultimate martial art.

REVITALIZATION AND RE-INVENTION

With the 're-discovery' of African-American VMAs, researchers with diverse agendas worked to reconstruct JHR, the 52s, and related fighting arts. As noted above, some sought to promote them not only as martial arts but as heritage arts that could be vehicles for self-actualization and community self-esteem. From an anthropological perspective, these efforts can be compared to cultural revitalization projects [Wallace 1956]. More precisely, these projects were nativistic, they were attempts to revive or perpetuate elements of a group's 'original' culture [Linton 1943: 230]. Such enterprises operate to preserve cultural integrity in the face of an external threat by drawing on models constructed from an idealized past [Green 1981]. A coherent view of the past provides explanations for present conditions and traditional models for reorganization. Such reframing is necessary for formulating strategies to defend social and cultural integrity and to arrive at a more satisfying future. In the case of the African-American Diaspora, the histories were not always in agreement, and at times gaps in the historical documentation were filled with speculation. The ethnic bond enabled by the narratives, however, is more important than the authenticity of the bonding agent. In instances of cultural revitalization, all versions of the group's story focus on strengthening a common identity. As the debate over African-American VMAs heated up at the end of the 20th century, long-standing racial conflicts added fuel to the fire.

As a confirmed Africanist, Dennis Newsome asserts that the roots of JHR are in the fighting systems that slaves brought with them to the Western Hemisphere during the colonial era [Capoeira Angola 2002c; Dempsey 1999]. He advocates the following scenario. The parent arts of JHR developed as local forms during the plantation period. One of these VMAs, 'Barnyard', can be traced to the era and locale of Nat Turner, he claims [personal communication 2002].

Newsome's historical narrative argues that these systems survived into the present due to their being taught in prisons [Planet Capoeira 2002a]. Even after Emancipation of the slave population, social factors – bigoted legislation, racist courts, and the oppressive penal system – operated in tandem to maintain a system of de-facto slavery in the U.S. that followed African-Americans (migrations from the American South to the North notwithstanding). In his words, the 'politics and racism that continue to influence the penal system in the U.S. make this prison combat system thrive as a functional necessity of modern African-Americans' [Capoeira Angola 2002b]. Whereas Newsome notes the JHR influences in the unconventional tactics of certain African-American professional boxers, he minimizes any influence from European culture on JHR – such as the colonial era boxing that others have cited as an arena in which cross-fertilization between

African-descended and European fighting methods occurred [Green 2003]. As a result, during a 2003 interview, he objected to my bringing up the possibility that the distinctive fighting styles of boxers Floyd Patterson and Mike Tyson, both of whom are cited as bringing the JHR style to international boxing, had been passed along by manager/trainer Constantine (Cus) D'Amato (1918-1985). Newsome insisted that Tyson brought elements of JHR to his fights and strenuously resisted counter-arguments. He continues to object to teaching JHR as a part of his open curriculum. As noted above, the arts he promotes (in addition to his primary public art of capoeira) are the African arts (as he labels them) of Caribbean Kalenda and Nguni (Zulu) stickfighting.

Research has consistently been the first order of business for Daniel Marks. As his biography from his original website dedicated to the 52s and related arts such as hip hop states:

For over 30 years. Mr. Marks, who possesses a Black Belt in karate [as well as expertise in boxing, jiu-jitsu, and kali], has researched African-American martial arts. He first heard of 52 Blocks from fellow officers at the beginning of his decade-long military career in the 1980s and was intrigued by the genre but found that information and tutelage was scarce ... In 1993, Mr. Marks moved to New York, pursuing a social work track and working in a group home as well as completing a degree in Computer Science. At that point, he [began] ... researching the culture and its connectors more intently, meeting with practitioners ... recording their narratives ... [and] piecing together the puzzle that is Black Martial Culture. Mr. Marks supports his passion and his research with earnings from his own LLC as well as his position within the field of high end IT technology and computer applications. [http://fwape.com/bio.php]

