

***Take Me Brown Girl!: A Study of the Subjugation and Liberation of Black Women in Capoeira Song***

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

The Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2020

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Capoeira, the Afro-Brazilian musical martial art of dance-fighting took the world by storm between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Characterized by improvised partnered acrobatics, the art of Capoeira has seen immense popularity reflected by the diverse population of practitioners globally. Practitioners of capoeira, known as *capoeiristas*, in the United States proportionately reflect the society of non-Black or non-Brazilian. My research deciphers the implications of underrepresentation of Black people in this specific Afro-diasporic artform. The representation begs the question *where is the Afro-ness in an Afro-Brazilian martial art?* Data suggests that classroom participation in Brazilian and American capoeira institutions continues to be split between men and women *capoeiristas*. Women still fail to be represented in leadership roles to the same capacity of their male counterparts. This study problematizes these polarities: *Why are there so few Black women representing capoeira in leadership roles?* Enslaved populations of Black men and women were equally present during the development and institutionalization of capoeira in colonial Brazil *so what happened to make Black women less visible in modern globalized renditions of capoeira?* My study analyzes the history of the representation of Black women in capoeira's visual and musical history to discern systemic mechanisms enacted by Brazilian Nationalism and sexist practices. Through my re-historicizing of Black women's history within capoeira, I assert that capoeira has effectively erased the voices of half of the practitioners that developed the art in its infancy. Furthermore, my study turns to

the tools that Black women in Brazil and the United States use to raise awareness for themselves and their causes. These tools include social media, educational institutions, and the comradery of identity politics to consolidate power lost through misogyny and colonialism. My study amplifies the voices of the marginalized who self-advocate for equitable representation and autonomy by mobilizing diasporic memory between Afro-Brazilian women masters, or *Mestras*, and Afro-identified students living in the United States. The strategic use of diasporic memory, technology, and colonial institutions (education and cultural tourism) are the modern tools Black women use to demonstrate their presence and power in twenty-first century capoeira.

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## Preface

Thank you to everyone involved in this project from its imaginings 10 years ago until the realization and final product. Thank you to my extended family for rooting for me all these years. Thank you to my brother, Chris (*Bravo*), for introducing me to capoeira 12 years ago. Your willingness to share your world with me sparked a type of joy I could never have imagined. To my parents, Audrey and Greg, thank you for supporting my curiosity about the world. Thank you for being pillars of support during the uncertainty of graduate school. Thank you to my advisors and colleagues in the Department of Music at the University of Pittsburgh, for your support, expertise, and guidance. To my advisor, Adriana Helbig, thank you for the countless hours you spent guiding me through academia, reading my work, and providing invaluable insight. John Bagnato, thank you for sharing the triumphs and hardships of Brazilian scholarship with me and for all your advice and support. Thank you to fellow capoeirista and advisor Luciano Tosta for your insight and support on this project. To the Portuguese teachers in Hispanic Languages and Literatures Department at the University of Pittsburgh, thank you for allowing me to audit class after class every semester. Ana Paula Carvalho, thank you for giving me every opportunity and resource to learn Portuguese at the University. Luana Reis, thank you for providing cultural insight, encouragement, support, and friendship. To my virtual teacher, Priscila Barbosa, thank you for helping me grow each and every day. To my capoeira teachers, *Mestres*, and *Mestras* who supported this project and offered their time and perspective. Special thanks to the capoeira communities and teachers that shaped me in Farmington Hills, Detroit, Ann Arbor, Kalamazoo, and Ypsilanti, Michigan. Thank you to capoeira schools in Rochester, New York; Washington

DC; Chicago, Illinois; and São Paulo, Brazil. Without the capoeira community, this work would not be possible. Thank you *Mestra* Marisa for sharing your life story. Thank you *Mestra* Janja for making equality in capoeira your life's work. Capoeira is forever in your debt. Thank you for sharing the history of political struggle in Capoeira Angola. *Mestra* Marisa and *Mestra* Janja are trailblazers. Lastly, thank you to all the women participants, my capoeira *camardinhas*, *minhas irmãs*. Thank you for sharing the *roda*, your homes, your lives, your struggles, your joy, and your stories. Thank you for being on the frontlines of change, even when it is not popular. Lastly, to my partner, Mike Krasoff, thank you for simply being there each and every day.

## 1.0 Introduction

The spread of capoeira outside of Brazil to the remainder of Latin America, North America, Africa, Europe, and Asia resulted in the proliferation of the Afro-Brazilian practice beyond the inception of the once-vilified game in nineteenth century Rio de Janeiro. Reconciling the need for liberation of African-descended Brazilians with the desire to model Brazil's republic after its European forefathers crippled the nation as it struggled to move forward. Emancipation in Brazil left the country with a disenfranchised, marginalized, and vilified Black population who were left out of the creation of a modern Brazil, while holding on to their cultural products, like capoeira, that are markers of Brazilian identity as we know it. Among these cultural artifacts and practices are syncretic religious practices like *candomblé* and music like *samba*. The United States also has a parallel history of Black populations enduring slavery, while simultaneously providing the country with the labor to stimulate the economy and cultural artifacts and practices that have become intertwined with what American-ness means in an era of globalization. While the conditions of slavery, racism, and nation-building in both countries have different contexts, they are inextricably bound in the subjugation of Black bodies and disavowal of Black intellectual property to be utilized and coopted by the State that habitually facilitates the erasure of Black experiences and Black voices. It is not through the mechanisms that distinguish Brazil from the United States, but through their histories that they become points of references to each other. My primary exploration in this dissertation is to look at the ways experiences of Black people in Brazil and the United States inform each other. Through the experiences of Black women in pre-established capoeira networks, women utilize technology to amplify their

messages of inclusion and activism as they contribute to the dissemination and circulation of capoeira knowledge within the African diaspora as well as between Brazil and the United States in the twenty-first century.

### *1.1 Insider/Outsider Fieldwork*

My goal is to examine the position of Afro-Brazilian women in capoeira, while acknowledging the diverse ways that women and women of color are making themselves heard. To do this, I had come to terms with the way my own identity complicates how I receive and interpret the knowledge given to me. The premise of this project is wanting to have access to voice and stories of women who look like me in capoeira. My position as a cis-gendered Black woman and the experiences that follow from those identities serve to relate to Afro-Brazilian women playing capoeira geared towards United States markets and audiences. My position as a United States citizen and as a non-Brazilian, despite my race and class, has some unintended position of power and authority as someone who aims to seek understanding but ultimately is removed from the Afro-Brazilian practitioners who learn and play capoeira in poverty and are excluded from these discussions, despite having more first-hand contact and accounts.<sup>1</sup>

Most of my knowledge on capoeira has been afforded to me by my position as a researcher. Access to journals, books, dissertations across many disciplines in English and Portuguese have given me entry to an understanding that resides beyond the folkloric methods of

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<sup>1</sup> Inkeri Aula, "Translocality and Afro-Brazilian Imaginaries in Globalised Capoeira," *Suomen Antropologi* vol 42 no. 1, (Spring 2017): 80.

passing down information between capoeira student and teacher. As a researcher, I became active in my pursuit of knowledge and could follow my curiosity with academic license instead of being dismissed if I asked a question on race or feminism at the end of training. Access to formal (that is, valid to academia) publications has been beneficial to a degree but has simultaneously put me back in the margins where I would be noticed taking photos or talking to teachers while traveling to events. Experiencing capoeira on both sides or on the fence as a researcher, participant, student in the *roda*, and an authority in the lecture hall took time to balance.<sup>2</sup> It takes understanding when to listen intently to advice on playing the berimbau or when to enter the discussion of which *Mestra* should be invited to the next women's event.

Throughout the process of piecing together this project and my fieldwork, the most significant observation about my positionality is recognizing that my intersectional identity as a Black woman is filtered through my nationality and my language. Reconciling that my ideas of feminism and membership in the African diaspora cannot be grafted upon Afro-Brazilian women's experiences as they carve out spaces for themselves in this martial art game. At the same time, there are similarities and parallels in which I hope to build upon in becoming an ally in sharing the stories of how a few *Mestras* and some of their students and other women of the African diaspora in the United States and in Brazil make their stories more permanent as capoeira practices rapidly spread throughout the globe. Instead of using difference to stagnate the conversation of Black womanhood in capoeira, I use it to build bridges and offer a space for

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley ed. *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives on Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008).

storytelling in a way that is often minimized by maleness, whiteness, and the commercialization of capoeira.

### *1.2 Theorizing Black Feminist Capoeira Scholarship*

Theoretical frameworks that ground my fieldwork to full illustrate the everyday realities of Black women capoeira practitioners are based on four interrelated bodies of literature: Afrodiasporic studies, Black feminist thought, the digital humanities, and capoeira scholarship. These differing works offer a look into the catalyst for making space for Black women in capoeira, nearly 30 years after capoeira's introduction to the United States popular culture and academic discourses.

Black feminist thought from the 1980s to the present day characterizes the conditions that Black women in the Americas are cognizant of to mobilize them/our-selves. Diasporic studies from the 1990s to the present day works congruently with a Black feminist framework, adding careful detail to how self-identification and belonging change through participation and performance of culture. The relationship between Black womanhood as well as performance and memory of Blackness through the diasporic connection are paramount to understanding the complexities of performing capoeira as a Black woman in the twenty-first century. The significant transition that capoeira has undergone between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has best been captured using social media, forums, and the social spaces that *capoeiristas* create for themselves. My fieldwork and participation in capoeira communities warrants incorporating digital and media studies to investigate how capoeira has been shaped in

the modern era—and more importantly how technology is situated within these established human networks.<sup>3</sup>

I respond by inserting the totality of Black women identities in white heteronormative and classist conversations about gender, gender roles, and women in society that have defined the first- and second- waves model of the feminism in the United States from the Seneca Falls Convention to the women's liberation movement of the 1970s <sup>4</sup> largely sparked by Betty Freidan's *the Feminine Mystique* (Freidan 1963), who was influenced by French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir and her book, *The Second Sex* (1949). Although, the “wave” metaphor that has and continues to define the ongoing fight for social and economic equity by women may not fully gather the nuance and complexities of the struggle of women as noted in Hewitt's work.<sup>5</sup> I propose the “wave” model has served the purpose of advancing the conversation on who has access to representation and who historically has not.

Black feminism as a movement in modernity is defined as an intersectional movement that accounts for the multiple identities that women reconcile to have a more equitable existence. Kimberlé Crenshaw's coining of the term *intersectional* in the 1989 law journal has had the staying power of 20 years but *intersectionality* as a concept has been enacted since the Black lesbian and queer feminist movement of the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Black lesbian feminism has

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<sup>3</sup> Tara McPherson, “Introduction: Media Studies and the Digital Humanities,” In *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2009), 119-12.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Nancy A Hewitt. *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum, University of Chicago Law School*. (Chicago, IL.1989), 139-168.

aimed to incorporate the totality of Black women's experience by expanding to expressive modes such as literature, poetry, and art.<sup>7 8</sup>

Black feminism opened the door for feminist discussions to account for more than just sex but race, gender, class, and performance of identities. Because Black feminism has been written about in opposition to white feminist “wave” models, intersectionality and Black feminism are often used interchangeably, resulting in misappropriating Black feminism for the “right” way to advance public and academic feminist discourses. In my view, Black feminism is not the gatekeeper to feminism but the key to understanding how a plethora of marginalized communities have a framework be heard within larger institutions. Black people and women are two of the most marginalized communities, which then becomes compounded when considering ability, the spectrum of gender identities, and class. Black feminism is not the gatekeeper, but they key to understanding the models of oppression. Black women may not be the most marginalized, but Black women and thus Black feminism as an institution has the largest visible membership of how oppression intersects. Distracting from the work that Black feminism can do for everyone is done in part by misaligning how Black feminism is beneficial for all marginalized communities. Disrupting the history of the wave model, as discussed in the Hewitt's edited volume on feminism, distracts from how Black feminism accounts for the variety of ways white feminism already silences.

I argue that Black feminism in capoeira, in Brazil and the United States, can begin a dialogue on the ways other marginalized communities are left out of the narrative. The work is

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Smith, “Toward A Black Feminist Literary Criticism,” *The Radical Teacher*, vol 1 no. 2 (March 1978): 20-27.

<sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. (New York, NY: Crossing Press, 1982).

not to suggest that Black women are the only marginalized but our history holds the key to understanding marginalization as an institution.

Feminist discourses for white feminism have shown to be transnational, and Black feminism has replicated the same solidarity towards Latin America, more specifically Afro-Latina and Afro-Brazilian perspectives. Exclusively Afro-Brazilian texts that focus on racial disparities in predominantly Black spaces in Brazil, like the state of Bahia.<sup>9</sup> Drawing upon the experiences and literature of other African American women like Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis becomes a roadmap and confirmation of solidarity for other Afro descended women in Brazil.<sup>10 11</sup> Afro-Brazilian women have aimed to create a new mode of understanding what empowerment looks like in societies that do not see nor hear Black women and their struggles ranging from political engagement, policy, social mobility, to healthcare.<sup>12</sup>

Afro-diasporic studies is amongst the largest framework used to interrogate the told and untold history of women in capoeira by looking at solidarity between Afro-descended women's work in Brazil and their effects in the United States and vice versa. Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* more than 25 years later captures the intricacies of displaced African communities in a global context.<sup>13</sup> Of interest to me in his argument for music as more than spiritual in his chapter "Jewels Brought from Bondage: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity." Despite the commonplace contemporary rejection of primitivism expressed by Euro-centric scholars of the

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<sup>9</sup> Silvana Santos Bispo, Dissertation, "Feminismos em Debate: Reflexões sobre a organização do movimento de mulheres Negras em Salvador (1978-1997)" (Universidade Federal da Bahia- UFBA, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Angela Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Kia Lily Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 207.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, England: Verso, 1993).

early twentieth century, like Adorno, it is worth reexamining the more-than-performative significance of Black music from the Diaspora as part of historicizing disrupted histories. Capoeira music is an example of what Gilroy refers to as metacommunication. This suggests Black culture is predicated on more than textuality and narrative. It encompasses nuance, gesture, and music.<sup>14</sup> I like to think of this as Black music specifically and Black culture generally. They respond to the disruption of non-Black interrogation and dismissal of all Black cultural practices, including existing peacefully pre-Trans-Atlantic Trade. Although Gilroy is less concerned with the meticulousness of music analysis and more the impact of cultural changes through interpretations and cultural judgements of authenticity, ethnomusicology serves as a more apt mode of continuing this conversation. In the introduction to the edited volume *The African Diaspora*, Ingrid Monson points to the weight imbued with Africanness; it is more than a monolith of Black musical artifacts but also the weight of the white supremacy that has defined Blackness through contrast.<sup>15</sup> These mechanisms of definition through difference as it relates to music impacts the reception and interpretation of Black music culture on a stratified level. This is my interest when it comes to the historic and contemporary uses of capoeira music in this moment of heightened globalized practices.

Gilroy and Monson help capture the intricacies of ever-changing uses and definitions of Blackness in the Trans-Atlantic world, but both omit one of the biggest groups of Afro-descended people in the West: Afro-Brazilians.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Ingrid Monson, *The African Diaspora* (Garland Publishing: New York, NY, 2000), 3.

There is a common omission of identities other than English-speaking countries like England, the United States, Ghana, or the Hispanic music cultures of Latin America. Kamari Maxine Clarke, Deborah A. Thomas, and contributors map out Blackness in its relation to whiteness, westerners, or proximity.<sup>16</sup> For Clarke and Thomas, globalization represents ongoing transformation as regards to uses of capital, technologies, communication, and conceptualization of place and space.<sup>17</sup> Despite this, they still carry the omission of the history of Black Brazilians and their contributions to carrying and maintaining remnants of the diaspora, despite very similar historical circumstances as African-Americans. The challenges of literature associated with the African-Diaspora is marked by the proximity to Western values, not just European aesthetics as with Falola's discussion of Benin, Ghana (the Gold Coast) and Yoruban histories and cultural artifacts.<sup>18</sup> There are benefits to demonstrating a historical transformation, but their missed narratives of the whole of the diaspora make for assumptions about which types of Africaniety and Blackness are worth of discussing and remembering.

My work heavily relies on Brazilian discourses of race and nationality in the context of modernity as it relates to the circulation of ideas about gender within the capoeira community. Roquinaldo Ferreira emphasizes the necessity of centering Black people in their own stories while re-historicizing the relationship between Angola and Brazil—which often is taken for granted, despite the fact that the majority of arrived enslaved people were taken from Central Africa (present day Angola) and brought to Brazil, and that this system of servitude continued

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<sup>16</sup> Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah A. Thomas, *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Productions of Blackness* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Toyin Falola, *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity, and Globalization* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013).

long beyond the history of slavery in the United Kingdom or the United States.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Ferreira asserts that this long-practiced system of oppression fortified cultural links from colonial Portugal through Angola and Brazil instead of sparking separation.<sup>20</sup> As an addendum to Gilroy's assertion of the Black Atlantic as a community that is bound through trauma and continues to be fortified through culture as expressed in opposition to white-Eurocentricity, Ferreira takes a less Euro-centric approach and centers the discourse on affect divorced of the global north and Europe.<sup>21</sup> More than a new way to reshape Atlantic discourses, Ferreira expands it to the largest affected communities, Angola and Brazil. These connections and histories inform the way capoeira practitioners understand self and resistance.

Ferreira re-historicizes the slave trade's history, politics, and players with respect to Angola and Brazil. Michael Hanchard's works extrapolates the impacts of Brazil's contentious history with race and politics, informing the modern era of fighting for equity. Hanchard discusses the rise of the *Movimento Negro Unificado* or Unified Black Movement and the potential problems that stifle political engagement for Afro-Brazilians, namely "racial hegemony" or the idea that race is secondary to a homogenized, nationalistic Brazil.<sup>22</sup> Hanchard's research adjusts thinking about Brazil to include the country's history into discourses on racial politics—specifically during the height of political engagement post-1988 which marked the centennial of the abolition of slavery in Brazil—reframing the extent to which Afro-Brazilians can assert autonomy apart from the desires of the Brazilian State. Hanchard continues

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<sup>19</sup> Roquinaldo Ferreira, *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil during the Era of the Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The "Movimento Negro" of Rio De Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil 1945-1988* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

with the notion that there are more commonalities between members of the African diaspora in the Americas.<sup>23</sup> This hypothesis is also supported by Edward E. Telles in his contribution to the volume. He makes clear the mechanism that contributes to the differing treatment of race relations between Brazil and the United States. Afro-Brazilian culture becomes simply Brazilian while African American and American culture create ethnic markers of ancestry and segregation within a racial caste system.<sup>24</sup> The edited volume continues to argue that despite the differing treatment of race in Brazil and the United States, Anti-Blackness has been at the center of the histories of each country and political engagement is the path that many individuals of African-decent have chosen to go forward. Telles further explores the significance of race in Brazil, illuminating the fact that Race and Blackness have always dictated social and economic mobility in the Americas, a feature not exclusive to the United States.<sup>25</sup>

Hanchard's *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* further expands the notion of diaspora participation in politics, particularly between Brazil and the United States. He explains that this agency, the freedom to examine the nuance of various discourse represented in the African diaspora, is precisely what mobilizes Black political thought today.<sup>26</sup> Hanchard maintains that politics does not function independent of cultural forms, yet they operate with distinct borders. There is no option to abstain from politics for members of the diaspora.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Hanchard, In *Racial Politics in Contemporary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Edward Telles, "Ethnic Boundaries and Political Mobilization Among African Brazilians: Comparisons with the U.S. Case," *Racial Politics in Contemporary* (1999): 84.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Hanchard, *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 14.

More than filling the void of contemporary discourse on Afro-Brazilians political displays in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Hanchard supplements a woefully lacking academic discourse that places Afro-Brazilians and African-Americans in the same historical cohort that is subject to and operating against some of the same colonial powers with different methodology. Brazilian history has advocated for denouncing Blackness through Brazilian-ness and American history has sought the isolationist route by providing the lesser than amenities of the American dream. The end goal of both is the silencing of Black voices. Hanchard's work in politics, race, diaspora, and modernity reconceptualizes the commonalities between Afro-Brazilians and African Americans with regards to moving beyond Anti-Black policies clouded and obscured by nationalist rhetoric. Brazil and the United States have always shared echoes of the similar types of subjugation by their respective colonist predecessors, literature and ethnic studies has been late to explore the extent to which this affects members of the diaspora until the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. I position my research on capoeira to serve as another example for the importance of diasporic connection and memory over identification with country or nationality.

My readings on the African diaspora begin broadly and ultimately filter down to express the intricacies of self-representation of race, place, ethnicity, nationality, and modernity to reveal the variety of approaches individuals take to reclaim personal histories and heritages in the twenty-first century. Outlining the community of the diaspora and its struggles with Gilroy is imperative, it is worth acknowledging how others have continued the conversation by examining specific types of movements and alliances that have developed more recently. Additionally, speaking about the African diaspora is to commemorate the history of struggle and gain in the twentieth century. The works presented in this section explore history and theory and continue to

comment on political movements that have stemmed from being an expert in the conditions of Afrodiasporic oppression required to speak truth to power. The next concern following the trajectory is to understand the tools or the mechanisms that allow Afro-descended people, and in this study- women, to connect and find a unified front to continue to mobilize their messages. Hanchard's work alone only takes us until the early twenty-first century, but modes of communication and political engagement have shifted drastically with the advent of social media.

What has set the precedent for this study is the novel ways that communities of Black women have access to capoeira, the world, and each other that historically has not existed. Virtual communities, as we have come to know them, were in their infancy in the 1990s, around the same time that capoeira gained notoriety in the United States. The convergence of these two facts created a situation for Black women to connect in spaces that have less danger and more capacity for meaningful interactions. The digital humanities have proven useful to understand how the intangible and virtual play long-standing and impactful roles in the real world. "People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind." <sup>28</sup>

The in-depth and meaningful spaces created through the internet become exponentially valuable considering the well-documented violence that is done to Black bodies, women's bodies, and the bodies of people that participate in a martial art. Rheingold's in depth view on the impact of virtual communities suggests an important implication for global grassroots activist

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<sup>28</sup> Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993).

movements for causes that were previously dismissed as being unrelated and/or unimportant as is the case of Black women's experiences in capoeira. Since the early 1990s, it has become increasingly apparent how productive organizing on the internet can be, as social justice movements have become mobilized and realized—from the Arab Spring, to Occupy Wall Street, according to Castells' account.<sup>29</sup> Castells' work is both useful and problematic as none of his case studies highlight how Black people in the diaspora or in Sub-Saharan Africa have used the internet to find hope or solidarity in a world that historically and continually promotes anti-Blackness. However, his work can encompass such movements as Black Lives Matter and #elenão in Brazil. Both have highlighted the importance of remembering Black voices and fighting against fascism, especially with the current Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, who has made disparaging and racist comments against Brazil's Black population and history. The digital humanities lack examples of Black community, social uplift, mobility, and organizing, further highlighting how the discipline has historically left out Black people. This goes beyond what scholars in the digital humanities and other studies regard as the "digital divide" or the lack of access to technology for Black and/or poor communities. The question in the digital humanities has shifted from, who has access to these technologies to How are people using these technologies? It has become apparent that the literature is more interested in prioritizing specific types of political and internet and social media engagement over others.

Social media and grassroots movements play an important role in how underrepresented communities engage. Social media provides a space for individuals and communities to curate

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<sup>29</sup> Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012).

their own experiences and engage in their communities without the same ramifications as real-world interactions. Despite increasing controversy surrounding Facebook and other popular social media platforms with misusing and abusing access to data, these tools have become integral and synonymous with political engagement for marginalized communities.

I will now discuss the last group of literature that informed my thinking about the role of capoeira before I began academic inquiry. My start, as with most capoeira students in the United States, was with Nestor Capoeira's trilogy about the history, philosophy, music, and etiquette of capoeira play. *The Little Book of Capoeira* (1995), *Capoeira: Roots of the Dance-Fight-Game* (2001), and *A Street-Smart Song: Capoeira Philosophy and Inner Life* (2006) were my introduction to the literary history of capoeira. First published for Brazilian practitioners in Portuguese between 1981 and 1992, the books capture the legacy of capoeira to orient new players to the intricacies and nuances of practice. While these books can be read independently of each other, I took them all in together while I began my first year of capoeira in 2008. Nestor Capoeira's work reinforced my original notions about capoeira, that it is more than movements and instrumental performance—that it carries a historical and philosophical way of being. My intellectual curiosities directed me to more academic pursuits on capoeira in both English and Portuguese. Through my studies as a practitioner, it occurred to me that the Brazilian dance-fight-game, as Nestor puts it, had become a trending topic of intellectual pursuit in the United States because of its complex and intertwined components. Disciplines that have taken to capoeira studies are most notably anthropology, sociology, history (including Africana studies), and music.

Another work that captures the intricacies of capoeira while being accessible to general audiences is J. Lowell Lewis' work which follows his ethnographic field work in Salvador,

Bahia between 1981 and 1983.<sup>30</sup> Lewis' work is full of thick description of the circumstance, position, and atmosphere of capoeira events that he attends as he carries out his fieldwork through participant/observation methodologies. Interspersed through his descriptions of capoeira are lyrics that are sung during the time of these descriptions. In the same style of *Mestre* Nestor Capoeira, there are sketches that capture the method of movement, usually with two partners—one as dark and one that is outlined to represent white—so readers can discern players and can connect capoeira descriptions when replicated by human forms. Lewis' work, moreover, remains a staple to English language academics because of its accessibility in outlining the stratified layers of importance of capoeira with the *jogar*, *tocar*, and *brincar* types of “play”. A single element, like the idea of “play”, can be represented in a variety of forms, much like the Portuguese language would represent. We play capoeira games with our bodies (*jogar*), we play capoeira instruments (*tocar*), and we play tricks or jokes on each other with *brincar*. The concept of play embodies the physical, performative, and psychological elements of capoeira interaction between bodies. The accessibility and thoroughness of Lewis' anthropological study paved the way for other scholarship concerning the practices of Brazilian capoeira.