The martial project that Marks undertook involved both 'library' research (especially on potential parent forms of Continental Africa and creolized VMAs in the Americas) and oral history to document practitioners of the 52s from what has been considered the 'golden age' of the 1960s-1980s. Marks' historical re-construction coincides with Newsome's up to a point. Although his primary focus became VMAs as they emerged in the urban Northeastern US, particularly Brooklyn, New York, his earliest efforts, which had been launched prior to the 'web wars' of the late 1990s, included African-descended martial culture in the South. In his words: 'We can't forget the Gullah [African-Americans of the Georgia Sea Islands] influence on this fight' [Marks 2004, personal communication]. Family members provided some of his earliest data on the African-American martial culture of the South. He reports the following concerning his grandfather:

He's from Greenville South Carolina. He has never heard of the names like K&K [knocking and kicking]; he's 68, but he knew of the fighting, especially butting. 'Man, I don't do no butting. They'll kill you with the head, them guys'. He said that the fighting that they learn[ed] was for survival. He was also in the military. Another quote, when asked about his knife skills, his reply was, 'Man listen, I ask a cat to hold a quarter out [extended his hand]. Draw my razor and put it back before the quarter hit the ground'. Could be a tall tale, but it shows the type of skill one would need to use the razor for survival. And his favorite words were 'don't let me have to pop my blade cause I cut you quicker than s**t'.
[Marks, personal communication, 2004]

Marks' research led him from the Gullah enclave in the Georgia Sea Islands to the Nation of Gods and Earths to hip hop [Green 2003, 2012]. Throughout the work on this project, Marks maintained his conviction that his was a martial reconstruction with deep historical roots that had the potential to impact the future of the African-American community. In his words:

I'm just trying to do what needed to be done a long time ago. Which is shed a little light on this side of the globe. To see so many young people give up on life before they have a chance to live. Simply because they don't believe that they matter or have made contributions to this world. This isn't about false Pride or following the yellow brick road. It's about real people with real problems struggling to survive the best way they know how. Then realizing that they got played, and now they want to pass on a little bit of what they learned. I'm just glad that I was put in a spot to gain from these Brothers [older members of the African-American community who have expertise in JHR and the 52s] before they pass into faded memories and urban legends.
[Marks, personal communication, 2003]

As the existential controversy over African-American VMAs raged on, in 2003, Douglas Century created opportunities for Big K to connect with Daniel Marks. As noted above, Marks had been working to reconstruct the 52s through interviews with skillful fighters from the 1970s and 1980s for the art's value as not only an effective fighting method but also for its unique cultural contributions relating to music, dance, and sport. There are thus important differences between the original 'street practices' and the re-framed 52s, the most important of which is that Marks took the 52s out of the shadows and sought to promote them as a martial art and as a heritage art.

Drawing on the street arsenals of surviving experts and especially on the skills of Big K, the work of developing a structured curriculum

began. The goal was to develop a coherent, embodied preservation of the 52s as distinct from the piecemeal and generally fortuitous survival that is the inevitable fate of most VMAs. I have argued above (and at length elsewhere, e.g. Green [2012]) that the 52s incorporate an African-descended aesthetic traditionally expressed in the polarities of hot-cool, sweet-sick, sweet-broad [see also Abrahams 1983]. This aesthetic system values improvisation and variations on a central theme, as in the jazz concept of 'riffing'. Following that traditional practice, the re-invented 52s mindset served as a catalyst for improvisation on the mechanics of a base art. Boxing was a reasonable choice for a martial foundation. Marks argued both in the martial arts forums and on his original website fwape.com (*Fwape* is from Haitian creole and means 'to strike or throw to the ground') that the use of boxing followed historical precedent as well. He argued that, from the anonymous Africans who acquired British-derived boxing skills in the course of plantation era 'human cockfights' through African-American pugilists Bill Richmond (the Terror of the London Prize Ring, 1763-1869), Jack Johnson (1878-1946), Archie Moore (1913-1998), and Mike Tyson, a distinctive Black boxing style had been intertwined with African-American VMAs [Green 2003]. Big K's stint as a professional boxer undoubtedly played an additional role in the selection of boxing.

As the efforts of Marks and Big K gained momentum and the 52s achieved a greater degree of legitimacy, others launched attempts to capitalize on and profit from the interest in the system. This became obvious in the latter by the absence of historical or cultural rhetoric beyond claims of ties to a ghetto and/or criminal (gang or prison) pedigree. In some cases, the actual term '52' in one form or another was attached to the products that emerged in the wake of Century's *Street Kingdom*, his *Details* article, and a series of similar pieces in both popular and academic venues. Apparently, efforts at capitalizing on the popularity of the 52s and JHR began as early as 2003 with Diallo Frazier's reputed autobiography of his years as an 'urban soldier', *Revelations of a Warrior*. In 2004, Frazier initiated production of a series of DVDs on 'Ghetto Blocks' through TRS (Threat Response Solutions) Productions. In 2014, after his stint as consultant and '52s coach' to Larenz Tate in the BET production of *Gun Hill* (2011), Frazier published *Tao of 52: Discovery of the Lost Science*, which reiterated much of the existing online and previously published print information on the 52s.

The launch of YouTube in 2005 and the subsequent posting of video clips, many of them featuring Marks and Big K, unleashed a torrent of instructional material. Per this article's opening remarks, more than one of the new crop of masters misinterpreted the derivation of the '52 Hand Blocks' and assumed that the number alluded to the number of defensive maneuvers contained in the art and not the NGE numerology nor the prank 52 card Pick-up [Green 2012]. This misapprehension compelled martial entrepreneurs to contrive a variety of techniques that, as far as can be determined, are not independently corroborated as

having circulated in any vernacular transmissions of the 52s.

Lyte Burley launched the most aggressive attempts at marketing his version of the 52s. At the time of writing, he had produced six instructional DVDs which he sells (along with t-shirts, hoodies, and other apparel) through his website, and has also posted dozens, if not hundreds, of online videos. New self-proclaimed experts continue to pop up, marketing contrived styles cobbled together from basic boxing techniques, wing chun kung fu, karate, modern versions of Bruce Lee's jeet kune do, print sources, and competitors' videos. I was contacted more than once after 2003 (when I began publishing academic pieces on JHR, the 52s, and related vernacular arts) by individuals purporting to be students, journalists, or fellow academics who were later revealed to be on fishing expeditions to hijack the practical expertise that I did not have.

During the years following their meeting, Marks and Big K were joined by urban fitness innovator Hassan ('Giant') Yasin, founder of Bartendaz Fitness, and by filmmaker Kamau Hunter. Marks, Big K, and Yasin came together to 're-frame' the 52s as a heritage art, a unique expression of African-American culture for cultivating health, fitness, and pride in cultural heritage. Hunter created visual records of the process.

The initial fwape organization founded by Marks, after a period of posting informational and instructional clips on YouTube and the fwape website, issued *Boxing for Combat* as a Blockstar Production in 2007. As the title implies, this instructional DVD offers an introduction to the basic boxing techniques that were beginning to form the core of the re-invented 52s curriculum. 2007 also saw the release of *Break the Glass: The Official 52 Hand Blocks Documentary*. Drawing extensively on Marks' previous field research with the OGs ('Original Gangsters' or, in tribute to the NGE, 'Original Gods') who used the 52s in the streets and prisons in the 1970s and 1980s, the two DVD set is an effort to confirm Marks' claims concerning the existence and most recent antecedents of the curriculum that he and Big K had begun to develop.

In essence, *Break the Glass* advanced the Constellation 52 agenda in the following ways. Significant members of the African-American martial community (including influential Afrikanist Tayari Casel of Kupigani Ngumi) attested to the existence of the 52s and asserted that the 52s had evolved from the boxing-based prison system Stato (Upstate New York Correctional Facility). Interviewees also claimed that the urban gangsters of the 1950s and 1960s abided by ethical warrior principles similar to Constellation 52's C.O.D.E: 'character, order, discipline, and equality' [http://52blocks.blogspot.com/2009_01_01_archive.html]. Establishing the latter was crucial to the 'rehabilitation' of the outlaw system as a tool for building a community movement.

Directed by Kamau Hunter, the formal association of Marks and Big K with Yasin was indicated by the DVD's being labeled a Blockstar/Fwape/Bartendaz Production. *Framing 52* is an abbreviated print reiteration of points made in *Break the Glass* with written commentary by Marks and photographs by Hunter. The 2007 printing credits these two as authors. A subsequent printing [2008] adds Big K and Yasin as co-authors. 2008 was the point at which the consortium organized Constellation 52 Blocks Combat and Fitness.