As capoeira gained more notoriety, historians began to closely trace the trajectory of capoeira culture and practices in Brazil. Matthias Röhrig Assunção dispels myths and narratives associated with the folkloric side of capoeira, while noting distinct time periods of transitions of capoeira.<sup>31</sup> Assunção and Maya Talmon-Chvaicer both complicate the notion of the game being fixed in Brazilian history, but they each capture the fluidity of migration caused by historical

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<sup>30</sup> J. Lowell Lewis, *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> Matthias Röhrig Assunção, *Capoeira: The History of An Afro-Brazilian Martial Art* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2005).

events which affect how capoeira went from a Black practice to homogenized, State-recognized, and celebrated global practices.<sup>32</sup> These texts are complimentary and integral to understanding how Black bodies and cultural artifacts have forever been politicized and co-opted as Brazil fortified power to become the strongest nation in Latin America from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Capoeira's history has been told through a Brazilian lens but also through the lens of the African diaspora. T.J. Desch Obi uses capoeira as a case-study among others to make a case for the African diaspora's movement disciplines being represented in the West.<sup>33</sup> Desch uses language connections, movement practices and rituals, and timelines to draw connections between practices in North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

Obi's methods of using capoeira as a case study also works in other methods of capoeira literature, specifically in music studies on the diaspora. Another scholar who is a cornerstone of capoeira studies in the United States is Peter Fryer. Fryer follows the musical practices of ethnic groups from Central and Western Africa and provides a compelling narrative for how they have permutated to be staples in modern Brazilian society.<sup>34</sup> Fryer's work was a model for me, for how music can be a useful tool to interrogate history and culture. He exposes how told and untold stories of performative culture is taken for granted. Music studies generally and ethnomusicology specifically have been at the forefront of investigating capoeira practices. This

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<sup>32</sup>Maya Talmon-Chvaicer, *The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup>T.J Desch Obi. *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Arts in the Atlantic World*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Fryer. *Rhythms of Resistance: African Musical Heritage in Brazil*. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

is primarily due to the lead instrument, the *berimbau*, and the ways that it has become symbolically linked to the sport not only as an icon but sonically as well.<sup>35</sup>

There has been an ideological shift in the way North Americans and Westerners speak about capoeira. Initially the anthropological studies focused on embodiment, corporeality, and learning capoeira framed through Brazilian practices as they begin to expand throughout the United States and Western Europe.<sup>36 37 38</sup> A new generation of capoeira scholars are examining the role of globalization, race, and nationhood as they intersect for professional *capoeiristas* to find a foothold in the business of selling culture while new American and Western audiences grapple with learning the multifaceted, centuries-old practice. An increasingly popular trend in capoeira scholarship in North America is to examine identity politics as they relate to race for non-Brazilian practitioners who identify ethnically with capoeira, moving away from the exclusively Brazilian nationalistic framing of capoeira, but more broadly focused on specific identities, like West-African capoeira practices and Black embodiment of capoeira.<sup>39 40</sup> I situate my work with scholars who prioritize the interpretations and performativity of Black bodies and voices in contemporary capoeira practices. Much of North American and Western scholarship of capoeira has focused on new communities learning and engaging in play while re-marginalizing

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<sup>35</sup> Galm, Eric A. *The Berimbau: Soul of Brazilian Music* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Greg Downey. *Learning Capoeira: Lessons In Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Katya Wesolowski. "Professionalizing Capoeira: The Politics of Play in Twenty first-Century Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives*. (March 2012): 82-92.

<sup>38</sup> Sara Delamont. "The Smell of Sweat and Rum: Teacher Authority in Capoeira Classes," *Ethnography and Education* 1, no. 2 (June 2006): 161-175.

<sup>39</sup> Celina de Sá, Dissertation "Becoming Diasporically African: The Cultural Politics of West African Capoeira" (Pennsylvania State University, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Laurence Robitaille, "Promoting Capoeira, Branding Brazil: A Focus on the Semantic Body." In *Black Music Research Journal* Vol 34, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 229-254.

the stories of ancestral practitioners. My work situated with the most recent scholars that addresses Blackness in capoeira, with the added dimension of gender.

### *1.3 Methods*

I began capoeira in May 2008 in a small studio in the Farmington Hills, Michigan. By family invitation, I participated in my first capoeira workshop and decided I would continue the practice. Looking back on that day, I had no idea that my future PhD fieldnotes would be informed by my reflections in many capoeira classes. This is how my time in capoeira and perusing my PhD has materialized. My life as a capoeira student has become my fieldnotes. My experiences are a departure from the typical researcher entering the field formally through the acquisition of grants. This path has been hard fraught and the resources that I have relayed on have been primarily from my family, individuals within the system of academia, and through the network of *capoeiristas* and Brazilian women I have met along the way.

It is not a coincidence that my fieldwork reflects my life and vice versa. Fortunately, the path of an American *capoeirista* often mimics the path of a field researcher. After formally making the decision to join capoeira, I was told to get a notebook and write down everything. From then on, all my experiences in capoeira were documented. The *Mestres* I met, the *capoeiristas* I met, the new songs I learned, the notation of the *toques*<sup>41</sup> on the *berimbau*—everything new. Documenting my capoeira life became integral to the lived and embodied

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<sup>41</sup> rhythms

experience. In the late 2000s, social media networks were in their infancy. Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube were each less than five years old. Acquiring capoeira knowledge for young non-Brazilian and non-Portuguese speaking students was difficult because of the language barrier and the lack of instantly accessible resources. All we had were our teachers. New *capoeiristas* were always “in the field” and attending as many capoeira events as possible. Capoeira conferences and *batizados*<sup>42</sup> were essential to gaining first-hand knowledge. It was a time to get “authentic” knowledge when Brazilian *Mestres* would be present. It was important to consume capoeira knowledge faster than your peers.

My dissertation follows a similar path as these experiences. My fieldwork is taken from my notes as a beginner *capoeirista* before entering academia and develops by accruing more resources. Over the next decade, I changed universities and played capoeira in different cities and states in the U.S. I made more Brazilian friends and I took more Portuguese classes. I was so determined to be a part of capoeira even when I was away from my home school. I went so far as to insist on Portuguese as my research language and take a translation proficiency exam even though my university did not offer Portuguese classes. I financed trips to Brazil through family intervention and support. During this time, the networks for capoeira culture and diffusion are growing stronger and faster as technologies advance and capoeira becomes synonymous with Brazilian sport. I began to seek out people like me in capoeira, women in capoeira, Black people in capoeira, and other intersectional identities in capoeira. From the beginning, I craved capoeira that reflected my experience. After all, capoeira had always been “pitched” to me as an Afro-

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<sup>42</sup> Literally translates to baptism. *Batizados* are an indoctrination ceremony into capoeira where newly inducted students play against high level practitioners for their first belt.

Brazilian martial art. Playing capoeira in Midwestern and suburban settings stifled the Afro-diasporic connection that I sought. This study comes out of that initial void.

Many of the participants that appear in this study are women that I have met as a result of seeking out and traveling to exclusively women's capoeira conferences or events. There are a few participants I have known for most of my time as a *capoeirista*. Others learned of my project through social media. My criteria for participation of interlocutors is simple: each participant must be self-identified as part of the Afro-diaspora, a woman, and a *capoeirista*. Each criterion is designed not to exclude other identities but to acknowledge those left behind in formal discussion of capoeira's impact on a national and global level. Additionally, this study from the position of intersectional feminism aims to provide space in the future for talking about other marginalized identities in capoeira.

My field methods are the product of learning how to be a student in capoeira and a graduate student in an American academic university system. My methods specifically are as follows: I would speak to teachers, I would attend classes, and I would follow the trends and shifts in discourses on social media as my channels become dominated by Brazilian news and trending topics in capoeira. Essentially, I utilized all the tools at my disposal. When I would learn a new song, I take notes. When a song was sung gleefully with particularly sexist lyrics, I would pay attention to who started to sing this song and the reaction of the participants around the *roda*. I began to travel to events with women that I saw regularly in capoeira, paying attention to the special guests and the theme of the event. I especially cared about events that focused on the importance of Afro-Brazilians and women in capoeira—bonus points if both identities, the intersection of Black womanhood in capoeira—was the event theme. Despite my identification as a Black woman in capoeira and wanting to hear stories and experiences of

women like me, I am not an Afro-Brazilian woman. I identify heavily as a capoeira practitioner and as a Black woman, but I recognize that my identity as a student in the United States complicates how I mediate and interpret information. As a result of my intersectional identity, I must maintain a self-awareness of my place as an ally, advocate, marginalized person, student, and researcher. The next section divulges more of these struggles of insider/outsider positionality during my fieldwork and research.

#### *1.4 Contributions to Ethnomusicology*

When I began this project in 2012, I knew that I wanted to center people like me: Black women in capoeira. I envisioned that by the time the project has come to fruition, there would be more studies that prioritized the marginal and intersectional communities of capoeira. While the research on capoeira knowledge has been prescriptive or descriptive, many have failed to acknowledge the parts of the whole.<sup>43</sup> The studies that followed philosophized and theorized what it means to be a capoeira practitioner in a specific geographic space (primarily Brazil) or through corporeal space. While these works have greatly contributed to the body of capoeira literature and how we know what it means and what it takes to become a practitioner of the sport, I want to contribute by allowing marginalized Black women to speak to an English audience and also by emphasizing the extent to which capoeira culture is globalizing rapidly. The second of my two goals is important because of the more recent trend in ethnomusicology to decolonize the

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<sup>43</sup> J. Lowell Lewis, *Ring of Liberation* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

field. Capoeira as a living practice contributes to ethnomusicology by problematizing the way we see outsiders of communities and insiders-no longer are the most knowledgeable or willing are not “away” or “othered” but members of our own communities.

My work will also contribute to ethnomusicology by serving as an example on how to contextualize living traditions that have existed for centuries but are continuously and rapidly altered by the modern era. My most important hope for my research in ethnomusicology is that, despite the trend to research and publish quickly, that we resist the urge to leave out voices that do not have the ability to compete with the hegemonic structures that keep them from competing. Women in capoeira is a primary example of this. After the scaffolding of capoeira schools and structure and gameplay was laid out, and the philosophy was applied, many moved on from capoeira as a trend in anthropology and ethnomusicology. This study is a testament that there is always something more, another story to be told, and another perspective.

### *1.5 Chapter Summaries*

Chapter 1 details the historical perceptions of Black women in capoeira. Utilizing cues from art history and military accounts of capoeira as Brazil transitioned from being a Portuguese colony with chattel slavery to a Republic vying for power in Latin America in the nineteenth century. While the official history of women of color in capoeira is largely underreported, many images and songs associated with prototypical capoeira culture display women of color in the peripheries of the practice. Capoeira scholars like Matthais Röhrig Assunção, Maya Talmon-Chvacier, and Peter Fryer show that women of color have always been participants in capoeira-

adjacent ceremonies and cultural activities—most notably *Candomblé*. The memory of capoeira frequently depicts the silent but present population of Afro-Brazilian women. Chapter 1 utilizes historical clues through images of Johann Moritz Rugendas that circulated during the eighteenth and nineteenth century in conjunction with capoeira song texts. Together, my analysis characterizes the extent to which women of color in colonial Brazilian society and early practices of capoeira were permitted to participate. In addition to analysis of images and text, I also investigate lesser known figures in capoeira that have gained notoriety through relationships to other prominent Masters of capoeira.

Much of this section on lyrical content and characterization of women is guided by the framework of the virgin/whore complex. Due to the deeply spiritual and religious nature of Brazilian society and the amalgamation of ethnic identities that make up the Brazilian population today, it is paramount to investigate the way that spirituality affects perceptions of women and how these women have been permitted to participate and shape the history of capoeira culture as a whole. Chapter 1 is the building block to understand the complexities of misogyny in capoeira. The goal is to acknowledge all the women that have been spoken about in the history of the dance-game of capoeira.

Chapter 2 relies on my fieldwork, interviews, and the stories from the perspectives of Black women in capoeira. The women that graciously participated range from capoeira students to instructors. These women are all members of the African diaspora and reside in either Brazil or the United States. This section of my study aims to show the diversity of Black women who participate in capoeira but also the unity of their goals and vision for capoeira. While much of discourse divides between *Capoeira Angola* and *Capoeira Regional* institutions, I depart from most. I will acknowledge the styles of each interlocutor. My goal is to emphasize that—despite

stylistic, philosophical differences, and general diversity—Black women in capoeira tend to lean towards the same goal. Much of the argument of my dissertation lies in advocacy of Black women in capoeira regardless of education, school affiliation, rank, citizenship, or years within the practice. The shared idea that capoeira should be equitable, inclusive, and safe is the result of mutual generational trauma that Black women have endured, which continues to be upheld by modern institutions.

Chapter 3 explores the complex relationships between race, gender, and cultural commodity through the story of *Mestra* Marisa, founder of the Gingarte Capoeira school in Chicago, Illinois. Much of the theoretical framework is predicated on the reality that capoeira practitioners often subsist through selling their culture to Westerners. Despite the negative connotation of “selling culture,” these exchanges there are mutual beneficiaries, an idea emphasized by George Yúdice.<sup>44</sup> Other opportunities become available through this cultural exchange, including the safe space for advocacy and self-realization. This chapter also explores consciousness raising between Afro-Brazilian and African American ideas and perceptions of race in the Americas and how they inform each other. Drawing on these parallels, I provide examples of women *capoeiristas* utilize tools of resistance inherent in diasporic iterations of Black feminism—and not necessarily Black feminism of a respective country. This illustrates how capoeira performance and participation for Black Women is just as much about diasporic resistance.

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<sup>44</sup> George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

Chapter 4 situates capoeira in this cultural moment of hyper circulation of capoeira practices and rituals through social media. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have unforeseeably shifted the way *capoeiristas* share knowledge, align, learn, and communicate. My fieldwork is significant in this chapter, exemplifying how virtual communities play a role in organizing both political and social events while advocating for a more equitable capoeira. With the recent availability of incredible amounts of capoeira content, more niche communities have emerged highlighting diverse identities. Chapter 4 highlights the new frontier of advocacy, membership, and discourse between marginalized communities in the virtual world of capoeira while reiterating strong diasporic ties between Black feminist movements in Brazil and the United States. Chapter 5 is centered on a co-founder of the Grupo Nzinga capoeira school, *Mestra* Janja. The account of *Mestra* Janja's rise to activism in academic and public spheres happens concurrently with her political engagement in capoeira. Against the backdrop of the *Movimento Negro Unificado* movement in Brazil, Janja's political engagement part of a broader social and political movement aimed to push back against systemic racism and sexism in Brazil. With these tenants, Janja and her collages began a capoeira school and soon thereafter a global empire advocating for equity in capoeira. *Mestra* Janja's story encapsulates intersectionality in capoeira, academic advocacy, and activism.

## 2.0 Historicizing Black Women in Capoeira

In the visual and performative practice of capoeira, diverse practitioners are among the most notable attribute. The iconography, historical texts, and folkloric methods of storytelling have resulted in varying trajectories for the modern understanding of Black women's participation in capoeira. Outlined in this chapter is the interaction between European voyeurism, Brazilian treatment of capoeira, and the values held by participants of capoeira (which are largely gathered through song texts). These three perspectives influenced the utilization of capoeira in Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century when capoeira was indoctrinated as a cultural mainstay, institutionalized by government entities, and reaffirmed through high-level capoeira Masters.<sup>45</sup> I put these historical events and actors in conversation to dissect why certain identities are either upheld or dismissed in our modern understanding of Black women's participation in capoeira. My historical reading of European interpretations, war, and music as memory set a framework for reintegrating Black women's voices in capoeira.

Reading the recorded capoeira history in Brazil, it becomes apparent that Black women became less valuable and less visible during times of conflict and again during reintegration into the cultural fabric of Brazil as a permissible social activity. On the contrary, song texts contend that Black women—mainly deities and a few notable figures—have always been significant to

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<sup>45</sup> Officially an UNESCO intangible cultural heritage in 2014, almost 100 years later

the history of capoeira.<sup>46</sup> This chapter is about the mediation of these narratives to re-historicize the role of Black women in capoeira.

### *2.1 J. M. Rugendas: A Visual History of Black Women in Capoeira*

German artist Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802-1858)<sup>47</sup> was instrumental in visualizing the diversity of landscapes and people in Brazil during the early part of the nineteenth century. J. M. Rugendas was born in Augsburg, then a part of the Roman Empire, to a family of painters. Heavily influenced by the growing popularity of travel accounts in the developing colonial Americas, J. M. Rugendas was inspired by other German artists depicting nature and broke with family tradition of depicting war through art. J. M. Rugendas had the opportunity to travel to Brazil from 1822 to 1824, detailing territories and the natural world. His works were to be published in botanical, zoological, and ethnological books.<sup>48</sup> Other than his works and lithographs, amongst the most widely published imagery of Brazil at the time, his depiction of capoeira in the nineteenth century became a fixture in the visual culture of capoeira. His most notable work is entitled “Jogar capoeira ou Dance de la Guerre.”

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<sup>46</sup> Maria José Somerlate Barbosa, “A Mulher Na Capoeira,” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* vol 9 (2005): 10. DOI: [10.1353/hcs.2011.0223](https://doi.org/10.1353/hcs.2011.0223)

<sup>47</sup> João Maurício Rugendas in Portuguese

<sup>48</sup> Renato Moreira Varoni de Castro, “Iconografia musical por artistas viajantes no Brasil do século XIX” *Visulaidades Goiânia* Vol 31, no.1 (Jan-Jun 2015): 10-39.

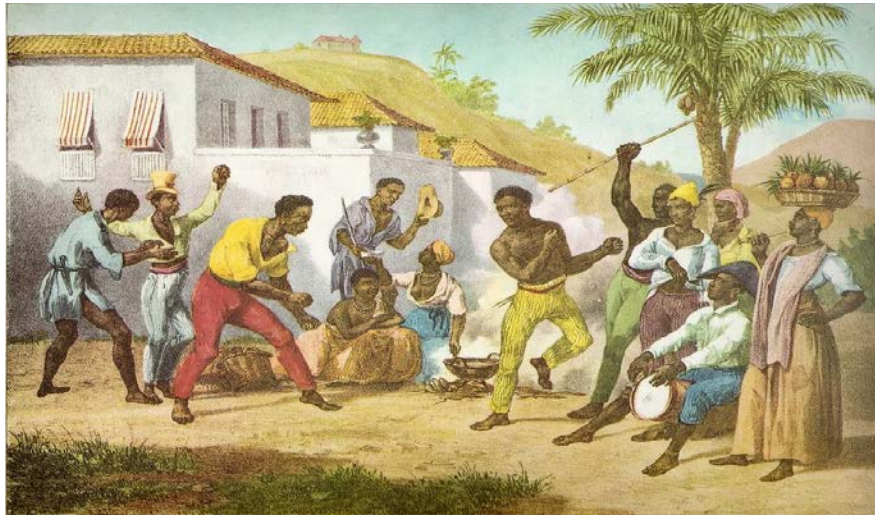


Figure 1 J. M. Rugendas' "Jogar Capoeira ou Danse de la Guerre" 1835

Figure 1 shows a small crowd of 12 Black people, ten who are arranged in sitting and standing positions. They are surrounding two people who have taken a battle stance opposite of each other. The player in the green pants appears to be engaging in the swaying motion of *ginga*, made apparent by a lifted foot and his bent arms in mid-sway close to his body. This is a protective stance. The man opposite him in the *roda* in red pants leans forward with his upper body and has bent knees, indicating transitional leg movements in *ginga*. The group surrounding the two *capoeiristas* are participating in a myriad of activities. There is a woman cooking while others appear to be engaged in music-making or other participatory activities like playing the drums or clapping hands or cheering, depicted by the man with a long stick in hand. The image embodies many signifiers of capoeira culture: community, movement, and music. "Jogar Capoeira" depicts women as bystanders as well. There is a woman at the far right of the image with a basket of fruit on her head, not appearing to engage musically but as a spectator. The other woman depicted is cooking with her blouse partially open and her breasts exposed. The seated

woman cooking is also carrying on a conversation with another person around the semi-circle *roda*, not actively paying attention to the display in front of her. Potentially there are other women in the picture, as there are figures with head coverings that differ from hats. For this discussion, I am assuming that the presences of breasts determine gender for this example.

The crowd gathers outside of a group of white structures that are oriented in rows as they decrease in size towards the landscape background. The capoeira scene is situated in front of a picturesque Brazilian landscape, an artistic signature of Rugendas. Emblematic in his work are the rolling hills, blue skies, and palm trees. In addition to his legacy of ethnographic data depicted through his vision of tropical romanticism, Rugendas is known for his prolific works of Black and indigenous people. J. M. Rugendas has portrayed Black and Brown bodies in terms of their acclimation with Brazil and civilized society by the amount of clothing being worn. Stature, posture, and the natural world were designated as codes for the social mobility of those depicted in J. M. Rugendas' works. Comparing "Jogar Capoeira" with other works that depict Black bodies support this theory that clothing signals the integration into the forming Brazilian empire.

"Navio Negreiro", based on the poem by Brazilian artist and abolitionist Castro Alves, is a work that illustrates the conditions on the slave ship, which is also the English translation of the work.



Figure 2 “Navio Negreiro” 1830

The transition between “Navio Negreiro” and “Jogar Capoeira” suggests performing capoeira was closer to Afro-Brazilians becoming integrated into Brazilian society. Despite J. M. Rugendas’ aversion to chattel slavery, he held the belief that acclimation into Brazilian society was the best way forward for enslaved people. The imagery of “Navio Negreiro” features a large group of Africans in chains below the deck of the ship. Some people are on the floor chained together. The body language of those in chains ranges from despair with faces covered or arms outstretched to bored or disgruntled with arms crossed. Almost everyone in chains is mostly or completely nude with exception of a garment covering the loins. Children are chained to women in the almost middle bottom of the picture. To the left and right, there are shelf structures that allow the groups of chained people to be stacked, many of them kneeling or sitting. In the center of the image is a hole to the deck, where to the center-left a muscular man is reaching for water being poured into a bowl. To center-right are 3 Europeans, presumed to be deckhands, fully clothed and appearing to point out the ill with a lantern. One the Europeans has the lantern

shining light in the dark corners, while the other is pointing to another person in chains. The third obscured white European person is in the process of removing a Black person.

The “Jogar Capoeira” image appears in many capoeira texts in and outside of academia and symbolically and visually positions capoeira as a both a Brazilian institution as well as an Afro-derived practice. J. M. Rugendas’ published works entitled *A Picturesque Voyage to Brazil* were compiled, featured, and circulated throughout Europe and the world.

My interests in this piece and the larger body of J. M. Rugendas’ legacy is due to the wide-reaching audience of his fixed ideas about blackness, African-ness, and Brazilian-ness with special attention to the ways these ideas have remained fixtures in the public consciousness of capoeira. His depiction of naked Black bodies has been interpreted as an indicator of their Brazilian-ness or level of civility in contrast to their inferred savagery and inferiority. J. M. Rugendas portraying Black people bare-chested suggested that they have yet to “acclimate” or transition as members of Brazilian society. This extends to the rituals of capoeira as well. For Rugendas and other ethnographic artists of the time, this indicator of cultural difference has potentially been reread historically as sexual availability as the Black women are often uncovered and their bodies are accessible to all men in the immediate proximity, notably European spectators, art critics, and travelers.

More than the exposure of Black women’s bodies, the date of J. M. Rugendas’ work undermines the internalized value that Black people had established for themselves in the way that they recognized Black women could and had been participants of capoeira. The European representation and intervention completely undermined the self-representation of capoeira practitioners as autonomous individuals in the seventeenth century. Early works and descriptions of capoeira were curated through the world view of European artists, who were known to have

taken liberties with depictions, misremembered events, and desires for integration over autonomy. The imagery of Rugendas have inhabited a large space in our collective memory of early capoeira and signifies the earliest way that capoeira became representative of life in Brazil during the nineteenth century. Not only is J. M. Rugendas' artistry showing capoeira to Europe, his work made capoeira visible to Brazil as well.

The legacy of the visual work of Rugendas is one step in the process of dismantling Black women's participation from the history of capoeira in Brazil. J. M. Rugendas' legacy is essential to the calculated measures to separate Black bodies from Black culture and artistic expression. The work of travel artists like Rugendas in the nineteenth century were participants of systems that viewed the Americas, enslaved and native people, and the landscape as resources in need of refinement.

Musicologist Tilman Seebass discusses the prevalence of instrument iconography and the degree to which instruments are used interchangeably during this period. Substitution between *violas* (guitars) and other lutes during the nineteenth century in the Americas was not an uncommon practice. Sometimes artists would replace local instruments with the instruments to which they were accustomed, as a frame of reference.<sup>49</sup> Historian Mattias Röhrig Assunção similarly notes in his chapter "Capoeiragem in Rio de Janeiro" the discrepancies between real and imagined instrumentation in J. M. Rugendas' portrayal of capoeira with the omission of a *berimbau* and other iconic capoeira instruments. J. M. Rugendas' description of capoeira heavily

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<sup>49</sup> Seebass, Tilman. "Iconography." In: *Ethnomusicology, an introduction*. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992): 238-244.

emphasized the headbutt attribute while not commenting on the prevalence of the kicks.

Rugendas' description is as follows:

The Negroes also have another war game, much more violent, the “jogar capoeira:” two champions charge against each other and seek to hit with their head the chest of the opponent they want to throw to the ground. By jumps on the side or equally skillful parries they escape from the attack; but by throwing themselves against each other, more or less like he-goats, they sometimes get badly hurt at the head: therefore one sees often the jesting being displaced by fury, to the point that blows and even knives stain the game with blood.<sup>50</sup>

To Assunção, this description is strikingly similar to another martial art played by Black men in Venezuela. It was not until another eyewitness in the early nineteenth century describes capoeira being played by two free men with the presence of kicks, crouching, and women bystanders.<sup>51</sup> Initial interpretations were mixed with explanations of others or rendered less specific or accurate by time before printing in Europe. The distance between recording data and printing has resulted in historic substitutions that misconstrue our present-day understanding of the then-rituals and performance. Assunção's tone on Rugendas' work is appreciative as it is the earliest record, we have but there are an increasing number of accounts that suggests realities were blurred with other traditions and European social, musical, and ideological aesthetics. This is acknowledged by art historian Pablo Diener, who described Rugendas' work as completed hastily for publication with aesthetics more than likely garnered to European tastes. Expectedly, there were cultural tensions between the memories of Brazil, tradition of Europe, and how the

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<sup>50</sup> J. M. Rugendas, “Voyage Pittoresque dans le Brésil” (Paris, France: Englemann & Compagnie, 1835), 26.

<sup>51</sup> Matthias Röhrig Assunção, *Capoeira: A History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005) 76.

Americas would be represented. The most accurate of the portrayals for Rugendas were the observations of the natural environment.<sup>52</sup>

What does this mean for the legacy of J. M. Rugendas in characterization of early capoeira? We have learned that he was first but not the most accurate in descriptions of capoeira, as he conflated two practices of other sports. We also have concluded that his works were done both by first-hand experiences of the landscape but also with the supplemental inspirations by other painters and poets. Lastly, it has been established that first-hand accounts have a considerable amount of space between what is originally documented and what made the final printing in J. M. Rugendas' now famous works. These details demonstrate that his work, while a primary source of contact for many spectators of life in Brazil and the Americas, were not the most reliable.

I agree that European instruments, clothing, and lifestyle caricatures could have been imposed on his depiction of Black bodies in the early nineteenth century. I extend this to the portraiture of women as passive, which is more akin to European society. Iconography demonstrated by J. M. Rugendas has the benefit of being the dominant narrative because it upholds ideals and stood the test of time. Unfortunately, his work lacks the informed opinions of participants and is where sound, music, and texts fill this historic void.

The liberties of an artist like J. M. Rugendas have had long-lasting effects on how we visualize the early capoeira and the role of Black women in this context. With the interpretations of an artist, European standards for feminine roles were ascribed into a non-European practice. J.

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<sup>52</sup> Pablo Diener, "O Catálogo Fundamentado da Obra de J. M. Rugendas e algumas idéas para a interpretação de seus trabalhos sobre o Brasil." *Revista USP*, São Paulo 30 (Junho/Augosto 1996): 46-57.

M. Rugendas leaves Black women as docile and passive while other working State apparatuses eliminate the possibility of women participants in capoeira. The legacy of the visual work of Rugendas is one step in the process of dismantling Black femininity from the history of capoeira in Brazil. Government intervention played a role from the opposing standpoint, not by dismissing femininity or Black women participants, but through weaponizing Black masculinity for the sake of Nation-building during the years of the Paraguayan War. In the next section I will discuss how Nationalistic tendencies in budding capoeira practices played a historic role when rehistoricizing the role of Black women in nineteenth century capoeira practices.