Constellation 52 Combat and Fitness offered training seminars open to the public regardless of race and continued to produce books, documentaries, and instructional DVDs on boxing-based 52s. In the re-invented 52s, techniques are built using a toolkit consisting of boxing drills, dance moves, and boxing equipment. Physical attributes (strength, endurance, flexibility) are developed through the bodyweight-based exercises that are Yasin's riff on exercise protocols developed over the years utilizing the minimal equipment available in prison yards, cells, school playgrounds, and inner city parks.

Implementing the 52s aesthetic, Yasin added lateral movements and bicycling legs to the conventional vertical up and down of the pull-up, for example. These modifications bring additional muscle groups into play and intensify the basic movement. They also add style and performance to the most standard, old-school calisthenics, just as the 52s adds flash to the boxing paradigm. Like the re-framed 52s, these exercises are based on an outcaste model, prison training, and what have been called 'Thug Workouts'. And, like the re-framed 52s, the intent is to convert negative to positive. This is obvious in the inspirational lectures that Yasin serves up along with demanding workout routines. He even reinvented the word 'THUG' to become an acronym for 'talented humans under great stress' [Daniel Marks, personal communication, 2010]. This alliance represented the most ambitious effort to date to document and revitalize JHR, the 52s, dance, physical culture, and related practices in African-American cultural history.

Constellation 52 benefitted inadvertently from the rising popularity of MMA. Indeed, indicative of a unique back-and-forth transmission, the early UFCs had fueled an interest in JHR and the 52s as 'ultimate martial arts', while years later, as the UFC and MMA were becoming more mainstream, fledgling MMA fighter Rashad Evans sought out the 52s in search of an 'edge'. In 2005, Evans was introduced to the 52s by Marks and Thomas Lomax a few months before joining the cast of Season 2 of the Spike TV competitive reality series *The Ultimate Fighter* (which he would go on to win before eventually becoming a UFC champion in 2008). Evidence that Constellation 52 had gained traction (primarily via YouTube clips) not only as self-defense and African-American heritage but also as physical culture and combat sport training is signified by

the release of *Best Hands for MMA* in 2009. The DVD featured a video testimonial by Rashad Evans and the statement that '52 Blocks is the best dirty boxing and inside fighting for MMA' [2009, back cover].

A subsequent DVD titled *Changing of the Guard* represents a significant turning point for Constellation's interpretation of the 52s. The contents of the DVD, therefore, deserve detailed consideration. As Daniel Marks asserts in the promotion for the DVD, 'it ends a chapter and starts with Constellation' [*Promotion for Changing of the Guard* 5/22/10]. The work is intended to pay tribute to those ancestors and ancestral arts that have gone before, allowing the Constellation 52 'family' to move forward as a new entity that preserves the positive element of the past while distancing itself from the negative image that came with practicing an underground outlaw VMA.

Taking inventory of the African-descended VMAs in the Americas, from those well-known (capoeira) to the less familiar (*garrote, cocobale, mani*), *Changing of the Guard* opens with the assertion that there has been less information available on the Black VMAs of the U.S. than anywhere in the Western hemisphere. The film addresses this ignorance by fleshing out the history, in turn, of 200 years of boxing (from the plantation to the prize ring): Stato, Jailhouse, and the Fifty-two Hand Blocks. Like *Break the Glass*, it is rich in oral history. Going even further than its predecessor, however, *Changing of the Guard* includes legends of the streets and beyond, such as Happy ('Robot') Crump, a 1970s karate competitor and dance innovator, and King Saladin, a reputed student of the notorious 52s fighter Mother Dear.

While the relationship of the 52s to hip hop and break dancing has been discussed by the members of Constellation and elsewhere [Green 2012], consideration of the ties between JHR and the blues among other musical traditions of the 1950s and 1960s sets *Changing of the Guard* apart from the pack. Through the comments of their interlocutors the film-makers explore the code of honor that prevailed before gangs turned to guns. *Changing of the Guard* was made, we learn, to 'preserve and serve' this embodied cultural heritage art. While remaining acutely aware of the history of their art, with this film Constellation 52 announced their intent, as Marks declares, to 'move on'.

In 2012, Constellation 52 Combat and Fitness reorganized as Constellation 52 Global (G52G) in a partnership including Marks, Big K, and Yasin. While not neglecting the 52s' cultural background, the current agenda increasingly focuses on fitness and combat. Their global outreach has had its greatest success in Brazil and Finland, and the combat has had direct applications to boxing and MMA. By December 2013, Yasin was no longer associated with C52G and turned his energies to developing his own fitness and self-improvement programs such as the Bartendaz, Life Is Movement, and G.I.A.N.T. (Growing Is a Noble Thing). As of 2016, the forces behind C52G are Marks, Big K, and Mike Djangali.

REFERENCES

- Abrahams, Roger D. 1983. *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bibb, Henry. 1969 [1850]. 'Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave', in *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup*, edited by Gilbert Osofsky. New York: Harper and Row.
- Century, Douglas. 1999. *Street Kingdom: Five Years inside the Franklin Avenue Posse*. New York: Warner Books.
- Century, Douglas. 2001. 'Ghetto Blasters: Born in Prison, Raised in the 'hood, the Deadly Art of 52 Blocks is Brooklyn's Baddest Secret', *Details* 19.9 [August], 77-79.
- Darling, Ann and James Perryman. 1974. 'Karate Behind Bars: Menace or Means of Spiritual Survival', *Black Belt* [July], 16-21.
- Dempsey. 1999. 'Jailhouse Rock Info'. Available at: <http://stickgrappler.tripod.com/ug/jhr1.html>.
- Frazier, Diallo. 2003. *Revelations of a Warrior*. Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing.
- Frazier, Diallo. 2014. *The Tao of 52: The Discovery of the Lost Science*. Self-published: CreateSpace.
- Gonzales, Ambrose E. 1922. *Tales of the Black Border: Gullah Stories of the Carolina Coast*. Columbia, SC: The State Company.
- Green, Thomas A. 1981. 'Folklore and Ethnic Identity in Tigua Nativism', in *And Other Neighborly Names*, edited by Roger D. Abrahams and Richard Bauman. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 226-251.
- Green, Thomas A. 2003. 'Freeing the Afrikan Mind', in *Martial Arts in the Modern World*, edited by Thomas A. Green and Joseph R. Svinth. Westport, CT: Praeger. 229-248.
- Green, Thomas A. 2004. 'African Roots of the Martial Arts: An Interview with Kilindi Iyi', *InYo: The Journal of Alternative Perspectives on the Martial Arts*. Available at: http://ejmas.com/jalt/2004jalt/jcsart_green_1104.html.
- Green, Thomas A. 2010. '52 Hand Blocks/Jailhouse Rock', in *Martial Arts of the World: An Encyclopedia of History and Innovation*, edited by Thomas A. Green and Joseph R. Svinth. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 25-31.
- Green, Thomas A. 2012. 'Sick Hands and Sweet Moves: Aesthetic Dimensions of a Vernacular Martial Art', *Journal of American Folklore* 125, 286-303.
<http://doi.org/bjpw>
- Green, Thomas A. 2013. 'White Men Don't Flow: Embodied Aesthetics of the Fifty-two Handblocks', in *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Carnal Ethnography*, edited by Raúl Sánchez García and Dale C. Spencer. London: Anthem Press, 125-140.
- Gwaltney, John L. 1981. *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*. New York: Random House.
- Hinton, William and D'Arcy Rahming. 1994. *Men of Steel Discipline: The Official Oral History of Black Pioneers in the Martial Arts*, edited by Jennifer H. Baarman. Chicago: Modern Bu-jutsu.
- Kouri, Christopher. 1992. *The Search for Knockin' and Kickin'*. Unpublished thesis. African-American Studies Department: Yale University.
- Kurchak, Sarah. 2016. 'Gary Busey: Actor, Reality Show Winner, Black Belt'. *Fightland Blog*. Available at: <http://fightland.vice.com/blog/gary-busey-actor-reality-show-winner-black-belt>.
- Linton, Ralph. 1943. 'Nativistic Movements', *American Anthropologist* 45, 230-240.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/aa.1943.45.2.02a00070>
- Marks, Daniel. 2007. *Break the Glass: The Official 52 Hand Blocks Documentary*. Blockstar/Fwape/Bartendaz Production.
- Marks, Daniel. 2007. *Framing 52 Constellations*. Blockstar/Fwape/Bartendaz.
- Marks, Daniel and Kamau Hunter. 2007. *Boxing for Combat*. Blockstar/Fwape.
- Marks, Daniel, Kamau Hunter, Kawaun Adon Akhenoten VII, and Hassan Yasin. 2008. *Framing 52 Constellations*, second edition. Blockstar/Fwape/Bartendaz.
- Marks, Daniel, Kawaun Adon Akhenoten VII, and Hassan Yasin. 2009. *Best Hands for MMA*. Constellation.
- Marks, Daniel. 2010. *Changing of the Guard*. Constellation.