## *2.2 War and Violence: Injecting Hypermasculinity into Capoeira*

The Paraguayan War, also known as the War of Triple Alliance, lasted from 1864-1870 and is known as the bloodiest war in Latin America's history.<sup>53</sup> The Paraguayan War was a land-grab attempt to control the Parana River and the land that surrounded it, providing easier access to trade routes and resources. Paraguay fought against the allies Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina. Brazil as a nation saw this opportunity to solidify their stronghold as a militaristic and economic powerhouse. While war itself cannot be responsible for the anti-Black and misogynistic tone that capoeira has undertaken in decades following, I propose that the circumstances of the Paraguayan war and growing Nationalism resulted in capoeira separating from influential positions and performances that celebrated the participation of Black women.

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<sup>53</sup> Paraguayan war

One of the more insidious ploys of Brazil during the Paraguayan war involved enlisting Black men to fight on behalf of Brazil.<sup>54</sup> Imprisoned or enslaved Black men were promised freedom upon return from the front lines.<sup>55</sup> The tactic was designed to provide bodies for the war effort and simultaneously dilute the Black population in Brazil. This race and class move proved to be an ineffective. After the end of the Paraguayan war, there was an increase in the number of *capoeiristas* “returning to the streets.”<sup>56</sup> Surviving war with capoeira as a defense mechanism is one of the ways that capoeira solidified its hold in Brazilian history and society.

War, politics, and power have historically been associated with masculinity. Joan Nagel discusses how gender and the performance of masculinity impact the creation of the nation-state.<sup>57</sup> Through her illustration of patriarchal masculinity and nationalism, I extend her thoughts to my example of capoeira, suggesting that capoeira became overtly masculine when the art became a tool of the State for geopolitical alliances in Latin America. The Paraguayan War example sheds light on the social mechanisms in which a genderless performance in capoeira can be utilized by the State apparatus which facilitated the presumption of capoeira as an explicitly masculine activity and later became endorsed by the Brazilian State after capoeira transitioned through the suppression and into the academy periods.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jorge Prata de Sousa, *Escravidão ou Morte: Os Escravos Brasileiros na Guerra do Paraguai* (Rio de Janeiro, 1996)

<sup>55</sup> André Amaral de Toral, “A Participação dos Negros Escravos na Guerra do Paraguai.” *Estudos Avançados* Vol. 24 (1995): 281-296.

<sup>56</sup> Maya Talmon-Chvaicer, *The Hidden History of Capoeira: A Collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance* “The Battle and the Game (1840s-1870s),” (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008): 53.

<sup>57</sup> Joane Nagel, “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* vol 21, no.2 (March 1998): 242-296.

<sup>58</sup> Maya Talmon-Chvaicer, “The Hidden History of Capoeira: A collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance,” *Patrons and Oppressors (1870s-1930s)* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008): 69-110.

In this example with Black men serving in a war sponsored and encouraged by Brazil, fighting on behalf of the State solidified the Brazilian masculinity of black men, making them integral members of the nation. Although freedom and citizenship were promised, it was not supposed to be granted as the risk of death was high. Just like the J. M. Rugendas had tiers of citizenship in his portrayal of Black and Indigenous bodies, the Brazilian State also had tiers of citizenship, evaluated by successful fighting on behalf of the country. Capoeira as a warfare tactic is also in my assessment is why the narrative of capoeira continues to omit the Black women.

War and fighting have historically been gendered as a masculine activity. It can be deduced that capoeira skills and techniques were lent more to these aggressive attributes intended for lifesaving and not for expressivity and performativity of culture and heritage. I think at this critical moment, capoeira began to exclude women of color from the conversation of contributing to capoeira discourse. War, masculinity, and Statehood began to erase the contributions of Black women and turn the game into a competition and a battle for livelihood and power. Another indicator of this is how little we see reports of women demonstrating expertise in capoeira or *Capoeiragem* in arrest records.<sup>59</sup>

Between the 1880s and 1890s, capoeira had reached a variety of social strata. Capoeira was not only practiced among West Central Africans but was also part of religious and social life. Moreover, capoeira existed in a social conundrum. Certain practitioners were punished for causing disturbances while those with government affiliations, like the national guard, were permitted to train and improve their skills. The contradiction of capoeira at the turn of the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.64.

twentieth century paved the way for a more structured and institutionalized form. Notable practitioners of the time were recruited to absolve capoeira of its dangerous past to make it more accessible to the elite and white classes.

Moving through the nineteenth century, it is increasingly apparent that historicizing capoeira is done on behalf of powerful institutions that did not permit women's autonomy—especially Black women. The era's de facto sexism created a vacuum of obscured history of contributing women in capoeira's history. The split between how institutions utilize and view capoeira and how Afro-Brazilians recollect and continue to re-envision capoeira differ vastly. This is most notably seen in the presence of women in capoeira song.

### *2.3 Music as a Stabilizing Force in Reconstructing Capoeira Narratives*

Unlike the previous examples of physical outcomes—wars, fighting, population shifts, and observances in demographics—the music in capoeira lacks tangible impact like using soldiers in war. Music has eluded the same sort of intervention because of its medium. It is easier to weaponize bodies than it is to weaponize song, further suggesting that capoeira bodies have been viewed as more significant than capoeira voices and rituals in the capoeira song that women exist. The irony of discussing women in capoeira song is that compositions shift based on time, place, and composer. The historical component of capoeira song has only been a recent phenomenon with the advent of recorded technology. The reality is that capoeira oral history is always one of retelling. The songs that are circulating today highlight significant themes, heroes, events, places, and rituals. Capoeira song recreates a narrative by suggesting attributes that new

inductees should know and remember as a self-regulating feature of the dance-game. Capoeira music as a point of reference contrasts with voyeuristic approaches and recollections because those who create capoeira songs have the past, present, and future of capoeira in mind—with the dedicated commitment of life-long membership.

Music is the grounding feature of capoeira gameplay. Musical features and song determine the ways that bodies come together within the physical space of a capoeira *roda*. Bodies operate as a secondary feature in capoeira, and history has set a precedent in modern practices that physicality comes first. Remapping with lyrics and texts resets priorities that have been disrupted through government interests in Brazil. Music is also a conduit for language where those who participate can have autonomy to discuss themes including history tied to both types of capoeira, *Regional* and *Angola*<sup>60</sup> To only recount the history of capoeira through bodies is to silence the totality of capoeira. Reconstructing capoeira narratives through song texts reconstitutes the voices of participants and to hear the values of capoeira.

Music has been an anchor to the history of capoeira, but it has still been a history dictated and forged by men resulting in a myriad of ways that women are represented or misrepresented. The women that are permitted to exist in the canon of capoeira history are represented in dualities. Women are considered a shining example or as an outcast: the sinner or the saint, the virgin or the whore.

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<sup>60</sup> Juan Diego Diaz, “Analysis and Proposed Organization of the Capoeira Song Repertoire” (Davis, California: University of California Davis, 2006): 145-170. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/33s1x95q>

## 2.4 Before it was Brazilian it was African: N'golo Zebra Dance for Women's Honor

Capoeira historians have had a fraught debate over the origins of capoeira with attempts to place the practice to a specific country and ethnic group in West and Central Africa. T.J Desch- Obi, Maya Talmon-Chvaicer, and Matthias Röhrig Assunção connect key characteristics of capoeira to Angola.

N'golo, the Zebra dance, is possible the origin of the Capoeira, the fighting dance of Brazil. It is danced at the time of the "Mufico," a puberty rite for the girls of the Mucope and Mulondo regions. The object of the dance is to hit your opponent's face with your foot. A rhythm for the dance is beaten by clapping hands, and anyone who attempts a [b]low while outside the marked arena is disqualified. The 'Angolan Capoeira' in Brazil also has its special rhythm, which is one more reason to believe that it originates with the N'golo. N'golo means 'zebra,' and to a certain extent the dance originates from the leaps and battles of the zebra; the blow with the feet while the hands are touching the ground is certainly reminiscent of the zebra's kick.<sup>61</sup>

Capoeira in prototypical iterations was about Black women, for Black women's affection and attention while showcasing displays of masculinity. The early renditions of capoeira before Brazilian empirical intervention provided a space for gender role and the performances of masculinity and femininity to coexist.<sup>62</sup> Capoeira has always been about women, about Black women—African women and Angolan women. Looking at the Zebra dances, Dandara, and Iemanjá demonstrate that women have been intrinsic to capoeira's existence in its infancy until our modern reimagining of capoeira's performance globally.

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<sup>61</sup> Matthias Röhrig Assunção, *Capoeira: The History of An Afro-Brazilian Martial Art* "The Context of the Black Atlantic," (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2005), 49.

<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Dossar, "Capoeira Angola: Dancing Between Two Worlds." *Afro-Hispanic Review* Vol. 11, no. 1/3 (1992): 5-10. <http://www.jstor.org/pitt.idm.oclc.org/stable/41417219>

Despite its history being erased mainly due to the majority Black practicing the art during the first two centuries of capoeira in Brazil, it is apparent that its vibrant music culture has accurately, and perhaps mistakenly, represented the value system both of capoeira and the Brazilian empire. *Mestre Moraes* of *Capoeira Abadá* succinctly captures the mythologized and real history of capoeira in this *ladainha* :

Capoeira é uma arte	Capoeira is an art
Que o negro inventou	Invented by the black man
Foi na briga de duas Zebras	In the fight between zebras
Que o N'golo se criou	The N'golo was created
Chegando aqui no Brasil	Arriving here in Brazil
Capoeira se chamou	It was called capoeira
Ginga e dança que era arte	Swing and dance that was art
Em arma se transformou	Became weapons
Para libertar o negro da senzala do senhor	To liberate black people from the master's slave quarters
Hoje aprendo essa cultura para me conscientizar	Today I study this culture for my conscience
Agradeço ao pai Ogum	I am grateful to father Ogum [god of war]
A força dos Orixas	To the power of the Orixas
Camaradinha.	Comarade

Figure 3 *Ladainha* by Mestre Moraes <sup>63</sup>

According to this *ladainha*, capoeira is the product of the Zebra dance and invented by Black people. Capoeira is about the liberation of Black identities in the face of colonialism and the spirituality that exists between the shores of Africa and Brazil. This short, sung history articulates the physical and spiritual values in capoeira from prototypical performances through times of enslavement. This *ladainha* praise introduces students to the value system of capoeira before the game.

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<sup>63</sup> Maya Talmon-Chvaicer, "The Hidden History of Capoeira: A collision of Cultures in the Brazilian Battle Dance," (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008): 157.

## 2.5 Dandara: The Woman leader of Palmares

Although Afro-Brazilian women have yet to have a leading voice in the history of capoeira, there are historical and musical clues that indicate the capacity in which women of color could participate. This section focuses on how Afro-Brazilian women and women of color are portrayed in capoeira song. Because this doubly marginalized community is barred from creating their narrative, the lyrical analysis demonstrates shifting attitudes towards the inclusivity of capoeira culture from its inception into modernity. Throughout this chapter, the most present theme is that of the virgin or the whore. A common trope in representations of women globally is that women are to be virtuous or harlots. This dichotomy has historically and continuously limited how women are permitted to contribute to their communities, especially for women of color and women of African descent. Capoeira lyric analysis show the underlying *machista* and misogynist attitudes that continue to plague contemporary practices. The lyrics reflect social values of the times and the variety of songs in circulation. In capoeira events today, newly composed songs mark changing attitudes about the role of women in twenty-first century practice. Song analysis is a method of historicizing capoeira through the voices and lens of practitioners who have been socially and culturally indoctrinated into capoeira life. My song analysis methods refer to my comparison of which historical figures are mentioned and in which song genre. Acknowledging that the topic of a song in a *ladainha* is more important than the topic of a *corrido* recognizes the composer of the song deems the heroine, deity, or goddess worthy of praise and adoration in a largely oral history of women in capoeira.

Analysis of lyrics over movement in the quest for gender and racial equitable representation in capoeira also functions as a mechanism to prioritize strictly bodily

performativity as indicative of value in capoeira practices. Moreover, I want to assert that the dismantling of Black women representation in capoeira first with removing women as physical participants and then also incorporating words discredited and omitted their contributions. Capoeira music signals the beginning of the physical display. I maintain that capoeira music's omission or denigration of the role of women served as an early mechanism in the degradation of Black women in the form. This chapter discusses how all aspects of Brazilian culture, including capoeira music itself, played a role in the omitting contributions of women.

Many *capoeiristas* in Brazil and abroad are familiar with the *quilombo* Palmares. The folkloric historians conflate who is considered as the first capoeira practitioner, Zumbi.<sup>64</sup> Zumbi is not only a heroic figure in capoeira but for Afro-Brazilians as well.

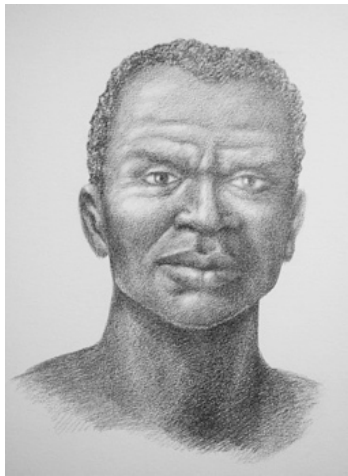


Figure 4 Artist Rendition of Zumbi dos Palmares

Zumbi was known to be an important figure Palmares, an autonomous colony for ex-slaves to live freely. This quilombo was in the state of Alagoas and is now remembered for its

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<sup>64</sup> Matthias Rörhig Assunção. "The Competing Master Narratives of Capoeira History," *Capoeira: The History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005): 6-31.

role in sustaining the lives of free Black people in Brazil during the seventeenth century before it was discovered and abolished in 1694.<sup>65</sup> The importance of the *quilombo* and Zumbi are noted by capoeira songs like this *ladainha* called “Zumbi dos Palmares” sung by *Mestre Moraes*<sup>66</sup>.

A história nos engana Dizendo pelo contrário Até diz que a abolição Aconteceu no mês de maio A prova dessa mentira É que da miséria eu não saio	History fools us Saying the opposite Even saying that abolition Happened in the month of May This proved to be a lie I can't leave this misery
Viva 20 de novembro Momento pra se lembrar Não vejo em 13 de maio Nada pra comemorar Muitos tempos se passaram e o negro sempre a lutar	Live November 20 <sup>th</sup> A moment to remember I don't see May 13 <sup>th</sup> As something to celebrate Much time has passed and the blacks always fight
Zumbi é nosso herói Zumbi é nosso herói, colega velho De palmares foi senhor Pela causa do homem negro Foi ele quem mais lutou Apesar de toda luta, colega velho Negro não se libertou, camarada!	Zumbi is our hero, Zumbi is our hero He was the master of Palmares Because of the Black Man It was he who fought the most In spite of this fight, old friend The black man is not free, comrade!

Figure 5 “Zumbi dos Palmares” *Ladainha* Lyrics

*Ladainhas* are the slow introduction to capoeira. Sung by the *berimbau gunga* player as a solo that incorporates the other instruments of the *bateria*. The tone is usually pensive and contemplative to match the mood of the content of the litany. The *capoeiristas* that create the *roda* watch and listen in silence during the *ladainha* as if to reflect on the mood of the prayer. These songs often show praise or remembrance but can be poetic as well. In this case, the *ladainha* is a testament to the strength and leadership of an iconic figure. Zumbi is celebrated

<sup>65</sup> Robert Nelson Anderson, “The Quilombo of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 23, no. 3 (October 1996): 545-566.

<sup>66</sup> Ilhabela, “Rei Zumbi dos Palmares,” YouTube video, 9:11, May 13 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6OsWM3RnxE>

most notably for being born free, being caught, escaping slavery, and spending the remainder of his life resisting colonial rule. In Brazil, the date of Zumbi's legacy is memorialized by celebrating the *Dia da Consciência Negra* or Black Consciousness Day on November 20<sup>th</sup>. Initially, Black Consciousness was celebrated on May 13<sup>th</sup>, the day Princess Isabella signed the emancipation for slaves. Since the late 1970s, it was thought that Zumbi's spirit better embodied the struggle and valor of Brazil's black citizens.<sup>67</sup> Zumbi is a symbol for Black culture and Black resistance in Brazil and by extension in capoeira.<sup>68</sup> In this short praise song, capoeira students listening learn the dates of the abolition of slavery, the day of Black consciousness in Brazil, and that Black people continue to fight for recognition in Brazil. In short, we have fought, but we still must continue our fight, and we give thanks to Zumbi.

While much is known about Zumbi, very little can be said for his wife, Dandara. Dandara is a figure in capoeira shrouded in mystery. A testament to this is confirmed with unverified details surrounding her place of birth—either in Africa or Brazil.<sup>69</sup> What is known about her is that she, like other inhabitants of Palmares during the reign of Zumbi, were capoeira practitioners.<sup>70</sup> Thus it follows that Dandara, wife of Zumbi, was the first woman *capoeirista*. The song “Dandara” performed by *Mestre Barrão* of the school *Axé Capoeira* sings of her life in this call and response *corrido*.

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<sup>67</sup> Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin do Nascimento, “Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and the African Experience in Brazil,” *Africans in Brazil: A Pan-African Perspective* (1992); 81-117.

<sup>68</sup> Roberto Kant de Lima e Magali Alonso de Lima. “Capoeira e Cidadania: Negritude e Identidade no Brasil Republica,” *Revista de Antropologia* 34 (1991); 143-182.

<sup>69</sup> “Face Feminina dos Palmares” *OGlobo*. Rio de Janeiro, November 15, 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Palmares residents historically were believed to be capoeiristas

**Ê Dandara**  
**Ê Dandara**

Dandara foi mulher guerreira  
No quilombo se refugio  
Conheceu Zumbi dos Palmares  
E logo se apaixonou

**Coro**

Com Zumbi ela teve três filhos  
No quilombo ela foi a rainha  
Sua história ficou esquecida  
Por muito tempo e ninguém não sabia

**Coro**

Domingo Jorge Velho  
Junto com seu bando  
Os mocambos queimou  
Atacando o povo quilombola  
Dandara lutando ele a capturou

**Coro**

Mil seiscientos e noventa e quatro  
Dandara se suicidou  
De jogando de uma pedreira  
Mas a exaavidão ela não se entregou

**Coro**

Mil seiscientos e noventa e cinco  
Foi a vez do grande rei Zumbi  
Depois da morte encontrou com Dandara  
Em num Paraíso eles vivem felizes

**Ay Dandara**  
**Ay Dandara**

Dandara was a woman warrior  
In the quilombo she sought shelter  
She met Zumbi of Palmares  
And she fell in love with him

**Ay Dandara (x2)**

With Zumbi she had 2 children  
In the quilombo she was the queen  
Her story stayed hidden  
For a long time, nobody would know

**Ay Dandara (x2)**

Old Domingo Jorge  
Together with his gang  
Burned the Mocambos  
Attacking the people of the quilombo  
Dandara, fighting him, was captured

**Ay Dandara (x2)**

Sixteen hundred ninety four  
Dandara committed suicide  
She threw herself from a cliff  
But slavery could not hold her

**Ay Dandara (x2)**

Sixteen hundred ninety five  
Was the time of the great king Zumbi (to die)  
After death he met up with Dandara  
In Paradise they lived happily

Figure 6 “Ay Dandara” Lyrics

Dandara is thought to have been caught and enslaved, but she took her own life because she was unwilling to exist in servitude.



Figure 7 Artist Rendition of Dandara of Palmares

The stories of Dandara and Zumbi are polar in their retellings and their outcomes. While much cannot be confirmed for the history of either, it is important to question why we praise Zumbi much more often and frequently forget about Dandara? Is it considered weak to commit suicide? Is it considered more heroic to stay and fight? Does this have to do with the religious connotations of Catholicism or *candomblé*? I suppose one could argue that Dandara in her duress was operating under the paradoxical *Exu*, a third way of being through conformity and conflict, not good nor evil but outside the conditions of servitude.<sup>71</sup> Despite history not remembering Dandara for her contributions and her legacy being shrouded in mystery, capoeira still commemorates Dandara through song.

The songs about Zumbi dos Palmares exist as call and response *corridos* but also as *ladainhas* or praise songs. Songs with Dandara as the subject are only *corridos*, with descriptive lyrics about her legacy. Zumbi's songs are presented as *corridos* and prayers or introduction to the capoeira ceremony. To be the topic of a *ladainha* is to be well-known. Capoeira songs are

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<sup>71</sup> Floyd Merrell, "Candomblé: Living Philosophy, Philosophical Living," *Capoeira and Candomblé: Conformity and Resistance through Afro-Brazilian Experience* (2005): 148-150.

singing the praises of what people call *o rei* or the king of Palmares while having to educate on Dandara's existence. Even as her name becomes more familiar to *capoeiristas* outside of Brazil, she is still known primarily through her proximity to Zumbi.

The history of Dandara is worthy of reexamination and resurgence in the twenty-first century as we begin to unearth the undisclosed ways Black women in capoeira have contributed and pushed these stories to the forefront of our memories. If Dandara played capoeira alongside Zumbi, why not remember and celebrate them both equally?

## *2.6 Iemanjá: The Most Beloved Black Woman in Brazil*

Prominent women in capoeira are far too few, given the longevity of capoeira's history. One figure who has a long-standing history is Iemanjá, referred to as the goddess of the sea. Iemanjá remains a great heroine because of her cultural origins in West African religious and spiritual reiterations throughout the Caribbean and Latin America.<sup>72</sup> In Brazil, specifically in Salvador Bahia, Iemanjá is celebrated on February 2<sup>nd</sup> by offering gifts to the water goddess at sea. Her importance in capoeira is noted by the beloved anthem "Mora Iemanjá" sung by Carolina Soares.

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<sup>72</sup> Solimar Otero and Toyin Falola, *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diasporas* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013).

Quando a maré baixa	When the tide lowers
Vá lhe visitar	Go to visit her
Vá lhe fazer devoção	Go devote to her
Vá lhe presentear	Go present to her
No mar	At Sea
<b>Mora Iemanjá</b>	<b>Iemanja Lives</b>
No Mar	At Sea
<b>Mora Iemanjá</b>	<b>Iemanja Lives</b>
No Mar	At Sea
Vários negros foram pro Brasil	Many blacks went to Brazil
Bantos, nagôs e Yoruba	Bantus Nagos and Yourba
Dentro de um navio negreiro	Inside of a slaveship
Deixando suas lágrimas correr no mar.	Leaving their tears to flow in the sea
No mar	At Sea
<b>Mora Iemanjá</b>	<b>Iemanja Live</b>
No Mar	At Sea
<b>Mora Iemanjá</b>	<b>Iemanja Lives</b>
No Mar	At Sea

Figure 8 "Mora Iemanja" Lyrics

The bolded chorus chanting “Iemanjá lives” is an affirmation of her survival despite the burden of slavery on black bodies and the survival of Afro-Brazilian and African ancestry despite attempts at stripping these attributes away during the building of the Brazilian empire post abolition.

Capoeira music shows women of color in stark contrast. Women represented during prototypical capoeira days are often shown in virtuous positions. They are women of valor and have value to the history of capoeira. Women of color, Black women in capoeira, represented historically in the modern era do not have the same value. In the twentieth century, after capoeira became codified and systematized, women become nameless or become objects, and sometimes both. Music as a historical narrative in capoeira shows that Afro-Brazilian and women of the diaspora have had some hand in the creation and dissemination of capoeira philosophy and life. So, why then is there such a large gap in representation between the time of Dandara in the late seventeenth century until the academy period in the twentieth century?

Capoeira has gained social mobility upward as *Capoeira Regional* sought to attain notoriety from the elite political class and then to the upper class.<sup>73</sup> The de-stigmatization of capoeira permitted an acceptable authority and social use of Black men with *Mestre Bimba* being the spokesman of Regional and *Mestre Pastinha* for *Capoeira Angola*.<sup>74</sup> *Mestre Bimba* specifically wanted capoeira to have wide appeal amongst Brazilians. Capoeira was no longer for the street gangs in Rio but had settled amongst Brazilian cultural practices as a sport or African art respectively. The transition was made evident when *Mestre Bimba* opened his academy in 1937. The upper-class Bahian clientele and the close affinity Bimba had for then Dictator Getúlio Vargas attempted to quell racial tensions by suggesting that African identities could be incorporated into the fabric of Brazilian society. Why was there not enough room for Black women to make the respectability leap within capoeira? What systems prevented their narratives from emerging in the capoeira canon? Black women remained present in the religious practices of *Candomblé* as practitioners, priestesses, and deities like Iemanjá.<sup>75</sup> *Candomblé* and Capoeira, notably *Capoeira Angola* remained ritually aligned to the continuation of Black artistic expression in Bahia.<sup>76</sup> Syncretic practices of *Candomblé* seemed to be an outlet where Black mythologies were allowed to remain while systematized capoeira became more closer aligned with the government. This divide of religion and government proves to be a disadvantage in who has authority to speak in capoeira. The history of Black women and Black femininity in capoeira have historically been in a compromised position because of the obscured nature of capoeira's

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<sup>73</sup> Nestor Capoeira, *Capoeira: Roots of the Dance-Fight-Game* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2002).

<sup>74</sup> Nestor Capoeira, *The Little Capoeira Book* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2007), 14.

<sup>75</sup> Ruth Landes, *The City of Women* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

<sup>76</sup> Floyd Merrell. *Capoeira and Candomblé: Conformity and Resistance Through Afro-Brazilian Experience*. (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005).

history in relation to the government, religious practices, and the apparent sexism. Women in capoeira appeared more often through lyrical content of songs and in specifically in religious contexts of goddesses like Iemanjá than actual people playing the stylized dance game.

### *2.7 Missing Narratives: Uses, and Abuses of Black Women in Capoeira Lyrics*

Representation of women in capoeira lyrics are not immune from the virgin/whore complex that marks discourses about women's lived experiences. For Black women in capoeira, the double demarcation of difference makes them target for ridicule in capoeira's history. Despite lacking full contributions of women of color from the inception and creation of the sport to the modern era, music makes clear that Black women's bodies were only significant for what they could offer men. This section analyzes the songs that degrade women of color and problematizes how prevalent they continue to be in capoeira circles today.

During my time visiting women's events and conducting interviews with my fellow Black women *capoeiristas* throughout this project, the song "Leva Morena, Me Leva" was brought up as a distasteful and disrespectful song for women of color in capoeira. Despite the abhorrent theme, this song is still commonly sung. The lyrics "take me brown girl, take me back to your bungalow and take me under your sheets" make it apparent that women are useful for sex and there is no time to waste with flirtation or acting coy. The full lyrics are as follows:

Leva morena me leva  
Me leva pro seu bangalo

**Leva Morena me leva  
Me leva pro seu bangalo**

Leva Morena me leva  
Eu sou Capoeira já disse que sou

**Coro**

Leva Morena me leva  
O hoje faz frio, amanhã faz calor

**Coro**

Leva Morena me leva  
Me leva pro baixo do seu cobertor

**Coro**

Leva Morena me leva  
Hoje sou pobre, amanhã sou doutor

**Coro**

Take me brown girl, take me  
Take me to your bungalow

**Take me brown girl, take me  
Take me to your bungalow**

Take me brown girl, take me  
I am capoeira, I already told you so

**Chorus**

Take me brown girl, take me  
Today it's cold, tomorrow it will be hot

**Chorus**

Take me brown girl, take me  
Take me under your blanket

**Chorus**

Take me brown girl, take me  
Today I am poor, tomorrow I will be a doctor

**Chorus**

Figure 9 "Leva Morena Me Leva" Lyrics<sup>77</sup>

There is a level of naivete that men desire of Black women in this text. In the last line we see 'today I am poor, but tomorrow I'll be a doctor' suggests that this dark-skinned woman should believe anything her suitor says. I first heard this song within a few weeks of beginning capoeira. This song was popular with students in my area because the lyrics were simple. As an English speaker, my classmates and I only needed to remember the order of 6 foreign words. After singing this song in a *roda* for 10 minutes straight, it's hard to shake the tune from your head. I went home and translated this song and decided that this was not a song that aligned with treating women as equal participants in capoeira. Why did we sing it then?

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<sup>77</sup> Agogô capoeira group, Netherlands, *Capoeira Song Compendium Version 1.0 International* 2007, page 30. Downloaded 2014. <https://www.scribd.com/document/60410898/Capoeira-Song-Compendium-Version-1-0-International>

Back in 2008, there were few resources to talk about capoeira in the format that exists today with the internet so much of what we knew and talked about was contingent on conversations before or after training or with our teacher or other teachers at events. I remember being met with some resistance on my feelings with this song. Some Spanish speakers in our group pointed out that "*morena*" simply means brunette or brown-eyed, and that I was making "a big deal" over lyrics and reading race into capoeira too much. The song has always made me uneasy with its implications and boastful nature of utilizing women of color (Black or not) as sexual objects to gratify men.

The *Morena* has been a reoccurring theme in my capoeira career. The seemingly innocent term of endearment or beauty or Blackness, outside of my cultural and linguistic understanding, had emerged again at a Synagogue. My first capoeira teacher, along with four other students, had met to show capoeira to young children between the ages of 5-8. My first teacher is Israeli, and thus many of his connections in Metro Detroit aligned with his ethnic and religious identities. As my teacher introduced the children to the different sounds and instruments of the *bateria* he also introduced the students to each of his helpers. I remember this because it was the first time I did an *au sem mão* (handless cartwheel) and I got my capoeira name. Getting an *apelido* is considered a less formal, yet still significant, marker of membership in capoeira. I was named on the spot in front of a room full of children as *Morena*. My feelings were mixed with this name, as I had already had strong feelings about the word and the song associated with *Morenas*. At this point, I did not have an opportunity to react or provide a rebuttal because we were in the middle of a show. I had been warned to be patient with the *apelido* process as it is quite useless to argue. I have heard horror stories of eager students making suggestions for their *apelido*, only to be named something distasteful or referencing poor character traits. I was disappointed that I had

been patient and still was named after the most visible features about myself, being a Black woman.

The history of this word compounds the history of misogyny and racism burdened to dark-skinned women. Being given this name reiterated the how undervalued women of color are in capoeira. Although I was within my two years of capoeira, racism and sexism had already marked my body in a casual and public way. To this day when I introduce myself to *capoeiristas*, I use the name my parents gave me.

Few women are known by name between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries unless they are deities, with timeless presence and social significance outside of Brazil. The namelessness of Black women and Afro-Brazilian women during this period is evidence as well for the way women were disregarded for their contributions in capoeira. When women do have names, it is about specific men. Dandara, mentioned early in this chapter, is one example. Perhaps the most famous example of famous women is Dona Alice. Dona Alice or Ms. Alice was rumored to be one of the mistresses of Manuel dos Reis Machado, commonly known as *Mestre Bimba*.<sup>78</sup> M. Bimba is known throughout the world for bridging the gap between capoeira as a Black practice in Brazil to being a celebrated art form in Brazil making the challenging leap of destigmatizing capoeira and making the sport available to the wealthy, the white, and political elite in the early twentieth century.<sup>79</sup>

I first heard of Dona Alice through a *corrido*, characterized by the short-sung call and response, following the lead *berimbau* player. The song's lyrics are as follows:

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<sup>78</sup> Capoeira song compendium, 66.

<sup>79</sup> Academy system, making capoeira a sport associated with nationalism

Ê Dona Alice  
Não me pegue não  
Não me pegue,  
Não me agarre,  
Não me pegue a mão.

**Ê Dona Alice**  
**Não me pegue não**

Não me pegue  
Não me agarre,  
Não me pegue a mão

**Coro**

Hey Ms. Alice  
Don't grab me, no  
Don't grab me  
Don't clutch me  
Don't grab my hand

**Hey Ms. Alice**  
**Don't grab me**

Don't grab me  
Don't clutch me  
Don't grab my hand

**Chorus**

Figure 10 "Dona Alice" Lyrics

*Corridos* like this are ideal for long capoeira *rodas* because those singing and clapping in response will be allowed to sing for extended durations as there is little rhythmic variation and participants repeat the exact words as the leader. A *corrido* like Dona Alice is quite convenient when teaching capoeira music to non-native Portuguese speakers. These few criteria are among the reasons that this too was a song I learned early in my capoeira career.

The continual singing of this song has been explained away. The song Dona Alice is meant to signal to experienced capoeira players that they are playing too closely.<sup>80</sup> More specifically, that a capoeirista in the *roda* is being too clingy to the other and not properly playing capoeira—being evasive, proactive, intuitive, and fluid. Dona Alice is sung as a warning to stop playing an unacceptable game. But why include the intimate partner of a master to illustrate this point? From the lyrics alone, women, in general, are grabby, not knowing when to let go or possibly that Dona Alice is affectionate publicly. When layered on top of capoeira game, this song is meant to say that one of the players is a woman. And it is not meant to be

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<sup>80</sup> Capoeira song compendium, 66.

complimentary. The subtext is that women cannot play capoeira and women, or at least Dona Alice, did not know when to let go.

Why sing a song that boasts an alleged sexual relationship? Why teach this song to beginning students, potential students that have not fully learned about this history of capoeira? These examples suggest that an early introduction into capoeira with song is that men are more worthy and that women have curated rules in hierarchical structures of capoeira that are contingent on centuries of social, economic, and racialized ideas about how women should occupy public spaces.

## 2.8 Conclusion

Conceptualizing Black women's contributions in capoeira history is a difficult feat given the pervasive and systematic attempts to quell the act of participating in capoeira. From all vantage points, capoeira has had few opportunities be presented without outside agendas or interests. Even as women began to make appearances in the twentieth century as capoeira academics become more pervasive, these women have not garnered the same notoriety as their male counterparts.<sup>81</sup> The difficulty of recognition is compounded when race is added to the equation of equitable representation in capoeira practices and contributions. The globalized

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<sup>81</sup> Maria José Somerlate Barbosa, "A Mulher Na Capoeira," *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* Vol. 9 (2005): 10. DOI: [10.1353/hcs.2011.0223](https://doi.org/10.1353/hcs.2011.0223)

practices of capoeira are just now beginning to provide a look at how gender effects participant engagement and perception.<sup>82 83 84</sup>

Capoeira songs, after the official reintegration of capoeira into Brazilian society, reiterates that Black women's participation was not welcomed but shunned given that the many texts decided to focus on women as deity or women as impediment to the status of men.<sup>85</sup>

To amplify the voices and narratives of Black women, we must look at an incomplete history of capoeira. Telling the history of women in capoeira through idyllic imagery of artists or through the victors of war silences the realities of people who lived the hardships and suffered the most in secret. This chapter points out the glaring omission of Black women in capoeira's history until very recently and the underwhelming attempt to rectify these omissions by leaving Black women in religious contexts. My own personal accounts of how Black women are portrayed in capoeira song indicate that the intersection of race and class in capoeira history is not a priority when it comes to teaching new students. The history of misogyny in capoeira remains pervasive even in the twenty-first century.

Works on capoeira gender and equity are beginning to fill in the gaps and create a supplemental narrative for the contributions of Black women while slowly phasing out the songs that we allow to be perpetuated in the *roda*. The remainder of this project attempts to fill in the

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<sup>82</sup> Sara Delamont, "The Smell of Sweat and Rum: Teacher Authority in Capoeira Classes," *Ethnography and Education* vol 1, no 2 (June 2006): 161-175.

<sup>83</sup> Sara Delamont and Neil Stephens, "Up on the Roof: The Embodied Habitus of Diasporic Capoeira," *Cultural Sociology* vol 2, no. 1 (2008): 57-74.

<sup>84</sup> Josivaldo Pires de Oliveira and Luiz Augusto Pinheiro Leal, *Capoeira Identidade e Gênero: Ensaios Sobre a História Social da Capoeira no Brasil* (Salvador, Bahia: EDUFBA, 2009).

<sup>85</sup> Maria José Somerlate Barbosa, "A Representação da Mulher nas Cantigas da Capoeira," *Portuguese and Literary Cultural Studies* 19/20 (2011): 463-477.

spaces of why Black women play capoeira and advocate for themselves in a martial art that regularly subverts Black women contributions.

### 3.0 What Does It Mean To Be A Black Woman In Capoeira?

#### 3.1 Defining Blackness

In this study, the participants identify in some degree as being a member of the African diaspora. Blackness is more complicated than skin tone or nationality but relates to self-identification and the perception of others. If Blackness conceptually is so multi-faceted, then why homogenize ‘Black’ for this study of women in capoeira? Blackness has different meanings in Brazil, in the United States, and in a multicultural global context. Situating the commonalities that are involved in moving in the world as a perceived Black person and a person that identifies as Black comes with similar lived experiences and understanding of self. Blackness is shared as a member of the diaspora. I maintain that is the expression of Black culture that keeps members of the diaspora engaged in capoeira, not explicitly the Brazilian-ness.

Considering the popularity of global capoeira practices, I focus on my interlocutors’ identities in relationship to what they have in common with Brazilian *Mestras* of capoeira—their Blackness. Black womanhood is the context for understanding and navigating capoeira in the twenty-first century. Undoubtedly, identifying as Black in the Western world comes with its share of hardships. For these reasons, participation in capoeira has become a source of pride and identification in a practice that resides outside of tropes and stereotypes. For some Black women

practitioners in the United States and outside of Brazil, the foreignness of capoeira signifies something of the *tabula rasa*—void of racial markers of difference or mimicry stylized by nationalism at home while the inherent and preserved Afro-ness of capoeira is reminiscent of something lost and found again.

### 3.2 Alanna

Alanna identifies as a cisgender African American woman. Professionally, she works in the technology field and hails from the American South. Alanna moved frequently in the South and lived abroad in Europe as well. Eventually, after high school she settled in Midwest region of the United States. Alanna trains and studies capoeira in the *Regional* tradition in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. Her journey in capoeira began after seeing a capoeira demonstration at a 2007 festival. Currently, Alanna teaches capoeira classes and promotes projects to spread capoeira awareness in her community. She is a big fan of *Mestra* Marisa of Gingarte Capoeira in Chicago, Illinois and *Mestra* Preguiça of the *Filhos de Bimba* capoeira academy in Oakland, California.

Alanna and I both played capoeira in the Detroit metro area and met during a *batizado*. I saw her for the first time playing inside the *roda* and wanted to connect based solely on identity and perceived kinship. After getting to know Alanna better by witnessing the way she made herself available to her school and other *capoeiristas*, I knew that she was a born leader in her capoeira circle.

Alanna has shown to be a dedicated leader in her school since her early days in capoeira. Not long after she had joined, the school had suffered an emergency. Her teacher was on bed rest after a health scare and could not return to his teaching responsibilities at his capoeira academy. Alanna took this opportunity to train under the most senior capoeira students in her academy at the time. Her initiative did not go unnoticed. In the time of duress for her academy, she had found a way to rapidly increase her skillset by helping to organize and lead classes. The void left by her instructor made everyone in the studio do more in order to keep their community thriving. In efforts to continue to be supportive of her school in Michigan, Alanna took it upon herself to encourage other students to continue learning music through recorded songs so students could more conveniently learn Portuguese lyrics by rote.

We did a CD recording with a bunch of commonly sung songs. We had no money, but we wanted our students to know what the songs sounded like. The initial project did not work out so well, but we tried again. A few of the ladies took it more seriously and had the intentions of sending the results to our *Mestre*. We wanted the women in Michigan to show the *Mestre* that we were dedicated. We organized who lead each song, we had our microphones and we had a small recording studio- we touched all the bases. When we got to post-production we gave a copy to all the participants to they can hear and give feedback. It got a little bit rushed and we couldn't meet all our deadlines. [The songs] sounded okay... It was not something to send to our *Mestre* but at least we all have a copy of it.<sup>86</sup>

The desire to fulfill such a big project for the benefit of other students suggests the caring and selfless nature of Alanna and her colleagues. The outcome of the projects was less than optimal, with a fizzle but the sentiment was there. It is unfortunate that the group was discouraged from sharing their work with their *Mestre*, who has a branch of his academy in Michigan. The struggle between perfection and service is constant for Black women in capoeira.

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<sup>86</sup> Alanna, in discussion with the author, December 15, 2018.

The students in the academy were provided ways to remain engaged in the art. With minimal effort on their part, the older students were guided into more thorough practice of the singing and playing skills. Students were getting a taste of the efforts required for such a large project. Alanna's example shows how strong the leadership efforts of Black women are in capoeira but also the reality that anything less-than-perfect is not worthy of praise or wide circulation. Moreover, their second recorded album would have filled a gap desperately needed in capoeira—the space for more women's voices to be heard leading the *bateria* and playing on the *berimbau gunga*. Even if the final project was less than perfect for their *Mestre*, surely, he would have appreciated their efforts. Taking on a monumental task without prompting or formal support demonstrates that as students, they are constantly trying to improve their capoeira community and working hard towards the goal of being ambassadors of his capoeira school.

### 3.3 Keira

Keira identifies as a seventh generation African-descended woman in America, or African-American for short. She lives and works in the East Coast of the United States and has been a member of the capoeira community since 2005. Keira works for a large non-profit health care provider in equity and inclusion. She considers herself a lifelong student of capoeira and has trained at many cornerstone capoeira institutions in the United States, among them *Mestre João Grande's* school in New York City. Keira is a fan of *Mestra Janja* and *Mestra Paulinha*, frequenting events for women in capoeira and listening to their teachings and academic works.

In the mid-90s, I was taking an Afro-Haitian dance at a studio and there was a capoeira class immediately following my class. So there were people coming in, they had the big

drum, and people were flipping around. I'm like, *what the hell are they doing?* Someone suggested I check it out because I was already doing a traditional African dance. But I was doing a more Congolese style, lower to the ground and this seemed more West African, higher and up in the air. I thought, *I can't be jumping in the air, that's not me.* I took a few classes and decided I would stick with the Haitian dance classes. That was my first introduction. Then in 2005 after I stopped taking the dance classes, I decided to try capoeira classes again.<sup>87</sup>

Keira's moment of belonging in capoeira happened on her first trip to Brazil. She goes on to describe,

I went to Brazil with some students and they started up the *bateria* to play music. The *berimbau*, the *atabaque*, the crispness and the tightness of the instruments playing together. It was so completely different than what I had experienced in the United States. Then the *Mestre* opened his mouth and started to sing. It started to pour down rain and I thought to myself, this is where I'm supposed to be.<sup>88</sup>

Sociologist Erik Cohen argues in "Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences" that tourism should be understood through the worldview of the traveler and that their desire is associated with the traveler's ancestry and spiritual roots.<sup>89</sup> Anthropologist Naomi Leite expands on the notion to claim that worldview is dependent on the culture of the traveler and is also embodied through performances that the visitor undertakes during their journey.<sup>90</sup> In Leite's view, roots tourism is a way to connect with the heritage and identity, to actively reconstitute connections of membership to a diasporic community.

In Keira's case, while not Brazilian but who is of African descent, she viewed capoeira from a distance in the context of other Afrodiasporic dance practices. Through traveling to Brazil with other American capoeira practitioners, participating in capoeira in its' national and cultural

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<sup>87</sup> Keira, in discussion with the author, December 21, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Erik Cohen, "A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences," *Sociology* vol 13 (1979): 179-201.

<sup>90</sup> Naomi Leite, "Travels to an Ancestral Past: On Diasporic Tourism, Embodied Memory, and Identity," *Anthropologicas* no. 9 (2005): 283.

context reignited the feeling of belonging and self-identification. After this trip to Brazil, Keira was committed to capoeira long term.

Clearly, capoeira has a special place in Keira's sense of identity and performing Blackness or African-ness in the Americas. Despite the benefits of having a cultural haven for expressing Black identity, Keira acknowledges the ill effects of performing Black culture in the United States when Black people, especially women, must fight a little harder to be worth of respect and authority. Keira reflects on an incident at her own school that reminded her of the racism and sexism that still exist in capoeira circles:

I had an interesting incident. The *Mestre* in my group needed a break and he hands me the *gunga*, to maintain the *roda*. There was a teenager who came to play [capoeira] and in our school you must tuck in your shirt. These are the rules according to the master and so I had to call this teenager back and ask him to tuck in his shirt. And he was very pissed off giving me a look like—"who are you to tell me what to do?!"—And he really tried to stare me down. Honestly, I think he was Brazilian and that could have another layer to the incident. I'm thinking, *Yes, I'm a Black Woman from America but I'm in charge now*. He was really trying to intimidate me...in the heart of my school... When I go to your school, I follow those rules.<sup>91</sup>

The power struggle Keira described should never have had to have been negotiated. It is a small instance in which, any other person in another type of body, possess the lead instrument, their voice and authority and requests would have been acknowledged without a doubt. The animosity and disdain for women in power—specifically a Black woman—has such a grip on our collective notions of power that a visiting *capoeirista* insisted on challenging her role as the person in charge of the *roda*.

Unfortunately, the reaction of this student is not uncommon. He not only made it a point to outwardly express his distrust in Black women leadership but consequently, he momentarily

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<sup>91</sup> Keira, in discussion with the author, December 21, 2018.

disrupted the ceremonial attributes of the *roda*, which is continuous and uninterrupted music. For Keira to address the hostility, she needed to call the student back from gameplay and within earshot. If Keira was using words to address him, she was not singing a song or performing other musical leadership duties of the *bateria*. It is common to pass songs between practitioners but if this was a moment when she was in the middle of a song, Keira would be regarded as an incompetent leader because of this momentary pause in the proceedings.

The display of bitterness towards a Black woman in power ultimately does a disservice to everyone present and additionally pressures Black women leaders to be able to handle these tense moments, knowing they will be judged for any slight departure from normal proceedings. Ultimately whether she ignores the transgression of not being in uniform, she is judged for not knowing proceedings- or at the very least ignoring them. If she does confront the people for their ignorance or disrespect to local rules and regulations, then she is aggressive. For men in charge of the *roda*, playing the *berimbau gunga*, these interactions with students and visitor are the price of being the leader. For women, and Black women, this can be their undoing.

The most refreshing aspect of Keira's relationship with capoeira is the lengths that she will go to ensure she can define the meaning of the art to her even down to how her instructors run their classes and teach other students. Keira tells me about internal conflict of having an instructor represent capoeira but not enough of an interest of modern struggles of Black people. Lauren talks about the signs learning capoeira from a person who did not seem to be a real ally of Black people:

Back when I left my old group, I told me *Mestre* (who was white) that I was going to be leaving the group because I wanted to explore. He said *Well I know ALL the Mestres around here...* And that's exactly why it's probably time for me to go. That school was focused on movements and music some, but they didn't know shit about Black people. They knew a lot about the old Black, you know- folks from time go by, but you got Black

folks right now that you're not dealing with and supporting. Everybody loves Black culture, just not Black people.<sup>92</sup>

If you don't like what is offered, you have the option to shop around. In this case, the teacher felt it was necessary to assert his power and connectedness with the capoeira community in that region. For a new *capoeirista*, this intimidation may have worked. Keira saw how power and capital were working together to suppress her displeasure with her former capoeira school in attempts to satisfy the needs of a *Mestre* who was not meeting the needs of all his students, specifically Black ones.<sup>93</sup>

The intersection of authority and identity is a site of discomfort for many teachers and practitioners that are not Brazilian nor Black. What is the requirement for empathy and sensitivity or leadership on the issues of race and racism as they relate to the history and legacy of capoeira? Giving this *Mestre* the benefit of the doubt, he could have just wanted to keep a talented student. Or he had no idea how his words or the day-to-day operations of his academy alienated Keira and possibly other students of African descent who sought a culturally haven. But what is the responsibility of the teachers? Should it be permissible for White American men to be the gatekeepers of an Afro-Brazilian practice? How can a teacher instill a sense of pride in Afro-Brazilian culture if he is not concerned with, as Keira puts it, "the Black folks right now." As contemporary capoeira practices suggest, the more time spent in capoeira accompanied by a personal pilgrimage to Brazil and the right name and school affiliations, your place in capoeira is secured. But what weight does that hold for students who have "skin in the game" or have a deep vested interest in representation and treatment of all things related to Black culture in the

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Americas? To what extent should white practitioners and teachers be able to empathize and teach about the subjugation of Black people in the Americas historically and in the present?

### 3.4 Lauren

Lauren identifies as a mother, a woman, care-er, and a person of the Earth. Born in West-Africa and raised in the American Midwest, Lauren is deeply connected to the identities of Africa and America as distinct and intertwined. Lauren is known to have been semi-nomadic in her life, having lived in New York City, Massachusetts, New Orleans, and Atlanta. Lauren has also spent time in Brazil in her journey to become closer to capoeira. Professionally, Lauren works in Nature Conservation, working towards community engagement and equitable practices. She currently teaches capoeira in the American South and is affiliated with larger international capoeira institutions geared towards racial and gender education, activism, and equality. Lauren is affiliated with *Mestra Janja* and *Mestra Paulina*.

Lauren came into capoeira through a network. Her path to the Brazilian battle dance was filtered through a system of people who knew of her connection with movement, dance, and her connection to self. In her words:

My mother is African. She raised me to really appreciate and value my culture. Another thing that my mom insisted on was that we'd be healthy and so there was a lot of physical activity and eating right in my household growing up. When I got to college, I would look for ways to get physical. I lived in a place that is not very diverse and there weren't a lot of cultural opportunities to enjoy and have fun and be celebratory in ways that were more in line with my culture. So, salsa was a frequent thing for me, and I met a woman who said *Hey, you know, you'd like this thing*. And she was the first lady to bring me to a *Capoeira Regional* study group that was left over from another *Mestre* who had been there with a group and had left. This group had practiced and continued without a teacher there. We traveled a lot to find where teachers were. We traveled across the country to

Massachusetts and the Midwest doing [capoeira] *Regional*. It was at a conference in Kansas that I saw *Mestre Cobrinha* and I was like, *whoa! That's amazing!* So that's what I've been looking for. It was clear.<sup>94</sup>

Coming into capoeira for Lauren took a while. She was a young adult in the Midwest when representation in Black culture were lacking. Until Lauren travelled with her study group (a capoeira school without a teacher on site), she had not fully grasped the possibilities for a capoeira performance. Lauren found a sense of belonging when she saw Brazilians perform and share the art in an environment where people had travelled to be together, further instilling the importance of membership and community in capoeira. Aside from learning movements, Lauren had started to assert herself defending others in capoeira games:

There were red flags. You know, exploitation of women's bodies, oversexualization between men and women and even disrespectful acts of violence. I don't mean to overstate it but people getting kicked in their faces and it not being a part of the game. Respect became a part of how Lauren saw treating her fellow *capoeirista*. Capoeira also gave Lauren an opportunity to advocate for herself after becoming a mother:

When I was a young mother, my child's father just did not think that it was appropriate for me to be going to capoeira. I felt guilt- *okay I gotta build my household, I gotta really focus here, and I don't have time to leave the house when dinner should be cooked and nurturing is happening and bedtime is happening. I can't be at class. I have to be a mom.* Then also because it was such a male space. My son's father was questioning my desire to be around a bunch of men. So the presence of women is important. It is important for other women to justify being in these spaces too.<sup>95</sup>

Despite raising young children, Lauren felt it important to stay in capoeira spaces. Lauren alluded to the fact that capoeira gave her more respect for her mother raising her to be healthy, active, and African. To abandon capoeira would be distancing herself from an expressive form that brought her closer to her upbringing. Moreover, motherhood should not negate her life

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<sup>94</sup> Lauren, in discussion with the author, November 3, 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

before children. For Lauren to not bring all the aspects of herself into capoeira spaces would be to concede to the face that women with children do not belong in capoeira spaces. Finally, Lauren acknowledges that if she were to leave capoeira altogether because of her new life as a mother, it may give other women who want to continue to be a mother and a *capoeirista* permission to give up capoeira. If you stay in a space, then you belong there. Despite her inner dialogue and the requests of her partner, Lauren knew that she had to remain in the spaces where the men trained and where after class, the men shared secrets and knowledge. Lauren couldn't be privy to this information if she were to always stay at home with the kids. Lauren found a way to incorporate her identity as a mother with her identity as a *capoeirista*. Lauren did not want to give men permission to exclude her.

### 3.5 Dana

Dana is a mother and a capoeira instructor. Dana is the sixth of seven children and began capoeira at the age of 14. Her upbringing is largely connected to capoeira as other family members have played capoeira before her. Dana has been apart capoeira in the United States for 20 years. Dana also comes from a capoeira tradition that is affiliated with *Mestre Acordeon* and *Mestra Suelly*, even getting her *apelido* from Acordeon himself. Dana has played capoeira in the American South, Hawaii, and the South West. Her international travels in capoeira include Mexico and Canada—her original teacher has satellite schools throughout the Americas, including Brazil. Dana still teaches and organizes events and women's capoeira encounters today. Dana shares her first experiences viewing capoeira:

My older brother was a *capoeirista* and he trained for a long time. He was touring with a show and the show was in my area, so I went to see it with my mom. I was just flabbergasted. I couldn't believe what I was seeing— but I knew that *that* was me. Oh my God, this is me. This is calling me. We saw the dances of the Orishas, we saw acrobatics and we saw the music and it was just something that was calling me to it. I was 13 at the time. That was 20 years ago, and I still get goosebumps thinking about what I saw as a kid when my brother was in the show.<sup>96</sup>

For Dana, learning about community and people through capoeira has transferred to her adult life and how things are drastically different for younger women coming into capoeira, 20 years later:

I'm feeling that women are needed a lot more support and their teachers are not preparing them and teaching them the danger zones and then they're kind of getting into situations that they can't handle...I'm saying my teacher was very good about preparing specifically his female students about those danger zones. He was very honest with us about that. You here some of these stories and I'm really concerned that they were not taught to see these warning signs of potential problems...but you know, I'm kind of the bad guy for saying that. I also think these women didn't have the opportunity for proper guidance. For whatever reason, the newer generation of teachers is more concerned with getting the rent paid and acquiring new students and they're not looking at the fact that people need more guidance. The short-term goal is to retain students and keep class volume high versus *let me create long term, lifelong capoeirista*.<sup>97</sup>

In the rush to grow capoeira brands and empires in the United States, Dana notes the contrast between her youth in capoeira as a young Black woman and the stories of others. For Dana, there is less concern about developing young people rather than growing consumers of capoeira culture. Dana's testimony is full of the conflict that women of color feel when witnessing the hardships that the younger generations of women in capoeira face as they navigate the martial art. First, she speaks about how modern techniques of apprenticeship and training

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<sup>96</sup> Dana, in discussion with the author, March 9, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

have not met the standard that she had been accustomed to many years ago. In part, this guidance by men, mostly because men are primarily responsible for teaching young women in capoeira.

The other tense portion of her testimony that gave us both pause with this idea of the “bad guy”, or victim blaming. Being in the “danger zone” of a predator is something that cannot be predicted by anyone but this capoeira instructor. She clarified that there is too much authority given to the men in capoeira to do right by women’s bodies and that the responsibility falls upon the larger capoeira community and the *Mestres* and other teachers who lead to instill a sense of respect for oneself and the bodies of others in capoeira. The response of many would naturally be that *teachers cannot monitor the behavior of their students*, and this is true. But what happens when these sorts of unacceptable predatory behaviors are perpetrated by the teachers, *Mestres*, and leaders? Dana continues:

Just because somebody has a higher level or *cordão* than you, does not mean that you need to trust that person with your physical safety all the time. If you feel or see that this person does not have your best interest in mind, you might want to stay away from that person. That’s a danger zone to me. You can be a capoeira *Mestre* and invite someone to coffee but if that same capoeira *Mestre* sends you a picture of them half-naked, that is the danger zone. That is not appropriate. That is not capoeira, that’s something else. There are people that don’t understand this.<sup>98</sup>

This discussion is at the very core of the case for and against feminism in capoeira. Too many men in high positions in capoeira are complicit in the victimization of women and women of color in Capoeira because they view the art in a positive-only light. Feminists in capoeira often feel the push back of residing in largely male-spaces and are ignored when wanting to speak about women’s issues and troubles—and the problem becomes even more contentious when race is brought into the mix. If capoeira is for everyone, then why do we have to talk about

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

identity politics. *Isn't capoeira just supposed to be fun?* The pushback received by women who raise their voices or question authority of their *Mestres* results in a culture of silence and fear. This argument is also symptomatic of rape culture in general because we collectively worry about what women should be doing to protect themselves instead of teaching young boys and men to always be respectful of girls and women's bodies and autonomy. Those things are difficult to teach when they are still novel concepts in society.

The idea of trust is imbedded in welcoming newcomers. Participants go on great lengths to ensure newcomers feel welcome and invested in capoeira. Being welcomed without judgment or without a lot of navigation into a new environment is an easy way to let your guard down. Many interactions can be passed off as "everyone is really nice," especially when coming into an established community without a pre-established baseline relationship for support. It is important to have a friend or relative outside of capoeira that can guide and acclimate you to the kindness of individuals in capoeira in contrast to their personality independent of capoeira. There is undoubtedly a honeymoon period for those of us who are enamored with the spectacle of the art. Dana refers to lines getting blurred and perhaps people losing their skepticism of strangers. Imagine, you are sweating profusely in front of strangers, your legs are wide open in kicks as someone escapes beneath your legs, your teacher may guide your body in the correct position through touch and so on—it is easy to see where lines become blurred and how not knowing when to wonder if a line has been crossed. You get swept up in the close, kindness of the community. And in the world, physical contact between strangers is uncommon. Keeping this guard up is what Dana thinks has been missing in some of the horror stories she hears from others beginning capoeira today. It is hard to know what is dangerous if nobody teaches you. Dangers can lie in trusting places.

### 3.6 Shori

Shori identifies as an African woman living in America. She arrived in the United States for college at the age of 18. Shori's capoeira style is described as *contemporânea* as she trains both *Capoeira Regional* and Angola styles regularly. Professionally, Shori works in housing, community development, and homelessness assistance. Shori's was first invited to try capoeira and immediately gravitated to the sense of community. Shori currently spends her time in Bahia becoming better acquainted with capoeira in Brazil.

I was in a relationship with a *capoeirista*. He would stop by the studio to open their classroom space to make it more inviting to people on the street. He wasn't getting paid and was putting in a lot of extra effort. This all intrigued me. Then I saw a performance. There was spinning on the ground and on their palms but in a circle. I was just like *I want to do that!* The other thing that I noticed in my capoeira space is that there were a few women that had figures like me, skinny on top and big hips and a big bottom. And these ladies were killing it. At this point, I had never done a cartwheel in my life. Just watching these Black women move so gracefully, so beautifully just inspired me.<sup>99</sup>

Shori was established as an adult and had felt a resurgence of self and pride when women who looked like her moved in capoeira spaces. Reinforcing her presence through physical representation was among the reasons that Shori felt seen in capoeira in her community. In addition to movement, Shori witnessed Black female leadership in a city that has undergone rapid gentrification and displacement of Black and Brown people in favor of the wealthy and elite classes.

In my experience with Shori's capoeira group, they are very forthcoming about their activism and outreach in their immediate community. Some of the community issues include

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<sup>99</sup> Shori, in discussion with the author, December 13, 2018.

housing, poverty, gentrification, and youth outreach. Washington DC has undergone rapid transformation resulting in Black and Brown people being relocated directly as a result of gentrification. Shori's response is to be welcoming and make sure that their capoeira space is a place that feels like home in quickly transitioning landscape particularly for Black and Brown people. Community responsibility shaped the way Shori saw herself in capoeira. Her interaction with newer students is shaped by the notion that the community is responsible for the atmosphere. Shori speaks about community in capoeira as imperative for forming and maintain bonds within local capoeira communities. She says this:

The community was the other thing that was a formative part of my capoeira experience. That first day of class, at the end, one of the girls comes up to me and she welcomes me. She's like 'how did your first day go?' and 'you looked really good out there. I want to encourage you because this is really awkward- so if you feel awkward don't worry about that, we all go through that.' So to be in a space where a woman was coming up to me and welcoming and embracing me was meaningful. She's a light-skinned Black woman with a similar body type as me. It was clear that everyone was a leader in that space. It was the kind of responsibility that my boyfriend had shown me in his actions- everybody in that space was living that responsibility [of leadership] <sup>100</sup>

Initial contact with an experienced member of a capoeira organization is essential for the continued attendance of a new practitioner. Shori's explained to me that this interaction helped set up her expectations for herself in capoeira. When you see capoeira, your imagination can run wild with how amazing your body can be with practice. Shori notes that "Many students should realize that we are all going to be mediocre at capoeira." Understanding early on that capoeira is more than just body play is integral to longevity in the practice. An experienced *capoeirista* intervened on expectations in capoeira by asserting that there is more to capoeira than excellent execution of movements, but also membership in a community. The importance of community

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

engagement within Shori's school is passed down by her in the way she welcomes in new students, particularly those of color. She goes on to explain the importance of Black bodies representing Black art in a historically Black city.

I feel personally invested in every Black person that walks in through the door in a way that I don't with every white person that walks in. People are moving out of [Washington] DC in droves and so if there is a Black person that is here, I want to make sure they feel welcome and that we are as accommodating as possible to help ease the person into the community, so they can become a part of the community. I feel invested in Black people in capoeira in a way don't with white people. If you look at my friends, they are mostly white and from all over the world. I'm not saying I discriminate against white people or don't want to be friends with white people, but I am paying special attention when somebody Black walks through the door.

As an African woman living in the United States, Shori takes the initiative for Black people to feel welcome within an art that has been hyper commodified in the last 20 years. Keeping more Black practitioners in capoeira is Shori's way of making capoeira equitable. Equity in capoeira is particularly significant in cities that are pushing out people of color in favor high-paying clientele. Shori's act of care and attention to Black people and people of color in capoeira comes from wanting African Americans to have a space in performing and embodying diasporic pride, despite the plethora of systemic forces that make capoeira widely accessible to wealthier and whiter communities. Her statements are controversial because they are in strong alliance with supporting Black ownership and occupation of space in a white country and in an increasingly white city.

### 3.7 Intersecting Capoeira Identities

These women and I have different experiences coming into capoeira. Keira, Lauren, Alanna, Shori, and I were young college-aged women when we were introduced to the art while Dana had learned of capoeira during her childhood. Lauren, Shori, Dana, and I had been fortunate enough to be introduced by friends or family members while others like Alanna had found capoeira by chance. Moreover, the level of experiences ranges wildly from student to teachers with every participant having a degree of interaction with both Angola and Regional styles of play. The diversity of experiences still leaves many of these participants willing to come together despite disproportionate opposition.

At the heart of their experiences is their unwillingness to concede their expectations of what capoeira should be for them in exchange for what their peers or institutions thought was enough. Alanna felt it necessary even as a young student to step up and bring her school together by starting a project to encourage her peers. When her teacher pressured her to stay in their school, Keira decided that what she expected of capoeira could not be met within an academy that did not fully embrace the love of Black people in the Americas. I as well took it upon myself to study the history of Black women in capoeira when the discussions at *batizados* and the mere presence of Black women was woefully absent in the popular capoeira discourse. Lauren made sure that her role as a *capoeirista* did not end when her journey as a mother began.

Other commonalties between their experiences are the women who inspired them to stay active in their respective capoeira communities. Many participants cited *Mestras* Marisa and Janja as a source of inspiration to be seen or to be engaged in capoeira despite the obstacles. Black women students are looking up to women like them to help navigate the increasingly

hypermasculine world of capoeira. Despite being non-Brazilian, the African-descended women are using Afro-Brazilian feminist positions as a tool for circumventing common dilemmas for women playing capoeira in the United States. This is an instance of capoeira practices becoming more transnational not in performance but also through identity politics. The next few chapters will introduce these *Mestras* of capoeira and discuss how their legacies have impacted younger women playing capoeira today.

#### 4.0 Mestra Marisa of Gingarte Capoeira: Existence as Resistance

This chapter chronicles how I met *Mestra* Marisa and learned about her work making capoeira practices inclusive for those who entered their academy doors. *Mestra* Marisa has circumvented the racist and sexist institutions around her. Recurring themes in Marisa's rise to prominence in capoeira are performing culture and the use of networks to ensure survival.<sup>101</sup> Her story encapsulates the process of performing Brazilian cultural practices as a resource for American consumerism.<sup>102</sup> *Mestra* Marisa's journey in capoeira explores the ways that performing identity and performing difference can work in favor of those who claim and occupy intersectional and marginalized spaces in an increasingly globalized economy. Furthermore, as a Brazilian native *Mestra* Marisa had the odds stacked against her. She was reliant upon the social networks in and outside of capoeira for social mobility despite rampant sexism. Through reclaiming her space and identity, she makes the greater Chicago area and the students and new generations of *capoeiristas* from Brazil the beneficiaries. Identity and performance of culture can only be co-opted if one cannot see the value in their identity, even if it is a marginalized one.

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<sup>101</sup> Vilna Francine Bashi, *Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Networks in a Stratified World* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>102</sup> George Yudicé, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in a Global Era*. (Durham NC: Duke University Press 2003), 21.

#### 4.1 Meeting Mestre Marisa

In April 2010, I traveled with my teacher to my first large capoeira event since starting in the summer of 2008. We drove from the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan to Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. In the six hours it took to get there, we played capoeira songs from some of the more well-known capoeira albums. We listened to albums by *Mestre Acordeon* and *Mestre Suassuna* in anticipation for meeting some of the biggest capoeira *Mestres* in the *Cordão de Ouro* school.

In my first year of training capoeira, I had realized that community was an important part of capoeira. As a member of a small Michigan capoeira school that has ties with both Israel and Brazil capoeira institutions, it became apparent that continual membership was contingent on the willingness to travel for capoeira, for your teachers, and for your friends. I could sense the excitement in my teacher's voice and readiness to get on the road. Not only was he going to meet our grand *Mestre*, Suassuna, but he was also going to reconnect with his capoeira contemporaries from Israel. His excitement was palpable and transferable. I was excited to get there, to witness the connecting of all these great Brazilian *capoeiristas* in the middle of Illinois, of all places.

Admittedly I felt this was my moment, and in the days leading up to our departure from Michigan to Illinois, I basked in my glory of meeting *Mestre* and traveling with the teacher alone. I knew I would be privy to information that *Mestres* shared between each other when they were not at the head of a class or teaching a workshop. It was a big deal to meet the man who started *Cordão de Ouro* almost 40 years ago from our first meeting.

After arriving the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, we headed to the gym. We registered and a quickly changed into athletic clothes. It was time to train. In some ways, this

event was like many other smaller-local capoeira events, including *batizado*<sup>103</sup> ceremonies and informal *rodas*.<sup>104</sup> In a space the equivalent of three basketball courts, there were *capoeiristas* stretching, warming up, and showing off their moves. Others congregated around the sidelines, depositing their gym bags or hung around the merchandise tables, checking out the CDs, shoes, shirts, or instruments.

Just as quickly as we had arrived, my teacher had left to train with the higher cords, those with a blue belt and higher.<sup>105</sup> I hurriedly searched for people like me, beginners with a green belt or no belt around their waist. The reality of the situation dawned on me. I was training capoeira with unfamiliar people, in an unfamiliar place. The time training capoeira was the closest to normal I felt, despite being in my own country and even in my same region. (The Midwest seems homogenous to anyone merely driving through.)

Our training began with simple sequences: pre-choreographed movements between partners that were crafted by *Mestre Bimba*, the father of modern *Capoeira Regional*. The hour went on like this.

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<sup>103</sup> Translates to “baptism” and signifies the introduction ceremony to capoeira. First time participants revive their first *cordão* or belt.

<sup>104</sup> Circle formations for capoeira games and in this instance, informal sparring-type gatherings to practice capoeira with friends but without the formalities of a ceremony or special guests.

<sup>105</sup> Instructor cord in capoeira or blue belt symbolizes the ability to teach capoeira in the regional and *Cordão de Ouro* schools. Many practitioners of this level have maintained training diligently for six to 10 years.

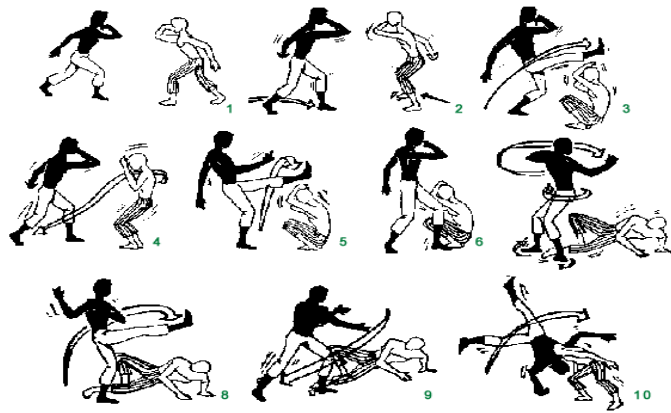


Figure 11 Mestre Bimba's Sequence One<sup>106</sup>

I knew these movements. These sequences were foundational to any *Capoeira Regional* school. I do not recall the name of my partners over the weekend, but it almost is irrelevant. We were training partners in a series of many, switching after each 60-90 second exercise. Despite our intimate body positioning—a raised leg over a head, crouching in between legs, smelling the mix of sweat and feet—training partners in capoeira are often a blur. Despite my initial overwhelming feelings of loneliness, my kinesthetic knowledge took over. In capoeira, the names of the movements and the order in which they occur often escape my lips when describing the series of movements learned and practiced in various workshops. For a person like me, corporeal knowledge grounds me and eliminate all doubt that I am a *capoeirista*.

The Eight Annual International Capoeira Conference at IUIC (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) marked many firsts for me. It was the first event that I met internationally renowned *Mestres* of capoeira including Grand *Mestre* Suassuna.

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<sup>106</sup> Photographic representation of Bimba sequence 1: <https://dccapoeira.wordpress.com/2012/11/29/mestre-bimbas-sequence-1/> Accessed March 20, 2019



Figure 12 Author with Grande Mestre Suassuna <sup>107</sup>

The capoeira conference was the first time that I had experienced *Capoeira Angola* workshops alongside *Capoeira Regional* workshops. I even purchased my first *berimbau* at this event—and it was also the first time I had encountered a woman master of capoeira that looked like me. A slim woman of average height with big curly dark hair swirling above her head. People were gathered around her, sitting as she stood, distributing half slips of paper. I claimed my space in the crowd on the floor. The next workshop was beginning: a song workshop. All the songs featured during this segment were compositions from *Mestre Suassuna*’s newly released album “Sou do Tempo Do Pai de pai de Paipai” roughly translated as “I am from the time of my father’s father [great-grandfather]”

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<sup>107</sup> Photo by Baz Michaeli



Figure 13 Album Art for "Sou do Tempo do Pai de Pai de Papai"

One of the songs was led by *Mestra* Marisa, called “Eu vi, Eu vi” translated as “I saw, I saw.” The song describes the seeing a roda and hearing the rhythm of the *berimbau* and seeing the specific capoeira movements.

I saw I saw a capoeira roda	Eu vi eu vi a roda de capoeira
I heard the rhythm of the berimbau	Eu escutei o toque do berimbau
I saw an armada a martelo and a meia lua (all kicks)	Eu vi armada vi martelo e meia lua
I saw a rasteira and also a salto mortal (all moves)	Eu vi rasteira e tambem salto mortal

Figure 14 "Eu Vi, Eu Vi" Lyric Excerpt

I remember how convent It was to get a handout for lyrics! At all the other capoeira events, we had to learn by rote, singing the same lines over and over. The call and response format for the *corridos* songs in capoeira made it a bit easier, as often the group would simply repeat what the leader sung moments before. In reflection, I realize that these Brazilian capoeira masters knew their market. Coming to teach American students with handouts. To make the text seem more accessible in those moments before deciding to buy the album from a table just 10 feet away after the music lesson. I felt that I was at somewhat of an advantage because

remembering melodies was easy for me. My challenge was remembering what syllables went where.

The music workshop continued with other capoeira instructors teaching the large group of student songs. *Mestra* Marisa repeated lines of the song with us over and over until eventually eyes shifted away from the handout and towards her as we sang back and forth, a call-and-response. The teaching of *Mestra* Marisa and *Mestre* Chicote were quite the opposite experiences. The first song was slow methodical until we got it right, while the last song we sung as a group ended in scream/singing, jumping up and down to the beat, and hopping from side to side while being squished into the shoulders of your neighbors. We were a sea of singers and a sea of *capoeiristas*. The leader struck the *berimbau* with ferocity as the sweat slid down his face and his voice echoed through the gymnasium, almost matching the entire group's intensity by the decibel. I'll never forget this man; he had the presences quite opposite of *Mestra* Marisa. A medium Brown man with shoulder length dreadlocks, haphazardly sequestered from his face with a headband. I had seen him walking arm and arm with Grand *Mestre* Suassuna, so I knew he was a special master. The song we learned from a Black *Mestre* was "Africa se Uniu" translated as Africa United to my Brazil. I bought the CD right after the music class. The lyrics reiterate the importance of connection of Black struggle in Brazil. The chorus and first verses:

Africa Se Uniu  
Ao meu Brasil

Mistura de raça e de côr  
Mantendo a nossa tradição  
Do povo guerreiro e sofrido  
Por isso não teme o perigo  
Lutar contra a escravidão  
Africa

Africa Se Uniu  
Ao meu Brasil

Africa United  
To my Brazil

Mixture of race and color  
Keeping our tradition  
The warrior people suffer  
Don't fear the danger  
Fight against slavery  
Africa

Africa United  
To my Brazil

Figure 15 "Africa Se Uniu" Lyrics Verse 1

The series of firsts marked by this capoeira event in the Midwest signified my true introduction to capoeira because it validated all the reasons, I was drawn to the sport more than 18 months prior. The Afro-Brazilian-ness was present, the inclusion of women of color, the participation in a global network. This event also marked my first instrument purchase, making *berimbau* practice more convenient—my own *berimbau*, with *beriba* grown on a farm of a *Mestre* and flew into the United States. Linguistic, musical, tangible, and diasporic culture had coalesced. I felt like this event was the convergence of the reason why I continued to train capoeira despite how grueling each session was. Black womanhood, check. Music about the African diaspora, check.

*Mestra* Marisa's presence was in stark contrast to other *Mestres* at the event because she was quiet and reserved but knowledgeable and approachable. Marisa's methods were similar but still in contrast to Chicote's energetic music workshop. Both music workshops we repeated the songs, but we had more time with Marisa to learn. The outcomes were the same. We all learned both songs with different approaches and different levels of energy. *Mestra* Marisa represented the diversity of types of capoeira teachers that I had yet to experience at that point in my capoeira

career. *Mestra* Marisa was my first example of seeing an Afro-Brazilian woman stand out on her own in *Capoeira Regional*.

In an interview with *Mestra* Marisa, eight years later after our first encounter, we spoke about how important music workshops had become since capoeira's increasing popularity in the United States and other countries that are not a part of the Lusosphere. Not only was this capoeira event a marker of many first for me where I felt authenticated and validated in capoeira, this was also the first event that I had seen the convergence of American institutions with cultural enterprises.

*Mestra* Marisa became more than a *Mestra*, but a symbol for what is possible in capoeira if you continue. In years following, I continued to frequent events with her capoeira academy in Chicago, named *Gingarte Capoeira*. Our first contact was from a distance as she was an authority and a teacher at the Champaign-Urbana event. Between our first and second meeting, I had embarked on two graduate programs in ethnomusicology and by the time I made it to Pittsburgh, I began frequenting *Mestra* Marisa's events as this project solidified. I was actively seeking out spaces and events where women of color were not just participants but were organizers and leaders. If her presence was important to me, I knew she was important to other women and Afro-descended women in capoeira because there were so few people like her teaching capoeira in the United States.

#### 4.2 Mestra Marisa: Coming to America and Bridging Black Consciousness

Marisa Cordeiro was born in 1964 and the middle child of eight siblings. She was raised in the outside of Curvelo, Minas Gerais. Marisa's family suffered tragedy early in her life. Her father passed away and her older siblings were tasked with helping their mother on the farm. The younger school-aged siblings were tasked with getting themselves to school an hour away. Marisa recalls the challenges of her early childhood and adolescence, "I had to pretty much take care of myself by the time I was seven years old, although not that well. I spent a lot of time alone. I had a lot of issues, but I did the best I could."<sup>108</sup> In addition to the challenges of growing up with financial and family troubles, Marisa shared the difficulties of growing up *preta* or Black in Brazil within the education system. She continues to describe how racism and education impacted her life and led her to São Paulo and eventually capoeira,

The Brazilian population is so mixed, you see all kinds of different skin-tones. So I was considered *preta*. To be called *preta* in Brazil is with the intention to offend somebody. And that's how they used that word....to make you feel worse than others. It was just classmates and not the teachers but [the teachers] didn't have the means to protect the students or to guide them....so [the students] would say things and hit me. My hair is crazy and curly, so I lot of times it looked wild and crazy...they really picked on me at school, but I kept going back for some reason. My clothes were not that clean because I had no sense of how to take care [of myself] but I always went to school no matter what...I stayed all the way to high school and one day, I went to class and sat down, thinking "I don't really know where this is going to take me and I don't have the time", so I grabbed my books and walked right out of the door with the intention to never go back.<sup>109</sup>

More than her constant mistreatment by classmates, and the lack of protection by teachers, Marisa had no safety nets or authority figures to advocate for her education. Her pro-

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<sup>108</sup> Mestra Marisa, in discussion with the author, November 19, 2017.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Black education began to take hold when she moved to São Paulo. *Mestra* Marisa was working domestic jobs, cleaning with her older sister when a friend invited her to a capoeira class. Despite the pain of training, she decided to stay. Eventually she began training capoeira with *Mestre* Cobra Mansa who began making comparisons between the N'golo or Zebra dance and African rituals. In the 1980s, there was even controversy about linking capoeira with Black culture in a positive light. They thought that relating capoeira to anything African in general could hurt the practice in a negative sense. Marisa admitted that early on in her capoeira career, “I didn’t know which side to be on.” As it was common practice to ignore the contributions of Afro-Brazilians because these disparities were institutional.



Figure 16 Mestra Marisa Sings and Plays Pandeiro <sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Jessica Louise Cunha and Jennifer Wright, Photo of Mestre Marisa, <https://www.gingartecapoeira.org/>

Marisa had been working at a retail shop to make ends meet and playing capoeira in her free time. On a day like any other, she headed to the *Cordão de Ouro* academy in downtown São Paulo for class. She saw a lot of unfamiliar people gathered in and around the studio. After inquiring about the extra activity, she discovered that there were people scouting talent for the *Oba Oba* troupe. Marisa and some friends decided to play a little bit of capoeira in the presence of the scouters. A few days later, Marisa gets the notice that she has been selected to join and travel to the United States. When asked if she was ready to leave, she didn't hesitate and accepted their offer. For Marisa, capoeira proved to be a way to find community and enjoyment during a difficult economic time in her early adult life. Moreover, capoeira provided a way to change her life, as she was invited to tour with the Brazilian dance troupe *Oba Oba*.

#### 4.3 *Oba Oba: Performing Brazilianness*

*Oba Oba* is best known for showing Brazilian dances to North American and European audiences. Oba is a Portuguese interjection that means “wow!” The title itself is indicative of the emphatic and breath-taking nature of the Brazilian variety show. Franco Fontana, a self-proclaimed impresario, created the spectacular showcase that toured the United States and Europe. His project began when he became fascinated with Brazilian culture. Fontana continually visited São Paulo and Bahia. In 1984, the first *Oba Oba* was performed in Rome and was an instant success, later expanding to other cities in Europe. In 1987, the show traveled to

Las Vegas for an initial eight weeks, that was later extended to 45.<sup>111</sup> *Oba Oba* eventually grew to a Broadway show. Franco Fontana was a very connected man in the music industry. His talents extended to Brazilian artists. *Oba Oba* was a phenomenon.

According to the 1993 review by Roy Sander, this two-and-a-half-hour show was designed to encapsulate the Brazilian music and culture experience and it even goes to recreate experiencing Black people in Brazil from slavery to emancipation, featuring other instruments and regional dances even a tribute to Carmen Miranda. Many reviews use language that describes it sensually and vibrantly. Much of the language that reviews use to discuss the show would be problematic by today's standards as they highlight the exoticized view of Brazilians' bodies and cultural products outside of the global North. Given that this show was created by an Italian man, it calls into question: whose version of Brazil was being performed? Surely the music and the dances are of Brazil, but the production was cultural consumption over appreciation.

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<sup>111</sup> Franco Fontana, "Franco Fontana," accessed April 1, 2019, <http://www.obaobashow.com/pagine/fontana.html>



Figure 17 Album Artwork of Franco Fantana's "Oba Oba" Tour Album

Artwork from *Oba Oba* album is forthright about the cultural value of Brazil by showing capoeira movements and a samba dancer as caricatures, both with brown to dark skin. Footage available on YouTube from a 1993 performance of Fontana's *Oba Oba* shows all the different dances, but the optics become clearer than the reviews suggest.<sup>112</sup> <sup>113</sup>There are men doing acrobatics and playing instruments and the women are primarily dancers. The costumes design for women range from flowing dresses to sparse bikini bottoms; bikini tops and grass skirts, traditional samba costumes with headdresses, and even lacy and brightly colored negligées type tops that twirl with each spin, revealing the bare chests of women dancers. The group dances

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<sup>112</sup> Migeul Lopes, "Oba Oba '93," YouTube video, 1:33:04, May 2014

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjBTVvTBL4s>

<sup>113</sup> HALIDONMUSIC, "Oba Oba- Franco Fontana's Oba Oba Show: The Brazilian Hit Musical," YouTube video, 24:32, September 27, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcCZC-IM-eY>

seem to have women more exposed than the partnered dances with men. To ensure my American sentiments were not clouding my impressions, I asked a few Brazilian women, who admitted that the sort of playfully scantily clad women is more common only during carnival. These displays were a bit more excessive and perhaps presumptuous of the desires of late-1980s and early 1990s audiences of Brazilian bodies. As the camera pans to the audience, we see an almost exclusively white audience. Black and Brown bodies were working for a white European man and dancing for white European and American audiences.



Figure 18 Oba Oba's "86" Album Cover

In hindsight, these portrayals may not have survived present-day analysis but at the time, this dance troupe provided a few Brazilians a chance to see and become acquainted with the United States. Even though Marisa was recruited through her capoeira academy, women did not perform capoeira in *Oba Oba*. Her tenure with the dance troupe was spent doing folkloric

dances, which she continues to demonstrate at workshops and *batizados*. Even when leaving Brazil, the sexism remained for the world to see and perhaps to further normalize.

Dancing with *Oba Oba* provided *Mestra* Marisa a way out of Brazil. Visiting the United States was an opportunity that proved to be life altering. She met her husband, an African-American doctor who speaks Portuguese. *Mestra* Marisa recalls, “We had no Black doctors in Brazil at the time, so I was like he must be telling a story because he wants me to go out and have dinner with him.”

*Mestra* Marisa confirms that her Brazilian education knowingly erased slavery from the curriculum while openly supporting negative stereotypes of Afro-Brazilians as ugly and lazy in media representations. Coming to the United States showed Marisa an alternative perspective, in which Black people could participate fully and unapologetically in their realization of their goals and dreams. Coming to the United States and interacting with other Black identities provided a new lens in which to understand Blackness in the Americas. Comparing racial structures of Brazil to those of the United States observed through class differences and racial stratification.<sup>114</sup> Marisa’s story reinforced the power of diasporic connection. Despite having a drastically different upbringing than upper middle-class African Americans, it is apparent how the diaspora reciprocates knowledge and power to those who need to be reminded of our collective struggle, trauma, and more importantly our collective power when we are in a position to recognize our history without interference. After that date, some paperwork, and some time, *Mestra* Marisa

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<sup>114</sup> Vilna Francine Bashi, *Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press), 209.

settled in Chicago and began work in what she was passionate about: sharing capoeira and her Brazilian identity with her community.

#### *4.4 Mestre Marisa's Gingarte Capoeira*

Marisa's annual summer event was a standard *batizado e troco de cordoes* ceremony- where students become baptized in capoeira and exchange cords for a higher rank. *Mestra* Marisa describes Chicago as a "city come-to-life" in the summer. Chicago is a city transformed when the frigid winter weather breaks and capoeira can be played outdoors, by the water (Lake Michigan) or out in the sun and heat, which is more customary to training in Brazil.



Figure 19 Roda by Lake Michigan Summer 2014

The more I visited her academy and events, the more I realized that Marisa had been mentoring other Brazilian capoeira instructors, many of whom were soon-to-be *Mestres*, inviting them to teach capoeira in the United States for her well-publicized events. At this event I met Contra *Mestre* Lobinho who I later traveled with to São Paulo for my pilgrimage to Brazil as a

*capoeirista*. Lobinho is not my official teacher, but we connected through the first Afro-Brazilian *Mestra* I met. Marisa's event was like every other capoeira event I had been too. Unfortunately for me, *Mestra* Marisa was busy cooking food for students—at least one meal a day so we did not have to purchase all our meals—making sure all her guests were comfortable and that things were running smoothly. Like many community leaders, her work was unseen yet crucial for the success of her school, her students, and other *capoeiristas* who were aspiring to start a capoeira academy in the United States. Through *Mestra* Marisa, I was able to make a connection to make my first trip to Brazil with someone I know and trust. My first research trip is a testament to capoeira's built-in community.

*Mestra* Marisa had been a force in the capoeira community in the Chicago area for nearly 30 years. In November 2017, I had the chance to sit down with *Mestra* to unpack her story and influence on *Capoeira Regional* in the United States and the importance of community engagement. This encounter was much smaller than previously mentioned *batizados*. November 20<sup>th</sup> celebrates *Dia da Consciência Negra* (Black Consciousness Day) in Brazil. I was with *Mestra* Marisa and another advanced student preparing coffee and snacks after the first workshop in session. We hugged and chatted then I joined in the group. She has always had a quiet yet inviting and warm personality, no matter the context that I can speak to her.

Instead of a gymnasium the size of 3 basketball courts filled with training *capoeiristas*, the setting was more intimate. No more than 35 people trained at a time. Instead of training in the hopes of gaining entrance into capoeira or graduating in cord level, this event was a remembering the contributions of Afro-Brazilians in capoeira. The special instructor was *Mascara* (mask) a contra *Mestre* from Brazil whose English was limited—another new *Mestre* being welcomed into the American capoeira community through *Mestra* Marisa and the *Cordão*

*de Ouro* school. He was a very talented instructor. We had an involved *maculele* class and had nearly put together a performable routine in a 90-minute session. Every participant had sweat soaked shirts. This is what I missed. We were exhausted but happy to execute the stick-dance movements to perfection. Pacing of the workshops were timed well, with classes often alternating between labor intensive and musical. We focused on body and music—*jogar* and *brincar*—body play and music play to recharge our spirits before the next movement workshop.



Figure 20 Small Training Space from Ida Noyes Hall, Zumbi Day Event, University of Chicago

November 19, 2017

Smaller events gave participants the chance to familiarize themselves with Marisa's students in addition to getting more one-on-one time with a new guest before they become a more popular capoeira practitioner in years to come. The *Dia de Conceincia Negra* or the "Zumbi Day" event is also a wonderful opportunity for new capoeira students to learn about the myths and legends of Zumbi but also the importance of Black liberation that is integral to capoeira. At the end of the first day of events, we had a *bate-papo* (chit-chat) session to open up the floor to participants about race and racism in the country and how it relates to capoeira. The

mixed group of Black, White, Latinx, and Asian-Americans, of teenage and middle age, ranging from beginner to seasoned *capoeiristas*, sat down to listen and voice frustrations and concern about racism and why we should have difficult conversations. It was common to have chatting session about capoeira life. But I had never experienced chatting sessions about race and racism in a *Capoeira Regional* setting. Only *Capoeira Angola* schools have provided this space.

By the presence of this event, and the topic of our *bate-papo*, *Mestra* Marisa was compensating for the lack of Black education in Brazil. Recognition of Black art and culture in the world has been a motivator for continuing this event. *Mestra* Marisa hosts events geared towards Black consciousness and others recognizing the importance of women in capoeira.



Figure 21 Poster from the “Mulheres da Capoeira’ Event”<sup>115</sup>

The imagery that accompanies special events makes women’s bodies central and that also emphasizes connections between Brazil and the United States. Through acknowledgement of the disparities of representation of race and gender in capoeira through hosting these events, *Mestra* Marisa is making it apparent that these are discussion are welcome in her academy. *Mestra*

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<sup>115</sup> Courtesy of Gingarte Capoeira

Marisa's story of coming from a rural community in Minas Gerais to a leading figure in *Capoeira Regional* has been characterized by making space for others. As an immigrant, early on in her career, she learned English alongside others seeking to improve their chances for citizenship. She utilized her expertise in capoeira and Brazilian dance to share Afro-diasporic culture to the low-income, African-American students in Chicago. She has also built an academy where women can feel safe from the victimization from Brazilian-born male *capoeiristas* looking for a weekend of fun with American women. In an interview, another woman *capoeirista* who taught classes in the mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and Pacific Northwest spoke to me about the normalcy of preying on women:

There's been a lot of inappropriate sexual stuff. In [Group name] capoeira and probably in many other groups...And it's very difficult to keep those [sexual] dynamics out of the classroom...there's a power dynamic within that relationship that makes it very difficult to tell what your obligations are-- what your choice are. In a setting in which you are consistently taught to do what your teacher says, I think introducing that element into it can have really harmful effects on the overall feeling of the [capoeira] classroom. Especially when you begin to notice your teacher does that with multiple people...<sup>116</sup>

This behavior is a common experience for women in capoeira. This instructor unpacks the complications of trying to establish a relationship in an environment that is predicated on hierarchy and status. To begin capoeira, it is necessary to some degree to sacrifice some inkling of autonomy to demonstrate your dedication to the system of *Mestre*-Student tutelage. When sexism and predatory-yet-normalized gender dynamics become part of the equation of the *Mestre*-Student relationship, it becomes difficult to know where and how to assert yourself. As a new *capoeirista*, it is difficult to plan for the potential backlash, as all your classmates will want to follow and support their *Mestre*. Students, mostly women, can become isolated from their

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<sup>116</sup> Anonymous woman instructor of capoeira, in discussion with the author, February 3, 2013, MidAtlantic Region

newly created friends and community, whether women want to be in relationships with their teachers or not.

With my interlocutor and *Mestra* Marisa in Gingarte, the benefits of women leadership in capoeira schools is apparent. Women students can feel as though their training and capoeira skills are prioritized instead of being distracted by the compounded social expectations of the perceived notion of the availability of women's bodies from men who have been taught that all women are available. Although my interlocutor has retired her *cordão* and *Mestra* Marisa does not teach all of the classes held in her academy, these examples demonstrate women in positions of leadership set a new standard and precedent for how to respect women's bodies in capoeira. One *Instrutora*, *Contra-Mestra*, and *Mestra* at a time, they will dismantle these gendered dynamics that keep women and girls from participating in capoeira. This isn't to say that all men teachers treat women and girls this way in the classroom, but certainly men teachers do not have the same experiences of trying to grow up in capoeira without being treated or viewed as a conquest. Have women lead in capoeira is one of many solutions that will ensure the longevity of women practitioners from youth to adulthood in a way that has yet to be seen in centuries past.

#### 4.5 Existence as Resistance

My encounter with *Mestra* Marisa, was by chance but necessary. In learning and knowing her through capoeira, her story reveals the ways that culture, performativity, and economic institutions play a role in identity making. Marisa's participation in capoeira began as an outlet in her day-to-day life and brought her new opportunities. Those opportunities were

created for a growing affinity for inclusivity through globalization, on one hand *Oba Oba* signifies the way that the West likes to exoticize Latin American and Brazilian culture. On the other hand, we see the way Afro-Brazilian's participate in the reification of their own culture. Yúdice posits in the Expediency of culture<sup>117</sup>, the global exchange of culture is not just one sided but has many players who can come to benefit a plethora of advantages from the exchange. Through performing Brazilian culture, she was able to travel and established herself in the United States. By performing Afro-Brazilianness and femininity, Marisa was able to exchange a stylized performance for her preferred one with which she identified. Through this exchange, Marisa not only improved her circumstance, but she also made *Capoeira Regional* in the Chicago area more accessible to inner city and college students alike. The performance of Brazilian culture—*samba*, *maculele*, and all of these cultural artifacts—may have been co-opted initially but reclaimed to assert a level of autonomy. *Mestra* Marisa has demonstrated in her *Oba Oba* career and the Gingarte academy a subsidiary of *Cordão de Ouro* in Brazil. She started a school on her own and gathered resources on her own, largely predicated on performing difference is not threatening and a convenient was to explore one's identity in a neoliberal America. *Mestra* Marisa has been able to participate and shape capoeira culture in the Midwest and simultaneously shift the values of celebrating openly sexist behaviors from her male contemporaries and proteges from Brazil. By mediating her citizenship in capoeira and the antiquated values of sexism, she has opened a dialogue on and course of action against misogyny in United States capoeira practice.

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<sup>117</sup> George Yúdice, "The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era," *Culture and Social Justice* (2003): 147

*Mestra* Marisa is still able to perform identity in a way that is less common for women of color for her time by engaging in acceptable forms of cultural performance at a distance from the institutions that have historically stifled new expressions of activism, like celebrating women of color and standing up to other men who were disrespecting women in her own institutions.

*Mestra* Marisa's story suggests cultural flow has advantages for cultural consumers as well as the purveyor and performer of culture. Despite *Mestra* Marisa's ties with larger institutions, primarily run by men, she credits her position and community support from her own work ethic. She has reclaimed her cultural capital and performed it in a way that is acceptable.

## 5.0 Social Media And Black Feminist Modalities in Twenty-First Century Capoeira

Consciousness raising and political activism in the age of social media allows marginalized groups to find their communities despite physical proximity. These ‘safe spaces’ permit users to learn and explore in the safety of home while engaging in identity politics. For some people, this trial and error exploration expedites the path to political engagement. It can be alienating for others. What has remained constant despite the inclusion of social media platforms is that people are bonded together over their experiences, struggle, and self-defined standpoint.<sup>118</sup> The criteria, as Patricia Hill Collins outlines, remains constant as Black women search for and create spaces for self-identification and political mobilization. For Black women who play capoeira, the themes are the same as it remains a struggle to find a community that identifies with the same set of problems in the midst of the glorified, rampant displays of capoeira masculinity. This chapter discusses consciousness raising for Black women in digital capoeira spaces.

Moreover, this section looks at social media’s function in Black women capoeira spaces as the Black diaspora itself forge ahead toward the future of digital consciousness raising.<sup>119</sup> On both the technological and historical fronts, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have lasting impacts for representing Black Womanhood in capoeira.

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<sup>118</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 25.

<sup>119</sup> Anna Everett. *The Digital Diaspora: The Race for Cyberspace*. (New York, NY: SUNY University Press, 2009).

### 5.1 Facebook and Group Politics

My membership in a few online groups designed for women in capoeira reveals different models for discussing race and gender for people of color in capoeira. Conversely, there are moments in which women of color carve out spaces for themselves to speak safely and gain allies. Max's Facebook group began in November 2011 and has grown to nearly 1,300 members<sup>120</sup>. Originally, the goal was maintaining relationships between *capoeiristas* after big events—specifically for those in Europe to feel connected to each other in addition to bigger capoeira communities in Brazil and North America. Max's group and other groups like hers aimed to use Facebook's social connectivity to provide a space to advertise for upcoming events, post links for help with music, and offer advice about sports injuries or athletic gear.<sup>121</sup> Shortly after inception, some male members began posting images of what Max calls “capoeira girls”



Figure 22 “Capoeira Girls”

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<sup>120</sup> While tracking the group in 2017 numbers were closer to 1600 members, now the numbers seem to be down to 1300... not sure but may be the result of interpersonal conflict concerning intersectional feminism

<sup>121</sup> Max, in discussion with the author, May 18, 2018.

“Capoeira girls” are women who are superficially engaged in capoeira while not showing their skills or faces but have the primary goal of sexualizing a woman’s body with capoeira as a backdrop. The moderator began to warn members who posted content of this nature that objectifies women, letting them know that sexism would not be permitted. Soon after, many men left the group without further prompting. Now, the group is only open to women. Those who wish to join must fill out a survey and if the responses align with the community values that Max has in place, then membership is admitted.

Members range in ability from beginning students to various levels of teachers with some casual players and others who train more vigorously. There are more than 20 countries represented in this community. Members actively post about where to train with women teachers. Some members even went so far as to create a spreadsheet detailing teachers, countries, cities, and capoeira school affiliation. Among the posts in the group are threads where members promote upcoming women capoeira events, share clips of music that is sung and performed by women, and even articles and think pieces about the role of women in capoeira today, including the disparity between women *Mestras* to men *Mestres*.



Figure 23 Screenshot from Women in Capoeira Group<sup>122</sup>

This space also acts as a place for women to speak candidly about their bodies as many women continue to train during pregnancy and resume training after giving birth. Additionally, the “women in capoeira group” serves as a place to warn others about predatory behavior. These behaviors range from unwanted advances to even sexual harassment or violence, committed by fellow students up to teachers and *Mestres*; people in positions of trust. The group has become just as much about keeping women safe as it is about sharing capoeira knowledge. One of the more illuminating developments occurred when a group of San Francisco Bay Area *capoeiristas* conducted a survey highlighting how pervasive sexual misconduct is in capoeira.

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<sup>122</sup> The caption reads: "Why are There So Few Women Masters in Capoeira" with a picture of Mestre Tisza playing *berimbau*.

# CAPOEIRA

## Sexual Misconduct Survey

A group of San Francisco Bay Area capoeiristas conducted a survey to research the prevalence of sexual misconduct in the capoeira community. We share this summary of the results in hopes of sparking discussions and actions to make capoeira a safer space for everyone.



## Demographic

### 42 Countries

Most Respondents:

55%	USA	497 Respondents
13%	Brazil	118 Respondents
9%	Canada	82 Respondents
6%	UK	50 Respondents



Figure 24 Capoeira Sexual Misconduct Infographic, Part I

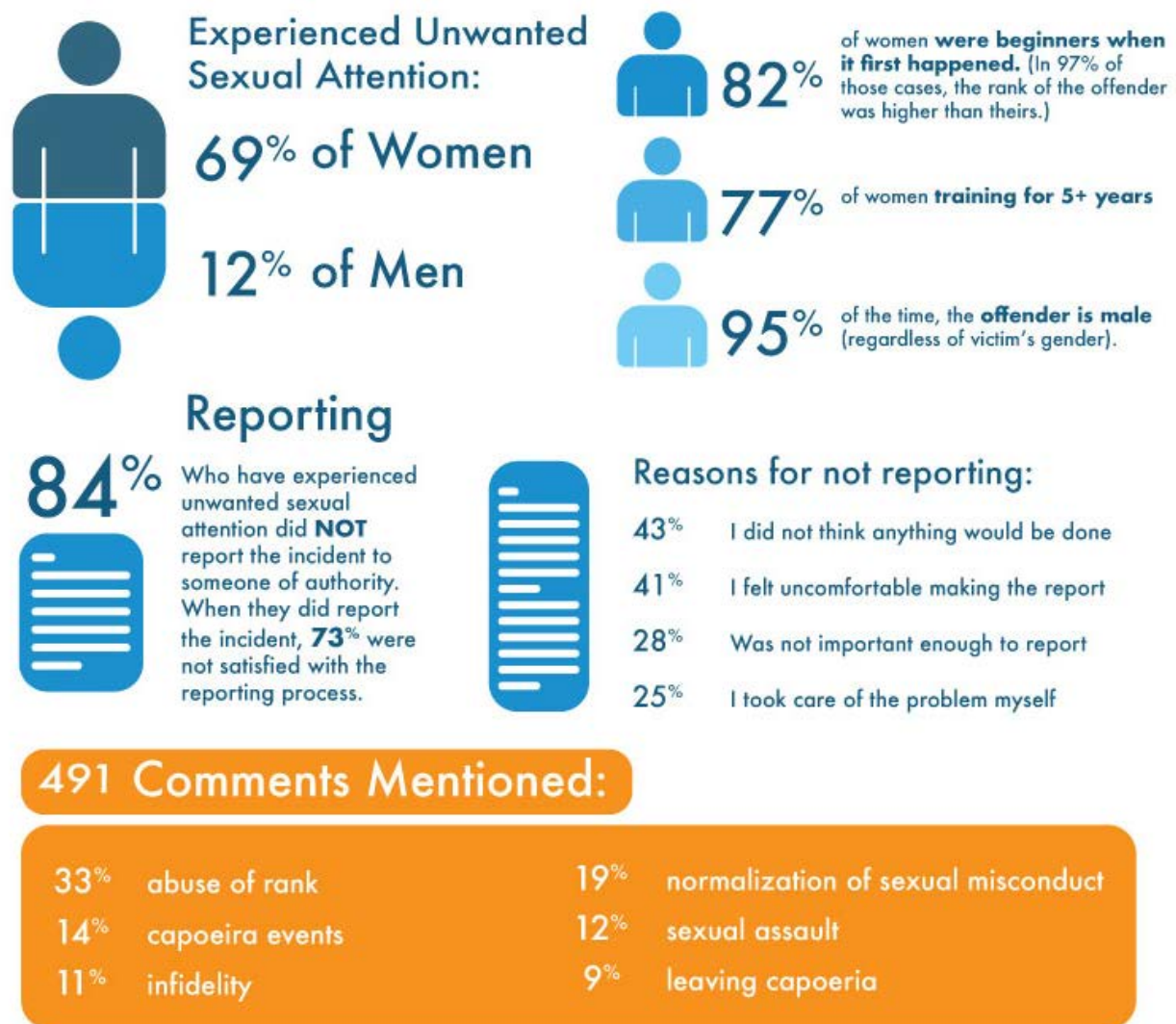


Figure 25 Capoeira Sexual Misconduct Inforgraphic, Part II <sup>123</sup>

It certainly seems like the ‘#metoo’ movement has reached capoeira in a way that was long overdue.

Max admits that her small Facebook group has grown far beyond her expectations.

Capoeira is an artform that valorizes strength and speed as well as physical and psychological

<sup>123</sup> Tammy “Foquinha” Chang, Capoeira Sexual Misconduct Inforgraphic (San Francisco, CA)  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/capoeira/comments/8qg72q/infographic\\_on\\_sexual\\_misconduct\\_in\\_capoeira/](https://www.reddit.com/r/capoeira/comments/8qg72q/infographic_on_sexual_misconduct_in_capoeira/)

manipulation of an opponent; it is easy to deduce why capoeira and toxic masculinity share many of the same traits.

The group “Women in Capoeira” exists because of the interaction between different types of women from different social, political, and cultural frameworks. In fact, this is well embodied by the moderator herself. Max originally from Argentina, enculturated in the machismo of Latin America but also living and working in one of the more gender equitable places in the world. According to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report for 2017, the Netherlands ranks 32, Argentina 34, the United States 49, Mexico 81, Brazil 90 out of 144 countries. Northern European countries rank quite high; Iceland, Norway, and Finland coming in at 1, 2 and 3 respectively.<sup>124</sup> European countries had the tendency to score higher on the scale which was measured by women’s access to education, work access, representation in government, and healthcare to name a few. These statistics are significant in contextualizing the social schemes many women in this group inhabit, while working towards the goal of women’s equality in capoeira. At the same time- it can be argued that white-European *capoeiristas* have less context for the diasporic connection and self-identification that people of color, mostly Afro-descended, people feel toward the performance, practice, and rituals of capoeira. These factors lead to passionate disagreements. During my time in the group over the last few years, I have seen these tensions between feminist ideologies bubble up to the surface to an eventual “resolution” that leaves some disheartened and disappointed with the group as a whole.

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<sup>124</sup> “Global Gender Gap Report 2017,” *World Economic Forum*, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2017/results-and-analysis/>

Two members became engaged in a heated discussion, sparked by perceptions of race in capoeira. One member of the group, a non-Black woman, claimed that many Black men in capoeira were “players” or womanizers. This non-Black woman referenced *Mestre Bimba’s* lifestyle outside of capoeira with mistresses.<sup>125</sup> A Black woman then interjected, asserting that it was unfair to relegate all Black men in this way. The subtext of this discussion is that it is racist to prejudge all Black men in capoeira based on the actions of a few. In this instance, we see a Black woman sticking up for Black men in a space that is predominantly non-Black, full of European and American *capoeiristas*. Because men are not allowed in this group, there were no men to challenge this notion asserted by the non-Black woman *capoeirista*. Asserting white-supremacy or anti-Blackness is to evoke racist stereotypes and alienate an Afro-descended *capoeirista*. The conversation then became about how white people should not have to feel bad about being white and playing capoeira. The conversation was derailed. Through parsing out the problematic assumption that all Black men are predatory or of acknowledging racist stereotypes about Black masculinity, the angry discussions led to the single Black woman who spoke up feeling attacked. The victimhood portrayed by the non-Black *capoeirista* in this example is exactly why marginalized people generally and Black people specifically seek out spaces to circumvent non-sequitur arguments or “what-about-isms” that distract from the goal of equitable representation of Black voices and perspectives in capoeira. It seems that mainstream white ideology in North America and Europe are still resistant to conceptualizing its role in participating in white supremacy and Black capoeira culture at the same time.

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<sup>125</sup> Referenced in Chapter 1 with Dona Alice.

Not every issue concerning intersectionality and identity politics have yet to work themselves out in a group format, where everyone is happy with the final discussion. On the one hand, some of these conversations could not have happened if capoeira was not widely available outside of Brazil. On the other hand, not everyone's feminism is the same. For the most part, Max allows people to post, collaborate, and share ideas without interfering. But the group is not without conflict, even as an online haven for women *capoeiristas*. The glaring problems for some women is the lack of representation for those with intersectional identities as either woman of color, queer, or gender non-conforming. To ensure that everyone feels respected, there is a strict no hate speech agreement and an aversion to what Max calls "radical ideology." This begs the question, what is hate speech? And to whom? Do "radical" ideologies differ from person to person? Simply put, Black dissent is perceived as violent in fragile and privileged white spaces. Black people not being able to speak about Black pain is another instance of social violence and tone policing against Black people's ability to speak on their experiences. Despite the intentions of the group, there are still contentious debates that resurface within many feminist spaces. The second wave<sup>126</sup> mid-to late century feminist model or the intersectional feminist model is adopted by the even further marginalized communities within capoeira. Max admits that "radical" is a word with strong connotations, but her reason for monitoring language is that it is easier to misinterpret online writing than face-to-face intention. The Facebook community attempts to shield users from misogyny; it is still regulated by moderate feminist ideals that ostracize those in the minority. Additionally, the absence of men does not equal the absence of

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<sup>126</sup> I make reference to the second wave feminism because Max sites Simone de Beauvoir as an important figure to Max's regarding equality and feminism. de Beauvoir is considered foundational for modern feminism and the "second wave" in the mid-twentieth century.

misogyny and the regulation of what types of feminism is deemed appropriate. Despite these challenges, virtual capoeira communities allow marginalized groups to safely access each other and communicate in a meaningful way.

A group that contrasts the general “Women in Capoeira” group is the “Women and Non-Binary People in Capoeira.” Despite having fewer membership and less presence for women *capoeiristas*, this group is designed to provide a space for some of the most marginalized people in capoeira. In an interview with the moderator, it was clear that this space provides an alternative to the alternative. Melinda said she started this group in the midst her PhD studies and is not interested in strict moderation, but the way members of the group facilitate discussion.<sup>127</sup> For Melinda, it was about carving out a space for people that cannot be visible in traditional ways, or because they are historically overlooked. In fact, her naming of the group was informed by other communities that she is involved in regarding motherhood and academia, which also focused on the inclusion of non-binary folks. Melinda’s approach to cyber communities is informed by her intersectional identities, a practicing *capoeirista*, a woman of color, and an academic who is tasked with theorizing identities made intelligible to our colleagues and the world.<sup>128</sup> Melinda’s group acts like another safety net for women who feel left out of other dominant narratives constructed by white feminists in capoeira. The Black woman who spoke up on behalf of Black men in Max’s more mainstream group found solace and comfort in a community that understood her struggles and frustration without explanation. Addressing the

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<sup>127</sup> Melinda, in discussion with the author, February 21, 2019.

<sup>128</sup> Theorizing identities for people of color, also from interview with Melinda February 21, 2019.

intersectionality in capoeira communities has proved to be more advantageous to women of color than the blanketed goals of general feminism in more mainstream spaces.

## 5.2 Instagram and Black Women in Capoeira

The photo sharing application Instagram has played a role in imprinting Black women and Black community values into the social media landscape. Unlike the Facebook group, the Instagram group is open for all to join or follow along in their activities, despite race or gender. The Instagram page has changed moderators, so no single person has been in charge of the page for too long. To be featured on the Instagram page, people must tag their photos with hashtag #blackwomenincapoeira and wait for moderation approval. The over 400 featured posts outline core values.

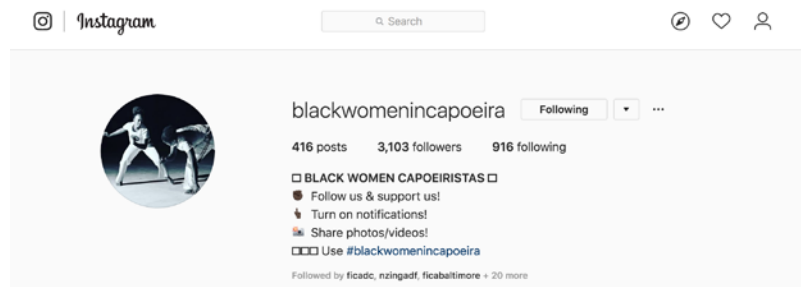


Figure 26 BlackWomenInCapoeira Instagram Page Header

Several posts are dedicated to milestones in capoeira, including *batizados* as well as learning and teaching music. The vibrancy of the page is encapsulated in the ability to share videos as well. There are clips of capoeira games between people and group songs at the height of a *roda*, meant to capture the energy of a big gathering, like lightening in a bottle. There are

images of young Black children learning movements and learning how to play the *berimbau*.

There are text images of empowerment in mostly Portuguese but also some in English. There are artistic renderings of prominent Afro-Brazilian figures critical to both capoeira and the Brazilian political landscape.



Figure 27 Snapshots of BlackWomenInCapoeira Instagram

The “BlackWomenInCapoeira”<sup>129</sup> Instagram page is more than a place for fandom but a place of community. The followers range from students and casual capoeira practitioners, to larger capoeira schools and Masters in Brazil and the United States. The range of practitioners who follow the page indicates that something more than spectatorship is at the core of the social media-based visual culture in capoeira. The “BlackWomenInCapoeira” page accommodates the need to support the work and achievements of Black women in capoeira.

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<sup>129</sup> Uppercase letters are my addition for clarity

The celebratory tone of Blackness in capoeira extends beyond the movements, instruments, and visual culture of the game. It reaches the political landscape of Brazil. The Instagram page affirms that capoeira and political life have intersections, because mere existence is a radical and political act for marginalized people. A post that was dated March 15, 2018 features a black and white portrait photo of a light-skinned woman with short curly hair smiling wide to camera. Text accompanying the post reads “Rest in Power Marielle.” With the hashtags #JustiçaPorMarielle #MariellePresente and #BlackLivesMatter.



Figure 28 Marielle Franco from BlackWomenInCapoeira

The first two hashtags translate to “Justice for Marielle” and “Marielle is here”. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, a rallying cry in the Black community in the United States, reiterates the notion Black lives are more important than society demonstrates, and another person was lost senselessly to State violence. The Black community in the United States were outraged and in mourning with our Afro-Brazilian counterparts.

Marielle Franco was not a *capoeirista* but a queer activist and politician. Raised in Rio de Janeiro, Franco had a difficult life. She was a single mother working hard to provide for her child

and had witnessed disproportionate crime and sexism in her city at the hands of the police. These injustices fueled her political platform of equity in her city. During Franco's time working on the city council, she advocated for gender rights, women's healthcare, and rights for those living in the favelas. Her last appearance was at a roundtable called *Jovens Negras Movendas Estruturas* "Young Black Women Moving [Systemic] Structures" which spoke about ways young Black women in Rio could get involved and become elected officials to directly impact their community,<sup>130</sup> especially because Black women held so few official positions in politics. Marielle was one of 32 Black women compared to the 811 city council positions in Brazil. Marielle was found shot dead in the backseat of her car less than two hours after this event. Her driver was also killed. A year after her death, two people were arrested in connection with her assassination; both had direct ties to the police.<sup>131</sup> Marielle's death was felt around the world and was a blow to the political advancement of marginalized people in Rio in Brazil and others around the world working for a fair and equitable society. Marielle had become a symbol for a global movement.

Acknowledging the life and work of Marielle Franco through photos is just one example of the "BlackWomenInCapoeira" group making their political position clear. On October 9<sup>th</sup>, a photo was posted of a Black man with long white dreads and arms crossed looking pensively to the side of the camera lens. His name is *Mestre* Moa do Katendê.

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<sup>130</sup> Juliana Gagnani, "Marielle era uma das 32 mulheres negras entre 811 vereadores eleitos em capitais brasileiras," *BBC News*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-43424088>

<sup>131</sup> "Marielle Franco Murder: Two Ex-police officers held," *BBC Brazil*, March 12, 2019.



Figure 29 Mestre Moa do Katendê from BlackWomeninCapoeira

*Mestre* Moa was a beloved member in the *Capoeira Angola* community in Bahia for his activism and musicianship. The hashtags that accompany the post read ‘#justicapormestremoa [sic] #elenão, #elenunca, #mestremoadokatende’, Justice for Mestre Moa, Not Him, Never Him, and a new hashtag that represents a slain Black person, a pillar in the capoeira community. The #elenão and #elenunca hashtags reference the Brazilian political left’s aversion to the then-rising politician now President, Jair Bolsonaro. The country was split over supporting and disavowing Bolsonaro for his racist and sexist views. Bolsonaro has been on record as saying repugnant things like a reporter is ‘too ugly to be raped’ and that ‘people that live in *quilombos* are lazy and do nothing’. Not to mention that he is homophobic and his policies have had devastating consequences to the Brazilian environment, most notably the Amazon Rainforest.

*Mestre* Moa expressed that he had voted for Fernando Haddad, Bolsonaro’s opponent and member of the Social Democratic Workers Party in the first of two votes on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018

election.<sup>132</sup> His death was sparked by a political conversation at a bar. *Mestre* Moa spoke about how Haddad was his choice and the right direction for Brazil. He was stabbed to death for expressing his opinion.<sup>133</sup> His death was senseless and cruel and sparked outrage in the capoeira community. Although *Mestre* Moa was not a woman, he represented ally ship and solidarity and was willing to speak his mind at great personal costs. Marelle Franco and *Mestre* Moa are examples of public figures that do not meet the superficial criteria of Black, woman, and *capoeirista*. They were allies in the fight for social and political justice. The “BlackWomanInCapoeira” group celebrates not just individuals who are dedicated to advancing the visibility of Black women leaders in the sport, but actual leaders in the real world. While discussion is secondary to the images and videos posted, the people that the moderator chooses to celebrate makes clear that social and racial justice outside of capoeira are tantamount to the imagery of Black women in capoeira.

### *5.3 YouTube, Music Sharing, and Value Affirmation*

YouTube, the large video sharing platform that launched in February 2005, is also the leading music streaming service in the world. The video contributions of the general public and companies coupled with advertisements drive the business model. Content in, advertisements

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<sup>132</sup> Brazilian elections have an initial popular vote and then a run-off election if neither candidate can secure more than 50% of the popular vote. If the most popular candidate takes more than 50%, they are elected without the need for the second round, held later in the month.

<sup>133</sup> Victor Uchôa, “Os minutos que antecederam o assassinato de um mestre da capoeira na Bahia,” *BBC News*, October 10, 2018, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticias/bbc/2018/10/10/os-minutos-que-antecederam-o-assassinato-de-um-mestre-de-capoeira-na-bahia.htm>

views and dollars out. The longer users stay on the site, the more YouTube's algorithms suggest related content to watch, and more advertisement dollars are made. The notion of "free" is arguable because users are essentially paying for their membership through watching commercials. That said, the wide use and large viewership of content posted on YouTube has created an entirely new economy of music consumption and participation for capoeira. YouTube was just three years old during my first year of capoeira. Song acquisition in those days happened through writing lyrics over and over in notebooks (spelling phonetically, of course) and listening to songs *ad nauseum* on CDs or going to music workshops at capoeira events. It was imperative to be physically present to learn songs and be an active student in capoeira until 2010 when capoeira tutorials began to appear online. It was common to buy physical CDs from capoeira masters or purchase music from iTunes as more prominent *Mestres* had made standard capoeira repertoire available digitally.

The advantages of YouTube for music sharing in capoeira are apparent. I have utilized the platform for my research and leisure activities related to capoeira. Not only is YouTube the leading videos sharing site but also as the second leading search engine to Google. It can instantly locate tutorials, songs, translations, and glimpses in the *roda* for those who have a casual curiosity about capoeira. For non-Brazilian and non-Portuguese speaking capoeira practitioners, searching for capoeira content circumvents the language barriers as the capoeira culture is almost exclusively in Portuguese, no matter the native language of the searcher. Capoeira through YouTube not only gives the world access to capoeira, but a more Brazilian-native and arguably more authentic version of it. The challenging implications arise when the use of YouTube supersedes the in-person resources and guidance of masters, teachers, and capoeira

physical community. While I more and more frequently was gravitated to Black women's spaces in all social media platforms, I had encountered a tribute to Marielle Franco.<sup>134</sup>

Marielle's song is modern and written for and by women. *Vai a Flor, Fica Semente* was published April 15, 2018 and has just 2,916 views on a channel that only has 2,100 subscribers—despite the fact that the death of Marielle is still a national headline and the facilitators of this project are founders of an internationally renowned capoeira school. After the death of Marielle *Mestras*, Paulinha and Janja composed a *ladainha* in Marielle's honor called *Vai a Flor, Fica a Semente* or “Go the flower, Stay the Seed”

Um mês do assassinato. Um mês sem respostas. Mas nenhum dia sem Marielle, presente!

Iêeee

Iêee Foi no Rio de Janeiro  
Num dia de quarta-feira  
Mataram mais uma preta  
Mataram mais uma preta  
Mataram uma companheira  
Sua vida, minha colega  
Sempre foi de muito risco  
Pra que luta todo dia  
Contra o machismo e o racismo  
Mas é na luta que aprendemos  
Vai a flor, fica a semente  
Enquanto estivermos juntas  
Marielle está presente  
camaradinha

A month of murder. A month without answers. But no day without Marielle, present!

Iêeee (Yaaaaay!)

It was in Rio de Janeiro  
On a Wednesday day  
They killed another black woman.  
They killed another black woman.  
They killed a mate  
Your life, my colleague.  
It was always a lot of risk  
Why do you fight every day?  
Against machismo and racism  
But it is in the struggle that we learn  
Go to the flower, stay the seed  
While we are together  
Marielle is present  
little fellow

Figure 30 "Vai A Flor, Fica A Semente" Ladainha Lyrics

The *ladainha* speaks about the place and time of the murder—a Wednesday. Repeating the line “they killed another Black woman” is a way to express sorrow through repetition. No

<sup>134</sup> Instituto Nzinga de Capoeira Angola, “Ladianha para Marielle- Vai a flor fica a semente,” YouTube Video, 01:05, April 15, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F\\_WwaNNIziQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_WwaNNIziQ)

other line is repeated. The lines “why do you fight everyday/it was always a lot of risk?” asks the questions of many living intersectional lives: Why make life harder by fighting against injustice? The system does not want to listen to people like us. The line “in the struggle we learn” marks a hopeful turn in the *ladainha* by suggesting that Marielle’s death was not in vain; her death was heard around the world. Despite her short time, Marielle made big changes. Marielle has become a symbol of another wave of resistance against the systems that do injustices to Black people and women. More importantly, this *ladainha* signifies the nature of music in capoeira, music that pays tribute to those whom the powerful rather we forgot.

These stories would not leave the local communities without social media. Her life and legacy would not have made waves in capoeira had there not been other women of color allies in capoeira to remember her and spread her message. Technology has enabled women of color to have a voice and be present without being ostracized, marginalized, and minimized. *Vai a Flor*, *Fica Semente* demonstrates that the strongest loudest and are still silenced. The circulation of the *ladainha* on YouTube highlights how technological advances often focus on the communities that already have access and representation rather than smaller marginalized communities that can use these tools. This chapter interrogates the platforms technology provided women of color to speak in a world that consistently ignores them. How are women of color reclaiming spaces that have historically thought to not be for them? How has social media been an integral tool to find other pockets of activists and to enlist allies? How does technology facilitate the indoctrination into capoeira culture for non-Brazilian practitioners?

I’ve stated in earlier chapters the significance of a *ladinha* and it’s worth mentioning again: a *ladainha*, or litany in English, signifies the beginning of the *roda*, the ceremony, and the beginning of our community. It is a prayer for what is about to take place in the *roda*. *Ladainhas*

poetically signify the importance of a master a deity, a saint. Usually, these figures are legends or myths rooted in religion or old masters of capoeira. This *ladainha* is different. Unlike most *ladainhas* that speak about Dandara or women of whom we know very little, this *ladainha* is for a contemporary person whose history we have access to because she made herself available to her community. This creates a capoeira space for a Black queer woman who protected the rights of poor people trans people and children. This brings the *ladainha* and capoeira music into this particular moment, praising disenfranchised Black women openly. The *ladainha* for Marielle was posted by the Nzinga Institute for *Capoeira Angola*<sup>135</sup> on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The YouTube format and distance of participants makes the format of this praise song is different from others. *Ladainhas* are designed to be sung by the *berimbau gunga*, the lead musician and most and only senior person. This *ladainha* is distinguishable from others because it is broken into sections. Other Nzinga affiliated groups participated in the performance of this digital *ladainha*. The affiliate Nzinga schools showcased are in Salvador, Brasilia, São Paulo, Atlanta, and Kyoto. Each magnate school sings sections from the song. All the participants are women. The women are the leaders. There is a sense of unity because all these *capoeiristas*—masters, students, professors—are coming together to show global solidarity to Marielle and her mission to protect the rights and livelihoods of the most marginalized. They are collectively singing her praises. Without a platform like YouTube, the praises and story of Marielle could have been lost to history.

While the gender and nationalities of these women are significant in my analysis, the format and platform provide insight to the cultural shift of capoeira participation. The

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<sup>135</sup> ‘Instituto Nzinga de Capoeira Angola’ in Portuguese

community is now international and without the traditional boundaries marked by the physical circle of the *roda*.

The video of Marielle's *ladainha* is separate from the *roda*, from a game, from the bodies and the showmanship. Marielle's *ladainha* is the topic at hand. Perhaps this video is only for those that can identify with the struggle of activism and a marginalized existence based on gender, race, or class. The originality of *Vai a flor Fica Semente* could be a primary factor to the lack of viewership. Conversely, the modern content expands the discomfort, pensiveness, outrage, sadness, and anger during a *ladainha*. YouTube has provided a more convenient tool to separate music from movement with video editing and sound mixing. The publisher chooses the focus of the viewer. Marielle's *ladainha* and the struggle of Afro-Brazilian women is the focus. Not as many people are listening. YouTube has undeniably altered the course of music education in capoeira with the readily available lyrics, translations, and recommendations. Students theoretically could learn a song in a day. Contrasting the popularity of movement videos with the specific example of the *ladainha*, it is apparent that you cannot make visible what someone does not want to see.

#### *5.4 The Impact of Social Media on Black Women's Spaces*

Everett's notion of the digital diaspora is highlighted by Black women in capoeira voicing their opinions and experiences online. In the example of the more popular Facebook group, the colonial notion that marginalizes Black voices still exists, despite everyone present knowingly participating in an Afro-derived art form. There is a well-signified and limiting notion

of what Black masculinity has meant for white women historically. That pervasive narrative alienated a Black woman in the group. As Everett puts it, this “encrypted meaning” of performing race and gender sparked a conversation that many in the group were unready or unwilling to have, despite the apparent “signifier-signified” meaning to dislodge privileged cultural ideologies, in this case of Black masculinity, and who gets to speak about Blackness and to what extent.<sup>136</sup> At the same time, Everett’s idea of diasporic participation are apparent in nearly all examples of internet participation. The successes or failures of Black women’s participation in creating or affirming diasporic spaces are a correlation to their network with other Black women or women of color. The intentions of a large group with diverse membership geared towards women in capoeira is appealing, but the short-sightedness of white feminism can be harmful for those wanting to openly talk about race and gender. Although there are alternative groups to help Black women users on Facebook, they may not support newer Black *capoeiristas* who experience the lack of support available in dominant spaces.

The Instagram account is an alternative space for Black women looking for affirmation. The follower model of Instagram’s platform allows people to stop by or continue scrolling through depending on their affinity for the content matter. Photography as medium permits users to curate and filter images and to actively participate by self-submissions. More significantly, “BlackWomenInCapoeira” has provided a space for positive Black visibility for women that have been underrepresented in capoeira, noted by the lack of representation historically. Photos

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<sup>136</sup> Anna Everett. *The Digital Diaspora: The Race for Cyberspace*. (New York: SUNY University Press 2009), 123-124.

set the conversation and decide who is visible, who is celebrated, and what is important even if considered taboo and controversial to mainstream capoeira groups.

YouTube as social media tool is different from Facebook and Instagram because individual capoeira pages do not accumulate the same numbers of followers. YouTube has been a pedagogical tool for increasing repertoire. Popular songs garner higher view counts. The Nzinga Youtube channel does not have as many followers as other capoeira song channels, despite the Nzinga school having a popular CD. The goal also does not seem to be garnering a large following but catering to the community that wants to seek them out. The act of dedicating an old song form to a current event suggests the ways conversations for Black women scholars in capoeira are moving the conversation forward by blending the boundaries of activism. If we want to advocate for equity inside of capoeira, we must advocate for those same values outside of capoeira. Intermixing political engagement, Black activism, and video sharing is geared toward a market of the politically conscious community that already exists in capoeira. The *Mestras* that sing the song dedicated to Marielle are more than practitioners, but they are educators as well. The YouTube channel has perhaps the smallest following of all the groups but also has the most specific message of solidarity through expressing a message with words first and singing the message out into the world for others to hear.

Black women are using social media to carve out the spaces to voice concern and conditions about what it means to be a Black woman in the world of capoeira. In the examples I highlighted here, it is apparent that quality over virality and popularity are the more valuable criteria for curating spaces to start discussions on ways to move the conversation forward in capoeira.

## 6.0 Mestra Janja and Feminist Leadership in Nzinga *Capoeira Angola*

In 2003, *Mestra* Janja and her colleagues *Mestra* Paulinha and *Mestre* Coelho released a 38-track album featuring some of the most prominent songs within capoeira repertoire. Songs like *Parana É*, *Tim Lá Vai Viola*, and *Sim, Não* appear within the contexts of the *ladainha*, *chula*, and *corrido*—the musical trinity and procession of capoeira *roda*. *Mestra* Janja's voice stands in contrast to the other contributors on the album because it is still rare to hear women lead a *roda* and perform *berimbau* on a studio recorded album. This album still is amongst the more popular capoeira albums to date.

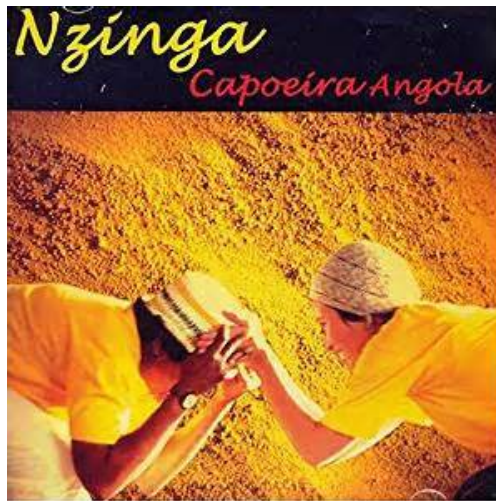


Figure 31 Nzinga Capoeira Angola Album featuring Mestra Janja and Mestra Paulinha

Contributors to this album include Angola teacher *Mestre* Cobra Mansa as well as Brazilian artist, composer and cultural icon Tião Carvalho, who participated with *Mestres* Janja, Paulinha, and Paloca with the hopes of sharing the long-standing impact of *Mestre* Pastinha in capoeira. This album is considered a notable work as it features the *orquestra do berimbaus*

(*berimbau* orchestra) in addition to drawing attention to the first female-founded capoeira school in history.



Figure 32 Mestra Janja Conducts the Orquestra do Berimbaus<sup>137</sup>

The innovative new uses of the *berimbau* highlight the versatility of the single stringed-gourd resonator. Using a non-Western instrument in a Western context of an orchestra is yet another example of how the Nzinga school in general and *Mestra Janja* and *Paulinha* subvert dominant narratives of “proper” and “normative” musical performances or uses of the *berimbau*. The modified uses of the *berimbau* challenge the notion of musical instruments in capoeira as primitive and African music aesthetics as simple and non-melodious. The *orquestra do berimbaus* focuses on the prominent overtone feature of the *berimbau*, a technical attribute which is celebrated more in Western instruments like violins or brass instruments for centuries

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<sup>137</sup> Courtesy of the Palmares foundation Ministry of Culture

but overlooked as a performative and theoretical feature for the uses of the *berimbau* in the twenty-first century. Not only have the joint efforts of the *Mestras* of Grupo Nzinga help solidify the performative variety of the *berimbau*, but as an instrument of both Brazilianness and Africaneity.<sup>138</sup>

As mentioned in Chapter 1, capoeira music is essential in re-historicizing how capoeira culture is re-envisioned in the future because language is a central feature of the music. In addition to reimagining new uses of instruments, *Mestra* Janja utilizes language to emphasize alternative productions of knowledge outside of the contemporary songs sung in Portuguese. In her album, Nzinga *Capoeira Angola*, there is a song sung in Bantu instead of Portuguese. Janja wants to make it clear that Black Brazilians learned the language of the colonizer. Her message is that capoeira has more than one linguistic orientation. Language plays an important role in identity and identity politics. Janja uses non-Portuguese to convey a message about being a warrior. Changing the language is a significant act because it makes students pay attention more. Imagine suddenly be in a *roda* or singing along to a CD and to be familiar with everything but one song. It makes students do the work. When students hear something that deviates, students listen more and work harder to understand where this perceived deviation comes from. Janja uses language as an homage to heritage for those who are paying attention. This method has a way of bringing together beginner capoeira students and students that have been training for years.

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<sup>138</sup> Peter Fryer, "Rhythms of Resistance: African Musical Heritage in Brazil," *The Angolan Heritage: Capoeira and Berimbau*, (2000): 27-39.

Track 10 of the Nzinga album is *Nkosi Biole Sibiolala*. The track is sung by *Mestra Janja* and reiterates the connections that capoeira maintains with Central Africa. This is the only song on the album that is not sung in Portuguese.

Nkosi biole sibiolala	O Guerreiro dá risadas quando vence
Nkosi biole sibiolala	O Guerreiro dá risadas quando vence
Nkosi biole sibiolala, eme kajamungongo,	O Guerreiro dá risadas quando vence, meu protetor,
Nkosi biole sibiolala	O Guerreiro dá risadas quando vence
Eme kajamungongo...	Meu protetor...
Nkosi biole sibiolala	O Guerreiro dá risadas quando vence

The Warrior laughs when he wins.  
The Warrior laughs when he wins.  
The Warrior laughs when he wins, my protector,  
The Warrior laughs when he wins.  
My protector..  
The Warrior laughs when he wins.

Figure 33 "Nkosi Biole Sibiolala" Lyrics

Changing the language shifts the perspective of who is the victor. The warrior singing in Portuguese is proclaiming or recalling history on behalf of Brazil, but the same text sung in Bantu suggests the victory or recollection of victory on behalf of the native Central African. Language changes perspective of who is on the receiving end of the tale, and who is controlling the narrative. The perspective shift through language in this song is a deliberate and calculated way of inviting students to engage by challenging their thinking and orientation of knowledge in capoeira. Inviting self-discovery through lyrics is a pragmatic way to engage practitioners about history utilizing Bantu languages. Using language from Central and Southern African further demonstrates the notion that capoeira practices and Afro-Brazilian culture generally is more plural than a monolith. In the 1950s when UNESCO funded studies on Black Brazil, the Yoruba

identity was ascribed to Brazil and consequently was superior.<sup>139</sup> Ascribing Yoruba practices as dominant consequently altered general understanding of capoeira as a marker of Afro-Brazilian identity. Language invokes the past intellectually by inviting practitioners to think about capoeira in the lineage of *Mestre* Pastinha. Language is a tool to initiate conversations without preaching to students. *Mestra* Janja raises the question and puts the responsibility on the students to investigate.



Figure 34 Homepage of Nzinga Academy Website “Nzinga.org.br”

Using African and Bantu languages to invoke memory of capoeira is relevant and practical. Additionally, *Mestra* Janja uses Shona next to Portuguese on the Nzinga website to welcome students to her school. ‘*Toma Kwiza*’ means welcome and ‘*Entrar*’ means enter.

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<sup>139</sup> Mestra Janja, in discussion with the author, April 11, 2019.

Language in capoeira makes distinction between colonized and colonizer but also between cultural representation and identity politics that distinguish which types of African identities are represented and celebrated in the African diaspora in the West. Yoruba culture has been the universally accepted representation of Black culture in Brazil. Consequently, there has been an inherent re-erasure of history by which African identities are remembered and which are forgotten. Songs that praise the West African deity Yemanjá is a testament to the prioritization of West African identities to Central African ones. Janja's use of Bantu languages subtly asks, 'Why is West African identity the standard?' Janja makes it clear in her work that it is not just West Africa that has significant impact on the dissemination of capoeira knowledge in the west.

The act of diminishing the diversity of African diaspora, validated by a global institution, made divorcing African-ness from capoeira easier because silencing one group is easier than silencing many. For *Mestra* Janja, the difficulty of activism lies in fully representing the past and at the same time, atoning for the sexism that should not be a continued tradition. Language for her has been able to compensate for the failures of cultural misrepresentation and intervene on the problem of sexism. Language inclusion is another method to ensure capoeira in the twenty-first century is moving forward in an equitable way.

Portuguese is a gendered language that poses everyday challenges to gender equity in capoeira. Among the challenges is a gender convention that a Master of the art is usually a male title. *Mestra* Janja insists on her title of *Mestra* opposed to *Mestre*. Not all women masters of capoeira make this distinction or this language change. The exclusionary aspect of language is built into some professions. It was unheard of to hear of a woman master of anything, so to insist on both womanhood alongside professional capoeira achievements becomes inventive, even though the suffix -a has been available for substitution for long before women's rights

movements began gaining momentum in capoeira. Even further than changing her title, *Mestra* Janja and others working towards more equitable spaces in capoeira subtly change the lyrics of songs to divert from the notion that women are unimportant afterthoughts. In her dissertation, *Mestra* Janja notes that *Mestre* Moraes had taught her cohort of activist *capoeiristas* that it is important to reject songs that reduce Black people to characters and racist stereotypes. This notion was extended to the language surrounding women in capoeira songs because there is no need to take part in your dehumanization. It became apparent that women *Angoleiras*.<sup>140</sup> could enact this resistance by changing the lyrics or not singing sexist songs. Lyrics like, “I am a man, not a woman” were changed to “there are men and there are women.” Or the lyrics, “Men can play pandeiro and women can clap their hands” were changed to “Who plays the pandeiro is a man and also women play [*pandeiro*].”<sup>141</sup> If the language of capoeira began to sound like all participants are equal then the equality would be taught to future students and practitioners.

The details of Grupo Nzinga’s self-titled 2003 album suggests a level of intellectualism behind the creation and realization of the project. The songs themselves have a traditional order and special guest features like other contemporary capoeira albums but diverged in its content and execution. The most apparent and perhaps most important feature was the inclusion of a woman’s voice as a leader. Other notable characteristics include the use of the *berimbau* as an ensemble instrument without voices and changing the language from Portuguese to Bantu. These changes were calculated to reimagine the limits of capoeira socially, artistically, and historically. Hearing a woman lead in a traditionally male role in capoeira permits practitioners to imagine

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<sup>140</sup> Women practitioners of Capoeira Angola

<sup>141</sup> Rosângela Costa Araújo. *Iê, Viva Meu Mestra: A Capoeira Angola da “Escola Pastinihana” Como Páxis Educativa*. (2004), 115.

women in leadership. Hearing the cacophony of *berimbaus* interchange between buzz and raspy tones dismantles the antiquated and colonial notion that is often ascribed to the *berimbau* on first glance: that it is primitive and thus limited its uses. Finally, the use of languages resituates our collective imagination of capoeira not as simply Brazilian, but as a practice that predates the adoption of Portuguese by West Central Africans in prototypical iterations of capoeira, recalling a time that capoeira was capoeira before Brazil was Brazil. These small but significant deviations walk the line between a divergence and status quo. Every divergence is an invitation to the listener to engage in the material, much like the work of a teacher. It was clear at the time that this school was on the cutting edge of capoeira moving into the twenty-first century, because academic inquiry was at its core. Both women co-founders of the school, *Mestra* Janja and *Mestra* Paulinha, are academics in history who continue to interject feminist discourse at the core of the work in capoeira. Moreover, the co-founders of Nzinga Capoeira put music as their primary conduit for sparking social change in capoeira. If the music work of this women-led and founded school was audible, what did their work look like in real life? I decided to see how the intersection of scholarship and capoeira played out in the summer of 2017 in Washington DC.

### *6.1 FICA DC- Capoeira Against Fascist Regimes*

In July 2017, I had the opportunity to meet the co-founders of Nzinga capoeira, *Mestra* Janja and *Mestra* Paulinha, in person at the *Fundação Internacional da Capoeira Angola* or ‘FICA’ Washington DC Women’s Conference. The event was not focused on a *batizado* ceremony but was an annual event celebrating the leadership of women in capoeira. The first day

was customary. The event opened with a *roda* and the FICA organizers thanked all those who made the event possible and for those who traveled far.

The most memorable features of the women's conference were the capacity to which leaders in the FICA academy and visiting *Mestras* spoke about solidarity and community engagement. The environment was equally focused on improving capoeira skills and improving the lives of those in your community. These sentiments were put on display in our third day. After our afternoon training session lunch, we met back at the FICA studio to get ready for our march.



Figure 35 March with Berimbaus July 3 2017 Washington DC 2017

*Mestras* and higher-level instructors grabbed *berimbaus* and walked through the streets as the group of 50 *capoeiristas* followed singing and chanting in response to songs. The majority of capoeira marchers were wearing their yellow and gold uniforms as a sign of unity. The one-mile march was formalized through our numbers and our voices. Unlike a traditional *roda*, our voices

cut through the city as we made our way to our destination, instead of encircling the players of the *roda*. We opened up our message to the city. People took pictures as the group of *capoeiristas* filed through Washington DC.



Figure 36 Anti-Facism Roda at the Columbia Heights Civic Plaza -Washington DC 2017

The message of our special roda was anti-fascism and women's rights. Signs read "Luta" or "Fight" for the rights of women. A sign on the *atabaque* read, this is not a democracy anymore, referencing that President Trump won the presidency without securing the popular vote.

My introduction to *Mestra* Janja was inevitable. Since my early days of capoeira, I craved unapologetic Black feminist leadership. I felt in my time in Washington DC. We were a group of men and women, young and old, American, Brazilian, and Canadian playing capoeira in a public

space advocating for the rights of workers. We were unified under the idea that fascism has no place in the West, a commentary on the election of Donald Trump and the rising popularity of then-Brazilian presidential hopeful, Jair Bolsonaro.



Figure 37 Anti-Facism Roda with Anti Trump Signs at the Columbia Heights Civic Plaza-  
Washington DC 2017

The banners were unfurled across the *bateria*, the sacred entrance to the *roda*, signifying our message was just as central as the music. The bodies that played capoeira to the *gunga* also played capoeira in solidarity to the message that democracy will prevail, and Trump was and is not the candidate of the people. In her written work, *Mestra Janja* was an advocate. In person *Mestra Janja* was an activist who was willing to take to the streets. She wanted to make sure students that learned capoeira with her were aware of the intersections of capoeira and activism.

*Mestra* Janja, professionally known as Rosângela Araújo, has solidified her legacy in and outside of capoeira through her academic career. With a master's degree in History and an education doctorate, *Mestra* Janja's story reveals the ways that activism can be a lifestyle and a mission. Her works include a dissertation, “‘Sou discípulo que aprende, meu mestre me deu lição’: Tradição e educação entre os angoleiros baianos (anos 80-90).” (1999) translated as “I am a Disciple that Learns, My Master Gave Me Lessons: Traditions and Education between Bahian Angoleros (between 1980s - 1990s)” From the University of São Paulo, which discusses the history of student-teacher relationships as they have made a new generation of *Capoeira Angola* practitioners in the predominantly Black state of Bahia. The work marks the importance of history, rituals, and identity in *Capoeira Angola*. Her presence in academic institutions coupled with her activism has provided a space to create music and support disenfranchised people all through music.

## *6.2 Becoming a Mestra: From Student to Activist*

Born in the State of Bahia in the city of Feira de Santana, Janja is the second oldest of six children. She began her journey in capoeira 36 years ago in 1982. Janja became involved in capoeira when she was 21 years old. I expressed that I was around the same age when I started capoeira and Janja responds, saying this age we are the bosses of our bodies. Our parents have less said in what we do and where we go and how we live our lives. It is not uncommon for people to come to capoeira in young adulthood. Being in the state of Bahia, which is steeped in Afro-Brazilian tradition and culture, Janja began her journey in *Capoeira Angola* under the

tutelage of *Mestre Moraes* and *Mestre Cobra Mansa*. Janja even trained with the highly esteemed João Grande before he moved his school to New York City.

*Capoeira Angola* was the frame of reference for all capoeira practices. When Janja moved to São Paulo for graduate school, she wanted to continue these studies. The capoeira she found was a different caliber. Janja did not find the *Capoeira Angola* that she had been accustomed to, she became indoctrinated in the *Capoeira Regional* styles, taught by the most elite *Mestres* in São Paulo. Among them are *Mestre Suassuna*, *Mestre Brasília*, and others who are among the sacred *Mestres* in capoeira. After expressing her desire to find more *Capoeira Angola* in São Paulo, she was told that *Capoeira Regional* and *Capoeira Angola* did not mix, as if each respective style has goals that are incompatible. This reality was also confirmed by her *Mestre* in Bahia, *Mestre Moraes*. Disappointed at the obvious fissures and division in capoeira community in the in 1980s, Janja became acutely aware that capoeira and specifically for her, *Capoeira Angola*, was more than mere physical education but was cultural and embodied and a manifestation of self. Her desire to make *Capoeira Angola* accessible outside of Bahia was among the primary motivations for beginning her own academy in capoeira. Through these conversations with her *Mestres*, Janja decided to change her educational path. Instead of perusing physical education at the graduate level, she decided to shift her focus on capoeira and the role of the African diaspora.

In Chapter 1, I argue that capoeira became less inclusive in regard to gender when practitioners were utilized by the state thus turning capoeira into a militaristic enterprise while simultaneously disenfranchising Afro-Brazilians cultural practice of the art. The separation of cultural practice from the people who perform and play capoeira allowed post-(outlaw) iterations of capoeira to assume characteristics more aligned with hyper masculinity. Expressivity,

philosophy, spirituality, and other less tangible attributes of capoeira became secondary to the more tactile and real notions of contact, fighting, and ‘out-witting’ the opponent. The later three characteristics more closely resemble performing masculinity. The continuation of capoeira as a masculine practice has alienated those who do not need to perform capoeira in a strictly athletic and object-based training style. Capoeira and Brazilian history merge again in the 1980s when political and social unrest take hold as Brazil breaks away from military rule and finds footing in democracy.

I attended college at a time when we lived the military regime in Brazil, so it [capoeira] was a militarized course, it was a course that understood the body as a model of society. It made me very uncomfortable to think of working with what I had learned in physical education. Even though I have a great passion for sports...And even played as a high-performance athlete. But when I entered physical education, it bothered me absurdly.<sup>142</sup>

*Mestra* Janja was coming into herself as a scholar and *capoeirista* at the same time as Brazil was redefining itself as a nation. Janja describes how capoeira became a reflection of Brazilian society, overly concerned with execution of movement and objectives. These traits were antithetical to the capoeira Janja had become accustomed to training *Capoeira Angola* in her home state of Salvador. What Janja found problematic was the replacing of expression for execution and the substitution for autonomy for obedience. Her interaction with the capoeira in São Paulo had disillusioned her and greatly changed the trajectory in her life. Instead of staying focused on physical education and athletics, Janja decided to study history, education, and social sciences for her master’s degree and PhD with an emphasis on the African diaspora. Janja describes this epiphany:

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<sup>142</sup> Mestra Janja, in discussion with the author, April 11, 2019. (Portuguese transcription by Priscila Barbosa, translations by author)

...it was a very big personal revolution, because deep down, I was looking for an aesthetic of expression that physical education had dismantled. At that moment I decided that I would not be able to professionally pursue a career in physical education, so I took a new exam and went back to university. My education was already very defined by capoeira, so I wanted to become a historian and I specifically wanted to study the one thing that in Brazil we were always prevented from studying which was Africa and studying the history of the Brazilian Black people. That's why I say that capoeira has produced a major life change, it has retraced my path forever.

The move to São Paulo, the pursuit of physical education as a career path, the history of Anti-Blackness in Brazil with the Militarized government—all were important aspects of Janja's call to capoeira as an academic, with special interests in the history and rights of Black people and women. Constantly questioning the institutions of State, capoeira patrilineal heritage, and the burgeoning activist movements that allowed the present generations of capoeira scholars in Brazil and in the United States to have an example of what leadership can be with introspection, community and vision.

*Mestra* Janja was trying to find *Capoeira Angola* in São Paulo, something comparable to the kind of capoeira that embodies Blackness and performativity she had experienced in Bahia. Unfortunately, *Angola* and *Regional* styles were not regarded as interchangeable at the time. For her the methodology of *Capoeira Regional* was a negation of the capoeira that she had been accustomed to. She had approached her teacher, *Mestre* Moraes to confirm what *Mestre* Suassuna, had expressed. These types of capoeira cannot exist together. The *Mestres* of capoeira claimed each style had two different objectives and cannot have conversations together. *Mestre* Janja took it upon herself to create a way that capoeira she wanted could exist in large cities like São Paulo and could be utilized or wouldn't be ignored by the status quo of capoeira and what

*Mestre* Janja refers to as the militarized and sports-oriented version of capoeira that strips away the expressive culture inherent in capoeira, rooted in the Blackness of *Capoeira Angola*.<sup>143 144</sup>

In the following section, I argue that the current feminist, Black-feminist, and marginalized community initiatives in capoeira are the direct result of young-then-students of capoeira becoming politically engaged. Despite capoeira's global impact today, the initiatives of inclusivity started 35 years ago with women like *Mestra* Janja who realized the kind of capoeira she wanted to play needed to align with her ideals about self, representation, and respect for the African diaspora, and the people who contribute to the continuation of the art, despite the strong propensity to athleticize and capitalize on capoeira in the twenty-first century.

### *6.3 Scholarship as Resistance*

Janja's many roles as a *Mestra* and an activist are beneficiaries from her academic work. In her teachings in small gathers and special group events, like the one I attended in Washington DC, showcase her dedication for inclusivity and respect in capoeira. Janja's written work in academia further explores the intricacies of corporeality, embodiment, and orality as they relate to learning and teaching capoeira in their relationship to the African diaspora. Music is one way that these forms of resistance overlap. Janja's contributions range from the creation of the *Orquestra do Berimbau*s to changing the way we hear capoeira music, through the traditions of

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<sup>143</sup> Rosângela Costa Araújo, Dissertation, "'Sou Discípulo que Aprende, Meu Mestre me Deu Lição': Tradição e Educação entre os Angoleiros Baianos (anos 80-90)." (University of São Paulo: USP, 1999), 211.

<sup>144</sup> Sara Abreu da Mata Machado, Dissertation, "UFBA Saberes e Fazeres na Capoeira Angola: A Autonomia no jogo de *Muleekes*." (Salvador, 2012).

lesser celebrated Southern African linguistic and religious traditions or by acknowledging the importance of gender equality. Scholarship is the way the *Mestra* Janja can pivot to ensure the importance of the multitude of capoeira history and life continue as the world rapidly changes to consumer culture globally.

Rosângela Costa Araújo, more commonly known as *Mestra* Janja, is arguably the most influential Afro-Brazilian woman *capoeirista* to date. She built a capoeira academy based on the inequity that she experienced in a militarized Brazil in the 1980s. As a student she saw gaps in representation and misrepresentations of Black women in capoeira. Because of her affinity for *Capoeira Angola* and the activist climate of the time, she extended her school's notion of anti-racism to include anti-sexist ideology while continuing the legacy of remembering *Mestre* Pastinha and keeping a direct line to the diversity of African lineages in capoeira. During this time, Janja utilized her various roles to continue consciousness raising about the ways capoeira culture could be improved. Her academic life provided a necessary conduit to be regarded as an authority in capoeira as well. If women could not be authorities in the *roda*, maybe the ivory towers could open the flood gates of intellectual capoeira discourse. Academia was more than a tool to validate the broader impact of capoeira practices but rewrite the silenced canon of Afro-diasporic participation. At the same time university participation evaded other systemic roadblocks in capoeira that dismiss the work of Black women.

Janja's capoeira life addresses the questions: what would it be to live capoeira fully through body mind and spirit? What work would we have to do as *capoeiristas* to connect capoeira's history in Brazil to capoeira's future globally? What will happen if we reclaimed the history of erased voices? What happens if we teach more than how to have a body of a *capoeirista*, but how to have the intellect, mental endurance, and compassion of those who

taught through criminalization and poverty? When capoeira was not in vogue? When embodiment was risky? Her story also shines light on the underlying and persistent message in capoeira, that people will always fight to have a place to be seen heard and understood in society. Janja's story helps answer some uncomfortable truths for new students in mainstream contemporary practices. Questions such as, why is activism important in capoeira? Why does *Capoeira Angola* insist on activism? Why are there so few women in capoeira? Can capoeira just be a sport? And others like it.

This chapter highlights how the thread of activism and self-preservation has developed within capoeira in the twenty-first century and how the ever-growing strain of activism in capoeira has roots in *Capoeira Angola* in the 1980s in Brazil. Through the Nzinga academies, academic research, and capoeira conferences, Janja demonstrates how to attempt to reconcile the past and welcome new bodies and voices to participate in shaping the future of the dance-martial art. Her schools make clear that playing capoeira is not merely that, but to assume the philosophical responsibilities.

Among the most important aspects of her story is that she makes no illusions about who capoeira has reached. It is apparent that she is not for the fixed nature of capoeira. Janja is clear that capoeira is inherently African in its origin, practice, and performance but does not aim to exclude new global iterations of the art. Her goal is to ensure that practitioners have an education in capoeira that is based on the mutual respect of all those playing which includes respecting the history of the practitioners who continued the tradition despite difficulties of racism and erasure of Black contributions. It's about inclusion. Janja uses capoeira music as a conduit to undo system racism and sexism in capoeira.

Janja and others in her cohort are the roadmap for the longevity of capoeira to invite the growth of a wholistic capoeira that enjoys the physical challenges of the art but also grapples with how transformative capoeira life inside the *roda* can be manifested to create better communities and compassionate people. This wholistic capoeira, in Janja's view, is the way modern capoeira iterations can resist racist and sexist themes that have always threatened the ideological framework from imperialistic tendencies. It is important to train your breath of human compassion just as it is to train your *bananaeiras*.<sup>145</sup> Capoeira and activism exist in the same place for many people of color. For the sake of the future of capoeira, we cannot forget the exclusionary practices of the past. When I asked her, what do you hope for the future of capoeira, she responded with "respect." In the next chapters, we see how the philosophy and teachings of Nzinga have spread in the twenty-first century and how activism in capoeira is reaching beyond Afro-Brazilian women.

Through capoeira Nzinga, Janja activist voice and her teachings permeate the physical realm of capoeira. Her background in history and education interrogate how he learn about our bodies and spirituality in capoeira not only to take in the information, but to disseminate the knowledge to become good leaders in capoeira in the future.

Capoeira for Janja has always been about bridging the gap and finding a way forward despite opposition. Frequently she invokes her capoeira teachings as the source of her intellectual inspiration. She makes clear that the future of capoeira is in the hands of those who want to participate. In the dedication of her dissertation she writes:

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<sup>145</sup> Literally translates to banana trees. Refers to a handstand in capoeira.

To the *capoeiristas* of various generations for the many teachings, especially to the *Angoleiros* who dedicate themselves to the preservation of the teachings of the *Pastinhan* school, for the collaborations and constant exchanges, while learning of its maintenance. Special thanks to my teachers, João Grande, Moraes and Cobra Mansa, for helping me to recognize in our philosophy of life, the place of community and solidarity in the teachings of *Capoeira Angola*. (Araújo iii: 2004)

#### 6.4 Late Twentieth Century Social Movements and Cultural Impacts on Capoeira

The political group *Movimento Negro Unificado* (MNU) had started in part after the militarization of Brazil. MNU had the rights of Afro-Brazilians at its heart but also was interested in women's rights as well. Many members of the Brazilian worker's party, *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), lean to the political left and embrace equity in Brazil. Many of these groups were intertwined in their objectives. This period of grassroots mobilization has intersectionality as primary focus with special attention to gender, race, and class with Afro-Brazilian women at the center.<sup>146 147</sup> Many of the activists in MNU felt it necessary to combat racism in Brazil, or the weaponization of Black culture, dance, music performance, and religion. In MNU social mobilization, they took it task to highlight how cultural performance is a central part of the Afro-Brazilian and Afro-diasporic sentiment of being. Reclaiming these artistic spaces was a necessary part of creating a pathway forward to assert autonomy through these political adversarial moments in the late 1970s through the 1980s. The military regime impacted a

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<sup>146</sup> Peggy A. Lovell, "Gender, race, and the struggle for social justice in Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 27,6 (2000): 85-102.

<sup>147</sup> Nathalie Lebon, "Beyond confronting the myth of racial democracy: The role of Afro-Brazilian women scholars and activists," *Latin American Perspectives* 34,6 (2007): 52-76.

spectrum of social issues. Francisco Vidal Luna and Herbert S. Klein note in their economic study of Brazil that after the military era:

Brazil would quickly pass through a demographic transition...in turn this had an impact on everything from family structure to employment. Mortality rates now began to decline at an ever-more rapid pace, and with it life expectancy began to climb toward European and North American levels. Final in this period Brazil urban centers grow dramatically, but for the first time the rural area would begin to experience negative growth rates...For all that change, Brazil was still marked by an ever-increasing inequality in terms of class and color, which was well reflected in increasing regional disparities.<sup>148</sup>

Disparities between rural and urban, rich and poor, Black and White were exacerbated as the vision for Brazil moving forward into democracy again left the most marginal communities in the past. Janja was among many who became politically active during this time in attempts to dismantle the military regime and seek out equitable treatment for disenfranchised Brazilians. The Black movement in Brazil has roots in the movements before and after abolition but has notably strong presence in the late twentieth century with the MNU.

Representation in capoeira became one of her main goals in capoeira. This manifested in her studies as well. The manifestation of representation and inclusivity in capoeira is not a movement that began with the globalization of capoeira in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but rather is the result of an internal struggle for visibility, autonomy, and economic right in Brazil for marginalized communities. Janja's coming of age story in capoeira is indicative of the intersection of identity politics and capoeira that first began in Brazil and now has spread throughout global capoeira discourses. Janja's beginning in capoeira came out of a need for various types of voices to be heard and that is reflected in Brazil's political climate which has

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<sup>148</sup> Francisco Vidal Luna and Herbert S. Klein, *The Economic and Social History of Brazil since 1889*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 219.

spread to the thinking of how capoeira should be shared and taught. Janja reflects on how her understanding of capoeira was shaped by the activism of *Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho*:

In the 1980s and 90s, the kind of work we did to form a *capoeirista* [new men and women practitioners] was not the type of work most groups did. I come from GCAP (Grupo de *Capoeira Angola Pelourinho*) that had a seminar every 15 days with invited guests, academics, intellectuals, political leaders. We always had study groups. We were told to study capoeira, to research capoeira in our generation. Our political background was very dense because we were a capoeira group within a larger political movement, which was the Black Movement. All at once we were fighting for the end of the military regime, fighting for rights, and fighting against racism. The *Angoleiros* were the ones who did it.

Janja continues to explain the fundamental ideological differences between *Capoeira Angola* and *Regional* at the time:

The modern capoeira, whether *Regional* or *Contemporary* (whatever name you want to give it), they already said *Capoeira Angola* was a thing of the past. They spread the news, they said, “*Capoeira Angola* is a thing of the past and doesn’t exist anymore” But we still had several living masters and some work going on, as was the case with Mestre João Pequeno and Mestre Moraes. At the time when we started, we were fighting for space within capoeira. Our methods have always been different from theirs because our purpose is different, we understand capoeira. First, we do not accept the explanation of capoeira as a Brazilian sport, or as the first Brazilian gymnastics. We do not accept this application. For us, we are working by referencing a continuum of African-ness within Brazil and as such, identifying the recorded memories in our communities- our sensory memories and historical data of a collective organization. And therefore, we didn’t really accept that capoeira was simply a Brazilian sport.

This is not designed to be a discussion of the merits of *Capoeira Angola* over *Capoeira Regional* but there is a difference between the capoeira that is of the Brazilian State and that is of the African Diaspora in practice. The beginning of Janja’s transition in her capoeira career was a conscious decision, made apparent by her academic endeavors. Moving from physical education to history and social sciences, to study what the Brazilian State did not want to promote, which is self-awareness of Black people in Brazil. This was in direct defiance of the systems and

individuals that told her that her views in capoeira were invalid. Janja took these dismissals and created her own school. That school is now Grupo Nzinga.

Janja told me that she and her colleagues started *Capoeira Angola* in a city without *Capoeira Angola*. They began a school as women when there was no women leadership in capoeira. Nzinga represents not just womanhood but Afro-Brazilian womanhood and ingenuity. As she cultivated strategic diplomatic relationships with the Portuguese in the interest of protecting her empire and people. Figurative Nzinga was a fitting name of this school because as a historic figure she navigated various regimes of oppression to maintain her role of leadership. This is exactly what *Mestre* Janja was doing despite her ranking as a student and not being a Master of capoeira, despite being told that “your way of envisioning capoeira cannot work” in a city that was established in this “militarized” methodology of capoeira focused on the execution of movements but not necessarily the non-physical components of capoeira as they related to values and traditions in capoeira.

She fought against a system that wanted to ignore the vision of Black women in capoeira and the validity of other types of capoeira. Janja’s journey is a reiteration of what was going on at the time in Brazil in which marginalized people were starting grassroots movements in which they could advocate for themselves. Janja’s school is derived from *Capoeira Angola* which at the very source are focused on African-ness, Negritude, equity, and continuation of tradition despite not having much support.

Although the 1980s proved pivotal, *Mestre* Janja was not the only person who felt *Capoeira Angola* was more important than the mainstream *Capoeira Regional* schools would imply. By starting this institution and being present and using her established relationships with Cobra Mansa and *Mestre* Moraes. By continuing to write about these issues with her dissertation,

she made a case for the continuance to speak about and perform Blackness into the modern history of the capoeira. Janja took a multifaceted approach to overcome systematic silencing of Black traditions and the initiatives of women in what was then becoming the most widely celebrated Brazilian practice globally.

## 7.0 Final Thoughts

### 7.1 Summary

Black women in capoeira have not always had control of the narrative of how they are perceived and how they participate in capoeira. We see this with representations that were set in the nineteenth century depictions by Rugendas. We also see this by the limited knowledge available by the lack of historical data suggesting that women participated in Capoeiragem in Rio de Janeiro. There is also little evidence to support the presence of Black women, when capoeira was used as a product of the state overtly and covertly. Despite these setbacks in representation, we see how Black women's voices have been integral to the fundamental core values about belonging, representation, and community within capoeira—despite the hardships.

To re-center and reframe Black women *capoeiristas*, I invoke diasporic memory by speaking about the ways that Black women *capoeiristas* of all ability rely on and gravitate towards ways of knowing that validate their experiences and way of engaging in capoeira, making it easier for them to share capoeira with other people. It becomes more apparent that being visible through all intersections of one's identity is just as important as participating physically and musically and philosophical as a community member. These networks are important. In speaking with these women, I discovered who their mentors are. People look up to people like them, who share their values and who look like them.

In *Mestra* Marisa's story, relationships and networks are important. Performing capoeira as a cultural product and export of Brazil was an imperative part of her story. Participating in the cultural economy of capoeira was necessary and made it possible for her to create a space for *Mestra* Marisa to find a way to survive the institutions that were meant to undermine her experience. Women of color create spaces online contrary to the notion of low social media participation of people of color. The understudied portion of technological engagement suggests the future of activism for Black people is virtual.

*Mestra* Janja and her co-founders of group Nzinga dedicated their work to academic endeavors in capoeira. They show that there is a space for political activism in capoeira, which dispels the notion that capoeira needs to be exclusive for other people to be seen and thrive within modern iterations of the sport. *Mestra* Janja herself claims that the future of capoeira is about respect.

Through all these instances of Black women in power in capoeira, music resides as a tool for recognizing difficulties and undoing problematic assumptions while reclaiming space; we see this with songs that degrade Black women, with Black women creating songs to be heard, and the creation of new songs and texts that take an active role in political engagement by advocating and supporting figures that are working more equitable treatment outside of capoeira. Music has served as a roadmap for the past of capoeira but the possibilities for future engagement in knowledge production for the martial art while engaging non-Brazilian members of the African diaspora.

In this moment the ramification of a globalized capoeira practice is starting to be realized. The project suggests the ways that capoeira is self-regulatory as people from the margins continually push inward and forward to be represented and reorient knowledge production as an

essential space. More than the *Capoeira Regional/Angola* divide, Black women in capoeira want to find their voices and leadership beyond stylistic differences and the divergent histories. Finding leadership has been central to all the interlocutors reiterated, despite school, stylistic, or national affiliations.

## 7.2 Future Considerations

The research outlined here is designed to be an exposition on what is gained when more people are given space. It is necessary to continue to have the conversations about what it means to train or play capoeira as more people have access to the Afro-Brazilian martial art. Some of the questions I still ponder include: What does allyship look like in the global era? What are the responsibilities of practicing *capoeiristas* to acknowledge the problematic components of capoeira's history? Can I just have fun? Can we exercise and validate marginalized experiences in capoeira? What does capoeira look like outside of the Atlantic world?

More than showcasing the work challenges and triumphs of Afro-descended women in capoeira, this study is also about making a way for marginalized communities in capoeira. If we apply the theoretical framework of intersectionality that advocated for by Black women, then we are advocating for inclusion for everyone.

This is a preliminary study into the potential of capoeira studies, when we imagine what capoeira inclusion would look like. This dissertation strikes me more as an exposition to the permutations of capoeira in the future to expand, collapse, and draw upon new themes as the world and the communities within it become more interwoven and connected.

Future studies of the intersectionality of capoeira include looking at trauma, healing, and therapy in capoeira. There have been studies done on former child soldiers in DRC or listening to survivors reclaim their space and bodies through knowing defensive techniques of a centuries-old movement discipline.

Thinking about different positionality in capoeira spaces opens the door to thinking about capoeira and ableism or disability studies, beyond just historicizing the way that capoeira has alienated certain groups of people with different abilities but also with how these narratives are training. I have had the pleasure of witnessing capoeira classes that include people with spinal cord injuries, or with Deaf people using American sign language to indicate the next series of movements and other modifications like speakers being placed on the ground with the volume turned up so students can still feel the rhythm of the *berimbau*.

What does it mean for *capoeiristas* to provide space and classes for people who are neuro atypical or for what some consider “hyperactive” children? What happens when we look at the ways capoeira is used to improve the lives of those whose experiences are far too often overlooked?

Another new frontier for capoeira is gerontological studies within the martial-art-game. An increasing number of capoeira *Mestres* are now in their 60s, 70s, and 80s. They may play their instruments a bit more, but still enter the *roda* and play their students’ students 20, 30, and 40 years their junior. When I was in São Paulo in 2017, I witnessed some *capoeira terapia* or capoeira therapy classes where groups of senior citizens practice music and modified movements to increase their mobility. What are some of the ways we can investigate aging into capoeira and supporting and respecting elders while maintain autonomous respect?

The *berimbau* calls capoeiristas to the *roda*, the *ladainha* calls us to reflect in capoeira. The *chula* begins the dialogue and the *corrido* is our ongoing back and forth. The discourses of gender, race, and diaspora will always be ongoing for Black women in capoeira to be seen, heard, and assert leadership in the history of an art that has been repeatedly resistant to hearing our voices in modernity.

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