Muhammad, Calvin. 2014. 'Muslim Martial Arts Master Enshrined in Hall of Honor', *Final Call*. Available at: http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/National_News_2/article_101229.shtml

Newsome, Dennis. 2003. 'Jailhouse Rock'. Available at: <http://www.malandros-touro.com/jailhouserock.html>.

O'Neill, Terry. 1987. 'Terry O'Neill Interviews Mel Gibson', *Fighting Arts International*, 10-14.

Planet Capoeira. 2002. 'Interview with Contre-Mestre Preto-Velho'. Available at: <http://www.capoeira.com/planetcapoeira/view.jsp?section=Feature&viewArticle=116>.

Rath, Richard Cullen. 2000. 'Drums and Power: Ways of Creolizing Music in Coastal South Carolina and Georgia, 1730-1790', in *Creolization in the Americas*, edited by David Buissert and Steven G. Reinhardt. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 109-111.

Soet, John S. 2001. *Martial Arts around the World II*. Burbank, CA: Unique Publications.

Swedenburg, Ted. 1997. 'Islam in the Mix: Lessons of the Five-Percent'. Paper presented at the *Anthropological Colloquium*, University of Arkansas, February 19, 1997.

Taylor, Gerard. 2007. *Capoeira, the Jogo de Angola from Luanda to Cyberspace*. Berkeley, CA: Blue Snake Books.

Thompson, 1999 [1966]. 'An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance', in *Signifyin', Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African-American Expressive Culture*, edited by Gena Dagal Caponi. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 72-86.

Wallace, Anthony F. C. 1956. 'Revitalization Movements', *American Anthropologist* 58, 264-281.
<http://doi.org/b7scw2>

Wiggins, David. 1977. 'Good Times on the Old Plantation: Popular Recreations of the Black Slave in the Antebellum South, 1810-1860', *Journal of Sport History* 4, 260-284.

Wilson, Lee. 2009. 'Jurus, Jazz Riffs, and the Constitution of a National Martial Art in Indonesia'. *Body and Society* 15, 93-119.
<http://doi.org/bfdpq3>

World Beat Center. 2002a. World Beat Center classes. Available at: <http://www.worldbeatcenter.org/classes.shtml>.

World Beat Center. 2002b. African Reconnection Program. Available at: http://members.tripod.com/~worldbeat/WorldBeat_Center_African.html.

MARTIALARTSSTUDIES.ORG

TWITTER.COM/MASTUDIES

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

EDITORS

Paul Bowman
Benjamin N. Judkins

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Kyle Barrowman

To discuss publication or to submit
a paper please contact:

martial.arts.studies@gmail.com

EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch *University of York*
Stephen Chan *SOAS*
Greg Downey *Macquarie University*
D.S. Farrer *University of Guam*
Adam Frank *University of Central Arkansas*
Thomas A. Green *Texas A&M University*
T. J. Hinrichs *Cornell University*
Leon Hunt *Brunel University London*
Felipe P. Jocano Jr *University of the Philippines*
Gina Marchetti *Hong Kong University*
Meaghan Morris *The University of Sydney*
Daniel Mroz *University of Ottawa*
Meir Shahaar *Tel Aviv University*
Dale Spencer *Carleton University*
Douglas Wile *Alverno College*
Phillip Zarrilli *Exeter University, Emeritus*

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Martial Arts Studies is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.



The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Martial Arts Studies is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.
cardiffuniversitypress.org

Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/n.2016.10060

Martial Arts Studies

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths