ABSTRACT

Hard Play: Capoeira and the Politics of Inequality in Rio de Janeiro

Katya Wesolowski

Capoeira is a game of physical dexterity and cunning that incorporates fight, dance, acrobatics and music. Developed by African slaves in Brazil and once an exclusively male domain, capoeira was viewed as a social threat and severely persecuted through the 19th century. By the mid 20th century capoeira had come to be celebrated as an element of national identity, and today the practice crosses class, ethnic, gender and national boundaries. Among its myriad definitions, capoeira is conceived of as “play”: two participants “play” in a ring, or roda, surrounded by other participants and accompanied by percussive music and singing. Interaction oscillates between playful cooperation and aggressive confrontation as partner-adversaries attempt to outmaneuver each other, claim space, and demonstrate greater corporal expression, intelligence and creativity. A bounded ritual space, the roda is also contiguous with the external world, as is evident in claims that skills learned in the roda carry into everyday life. This ethnographic study, based on two years of fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro and my ongoing involvement as a practitioner, approaches capoeira as embodied play and a social practice that constitutes a particular type of engagement with the world: cultivating intelligent, expressive bodies through training and play, and forging collective identities and fictive kinship ties through group affiliation, practitioners become “capoeiristas,” and in so doing reshape themselves and their relationships to their environment and people within it. In Rio de Janeiro, an urban space organized by inequality, capoeira emerged out of and was a
response to the politics of exclusion. Today, urban youth in Rio continue, through their practice and the play of their bodies -- sometimes controlled, sometimes volatile -- to confront the enduring structural violence of poverty, racism, sexism and social marginalization. A theoretical premise of the study is that the body is a nexus of intersecting cultural, political and phenomenological forces: constrained by social conditioning and interpretations of bodies, through embodied experiences such as play individuals nonetheless discover a capacity to transform themselves in creative and potentially liberating ways.
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PREFACE

ENTERING THE RODA

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Berkeley, California

The throb of a drum, like a heartbeat, courses through a ring of singing and handclapping bodies. Energy flows into the center of the ring where two bodies circle, dip and sway around each other in constant motion. Another instrument, resembling a hunting bow, lays a syncopated pattern on top of the drumbeat to which the bodies respond, lightly weaving kicks and acrobatic moves between a steady side-to-side circular swaying step. Fluid, graceful and elusive: what appears to be dance one moment slides into fight the next only to suddenly explode into acrobatics. The bodies are frequently inverted, head or hands planted on the ground, legs scissoring and twisting in the air. Handstands morph into crouching positions, transform into leaping kicks. Cartwheels dive to safety over sweeping legs. One body suddenly breaks from the continuous circling and with a swaying torso tattoos a light-footed dance on the ground, grinning and gesticulating expansively.

Bodies are in constant exchange, replacing those on the instruments and those in the middle of the ring so that music and motion do not stop for over three hours. Most striking is the ambiguity of the interaction: frowns and grimaces slide into grins and laughter; body postures oscillate between threat and camaraderie. There is a seriousness to this play.

One of the challenges of writing ethnography is to remember and re-create one’s own experience of the subject previous to complete immersion. The above is an attempted re-creation of my first contact with capoeira, a sensuous experience. It has often been said that the job of an anthropologist is to render the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Through long-term fieldwork, what was at first strange slowly becomes familiar, and on return home, the familiar suddenly appears strange. This dialectic of the strange and familiar also, I believe, informs the process of writing ethnography: in writing thick description for a naïve audience one must recapture, and in a sense make strange again, those phenomena that once were strange but now are familiar. This has
certainly been the case for me: seventeen years have passed since I first saw capoeira. Over the intervening years I have become increasingly involved as a practitioner and researcher. What on first viewing was a strange and indecipherable spectacle has become a familiar, daily practice. Part of the exercise in writing this ethnography has been to rediscover and capture in words the sensuous experiences of capoeira.

At the same time that capoeira has become a second skin to me, its recognition has grown around the world. A dynamic blend of fight, dance and acrobatics, capoeira was created by Africans in Brazil several hundred years ago as a form of entertainment and self defense. Repressed in the 19th century for the part it played in urban unrest, glorified in the early 20th century as a part of brasilidade, or Brazilian national identity, today capoeira is practiced as a sport and cultural manifestation from Japan to Angola. Seventeen years ago when I first saw capoeira in my hometown of Berkeley, California, relatively few people outside of Brazil had heard of it. Today, capoeira classes are offered in gyms, dance studios and public schools around the world, and it appears in Hollywood movies, television and magazine advertisements, video games and on the Internet.

Taking a break from writing one morning in the spring of 2005, I left my house in Berkeley to find a car parked on the street with a plaque on the back that read in bold black letters, LEARN CAPOEIRA and a phone number. There was no accompanying visual -- a Brazilian flag perhaps -- to indicate what capoeira was; knowledge was assumed. Similarly, capoeira has appeared in recent Hollywood movies (Cat Woman, Ocean’s Twelve and Meet the Faukners), European television commercials, Japanese video games (Mortal Combat, Teklen) and Vogue Magazine (Spring 2006) with little, if
any, socio-cultural context. In this age of rapid transnational movement, the strange becomes familiar in de-contextualized ways. Perhaps the task of the anthropologist is to render what has become familiar, strange again. In this study capoeira is situated in Rio de Janeiro, where I conducted fieldwork from 2002-2004. One of its places of origin, Rio de Janeiro today is a central hub in the international circulation of capoeira. The capoeiristas with whom I worked are in some way, directly or indirectly, a part of or affected by this circulation. This study is informed by the globalization of capoeira but is concerned most specifically with local contested meanings of capoeira in Rio de Janeiro.

Although the study is based primarily on my two and a half years of fieldwork in Rio, the research also draws on my previous and ongoing involvement in capoeira as a practitioner. As a transformative social practice that privileges the body, capoeira is an ideal arena for undertaking what has been termed “sensuous scholarship” (Stoller 1997) or “carnal sociology” (Wacquant 2004). In such scholarship, the body, in all its sensual capacities, is the crucial methodological instrument. In the ethnography produced by such scholarship the researcher’s body is not erased or rubbed out as if it were an invisible and objective tool, as anthropologists once believed. Rather, the researcher’s body and her corporal engagement with the subject of the study are present so as to render visible the process by which she came to learn and understand what she did.

The description with which this preface opens is of a roda. The term roda refers to both the physical space of a circle in which capoeira occurs, and to an event, or a gathering of capoeiristas. A roda is both performative and fully participatory. An audience is not obligatory, but appreciated, and when present encouraged to join in the handclapping and singing. The capoeiristas rotate roles in the roda so that they switch
between performing in the center, playing the musical instruments, and singing, clapping
and watching from the edges of the circle. At the first roda I witnessed -- which had
brought together Brazilian mestres (masters) and their students from around the Bay Area
-- everyone, despite varying degrees of expertise, took their turn in the center: adepts with
initiates, adults with children, men with women.

The movement of capoeira, while reminiscent of many things, is disconcertingly
ambiguous. On first sight, I was unsure whether to call it dance, fight or something else
altogether. The straight and spinning kicks resembled those in other martial arts yet
were gracefully strung together as in ballet; the constant, swinging side-to-side step and
acrobatic moves that ranged from head spins to arm balances, were similar to the top
rocking and break dancing of hip hop; the occasional arrests in motion and feet shuffling
on the ground had the flavor of American tap dance or Cuban rumba; and the infectious
music -- led by a musical bow called a berimbau and accompanied by a drum, other
percussive instruments, hand clapping and call and response singing -- and the way in
which partners took turns performing together in the center of the circle while others
watched, occasionally emitting cheers or whistles, reminded me of West African dance.

My first clue to understanding capoeira was in the language participants use to
describe what they do. Capoeiristas do not fight or dance, but “play,” jogar in
Portuguese, and a match between two players is called a game (jogo). This explained the
ambiguous playful seriousness. There was a competitive edge to the games, especially
between the more adept, that lent an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation to the
roda. The exchange of movement between two players was obviously improvised and
spontaneous rather than choreographed. And even though players worked together like
partners in a dance to maintain a graceful fluidity of movement, they also tried to
outmaneuver each other, even occasionally striking or knocking each other off balance.
The game was simultaneously one of aesthetics, strategy and physical prowess.

More baffling still than defining capoeira was learning to play. Despite my dance
background, I found the process of training excruciatingly difficult, slow and frustrating.
I began classes with Mestre Beicola, a recently arrived 30-year old Afro-Brazilian from
Rio de Janeiro. First introduced to California in the 1970s, by the late 1980s capoeira
was rapidly spreading. Close to a dozen Brazilian capoeiristas, many of whom had first
come to the United States as performers in Brazilian dance troupes, were living and
teaching in the Bay Area. I joined Mestre Beicola’s small group of novice students. We
trained in a bar in Oakland, the floor of which we swept clear of cigarette butts and
broken glass so as not to cut our bare feet. Mestre Beicola’s pedagogy was based on
mimesis, verbal explanation and experimentation. He showed us movement and we
imitated it as best we could. His corrections came by way of explanation of the utility of
a move. He demonstrated how a move could be used as an attack, a defense, a
counterattack, or a combination of all three, by putting it into context with other
movements. Then he left it up to us to figure out through experimentation. He played
with us or we played with each other, attempting to apply what we had learned in a
spontaneous and improvised fashion. He would periodically stop the games to analyze
them and explain other options we could have taken.

As a dancer I was accustomed to a different kind of moving, conditioning and
being in my body. The process of learning capoeira was so difficult because more than
just adapting new movement, I had to learn to perceive, think and act differently through
my body. Many of the moves were spinning, inverted or close to ground. It was
disorientating to execute them, especially while simultaneously trying to keep my eyes on
my partner. Even the fairly simple ginga, the swaying side-to-side step that links all the
movements together, was difficult to master. Somehow I had to maintain a relaxed,
swinging body that was nonetheless ready for quick actions and reactions. My movement
had to be in rhythm with the music and be continuous and improvised. Yet I had to
anticipate and respond to my partner. Most difficult was capturing the ambiguity of
capoeira. I had to maintain the aesthetics while trying to outmaneuver my partner; be
competitive but not too aggressive; be open yet guarded; be playful but cunning too.

As I became more involved in Mestre Beićola’s group, struggling towards
competency in the roda and coming to identify as a capoeirista, I underwent the
inevitable rite of passage for foreign students -- a trip to Brazil. I went first for two
weeks in 1995 with Beićola and a group of students to Rio de Janeiro to meet and train
with his own teacher, Mestre Touro. I returned on my own for five months in 1996,
training with the capoeiristas I had met in Rio and traveling around the country. I was
amazed at the ubiquity of capoeira: everywhere I went from Salvador in the northeast
state of Bahia, to Porto Alegre in the southern state of Rio Grande de Sul, I met
capoeiristas who eagerly invited me to train with them; signs advertised capoeira classes
in community centers, health clubs and schools; tourists shop sold berimbau, capoeira
pants and t-shirts; street performers played capoeira to earn a few coins; television stars
demonstrated their skills on telenovelas (soap operas) and talk shows; street children
practiced moves on the beach.
I was repeatedly told that capoeira was the second most popular “sport” after *futebol*, or soccer, and a “cultural manifestation” of *brasilidade* or “Brazilian-ness,” and that the practice crossed class, gender, age and ethnic lines. Yet I wondered how a young black boy playing capoeira in one of Rio de Janeiro’s hillside *favelas*, or “shantytowns” could possibly have the same experience or understanding of capoeira, let alone of “Brazilian-ness,” as a white girl in a private nursery school in Ipanema.

My involvement with one particular capoeira group shaped my experience of Rio de Janeiro. I became intimately acquainted with a side of the city few tourists see. I spent most of my time in the *Zona Norte*, or North Zone. Far from the glamorous beachside neighborhoods in the *Zona Sul* or South Zone, the Zona Norte is a sprawling conglomeration of working class neighborhoods and favelas. I lived and trained with a former student of Mestre Beiçola’s, who was carrying on his work teaching youth from low-income housing complexes and favelas in the neighborhood where he had grown up. The students, mainly adolescent boys, played capoeira with an intensity and aggressiveness I had not previously experienced. The trainings were held at night in a public schoolyard and usually drew a crowd of spectators curious to see a *gringa* (foreigner) playing capoeira. The teacher and students played with me with an affectionate aggressiveness aimed at teaching me, as they explained, to be a more prepared and effective capoeirista. My shins were bruised and swollen from sweeps and my ribs sore from kicks that met their mark when I did not move quickly enough. At times I felt mildly absurd -- a white American woman in her mid twenties trying to learn from a group of young black male students half her age. If they thought it was absurd,
however, they certainly disguised it with their sheer enthusiasm to share not only their love and knowledge of capoeira but also their lives with me.

When I moved to New York City in 1996 to begin graduate school, I started training with a group that was in the process of affiliating with Abadá-Capoeira. Founded and led by Mestre Camisa in Rio de Janeiro, Abadá is one of the largest capoeira associations in the world today, with member groups throughout Brazil, North and Central America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Training with this group could not have been more different from my previous experience. The group was led by an Afro-Brazilian woman, Mestra Edna Lima, and classes were held in dance studios and health clubs with often as many as forty students. Most of the students were in their twenties and thirties, more than half were woman, and a wide array of nationalities were represented (e.g., Japanese, Israeli, Italian, Russian, Dominican, Puerto Rican). Lined up facing the mirror we practiced ginga and combinations of moves in unison before working in partners. I heard words like “technique” and “efficiency” a lot, and strengthening and stretching exercises were integral to the training. I was explicitly taught how to mold my body into correct positions. Edna gave verbal instructions and when those failed, physically manipulated my body. I was told to break the “bad habits” of my previous style. This proved a formidable task as it involved regaining conscious awareness of movements and postures that had become second nature, breaking them down, and rebuilding them in similar but different forms. At the same time, the style and pedagogy appealed to me as it felt more comfortable and familiar to my dancer’s body.

I went back to Rio de Janeiro for the summer of 1997 to conduct exploratory fieldwork. I returned to the Zona Norte and while my friends and teachers were pleased
to have me back, they were disappointed that I was learning this new style. They felt betrayed and told me so. They told me that my capoeira was no longer da raça, implying that it had lost its roots or ancestry, and that Abadá and other Zona Sul groups promoted a “modern,” “commercialized,” “mechanical” “whitened” and “bourgeois” capoeira.

When I returned to Brazil at the end of 2001 to begin my dissertation fieldwork, I carried some of these preconceptions with me. My growing involvement with the New York group over the years had solidified my decision to train and focus a good part of my research on Abadá-Capoeira in Rio de Janeiro. I was curious to see what I would find.

I situated myself in a central neighborhood that gave me easy access to both my old friends in the Zona Norte and the place where Mestre Camisa teaches capoeira in the Zona Sul. The division I had built up in my mind between the two zones of capoeira proved tenuous. Certainly there were differences between the styles of play and in pedagogy, and in the Zona Sul there were more white, middle and upper class men and women training so that classes, at first glance, appeared like the ones in New York City. However, I soon discovered that the majority of the core group of Mestre Camisa’s students, those who were themselves teaching in various locations around the city, were from favelas in the Zona Sul and poor neighborhoods in the Zona Norte. Many of these capoeiristas, in their twenties, grew up with poverty, violence and a lack of education. Yet these same capoeiristas are today teaching capoeira in health clubs, private schools and public universities across Rio and abroad. It made me rethink what had first appeared to be that gulf between the capoeira played by a black boy in a favela and a white girl in Ipanema.
In this dissertation I draw out some of the strands of the web that connect the multitude of practitioners and the various interpretations and practices of capoeira. To borrow a phrase from studies of the panoply of religious practices in Brazil, there exists in capoeira a “political economy of polyphony” (Burdick 1993: 10). Examining this polyphony sheds light on how different individuals and groups of people understand and appropriate social and cultural practices in ways that resonate with their life situations; and while this polyphony may be fraught with tension and contradiction there also exist spaces of possibility for dialogue and alliance.

What the many capoeiristas have taught me over the years is that at the heart of things the style of capoeira you play is less important than the life you build around capoeira and others similarly engaged. “Capoeira,” I was repeatedly told, “is about convivência.” One of those untranslatable words, convivência connotes friendship, cohabitation and an understanding of the life experiences of your companions. As Mestre Touro once told me, “Capoeira is a gathering. It is about you coming to my house one Sunday to play capoeira and eat my rice and beans; and me going to your house one Sunday to play capoeira and eat your rice and beans.” I hope that this study can communicate some of that convivência.
INTRODUCTION

CONCEPTUALIZING CAPOEIRA: THEORETICAL & METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

August 17, 2003
São Paulo

The most emotionally charged and potentially explosive moment of the Third National Capoeira Congress came when one of São Paulo’s oldest mestres took the podium. Overcome with emotion during the presentation by a young delegate from his state who supported the regulation of capoeira by the Federal Council of Physical Education, Mestre Pinatti, well into his 70s and walking with a cane, struggled uninvited onto the stage. Reaching the microphone, he raised a clenched fist and cried: “Capoeira is culture, not sport!” The deafening cheers from the floor were testimony that his opinion was shared by many of the gathered delegates. Encouraged, Mestre Pinatti went on to criticize the explicitly political atmosphere of the congress -- sponsored by the PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil) -- and admonish his fellow capoeiristas to be wary of politicians whom he directly blamed for the “big mess the country is in.” In a voice trembling with emotion he closed his speech with, “At times I am prouder of being a capoeirista than a Brazilian!” An even stronger wave of cheers surged through the audience and a number of the older, prestigious mestres rushed onto the stage to shake his hand, tears in their eyes.

The Third National Capoeira Congress held in São Paulo in 2003 brought together politicians, academics and close to five hundred capoeira mestres and teachers from across Brazil. The goal of the meetings, held over a weekend in August, was to create a legislative proposal for the federal recognition and regulation of the teaching of capoeira as a profession. The above scene in which Mestre Pinatti distinguished between being a capoeirista and a Brazilian -- and professed greater allegiance to and pride in his identity as a capoeirista -- was ironically framed by the motto of the Congress emblazoned on tall banners flanking the stage: below a map of Brazil superimposed with a muscular, light-skinned Afro-Brazilian capoeirista were the words “Capoeira is Brazil!” This slogan,
also printed on nametags, free t-shirts, caps, pens and folders, was meant to encourage unity among the delegates and promote pride in a monolithic Brazil and a monolithic capoeira.

Contrary to the intentions and hopes of the organizers, the Congress placed in relief the fractured and contested terrain of capoeira. Over three days of public forum, voting, and private discussion, delegates struggled to have their voices heard in debates over what it means to be a capoeirista and practice capoeira in Brazil today. Capoeiristas often reify capoeira, describing it as “energy,” the call of which they are unable to resist, and as a “force” that shapes and drives their lives. How they incorporate this force into their lives, however, varies significantly and can change over the course of a lifetime. Nonetheless, the overwhelming show of support for Mestre Pinatti’s manifesto
demonstrates that some common subjectivity exists among practitioners: if nothing else than their fierce dedication to defending their right to define and practice capoeira in their own, varied ways.

While ostensibly about capoeira, Mestre Pinatti’s comments, and the intense show of support they received, were also a critique of the politics of inequality in Brazil. Though maintaining democratic political consolidation since 1985, Brazil is far from a truly representational or participatory democracy. Persistent violation of human rights, increased levels of violence, and corrupt political and judiciary systems, leave Brazilians with deep feelings of unease and distrust in the system and their future. Corruption and a lack of transparency -- some of which was in evidence at the Third National Capoeira Congress -- have left Brazilians particularly distrustful of politicians and the state of politics in Brazil.

The debates that raged over the course of the Congress, as to whether capoeira is “sport” or “culture,” were not about reaching consensus over a definition of capoeira. In fact capoeiristas are most proud of the fact that capoeira defies any one definition. The myriad interpretations -- fight, dance, play, game, sport, art, corporal expression, resistance, liberation, education, culture, history, identity, energy, philosophy, a gathering, a dialogue, a vice, a way of life, to list the definitions I have heard over the years -- are what have given capoeira as a practice its resiliency over two hundred plus years of history and what today attracts a multitude of diverse practitioners. As one mestre summed it up for me, “capoeira is a prism that incorporates all these [definitions] and more.” Along with evoking the multi-faceted nature of capoeira, the metaphor of a
prism also suggests capoeira is a lens through which practitioners view and come to understand the larger political and social context in which they live.

What many of the participants of the Congress were protesting, and what Mestre Pinatti so passionately decried, was any attempt to create hegemony and control of the interpretation and practice of capoeira. In particular they were protesting the definition and regulation of capoeira as a sport by federal and state governmental bureaus. The CONFEF (Federal Council of Physical Education) and the CREFs (Regional Councils of Physical Education) were created in 1998 in order to implement federal law 9696/98 that designated the regulation of Physical Education as a profession. The new law required that any teacher of physical activities, including capoeira, must be certified by the CREF and in possession of an identification number and card. Anyone with a degree in Physical Education would be automatically certified; anyone else had a five year grace period to receive certification through a year-long course with CREF: this course requires attendance two Saturdays a month and carries a monthly tuition which is more than what many Brazilians earn in a month. The imminent expiration of the grace period was the motivation behind the Third National Capoeira Congress. What many delegates feared, and what they felt was not being adequately addressed by the politicians who had organized the Congress, was that this kind, or any kind of federal or state regulation of capoeira, would inevitably discriminate against those capoeiristas with minimal education and financial resources: elite appropriation of the resources for teaching and learning capoeira would exclude those who have long been involved in the transmission of capoeira.
PLAY, GAMES AND BODIES IN SOCIAL THEORY

It is not that relation to seriousness which directs us away from play,
But only seriousness in playing that makes play wholly play
- Hans Gadamer (1975: 92)

In our play we reveal what kind of people we are
- Ovid

Whether practitioners define capoeira as sport, culture, or both, they certainly see it as a form of play and a game. The English “play” has three equivalents in Portuguese: 

jogar (verb) and jogo (noun) refers to the play of games or sports;
tocar (verb) and toque (noun) to the play of musical instruments;
and brincar (verb) and brincadeira (noun) to the play of children. All three apply to capoeira: capoeiristas (also called jogadores or “players”) do not “fight” or “dance” capoeira but play (jogar); each match between two players is a game (jogo); games are commanded by the musical play (toque) of percussive instruments; and when players are particularly relaxed and playful they can be described as a brincando.

Equally important as the ludic aspect of capoeira is its agonistic element: it is exactly its ambiguity -- both play and fight, cooperative and competitive -- that creates a particularly rewarding and exciting tension in the game. According to Norbert Elias, excitement in leisure activities arises from "the creation of tensions. Imaginary danger, mimetic fear and pleasure, sadness and joy are produced and perhaps resolved by the setting of pastimes" (Norbert and Dunning 1986: 42). As was evident in the Third National Capoeira Congress, however, the game of capoeira is played out in a wider field of social and political forces. Therefore I suggest there is yet another type of play in capoeira, which I call “hard play.” This is my translation of an emic term jogo duro,
which also translates as “rough game.” Analyzed in depth in the last chapter, jogo duro describes a more aggressive game that pushes the boundary between fight and play, and which capoeiristas describe as “objetivo,” or “purposeful.” Hard play is just one form of capoeira play, and in fact makes up a relatively small portion of all the time capoeiristas spend training and playing. Nonetheless it captures an essential aspect of capoeira: as in the “deep play” of the Balinese cockfight (Geerz 1977), in the “hard play” of capoeira stakes are high and players deadly serious.

Play and games are often framed as non-serious or non-productive in that they have no purpose beyond the pleasure of playing. Gadamer describes play as “the to-and-fro movement which is not tied to any goal which would bring it to an end…rather it renews itself in constant repetition” (1975: 93). As a form of play, games, like ritual -- also used by practitioners to describe capoeira -- are often described as separated from ordinary life, static, rule-bound and repetitive. Yet not only do rituals change with shifting social and historical conditions, but they are open to improvisation and can be deeply transformative on an individual and social level (e.g. Drewel 1992; Sharp 1993). So too are games and play. While capoeiristas often claim to have been almost magically “called” and transformed by capoeira, they are cognizant that it is they who transform themselves through capoeira and, in the process, transform capoeira. Seduced by their language of reification, I once asked a mestre what capoeira can “do” for people. He quickly replied, “it is not what capoeira does for people but what people do with capoeira.” Expressed in another way, capoeiristas will say a good player is full of axe, a Yoruba term that embodies the notion of action, or “the power to make things happen” (Drewel 1992: xix). Becoming a capoeirista who “makes things happen” demands hard
work and commitment. It takes discipline and dedication -- often a lifetime of training and playing -- to become a true adept. Beyond the physical activity, capoeira is a practice that involves a network of social relationships. These relations are developed and enacted in the arena of capoeira, yet are embedded in the history, political economy and social conditions of Brazil.

Political and ideological debates aside, the category of sport is useful for thinking about capoeira theoretically. In his essay, “Programme for a sociology of sport,” Pierre Bourdieu writes that the “space of sports is not a universe closed in on itself…We are altogether justified in treating sporting practices as a relatively autonomous space, but you shouldn’t forget that this space is the locus of forces which do not apply only to it” (1990: 159). While sports have an internal logic of practice, they do not develop in a vacuum, nor do individuals engage in games as neutral players. Each sport has a history throughout which players have interpreted and practiced it in diverse ways, bringing to the field their different social positions and dispositions. This way of understanding sports resists the tempting and facile linkage of particular sports and leisure activities to certain classes or categories of people (e.g., boxing with the lower classes and golf with the upper classes). Under the rubric of any one sport exist a multitude of practices, creating competition and conflict over interpretation (1990: 163). Capoeira is a beautiful illustration of this: as we will see throughout the course of the dissertation, it has undergone remarkable historical transformations and today exists in multiple and contested forms of practice.

As a social space, sports constitute a “field,” one of the foundational concepts in Bourdieu’s sociology. In turn he uses (with caution) the analogy of a game in the
elaboration of this concept. In his framework, society consists not of a seamless whole, but of various fields or “spheres of play” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 17). These fields -- e.g., politics, matrimony, sports, ritual, religion, academia -- are not predetermined structures but exist because social actors believe and invest in them. Fields are shaped by relationships of power, and “agents struggle, depending on the position they occupy in that space, either to change or to preserve its boundaries and forms”; a field is thus, like a game, a “space of conflict and competition” (1992: 17).

Bourdieu cautions against a complete analogy of game to field that assumes social games have pre-established, external rules. While social games involve activities that “obey certain regularities,” people engage in them with “strategies” that “enable an infinite number of moves to be made, adapted to an infinite number of possible situations which no rule, however complex, can foresee” (1990: 9). The concept of “strategies” is Bourdieu’s own strategy for approaching the question that has long haunted social scientists, that of structure versus agency. Strategies create the “feel for the game,” whereby players are neither completely bound by external structures or “rules” nor completely free agents. Rather than a dichotomous view that places individual against structure, conscious against unconscious, internal against external, Bourdieu’s view is relational. Within Bourdieu’s framework, Ovid’s insight about play being revelatory of the people we are might be reconsidered as revelatory of the social relations -- developed, maintained, challenged and reproduced over time -- that bind us.

One area in which to see Bourdieu’s relational sociology at work is in his use of the term habitus. A concept that stretches back to the Greeks, habitus as elaborated by Bourdieu comes most directly from the French sociologist Marcel Mauss. In his 1934
essay, “Techniques of the body,” Mauss postulated that there is no such thing as a “natural” body: people learn to be in and use their bodies in distinct ways according to the particular cultures, societies, classes, occupations or historical moments in which they are situated; thus a Frenchman is distinguishable from an Englishman by his gait (Mauss 1973: 72). In his “theory of practice,” Bourdieu elaborates on the concept of body techniques in a definition of habitus as systems of embodied dispositions -- gestures, attitudes, ways-of-being -- produced and reproduced over time by particular environments or material conditions. Habitus, like strategies, enables “agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations “ (1977: 72).

The dispositions and practices of habitus are for the most part unconsciously embodied and reproduced. Bourdieu suggests that practices that involve explicitly educating the body, such as dance and sport, provide an arena in which habitus as the process of learning and understanding with one’s body is brought to consciousness:

I think that sport is, with dance, one of the terrains in which is posed with the maximum acuteness the problem of the relations between theory and practice, and also between language and the body. Certain physical-education teachers have tried to analyze what it is, for example, for a trainer or a music teacher to command a body. How can you make someone understand, that is, make someone’s body understand, how he can correct the way he moves? The problems raised by the teaching of a bodily practice seem to me to involve a set of theoretical questions of the greatest importance, in so far as the social sciences endeavour to theorize the behaviour that occurs, in the greatest degree, outside the field of conscious awareness, that is learnt by a silent and practical communication, from body to body, one might say. And sporting pedagogy is perhaps the terrain par excellence in which the problem can be raised that is raised ordinarily on the terrain of politics: the problem of coming to conscious awareness. There is a way of understanding which is altogether particular, and often forgotten in theories of intelligence: that which consists of understanding with one’s body. (1990: 166)
Physical regimens for disciplining and indoctrinating the body can of course be a tool for subjugation. This has been explored most extensively by Michel Foucault in his studies of the historical development of medicine (1994), punishment (1995), and sexuality (1990). In his influential *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Foucault traces the historical movement away from gruesome spectacles of public punishment to non-coercive regimens of the body as forms of social control. Foucault describes the classic age as a time when the body was discovered as an “object and target of power” to be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (1995: 136).

More recently, in the fields of medical and psychological anthropology and feminist theory, work has been done to recuperate the lived experience of the body (cf Csordas 1994; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; Grosz 1994). While continuing to investigate the body as a bearer of cultural values and meanings, and subject to coercive and non-coercive forms of power, new approaches attempt to understand the body as also a mediator for “reflection and action upon the world” (Lock 1993: 133). Drawing on phenomenology, these approaches resist the mind/body split that posit the mind as the subject and the body the object; we do not have bodies, we are bodies. While still always constrained by culture, bodies are also producers of culture in their daily interactions with other bodies and the world around them. Shaped, regulated and disciplined, targets of desire and violence, bodies are not just objects acted upon but also subjects that experience and react, sometimes in unpredictable ways. Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) capture the varied theoretical approaches to the body with their trifold model of the “mindful body”: the “social body” addresses the body as natural symbol for representing nature, culture and society; the “body politic” refers to the surveillance,
discipline and regulation of individual and collective bodies; and the “body self” speaks to the phenomenological experience of the lived body.

Giving attention to the “body self” allows us to see that even when physical disciplines are used in the service of oppressive ideologies or institutions, the experience of incorporating and performing movement “may ultimately liberate the actors…which in turn can affect motivation, commitment and decision making in other spheres of social life.” (Blacking 1985: 65). In this view, the individual body is “the most immediate, the proximate terrain where social truths and social contradictions are played out, as well as a locus of personal and social resistance, creativity and struggle.” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987: 31).

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BODIES AND EDUCATION IN BRAZIL

In Brazil, the body is overwhelming present, both in the unfolding of its history and in its contemporary society. As a Portuguese colony Brazil was founded on the subjugation and exploitation of bodies.¹ The fact that it was first conceived of as a colony of exploitation rather than settlement is reflected in its very name: originally baptized Vera Cruz (True Cross) by Pedro Cabral, the land quickly became known as Brazil derived from its first export, pau brasil or “brazilwood” a native tree from which was extracted a red dye that fetched a high price in Europe.² Before long the shipments of pau brasil were joined with native bodies, displayed as museum pieces and sold as

¹ Tellingly, in Portuguese to explore and to exploit are designated by the single verb explorar (Mello e Souza 1993: 44).
² The tree, called ibirapitanga in Tupi, probably gained the name Brazil from the red glow of its core reminiscent of a brasa or burning coal (Dean 1995: 45).
sexual objects in Europe (Dean 1995: 47). While the bodies of Amerindians were alternately viewed as exotic keepsakes, lascivious monsters and innocents to be saved, the colony was built on the backs of African slaves; their bodies and culture, as we will see throughout the dissertation, became important components in the figuring of national identity.

Today the nation still bears the open wounds of colonialism and slavery. In one of the most unequal distributions in the world, the upper 20% of the population owns 60% of the nation’s wealth. 35 million of the 180 Brazilians, half of the entire work force, earn their living in underground economy (Levine 1999: 22). At least one million of the 10 million inhabitants of the greater metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro live in favelas (Goldstein 2003: 276). Successive democratic regimes since the military dictatorship ended in 1985 have not been able to stabilize the economy and curtail inflation. During my two years in Brazil, the real fluctuated between 2.5 and 4 to the U.S. dollar and the minimum wage in Rio rose only once, from 180 reais to 240 reais a month. During this same time, bus fare nearly doubled from one to two reais.

The greatest marker of inequality in Brazil is race. In a population where 40% self-identify as nonwhite, the illiteracy rate for nonwhites is twice as high as for whites (36.3% to 18%); whites are twice as likely to complete the eight years of obligatory education as nonwhites (29.5 % to 13.6 %); whites have four times the probability of completing higher education of nonwhites; and whites make more than twice the monthly salary of nonwhites (Hasenbalg and Silva 1993: 142-143). In a country still entrenched in patriarchal values, where women earn less then men while working “double shifts” of house chores and childcare, poor black women are at the very bottom rung of the social
ladder. And black youth of the underclass are alternately targeted as the “victims” or “perpetrators” of the violence that breeds on such severe conditions of inequality and discrimination.

The education system in Brazil maintains and reproduces structures of inequality and discrimination. This system, or more accurately systems (Plank 1996: 70), is best described as perverse. A combination of confused bureaucracy and decisions swayed by political interests rather than the educational needs of students has created parallel private and public systems of enormous inequality. The children of the poor are served by city and state funded primary schools that lack adequate facilities, supplies, teachers and instruction. Middle and upper class families send their children to private primary and secondary schools and to expensive college prep courses that ensure they pass the difficult vestibular (college entrance exams). Students who manage to stay in the public school system are miserably unprepared to pass the vestibular. And herein lies the real perversity: those students who manage to make it through the public schools often fail the vestibular and are thus barred from attending the best universities, which are federally funded and free. In a final bitter twist, in what has been spun as the “democratization” of higher education, a plethora of new private “universities” have sprung up in Rio de Janeiro and other urban areas. Of dubious quality to say the least, these institutions are market-driven endeavors. They accept anyone who can pay the fees and as a

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3 This was in fact the adjective used by the chancellor of the Federal University of Bahia during a talk at the University of California at Berkeley in the fall of 2005 in which he addressed the move to implement affirmative action programs in Brazilian public universities.
consequence, ill-prepared students often drop out within the first semester after accruing substantial debt.⁴

Within these social and educational limitations, youth of the underclass often turn to their bodies as the most immediate resource and tool over which they have control. Bodies in Brazil -- and in particular in Rio de Janeiro, world famous for its semi-nude carnival and beaches -- have long captured the social imagination. Physical appearance and care of the body is a near obsession in Rio de Janeiro, where life seems to be a year-round parade of bodies to see and be seen. On a daily basis men and women spend time and money on the meticulous care and display of their bodies: joggers and sunbathers pack the beaches; fitness clubs, beauty parlors and juice/natural food stands proliferate in every class of neighborhood; tight, revealing clothes are customary dress for both sexes; and the city has the highest number per capita of plastic surgeons in the world.⁵ Personal hygiene is of utmost importance: during the summer months people take numerous showers a day and it is not uncommon to be offered a shower when arriving at a friend’s house, even when paying a short visit. Men and women wax, moisturize, tan and perfume their bodies with a wide array of products.

This obsession with the body is not without its anxieties. The social geography of Rio de Janeiro, as we will see in Chapters One and Two, was and is predicated on regulating certain types of bodies -- poor and black -- to certain urban spaces. Bodies in Brazil are visible markers of social status, and some individuals spend much time and

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⁴During my fieldwork, a news story by an investigative reporter exposed how an illiterate man took an entrance exam and was admitted to one of these institutions.

⁵A Rio de Janeiro newspaper article entitled *Cidade da Beleza* (City of Beauty) gave the following statistics: The city of Rio has the 4th largest aerobics market in the world, with 25% of the 7,000 health clubs in the country: 1700 in total with 294 in the Zona Sul, 218 in the Zona Norte, 200 in the Zona Oeste and 31 in the center (O Dia April 18, 2004 p.9)
money to change physical aspects that mark them as on a low rung of class and race hierarchies. These physical changes boost self esteem in public settings and also, it is often hoped, will attract mates of higher social standing (cf. Mello e Souza 1993; Burdick 1998).

Anthropologists have explored the ways in which the body in Brazil is central not only in shaping desires and anxieties but also in negotiating social and bureaucratic relations (e.g. Parker 1991; Linger 1992; Mello e Souza 1993; Rebhun 1999). Getting things done often demands physical presence, hence the never-ending lines in banks and places where bills must be paid in person. I was often frustrated by the insistence of friends and acquaintances that we get together to take care of a bit of business that could have been done quickly by telephone or mail. The sense of “personal space” and privacy valued by North Americans is lost on Brazilians who will lean on you in crowded buses, touch you repeatedly during animated conversations, are troubled by your desire to spend time alone, and freely discuss the appearance and care of their or your body.

This lack of personal privacy may be one of the more benign indicators of the “unbounded body” in Brazil, a model presented by Theresa Caldeira in the final chapter of her book *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo* (2000). In her work Caldeira examines the apparent paradox that though Brazil has been a political democracy since 1985, violations of civil rights -- e.g. police violence, support of vigilante groups and urban spatial segregation -- are on the rise. She argues that this paradox is due in part to the fact that the use of violence is not exceptional to but constitutive of social order and culture patterns in Brazil. She uses the “unbounded

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6 Linger even interprets the key cultural term of *saudades*, which connotes intense longing, nostalgia or melancholy, as missing the *physical* presence of a person, place or time (1992: 7).
body” to theorize the ways in which Brazilian bodies are unprotected and thus subject to violence, violation and manipulation. Caldeira provides diverse examples from the political arena (the use of torture), medical arena (enforced sterilization of poor women) and social arena (the accepted practice of physically disciplining children) to show how the “unbounded body” is a visible sign of the extreme disregard for individual civil rights in Brazil.

I propose that while the “unbounded body” may be subject to violation, it is also capable of resisting frameworks and categories attempting to contain and control it. While keeping the “body politic” always in view, room can be made for the “body self.” Capoeira provides the arena: out of conditions of the severest violation of the body -- slavery -- emerged the embodied practice of capoeira. And though over its long history capoeira and its practitioners have been subjected to containment, exploitation and violation, in their creative transformation, capoeira bodies are nonetheless resilient and resistant.

“CAPOEIRA É LIBERDADE!”: POWER AND RESISTANCE

That resistance is central to practitioners’ interpretation and practice of capoeira was illustrated during another dramatic and potentially explosive moment of the Third National Capoeira Congress. The incident occurred at the end of the first long day devoted to panel discussions of invited politicians and academics and to the presentation of proposals by delegates of each state. Capoeiristas play capoeira; that is what they like to do, and what they claim to do best. After hours of sitting, the delegates were irritable
and grumbling that there should have been more scheduled breaks to play capoeira. At 5:00pm their chance came during the first and only officially scheduled roda, which, perhaps in keeping with the theme of education, was announced as a “roda de mestres eméritos.” The designated organizer of the roda, a young mestre in his 30s with a large group in Minas Gerais, immediately ran into a dilemma: as no prior invitations had been extended, how would it be determined who the “emeriti” mestres were? Capoeiristas inactive all day were not about to surrender their chance to play, and the inevitable occurred: as the instruments were set up at the foot of the stage, anyone considering him or herself a mestre (and then some) rushed forward to claim a spot and a chance to play. The roda quickly became thick with bodies squatting and standing and those of us in the back stacked and stood on plastic chairs six feet high, in order to see.

After a brief period of chaos, capoeiristas jumping into the roda left and right, the mestre in charge cried out for the instruments to stop. He told the protesting crowd, irritated that the music had stopped, that the roda would begin again but this time fechada, or “closed.” He explained that play would be restricted to mestres over 50 years and then progressively open, by decade, to younger capoeiristas. The roda began again with a handful of the oldest mestres -- several well known ones from Bahia in their 60s and 70s -- playing and everyone else watching and waiting their turn. But by the time the roda had opened to capoeiristas in their twenties, it had become a mess again, everyone pushing to get their turn to play.

Suddenly the sound of a berimbau, atabaque and pandeiro were heard coming from the opposite end of the auditorium. Several of the older mestres who had already played in the “official” roda had started another one and younger capoeiristas were
quickly migrating over to it. The officiating mestre again stopped the music and called out “Please, there cannot be a parallel roda! Respect the rules of the Congress!” There was a moment of silence as everyone digested this command and then someone cried out “capoeira é liberdade!” (“Capoeira is liberty!”). The crowd roared its appreciation, chanting the cry over and over. Finally giving up any pretensions to exclusive leadership, the mestre in charge shrugged his shoulders and the two rodas continued.

The cry “capoeira is liberty!” appealed to the crowd of capoeiristas for its message of rebellion and liberation. Of the many definitions of capoeira, one of the more persistent is capoeira as a form of “resistance.” What capoeiristas mean by this, however, varies considerably. In explanation, practitioners usually point first to the history of capoeira and the conditions of slavery out of which it emerged. They describe capoeira as a form of cultural and physical resistance of the African slaves to their oppressors in Brazil. As we will see in Chapter One, the paucity of pre 19th century documentation of capoeira and the rich tradition of oral history allows for various contesting narratives and interpretations of capoeira’s exact origins and earliest manifestations. Depending on the politics of capoeiristas and capoeira groups, this history of resistance takes on different meaning in contemporary practice. Some practitioners who espouse an Afro-centric politics maintain that capoeira existed first in Africa and was transplanted to Brazil; for them, capoeira is an example of the force of African cultural resistance even under the yoke of severe repression, and today represents a resistance against the “false consciousness” of a Brazilian national discourse that claims racial harmony. Other practitioners stand strongly on the side that capoeira is uniquely Brazilian, emerging out of the particular conditions of slavery as a form of physical resistance or a weapon of the
weak -- self-defense disguised as dance -- and that today it represents the force of Brazilian culture “resisting” the encroachment of North American culture.

How capoeiristas interpret capoeira as “resistance” in their contemporary practice is equally varied and often contradictory. A common notion is that capoeira continues to be a form of physical resistance that prepares one for, as Brazilians put it, a luta que é a vida, “the fight that is life.” Many practitioners hold the view that though slavery was abolished in Brazil in 1888, a large majority of Brazilians continue to live in slave-like conditions of extreme poverty, racism and violation of human rights. A popular phrase that I have seen capoeiristas sporting on their group t-shirts is “1888: abolição falsa,” “1888: false abolition.” For these citizens, simply surviving is a day-to-day struggle. Again, how capoeira prepares one for this struggle is open to interpretation, as is evident in the different styles and approaches to the practice: some groups promote well-toned, disciplined and controlled bodies and a worldview and a code of ethics that include hard work, honesty and direct confrontation; others cultivate bodies that appear unkempt and uncontrolled, and a worldview and code of ethics that emphasize deception, mistrust and indirect confrontation.

Finally, many practitioners interpret capoeira as resistance in that it is a kind of “subculture” or “counter-culture.” They claim that practicing capoeira is a lot more than just learning and developing a physical discipline: they describe it as a “way of life” or way of “being-in-the-world” (modo de ser). Through their bodies they develop an alternative way of seeing and moving in the world and forge collective identities and social ties that connect them to others in this “subculture.” Yet again, what this subculture means and does for an individual varies substantially. For some it is an
avenue for dropping out of the “system”: being a capoeirista allows one to resist working a regular job or being constrained by social conventions and rules of conduct. For others, it is an avenue for entering the system: the growing popularity of capoeira and the push to have it recognized and regulated as a profession is seen as a way for those shut out from the formal economic and educational system to educate themselves and gain legitimate employment.

The multiple and contradictory ways in which capoeiristas conceptualize resistance underscore the caution and care with which the concept must be approached. As an analytic category, resistance has become increasingly problematic in the field of anthropology (cf Ortner 1995; Abu-Lughod 1990). Once a relatively unambiguous construct forming the second half of a binary with domination, resistance, as a conceptual category, has become increasingly complex and problematized (Ortner 1995). With the recognition of more diffuse, un-institutionalized and non-coercive forms of power (e.g. Foucault), focus has shifted to more subtle and everyday forms of resistance (e.g. Scott 1985). According to Ortner, however, resistance studies continue to display an “ethnographic refusal,” glossing over the internal politics, culture and individual subjectivity of those involved in acts of resistance. Abu-Lughod (1990) warns that in order to avoid a “romancing” of resistance we must approach it as a multivalent rather than a monolithic category and treat it as a diagnostic of power.

The incident of the “rebel roda” during the Third National Capoeira Congress illustrates one way in which power is at work in capoeira. The delegates started up the second roda to protest the assumptions by the organizers of the Congress that it was their place to decide which of the mestres were prestigious enough to play in the “official”
roda. Even the title of “master” in capoeira is a troubled and contested category. As there is and has never been a unified regulatory board (a fact that some at the Congress hoped to change), there are no standardized criteria for conferring the title of “mestre.” Each group has its own hierarchical organization and method for designating status. In the past, as was explained to me by one older mestre in Rio, the title was conferred by o povo (the people): that is to say, an individual who was known on the streets of his neighborhood as a capoeirista and a tough fighter, and who had disciples, would eventually be referred to as a mestre de capoeira. That mestre, in turn, would eventually bestow the title of master on some of his own students after a period of apprenticeship, and they in turn would form their own groups, and so on and so on. In this way capoeira was transmitted from generation to generation within a particular lineage of style. Twenty years ago, the mestre told me, there must have been no more than fifty mestres in Rio, all of whom he knew; today, he concluded irritably, there must be five hundred fulanos (“so-and-sos”) using that title.

The explosion in the popularity of capoeira in Brazil and abroad has created a greater market for classes, a demand for teachers and an increase in mestres. Capoeiristas disparagingly use the title “mestre de Varig” to refer to an “unqualified” individual who gives himself the title of mestre “while in the airplane” so as to attract students and find work abroad. The fad for large international groups -- as a sign of prestige and power -- has encouraged founders of groups to bestow the title mestre on students with few years of experience, or to use it as an enticement for capoeiristas from other groups to join their groups. These concerns, coupled with the fear that students of physical education who have taken a six-month university course in capoeira will, because of their degrees, get
hired over capoeiristas and mestres with a lifetime of experience and no formal education, have resulted in what many refer to as the menosprezar or “undervaluing,” “cheapening” and “disparaging” of the title, mestre.

The perceived “mestre crisis” has led to internal debates among capoeiristas over the meaning of the term, and increased urges to pay homage to the velha guarda or “old guard” of mestres. In recent years much focus has been placed on the need to preserve the memories and teachings of the velha guarda before they die out (cf Viera 1998). While this is certainly an important endeavor, I believe it is equally important to pay attention to younger voices, the youth of capoeira.

Youth and Capoeira

Along with inter-group conflicts, the contested category of mestre also highlights generational tensions among capoeiristas, as well as the complex web of educational politics in which Brazilian youth are caught. The concept of youth is itself a constructed and flexible category (cf. Sharp 2002; Carrano 2002) and is best understood as a “social achievement” (Maira and Soep 2005: xviii) rather than a natural or given psychological or biological stage of development. Nowhere is this better highlighted than in capoeira, which, similar to sport and dance (cf Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995), is an activity that extends the normally accepted age limits of youth. In this dissertation, youth is thus loosely defined as preteens to early 30s. This extended “youthhood” is evident in the number of capoeiristas who, in order to maintain flexible bodies and schedules, forgo

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7 Many of the debates appear in capoeira journals and magazines. For example, the article “O que é preciso para ser mestre?” (“What does it take to be a mestre?”) appeared in the journal O Berimbau 1997 no. 20. June/July 1997. Three of the largest capoeira magazines, Praticando Capoeira, Revista Capoeira and Ginga Capoeira regularly run feature stories on the grã- mestres (“great masters”)
having families and steady income or wait to do so until their late 30s or 40s. This sets them part from many of their Brazilian peers, especially in the lower classes, who start families and enter the work force in their teens and are thus categorically considered adults.

Because of the inflation in the title mestre, some capoeiristas as young as 20 have already gained this title. However, they are generally distinguished from the “older” generation of mestres who tend to be in their 40s and 50s but have not yet entered the ranks of the velha guarda. Many mestres in this older category in Rio de Janeiro, such as the one quoted above, believe that once bestowed, the title of mestre ensures a lifetime of prestige and respect. His disdain for the explosion of mestres in Rio de Janeiro is in part a protest against the fact that many of the younger generation of mestres either have no idea who he is, or feel no need to offer him respect. On the other hand, many of the younger generations of capoeiristas feel that a mestre must earn and maintain his title. “Playing well and having disciples” is no longer accepted as the only criterion for achieving (and maintaining) the title of mestre. Many younger capoeiristas in Rio expressed scorn for older mestres who, though famed for being brave capoeiristas when younger, are today out of shape and spend more time drinking beer than playing capoeira. Many expressed to me the opinion that besides playing well, a mestre should be, among other things, a ”positive role model,” a father figure, a dedicated and innovative educator, and an activist for social causes.

The extended youthhood of capoeira and the clash of opinions among different generations of practitioners may be in part a byproduct of shifting economic trends. In a recent article Saskia Sassen argues that the globalization of economy has rendered the
adult world of employment so insecure and unrewarding that youth turn to other arenas for seeking meaning, forming identities and establishing social ties (2007: 106). Even when they do hold jobs, many young adults are entering, and remaining longer in, gangs, music movements such as hip hop, or other youth social spheres, including capoeira. As membership grows and includes a larger range of ages, these groups are taking on new dimensions: even some street gangs, traditionally perceived as purely marginal and criminal entities, are reconstituting themselves as political and social movements (Brotherton 2007; Sassen 2007). In this dissertation I argue that such a process is underway in capoeira.

Furthermore, with the exponential growth in popularity of capoeira throughout Brazil and the world the practice has become a viable option for making a living. Until ten or twenty years ago, it was virtually impossible to make a living solely from teaching capoeira. Most of the older mestres whom I know in Rio hold fulltime jobs ranging from security guard, manual laborer and street vendor, to dentist, banker and city hall custodian. Many of them explained to me that teaching capoeira in the evenings was a “labor of love” with little or no remuneration. Today, young capoeiristas continue to teach for free in the poor neighborhoods in which many of them grew up, while also making a living teaching in schools and health clubs. And as capoeira’s popularity grows around the world, they are also traveling and moving abroad to teach. This “professionalization” of capoeira, with youth at its center, is transforming the practice. If youth are understood not simply as participants in adult culture, but producers and transformers of culture (e.g. Sharp 2002; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998; Stephens 1995; Maira and Soep 2005; Ross and Rose 1994), then capoeira is an arena in which to
see how individuals of different generations interact, clash and cooperate in the day-to-day construction of social practices.

**Women in Capoeira**

Gender is another area in which to see power, resistance and transformation at work in capoeira. Previous studies have alluded to a growing number of female practitioners (e.g. Lewis 1992; D’Aquino 1983; Assunção 2005), but none have adequately examined the gender and sexual politics of capoeira. Again, in order to illustrate, I begin with a brief anecdote that predates my interest in capoeira as an academic.

At an international capoeira conference in San Francisco in 1995 a *roda de mulher* (“woman’s roda”) was held as a way to acknowledge and “empower” the growing number of female capoeiristas. While participation was restricted to women, all were invited to watch. Most of the male attendees, however, took the opportunity to step outside for a food break or to converse amongst themselves. Whereas all the other rodas held over the weekend often had fifty or more participants and even more spectators, this one had barely a dozen. The suggestion was made that we sing capoeira songs that mention women and after some thought the roda began with a round of “Eu sou homem, *nao sou mulher!*” (“I am a man, not a woman!”). What was so poignantly ironic about this choice of song was that not only did it reveal the lack of female heroes or historical figures to sing about, but it uses women as a trope to define what capoeira is not. *Eu sou...*
homem, não sou mulher, is often sung to taunt players thought to be displaying cowardice or weakness. 8

The above anecdote is a perfect illustration of how gender is performed (Butler 1990) and that “being/becoming a man and being/becoming a woman are…mutually constitutive processes” (Cowan 1990: 8). For most of its history capoeira has been not only an exclusively male domain but also an arena for performing masculinity, as the song “I am a man, not a woman,” clearly indicates. Furthermore, in a reversal of the usual dynamic of male as spectator, female as object (though in no way displacing man’s position as subject), in capoeira women watch and admire, as men perform. 9

Today, more and more women are stepping into the subject position in the roda. In fact, when one walks into a capoeira class in a health club or dance studio in Brazil or the United States, one might surmise that the activity is predominantly female. However, when economic class and ethnicity are taken into account, and as one moves up the hierarchical organization of capoeira groups, the picture changes drastically. Brazilian women face sexist and macho attitudes both within capoeira and in other areas of their lives, making it difficult for them to maintain involvement and move into leadership roles. Families, friends and male capoeiristas may encourage their practice as a hobby, a social outlet or a way to stay in shape. But once their skills improve and they become a challenge to male students, or once they show an interest in making a life for themselves with capoeira -- perhaps forgoing other “female” occupations such as marriage and children -- their involvement becomes problematic. Nonetheless, as we will see, women

8 Song and music are discussed in Chapter Three.
9 Feminists point out that even when the male body is an object of the female gaze, it is displayed in action rather than passivity: “men act, even while we are invited to watch; women continue to simply appear” (Lockford: 2004: 27).
are creating space for themselves, albeit a space fraught with its own internal politics and contradictions. Their increased participation is transforming the practice of capoeira and affecting change in the ways in which young men and women interact with each other in this arena.

FIELDSITE AND METHODOLOGY

If the facts narrated in this book did not occur according to how Cobrinha Verde tells them, too bad for the facts (Santos 1990)\(^\text{10}\)

As I fiercely scribbled in my field notebook while observing a capoeira class one evening, the mestre turned to me chuckling and said, “You have to write it all down, I keep it up here” and tapped his head. I was repeatedly impressed in Brazil with peoples’ ability to remember a face or name and to retain information. Capoeiristas can recall in great detail -- and will spend hours recounting and analyzing -- particular games in a roda of many hours’ duration. Embodied mimesis, memory and talk are core elements in the learning and transmission of capoeira. Today, new media -- books, magazines, video cameras, digital recording apparatus, and the Internet -- are increasingly preserving and disseminating knowledge. When I returned to Rio de Janeiro in 2001, one of the mestres with whom I had worked closely in 1997 showed me the manuscript of his book, *Conhecimentos e Metodo de Ensino de Mestre Touro* (Knowledge and Teaching Method of Mestre Touro). Registering my surprise (Mestre Touro is barely literate) he explained that his son, his girlfriend, and the Internet were helping. He grumbled that since

\(^{10}\) “Se os fatos narradas neste livro não aconteceram conforme Cobrinha Verde conta, azar dos fato”. This is the epigraph to a biography of Cobrinha Verde (Little Green Snake), a famous Bahian capoeira mestre who was born in the early 20\(^\text{th}\) century and lived until 1983. The book, a series of stories and songs, was narrated to and recorded by Marcelinho Dos Santos, a student of a student of Cobrinha Verde.
everyone was writing a capoeira book nowadays, he thought he had better set the record straight as to his own take on his life’s devotion.

Since the early 20th century mestres and students of capoeira have been committing their philosophies, pedagogies, anecdotes, poetry and biographies to paper (see ODC 1907; Burlemaqui 1928; Pastinha 1964; Almeida 1986; Capoeira 1992, 1997, 1999, Mestre Russo 2005). But it is only in the past several years, as capoeira’s popularity has exploded around the world, that information previously difficult to access -- history, images, song lyrics, pedagogy -- has become readily available in books, videos, magazines and websites.11 In Brazil, dissertations and books on capoeira by practitioners and non-practitioners in the fields of anthropology, history, sociology, psychology and education have multiplied exponentially in the last decade (e.g. Reis 2000; Travassos 2000; Soares 1994, 2001; Pires 2002; Vieira 1998; Cordeiro 1998; Falcão 1996; Freitas 2003; Campos 2001).12

The explosion of information about capoeira illuminates the wide field on which the practice is played today. It also increases anxieties and conflicts over questions of interpretation, “authenticity” and quality. Many older mestres and practitioners worry that the younger generation of capoeiristas are “learning too fast.” With copious and readily available information from which to learn the physical skills and music, they worry that skills no longer match knowledge. A book entitled Capoeira Sem Mestre (“Capoeira Without a Mestre”) raised hackles and fears.13 I was repeatedly told that

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11 A Yahoo search brings up 3,300,000 hits for capoeira, up from 4,000 in 1998.
12 During my time in the field, I went to 8 book signing parties; the defense of one MA thesis (and heard of one other); and met two practitioners working on their MA theses on the history and the internationalization of capoeira.
13 The book was published in the 1960s by a navy lieutenant Lamartine Pereira da Costa from Rio who went to Bahia to learn from old mestres as part of a project to include capoeira in the military (see Chapter One). Assunção suggests the publication of this book was the author’s retaliation against the mestres who
while skills can be learned from a book or video, capoeira cannot. To really know and incorporate capoeira entails a long-term apprenticeship and *convivência*, or living with others.

Anthropologists certainly know the value of long-term *convivência*. Furthermore, in the last several decades, as anthropologists and sociologists have become increasingly interested in exploring movement disciplines, apprenticeships have become an important methodological tool in long-term fieldwork. Roles have shifted from “participant observer” to “observing participant” in a wide array of studies of dance, sports and martial arts. While some researchers take up training for the explicit purpose of the research (e.g. Zarrilli 1998) and others fall into it in route to gaining entrée into a field site (e.g. Wacquant 2004) the majority have been previously familiar with the particular or other similar movement forms (e.g. Downey 2005; Alter 1992; Novack 1990; Daniel 1995; Mendoza 2000; Taylor 1998; Cowan 1990).

My involvement with capoeira predates my dissertation fieldwork by twelve years. During all this time, however, my practice never reached the intensity that it did during my fieldwork. Biweekly classes transformed into daily training and playing, and my fellow students and teachers become my closest friends and companions. The intensive training changed my physical body and my way of being in that body. These changes extended into my everyday life: as my body became leaner, stronger, more flexible and alert, my eating habits, manner of dress and comportment changed. I carried myself in the street and greeted people differently. I learned to communicate in new ways, giving and receiving messages indirectly through body language, jokes and teasing.

were reluctant to share their knowledge with someone who was not interested in a long-term apprenticeship and whose sincerity and intentions they doubted (Assunçao 2005: 172).
My apprenticeship not only deepened my understanding of capoeira, but also gave me crucial insights into Brazilian social values and behavior that prioritize the body. Capoeiristas claim that capoeira teaches one how to survive and navigate life in Brazil. Training capoeira thus, in a sense, sped up and made visible my socialization in Brazil by making explicit processes that otherwise may have stayed obscured.

One of the earliest lessons I learned via my body was the value placed on loyalty. As explained in the Preface, my induction into capoeira was with a group in California with affiliates in Rio de Janeiro’s Zona Norte. During my first trips to Brazil in 1995 and 1996 and my three months of exploratory summer fieldwork in 1997, I lived, trained and worked with these groups in the Zona Norte. By the time I returned to Rio to start my dissertation fieldwork I had become a member of the group Abadá-Capoeira in New York City. One of the largest capoeira associations today with affiliates all over the world, the head and heart of Abadá is in the Zona Sul of Rio where the founder and leader, Mestre Camisa, runs his school. During my short stint of fieldwork in 1997 I had not fully committed to Abadá nor given up my affiliation with my previous group. While my friends in the Zona Norte were happy to have me back in their lives, they were not happy with my ambiguous position in capoeira. Rather than telling me this outright, they communicated it through their treatment of me in trainings and rodas. They criticized my movement as being “wrong,” “not capoeira” or “ineffective” and played roughly with me in a way that highlighted my many flaws.

Their point was taken: capoeiristas are discouraged from training in multiple schools. The loyalty that mestres expect from their students -- and which students tend to give -- makes membership in two groups awkward, to say the least. It is not just
emotional loyalty to one’s mestre and group that is expected, but physical loyalty to style as well. While seasoned capoeiristas can and do play well with members of different groups, they can usually only do this once their own style of play is deeply ingrained. In training two different styles, novices will often experience difficulty defining and having confidence in their movement. I had experienced just such a corporal confusion when I attempted to train with Abadá in New York while trying to maintain my previous style. In 1997 my friends could read this confusion on my body, which fueled their criticisms. Their sense of betrayal and criticism of my training capoeira with a different group also revealed social divisions among the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro. To understand these divisions necessitates an introduction to the social geography of the city.

Fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro

Unlike most tourists and many anthropologists in Brazil, I first experienced Rio de Janeiro by moving from the margins to the center.\textsuperscript{14} Long before being seduced by the historic center, the glamorous beaches of Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon, and by the stunning vistas from Corcovado and Pão de Açúcar mountains that crown Guanabara Bay and make Rio de Janeiro one the most beautiful cities in the world, I was well acquainted with the flat, hot, anonymous sprawling \textit{Zona Norte} (North Zone). I first traveled to Brazil in 1995 and 1996, not as an anthropologist but as a capoeirista. In Rio I lived and trained with various capoeiristas in the \textit{Zona Norte} \textit{subúrbios}, or suburbs, which unlike wealthy bedroom communities in the United States are a mix of middle and working classes houses, government subsidized apartment buildings and favelas.

\textsuperscript{14} See for instance Goldstein’s (2003) and Guillermoprieto’s (1990) accounts of getting to know Rio.
I found life in the subúrbios rather intense. My capoeirista hosts and their families were overwhelmingly hospitable, eager to accommodate one more into their cramped living spaces. Yet at times I was exasperated by the complete lack of privacy and the incessant teasing and questioning from neighbors and friends who came to meet the gringa. My days, filled with capoeira, were exhausting: long, brutal trainings in the early evenings, and on the weekends terrifying, high speed bus rides through indistinguishable subúrbios to capoeira events that inevitably began and ended late. There was little relief at night. The sticky, suffocating heat stayed trapped between the clusters of concrete apartment buildings and there was a constant barrage of noise: from within homes televisions and stereos simultaneously blaring at top volume, and in the streets, music from outside bars and the frightening clatter of firecrackers that my friends taught me to distinguish from the dry pop of gunfire.

What for me were hardships were to my friends the routine annoyances or small pleasures of everyday life. Slowly I acclimated and even began to appreciate some of the things they did -- watching telenovelas (soap operas) and analyzing the characters over small glasses of hot sweet coffee; learning to samba to that year’s carnival songs at high volume; sitting in the street late into the night still sweating from the day’s heat, sipping beer and watching the balões (hot air balloons) light up the night sky; and flying kites with the neighborhood kids on a Sunday afternoon when there was nothing else to do. I began to understand the teasing and sometimes off-putting humor as affectionate and a

Following Meade’s lead (1999; 70 fn) I retain the Portuguese word subúrbios to distinguish it from North American suburbs.

Balões are paper balloons sent up into the sky with hot air generated from small lanterns. Balões are especially popular during the saints’ festivals, or festas juninas celebrated in June, July and August. Because of their propensity to explode or fall, burning, onto rooftops, they are illegal in Rio, though still popular in the Zona Norte.
sign that I had been accepted and my presence grown used to; no-one seemed to mind that a week’s visit stretched into months with a family member displaced to the sofa so I could have a bed.

Occasionally, in need of solitude and relief, I ventured alone to the Centro (Center) and Zona Sul (South Zone) of Rio to visit a museum or catch a breath of ocean air. Leaving the congested polluted Avenida Brasil -- the monstrous multilane highway that leads in and out of Rio to the north -- the bus would travel at high velocity through the downtown, port district and inner bay. Then, plunging through one of several tunnels that cut across the spectacular mountains, we would arrive in the sequestered beach neighborhoods that rim the Atlantic Ocean. With the journey, the urban environment changed drastically: modern high rise hotels and stately 19th century apartment buildings stood in place of clusters of identical cement housing complexes and low bungalows; green parks with fountains, playgrounds and kiosks serving cappuccino punctuated the landscape rather than dusty praças (squares) with forlorn seesaws, rusty calisthenic equipment and slew of hotdog stands; elegant boutiques and enormous shopping malls replaced sprawling outdoor markets selling cheap clothing, electronics and pirate CDs; and the famous black and white mosaic sidewalks of Copacabana, dotted with vendors selling jewelry and beach wear, lined the streets rather than broken pavement and piles of burning rubbish.

The people also looked different. While there was still a remarkable variation of skin tone, hair and facial features -- the famous Brazilian mix of African, Europeans and indigenous blood -- class was more distinguishable than in the subúrbios: people of darker skin were selling cold drinks on the beach, guarding the gates of apartment
buildings, making deliveries, watching parked cars, entertaining drivers stuck in traffic or begging. Those people with lighter skin were sitting in the outdoor restaurants, entering or exiting the many boutiques, beauty salons and health clubs, jogging or sunbathing on the beach. The bodies I was used to in the Zona Norte, thin and wiry from hard labor and often scarred with signs of poor medical care, gave way to well-groomed, well-toned and tanned ones. Even the dogs were different: instead of fierce mutts chained in front of houses barking menacingly at anyone who approached, here one encountered pampered poodles and lapdogs leaving one of the many grooming salons or, as in one case, riding on its owner’s chest in a baby carrier.

My friends in the subúrbios rarely accompanied me on these trips, grumbling about the distance and danger. They warned me to be watchful of my belongings while on the beach and to stay attentive to pickpockets. Their anxiety rubbed off on me so that though I was intrigued by the historic center and port district and restored by the quiet, cool botanical gardens and breathtaking views, I was always somewhat relieved to get home to the subúrbios where the man selling snacks at the bus stop would greet me with a smile and ask how “going down to the city” had been. The verb *descer* (descend) that people in the subúrbios used to describe going downtown or to the beach areas at first confused me; surely the Zona Norte was as much a part of the city as the Centro and Zona Sul? But what I caught glimpses of during my first trips to these other areas of the city and would later come to understand more fully, was that this expression referred less to the geographic boundaries of the city than to social and economic ones.

Of the 15.5 million inhabitants of the small southeastern coastal state of Rio de Janeiro, 10.5 million live in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro. The municipality of
Rio de Janeiro itself, comprising the Zona Sul, Centro, Zona Norte and Zona Oeste (West Zone) is home to 5.5 million cariocas, as the inhabitants of the city call themselves. The cidade maravilhosa, (marvelous city), an epithet coined in the early 20th century as Rio burgeoned into a modern metropolis, has in more recent years been called a cidade partida or the “divided city” (Ventura 1994). In a condensed space the contradictions of Brazil, and in particular the intensely unequal distribution of wealth, are graphically displayed. As in the nation as a whole, the majority of wealth and modern developments in Rio de Janeiro resides in the south while the north remains poor and underdeveloped. These boundaries are not the only ones. “Going down” is an expression used not only by residents of the periphery, but, more appropriately, by a good portion of cariocas who live at the very heart of the city in shantytowns high up on the hills. As we will see in Chapter Two, beginning in the early 20th century the city began to expand and modernize, pushing away from the waterfront and carrying the poor with it. However, there were those who resisted their forced displacement and built shacks on the numerous hills dispersed around the city. The temporary cliff side dwellings turned into permanent shantytowns, or favelas as they became known.

Today, Rio’s favelas are as much a symbol of the city as its glamorous beaches. Simultaneously romanticized as the birthplace of samba and carnival -- Rio’s biggest tourist attractions -- and deplored as an unsightly blemish on the “marvelous city,” the favelas are raked by extreme poverty, drug wars and violence. As these social problems refuse to remain in the hills and increasingly affect all residents and visitors to the city (assaults, robberies, kidnappings, car and bus high-jacking, and the temporary closing of schools and businesses by drug gangs daily made the news during my fieldwork, Rio de
Janeiro is portrayed as a notoriously dangerous city. This violence, and visible signs of inequity and racism out of which it is born, create a tenor of uneasiness throughout the city perhaps best captured, unwittingly, by Lévi-Strauss in his rather sinister description of the much praised hills of Guanabara Bay: remembering his first sight of them in 1935, he wrote in *Tristes Tropiques* that they were like “stumps sticking up here and there in a toothless mouth” and “fingers bent in a tight, ill-fitting glove” (1981: 79, 87).

During my fieldwork it became apparent to me that the city was not just a backdrop to the action, but a key player in the lives of carioca capoeiristas, and thus an essential character in this study. Cariocas love to talk about their home, expressing great pride in and love of their city -- which many believe to be the heart of Brazil -- as well as anxiety and frustration over its current conditions. While cariocas appear united in their love, the deep divisions suggest many cities in one, or parallel universes. For instance, Rocinha, the largest favela in Brazil and Latin America, which straddles the mountains between two extremely wealthy areas in the Zona Sul with half a million inhabitants, several banks and public schools, has been called a “city within a city.”

However, to conceptualize the city as “divided,” or many cities in one, glosses over the fact that the distinct areas are mutually constitutive and their inhabitants linked in many ways. The accusations of my friends in the Zona Norte that capoeira from the Zona Sul was “bourgeois,” “whitened” “commercialized,” “mechanical,” “modern,” and “violent” revealed their anxieties about social and economic divisions in the city. Yet I discovered that the students and teachers of a group like Abadá-Capoeira, which offers classes in the health clubs in the Zona Sul, often were from similar conditions to those of my friends in the Zona Norte. In fact I was amazed by the mix of students -- from
various social classes and city neighborhoods -- who trained regularly with Mestre Camisa (see Chapter Three). It was this mix of students, as well as my physical frustration at trying to stay affiliated with two groups simultaneously, that solidified my decision to train exclusively with Abadá and base most of my dissertation fieldwork on that group. After making this decision I feared that the capoeiristas I knew in the Zona Norte would shun me. To the contrary, once I made explicit my commitment, and as I inched up the Abadá hierarchy during my time in Rio, transitioning from student to graduada (graduated student), they accepted it albeit grudgingly. My relentless insistence on showing up in the Zona Norte on their doorsteps and at their events (but not attempting to train with them) and my willingness to share my experience and my research strengthened our friendship. My ability to move between capoeira groups in the Zona Norte and Zona Sul provided much invaluable comparative data that gives this study its breadth and depth.

During my fieldwork from November 2001 to May 2004 I lived in the neighborhood of Catete located between the grittier central neighborhood of Lapa and the more elegant neighborhoods of Flamengo and Botafogo (see Appendix A for maps). I was attracted to the neighborhood for its central location and historic buildings and because it was socio-economically and ethnically mixed. From Catete I could catch buses and the subway direct to the Zona Sul and to the Zona Norte. One of my favorite retreats was the quiet garden, café, museum and bookstore that make up the Palácio da Catete, once the royal and then the presidential residency. I lived at the top of a cobblestoned street known in the 19th century as the “rua da princesa,” as Princess Isabella used to ride her horse from the palace to the chácaras, or small farm, at the top.
Today the chácara has been replaced by a small (several hundred family) favela. I lived at the entrance to the favela in a subdivided 19th century mansion built from the stones harvested from the nearby quarry. The establishment of a BOPE (special police force unit) on the hill a few years before had eradicated drug trafficking, and today the dead-end street and favela is a fairly safe neighborhood within a neighborhood consisting of families, many of whom have been living there for generations. Because the neighborhood was small, people soon came to know me and I always felt safe in the streets, even coming home late at night. I became so comfortable in fact that one morning I awoke to find that I had left my front door, which opened right onto the street, not only unlocked but open.

I soon discovered that Catete and the adjacent neighborhood of Glória were historically, and continued to be, home to a large number of capoeiristas. One 30 year old Afro-Brazilian capoeirista, now living and teaching in Portugal, describes his initiation into capoeira in that neighborhood:

I was born and raised in Glória, specifically on Santo Amaro St. And as far as I understand, on Santo Amaro there were always capoeiristas. When I was a child, there was a capoeira roda in the market in Glória. So even before I was in school, I heard about capoeira. I heard stories about capoeiristas. And it fascinated me. Just yesterday I was talking to a childhood friend about how when we were kids these capoeiristas were our heroes, our idols….and there was something about capoeira that I always liked, something that always got inside me and I remember I would go to the market with my father and I would sit there watching the roda but I was young and there was nowhere for me to train. But it stayed within me -- capoeira, capoeira, capoeira….I think this was my impulse to train capoeira. And then later, I saw some studies by anthropologists such as Eugênio and I discovered that the neighborhood with the largest concentration of capoeiristas was Glória.17 In the last century the maltas of capoeiristas, the gangs of capoeiristas, most

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17 He is referring to Carlos Eugênio Libano Soares, the historian whose seminal two-volume history of 19th century capoeira in Rio de Janeiro I draw on extensively in the next chapter. Eugênio grew up and continued to live on Santo Amaro St while I was doing my fieldwork. While not a practitioner, he is well known among many groups in Rio.
feared, the best capoeiristas lived exactly here in Glória on Santo Amaro St! So I think it is an ancestral thing that they left here and the new generations ended up with this fascination for capoeira. I think this is the explanation for all the capoeiristas, not just from Abadá but also other groups, in Glória.

Within the half mile radius of my neighborhood there was an extraordinarily high representation of capoeira: classes were offered at three schools, one dance studio and two health clubs; there was a Capoeira Angola center which housed four different groups; and free classes were held in community centers on the two favelas that stand on the hills behind the neighborhoods. Once a month rodas were held in the street by three different groups.

While perhaps slightly over-represented, capoeira in these neighborhoods is a good indication of how prominent the practice is in Rio de Janeiro. Capoeira can be found in just about every neighborhood in the Zona Norte and the Zona Sul. Statistics in terms of number of groups and practitioners were difficult to obtain. Though there are capoeira leagues and federations in Rio, not all groups join, and even those organizations in place do not keep accurate records. The president of the largest of several federations told me that there were approximately 100 groups affiliated and that at least one new group joined each month. Thus it is probably safe to say there are several hundred distinct groups in the city. While some of these groups are quite small -- one mestre and half a dozen students -- others have several dozen instructors teaching in various locations and hundreds of students. Thus practitioners in the city easily number in the many thousands.
Methods

In studying an expressive practice that privileges the body, it would be tempting to, in a sense, let the body speak for itself. In fact, capoeiristas often describe capoeira as a “dialogue” or a “conversation” (see Chapter Three), and writing this ethnography has been in part an exercise in translation: I grappled with transcribing that which is corporally learned, transmitted and expressed in three dimensional space, into written words on the one dimensional plane of a page. Not an easy task. My own apprenticeship was essential in this process: not only did I learn to move, think and see the world like a capoeirista, but training also lent me an intimacy with the movement vital to the process of translation. My apprenticeship was also grueling: On the evenings (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) that I was not training with Mestre Camisa I helped with a children’s capoeira class in a favela near my house, trained with other Abadá instructors or visited other groups around the city. My weekends were spent participating in events -- graduation ceremonies, rodas, presentations and shows -- sponsored by Abadá and other groups. Training capoeira in the evenings (often not getting home until 11pm), and attending events on the weekend (sometimes several in one day) that took me all over the city, made the immediate write-up of field notes difficult. I set aside my mornings for the task. Field notes were indexed chronologically and labeled with subject headings.

Along with my apprenticeship, an essential aid in my translation project was my use of black and white photography and digital video recording. I became known as the group photographer, often risking bodily and equipment injury by standing inside the roda filming and photographing games. In order to capture a still photograph of one movement out of a flow, I had to learn to anticipate so as to click the shutter a split
second before the move was executed. Through this process I became familiar with the particular styles and habits of the capoeiristas with whom I regularly trained, played and photographed, which in turn deepened my understanding of the game both as an observer and player. Photographs were also a wonderful way to thank participants for their help. I joined a local photography association and had access to a darkroom (a solitary retreat from the heat and chaos of the city) in which I made multiple, enlarged prints. Many were the times that I went over to a capoeirista’s house to find a photograph I had taken prominently displayed. Copies of a few of my photographs have been included in Appendix C as way to illustrate the movements described in Chapter Three.

Video recording was also a way to thank participants in my study who would solicit my services for events. I would make a VHS copy of the tape that would become part of the capoeirista’s video archive, or in more cases than not, taped over at a future event. Videos have substantially contributed to how capoeiristas “do capoeira” in the broader sense. “Doing capoeira” does not just entail playing, but also talking about capoeira. Capoeiristas will spend hours rehashing rodas and games, dipping and swaying their bodies and using their hands to retell the movement. Videos have contributed to this ongoing conversation, capoeiristas eagerly watching and dissecting events and games over and over. While video freezes events in time and in a way provides visual “evidence,” interpretation is still hotly debated.

Because I believe that capoeiristas construct their practice through talk as well as through action, I was concerned with capturing not only the corporal but also the verbal language of capoeira. The way capoeiristas talk about capoeira helps shape the experience of their practice: they act, but they also express intentionality and reflect on
the resulting actions, inactions and reactions. Verbal expressions take the form of song lyrics, collective oral histories, personal biographies, lessons that accompany physical training, gossip and discussions following events. Along with these speech acts I recorded the rich vocabulary capoeiristas use to talk about different elements of their practice. Much of this vocabulary has meaning in the other contexts, and discussing these words with capoeiristas lent insight not only to capoeira but also to other aspects of social life in Brazil.

In addition to many hours of informal conversation, I conducted forty taped interviews with Abadá students and instructors and half a dozen interviews with mestres of other groups in Rio. I followed a loose interview guide that focused on the interviewee’s capoeira history, family and childhood, employment history, and views about particular aspects of capoeira such as music, teaching, the title of mestre, violence, gender and “modern” innovations. Interviews, which lasted between one and four hours, were audio or video taped and I transcribed these tapes (some in entirety, others partially) while still in the field. The process of transcription did wonders for my written Portuguese and encouraged me to refine my interview guide as I went along. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in the dissertation are mine. Portuguese words are italicized the first time they appear and an immediate gloss provided. Words that appear frequently thereafter are not italicized and are included in the Glossary.

Along with field notes, interview transcriptions, questionnaires, photographs and videos, I brought back from the field a representative collection of the material culture of

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18 Margaret Drewel makes a similar point in her ethnography of Yoruba ritual: “Part of what people do in the midst of performing ritual is to talk about what is happening and gossip about what particular individuals are thought to have done. The representation takes on its own reality” (1992: 25).
capoeira: group newsletters, flyers for events, cds and dvds, t-shirts, local and national capoeira magazines, and certificates for many of the events and workshops I participated in. I collected newspaper articles that mentioned capoeira, and videotapes of capoeira as it appeared in *telenovelas* and other popular television shows. Thanks to the work of capoeira historians (e.g. Assunção 2005; Soares 1994, 2001; Dias 2001), particularly Carlos Eugênio Libano Soares and Fred Abreu who generously shared their materials with me, my archival work was limited to searches for more recent articles for which I used the microfilm archives at the Biblioteca Nacional and the digital archives at the Centro Nacional de Folklore e Cultura Popular.

Over two and a half years I attended numerous national and international events including: two national and two international Abadá Conferences and Competitions; several weekend courses for Abadá students and instructors; a National Capoeira Congress that brought together politicians and capoeiristas from various groups all over Brazil; two international women’s Capoeira Angola conferences in Rio; a semester long capoeira course in the social science department of University of São Paulo; and the first National Seminar for the Study of Capoeira in Campinas. I also traveled to visit Abadá groups in Salvador, Belo Horizonte, Goianias, São Paulo and Brasília, and I took a month long trip to Angola with Mestre Camisa to visit a group of young Angolan capoeiristas who are eagerly making their own way in capoeira in Luanda and Benguela.

As important as the training and events I attended was the life outside of capoeira that I shared with my fellow students. We went to the beach, consumed large amounts of beer and meat at *churrascos* (BBQs) in their and my homes; spent late nights dancing at *pagodes* and *bailes funk*; went hiking and camping and spent three carnivals together.
The closeness of our friendships and their eagerness to appear in my research has made the issue of anonymity particularly difficult. While wanting to honor their desire to see their name in print, I have also been conscious of the sensitivity of some of my material, much of which they may not have expected me to write about. This, along with my obligations to my university’s IRB, sealed my decision to use pseudonyms for everyone other than Mestre Camisa and Abadá-Capoeira. My reasons for this exception is that Mestre Camisa is a well-known public figure and many of his views have been published in interviews and news stories. All other capoeiristas I have baptized with new nicknames in English. A nickname is an essential aspect of a capoeirista’s identity (see Chapter Four) and often reflects a physical or personality trait. I have tried to retain this by providing nicknames that, while not a direct translation from the Portuguese, capture some of the same meaning.

ANATOMY OF THE STUDY

Each chapter begins with an italicized text compiled from historical archives, field notes, journals and memories that span my seventeen years in capoeira. The texts illustrate the themes to be discussed in the chapter and anchor the analysis within an ethnographic context.

Chapters One and Two situate capoeira in time and space, tracing its development within the social geography of Rio de Janeiro from the late 18th to early 21st centuries. The exact origins of capoeira are unknown, a fact that has given rise to fierce identity politics among groups and practitioners. These politics and the competing narratives of
origins that capoeiristas tell inform the first part of Chapter One. The chapter then moves into 19th century Rio where the first visual and written historical documentation of capoeira appeared in travel writing, paintings, literature, police reports and popular press. Since its inception as a small colonial outpost, Rio de Janeiro has been contested terrain. As the city progressively became the symbolic and material center of the nation’s push away from “backward” colonialism towards “civilized” modernity, black, lower class bodies were confined to particular spaces. The chapter argues that during the 19th century capoeira was as an urban strategy among the most disenfranchised of the city’s residents to accommodate, negotiate and resist this spatial segregation and racial and social discrimination.

Chapter Two continues where Chapter One left off, tracing the development of capoeira throughout the 20th century from a marginalized and outlawed activity to a glorified manifestation of brasilidade, or Brazilian national culture. This process of “taming” capoeira further emphasizes the politics of inequality, including gender politics, as women increasingly became involved in the practice. The chapter ends with the current situation of capoeira in Rio, where spatial segregation and racial and class discrimination has not lessened but intensified. In this chapter I argue that as the practice of capoeira has adapted to the city’s political contours, it continues to be an arena in which social inequalities are played out and challenged.

Chapters Three and Four examine capoeira practice in Rio de Janeiro today. Using a model of apprenticeship and engaging the theory of “situated learning” (Lave and Wenger 1991) I argue that mastering capoeira involves self-expression, constructing identity and deepening commitment to a “community of practice.” This in turn produces
particular social actors. Chapter Three examines the physical process of becoming a capoeirista. Thick description of the movement and music, and the lessons (verbal and physical) that accompany these games highlight different aspect of a code of ethics that practitioners relate not only to capoeira but to their lives. In this chapter I argue that in developing what I call “intelligent bodies” and “expressive skills” capoeiristas gain strategies for, in their words, surviving “a luta que é a vida” (“the fight that is life”).

Chapter Four presents the social process of becoming a capoeirista. While many people today practice capoeira, not everyone becomes a capoeirista. In the words of practitioners themselves, becoming a capoeirista involves “identifying” with and “committing” to capoeira and to a particular mestre and group. This chapter examines the various rituals, ceremonies and stages of a capoeira apprenticeship that mark a capoeirista’s changing status within a group. For youth in Rio’s favelas, where I was repeatedly told most capoeiristas are “made,” involvement in capoeira can be an attractive alternative to drug trafficking and the capoeira group can become a surrogate family. Codes of masculinity – toughness, sexual prowess and honor -- constitute part of male capoeira identity, making it difficult for female practitioners to solidify their identity as capoeiristas and rise through the ranks of group hierarchies. Nonetheless, as I demonstrate in the last part of the chapter, women are succeeding and reaching the final goal, which for many is becoming a “professional” capoeirista.

A new code of ethics that values disciplined bodies, hard work and honesty accompanies the increasing professionalization of capoeira. However, in Chapter Five we see that bodies are volatile. Based on observations and conversations the chapter delves into the slippery terrain between fight and play in capoeira. I examine the
distinction capoeiristas make between jogo duro or “hard play” and brigas or “fights,”
and how they relate these to notions of “controlled” and “uncontrolled” violence.
Engaging larger discussions of violence in Brazil in this chapter I argue that the practice
of capoeira in Rio de Janeiro is both shaped by and a response to the structural and
everyday violence of life. It is in “hard play” that race class and gender inequalities most
graphically get played out. The dissertation concludes with some reflections on capoeira
in the global arena and the transformative nature of play.
CHAPTER ONE

RESISTANT BODIES:
CAPOERIA IN 19th CENTURY RIO DE JANEIRO

Rio de Janeiro
1826

I had the opportunity of observing the dexterity with which negroes effect the work of murder, whilst standing talking to a friend near the residence of the pope’s nuncio. A carriage was drawn up at the door of the house, and the coachman and lacquey were lounging against the stone posts on either side of the door. A negro slave going along the street passed betwixt the house and the carriage. So good an opportunity of mortifying a poor half naked negro was too good to let slip, and the coachman gave him a very severe cut with this whip over the bare shoulders, which raised a welt as thick as my finger. The poor creature writhed with pain, upon which the blow was repeated; and the footman then seized the whip, and amused himself in a similar manner. I could not help expressing my astonishment at the negro’s remaining there under such evident suffering, instead of attempting to escape…Blacky had however his reasons for thus appearing passive; he was watching his moment and having found it, a flash of lightening is not more prompt than were his movements. With his head crouched low, he butted at the coachman’s stomach, who having the wall immediately behind him was settled in the twinkling of an eye; then turning suddenly at the lacquey the negro gave him with the sole of his foot a kick in the stomach with such force and dexterity that he stretched him lifeless. Leaving both his victims, he then took to his heels with the swiftness of a deer, to our no small satisfaction at seeing such gratuitous and unprovoked brutality receive its due reward. (A.P.D.G. 1826: 304-306)

This remarkable passage from the travel writings of an English visitor to Rio de Janeiro in 1826 reveals the daily dangers and humiliations of the streets for many of the city’s inhabitants. As Rio de Janeiro burgeoned into a cosmopolitan metropolis at the beginning of the 19th century, elite cariocas, who emulated European styles and tastes, considered the African slave presence at best a blemish and at worst a threat to their beloved city. Ironically, while the elite took pains to ignore and cover up this presence, European visitors often found this aspect of the city most compelling: whether outraged by the treatment of slaves or mesmerized by the rich African culture, the travelers
documented what they observed, and it is largely thanks to their journals and paintings that an historical record of slave life in Rio de Janeiro exists (Karash 1987). Among this documentation are found some of the first visual and written representations of capoeira. Whereas the above passage contains no mention of capoeira by name, the deadly strategy and precision with which the slave responds to his attackers -- feigning passivity followed by a head butt and mortal kick -- suggest elements of fighting arts that Africans brought to Brazil and from which, it is believed, capoeira developed.

Drawing on oral, written and visual history, this chapter constructs a narrative of capoeira from its rather mysterious origins to its robust presence in 19th century Rio de Janeiro. In recent years historians have pieced together written histories of capoeira from 19th century travel journals, paintings, newspaper articles, police records and literature (Holloway 1989; Soares 1994, 2001; Dias 2001). These written histories have been adopted by many contemporary capoeiristas, influencing their understanding and experience of their practice. However, as in most aspects of capoeira, history is primarily learned and transmitted through the body. This embodied history resides in the very movement and gesture of capoeira, as well as in shared anecdotes, legends, and songs. Conceived as such, history is much more than “a narrative appended to practice”; it is living and dynamic presence that allows players to experience physically the past in the present and feel a direct connection to their predecessors (Downey 1998: 71).

Experiencing history in this way, practitioners bring meaning to who they are in contemporary Brazilian society. As a lived experience that affects capoeiristas’ understanding of their practice and lives, constructing capoeira histories is both a personal and political act, as best revealed in the competing narratives of origin.
COMPETING NARRATIVES OF ORIGIN

A paucity of pre-19th century documentation of capoeira and the equally vague etymology of its name have generated intense debate over the exact location and form of it genesis. Did capoeira exist in Africa or did it only come into being in Brazil? Where in Brazil? In senzalas (slave barracks), or on quilombos (runaway slave societies)? On the streets of Rio de Janeiro, or on the sugar plantations surrounding Salvador? Such questions are essential to capoeiristas who place much importance on the “authenticity” and lineage of their groups. Debates over “purity” and heritage of style begun in the 1930s (see Chapter Two) have intensified today with the proliferation of groups of capoeiristas who bring to and define through their practice particular worldviews and politics. Those who espouse an Afro-centric vision, for example, tend to claim that capoeira originated in Africa among free men (cf Downey 1998, 2005). Others hold fast to the notion that capoeira is uniquely Brazilian. Still others, while maintaining that capoeira was birthed on Brazilian soil, contest the exact location of its genesis: Bahian capoeiristas claim that capoeira first appeared in and around the city of Salvador, the capital of the Northeast state of Bahia, and carioca capoeiristas claim Rio de Janeiro as its birthplace.¹

One would hope that the name capoeira might provide insight into its origins. To the contrary, several possible etymologies of the word support various hypotheses. Some

¹ We will see in Chapter Two that the belief that “real” or “pure” capoeira is from Bahia, rather than Rio de Janeiro, is a result of a particular moment of nation building in early 20th century in which Bahia was promoted as the heartland of “authentic” Afro-Brazilian culture. This view is still pervasive today as evidenced in the frequency with which people asked me why I was doing research on capoeira in Rio rather than Bahia. This attitude mirrored a similar one Diane Brown ran into while conducting research on the spiritist religion Umbanda in Rio in the 1960s which was treated by academics and non-practitioners as the “inferior stepsister to its purer more African relatives in the northeast” (1994:3 )
suggest a Bantu root of the word (Kubick 1978). While the most unlikely of its possible etymologies, this theory supports the popular belief that whether or not capoeira existed in Africa prior to its appearance in Brazil, its roots are firmly planted among the Bantu-speaking people of Angola. Over the 350 years of the Brazilian slave trade -- the largest forced human migration in history-- 3.5 million slaves were brought from the western, eastern and southern coasts of Africa. The heaviest trade was in the areas of present day Angola, Benin and Nigeria. Most African traits that endure in Brazil today, appearing in everything from religious practices and dances to language and cuisine, are traced back to the Yoruba and Bantu-speaking peoples of these regions.

Capoeira is tied to Angola though several strands: the two most famous early 20th century mestres (see Chapter Two) claim they learned capoeira from former Angolan slaves; capoeira was known in the 19th and early 20th century by the alternate name of jogo de Angola (“game of Angola”); and old capoeira songs mention locations in Angola such as the slave ports of Luanda and Benguela. In the 1960s, an Angolan published a book, Da Minha África E Do Brasil Que Eu Vi (“Of My Africa and What I Saw of Brazil”) based on his travels through Angola and Brazil. In a series of drawings the artist and author, Neves e Sousa, depicted the striking similarities he noted between capoeira and Bassula, a wrestling fight among fishermen in Luanda, and N’Golo, a male dance performed for female puberty rites in the Mucope region of southern Angola. Neves e Sousa suggested that N’Golo -- the movement of which he describes as imitating the leaps and kicks of a zebra with the objective of “strik[ing] the opponent’s face with one’s foot” -- was the origin of capoeira (Neves e Sousa n.d. 57). These references have been embraced by many practitioners (the logo of one international group is two zebras
playing capoeira) and have inspired a number of academic studies on the African origins and aesthetics of capoeira (Dossar 1994; Desch-Obi 2000).

While most practitioners today agree that capoeira’s roots are in Africa, and most likely Angola, many believe that it was the particular conditions of Brazilian slavery that gave capoeira its distinctive form. One of the most popular notions is that capoeira developed in the *senzalas*, or slave barracks, on the sugarcane and tobacco plantations around Salvador, the first slave port, capital, and economic center of the colony. Practitioners who support this theory draw on the movement and ethos of capoeira as evidence that it developed under conditions of captivity. They claim that the playful and dance-like aesthetic of capoeira was an artful and cunning disguise; similar to the idea that the syncretic religion Candomblé arose from the practice of linking African deities to Catholic saints so that slaves could continue to worship their gods while maintaining the appearance of conversion to Catholicism, it is suggested that early practitioners of capoeira masked its potential lethality with playfulness. A particular rhythm of the berimbau called *cavalaria* that imitates the sound of galloping horse hoofs was allegedly a warning signal: when played, slaves knew that authorities were approaching and would

**Figure 2:** N’Golo. Drawings by Neves e Sousa from... *Da Minha África E Do Brasil Que Eu Vi*... (Luanda: n.p., n.d.)
transform their martial movement into dance.² In its disguised form, slaves allegedly trained capoeira as a form of self-defense under the very noses of their oppressors. Other stories emphasize that strikes with the head and feet are privileged over hand strikes because slaves were shackle at the wrists. Many practitioners today acknowledge the dubious validity of these stories. For instance, slaves were more likely to be shackled by their ankles than by their wrist so as to allow work to continue, and head butts, common in capoeira, also characterize many fighting arts developed in Africa by people not in captivity (cf Desch-Obi 2000). However, such stories, often taught to initiates as they first learn the movement, continue to circulate as a way to contextualize capoeira within the history of slavery and slave resistance in Brazil.

Whether or not in its earliest forms capoeira was utilized as a weapon of resistance, that slaves in Brazil engaged in various acts of overt and covert rebellion is well documented (Karash 1989; Soares 2001; Reis 1993). One of the oldest and most popular capoeira songs speaks to a slave act of sabotage as a classic example of “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985).

và dizer ao meu senhor  
go tell my master
a manteiga derramou  
the butter has spilled

a manteiga não é minha  
the butter is not mine
a manteiga é d’ioio  
the butter belong to the master’s son

One interpretation of this song is that the slave sabotages the economic production of the master by letting the butter spill in the process of churning (cf Lewis 1992: 28-9).

Another possible interpretation is that phrase “the butter belongs to the son of the master” refers to the fact that many slaves in Brazil were the illegitimate sons of their masters and slave mothers who were never recognized or given the privileges of their fathers’

² Music is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.
legitimate sons: the slave son churns the butter and sings his protest. As we will see below, the question of the use of capoeira in acts of resistance and rebellion will re-emerge throughout its history, especially in 19th century Rio de Janeiro.

While some hold fiercely to the notion that capoeira developed on the senzalas, others claim that it artistic and martial expression fully flourished on the quilombos, or runaway slave societies. From the 16th century right up until abolition in 1889 quilombos existed in rural and urban areas throughout Brazil. In the interior of some states the quilombo inhabitants included Amerindians. In Brazilian Portuguese, the word capoeira also refers to low shrubbery or secondary growth after forest has been cut. The possible root of the word is from an amalgamation of two terms from the indigenous Tupi language: caá (forest) and pûera (extinct). Some capoeiristas claim that this Tupi etymology of the name is evidence that capoeira developed on the quilombos and was influenced, at least in name, by indigenous people.

The most famous figure in narratives that places capoeira on the quilombos was King Zumbi. Zumbi was the famed African leader of Palmares, the largest and longest enduring quilombo in the northeast state of Alagoas. At its height in the 17th century, the extensive conglomeration of villages, modeled on an African state, had thousands of inhabitants and a fortified system of defense (cf Bastide 1978). Despite no mention of capoeira in the historical documentation about Palmares, legends tell of King Zumbi training an army of foot soldiers who defended their kingdom with capoeira martial
techniques.\textsuperscript{3} Today Zumbi is a popular symbol of Afro-Brazilian resistance and pride, and capoeiristas claim him as their fiercest of predecessors.

A final possible etymology of the name capoeira suggests it is a derivative of the Portuguese word \textit{capão}. \textit{Capão} refers to a neutered cock, or the basket in which fowl were carried to market, and the word capoeira still carries a second meaning, especially in Portugal, of chicken coop. The narrative of origins connected to this etymology brings us back to Rio de Janeiro where, some practitioners claim, capoeira originated in the markets among chicken vendors.\textsuperscript{4}

\textbf{Figure 3: Negros Vendadores de Aves (Slaves Selling Birds).} Watercolor by Jean Baptiste Debret (1816-1831)

We will never know whether capoeira first emerged in and around Rio de Janeiro or in and around Salvador or perhaps, as many practitioners claim, in and around several urban centers simultaneously. And though our earliest and richest written documentation of capoeira comes out of 19\textsuperscript{th} century Rio de Janeiro, to which I now turn, practitioners

\textsuperscript{3} This legend was perhaps generated by, or at least gained currency from, the 1984 Brazilian film, \textit{Quilombo} which tells the story of Zumbi de Palmares and contains scenes of warriors training and using capoeira in battle with invading slave captors. The figure of Zumbi will be revisited in Chapter Five.

\textsuperscript{4} This etymology also, of course, suggests possible connections to cock fighting. Though such an analysis has not been pursued, American anthropologist John Lowell Lewis (1992) does draw on Geertz’s essay on “deep play” and the Balinese cock fight in his semiotic interpretation of capoeira.
continue to accommodate, challenge or refute evidence in constructing and defending their own interpretations of the history of capoeira.  

**SLAVE CAPOEIRA IN THE CIDADE NEGRA (1808-1889)**

Two popular epithets for 19th century Rio de Janeiro -- the *corte imperial* (royal court) and the *cidade negra* (black city) -- capture the duality of the capital, which in the early 1800s experienced a simultaneous influx of Africans and Europeans. Until 1763, when it became Brazil’s new capital and the main portal for importing slaves and exporting goods, Rio de Janeiro had been little more than a forgotten trading outpost. Named by Portuguese explorer Gasper de Lemos, who mistook the bay into which he sailed in January of 1502 for the mouth of a river, Rio de Janeiro’s first settlement was established fifty years later not by the Portuguese but by the French. Along with the Spanish and Dutch, the French challenged the Portuguese dominion of the vast territory that fell to them as the result of the 1494 papal Treaty of Tordesillas. The French settlement -- little more than a trading post and fort in the bay that were the failed attempt to create a religious utopia for Protestants and Catholics to escape escalating religious wars in Europe -- soon fell to the Portuguese. Initially viewing Brazil as a colony of exploitation rather than settlement, by the mid 16th century the Portuguese were importing slaves from Africa. The Amerindians’ susceptibility to disease, unfamiliarity with agriculture and facility for escape had made their enslavement problematic and so the Portuguese, involved in the African slave trade

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5 For instance one capoeirista in Rio told me an outrageous theory that Africans invented capoeira during the Middle Passage in the tight hold of the *negreiros* or slave ships; it was because slaves could not stand up in the hold, he claimed, that much of capoeira movement is performed low to the ground.
since the 15th century, were soon shipping large numbers of Africans to the northeast city
of Salvador. Close to the site of Pedro Álvaras Cabral’s first landing in Brazil, Salvador
had been designated the capital, and its surrounding sugar and tobacco plantations to
which the slaves were sent were the colony’s first economic mainstay. When gold and
diamonds were discovered in the southwest region of Minas Gerais and coffee production
around São Paulo began to outstrip the sugar and tobacco industries of the north, the
wealth of the colony drifted south. In 1763, because of its strategic location, Rio de
Janeiro became the colony’s new capital. Hemmed in by its extraordinary geography of
sea and mountains, its population swelled quickly and Rio became a densely crowded
city clustered along the waterfront. Situated close to its ports was the Volongo, the
largest slave market ever to exist in South America (Karash 1987). During the peak of
the Brazilian slave trade, 1million of the 1.6 million Africans to arrive in Brazil passed
through the Volongo. Many of these African were sold as slaves to residents of Rio de
Janeiro, creating the largest urban slave population in the Americas, which by 1821 made
up 46% of the total city population (Holloway 1993:26).

The growing African population was accompanied by burgeoning European
migration that increased in 1808 with the relocation of the Portuguese royal court from
Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro. Fleeing from Napoleon’s invasion of the Iberian Peninsula,
King João VI moved his court and family to Rio. Accompanying him was a select group
of intellectuals, architects, botanists and artists who would forever change the physical
face and social image of the city. Importing models and consultants from France, the
king established a public secondary school and university, a printing press, botanical
gardens, museums and a school of fine arts. An enduring standard was set whereby the city and its people should aspire to European (especially French) culture and aesthetics.

Alongside this elite European culture a slave culture was in full bloom. African inflected music, dance, clothing, religious ceremonies and food were prominent and visible aspects of Rio’s bustling street life. The best records of this rich culture come from the paintings and writings of several European artists who spent extensive time in Brazil visually documenting their travels. Among these paintings are the first visual representations of capoeira. The most explicit reference, and an image frequently reproduced in the literature on capoeira, is an 1835 engraving by German artist Johann Mortiz Rugenda entitled *Jogar capoeira ou danse de la guerre.*

Even more often reproduced than this painting is the one entitled *São Salvador* that depicts slaves engaging in some sort of dance on the outskirts of Salvador. As Assunção (2005: 101) points out, however, there is no evidence that this is capoeira and not one of the many other slave dances.

![Figure 4: Jogar Capoëra ou Danse de la Guerre. Engraving by Johann Mortiz Rugenda, 1835.](image-url)
The scene depicted by Rugenda suggests a moment of leisure as other slaves take a break from their workday to gather around and clap hands. While the action seems relaxed, as if the two men were dancing rather than fighting, the text accompanying the painting hints at potential violence:

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 skilful 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. (quoted in Assunção 2005: 76).

The absence of a berimbau in Rugenda’s engraving, as well as other depictions of capoeira from this time, suggests that the instrument was a later addition. The berimbau - an upright version of a gourd resonating bow instrument of Angolan origin -- was visible in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, played by slaves for musical entertainment or to attract customers to their market stall. The instrument probably did not become attached to capoeira until the 20th century, a fact that causes some consternation among contemporary practitioners who view the berimbau as emblematic of their art from.  

 Assunção (2005:7) even notes seeing on a reproduction of Rugenda’s painting, popularly hung in capoeira academies, a berimbau is drawn in, turning a bystander into a musician. See Chapter Three for a full description of the berimbau.
An 1822 painting suggestive of capoeira introduces an important element for understanding the social status of this slave activity in 19th century Rio. The painting, by English artist Augustus Earle, is entitled *Negros Lutando* (Slaves Fighting) and, like Rugendas’ engraving and accompanying text, is ambiguous. Though the title describes the slaves as fighting, as in Rugenda’s depiction, their body language appears playful and dance-like, and other nearby slaves seem to enjoy the spectacle. The most illuminating element is in the background of the painting where an officer scrambles over a fence apparently on his way to break up the scene.

**Figure 5**: *Negro Trovadores*. Watercolor by Jean-Baptiste Debret. 1816. The berimbau is the middle instrument.
Earle’s painting leaves us with many questions: who and where are the men? Are they slaves in front of their living quarters on a plantation outside of Rio or are they runaways on one of the quilombos that existed on the city hills and beaches? Will the officer arrest them? What will their punishment be? The officer, perhaps, is a policeman in Rio de Janeiro’s newly formed police force. Along with his botanical gardens and libraries, King João also established Rio’s first police force. The primary responsibility of these officers was to enforce social order and protect the city’s elite citizens from the lower classes of residents (Holloway 1989). With the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) a recent memory, the Africans in Rio were particularly feared and despised as a blemish on the face of the burgeoning Luso-Brazilian capital in the tropics. The spatial limitations of the city, squeezed between the sea and the until-then impenetrable mountains, meant that

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8 While quilombos were most common in rural areas especially in the Northeast of Brazil, a number existed within Rio de Janeiro. See, for example, Silva’s (2003) history of a quilombo on the present site of Leblon beach that existed late into the 19th century and played a role in abolition.
the chaotic and cramped neighborhoods were ethnically and economically mixed: the elite lived in close proximity to slaves, and as the century progressed, thrown in to the mix were free blacks and poor European immigrants.

Along with the repressive techniques of the police force, social order in the city was maintained through strict social stratification. This stratification separated not only the elite from the poor, European-born from Brazilian-born from African-born, but also slaves of the rich from slaves of the middle class and poor (Karasch 1987). This social stratification peeks out at us from the passage that began this chapter. A slave, whose “half naked” appearance suggests he is the property of a master of low social and economic status, is physically attacked by two coachmen when he dares pass in the space between their carriage and the gates of a wealthy residency. Even if slaves themselves, because of their position as coachmen these attackers probably held a higher position on the social ladder then their victim.

In her seminal work on slave life in 19th century Rio de Janeiro (1987), historian Mary Karasch describes the elaborate stratification among slaves designated by their birthplace, skin color, and occupation, and by the socio-economic status of their employers. Slaves of the wealthy were usually well clothed and fed, and subjected to less grueling work schedules since large households could afford many slaves, each with a specific task. In contrast, the slave of a poor person -- and in Rio even slaves could own slaves -- was often the only servant and source of income for his or her owner, and therefore not only attended to all household chores but also worked in the streets or for other employers. Gaining freedom through manumission or otherwise, though providing certain benefits – e.g., the right to vote, own property, wear shoes, marry, live
independently and keep one’s wages -- often resulted in downward mobility to the bottom strata of society as a former slave was no longer connected to the patronage and social status of his or her owner (Karasch 1987).

Karasch hypothesizes that this class system, exacerbated by ethnic diversity, discouraged unity among the slave population. This lack of unity, combined with the proximity of the seat of governance, made large-scale rebellions in Rio de Janeiro extremely rare. This is not to say, however, that slaves in Rio de Janeiro did not engage in violent and non-violent forms of resistance: assault, theft and murder were common, and street demonstrations often turned into spontaneous, violent riots. Indirect acts of rebellion included foot dragging, work sabotage, witchcraft, petty crime and running away. The passage that began this chapter suggests that fighting techniques were one such strategy; if not an act of rebellion against slave owners or employers, they were a form of self-defense against the daily humiliations and abuses perpetrated by other members of the work force of higher status.9

While the stringent social segmentation may have dissuaded group identity and unity across the slave class as a whole, clusters of slaves, freed slaves and others at the lowest rungs of the hierarchy did create solidarity across occupational and religious affiliations (Karasch 1987). Especially for those working in the street and cut loose from the protection and security of a wealthy patron, these religious and occupational mutual aide societies provided some financial security for slaves (even on occasion buying freedom), re-created the extended families they had been torn away from in their homelands, and offered ways for building respect and prestige on the streets. These

9 Physical self-defense may have been wedded to magical protection in the use of amulets and mandinga, or witchcraft, which as we will see in Chapter Three continues to be an important concept in capoeira today.
mutual aide societies, which included *irmadades* or Catholic brotherhoods, houses of Candomblé and Umbanda, work groups formed by stevedores, washerwomen and other laborers and the capoeira street gangs known as *maltas*. The maltas’ violent territorial clashes, acts of street disturbances and crime quickly gained them notoriety among Rio’s residents, and attracted violent repression from the nascent police force. It is in police reports, jail records, courtroom documents and newspaper articles that we begin to find some of the answers to the question left hanging from the previous portrayals, of who were these *capoeiras* who engaged in the art, and violence, of *capoeiragem*.10

*Capoeiragem and Capoeiras*

The mulatto Adam, slave to Manoel Cardoso Fontes, bought when still a boy, grew into a strong worker, very obedient to his master, serving him in the house chores. Manoel decided to hire him out as a handyman (*servente de obras*), porter or in any other manual labor. Thus Adam became a good source of income for his master. Over time the timid slave, who before had always lived within the house, became wanton (*desenvolto*), independent and began to arrive home late, much after the end of the workday. Manoel questioned him: what had caused the change in conduct? His excuses to his master were inconsistent. And then the worst occurred: Adam did not return home. Certainly he had escaped to some quilombo in a suburb of the city. To his surprise, Manoel discovered Adam behind bars in the Relação jail. He had been arrested along with some ruffians who practiced capoeira. That day a fight had occurred between *capoeiras* and one of them was killed. Grave crimes according to the reign of law: the practice of capoeira still resulted in death. During the trial Adam was proven innocent of the murder, but his identity as a *capoeira* was confirmed and for this, he was condemned to 500 lashes and two years of public work. His master, after Adam had served several months and had been punished at the whipping post, solicited the king, in the name of the Passion of Christ, a pardon from the rest of the sentence, arguing that he was a poor man, and thus very dependent on the income that his slave provided him. He promised to take care that Adam never again fraternized with the *capoeiras*, or became one of them. The request was honored by the court on the 25 of April, 1789.

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10 During the 19th and early 20th centuries capoeiristas were known as *capoeiras* and capoeira was also known by the term *capoeiragem*. In the next several sections, I will keep these semantics, italicizing *capoeira* when referring to the capoeiristas of this time.
In this document, to date our earliest reference to capoeira, trouble for Manoel began when he turned his slave, Adam, into a *negro de ganho*, or “hired slave”. In order to generate extra household income, masters often hired out their slaves to work for others or sent them to work in the streets as vendors, shoe shines and porters. Away from the watchful eyes of their masters, negros de ganho experienced greater autonomy than house slaves. With free access to the streets they mingled with other slaves, hired slaves and freed slaves employed in similar occupations, and some could even keep any wages earned above the fixed rate set by their owners (Karasch 1987). When his master hired him out as a handyman, giving him free access to the streets, Adam began to fraternize with a group *capoeiras*. This association, according to the police report, catalyzed his transformation from an obedient and docile slave to a rebellious one.

Pointing to the lack of evidence of capoeira in the slave market Volongo (which resembled a small village with recent arrivals from Africa often living there for months before their sale), historian Eugenio Soares (1994, 2001) surmises that capoeira was not an activity of the *boçais*, or recently arrived Africans. Rather, he suggests it originated among the *ladinos* or *crioulos*, as were known those already well accustomed to slave life in the city. These ladinos were slaves, hired slaves and freed slaves who worked the streets as messengers, vendors, shoes shines, craftsmen, stevedores and porters. Soares suggests that perhaps it was the latter two of these occupations, since they necessitated group effort and cooperation, that gave origin to the first capoeira maltas: when working in teams to carry large objects or unload ships at the docks, men would sing and drum so as to coordinate their movement and keep up energy and morale. Such group work may

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have forged bonds of solidarity and identity that later emerged as a central aspect of the maltas (Soares 1994).

Along with particular forms of cooperative work, Soares suggests that it was in the space of slaves’ small windows of free time that capoeira developed. Congregating in public areas such as the ports, taverns, churches, zungus (establishments that served the popular, cheap dish of anju) plazas and water fountains throughout the workday and on Sundays and religious holidays, slaves would fraternize, gossip and entertain themselves. From an 1817 communication from the superintendent of the police to the commander of the Royal Guard we know that capoeiragem was a frequent sight in these public spaces: “today, tomorrow or soon, arrest all the blacks and mulattos found amusing themselves with games of capoeira in the public squares of Sé, Carioca, Santa Rita, São Domingos, Praça do Capim, São Francisco de Paula e Praia de Mineiros…” (Soares 2001: 182). Even when described as a form of entertainment, capoeiragem was viewed by the authorities as a threat to public order. As a reminder that congregating in large numbers and idling away their time in unsanctioned activities was punishable, the popular gathering spots for slaves were also the sites of pelourinhos or whipping posts. Similar to the public spectacle of guillotining as a form of social control in 18th century Europe (Foucault 1995), in 19th century Rio public flogging was used to frighten and subdue the slave population (Soares 1994). An 1840 painting entitled “Negroes who will be flogged,” depicts soldiers leading chained slaves carrying a sign with the label “capoeira”; most likely they are being taken to a pelourinho to be publicly whipped as a warning to other possible offenders.
That punishment for engaging in capoeiragem could also result in imprisonment is revealed in Rio’s court and prison records. In the year 1858 capoeira was the most common reason -- followed by disorderly conduct, vagrancy, drunkenness and curfew violation -- for detention in the slave prison of Calabouço (Holloway 1989). Prison records tell us that the majority of men arrested for capoeiragem were African-born, and from the Angola region (Soares 1994). These records, however, must be read with a critical eye in terms of what they tell us about capoeiragem or those who engaged in it: for instance, *capoeira* became a term applied to any category of “street hoodlum,” and capoeiragem, a catch-all label for any kind of activity deemed a threat to social order (Holloway 1989). Similarly, though prison records show that those arrested for capoeira were predominantly men of African descent, as the 19th century progressed, and the slave population declined in Rio, more members of the free lower classes including recent
Portuguese and Italian immigrants, became involved in capoeira. Soares (1994) even suggests that the Portuguese had quite a bit of influence on the practice, introducing the use of knives and straight razors, a skill for which they were famous.

It was not only recent European immigrants -- who often found themselves on or below the same socio-economic rung as slaves and former slaves -- who engaged in capoeira. Foreshadowing the widening social base of its practice that would take off in the 20th century, capoeira began to attract attention in elite circles where it “became highly prized by some upper-class whites, not only for self-defense but also as an expression of physical elegance” (Freyre 1970: 11). Whatever the extent of cross-class and cross-ethnic participation in 19th century capoeiragem, what is fairly certain is that the only people categorically excluded were women. A rare newspaper article from January 29, 1878 is the exception that proves the rule:

EVEN THE BEAUTIFUL SEX: In the street Riachuelo, the night before last, Isabel Maria da Conceição, known as Baby, Ana Clara Maria de Andrade, and Deolinda, slave of D. Bandeira de Gouveia, were arrested for being in a fierce fight, so much had they fought, in fact, that they appeared to be exhausted. Isabel and Ana spend their lives fighting; hence, they challenge whoever directs towards them a disagreeable word and in any fight show themselves to be experts in capoeiragem. (quoted in Soares 1999: 303).12

While there may have been women, such as Baby, Ana Clara and Deolina, who used the techniques of capoeiragem in their street fighting, it is improbable that these women would have been identified or arrested as capoeiras, and they most certainly would not have been affiliated with one of the maltas, the all male capoeira gangs which became the prime target of police repression as the century progressed.

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12 “ATÉ O BELO SEXO. Na rua do Riachuelo, antehontem a noite, Isabel Maria da Conceição, vulgo Nené, Ana Clara Maria de Andrade, e Deolinda, escrava de D. Bandeira de Gouveia, foram presas por estarem em renhida luta, e tanto haviam brigada que pareciam estar sem forças. Isabel e Ana passão a vida a brigar; e para isso desafiam quem lhes dirige qualquer palavra desagradável, e quando empenham qualquer luta mostram ser peritas na capoeiragem.” (Soares 1999: 303).
The *Maltas*

Not long ago, the Guayamú gang still trained novices on Livramento Hill, a place named Mangueira. The trainings were held on Sunday mornings and consisted of exercises with the head and feet and strikes with a razor and knife. The more famous capoeiras were instructors to those just beginning. At first, strikes were practiced empty handed; when the disciple had learned the lessons, he began to train with wooden weapons and finally with knives and razors, so that many times the training ground became bloody. The Nagõas had similar trainings, the only difference being that they were held on Russel beach...(Abreu 1886:2).

In 1886, Placido de Abreu, a Portuguese-born writer and alleged adept at capoeira, published a novel entitled *Os Capoeiras*. This novel and an 1893 essay by folklorist Mello Moraes Filho entitled “Capoeiragem and famous capoeiras in Rio de Janeiro,” (Filho 1999) provide sparse, yet rich, detail about the maltas that, by mid 19th century, were a highly visible and notorious aspect of Rio street life. Police reports, court proceedings and the popular press painted a portrait of the maltas as impenetrable and inexplicable gangs of bloodthirsty criminals. A newspaper article from the 1850s describes the maltas as “a singular secret society among the negroes, in which the highest rank is assigned to the man who has taken the most lives” (Holloway 1989: 663). The ethnographic writings of Abreu and Filho, on the other hand, provide nuanced accounts of the maltas as hierarchically organized social institutions that fostered group identity and pride and transmitted a rich culture of fighting techniques, language and ritual.

The names of Rio’s maltas, the size of which ranged from a handful to hundreds of members (Filho 1999 Soares 1994), reveal something about their organization. The titles members gave their gangs often evoked the name or characteristic of a patron saint of a church. 19th century Rio was organized in neighborhoods, known as “parishes,” located around the city’s many churches. The names of the maltas suggests that their members defined themselves and laid claim to a geographic area associated with one of
the parishes: thus Os Franciscos were located in the São Francisco de Paula parish; Os Luzianos in Santa Luzia; the malta named Lança, or “Lance,” referring to the weapon used by Saint George to kill the dragon, were centered in the São Jorge parish; and the neighborhood of Santa Ana was home to the Cadeira da Senhora (Lady’s Seat) as Saint Anne is most often depicted seated.\footnote{see Appendix A for a map of the maltas in 19th century Rio de Janeiro} Consolidating around a particular parish, maltas then dominated the public space and ensured control of valuable resources such as the use of a water fountain or exclusive contact with clientele for street services such as shoe shining or vending.

By the 1870s, Rio’s maltas had consolidated into two large factions: The Nagoa who controlled the newer settlements of the city extending south along the waterfront, and the Guaiamu who dominated the neighborhoods in the central area of the city known as the Cidade Velha (Old City). These names, which are not religious references, and the areas they dominated suggested to historian Soares (1994) a possible ethnic affiliation: The Nagoa (similar in name to Nagô, a people from West Africa) comprised of Africans and the Guaiamu (suggestive of an indigenous etymology) comprised of creoles and Brazilian born. However, historian Assunção (2005: 89) questions Soares’ conclusions, pointing out, among other things, that residential patterns in the city did not fall along clear-cut ethnic lines. In fact, as with the previous maltas, members of the Nagoa and Guaiamu were ethnically mixed, and not all lived or worked in the neighborhoods controlled by their malta.

While it is difficult to ascertain what determined affiliation with a particular malta, that members’ loyalty was fierce upon joining is evident. Along with controlling a geographic space, the maltas created and controlled a social space within which members
experienced group solidarity and the limited possibility of upward mobility -- near impossible in the larger Brazilian society. While categories, such as ethnicity, place of birth, occupation and economic class, designated status in Rio’s highly segmented social structure, within the hierarchical organization of the malta, *valentia* or “bravery” was the most valued characteristic; those with the most valentia would rise through the ranks, eventually gaining the title of *chefe*, or “chief” (Filho 1999: 258).

Pride in the “colors” of one’s malta and willingness to defend it unto death, was displayed in the dress and rituals of the *capoeiras*. Colors were incorporated into and flaunted by the distinctive costume of the *capoeiras*: baggy pants, unbuttoned jacket, colored shirt, collarless waistcoat and boots, topped with a hat of felt or straw (Filho 1999). As illustrated in the drawing from a Rio de Janeiro magazine, the style of wearing one’s hat and the colors of one’s cravat or piece of colored ribbon tucked into the brim of one’s hat were a visible sign of one’s malta affiliation.

*Figure 8:* “Types and uniforms of the old Nagoas and Guayamu with the principal distinctions of the former being a cravat with the colors white over red and a hat with a lowered brim, and of the latter, a cravat of colors red over white and a hat with a raised brim.” *Revista Kosmos* No. 3 (March 1906)
The domination of one’s colors over the colors of another malta, symbolically represented in the overlaid colors of the neck scarves of the two capoeiras in the above illustration, was also performed in ritual acts. In a passage from Os Capoeiras, Abreu describes such one such act of symbolic domination as a ritual of provocation:

…when enemy capoeiras meet in a fortress (tavern)\(^\text{14}\) the Guaiamú asks for wine and rum, spills the latter on the ground and steps on it in swaying motion (saracoteia em cima’) and finally drops the wine over the rum. This is enough to start the fight because a capoeira will not allow his color to be stepped on, much less let it be covered by the color of his opponents. For that reason many honest workers who have used colored ribbons have been cut with razors. (Abreu 1886:2).

The spilling of white rum over red wine was a call for action from the insulted malta.

Such an act might be followed by ritualized speech, or verbal taunts as recorded by Abreu. The Guaiamu would begin:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portuguese</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theresinha de Jesus</td>
<td>Little Theresa de Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abre a porta apaga luz</td>
<td>Open the door and turn off the light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quero ver morrer nagoa</td>
<td>I want to see a Nagoa die</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A porta do Bom Jesus</td>
<td>At the of [the church of] Good Jesus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and the Nagoas would respond:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portuguese</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O castello içou bandeira</td>
<td>The castle holds aloft the banner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Francisco repicou</td>
<td>St. Francis rang the Bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guyamu ésá reclamando</td>
<td>Guaiamu are complaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manel Preto já chegou</td>
<td>Black Manoel has arrived</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such taunts might be called out in the street by the youngest members of the malta, the apprentices, who delivered messages of provocation and ran through the streets

\(^{14}\) In their slang, capoeiras referred to taverns as fortresses, indicating their importance, as places of attack and defense in the geography of malta conflicts (Soares 1994:72).
announcing an impeding clash. Novices, or caxinguelês, sarandejes and carrapetas as they were called (Filho 1999: 260), began their apprenticeships as young as ten or twelve years of age. In order to train with a malta “whose schools were the plazas, streets and alleyways” (Filho 1999: 260), an apprentice might first have to undergo a rite of initiation. Such rituals ranged from innocuous pranks like climbing a church tower and ringing the bells in the middle of the night, to being an accomplice to a theft or murder.

Soares (1994: 89-91) interprets a police report from 1881 as one such rite of initiation. On October 23, 1881 a policeman filed a report detailing an incident that had occurred on his beat in the neighborhood of Glória. He described the following incident as the activity of a “malta in formation”: Domingo Soares Calcado, accompanied by a group of boys ages nine to eleven, approached a bakery where they proceeded to provoke one of the bread sellers with thrown loaves. When the seller reacted, Domingo, who had been standing in the background with a hat pulled low over his eyes, leapt forward and stabbed him with a jackknife, crying out in capoeira slang, “this one is wounded!” (“este está pronto!”). The group took off running and when they reached the Largo de Machado Domingo handed off the weapon to one of the boys, who disappeared into the crowd. Had Domingo not been caught by the policeman, the little group would presumably have reassembled at a pre-determined spot. In Soares’ interpretation of the police report and recordings of Domingo’s trial, the incident was a “baptism of fire”: Domingo, in the process of forming his own malta, was testing the bravery of his students and schooling them in the art of knife attack against someone who may possibly have been a member of a rival malta (Soares1994: 89-91).
The violence of the maltas, though most often directed internally, was in large part a response to the violence of daily life in the city. Consider the lone slave in the incident that opened this chapter who defended himself, with the only resource he had -- his body -- against a vicious attack on the street by his social superiors. As historian Holloway aptly notes, “In a social hierarchy based fundamentally on the threat and reality of physical harm, capoeira gave those on the bottom the opportunity to meet force with force. It should not be surprising that the internal hierarchy of the gangs and the competition among them should have a similar base” (1989:646).

The violence of the maltas was not always self-contained; it often spilled over, affecting the general population of Rio. Though fearing the possibility of falling victim to a capoeira’s street crime or being caught up in the cross-fire of gang clashes, Rio’s inhabitants also stood in awe of the capoeiras, even at times enlisting their services. The ambiguous relationship between the working classes and the valentões, or “ruffians,” as capoeiras were also known, is captured in the celebrated novel Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant. First published as installments in an 1852 Rio newspaper, the author Manuel de Almeida places the action “during the time of the king” (referring to King João’s residency in Rio from 1808-1821), and paints a satirical portrait of morally corrupt social world. One of the characters, Chico-Juca, known for his fearsome fighting skills, is hired by the novel’s protagonist to start a brawl at the wedding of former lover who snubbed him. Though the term never appears in the novel, the description of Chico-Juca has led literary scholars and historians (Candido 1970; Soares 2001) to identify him as literature’s first capoeira:

Being a ruffian was at one time an actual calling in Rio de Janeiro. There were men who made a living from it: They would beat people up for money and go
anywhere to purposely start a riot no matter what the outcome, as long as they were paid. Among the honest citizens thus occupied there was, at the time of this story, one Chico-Juca… a dark-skinned man, tall, heavy, with red eyes, a long beard, and close cropped hair; he always wore a white jacket, full-legged pants, black slippers, and a small white hat ever tipped at a rakish angle. He was usually affable, clever, full of jokes and sayings. When what he called the 'rumpus' started, however, he bordered on outright brutality. Just as some have the vice of drunkenness, others the vice of gambling, and still others of debauchery, he had the vice of ruffianism. Even when he was not being paid, all he had to do to start a brawl was to take it into his head to do so. And only after he had thrown punches until he could throw no more was he satisfied. He profited greatly from this: there was no tavern-keeper who did not extend him credit and did not treat him exceedingly well. (Almeida 1999 [1852]: 57)

An “honest citizen” addicted to the “vice of ruffianism,” Chico-Juca inhabits a social world in which client-patron relationships are paramount and violence is an accepted avenue for getting what one wants. From this passage it is clear that the tavern owners and valentões co-existed in an uneasy relationship of intimidation and protection. At the same time, the general public also admired and appreciated the fearless fighting skills of the *capoeiras* as a form of entertainment: maltas held their rumbles on Sundays and holidays at pre-advertised times and places so as to encourage spectators. And during carnival *capoeiras* were a welcome addition to the street parades: leading the way as *abra alas* (“open the wings”), they impressed the crowds with their acrobatic feats and cleared the way so that the “wings” of costumed paraders could pass. In 1878, the maltas had so become an integral part of city life that they were even made the theme of a carnival parade (Soares 1994: 240).

Rio’s law enforcers despised and hunted the maltas; yet they too were not averse to at times enlisting the services of the *capoeiras*. Such was the case in an 1828 mutiny by Italian and German mercenaries, commissioned by Pedro I to wage a war in the south of the country and stationed in Rio. Disgusted with the poor living conditions and
corporal punishment to which they were subjected, for five days the soldiers ran wild in the streets, looting and pillaging. When *capoeiras* joined in the fighting alongside the Brazilian soldiers, the authorities welcomed their contribution in restoring public order. This incident is celebrated in capoeira oral history as an example of the *capoeiras’* patriotic service to the city. Much more probable, however, is that the *capoeiras* were simply taking advantage of the situation to exercise their skills, express anti-foreign sentiments, and avenge humiliations suffered at the hands of the mercenaries or other foreign-born residents of the city (cf Holloway 1989:647-8). The incident again highlights the many tensions, conflicts and collaborations that existed among the various segments of Rio’s population.

Though on rare occasion enlisting their services, Rio’s authorities considered the maltas a thorn in their side: their internal cohesion, the fierce fighting skills of their members, and the systems of codes (e.g. whistling, slang, rituals and nicknames) by which they communicated eluded and infuriated the police. This impenetrability rendered the maltas, in the words of historian Holloway, “the most persistent and perhaps the most successful effort to establish a social ‘space’ on the part of urban Afro-Brazilians -- an area of activity which they controlled, used for their advantage and largely on their own terms, and from which they could exclude outsiders” (1989:646). This force would only be disbanded with the changing political environment of Rio towards the end of the century.
ABOLITION, THE 1ST REPUBLIC AND THE CRIMINALIZATION OF CAPOERIA

Given that it was the secret and insular nature of the maltas that fortified them against Rio’s authorities for most of the 19th century, it is not surprising that their ultimate demise occurred when the capoeiras aligned themselves with the city’s elite at a critical moment of political transition (Soares 1994). This moment was defined by the struggle for abolition and the replacement of the Empire with the 1st Republic. When King João returned to Portugal following Napoleon’s defeat he left his son, Prince Regent Pedro I, who, on September 7, 1822 proclaimed himself Emperor of the independent Brazilian Empire. This bloodless transition from colonial to independent status had a lasting effect on the social imaginary of Brazil as a “peaceful” nation (see Chapter Five). The transition, however, was not without political turmoil, the eye of which was located in Rio. Discontent reached a crescendo during the long drawn out, and barely successful, Paraguay War (1865-1871) orchestrated by Dom Pedro II, Pedro I’s son, crowned emperor at age 15 after his father returned to Portugal. The war’s end brought an influx of returning soldiers, including former slaves, to Rio de Janeiro. Disgruntled by their lack of pay, and not fitting into the social system of the city, many joined capoeira maltas and engaged in street crime, contributing to the elites’ fear of public disorder and desire for political reformation. 15 The landowning oligarchy consolidated into two political parties: the Conservatives, consisting of the older plantation owners of the northeast,

15 Capoeiras involvement in the Paraguay War is a central element of contemporary lore and offers several interpretations. A popular story is that slave capoeiras were conscripted into the army as a way to get them off the streets with the promise of freedom after their service. Holloway (1989: 668) points out that slaves could not be forced into military service and thus those capoeiras who fought in the Paraguay War were more likely to have been free lower class men. Soares (1994: 209), on the other hand, suggests that the promise of freedom encouraged slaves to run away and join the army voluntarily. Perhaps both slave and free capoeiras, voluntarily and involuntarily, fought in the war.
who held political power and were pro-monarchists, and the Liberals, the newer coffee barons from around Rio and São Paulo, who fought for abolition and the installment of a republic.

Capoeiras recognized that the evolving political situation and politicians’ appeals for support could work to their advantage; forging political alliances might afford them privileges of patronage and protection with the victorious side. One might expect, in keeping with the image of capoeira as a form of resistance, that the capoeiras aligned themselves with the abolitionists. In actuality, they fought on both sides, enforcing the notion that their political involvement was driven more by personal than ideological or political motives. And in fact, it was the Conservatives, rather than the Liberal abolitionists, who had the widest success at retaining the support and aid of capoeiras. As the party currently in power, the Conservatives could ensure better protection of their supporters and, unlike the Liberals, they did not balk at using such political strategies as manipulating and bullying the illiterate classes to gain votes (Soares 1994).

Capoeiras were hired as bodyguards to politicians, and as capangas or “thugs,” to patrol the voting urns, gather support for their party and rough up opponents. Malta were hired to break up political rallies (yelling out political slogans rather than their own anthems of provocation), ransack the newspaper offices of the opposite party, and attack opponent politicians in the street. The best known politicized capoeira malta was Flor da Gente, from the neighborhood of Glória, a district just south of the city center and overseen by the Conservative deputy and minister of peace, Luiz Joaquim Duque-Estrada Teixeira. During his 1872 re-election, Teixeira hired the Gloria malta to vote repeatedly under false names and physically harass voters from the Liberal party. Teixeira referred
to his capoeira aides as “a flor da minha gente” (the flower of my people), a phrase the 
malta adopted as its name. It is perhaps during this time of working for politicians that 
capoeiras adopted a particular form of dress -- dapper white suits and straw hats -- which 
some practitioners claim are the origins of the contemporary custom of wearing all white 
uniforms (Soares personal communication). Some capoeiras, such as the famous 
Manduca da Praia, even aspired to their own political careers.

Despite the Conservatives’ stronghold, support for the Liberals increased. In 
1888, in a last-ditch attempt to gain the support of the abolitionist, Princess Isabella, the 
daughter of Dom Pedro II, signed the Golden Law of Abolition. Nonetheless, little over 
a year later, on November 15, 1889, Dom Pedro was forced to abdicate and the 1st 
Republic was instituted. Once in power, the Republicans set about cleaning house. With 
the goal of wiping out the corruption and violence that had mired the city during the 
political transition, disbanding the maltas was at the top of the list. João Baptista 
Sampaio Ferraz, the first appointed police chief of the Republic, made it his mission to 
hunt down and demolish the maltas. The autonomy and protection capoeiras had 
experienced during the period of turmoil quickly came to an end. As most maltas had 
aligned with the Conservatives, their members now found themselves without protective 
ties. Within a few weeks, hundreds of capoeiras had been arrested and deported to the 
island of Fernando de Noronha off Brazil’s northeastern coast, and the maltas were 
effectively eradicated. Articles 402-4 of the new penal code issued in 1890 officially 
outlawed capoeiragem in Rio de Janeiro:

16 During my fieldwork, in my neighborhood of Catete that borders Gloria, there existed the academy of a 
capoeira group that went by the name, Flor da Gente, in honor of this famous malta.
17 With this date, Brazil was the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery. While the transatlantic slave 
trade was made illegal after 1831, it was not until 1850, under pressure from Britain, that the law was 
enforced, and even then the black market continued up until abolition.
**Art. 402** doing exercises of physical agility and dexterity, known by the denomination capoeiragem, in the streets and public squares; running amok with weapons or instruments capable of producing bodily injury, provoking tumult or disorder, and threatening, frightening or injuring specific or unspecified individuals, or instilling fear of some evil. Penalty: incarceration for two to six months.

**Single Paragraph:** It is considered aggravating circumstances to belong to a malta or gang. Upon chiefs or heads will be imposed a double penalty.

**Art 403:** In the case of repeat offense, the penalty of Art 400 will be applied to the capoeira, to the maximum degree.

**Single Paragraph:** If a foreigner, [the convicted] will be deported after serving the penalty.

**Art 404:** If during these exercises of capoeiragem [the convicted] perpetrates homicide, causes corporal injury, violates public or private propriety, disturbs public order, peace or security, or is found with weapons, he will cumulatively incur the penalties assigned to such crimes (from Lacé Lopes 1999: 46)

As Rio de Janeiro geared up to enter the new century and a new phase of intense modernization, an important chapter in capoeira history came to a close. Yet, capoeira would live on in the hidden pockets of the reformed urban landscape, and in the social imagination of the newly forming nation.

**CONCLUSION**

The title of this chapter, “resistant bodies,” captures practitioners’ understanding of capoeira history as embodied in and transmitted through their contemporary practice. In the words of one Brazilian anthropologist and capoeirista, the capoeira body is an *arquivo-arma*, or “weapon archive” in which a collective memory of the history, culture and resistance of the Afro-Brazilian people is preserved and transmitted (Tavares 1984). The mysterious origins of capoeira and the murky etymology of its name allow for multiple readings of its earliest history. These various historical interpretations add
meaning and depth to capoeiristas’ understanding and experience of their practice, allowing them to connect to real or imagined predecessors and situate themselves in contemporary Brazil.

Capoeiristas tend to agree that whether capoeira originated on African soil, in Bahia or in Rio de Janeiro, it was the particular conditions of Brazilian slavery, colonialism and political transition to independence that shaped it as a form of cultural and physical resistance. Creating new practices and adapting old ones to new conditions of oppression, Africans in Brazil resisted a complete severing of ties to their homelands while simultaneously creating bonds in their new home and contributing to the political struggle for sovereign independence. At the crossroads of solidarity and conflict, artistic expression, violence and politics, capoeira flourished in 19th century Rio de Janeiro as a strategy of the most disenfranchised citizens to navigate and negotiate the divided social landscape.

Keeping in mind that “resistance” is never a monolithic and united movement (see Introduction), this chapter illustrated that from its earliest manifestations capoeira has been structured by internal hierarchies, power struggles and conflict: in their battles to carve out territorial and social spaces in Rio de Janeiro, the 19th century malas and capoeiras fought mainly amongst themselves. By the end of the 19th century, their struggles for power even led them into alliances with the political and elite forces of the city, a strategy that was ultimately their downfall. In the next chapter, which begins where this one left off and journeys up to the dawn of the 21st century, we see how internal conflicts and struggles, shaped by the political and social conditions of Brazil, have continued to define and transform the practice of capoeira.
March 2002
Rio de Janeiro

I spent today seeing the “other side” of Rio. My Brazilian hosts, acquaintances of a friend from home, picked me up in the morning and we drove to the Yacht Club in Botafogo where their sons take sailing lessons. Situated alongside a polluted beach in the inner bay popular among some of my friends for playing soccer and training capoeira, the high walls of the club hide a private marina, posh hotel, outdoor bar and swimming pool. In the afternoon my hosts insisted on showing me the house they are building in Barra de Tijuca. Leaving the inner bay of Botafogo we drove along the coast, passing the beaches of Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon, and traversed the cliffs that separate this newest development of the city. Despite the stretches of white, relatively clean beaches, I find Barra ugly and depressing for the way it mimics the most unattractive elements of suburban United States. Flanking the super highway is an unending stream of shopping malls, car dealerships, mega supermarkets, high-rise condominiums and gated communities. My hosts’ new house was in a more tasteful (and expensive) development separated from the superhighway by a canal and tucked against the hills of Floresta de Tijuca, the largest urban forest in the world. Their house, nearing completion, was magnificent: three stories, huge bedrooms with private baths for each family member and at the top a crow’s nest office commanding a 360-degree view of the ocean and mountains. Pressed for time on the way back, instead of returning along the highway that hugs the coast, we took a route that passes under Rocinha, the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro with several hundred thousand inhabitants. My hostess apologized for the eyesore, complaining that it was a blemish on the beauty of the city. She told me that favelados “live like animals” and that the government should destroy the favelas and build proper housing on the peripheries of the city. I suggested that there might be advantages to living in Rocinha rather than at the edges of the city: it is closer to work for many of its residents and there are the ocean views and breezes not available inland. My hostess retorted that they do not deserve such luxuries as they do not pay property taxes and that they would just have to learn to live with the commute. Her husband added that he too, after all, had an hour commute to work. Not wanting to be an ungracious guest, I refrained from pointing out that his commute is in an air conditioned car from a beautiful house to a spacious office and not on a crowded, hot and dangerous city bus from a nondescript cramped government apartment to a low paying menial job.

The geographic apartheid of Rio de Janeiro has inspired the re-christening of the cidade maravilhosa, or “marvelous city”-- a epithet bestowed at the start of the 20th
century -- as the *cidade partida*, or “divided city” (Ventura 1993). The spatial segregation so apparent today offers visual evidence of a process of racial and economic marginalization that began in Rio de Janeiro at the end of the 19th century. Beginning where the last chapter left off just after abolition and the establishment of the 1st Republic in 1889, and ending at the time of my fieldwork, this chapter traces this process of segregation and how it affected the practitioners and practice of capoeira in Rio de Janeiro. Embedded within larger political changes in Brazil, the marginalization of many of capoeira’s practitioners was accompanied, with bitter irony, by a growing public acceptance and celebration of capoeira as a manifestation of *brasilidade* or “national culture.” In order to understand the political ideology that sparked this transformation in the public image of capoeira from a social threat and “moral disease” to a “national sport,” we must return to Rio de Janeiro at the close of the 19th century.

**CIVILIZING RIO AND TAMING CAPOEIRA (1889 – 1930)**

Like yellow fever, which for unknown reasons attacks so many people and which everyone wants to see vanquished, capoeiragem, a national fight that is degenerating into murders, deserves persecution without rest, war without conditions (Moraes Filho 1999 [1893]: 257).

Though the maltas were eradicated by 1890, capoeiragem lingered on in the crevices of Rio de Janeiro. The city, the population of which continued to swell with increased external and internal migration, was mired in filth and disease. With an ambiguity typical of 19th century portrayals of capoeiragem, in his essay Moraes Filho simultaneously celebrates the bravery of the *capoeiras* and compares their criminal

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1 “Como a febra amarela, que não sabemos porque espanta tanta gente e quer-se a todo o transe debelar, a capoeiragem, que é uma luta nacional, degenerando em assinatos, tem merecido perseguição sem descanso, guerra sem condições.”
activities to one of the epidemics sweeping the city. Evoking Darwin’s “laws of heredity,” Moraes Filho describes capoeira as a “national fight,” that had to be wrested away from its “barbarous” African practitioners and elevated to a nobler status. He cites several illustrious cariocas -- politicians, schoolteachers, and military men -- who, through their own practice, demonstrated the potential worth of capoeira in the proper hands (Filho1999 [1893]). Similarly described by a chief of police as the “strangest moral disease of this great and civilized city” (Holloway 1989: 669), capoeiragam, or rather those of the lower classes that practiced it, were considered an obstacle in the project to modernize and “civilize” Rio.  

Raising its newly minted flag emblazoned with the positivist motto “Order and Progress,” the First Republic of Brazil focused its energy on the capital city. Bolstered by European scientific thought, including racist doctrines of social Darwinism and eugenics, Republicans embarked on a campaign to beautify and sanitize a city that had become increasingly overcrowded and squalid.

*O Cortiço*, written by Aluísio Azevedo in 1890 and one of Brazil’s most famous works of literature, vividly captures the everyday struggles that shaped life for many of Rio’s inhabitants at the dawn of the First Republic. The realist novel portrays life in a cortiço (beehive), as were known the overpopulated boarding houses that sprang up throughout the city center. Abolition brought an increase in internal migration as former slaves moved to the city in pursuit of employment. At the same time European migration increased, encouraged by a government that, fearing the new population of free slaves, wished to swell the work force with European stock. During the course of the First Republic the population of Rio doubled, from just over half a million to over one million.

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2 This term comes form Teresa A. Meade (1997) *Civilizing Rio: Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City 1889-1930*, from which this section draws.
The new residents of Rio de Janeiro found themselves cramped together in sub-
adequate living quarters. São Romão, the Botafogo cortiço portrayed in Azevedo’s work,
is a heterogeneous mix of inhabitants. Among them are an immigrant from the Northeast
State of Bahia and her Rio born boyfriend, who represents the unfulfilled hopes of the
politicized *capoeiras*. In his description of Firmo, Azevedo writes, “between the ages of
twelve and twenty [he] belonged to various gangs of hired thugs…made a name for
himself in various quarters…but had given up electoral battles in disgust because he had
never managed to get a job in a government office” (Azevedo 2000: 51).

The residents of São Romão live in constant friction amongst themselves --
slinging racial and sexist slurs, fighting over spouses, lovers and washtubs -- and with the
greedy slumlord, a Portuguese immigrant determined to pull himself up by his bootstraps.
They find moments of solidarity, however, over guitar playing, singing and dancing on
their days off, and in fiercely defending their living quarters from attacks by a group of
*capoeiras* from a rival cortiço. Their greatest fear and motivation for solidarity,
however, is invasion by the state authorities. When a bloody fight between the
Portuguese stick-fighting Jerônimo and the Brazilian capoeira-fighting Firmo brings the
police, the residents of São Romão band together to block their entry:

Men armed with clubs, axes, and iron pipes poured from doorways. A common
determination stirred them to solidarity, as though they would be dishonored for
all eternity if the police set foot into São Romão. A simple fight between two
rivals was fine and good! May the best man win and keep the girl! But now it
was a matter of defending their homes, their community, their loved ones and
prized possessions…They were all terrified of the policemen, who spread
destruction whenever they entered a slum like São Romão. With the excuse of
stamping out gambling and drunkenness the cops burst into homes, smashing
everything in sight. It was an old feud. (Azevedo 2000: 104).
In this passage Azevedo makes clear that police interventions in the internal conflicts of the cortiços were not about protecting the inhabitants; rather they were an excuse to enter, destroy property and make arrests, all part of the larger project to “civilize” Rio. Succinctly stated in an 1895 newspaper editorial, “to speak of a policed country is the same thing as to speak of a civilized country” (Meade 1997: 17).

Justified by a need to eradicate the disease and filth that were festering in the cramped neighborhoods, the cortiços, narrow alleyways and many churches in the city center were demolished and replaced by large boulevards modeled after those of Paris. Urban reforms redefined the cityscape and allocation of space: the wealthy would enjoy the amenities of the city center while the poor would be pushed to the peripheries of the city, out of sight and out of mind. The promise of new government housing after the destruction of downtown tenements was more often then not reneged, and the displaced were left to fend for themselves. Their options were to move out to the subúrbios, a spreading conglomeration of settlements in the industrial zones to the north and west of the city, or to settle in one of the hillside shantytowns, or favelas, that began to dot the city by the beginning of the 20th century. The latter was often the more attractive option, as the favelas were closer to the resources of the city center such as electricity, food, water and transportation. The settlements in the subúrbios that grew up around the textile factories and mills lacked running water, paved roads, electricity and convenient transportation, and the residents had to rely on the overpriced markets owned by the factories to buy their food and supplies. While the Zona Norte slowly developed with

3 The first favela appeared on a hill near the War Ministry when a group of war veterans took up vigilance to protest their lack of compensation for fighting in the Canudos Campaign (discussed in Chapter Five). The veterans named their occupancy after Favela Hill from which the last assault on Canudos had been launched. The name subsequently was applied to other hillside shantytowns (Meade 1997: 71 n. 61).
little aid from the government, money was pumped into wealthy enclaves developing in the beachfront areas of Ipanema and Copacabana. Residents of the Zona Sul were far fewer than those in the Zona Norte, yet a passenger trolley system quickly developed to connect this area to the center. Residents in the Zona Norte meanwhile, had to make do with a few passenger cars on the dirty, slow industrial trains.4

The state invaded and redefined not only the living quarters of the poor, but their bodies as well. In the early 20th century a public health program was put into place as smallpox and yellow fever epidemics continued to ravage the city. While little was done to curtail the breeding grounds of disease, such as stagnant water and open sewage, in 1904 a smallpox vaccination was mandated. This state medical intervention, which targeted but was not limited to the poor, catalyzed a citywide revolt. Though small protests against poor living conditions, forced displacement, unemployment and high prices had been going on since the installment of the First Republic, the inexplicable threat of the invasion of bodies with needles was the last straw. Using the only weapon at their disposal -- their bodies -- cariocas engaged in street riots and collective acts of violence. The revolt crossed racial, class and gender lines and raged for several days, temporarily stopping enforcement of the vaccination.

A less invasive, and more insidious means of “civilizing” Brazilian bodies found voice in an emerging racial discourse. Based on the eugenics movement sweeping Europe, this discourse promoted an ideology of *embranquecimento* or “whitening.” In 1890 a law was passed that banned blacks and dark-skinned immigrants, and at the same

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4 Today, commuter trains that run along these same tracks and connect the peripheries of the city to the center continue to be notoriously slow, irregular and dirty. Most subúrbio residents rely on the bus system and for those lucky enough, the new metro system that services mainly the city center but stops in a limited number of destinations in the subúrbios.
time European immigration was actively promoted. Through miscegenation, which was encouraged rather than frowned on in Brazil, it was hoped that the morally corrupt African blood of the Brazilian people would be diluted and strengthened by the sturdy, upright European blood. Supported by Social Darwanism, the ideology of “whitening” was promoted as a way to ensure the survival of the Brazilian nation and its people. Also of increasing national concern were military training, hygiene, diet, child rearing and physical education (cf Besse 1996). The search for a national gymnastics, an idea that dated back to early 19th century Denmark (Assunção 2005: 15) and was of increasing concern to European nations in their development of militaries, became a preoccupation of Brazilian elite. It was inevitable that they would turn to capoeira, the only fighting art to have developed on Brazilian soil.

**Capoeiragem and Brazilian Gymnastics**

Figure 9: A Cabezada; O Corta Capim; A Queixada. From *Gymnastica Nacional (Capoeiragem) Methodisada e Regrada* Aníbal Burlamaqui, 1908

Rio’s famed politician and writer, Coelho Neto, who is credited with baptizing his beloved city “a cidade maravilhosa” (“the marvelous city”), an epithet by which Rio is
still known today, recognized the potential worth of capoeira. He allegedly recalls associating with “colored laborers” shortly after the Paraguayan War in order to “learn the secrets of capoeiragem, so useful for those in politics, in teaching, or in the Army and Navy.” (Freyre 1970: 12). Other members of the ruling class apparently held similar views as Neto; in 1907, “a distinguished official of the Brazilian army” published in Rio de Janeiro a small pamphlet entitled Guia do Capoeira ou GymnasticaBrazilieira (Guide to Capoeira or Brazilian Gymnastics). Perhaps uncertain how his promotion of an activity that he describes in the preface as “currently represented by wretched bums…such that the worst insult you can give a youth is to call him a capoeira” would be received, he published the pamphlet anonymously under the initials O.D.C. He proposed rescuing capoeira from its current degenerative state and elevating it to the status of Brazilian Gymnastics on a par with English boxing or French savate. With a few instructions on proper attire -- short hair so as to avoid holds from the adversary, baggy pants to facilitate free movement of the legs, and sturdy shoes -- he provided a guide to the posture, attacks and defensive moves of capoeira.

Two years later, on May 1st 1909, Rio de Janeiro would witness first hand the efficacy of capoeira as a national fighting technique. In the International Pavilion on the recently inaugurated Central Avenue, crowds watched a match between the Japanese world ju-jitsu champion, Sada Miako, and an Afro-Brazilian stevedore by the name of Francisco de Silva Ciriaco. Much to their surprise, the underdog Ciriaco ended the match when he felled Miako with a rabo-de-arraia, a low spinning kick characteristic of
capoeira. The crowd took to the streets with the champion on their shoulders, proclaiming the match a victory of Brazil over Asia (Soares 1994: 9-10).  

Nowhere in ODC’s pamphlet are the African origins of capoeira mentioned. The few accompanying drawings are of faceless, hairless men (in proper attire) illustrating various movements. The original work lost, the copy in existence is a reconstruction from notes taken by the sportsman Aníbal Burlamaqui (known as Zuma), who twenty years later would publish his own, more complete guide. In Gymnastica Nacional (Capoeiragaem) Methodisada e Regrada (National Gymnastic (Capoeiragem): Method and Rules), published in Rio in 1928, Zuma provided what was missing from ODC’s pamphlet. The first chapter is dedicated to the history of capoeira, and the idea that it developed (in 1697) as a “terrible weapon” of the slaves against their masters and the capitães de matto (slave catchers). In Zuma’s vision, though Africans created capoeira, they did so in the unique, tropical environment of Brazil; they developed the fighting style not from any skills they may have brought from Africa, but by interacting with the Brazilian flora and fauna (e.g., imitating monkeys in the trees). With this historical interpretation the author laid the foundation for his methodology and rules that would turn capoeira into “a sport, an exercise, a game…” (1928: 15). The ensuing guide presented a thoroughly Europeanized capoeira, as evidenced in the illustrations in Figure 9. Taking inspiration from English boxing -- e.g., wearing ankle boots and imposing three-minute rounds -- Zuma outlined a series of exercises and rules for fighting capoeira in a ring. Despite this Europeanization of capoeira, Zuma’s acceptance at least of the

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5 Miako won subsequent matches with capoeira fighters in the Amazon city of Belém, where he settled and taught ju-jitsu. One of his students, Carlos Gracie, would go on to develop Brazilian-style ju-jitsu, which, like capoeira, has gained enormous popularity in Brazil and internationally in the past several decades.

6 Historian Assunção suggests that Zuma should be credited with inventing the myth, still very current among practitioners today, that slaves developed capoeira in the bush and on quilombos (2005: 18).
initial contributions of African slaves to the art form foreshadowed the changing tide in racial thought in Brazil that, as we will see below, came to fruition in the 1930s.

**Capoeiristas and Malandros of the Belle Epoque**

![Figure 10: A Cocada; A Lamparina; O Corta Capim. Drawings by Kalixto Cordiero, 1906](image)

The desire of ODC and Zuma to see capoeira develop into a system of national gymnastics never made it very far. However, their attempts to reshape the fighting art as a regulated and regimented sport were the first forays into what would become and continues to be a highly polemic issue among practitioners: if and how capoeira should be treated as a sport. The term *capoeirista*, unclear exactly when in the 20th century it was introduced, marks the shift towards a sport’s model; similar terms ending in *ista* are used for other athletes (e.g. *alpinista* for mountaineer; *ciclista* for a cyclist). Today, some practitioners continue to refer to themselves with the older title, *capoeiras*, as a sign of protest of the “sportification” of capoeira.

As we will see in the next section, the transforming of capoeira into sport would heat up in the 1930s, resulting in a lasting bifurcation in the style of playing and pedagogy. Before examining that process, it is important to look at another very different image of the capoeira body that was percolating in the Brazilian social imagination.
The illustrations by Kalixto Cordeiro in Figure 10, which appeared in a Rio magazine *Revista Kosmos* in 1906, make a stark contrast to ODC’s clean-cut faceless figures and Zuma’s athletes dressed in gymnast costumes. The suits, ties, dress shoes and hats suggest a “modern” version of the 19th century *capoeiras*. But who were these early 20th century practitioners of capoeira and where did they roam?

In their effort to clean up and redefine Rio, city officials were concerned not only with material conditions of the urban landscape but also with the moral stance of its inhabitants (Meade 1997:94). The central neighborhoods of Lapa and Glória (former haunts of the maltas) were considered morally dangerous zones not just because they catered to the city’s gambling and erotic night life, but because as entertainment districts they attracted a cross-section of Rio’s citizens. After work hours the cafes, restaurants and bars filled with businessmen, government employees, manual workers and students. The nightclubs, which similarly drew a wide variety of clientele were some of the first establishments to be destroyed in renovations of the city center. Thus urban reforms were an attempt not only to regulate the living and leisure space of the poor, but also to dictate “appropriate” entertainment and cultural values of the wealthy (Meade 1997: 41-43). The turn of the 19th to 20th centuries, the “belle epoque” of Rio, saw a flourishing of elite culture that mimicked that of Europe (cf Needell 1987). Nonetheless, alongside this elite culture, popular culture -- in particular the music and dance of samba -- continued to develop on the streets of poor neighborhoods and in the hillside favelas and continued to draw admirers from a mix of social classes. At the peculiar crossroads of this elite and popular culture emerged the figure of the *malandro*. Dapperly dressed and a frequenter of the city center’s houses of night life and the samba parties high up on the hills, the
malandro would become a powerful and pervasive trope in cariocas’, Brazilians’, and capoeiristas’ self-image.

Glossed in English as ruffian, rogue, hustler, con artist and trickster, the malandro is a lower class character that uses his charm, talents and street smarts to navigate various segments of society. Always impeccably dressed in a white linen suit, shiny shoes and straw hat, he cultivates a particular manner of walking and talking that suggests a man of leisure; the malandro is a poor cousin to the elite flaneur, the Parisian dandy around town. But without money to bankroll his chosen lifestyle, the malandro gets by as a con artist and opportunist who lives off of others. Women, charmed by his good looks, talents as a dancer and musician, and valor as a capoeirista, often fall victim to his charms. The malandro is thus also a quintessentially masculine archetype. It is perhaps rather surprising then that Rio’s most famous malandro was a homosexual transvestite. Born in 1900, João Francisco dos Santos was a light skinned Afro-Brazilian street kid who grew up in the bars and brothels of Lapa. In his teens, he took the stage name Madam Satã when he began performing transvestite cabaret shows, and supposedly used capoeira to defend himself on the streets.

The story of João Francisco dos Santos -- recently resurrected in a big budget film entitled Madam Satã -- emphasizes the importance of the body as the malandro’s tool and weapon. The body is the site of malandragem, the code of ethics by which the malandro lives. Malandragem is the art of being cunning, deceitful, flexible, adaptable, creative, intelligent, perceptive, prepared. Above all else, malandragem is the art of self-preservation. Closely related to malandragem is the concept of the jeitinho, “little way” or favor. Appearing in literature, pop culture, sociology and anthropology, malandragem
and jeitinho have been used to interpret everything from Brazilian’s distinctive way of playing soccer, doing politics, relating socially and navigating state bureaucracy (cf DaMatta 1991; Mello e Souza 1993; Soares 1994). Today eulogized as quintessentially Brazilian, malandragem, it is often forgotten, emerged from particular conditions of class and race prejudice and marginalization (cf Soares 1994). In a world of unpredictability and instability -- food might be on the table one day but not the next -- the poor turned to any means, dishonest or otherwise, and more often then not against those not much better off then themselves, to scrape by. Their bodies, used as sexual objects to cull favors or as weapons for crime, were their only means of survival. Malandragem and all its ambivalent value has come to be a central aspect of capoeira (see Chapter Three). The lone malandro in Lapa, wooing the women and pulling a straight razor on his enemies, kept alive the flame of capoeira in Rio de Janeiro at the dawn of the 20th century. But we must now turn briefly to another part of the country where, as Brazil struggled to define itself as a nation, the art and practice of capoeira would be forever transformed.

**BRASILIDADE AND THE FOLKLORIZATION / SPORTIFICATION OF CAPOEIRA (1930-1964)**

The 1930s were a pivotal moment in the history of Brazil and capoeira. The country was ripe for a political and ideological revolution. Rapid urbanization and industrialization, coupled with a lack of economic and agrarian reform, was widening the gap between rich and poor and sowing discontent. Strong regionalist sentiments and insurrections in various states threatened to divide the country. When a military coup placed Getúlio Vargas in power on October 3, 1930, the majority of the population
welcomed their new populist leader who promised educational, political and economic reform. By 1937 an authoritarian state modeled on Italian fascism had been established and Vargas had followed through on few of his promises. However, his success in uniting the country through a nationalism that celebrated the culture of o povo (the people) gained him the nickname “father of the poor” and ensured his legacy as Brazil’s most loved leader.  

Creating a national identity or brasilidade (Brazilian-ness) had already caught the imagination of intellectuals and artists. In the 1920s Oswald de Andrade and a group of São Paulo artists and writers had created the movimento antropófago (“cannibalistic movement”). Through their art and manifestos they urged modernists to cast off the imitative and dependent relationship with Europe that had so far defined cultural, social and artistic life in Brazil. They proposed developing an autotheneous national identity based on a “cannibalistic” ingestion, mixing and regurgitation of the images and symbols of Brazil’s many cultural strands and the foreign images of Brazil as the “other.”

More influential than the movimento antropófago in defining the new nation-state, however, were the writings of sociologist Gilberto Freyre. Influenced by the anti-racist thinking of Franz Boas, with whom he studied at Columbia University, Freyre introduced a new paradigm for thinking about Brazil. Diverging from other Brazilian anthropologists of the time (e.g., Nina Rodrigues and Artur Ramos) who viewed “whitening” as a way to eventually wipe out the undesirable African physical and cultural traits in Brazil, Freyre celebrated miscegenation and cultural mixing as the unique force

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7 A museum in the Palácio Império where the Royal family lived and later Getúlio Vargas lived (and shot himself at the end of his second term as a democratically elected president) has an exhibit of the dictator in which, among other things, his pajamas with the bullet hole are on display and there is a room dedicated to the testimonies of people named after him.
of the nation. In Masters and Slaves (Casa Grande e Senzala 1933), the first volume of his trilogy on Brazilian history, Freyre painted a romantic portrait of Brazil’s patriarchal colonialism. Stressing the unique contributions of Europeans, Africans and Indians in the formative years of the colony, Freyre argued that these contributions and the intimate relations between slaves and masters paved the road for “racial democracy” in contemporary Brazil. While recognizing African-derived cultural practices such as dance, food, religion, music and capoeira as the pride of Brazilian national culture, Freyre did not question the established racial hierarchy. In his work blacks are celebrated for their cultural contributions, “mulattos” for their physical beauty, virile sexuality and performative talents, and whites for their ability to order and rule.

Brazil displays prime examples of the “invention of tradition” that so often accompanies intense periods of nation building (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). Under the influence of Freyre’s ideas, certain characteristics of Afro-Brazilian and regional culture were elevated to national symbols: feijoada, a cheap dish that had been popular among slaves as it consisted of black beans and leftover scrap meat, became the “national plate,” no longer eaten only by the poor but also served in fancy restaurants; samba, an African based music and dance originating in Rio’s favelas, became the national music (cf Vianna 1999). While the cultural traits and practices of the marginalized people in Brazil were elevated to national symbols, their practitioners continued to be persecuted: police broke up samba parties in favelas, and raided the terreiros, or “houses” where practitioners of Candomblé, the Yoruba based spirit possession religion, gathered to worship. As academics, intellectuals and artists became preoccupied with finding “authentic” and “pure” culture, their eyes turned away from Rio towards the Northeast
state of Bahia, and in particular Salvador with its majority black population (80% as opposed to the national 45%). While the lone malandro kept the flame of capoeira alive in Rio, it was in Salvador that two Afro-Brazilian capoeira mestres -- Mestre Bimba and Mestre Pastinha -- took advantage of the new political environment, and forever transformed the way in which capoeira would be practiced and transmitted.  

**Mestre Bimba and Capoeira Regional**

Mestre Bimba -- one of capoeira’s most acclaimed figures -- has generated an extensive and polemic body of literature, songs, art and debate over his life, philosophy and teachings. Bimba, who has been called a charismatic leader (cf Vieira 1996), is praised by his supporters and criticized by his detractors for “modernizing” capoeira. It is important to acknowledge, however, the role that the particular historical moment played in the formulation and acceptance of his ideas. The political environment that promoted Afro-Brazilian culture as national identity and the introduction of international codified combat sports to Brazil were major contributors to the new style, Capoeira Regional, developed by Bimba. Bimba’s innovations in the style and teaching of capoeira fundamentally altered its social practice and acceptance, the results of which are still felt today.

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8 Salvador is located on the Bay of All Saints in the state of Bahia. The names Salvador and Bahia are often used interchangeably to refer to the city. Here I will use Bahia as it encompasses not only the city of Salvador but also the surrounding areas, particular the towns of Santo Amaro and Cachoeira in the Recôncavo - a fertile sugarcane and tobacco growing area and an important site for the development of African-derived practices such as capoeira.

9 See for example, Almeida B. (1986); Almeida R. (1994); Moura (1993); Muniz (2002); Pires (2002); Abreu F. (1999).

10 See Assunção (2004: 129-132) for a discussion of the context of modernizing combat fighting in the 1920s and 30s.
By popular account, Manoel dos Reis Machado, born on November 23, 1899, received the nickname Bimba (little penis) from the midwife who won a bet over the expected gender of the baby. Growing up in a lower class neighborhood of Salvador, Bimba worked from the age of 13 in various jobs including stevedore, cart driver and carpenter. It was at this time that he was introduced to capoeira by an African nicknamed Bentinho who worked as a ship captain. Bimba’s development as a capoeirista was also greatly influenced by his father who was a champion in *batuque*, a kicking and tripping dance/fight/game also of African origin. There is some controversy as to exactly when Bimba began developing his own style of capoeira and teaching it, but certainly by the 1930s he had established himself as mestre with followers and was publicly expressing his disgust with the current state of capoeira. His proclaimed goal was to simultaneously distance capoeira from its violent past and to rescue it from sinking into future banality, becoming a mere museum piece in folklore and tourist shows. In order to understand his project, we must briefly examine how capoeira was viewed in Bahia at the time.

The organized capoeira maltas of Rio de Janeiro that created such problems for the city’s authorities were not a visible force in Bahia. Though the 1890 penal code applied to the whole country, the article outlawing capoeira was rarely enforced outside of Rio. Thus the rich documentation of carioca capoeira in the form of police and newspaper reports does not exist for Bahian capoeira. If capoeira gangs existed in Salvador, they were unorganized and amorphous entities that rarely engaged in communal acts of violence such as gang fighting or rioting (cf Assunção 2005). Pedro

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11 Nicknames, popular in Brazil and an essential marker of capoeira identity, are discussed in Chapter Four.
12 Batuque is an ambiguous term. The Portuguese used it both in Angola and colonial Brazil to designate any circle dancing, drumming and singing. In 19th century Bahia it became associated with a circle dance/fight in which one dancer attempts to knock down a stationary adversary with sweeps and trips. In Rio de Janeiro the dance is known as *samba duro* or *pernada carioca*.
Gordilho, the equivalent of Rio’s Sampaio Ferraz, was known for his severe repression of Afro-Brazilian practices in Salvador, especially Candomblé, yet there appear to have been few arrests for capoeira.

While written documentation of capoeira activity and repression in Salvador is scarce, there does exist a rich oral history of the names and stories of individual capoeiras from the region. Mixing historical tidbits with legends, which often include supernatural strength and powers, these stories portray a generation of valentões, or “tough guys.” Holding a similar position in the social imagination of Bahians as the capoeiras and malandros in Rio, these valentões were feared and admired. Along with their reputation for bravery and violent behavior, the valentões were associated with idleness and vagrancy. Thus another popular label for capoeira at the time, and still referred to in capoeira slang and songs today, was vadiação, from vadiar meaning to “hang out” or “mess around.”

The most famous of the valentões, eulogized in many songs and stories, was Besouro Mangangá who lived a short life (1885-1924) in the town of Santo Amaro near Salvador. Famed for his magical power and fierce exploits, he is credited with, among other things, battling an entire police force, having a bulletproof body, and possessing the ability to transform into a beetle (besouro).

The names of some of the famous Bahian valentões (e.g., Beloved of God and Black Leopard) and the gender politics of 1930s capoeira are recorded in the pages of American anthropologist, Ruth Landes’ City of Women. A student of Franz Boas, Landes

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^13 See Assunção (2004:119-125) for a discussion of valentões and vadiação. He persuasively argues that valentão and capoeira were not synonymous terms in Bahia: while some capoeiras may have been valentões, not all valentões were capoeiras and vice versa. In fact, as Assunção points out, the ethics of malandragem contradicts the posture of the valentão who openly boasts about and displays his violent capacities rather than disguising them. His point well taken, I would argue, however, that malandragem would only become a defining aspect of capoeira as the 20th century progressed.
was part of the pioneering wave in American anthropology that sought to distance itself from 19th century social evolutionary thought. As a result of the attempt to disarticulate the concepts of race and culture, Brazil and its large African-descent population became of interest as a case of comparison to the United States. Landes, like many of her peers, was seduced by the Brazilian nationalist rhetoric of the 1930s and concluded even before she started her year of fieldwork in 1938 that there was no racism in Brazil, and therefore race relations do not (explicitly) enter into her study of Candomblé in Bahia. In the ethnography Landes devotes several pages to a capoeira roda she witnessed at a religious festival. Intrigued, she asks her companion, Brazilian folklorist Edison Carneiro, why the Candomblé priestesses disapproved of capoeira:

Well, they say it’s because the men of capoeira do not believe in God. They drink a lot of rum, they are tough customers, sometimes they are lawbreakers -- it’s another world. Personally, I think it’s because capoeiristas are all men, and there’s no place for women among them. (1994 [1947]: 92).

Whether or not there existed animosity between the practitioners of Candomblé and capoeira is debatable: Mestre Bimba, along with his mother and wife, was a practitioner of the religion. And in fact, many of the rituals that Bimba introduced into his capoeira practice and teaching appear to have come out of his involvement in Candomblé (cf Assunção 2004). For example, the symbol of his capoeira school, the Star

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14 In fact racial tensions run throughout the ethnography, particularly in Landes’ experience with taking as her research assistant and lover, the Afro-Brazilian folklorist, Edison Carneiro. Landes’ beautifully written ethnography proved too progressive for its time and was harshly rejected as “unscientific” by her colleagues, particularly Melville Herskovitz (see his 1948 book review in American Anthropologist). She was criticized for her methodology (her personal involvement with the Afro-Brazilian Edison Carneiro), conclusions (which demonstrated the centrality of women to candomblé, a dynamic religion particular to the social conditions of Bahia and not simply an African “retention”) and writing style (self-reflexive). In a later essay reflecting on her experience as a woman in the field, Landes expressed a view of fieldwork that resonates with the notion of “sensual scholarship” that grounds this dissertation: “Field work serves an idiosyncrasy of perception that cannot separate the sensuousness of life from its abstractions, nor the researcher’s personality from his experiences” (In Golde 1986: 121).
of Solomon with a cross at the top and an R in the middle, as well as his use of the greeting *axe* ("divine energy" in Yoruba), are both drawn from Candomblé. Most likely other capoeiristas during the 1930s were also involved in capoeira. Some practitioners today even trace the tradition of wearing all white to the fact that capoeiristas would come to street rodas, often held on Sundays and feast days, directly from worshipping in houses of Candomblé were all white clothing is worn (cf Downey 2005: 103-4).

Assunção suggests that in Bahia, as opposed to Rio, capoeira was viewed as a spiritual and ritual arena and thus not particularly conducive to violence. He sites the fact that most stories about the violent exploits of legendary Bahian capoeiristas usually take place outside of the immediate context of capoeira (Assunção 2005: 127).15

While the relationship between religion and capoeira remains murky in Landes’ ethnography, what is clear in Carneiro’s response is that capoeira in Bahia in the 1930s was still considered a rough and exclusively masculine activity. Some sources and songs suggest that a few brave women challenged this male domain. However, beyond nicknames -- Maria Homen, Maria Cabaço, Palmeirona, Júlia Fogareira, Maria Pernambucana, Maria Cachoeira, Maria Pé no Mato, Odília, Tonha Rolo do Mar -- little is known about these women. The most famous legends are those of Maria Homen (Maria Man) and Maria Doze Homens (Mary Twelve Men), possibly the same person as it is not uncommon for historic *capoeiras* to be known by several variations of a

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15 The intersection of religion and capoeira is contested terrain today: while most practitioners emphatically state that capoeira is *not* a religion, many incorporate elements of their religious practice into their capoeira practice. While many practitioners in Bahia are also practitioners of candomblé, among the groups I worked with in Rio this was less common. In fact, often at presentations in favelas and poor neighborhoods, the capoeiristas in charge would reassure the watching crowd that even though capoeira includes drumming and wearing white clothing, as in candomblé and umbanda, it is not affiliated with either. There are a high number of *crentes* (evangelists) among the poor in Rio, and African-based spirit religions are considered *macumba* (a derogatory term for candomblé or umbanda which denotes “black magic.”)
nickname. The nicknames are ambiguous: on the one hand perhaps laudatory, suggesting a female *capoeira* with the strength of one or many men; and on the other hand derogatory, suggesting masculine woman (in appearance or sexual preference), or in the case of Maria Twelve Men, a woman with many sexual partners. As we will see below, it would take another thirty years for women to really enter the capoeira roda.

Mestre Bimba has been referred to as the last of the valentões (cf Pires 2002; Downey 1998). Tall and muscular, he cut a formidable figure and held a contentious relationship with the police. A famous newspaper article from August 10, 1936 entitled “It’s Not Easy to Catch a Capoeirista” reported Bimba’s intervention in the attack on a young boy by a rowdy group of policemen. In attempting to tear the boy away from a policeman’s grip, he “only missed being wounded by bayonet because he used his capoeira technique to avoid it” (quoted in Almeida 1986:33). Though proud of his exploits, supposedly boasting of having been arrested for fighting for the twenty-fourth time on his 20\textsuperscript{th} birthday (Assunção 2004: 141), Bimba nevertheless proclaimed a mission to remove all associations of capoeira with violent and marginal characters and elevate it to a respectable activity of reputable citizens. At the same time, he reacted strongly against the superficial presentations of capoeira for tourists on the street or in folklore shows of “authentic” Bahian culture in which it was stripped of its essential power and meaning. He pronounced himself the defender of capoeira as an effective and powerful fighting art.

In order to disassociate his capoeira from irrational violence or banal performance, Mestre Bimba developed a new style that emphasized discipline and

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16 Another story has it that Bimba hide from the police by spending a night at the top of a mango tree, tying himself to the branches so as not to fall should doze (cf Pires 2002: 59).
efficiency. Drawing from batuque and other Brazilian dance/fight forms as well as international combat arts such as ju-jitsu and French savate, he expanded the established capoeira repertoire to include 52 attacks and defenses.\(^{17}\) In the 1930s he began challenging Bahian *capoeiras* and other combat fighters to ring matches.\(^{18}\) His success in these matches won him a second nickname, Três Pancadas (Three Blows), for allegedly no opponent could withstand more than three of his strikes. Eventually, however, with increasing criticism from other Bahian capoeiristas, who claimed he was taking capoeira too far from its roots, and pressure from other competitive combat fighters to codify capoeira so as to better fit match regulations, Bimba abandoned his ring career and concentrated on teaching. It was in this domain, more than in stylistic changes, that Bimba most profoundly transformed the social practice and transmission of capoeira. In opening the first capoeira academy Bimba moved the space of instruction from the streets to the academy; formalized the pedagogy; solidified individual and group identity through ritual; greatly widened the social base of students; and transformed the public image of capoeira.

Practitioners and academics often present Bimba’s innovations as if they were completely new to capoeira. I would argue however that, from the little we know of 19th century capoeira, much of what characterized Mestre Bimba’s approach was already in place in the organization and activities of the Rio de Janeiro’s maltas: the gangs of *capoeiras* maintained internal hierarchies; had a diversity of members in terms of occupation and ethnicity; had specific training places and times; used a scaffolding

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\(^{17}\) The extent to which Bimba was influenced by other combat arts and by other Brazilians attempting to codify capoeira, such as Aníbal Burlamaqui, is a source of undying polemic. See Assunção (2004: 133) and Lacé (2002).

\(^{18}\) See Abreu (1999), *Bimba é Bamba: A Capoeira No Ringue* for a detailed account of 13 of these matches.
pedagogy in which students learned skills incrementally (e.g., moving from wooden
sticks to more dangerous weapons); and had rituals of initiation for novices (Abreu 1886;
Filho1999 [1893]). Thus, it would seem that rather than breaking completely with the
past, Mestre Bimba was reshaping a social practice -- one that incorporated group
identity, solidarity, internal upward mobility and pedagogy -- into a mold that would fit
into the legitimate context of formal education. This might explain the name under
which Mestre Bimba registered his capoeira school in 1937. The name, Centro de
_Cultura Física Regional_ (Center of Regional Physical Culture), is a source of controversy
among practitioners today. While some claim that the name is an indication that Bimba
wished to introduce a new sport only tangentially related to capoeira, others claim that he
was forced to use this pseudonym as the illegality of capoeira prohibited openly
advertising its practice. Yet, as has been noted above, the law prohibiting capoeira was
rarely enforced in Bahia. Thus I would argue that in keeping with his project Bimba
chose this name to distinguish his style from other capoeira, and by using the language of
the day -- “regional culture” and “physical education” -- gave his school a ring of
legitimacy.

The academy moved locations several times over its lifespan, contributing greatly
to the wide variety of students it attracted. Its first location, in the backyard of a house in
a favela in the middle class neighborhood of Roça do Lobo, attracted mainly dark-
skinned lower class students. When the academy moved to Pelourinho, the old center of
Salvador in which the School of Medicine was located, Bimba drew many white, middle
and upper class students. By some accounts, Bimba also gave private classes in the

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19 Today run by a former student, Bimba’s academy is still located in Pelourinho, which since renovations
in the 1990s has become one of Brazil’s major tourist meccas.
homes of Salvador’s elite, including politicians and academics (cf Pires 2002: 54). Mestre Bimba’s detractors accuse him of being co-opted by his white, elite students. These students probably did influence his ideas and helped gain him access to social arenas from which he would have otherwise been barred; however, Mestre Bimba never abandoned his work in humbler neighborhoods. Furthermore, his rule that anyone wanting to train with him had to present a student or worker identification card was not introduced in order to restrict entrance to his academy to the middle and upper classes, as some have asserted, but to sever it from its popular image as the vadiação of marginal, lazy or “unproductive citizens.” One of his professed goals was to encourage discipline and hard work among all his students no matter what their social standing.

There is much debate as to whether Mestre Bimba did allow entry to his academy of one particular category of student: women. It is rumored that he taught his own daughters and that there exists a 1930s photograph of Mestre Bimba teaching a group of black women in the backyard of his academy (Capoeira 1999: 183). Almeida refers to a group of six women whom Mestre Bimba trained in the mid 1940s for an international event (1986: 41). If nowhere else, women were certainly present at Mestre Bimba’s recordings of capoeira music, as their voices are heard on back up vocals. Yet I have also heard a student of Mestre Bimba’s claim that in his academy it was considered bad luck to allow a woman, especially a menstruating woman, to touch or pass under a berimbau. From descriptions of the environment within the academy and of the strenuous trainings, it seems most probable that it was a male domain that only rarely was punctured by the presence of women.
To be accepted into Mestre Bimba’s academy, after proving one’s status as a “productive” citizen, one had to pass a physical exam. The exam included proof of flexibility (performing a backbend) and physical/psychological stamina (enduring a neck hold that Bimba himself applied). If he was accepted, a student’s first six months of training focused on learning the ginga (see Chapter Three) and eight sequences of the basic offensive and defensive moves performed with a partner. Only when the student had mastered these basics was he allowed to play in the roda at the end of class. This occasion was acknowledged as a rite of passage and marked by a ceremony called a batizado or baptism. A cohort of novices would be baptized at the same time, each one play in the roda with a more advanced student, designated his “godfather.” (padrinho). The godfather would symbolically baptize the novice by sweeping him or otherwise bringing him to the ground. At the end of the ceremony the student would receive a nickname or nome da guerra (war name) that symbolized his new identity and full integration into the group.  

A baptized student would then enter six months of more intensive training in preparation for his formatura or “graduation.” As a novice one might expect softened treatment -- sweeps and kicks not hard enough to cause great injury -- but as a baptized student the stakes were raised (Almeida 1986). Not only did students have to learn more advanced movements -- such as the balões, a series of throwing moves performed with a partner and an elegant game of floreios, or acrobatic moves -- but they were also subject to more aggressive play from their peers.  

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20 These rituals are still a central practice among many capoeira groups today and will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

21 This type of “hard play” is discussed in Chapter Five. See also Almeida (1986: 118-119) for a brief description of this aspect of training in Bimba’s academy.
own in the roda, no matter the challenger or type of game. At the six-month mark, students underwent a graduation ceremony that was open to the public and presided over by Mestre Bimba, elegantly dressed all in white. Those graduating would show their skills in the roda and a designated orator would explain the regional style and the meaning of ceremony to the audience. Women -- mothers, sisters or girlfriends of graduating students -- were invited up as “godmothers” to present the graduates with blue silk scarves and medals. Mestre Bimba instructed his formados (“graduates”) to wear the scarf around their necks in homage to the 19th century capoeiras who did the same, the slippery silk allegedly a protection against the slice of a razor blade. The medal, pinned on the graduate’s chest, had to be defended in a subsequent game; if the opponent -- a more advanced student -- managed to grab the medal, graduation would supposedly be denied. Once formados students continued with an even more aggressive training including a three-month course in “guerilla warfare” in the forest around Salvador (see Chapter Five).

Mestre Bimba expected strict discipline from his students both within and outside of the academy walls. He discouraged drinking hard alcohol, expected students to maintain their status as a worker or student, and demanded they be respectful in appearance (wearing uniforms in class) and behavior. Strict discipline, rituals, rules and hierarchy, were meant to instill group identity and pride that could cross race and class (though not gender) lines. In 1953 Mestre Bimba reached a pinnacle of success in his project to see capoeira accepted as a legitimate national sport when he was invited to perform at the state governor’s palace for an audience that included Getúlio Vargas.

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22 Pires (2002) claims to have found no historical evidence of the use of silk scarves for this purpose among capoeiras.
himself. It as after the presentation that Vargas allegedly proclaimed capoeira “the one true national sport.” Despite this success, Mestre Bimba was increasingly disgusted with the lack of public recognition and financial support from the state for his work. In 1973 he moved his ten children and one of two wives to the city of Goiânia in the south-central state of Goiás, where one of his students promised him a better life. Again his expectations were not met, and he died of a stroke in 1974. Against his expressed wishes never to return to Bahia, his remains were exhumed and reburied in Salvador in 1978. It was not until the 1990s that he was fully recognized by the city with the inauguration of a public plaza with his name and a statue and with a posthumous honorary doctorate from the Federal University of Bahia.

**Mestre Pastinha and Capoeira Angola**

Mestre Pastinha, born Vicente Ferreira Pastiña in Salvador on April 5, 1889, is capoeira’s other titan. In many ways he was Mestre Bimba’s counterpoint: a small, frail light skinned Afro-Brazilian who was a philosopher, artist and avid writer. Some consider Capoeira Angola, the style developed by Mestre Pastinha, the antithesis of Mestre Bimba’s Capoeira Regional (cf Frigerio 1989). Though the styles today could not be more distinct, probably the two mestres’ personal style of play was more similar than different at they learned capoeira at the same time and in the same location and from similar teachers. Furthermore, though stated differently, their vision and projects for capoeira were much more similar then contemporary followers of the two styles might like to admit.
Although Pastinha published a book during his life -- *Capoeira Angola* -- and left several unpublished manuscripts, much less is known about his life then of Mestre Bimba’s.\(^{23}\) His mother was a black woman from Bahia and his father, who worked as a peddler, was from Spain. Like Bimba, Pastinha was initiated into capoeira at a young age by an African named Benedito. As he told in an interview (of which he did many over his lifetime) Pastinha took up capoeira for self-defense. His small stature made him victim to repeated bullying by another, larger boy on his street. One day Benedito, who lived on the same street and was witness to the bullying, offered to teach Pastinha capoeira. After several months of training Pastinha allegedly got his revenge. At age twelve he became an apprentice in the Brazilian Navy School in Salvador where, along with fencing, knife fighting and Swedish gymnastics, he developed his musical skills playing in the navy orchestra. After quitting the navy at age twenty, he lived by holding various odd jobs including carpenter, newspaper boy, shoeshine and bouncer for card games.\(^{24}\) In 1910 he began teaching capoeira to artisans and students in the back of a bicycle workshop. This predates Bimba’s debut as a capoeira teacher, but little is known about this early phase of Pastinha’s teaching and shortly after, in 1912, he completely withdrew from the capoeira scene for three decades.

Pastinha’s re-entry into capoeira in 1941 was instigated by Mestre Bimba’s success and some of the “old guard” Bahian *capoeiras*’ growing concern with the loss of “tradition.” While some of the mestres in Salvador embraced Bimba’s innovations, there was a group of old mestres who resisted what they saw as the modernization of capoeira. To distinguish their capoeira from Bimba’s Capoeira Regional, they called it Capoeira

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\(^{24}\) Skeptical eyebrows were allegedly raised when he presented himself for the last of these jobs, but he quickly proved himself with his fighting skills.
Angola. They regularly held rodas in the Liberdade, a predominantly black, working class neighborhood. When Aberre, a famous capoeira and a student of Pastinha’s, brought his former teacher to the roda in 1941, Pastinha was respectfully acknowledged; and when Mestre Amorzinho, the head of the roda, died in 1944, Pastinha continued his work.

In 1949 Pastinha established the Centro Esportivo de Capoeira Angola in a soap factory where he was working as a watchman. The name suggests that like Mestre Bimba, Mestre Pastinha wished to bestow legitimacy on his school. By calling it a “sports center” he was distancing capoeira from associations with criminal, violent or vagrant activity. In the introduction to his book Pastinha explicitly states his vision and goal for capoeira. Like Mestre Bimba, he wished to divorce capoeira from its violent past and from those “individuals of bad character who used capoeira to discharge their aggressive instinct.” He goes on to state that:

Fortunately those disorderly capoeiristas were small in number and deserved violent police repression. Unfortunately the consequence of these episodes from distant times and verified in our state, brought doubt and antipathy to capoeira for many years. It is with great pleasure that I can verify that that doubt has been erased, and today, capoeira Angola is practiced by all social classes and receives protection and prestige from the authorities for being one of the most authentic manifestations of national folklore (Pastinha 1964: 26).

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25 There is some controversy over when this name began being used. It seems that in the 19th century capoeira may already have been called o jogo de Angola (game from Angola). See Assunção (2004: 158-160) for a discussion of the adoption of the name in the 1940s which he likens to the practice of claiming a “nation” among houses of candomblé in Bahia.

26 “Felizmente, esses capoeiristas desordeiros constituíam uma pequena parcela e mereceram uma violenta repressão policial. É de lamentar que esses episódios, em épocas remotas, se tenham verificado em nosso Estado, trazendo como consequência a duvida e antipatia acerca da Capoeira por muitos anos. É com a maior alegria que verifico como se apagou essa duvida hoje, a capoeira angola é praticada por todas as camadas sociais, goza da proteção e prestígio das autoridades por ser uma das mais autênticas manifestações do folclore nacional.”
Though proclaiming capoeira to be an important element of Brazilian folklore, like Bimba, Pastinha did not want the efficacy and power of capoeira as fight to be lost: he reminded his readers, “but Capoeira Angola is, before all else, a fight and a violent fight” (1964 30). Again like Bimba, in order to reach his goals Pastinha codified capoeira and his teaching of it. Rather than expand, he limited the repertoire to seven basic moves and their variations, and discouraged the introduction of any “foreign” fighting techniques. He taught structured classes and demanded that his students wear uniforms (sport jerseys in black and yellow, the colors of his favorite soccer team, Ipiranga). He emphasized music, experimenting with various configurations of the orchestra, and certain rituals that Bimba had dispensed with.

Where Bimba had the support of medical students and politicians, Pastinha had the support of artists and intellectuals. Famed Bahian author Jorge Amado immortalized him in several of his novels. Anthropologist Edison Carneiro, who in 1937 had erected an “exhibition of Capoeira de Angola” at the second Afro-Brazilian Congress in Salvador, scorned the Regional style, claiming the Angola style to be the only true capoeira. In 1955, with the help of these supporters, Pastinha was able to move his academy to the more centrally located neighborhood of Pelourinho, drawing more students and publicity. On the issue of women in capoeira, Pastinha was more vocal than Mestre Bimba. In a 1969 interview he lamented the fact that there were no female capoeiristas in his academy, “or anywhere in Salvador,” going on to say that women should train in order to share the “protection of their lair.” He claimed that female capoeiras existed in the past when women “were braver” and when Maria Homem,
famed for her heavy drinking and skill at evading arrest, “would hitch up her long skirts
and jump into any roda” (Diário Popular 1969).

By the 1950s the Bahian tourist industry had become an important economic
avenue in a state that was falling behind the rest of the country in terms of
industrialization and modernization. While the southern part of the country was
experiencing increasing European migration and thus increasing cultural heterogeneity,
Bahia was seen more and more as the preserver of “pure” national identity (cf Assunção
2004: 164). Bahian folk troupes began to travel around the country with shows that
included religious and secular dances and capoeira. Pastinha and his students toured in
the country and in April 1966 made it as far as Dakar, Senegal where they represented
capoeira in the First World Festival of Black Arts.

Despite his international fame in capoeira, like Bimba seven years before him,
Pastinha died, destitute and disillusioned. In the early seventies he lost his academy in
Pelourinho when the building in which it was housed was claimed for restoration, rather
ironically, by the Foundation for the Artistic and Cultural Heritage. In 1979 the city
granted him another space, but, old, blind and disheartened, Pastinha never recovered and
on November 13, 1981 he died of a stroke at the age of 93. At the time of his death he
was living in a shelter for indigent old people and his funeral, paid for by his artist friend
Caribé, was sparsely attended. The abjection in which both Pastinha and Bimba died
illustrates “the uncomfortable truth that patronage was not a perfect life insurance for the
poor, and how Brazilian society and the state dealt with its popular heroes” (Assunção
2004:167). Mestres Pastinha and Bimba died disenchanted and heartsick, unsure of what
the future would bring for capoeira. Little did they know that they would endure as
revered figures and an inspiration for many generations of capoeiristas to come. Even before their deaths, their legacy and influence had spread to Rio de Janeiro where some of their former students migrated and began teaching in the 1960s and 70s. During this time the practice of capoeira again underwent transformations in response to the new political environment: the military dictatorship.

MILITARY DICTATORSHIP AND EXPANSION OF CAPOEIRA (1964-1985)

Pressured by the United States to join the Allied Powers during World War II in return for boosting its failing rubber industry, Brazil began to transfer its political, economic and cultural ties away from Europe and towards the north. Vargas’ Estado Novo, difficult to maintain with the growing relationship with the United States, dissolved after the war and was replaced with a brief period of constitutional rule. The 1950s, under elected president Juscelino Kubitschek, was a period of intense industrialization, development and spending -- the establishment of national airline and automobile industries, the construction of the modernist capital of Brasília, -- that created an enormous foreign debt and garnered public criticism. When the leftist administration elected in 1960 began pushing for nationalizing oil fields and enforcing land reforms, the military, with support from the middle and upper classes and aid from the United States, ousted President João Goulart.

Over the next 21 years, Brazil endured the longest military regime in Latin American history with periods of intense repression, torture, and the disappearance and forced exile of intellectuals, artists, politicians and civilians. Censorship, suspension of
rule of law, propaganda that enforced patriotism through intimidation, and the “economic miracle” of an industrial boom in the early 1970s curtailed outspoken protest of the regime (Levine 1999: 129). Veiled criticism did come, mainly from the artists, musicians and filmmakers of the Tropicalismo movement, which like the movimento antropófago of the 1920s (see above), used parody, irony and absurdity to underhandedly condemn the military regime, consumerism, populist politics and United States imperialism.\footnote{Among the most famous members of the movement were musicians Cateano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, who today is Minister of Culture in Lula’s administration.}\footnote{Bamba is a term applied to someone who is extremely good at what he does, usually in the area of music, dance or capoeira. It is also sometimes used as a synonym for malandro.} However, there were also segments of the population who supported the discipline and order that the dictatorship imposed. The military had a far-reaching effect on civil society, including capoeira.

While organized capoeira in Rio de Janeiro died after the disbanding of the maltas at the end of the 19th century, its practice continued in various pockets of the city, including the subúrbios and, rather surprisingly, the wealthy neighborhood of Ipanema. In the 1930s, 40s and 50s, a middle class white athlete named Agenor Moreira Sampaio (1891-1962) taught his version of capoeira in a small academy in his house in Ipanema. His students were all male and upper class, including the famous musician Tom Jobim. Mestre Sinhozinho, as he was known, was an impressive athlete schooled in various fighting forms. He claimed to have learned capoeira from “observing the bambas of his time, fraternizing with the bohemians, tough guys and malandros of Rio” (Lacé 2002: 127). Putting Zuma’s ideas into practice, Sinhozinho taught a capoeira stripped of music and ritual and that was essentially a sparring fight using hand and leg strikes, escapes, sweeps and take-downs. As one of his former students told me, “there was no
ginga, no berimbau, it was pure fight.” In a newspaper article that describes capoeira as “born God knows when and where, originating in an infernal dance of an African tribe…[which today is]…a violent sport, exclusively for strong men,” Sinhozinho expressed his view: “I prefer not to classify it as a dance, game or fight. In my opinion it is a true National Gymnastics” (Leal 1951). A controversial figure -- some believe that what he taught cannot be considered capoeira -- Sinhozinho nonetheless kept capoeira alive in the imagination of elite cariocas and a presence in the exclusive areas of the city.  

At the same time that Sinhozinho was teaching in Ipanema, capoeira continued to be practiced in the favelas and surbúbios. Little is known about these groups or teachers, however, and it was not until the 1960s, when a wave of migration from the north of the country hit the cities in the south, that capoeira once again became a visible force in Rio de Janeiro. Along with thousands of northeasterners hoping to find better jobs in the industrialized south came capoeiristas, among them Artur Emídio. Born in 1930, one of eight children of a coffee farmer in the southern Bahian city of Itabuna, Artur was introduced to capoeira at age 7 by Mestre Paizinho. When he was 15 his mestre died and he continued learning with an African named Nene who made wooden sandals. His parents, whom he describes as upper middle class, did not like capoeira. In 1955, at age 20 Artur came to Rio and opened a capoeira academy in the Zona Norte suburb of Bons sucesso, which he maintained until 1970. Artur describes his style as “neither Regional nor Angola, but a free, elastic and versatile capoeira” and understands his

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29 See A Capoeiraigem no Rio de Janeiro: Sinhozinho e Rudolf Hermanny (2002) by André Lacé, for a defense of the importance of Sinhozinho in the history of capoeira.
30 This biography is from an interview I conducted with Artur in 2003 in Guapimirim, a town near Rio where he currently lives. See also Revista Capoeira Year # 1. 1 and Praticando Capoeira Year 1.7 for articles about him.
practice as “a sport, an education for physical and mental health, and not about fighting.”

Thanks to Artur Emídio and his academy in Bonsuccesso, a new generation of capoeiristas emerged, and by the 1960s there were a number of burgeoning groups in the Zona Norte. His most famous student was the acclaimed Leopoldina, who still lives in the Rio and from whom the majority of mestres still active in the Zona Norte claim direct descent.

**Who was Rio’s First Female Capoeirista?**

The origins of female participation in capoeira are a mysterious and hotly debated issue among capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro today. Artur Emídio claims to have been the first to teach capoeira to a woman -- Brazilian tennis champion Lucy Maia -- who in 1955 took a number of classes with him to improve her strengths as an athlete. Mestre Leopoldina, however, holds that only he can lay claim to having “formed” the first female capoeirista, as Lucy Maia never pursued her training beyond a few classes. A 1964 article from *O Globo* would seem to support Leopoldina’s claim: boasting Rio de Janeiro as home to the “only female capoeirista in Brazil and perhaps the world,” the article tells the story of twenty-year old Maria Lúcia de Souza, who started training capoeira, and playing berimbau, upon moving next door to Mestre Leopoldina in a poor subúrbio in the Baixada Fluminense.

Even more contested than the first woman to train capoeira, is who among Rio’s female capoeirista can claim to have been the first to give and receive the title of mestra. As the number of female participants ever grows, this question has become highly

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31 Interview October 29, 2003. His description fits what others have described as his “showy style with jumps and spectacular kicks” (Mestre Gato quoted in Assunção 2004: 171).
political as illustrated by an anecdote from my field notes: in 2002, during one of the popular monthly rodas in the Zona Norte an elderly mestre introduced himself to the gathering of a hundred mestres and students from different groups. I had never seen this mestre before and from the murmurs around me I gathered that few others in the crowd had either. He gave an extended speech in which, among his other “credentials,” he claimed to have formed, 20 years earlier, the first mestra in Rio de Janeiro. In what I interpreted as an attempt to please the crowd of capoeiristas, many of whom were female and several of whom held the title of mestra, he eulogized his famous student, Mestra Sandrinha (of whom I had heard rumor). As he spoke, a petite, white female capoeirista in her 40s who was standing near him and had previously been introduced as a mestra grew increasingly agitated and eventually broke in. She told the crowd that when she was a teenager just starting out in capoeira she had heard stories about this “supposed Mestra Sandrinha.” She sought her out but never discovered where Sadrinha taught and never once saw her at a roda. What kind of capoeira mestra is that, she asked heatedly, if she neither plays nor teaches? This mestra’s outburst was caused by the fact that she claims (and is recognized by many) to be Rio’s first mestra, a title she gained in 1989. Later, she emphasized her point, and defended her own claim to being Rio’s first mestra, by playing often and fiercely in the roda that day.

If there were women training and playing capoeira in Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, they were few and far between. Females would only become a major presence starting in the 1980s and increasing exponentially in the 1990s. Their way was paved by a group of white upper middle class adolescent boys who, while capoeira was expanding in the Zona Norte, gave it a new foothold in the Zona Sul. The two brothers
Rafael and Paulo Flores had taken classes with Mestre Bimba during a visit to Bahia. On their return to Rio they began training with a group of friends -- all except two from a similar socio-economic background to theirs -- on the terrace of their apartment in the middle class neighborhood of Laranjeiras. The group, which over time took the name Senzala (slave barracks), had no designated leader. The friends traded information and took inspiration from other martial arts to develop exercises that would increase their stamina, speed and strength. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the embryonic group was joined by some of Mestre Bimba’s former students who had first come to Rio in 1966 with the show Vem Camará.

Shows like Vem Camará, promoted by the tourist industry as a way to disseminate “Brazilian culture” around the country and the world, contributed to folkloric views on capoeira. In other quarters, however, capoeira was being pushed as physical education and a tool for the military regime. A major proponent of this view was navy officer Lieutenant Lamartine Pereira da Costa. After training with Artur Emídio for several years, and with the mestre’s help, he launched an official program for teaching capoeira to marines stationed in Rio de Janeiro. Mimicking ODC and Zuma before him, in the 1960s he published two books entitled *Capoeira Sem Mestre* ("Capoeira Without a Mestre") and *Capoeiragem: A arte da defesa pessoal brasileira* ("Capoeiragem: the art of Brazilian self-defense"). The titles suggest that, like Zuma and ODC, Lamartine wished to transform the current practice of capoeira (that emphasized a long-term apprenticeship with a mestre) to an institutionalized and bureaucratized system to serve in the defense of

32 The key players in the beginning were the brothers Gato and Gil Velho, Nestor Capoeira, Peixinho, and Garrincha and Sorriso (the last two from the favela of Santa Marta in Botafogo).
33 See Capoeira N.(1992: 92-3) for a history of Senzala, and description of training and organization in the early years.
Brazilian national interests. Similar attempts were made in Bahia, where capoeira was introduced into the state military police and public schools as a “useful means of personal defense and a perfect system of physical training” (quoted in Santos 1998: 127).

While Lamartine’s and others’ dreams to see capoeira spread to the military forces throughout Brazil never came to fruition, the influence of the military on capoeira is still visible today. One year of military service is required of all 18-year-old males, and many young men from the favelas and working classes stay on after completing obligatory service as the military provides financial security that life on the outside does not. Thus the majority of Rio’s capoeiristas have spent at least one, and often several, years living and working in the quarteis (soldier barracks) that dot the city landscape. Many groups, especially in the Zona Norte where military service is most often extended for its poor inhabitants, adopt a military style training with warm-ups conducted in columns, count-offs for jumping jacks, push-ups and sit-ups and ending class with a salute and the cheer, “Salve capoeira!”

Bureaucratization of capoeira increased with the development of federations and leagues in the 1970s and 80s. Though capoeira was first included in The Carioca Boxing Federation in 1962, it was not until after the military coup that, in keeping with the government’s project to control civil society, concerted effort was made to regulate and institutionalize it at a federal level (cf Assunção 2005:178). In 1968 two capoeira symposiums were held on the Brazilian Air Force Base to discuss nomenclature of moves, regulation, and rules that could be applied across styles. This proved a difficult if not impossible task -- Mestre Bimba, the most honored guest of the symposium, is said to have walked out after several days, disgusted with the inventions and lack of knowledge
of the younger capoeiristas (cf Almeida 1986: 51) -- and little came out of the symposiums.

In 1972 the Brazilian Boxing Confederation, then headed by a military officer, incorporated “Technical Rules of Capoeira” which laid out rules for the movements, ethics, uniforms and competitions of capoeira. The first belt system was created, using the colors of the Brazilian flag to designate levels (see Appendix C). Following the official recognition of capoeira by the National Sport Council, individual states moved to form their own federations, led by São Paulo in 1974 and Rio de Janeiro in 1978. The federations attempted to regulate the many new groups that seemed to be appearing daily in urban centers around the country, and to set up competitions that were modeled on other competitive fights (see Chapter Five). While the bureaucratization and institutionalization of capoeira was under debate in politicians’ offices, capoeiristas still fought, with their bodies and souls, in the public arena of the streets.

Rodas de Rua: Capoeira in the Streets

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nessa terra capoeira tem roda o ano inteiro</td>
<td>In this land of capoeira, there are rodas all year round</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roda da Penha, Caxias e Cordovil</td>
<td>Roda in Pehna, Caxias and Cordovil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tem na Barra da Tijuca e o Quilombo em Acari; Na Carioca, na Glória e na Central, Macaé, Rocha Miranda no Leblon e Marechal</td>
<td>In Barra da Tijuca and Quilombo in Acari; in Carioca, Gloria and Central Macaé, Rocha Miranda, Leblon and Marechal</td>
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34 For a history of capoeira in São Paulo see Leticia Reis (2000). Some evidence suggests capoeira existed in São Paulo in the 19th century as there were municipal laws outlawing it. However, like in Rio, it was only in the second half of the 20th century with the migration of Bahians to the city that it became a big presence. Today, São Paulo rivals Rio in number of capoeira groups and hosts many of the administrative, political and academic conferences on capoeira.
Quem não sai da academia não conhece Mandingueiro

Whoever, does not leave the academy
Will not know a mandingueiro (a capoeirista who plays with mandinga)

-- Cobra / Babuíno (Abadá 1997:109)

The verses quoted above from a song written by a capoeirista who made a name for himself in Rio in the 1980s describe the importance of rodas de rua or “street rodas”: the song claims that while training is important, it is only in leaving the academy and playing in the streets that one really comes to know capoeira and play it well. The venue for playing outside of the academy were street rodas, held in various public locations throughout the city and open to all thus drawing a wide variety of capoeiristas. While a few street rodas still exist in Rio today, they were much more prolific and popular in the 1970s and 80s. The most famous ones included: a roda da Penha held on Sundays throughout October during a popular religious festival in the Zona Norte subúrbio of Penha (the roda continues to day, held at the foot of the high hill that leads up to the church that overlooks the subúrbio); the Roda de São Cristovão held on Sundays at the Northeasterners fair (no longer in existence); the Roda de Caxias also held on Sundays in Caxias, one of Rio’s poorest municipalities in the Baixada Fluminense (still in existence); the Roda de Central was held at Central Railway Station in downtown Rio during carnival (no longer in existence); and in the Zona Sul, the Roda de Flamengo and the Roda de Ipanema (no longer in existence on a regular basis).

Capoeiristas in Rio who were just starting out, or at their peak of their capoeira careers in the 1970s and 1980s, speak of this era with a mix of nostalgia and relief. The “good old days” were an intense time of what they call “self-affirmation” (auto-

35 Street rodas today are analyzed in Chapters Four and Five.
affirmação), in which individuals and groups were proving their worth and making names for themselves. Thus the street rodas were a venue for displaying bravery and effective fighting and it was within their boundaries that reputations were built and challenged. Games would heat up, tempers flare and the rodas become dangerously violent. At the Roda de Central, allegedly the most dangerous, it was not infrequent that guns would be pulled.36

By the 1980s the social base of capoeira was expanding, classes beginning to appear in Zona Sul fitness gyms and schools. Yet the continued existence of street rodas meant that the practice was still viewed by many in Rio de Janeiro, most predominantly among the lower classes, as a “marginal” activity of vagabundos, “good-for-nothing guys” who spent their time hanging out in the streets and getting into trouble. Mothers of capoeiristas in their late 20s, 30s and 40s often told me that they had never liked capoeira as it took their sons away from serious endeavors such as school and work, and brought them home injured from fighting. Some of these mothers are still wary of capoeira despite its popularity today and the success of their sons; as one woman in her 60s, whose son -- whom she raised in an extremely poor housing complex in the Zona Norte where he first began playing and teaching capoeira -- is today mestre of a successful international capoeira group told me, “I do not like capoeira: never have, never will. It was just an excuse for my son to go out in the street and fight.”

If the families of young men were displeased with their involvement in capoeira, those families of young girls who became interested in capoeira in the 1970s and 1980s were all but scandalized. The narrative recounted by Mestranda Márcia, a 40 year old woman from Rio de Janeiro who now teaches in the United States, is typical of ones told

36 Fights and violence in capoeira are discussed in Chapter Five
me by women who became involved in capoeira in the early 1980s: when Márcia, who had been athletic since a young age, saw a capoeira demonstration at her school when she was 16, she knew she wanted to train. Her mother, who enjoyed sports and supported her daughter’s athletic aptitude, was shocked that Márcia wanted to train capoeira, exclaiming, “Oh my god! I cannot believe you are thinking of that! It is ridiculous. Capoeira is for vagabundos! It’s not for women, what are you thinking!” Márcia’s mother only grudgingly consented to allow her daughter to train under the condition that she wait a year, successfully complete a course in sewing (“an appropriate activity for young women”) and find a male friend to accompany her to the classes. When it became apparent that her daughter’s interest in capoeira was developing into more than just a hobby, Márcia’s mother refused to continue paying the monthly tuition, telling her it was “time to get serious and find a husband.” Márcia was tenacious and stuck with capoeira despite all the obstacles, as we will see subsequent chapters, which women in capoeira in Brazil faced and continue to face.

Outside of Brazil, however, a very different situation was forming. Since the 1950s, capoeira had been traveling abroad with Brazilian shows and exhibitions, and by the mid 1970s several mestres were living and teaching capoeira in Europe and the United States. Severed from its public image as a rough, masculine activity, and because of its dance-like quality and perceived holistic approach to self-defense, capoeira at first attracted more women than men. In California’s Bay Area, Mestre Acordeon (Bira Almeida) began teaching not only in white upper middle class settings like Stanford University in Palo Alto and a martial arts studio in the wealthy enclave of Marin County,

37 The first mestres to live and teach abroad were Nestor Capoeira in London, Jelon Veira in New York City and Bira Almeida in the Bay Area, California.
but also in the ethnically diverse lower class neighborhoods in East Oakland and San Francisco’s Mission District. He was surprised, however, to find that rather than African-Americans or Latino males he was “developing a cadre of white women with dance experience” (Almeida 1986: 58). In 1983 Mestre Acordeon took 52 American students to Brazil to compete in a capoeira tournament. Whereas the American male team lost all their matches, the American women’s team won all theirs (1986: 60). Capoeira’s respectable image abroad and its popularity among foreign women contributed to the gradual opening of the practice to Brazilian women in the late 1980s and 1990s. Still, even in the late 1990s I met a number of young Brazilian women in capoeira classes in the United States who told me they were thrilled to have an opportunity to train now that they were living abroad as they had always wanted to in Brazil but their families, or boyfriends, had not let them.

As the number of capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro crept up in the 1980s more groups formed, increasing territorial disputes and rivalries. Battles in the street rodas were fought not just to prove individual strength and valor but also to gain recognition of and social space for one’s group. As several Rio mestres laughingly told me, taking over a street roda was one way to demonstrate dominion: they nostalgically recalled taking their students to invade another group’s street roda, beating everyone up, stealing the musical instruments and using them to hold their own roda at a different location. Groups fought over territory as well as over the “proper” interpretation, style and practice of capoeira. Groups in the Zona Norte, which traced their lineage to Artur Emídio or professed an even older ancestry of the 19th century maltas, opposed what they considered the “modern” style of the Senzala Group that was quickly growing and spreading throughout
the Zona Sul. In the 1970s and 80s these groups were joined by a new, or re-invented, style of capoeira. Capoeira Angola, near extinction in 1960s due to the widespread popularity of Mestre Bimba’s style, gained new life by the Pan-African political movement just reaching Brazilian shores in the 1970s. A key player in the new Capoeira Angola movement was Mestre Moreas (Pedro Moraes Trindade). Moreas had trained with Mestre João Grande and Mestre João Pequeno, the last of Mestre Pastinha’s students teaching in Salvador. In the 1970s Moreas came to Rio de Janeiro as a young Marine. His ability to hold his own in the street rodas, playing what had come to be considered an “old man’s” or “folkloric” capoeira with aggressiveness and efficacy, quickly won him a reputation and a cadre of followers. In 1980 Mestre Moraes founded the Grupo de Angola Pelourinho (GCAP) and shortly thereafter returned to Salvador, where his new group became enormously popular. Students of his who remained in Rio formed their own Capoeira Angola groups. While these groups make up a small fraction of the groups active today in Rio (roughly 30 among the hundreds of groups) they are a strong presence, bolstered by the growing popularity of Capoeira Angola abroad.

Another frequenter of Rio’s infamous rodas de rua, and a crucial player in this dissertation, was an intense young capoeirista known at the time as Camisinha (Little Shirt). José Tadeu Carneiro Cardoso was born on October 28, 1955 on a farm in the interior of Bahia, where he was raised until he was eight with five brothers, three sisters and a cousin. Camisinha took his first steps in capoeira with his older brother Camisa Roxa (Purple Shirt) who lived in Salvador and trained in the academy of Mestre Bimba and would pass on his knowledge to his siblings whenever home for a visit. With the

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38 All his brothers, also capoeiristas, had nicknames having to do with shirts. When camisinha became a popular slang term for condom, Camisinha became known as Camisa.
death of their father in 1964 the whole family moved to the neighborhood of Liberdade in Salvador. Camisinha became a student in Mestre Bimba’s academy as well as frequenting the rodas de rua in Liberdade.

In 1972, at the age of 17, Camisinha came to Rio de Janeiro with Camisa Roxa and the traveling folklore troupe, Olodum Maré. When the group left for Europe, Camisa Roxa gave his younger brother a bus ticket back to Salvador. But Camisinha, who had fallen in love with the city and its capoeira, tore up the ticket. Sleeping in the bus station and on the floor of a friend’s room in a boarding house, Camisinha eventually secured a place to live and teach capoeira in a Judo academy in the middle-class neighborhood of Laranjeiras. He frequented the weekly rodas of the Senzala group and his incredible speed, force, technical precision and fearlessness soon won him a leadership role and the title, Mestre Camisa. Over the next thirty years, during which Mestre Camisa dedicated his life exclusively to capoeira, this leadership role would become national and international in scope. The success and influence Mestre Camisa has experienced has been largely due to his ability to adapt his vision and teaching of capoeira to changing social and political conditions and to the changing needs and desires of Brazilian youth.

**DISJUNCTIVE DEMOCRACY & CONTEMPORARY CAPOEIRA (1985-2006)**

Capoeira is culture and culture is alive.
Culture isn’t some dead thing in a museum!
Culture adapts with society and so does capoeira.

- Mestre Camisa

Increasing public protest against the military dictatorship eventually led to the *Abertura* (opening) in 1985 and the slow restoration of democracy in Brazil. The
changing political environment was reflected in the agenda of the Second National Capoeira Encounter held in Rio de Janeiro in 1984. Whereas fifteen years earlier, under the influence of the military dictatorship, the First National Capoeira Encounter had embraced an agenda to “universalize and militarize” the practice of capoeira, the goal of the second encounter was to celebrate its growing popularity and diversity in Brazil and abroad. At the same time, concerns were raised about traditions and values perceived as threatened with extinction (cf Capoeira 1999:270).

Among the various topics discussed was the increased inclusion of women, reportedly received as a “natural novelty in the evolution of capoeira” (Capoeira 1999:273). Special guest Mestre João Pequeno, an old and respected Bahian mestre, was asked what the “velha guarda” thought about women in capoeira. His rather convoluted response -- vacillating between seeing women as equal and different -- reflected the still nascent women’s movement within capoeira. He is reported as saying, “women have human bodies just like those of men and they feel the same things as men….in truth women need capoeira more than men because they have less physical force” and concluding (to much applause) with, “in capoeira I consider people equal” (1999: 273).

While the increase in female participation in capoeira may have been due in part to an expanding consciousness among Brazilian women to fight for their place in previously male dominated domains, the internationalization of capoeira and its promotion as an activity in the health and fitness industry contributed as much if not more. Many in Rio credit the group Senzala (and its split-off groups) and television, for promoting capoeira as a fashion mode in the 1990s. It is no exaggeration to suggest that television played a major role in popularizing capoeira. Brazil ranks fourth in the world
for number of televisions sets and has been reported as having the largest television
watching population in the developing world (Kottack 1990). The near monopoly of TV
Globo, the fourth largest commercial network in the world, means that everyone watches
more or less the same programs. There is a national obsession with *telenovelas* and their
stars, and it is from these shows that Brazilians absorb mainstream cultural values and
accepted social behavior (cf Simpson 1993; Kottak 1990).

In the early 1990s, Mestre Boneco, nicknamed Doll for his alleged good looks (he
is white, tall and muscular), broke off from Senzala to form his own group, Capoeira
Brasil. His parallel career as a model and soap opera actor won him a spot in 1996 on the
vastly popular *Faustão*, a Sunday afternoon talk show that focuses on the lives of
television and movie stars. Boneco appeared with a group of female students -- including
several soap opera actresses and models -- from his class at a chic sports academy in the
wealthy southern suburb of Barra da Tijuca. The host and his guests promoted capoeira
not only as an expression of “nossa cultura” (our culture), but also a great way to “tone
the abs and buttocks.” This television spot as well as others -- including a story line on
the popular teen soap opera, *Malhação*, the action of which takes place in a high school
and health club -- elevated the image of capoeira as a marginal activity of young street
toughs to that of the leisure activity of the rich and famous.39

The image of capoeira as a fashionable way to stay fit catalyzed a craze for
capoeira classes in high-end health clubs in Rio de Janeiro. In this context, classes cater

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39 When a friend of mine in Rio de Janeiro discovered she had the possibility of teaching capoeira at the
private school where Xuxa’s young daughter is a student, I joked that this could lead to a capoeira
performance on Xuxa’s popular children’s television show. Xuxa, a blonde, blued eyed former porn star
and wife of Pele, is Brazil’s most popular television personality. My friend’s eyes widened when I
suggested this, nodding her headed enthusiastically as if to this would be the pinnacle of capoeira success
and propagation.
to a clientele who are interested in a novelty exercise class rather than in becoming capoeiristas. Thus the classes tend to emphasize capoeira movement for aerobic and strengthening purposes and de-emphasize actual playing. Some instructors have even created a whole new line of capoeira class: Mestranda Enda, who has been living and teaching in New York City since the early 1990s, created the “capoeira workout,” a nonstop aerobic class done to a remix of house and capoeira music, that was voted “best workout in the City” in 1998 by a chain of fitness gyms. In 2003 a group of instructors were asked by a chain of chic health clubs in the Copacabana and Ipanema to introduce an “aquatic capoeira” class as a low-impact workout. With a Sunday spread in O Globo newspaper, the management tried to pitch the class as the new summer fitness fashion.

That the female body became an important marketing strategy is visible in the capoeira magazines that started to circulate nationally and internationally in the 1990s. On the cover of the first issue of one of the largest such publications is a picture of a young white woman doing a benção with the caption “Model Maria Fernanda has been playing for four years.” The model’s benção (the most basic kick in capoeira in which the knee is brought to the chest and the leg pushed straight out with a flat foot aimed at the opponent’s chest) is completely ineffective. Her standing leg is turned out and her arms loose at her side, compromising the force of the kick and leaving her upper body vulnerable to attack. Either the model is highly inexperienced, despite her supposed four years of training, or she was instructed to do this in order to reveal more of her body, particularly her crotch. While there is no follow up story inside, there is a two page spread in the “social” section entitled “a mulher na roda” with photographs of female
capoeiristas, none of whom, however, are actually shown, as suggested by the title, in the roda or playing capoeira (Revista Capoeira Year 1: #1).

If this issue caused grumbling among some female capoeiristas, the second issue of the same magazine sent a wave of outrage: the cover and centerfold are dedicated to the “sexy machine” model and actress, Tiazinha.

This image, head provocatively thrown back, long loose hair cascading over her bare tanned shoulders, and her black carnival mask, like the image before it, does nothing more than emphasize Tiazinha’s sexual appeal and ineffectiveness as a capoeirista: wearing a mask would seriously jeopardize peripheral vision, essential in playing. The center page displays Tiazinha in various photos modeling lingerie and playing capoeira (not in lingerie but always in her mask) under the suggestive title: “when she takes off her lingerie, Tiazinha puts on her uniform and enters the roda to play capoeira.” (Revista
Capoeira Year 1: #2). Many female capoeiristas I talked to at the time were outraged and disgusted by the magazine’s attempt to sell capoeira through an image of sexy women. While some were angered at the message it sent that women in capoeira are only eye candy and not serious practitioners, others seemed more concerned over the denigration of capoeira through these images, an opinion shared by many male capoeiristas as well. It seemed that the latter, rather than former opinion, eventually effected change: after three more issues with blonde women “playing” on the cover, the magazine started producing cover photographs and stories of well-respected male capoeiristas.40

Despite controversies over the proper place and role of women in capoeira, females are undeniably a major presence in the practice today both in Brazil and abroad. In fact, walking into a class in a health club in Rio’s Zona Sul one might think that capoeira today is a female dominated practice. Yet when we take into account class, race, urban geography and the hierarchy of capoeira groups, the portrait shifts drastically. Nearly all the women in capoeira classes in health clubs and dance studios are white and middle class and tend to be in their twenties or early thirties. In a class in a gym in the Zona Norte or in a community center in a favela, on the other hand, the majority of pre-teen and teen students are male. This is shifting somewhat as more poor, dark-skinned girls are starting to train with a local capoeira group, something which was all but unheard of twenty years ago. However, as one moves up the hierarchical organization of capoeira groups the female presence reduces drastically: of the hundreds of mestres in Rio, I could only identify seven who are women. The reasons for this invisibility, and the

40 Since then stories about important female capoeiristas and mestras have begun to appear.
continued upward struggle of women in capoeira, will be examined in subsequent chapters.\textsuperscript{41}

\textbf{Abadá-Capoeira and Struggles for Public Space}

The restrictions on female participation in capoeira today, due not only to gender but also race and class, is illustrative of the fact that despite democratic political consolidation and the progressive 1988 constitution, Brazil is still struggling towards a truly representational and participatory democracy. The continued flagrant violation of human rights has led to the conceptualization of Brazil as a “disjunctive democracy” (Holston and Caldeira 1998). These violations include inadequate housing, food and employment for a good portion of the population, increased levels of crime and violence at the hands of both criminals and police, and the perpetuation of vigilante groups. A widespread distrust of the corrupt justice system (judges can be bought off or intimidated) has spawned a belief in “justified” uses of violence. Across classes, many support the use of private “death squads” to fight crime, and those with financial means fortify their homes and offices and hire private security forces.

In her powerful study, \textit{City of Walls: Crime, Segregation and Citizenship in São Paulo}, Caldeira describes an urban landscape in which “inequality is an organizing value” (2000: 4). São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city and the third largest in the world, is increasingly defined by fortified enclaves -- gated communities, shopping malls, office

\textsuperscript{41}I must include an important caveat here: In this study I do not address gender in Capoeira Angola schools. One Brazilian female member in a large international Capoeira Angola group suggested to me that the politicized agenda of the Capoeira Angola style in terms of race has also allowed a window for a stronger feminist movement within her, and other Capoeira Angola groups. Certainly abroad the Capoeira Angola style has attracted a lot of female participants, but so has all styles of capoeira. Nonetheless, even in Brazil there seems to be a stronger feminist movement within Capoeira Angola, evidenced by an annual international all women Capoeira Angola conference.
buildings -- in which the rich live, work, consume and entertain themselves in protected, isolated spaces. Caldeira writes, “The new urban environment that enforces and values inequalities and separations is an undemocratic and unmodern public space” (2004: 4). Similar patterns of spatial segregation are emerging in Rio de Janeiro, especially in the sprawling new southern development of Barra de Tijuca where gated communities and shopping malls predominate. In the condensed areas of the rest of the city, however, rich and poor continue to live as they have done throughout the city’s history, in close proximity: the shacks of favelas rub shoulders with swank houses and apartment buildings. With no abatement in growing poverty, the wealthy anxiously watch as the poor “encroach” on their living and leisure spaces.

Several shocking events in the 1990s illustrate class struggles over public space, and how youth are often in the crossfire. The first incident took place on Copacabana Beach, often imagined as a democratic space for the way in which poor, rich, black, white, Brazilian and foreign bodies sunbathe, buy food and beer from walking vendors, listen to music, play sports and swim together. In the early summer of October 1992 on a stretch of beach near a rocky spit that is popular with surfers and poor black youth from Zona Sul favelas and Zona Norte subúrbios, a group of youth swept down the beach shoulder-to-shoulder, robbing and beating anyone in their path. For days after, the press bombarded the public with images of the arrastão -- or “big sweep” as the looting rampage came to be known -- and hordes of boisterous black youth on the streets and crowded buses. This overblown coverage instilled panic among the middle and upper class Zona Sul residents.42 The arrastão inspired suggestions to cut off bus service to the

42 Adding to the panic was the media’s identification of the youth as warring factions of funkeiros, or frequenters of the popular funk dance parties sponsored by drug traffickers in the favelas and subúrbios.
Zona Sul from the subúrbios. The idea was only dropped when it was realized that such an action would also bar the entry of the many people who work service jobs in the Zona Sul. One newspaper reported that “angry residents [of the Zona Sul] demanded the death sentence and army patrols on the streets” (quoted in Yudice 1994:201).

Demands for violent suppression of poor youth “out of place” (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1995) were met one year later. In the early morning of July 23, 1993 a group of off-duty policemen – a hired “death squad” -- opened fire on a group of forty street children asleep at the doors of Candelaria Cathedral in downtown Rio, killing eight and wounding many others. The Candelaria Massacre, as it would become known, created international outrage over the treatment of street children in Brazil. Yet surveys conducted in Rio revealed that close to 20% of the public approved of the police action against the street children who were considered “dangerous,” “criminal,” “dirty” and a threat to shop owners and pedestrians (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998).

A more “civil” response to the threat of bodies out of place was underway when I arrived for my fieldwork and completed shortly thereafter. The Piscinão do Ramos, or “large swimming pool” was created on the edge of one of the most polluted sections of the Guanabara Bay in the heart of a favela in the Zona Norte subúrbio of Ramos. Through a dubious purification system 30 million liters of water from the bay fills a pool the size of 3 soccer fields, which is separated from the foul smelling bay by a thin strip of sand. City advertising showcased the Piscinão de Ramos as a project to “build citizenship” and billed it as the fashionable spot for Summer 2002 beachgoers. Instead it

An explosively popular music movement that was attracting many middle and upper class youth as well, funk had become a growing concern in Rio de Janeiro. See Yudice (1994) for an analysis of the incident and how the press exaggerated a situation that involved only a minor amount of criminal activity by a handful of youth.
became the summer’s joke -- who, outside local residents, would travel to the Zona Norte to bathe in the waters of Guanabara Bay? Criticized as a populist ploy by Governor Antonio Garotinho to kick off his presidential campaign, more significantly, it was a blatant attempt to keep black, poor bodies in their proper place: in the subúrbios and away from the Zona Sul beaches.

A very different kind of *arrastão*, and claiming of public space, has been taking place every August since 1997 along the Zona Sul beaches. Hundreds of capoeiristas -- from neighborhoods and favelas throughout Rio, from all over Brazil, and from various foreign countries -- gather to play capoeira, on the Avenida Atlântica in front of Copacabana beach. It is Abadá-Capoeira’s annual *aulão* or “big class.” Since 1997 Mestre Camisa has sponsored the *Jogos Mundiais* (World Games), a week-long conference of classes, lectures and competitions. The Games bring together members of Abadá-Capoeira from all over Brazil and the world, and according to Camisa are an important event for *divulgando* (disseminating) the value of capoeira as a tool for education, social integration and political mobilization. Each year the conference is tied to a social campaign of city, national or global scope. These have included disarmament, health care, world peace, blood donation, AIDS and environmental conservation. Along with discussions about the campaign before and during the conference, actions are taken (for example setting up a blood drive). Each year a song is composed for the campaign. On the last morning of the conference the attendees gather on the Avenida Atlântica, open only to foot traffic and bicycles on Sundays. A stage and sound system is set up

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43 The *piscinão* supposedly did become something of an attraction for out of state tourists who were reportedly flown in on helicopters so as to avoid land travel through the favela.

44 The World Games are held in odd years and the Brazilian Games, the competitions of which are restricted to Brazilians though anyone can attend the rest of the events, are held in even years. The Games are discussed again in Chapter Five.
from which Camisa leads a short warm up, and then a dozen rodas form. The hundreds of capoeiristas sing the campaign song and then, on the chorus, form large letters of a word. In 2005, the campaign was about conserving water, not something cariocas are terribly conscious of because unlike the northeast of the country, the southern littoral rarely experiences drought. On the chorus of the song --

\begin{verbatim}
Agua pra plantar        Water to plant
Agua de beber          Water to drink
Agua é fonte de vida   Water is the fountain of life
Sem agua não vou viver  Without water I will not live
\end{verbatim}

-- the capoeiristas broke off playing to form giant letters spelling AGUA. Television and newspaper coverage of the event each year often includes aerial images of the aulão and mention of the social campaign.

The public aulãos are part of Abadá-Capoeira mission, as symbolized in the name and logo of the group: Abadá is both a Yoruba word (also written as aqbara or agbada) and an anagram that stands for >Associação Brasileira de Apoio e Desenvolvimento da Árte Capoeira< (The Brazilian Association for the Support and Development of the Art of Capoeira). The group’s logo is a world globe across which is emblazoned the name. The word abadá once referred to the long white frocks worn by Muslim, or Malê, slaves in Salvador. During the 1835 slave revolt, hundreds of Muslim slaves took to the city streets in their abadá, which were subsequently dubbed “war garments” by the authorities (Reis 1993:103). Today, the word has been adopted by many capoeiristas to refer to the stretchy white pants that constitute part of the uniform.45 Like the names of many other capoeira groups (e.g. Senzala, Flor da Gente, Palmares, Quilombo), Abadá references

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45 I also sometimes wondered if there was not a good dose of humor in choosing the name: while abadá refers to pants, Camisa’s nickname translates into “shirt.” Nicknames are discussed in Chapter Four.
and keeps alive the history of capoeira and the belief among practitioners that capoeira represents a struggle for liberty by oppressed people. The longer name for which Abadá stands captures the mission to see capoeira developed and recognized as a profession. The globe represents the spread of Abadá and capoeira around the world. The goals of the group are described in the mission statement:

Abadá-Capoeira is a nonprofit organization with the goal of diffusing Brazilian culture through capoeira. The practice [of capoeira] is a strong instrument of social integration as it works with all classes and strives to recuperate the notion of citizenship….The philosophy of Abadá-Capoeira is to develop its work in various areas, whether that be elevating the technical and theoretical level of the capoeirista, or using capoeira as a valuable pedagogical, artistic and cultural resource. Among other things, it aims to professionalize capoeira and recuperate the value of Mestre of capoeira as a producer and transmitter of culture and life experience. Abadá-Capoeira searches to contribute to the formation of human and ethical values based on respect, socialization and liberty…For Abadá-Capoeira, capoeira is an ancestral and future art. It is a living expression of the liberty of a people and so we believe must be practiced with reverence and deserves our respect and attention. Transforming and preserving values, our work emphasizes the need to leave capoeira free to be what it is: capoeira is a chameleon that changes, yet preserves its essence. (Abadá-Capoeira 1997)

Mestre Camisa’s charismatic leadership, stylistic and pedagogical innovations and commitment to social projects have attracted an enormous following. Today Abadá-Capoeira claims thousands of members throughout Brazil, Western and Eastern Europe, South, Central and North America, Asia and Africa. Organizing and running a heterogeneous capoeira group that spans five continents is no easy task. Mestre Camisa’s strict enforcement of a hierarchical structure has kept the group growing and strengthening over fourteen years of existence. This growth has not been without controversy both from within, and more frequently, outside of the group. Abadá has been called a “mulit-national franchise” that promotes capoeira that is “modern” “commercialized,” “bourgeois,” “whitened” “mechanical” and “violent.” These
descriptors express anxiety over the growing market for capoeira and the new rivalries among groups that, similar to their 19th century predecessors, jostle for territory. Battles are now fought mainly on ideological and pedagogical grounds in order to disseminate a particular view and philosophy about capoeira and to capture new clientele, teaching venues and media coverage. As will become evident in the following chapters, these accusations and the anxieties that produce them are also revelatory of the larger social, economic and political forces that shape the lives of capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro.

Despite internal politics, the many groups in Rio de Janeiro that I have visited over my ten years of traveling to Rio or read about on websites and newsletters, have at least one goal in common: through capoeira they strive to offer individuals -- especially youth -- tools for confronting life’s hardships and for building better futures. Often described as “resistance,” this mission is interpreted in different ways by different groups. As we will see in the following chapters, for Mestre Camisa and Abadá, it means promoting fit, strong bodies and developing multiple avenues for self-expression; building political consciousness around race and class discrimination; developing emotional and physical self-control for confronting violence; and encouraging the pursuit of education and professional careers.

CONCLUSION: BRAZIL AND CAPOEIRA, SLEEPING GIANTS?

This chapter examined transformations in the image and practice of capoeira throughout the 20th and into the 21st century. The title, “Brazilian bodies,” evoked the processes of nationalization and folklorization that capoeira underwent and the part it played in shaping national identity. In a radical shift from its previous image as a
sinister activity of *marginais* (criminals) and a threat to social order, under the influence of a political ideology that celebrated Brazil as a “racial democracy” capoeira came to be seen as an important element of *brasilidade* or national culture. Even while practitioners embraced this new image of their practice as quintessentially Brazilian, many continued, because of their ethnicity, to live in conditions of intense poverty, spatial segregation and social discrimination. This is most graphically illustrated in the life histories of Mestre Bimba and Mestre Pastinha, capoeira’s most revered historical figures who helped transform the practice into a socially accepted sport yet died in abject poverty and disillusionment.

During the second half of the 20th century, as capoeira spread quickly throughout Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and the world, the practice gained new range of participants, most notably women. In Rio de Janeiro today, capoeira classes are offered in fancy health clubs in Ipanema, private nursery schools in Leblon, and senior citizen residencies in Barra de Tijuca. Despite the spread of capoeira across economic classes and neighborhoods of Rio, the social geography of the city, built on racial and economic segregation, continues; many young capoeiristas, including those who teach capoeira in the above venues, live with the daily experience of poverty, racism and violence. For these youth, capoeira endures, as it did for their predecessors, as a tactic for surviving the daily struggle of life in Rio. Conceived in its earliest manifestations as a form of resistance of oppressed people (slaves) against their oppressors (owners), capoeira today is still considered by many as a form of resistance, albeit with updates. Though capoeira in Rio de Janeiro looks very different today, we will see in the following chapters that some of the social structures and values that helped organize and define capoeira in its
earliest manifestations continue to shape its practice for youth who struggle to navigate

life in Brazil.

In November 2002, Worker’s Party candidate Luís Inácio Lula da Silva became

Brazil’s president. Lula, from a poor Northeastern family, worked his way up the

political ladder through his activism in the labor union movement. After two previous

presidential defeats his victory was hailed by many, including most of the capoeiristas I

knew in Rio de Janeiro, as a ray of hope for Brazil. In the words of Mestre Camisa:

I voted for Lula because I identify with him. He is not well educated; he has
defects; he comes from the popular classes just like capoeira; he fought to get
where he is today. So he serves as an example for many Brazilians who are at the
bottom, he is a light, he gives us strength for the struggle. But Lula is not going to
solve Brazil’s many problems. He is going to have to negotiate with many
different segments [of society]. He is going to have to be flexible. Lula is going
to have to play capoeira, with lots of mandinga. He is going to have to act like a
capoeirista. And he is going to receive a lot of rasteiras and he is going to have to
learn to fall, get up and fall again. But I am not going to get frustrated if Lula
doesn’t resolve all of Brazil’s problems. Because it doesn’t depend just on him,
the people have to change as well. They have to change their way of thinking and
acting. Now, popular manifestations can strengthen the people and capoeira can
help with this. Capoeira is a weapon; consciousness is a weapon. They say Brazil
is a sleeping giant. So is capoeira.

Mestre Camisa’s words reflect the remarkable mix of optimism and resignation that many

Brazilians express in talking about the future of their country. Optimistic about a leftist

president who proclaims solidarity with the poor, they do not expect miracles in the

political arena. According to Camisa, it is not just up to the politicians to change the
country, but up to its citizens as well. As we will see in the following chapters, Camisa,
like many capoeiristas, envisions capoeira as a vehicle for raising political and social

awareness, and affecting individual and collective transformation.

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46 By 2005, three years into his mandate, Lula was implicated in scandal and corruption. However, after a
drop in popularity and a tense campaign, on October 29, 2006 Lula was re-elected for a second term.
I squat at the foot of the berimbau. Top crouches opposite and flashes me a friendly yet provocative grin. He pivots slightly on his toes to face Mestre Camisa’s berimbau and with his right hand lightly touches its base and then crosses himself, and for good measure, lifts the small gold cross around his neck to his lips. His benediction complete, Top stretches his arm across the small space between our bent knees and we shake hands. The rhythm is slow and cadenced and before lowing his berimbau between us to indicate that we may enter the roda and begin our game, Mestre Camisa leans down to me and in his hoarse voice whispers: “Make yourself small, Camarão!” The lead singer has finished the first verse of the song and the chorus, 50 people strong, surges around us like a cresting wave, turning the flesh on my arms to goose bumps. The game is on and immediately I am in trouble. The small space that existed between my partner and me seconds before quickly dissolves as Top launches an offensive move: blocking my entry into the roda with a low backward spinning half moon kick. I retreat around the back of his body, almost crashing into the orchestra, but managing to escape into the middle of the roda with a cartwheel on my head, my knees bent in to my chest for protection. The rhythm is Benguela so Top most likely will not strike or knock me down, but he will do everything to steal my space and disorient me. The rhythm tells me to limit the ginga and stay low, with one or both hands always touching the ground. We weave in and out of each other’s space, marking a strike, retreating, transforming one move into another. Top is almost a foot shorter than I am, a perfectly proportioned bundle of muscles and as bouncy as a spring. He exudes confidence as he dances around me, and suddenly slips under my outstretched leg, out of sight behind my back. As I whip around to find him he leaps over my bent back in a back handspring or pulo de gato that is truly as light as a “cat’s jump.” He lands far from my reach and glides up into a one armed handstand, grinning and waiting my next move. I advance hoping to strike his chest with a head butt but before I reach him he flips into a back bridge and whips his body around with a spinning kick that clips my side. In my peripheral vision I see Camisa, intently watching, his body swaying and dipping as he reacts to every move of the game as if he were playing. He is shaking his head at my mistakes and his directive comes again, urgently: “small Camarão, protect yourself by becoming small!” Easy to say, I think, if you don’t have mile long legs and a high center of gravity. But I blunder on, my awkwardness further highlighting the eloquence of my partner.
Mestre Camisa, the Abadá instructors and other students with whom I trained five evenings a week for two years never tired of instructing me. Besides ensuring that I was executing the proper technique that a particular rhythm dictated -- such as becoming small in the above anecdote -- they were intent on developing a certain flavor to my game that would make it, in their words, more Brazilian. To this end, the most frequent directives I heard were to add more *manha* or “swing” to my game and to be more expressive. The first time I heard “*faz com expressão, Camarão!*” (“Do it with expression!”), I was training a series of difficult kicks. Unsure of what was meant, in jest I contorted my face into a scowl to express my physical effort. The instructor chided me: “No Camarão, not with your face! Be expressive with your body,” going on to explain, “you are keeping your body prisoner. Let it be free (*deixa solto*).”

Letting your body be free does not mean abandoning it, but becoming it. Playing with expression means playing with feeling and confidence. To be expressive is to demonstrate with one’s whole entity -- not just the face -- that capoeira is not separate from, but part of oneself, body and soul. In describing what it takes to make a capoeirista Mestre Camisa explains:

I believe you have to capture the spirit of capoeira. Because you can have a mechanical, a practical, capoeirista who repeats the movement and does it well, even in a way that attracts attention. But he is not a capoeirista of the spirit (*da alma*). Doing capoeira is a way of feeling. You incorporate -- put in your body -- a form of behavior. And this is the most difficult thing because today with all these resources -- cds, videos, the internet, dvds -- it is easy to make a physical capoeirista, a capoeirista of the body. With all these resources a guy can learn how to play but he doesn’t have soul, he doesn’t feel it. You have to feel the music, the rhythm of the berimbau. You have to let the sound enter you, feel the song, the message of the music, and your body turns to goose bumps, you feel that emotion, you incorporate the game. I believe that the most difficult thing is to make a capoeirista with soul, heart, and feeling. Because every day that passes, with all these resources, we have many capoeiristas without feeling, mechanical.
A good capoeirista has to be full of feeling and knowledge and he has to assimilate the philosophy of capoeira and the ideology of his group.

Making or becoming a soulful capoeirista -- a capoeirista with expression and spirit -- takes years of training and most importantly, playing: while a good portion of a student’s time is spent practicing technique, it is only in playing with another in the roda, with music, that one feels the game and masters the skills. And according to Mestre Camisa, getting to this stage involves much more than simply learning the moves: while one may become adept at capoeira from a book or video, to develop into a “capoeirista with feeling and knowledge” means committing to a mestre and group, and engaging in a long-term apprenticeship.

In recuperating the theoretical significance of apprenticeship, a concept that in their view has become overused in learning-research problems and thus somewhat emptied of meaning, Lave and Wenger present a model of “situated learning” (1991: 29-30). This model works against the “banking” system of education in which instruction is viewed as teachers “depositing” knowledge into the heads of students (Freire 1990: 58). Learning is conceptualized not as a something that occurs within the individual, an internalization of knowledge and skills, but as a co-constructive process in which teachers are also students and students also teachers. Knowledge and skills are not possessed by teachers and given to students, but are produced through practice. In this way, it is not just apprentices that are transformed in the learning process, but also the masters, and the practice itself (Lave and Wegner 1991). “Situated learning” is based on the view that “agent, activity and the world mutually constitute each other” (1991: 33).

1 The idea that teachers are also co-learners is central to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s theories of pedagogy and will be addressed in Chapter Five.
In this model all social practice is in essence “situated learning,” thereby troubling the dichotomy between “formal” and “informal” education and urging for a more ample vision of instruction. Accordingly, Lave and Wenger conceptualize the contexts in which learning occurs, not as classrooms or educational sites, but as “communities of practice.” In this conceptualization learning is not structured as a hierarchical ladder that students move up as they gain more knowledge; in communities of practice novices begin their apprenticeship on the “periphery,” and as mastery increases move towards the center and “full participation.”

Communities of practice, as with any learning context, are never isolated or enclosed spaces but are produced and embedded in larger socio-cultural contexts. Situated learning is thus involved in the production and reproduction of social order, social action and identities. Learning is not a way of knowing about the world, but rather a way of being in the world (Lave and Wenger 1991: 24). Learning fundamentally affects who we are and how we move; and skills and knowledge acquired in a particular learning context are not restricted to application in that context only, but carry over into other areas of life. True mastery is ultimately the ability to improvise and apply skills and knowledge to new situations.

Working from this model of situated learning, this chapter and the next explore the parameters of a contemporary capoeira apprenticeship and what it “does” for a person. This chapter presents a thick description of what is taught and learned in practice: it describes the movement and music of capoeira and the life lessons embedded therein. Capoeiristas claim that capoeira is a transformative practice: training and playing capoeira fundamentally affects the way they perceive and move at all times (cf
Ivan M. Downey 2005). Incorporating the body techniques of capoeira produces the habitus and identity of a capoeirista that stretches beyond the context of capoeira. The acclaimed transformative powers of capoeira are best expressed in the oft-heard edict that capoeira is more than a physical activity, it is “is a way of living” (*modo de vivir*) and “a way of being” (*modo de ser*).

Practitioners connect this way of being-in-the-world to the particular social context of Brazil. As Mestre Camisa would often tell his students, “capoeira is not just about training, playing and getting a beautiful body. It is about knowing your place and role in society.” In telling me to put more swing and expression in my game so that it would be more “Brazilian,” my fellow students and teachers were instructing me to see their social world and move in it the way they do. They would explain that “capoeira is not just about learning the moves, it is about *convivência*.” A term that evokes companionship, co-habitation and an intimacy with others’ life experiences (see Preface), *convivência*, or understanding their lives, would be, they told me, my greatest teacher. This chapter and the next present these lessons as learned both through the physical incorporation of capoeira, and through social integration into a capoeira group. This chapter begins with a description of the physical space and structure of training, and a brief profile (expanded in the next chapter) of the students in Mestre Camisa’s classes in Rio de Janeiro.
THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The Agostino Neto CIEP (Integrated Center of Public Education) in the neighborhood of Humaitá has been the home of Abadá-Capoeira in Rio de Janeiro since 1989. The three-story concrete structure of the public elementary school, discreetly tucked against the foot of a hill, is almost hidden from the street by the foliage of large tropical trees. There is a small Umbanda center next to it and a gas station and a theatre/art gallery across the street. In exchange for offering free capoeira classes to the school children during the day, Mestre Camisa holds his adult classes in the covered outdoor recreation area on Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings. To accommodate students who work late or have a long commute, the four-hour time block is broken into two classes; some students stay for both.

Humaitá is a small upper middle class neighborhood squeezed between the larger middle class neighborhood of Botafogo and the lake, Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, across from which are Ipanema and Leblon (see Appendix A for maps). Despite its location, the CIEP is identical to all the other 350 CIEPs throughout the city and state of Rio de Janeiro. Built in the 1980s under then governor Lionel Brizola, the public schools were designed to provide full days of academic instruction, meals, physical education and extracurricular activities. Many of the students at the Agostino Neto CIEP come from the favela Rocinha, a 15-minute to hour long bus ride depending on traffic. Others come from the tiny favela directly across the street: an almost farcical parody of the way in which Rio’s extreme wealth and extreme poverty rub shoulders, this tiny favela of less then 100 families occupies the crevices between several high rise condominiums and is
completely invisible from the street. To protect the neighbors rather than the favelados, the entrance of the favela is gated and guarded so as to dissuade expansion.

During an interview Mestre Camisa explained to me why he chose this particular CIEP when the Association of Civil Workers in Botafogo, where he taught in the 1980s, closed down:

I always liked teaching in “popular” places. I’ve given classes in wealthier areas as well, I have taught in all sorts of places. But the places where I have always brought together the biggest number of students is in popular spaces. So I wanted to start a project with school children in the CIEPs and I came to Brizola’s inauguration of this one and I saw the name -- Agostino Neto, the first president of Angola -- and I thought that was pretty appropriate. And this is also a good location; it is a central place that is easy for people from the Zona Norte and the Zona Sul to get to. Anyone, from anyplace, favelas, whatever, can train here. There is no discrimination. And anyone who is prejudiced is not going to train here, or they will and they will lose their prejudice. So I have purposefully stayed here all these years. Even if we get our own center some day, I will continue to hold classes for the school children here and we will continue to have the aulão here because it wouldn’t work in a smaller space.

The open air space of the recreation area where trainings are held contributes to the openness of the class: the sound of the berimbau can be heard from the street and on most evenings curious visitors come up to watch. The first students to arrive sweep the concrete floor but even so, feet and uniforms turn black with dirt and sweat by the end of class and the bathrooms, with erratically functioning toilets and sinks and no soap, provide little help in cleaning up. The nominal monthly fee of 60 reais is expected only of those students who can afford it, and of the sixty or so regular students who train there, easily a third, if not more, have never paid tuition.

Mestre Camisa’s desire to bring together a wide range of people from different geographic locations and social segments of the city is reflected in his students: the oldest

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2 Popular (*popular*), a terms widely used in Brazil, refers to the working class and poor.
3 The *aulão*, or big class, held the last Friday of each month is discussed in the next chapter.
regular students are a 52 year old, white Army Lieutenant who lives with his girlfriend in Ipanema and a 40 year old black woman who works in the service industry and lives alone in a favela in the center of Rio; some of the youngest include a 17 year old male from a nearby favela who sporadically works and does not attend school, a 16 year old female high school student from an upper middle class family, and a 12 year old Haitian adoptee of Belgian parents who chose to retire in Brazil in part so their son, who began capoeira with Abadá in Europe, could continue his training with Mestre Camisa. While this last case is certainly the most extreme example of re-location in order to train with Mestre Camisa (obviously made possible by the family’s economic situation), other stories of internal migration abound. The narrative of Elton, a thin, wiry, 16 year old with a chronically sunburned nose who showed up at the CIEP shortly after I arrived, is illustrative. One day before training Elton told me the story of how he became involved in capoeira and decided to move to Rio de Janeiro from his distant home state of Rondônia, on the border of Bolivia:

E: I had never heard of capoeira, as there are so few groups in Porto Velho [capital of Rondônia]. One day when I was 13 I saw my older brother leaving the house dressed all in white. I said “What is this brother? Are you messing with macumba!” When he told me that capoeira was a martial art I was intrigued and wanted to tag along but my mother wouldn’t let me. I was an aggressive kid always fighting in the street, so my mother was scared to let me train a martial art. I snuck out anyway and watched a class and I was mesmerized.

K: What attracted you most?

E: The harmony: everyone there, boys, girls, clapping hands, singing -- it seemed as if everyone knew everyone and that everyone was friends. And I liked that it was a fight but done to music without aggression.

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4 Macumba is a derogatory term for candomblé and other African derived religions in Brazil (see last chapter, footnote 16).
Elton eventually persuaded his mother to let him train, promising that capoeira would help change his aggressive ways, which he claims it did. He joined a small “fundo de quintal” (backyard) group in Porto Velho. He started hearing about Abadá and when a friend lent him a videotape of an Abadá event, he was impressed not only with the way Mestre Camisa played, but the way he spoke. He told me, “I thought, Damn! This guy is intelligent, he speaks well.” Elton began saving money and at sixteen gathered up his small savings and a supply of locally made jewelry and crafts and took the long (several days) bus ride to Rio. Life in Rio was not easy for Elton; he lived in a cheap pension and was often exhausted upon arriving for training after a long day on the beach selling his wares under the hot sun. But it was worth it, he said, “just to be close to the mestre.”

The sentiments expressed by Elton -- a deep respect for Mestre Camisa and belief that he had much to gain from being close to, training and listening to the mestre -- I often heard repeated and will return to at the end of the chapter.

On a more general note, what first attracted Elton to capoeira, and something I often heard repeated, especially by novices, was the heterogeneity and apparent unity of the group. Unlike in many other learning contexts, students are not necessarily divided by level and skill; nor are they segregated by age, gender and physique, as one might imagine in a physically demanding activity such as capoeira. In the field note that opens this chapter, for example, I am playing in class with Top, a 5’4”, 27 year old Afro-Brazilian male and one of Mestre Camisa’s most advanced students. Certainly as capoeira has increased in popularity and its teaching become more widespread and specialized, divisions have begun to appear more frequently: classes held in certain neighborhoods of the city greatly restrict the ethnicity, gender and class of students, and

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5 See Chapter Five for a discussion of aggression.
instructors have developed classes for special categories of students (e.g., children, senior citizens, the physically and mentally disabled). Yet within particular learning contexts, such as the CIEP, there still often exists much variability.

This is not to suggest, despite the “harmony” Elton described, that this heterogeneity is problem or conflict-free. The multiple inequities, tensions and struggles for power within the group will become quite evident in subsequent chapters. Nor is this description of the heterogeneity of capoeira to suggest that hierarchy does not exist. On the contrary, Abadá, like most capoeira groups, is a rigidly hierarchical organization. During training this hierarchy is always evident: as part of their uniform students wear different colored cords that indicate their graduation level (see Appendix C) and they arrange themselves accordingly in the space. Classes at the CIEP usually begin with students spread out in long rows with the most advanced in the front and the most novice at the back. From a position at the front while playing the berimbau, pandeiro (tamborine) or atabaque (drum), Mestre Camisa, or in his absence the highest-level student present, calls out a series of stretches, moves and combinations of moves. Students execute the movement in unison with the students in front serving as models for those in the back. The combinations often increase in difficulty and it is not uncommon that novices at the back become confused and have trouble keeping up.

Just when frustration among beginners may begin to set in, the training shifts in format to working in pairs. Sometimes the class is then split into two or more sections according to cord level. More often then not, however, the group is kept together and students alternate working with someone of their level, higher, or below. When paired with beginners advanced students are reminded to be careful in their own movement as
they are training with someone below their level, and to give their partner corrections; when paired with someone their own level or higher, advanced students are encouraged to *puxar* (“push”) the training to a more intense level. At the end of training there is a roda (discussed below) in which everyone plays together: advanced with novice, novice with novice, advanced with advanced.

I was often amazed during the rodas at the end of class by the unwavering attentiveness and interest with which Mestre Camisa observed every single game. Despite what must be the hundreds of thousands of games he has seen over the last forty years, from the expressions on his face one would believe that each time two players enter the roda, Mestre Camisa witnessed capoeira for the very first time. When I remarked on this, he explained that he never gets bored because he is always learning, always seeing new things and imaging new possibilities. He encourages his students to do as he does while observing others: he puts himself into the game, thinking through it and sharpening his mental reflexes by imagining what he would do in a similar situation. Mestre Camisa’s acute observation of his students results in his constant innovations and re-invention of capoeira. He describes his school in Rio as a “laboratory” where new ideas are developed. He disagrees with the notion that capoeira exists in some “traditional” form that should be preserved. In distinguishing his opinion from that of another mestre in Rio who told me “capoeira is complete (*está feita*) and needs nothing new added to it,” he told me: “Capoeira is culture and culture is alive. Culture shouldn’t be kept untouched in a museum! Culture adapts with society and so does capoeira.”

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Thinking through games can also occur when one is not observing or otherwise actively engaged in capoeira. During intense periods of training or transition phases in which I am breaking through to the next level of skill, I often dream of playing capoeira at night, or find myself during the day imagining and playing games in my head.
chapter, while providing thick description of the music and movement characteristics of all capoeira play, specifically examines the particular innovations of Mestre Camisa. These innovations, which do not develop from a top-down ideology of what capoeira should be but from Mestre Camisa’s observations of what his students bring to their practice, exemplify the ways in which social actors and social practices are mutually defined and transformed.

The array of students -- ranging in physique, ethnicity, class, age and gender -- and the structure of training so that all students learn and play together, so evident in Abadá as well as in many other capoeira groups I visited, reflects a fundamental philosophy espoused by practitioners: that anyone can learn, play and excel at capoeira. The multiplicity of skills and knowledge that comprise capoeira, particularly those developed and elaborated by Mestre Camisa and his students, creates a wide palate of competencies: becoming an adept does not just take physical prowess, but also mental acuity; not only strength but also artistic expression; not just speed but also musicality. Students who are weak in one area can compensate in another; and as they grow older, privilege those aspects that demand less physical dexterity. This variability and flexibility of capoeira is one of the things that make it attractive to such a wide variety of participants, and keep them involved often for an entire lifetime. However, a “complete capoeirista” (capoeirista completa), in the language of participants, is one who excels in all areas. In hopes of one day achieving such full participation, from their position on the periphery, novices begin by learning the basic movement vocabulary, from which they hope to eventually “speak” capoeira.
LEARNING TO “SPEAK” CAPOEIRA

Capoeira is a dialogue between two bodies; Capoeira is a game of chess played with the body
--- often heard metaphors

The expressed belief that capoeira is a “way of being” and Mestre Camisa’s words that incorporating capoeira means “putting into your body a form of behavior” resonate with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and his statement that “there is a way of understanding which is altogether particular, and often forgotten in theories of intelligence: that which consists of understanding with one’s body” (1990: 166). Dancers speak of this understanding with the body as “muscle memory” by which the body, not the mind, remembers and leads one through a set of steps. This is not a question of autopilot or mechanical repetition but of thinking with the body (cf Browning 1992:13). Thus learning and knowledge cohabit the physical and cerebral domains; we come to understand through our bodies and minds. To become a capoeirista who is not merely mechanical, according to Mestre Camisa, entails feeling and knowledge. One must become a body that is both expressive and intelligent, a body that thinks as it moves.

The notion of intelligent bodies is beautifully captured in two popular metaphors for capoeira: a dialogue spoken, and a game of chess played, with two bodies. These metaphors suggest that capoeira involves mental work as much as it does physical work, and that the two are inextricably linked. The physical skills that the game demands -- flexibility, speed, strength, and rhythm -- come to fruition through mental work -- communication, improvisation and strategy. These metaphors also highlight that learning capoeira is never an individual or complete process -- a set of skills that are internalized and reproduced -- but one that it is continually created and re-created through

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7 See the Introduction for a discussion of habitus.
interaction. As in a conversation or game of chess, this interaction is dependent on a
certain amount of cooperation, at the very least consensual turn taking. Practitioners
 liken the movement in a game of capoeira to an exchange of questions and answers in
which players attempt to best match their responses so that a fluid and dynamic
conversation is maintained. The movement and music of capoeira conform to a call and
response pattern. Attacks are not blocked but moved away from with an “escape”
(esquiva) and responded to with a counterattack. A seamless whole is created that
appears more like cooperative dance than competitive fight.

Despite appearances, capoeira is competitive and, as we will see in Chapter Five,
can become dangerously so. While there is no official winner or loser in a game, each
player attempts to demonstrate superior skills and knowledge. Continuing with the
metaphor of a dialogue, each player attempts to stump the other by asking, as capoeiristas
say, “an unanswerable question.” This utterance disorients or unbalances the other, and
momentarily arrests the flow of action. It must be uttered with eloquence, however, so as
not to disrupt the aesthetics of the game. Thus the implicit goal of the game is to
outmaneuver and disorient the other while displaying greater control, aesthetics and
creativity of movement (cf Downey 2005). One of the key ways to do this is to
demonstrate an ability to strategize. Like chess, capoeira is a game of strategy that
involves negotiating and claiming space. As Mestre Camisa explains it, one must
imagine the roda as the chessboard and the parts of the body as the pieces -- an elbow is a
pawn, the head a bishop. One must learn to strategize the right moment and place to set
one’s pieces. This involves observing the opponent’s game and analyzing his habits and
idiosyncratic way of moving so as to set a trap. Using a movement said to chamar (call),
one leads one’s opponent to move in the direction or respond in the way intended, thus falling into one’s preplanned strike, sweep or takedown.

Showing superiority in a game does not only depend on executing a successful attack. One can show superiority in attitude and way of moving, in playing with confidence and expression. Superior players direct the game by manipulating their bodies and the bodies of their partners in the space around them. The negotiation and manipulation of space and others within it is what drives the game and constitutes the fundamental ethics of capoeira. Furthermore, it is this awareness of their environment and negotiation or manipulation of interpersonal interactions that capoeiristas see as carrying over into other areas of their life. These claims are expressed in historical anecdotes and verbal lessons that often accompany the teaching of movement, in song lyrics, and in the ethos of different styles of play. I begin with the lessons incorporated in the basic movement vocabulary and then proceed to music and style of play.

**The Movement Vocabulary**

How one plays capoeira is the greatest marker of group identity. Students who switch groups are often told to break the “bad habits” of their previous style. This can prove to be a difficult task taking up to months or years, depending how long one was with the previous group and how different the style was. The particular style of a group can relate to a political ideology: for instance, some Capoeira Angola groups limit their repertoire to the seven moves taught by Mestre Pastinha in the 1930s. They emphasize moves (such as head butts and sweeps) and corporal dispositions (such as being low to the ground) that they believe tie the art to its African roots, and reject movements (such
as high kicks) they believe have come from Asian martial arts. As we will see below, Mestre Camisa, who descends from Mestre Bimba’s Capoeira Regional style, has a very different philosophy. 

Even across groups that play a similar style, individual moves may have different names, or the same name may refer to different moves. Furthermore, moves executed in different situations serve different purposes and thus may be simultaneously categorized as different things. Across styles, however, movement generally falls into three categories -- the ginga, defenses, and attacks -- and new students usually learn the movement groups in that order (cf Lewis 1992: 98, Appendix B; Almeida 1986: 155).

The Ginga and the Gaze

The ginga is a capoeirista’s walk; it is the very first thing a student learns. The ginga is a continuous swaying side-to-side step that keeps to the beat of the music and ties attacks, defenses and acrobatics into a seamless circular whole. The step begins with one leg back in a slight lunge, knees bent, front foot flat on the ground and back foot on the ball with the heel raised. The arm on the same side as the leg that is back is raised for protection in front of the face; the other is held at the side, cocked slightly away from the body. The back foot steps up parallel to the front foot in a wide stance and the front foot steps back to complete the move on the other side. As in walking, the arms switch positions in time with the step. The ginga is deceptively dance-like. When students first begin they often exaggerate the swing and lift of the body so that the step is reminiscent of a waltz. Yet the ginga is the position from which one launches all attacks and

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8 See Chapter Two for a discussion of the historical development and differences between Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional.
defenses. The most difficult aspect of mastering the ginga is learning how to retain a loose, flexible, dance-like step that is nonetheless ready for action.

The term ginga is not exclusive to capoeira, nor does it only refer to the particular step; it has meaning in various Brazilian contexts. Glossed in English as “sway” or “pitch,” as in a boat upon the sea, in popular jargon ginga is similar in meaning to American “swing.” Like swing in jazz, it connotes not only rhythm, but also improvisation and being cool or hip.\(^9\) Ginga is an embodied concept located specifically in the hips, and most often is attributed to those who display corporal dexterity: the famous Brazilian soccer players have ginga in their game; the carnival paraders have ginga in their samba. In the religious arena, ginga refers to the movements performed by spirit mediums in Candomblé in order to incorporate spirits (Burdick 1998: 58).

In capoeira, the ginga is the most immediate identifier of a capoeirista’s lineage. At the same time that the ginga marks one’s membership in a group, students are encouraged to develop their own personal swing and style. Some mestres never give specific instructions on how to ginga, telling their students to mimic what they see and discover their own individual style.\(^10\) In other groups, such as Abadá, new students are instructed to place their arms and legs in precise positions as they learn to ginga. Once they have become confident with the basic step they are encouraged to “break” (quebrar) the ginga, finding their own swing and sway.\(^11\) The sway of the ginga is a deceptive

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\(^10\) A prime example of this is the students of Mestre Russo who runs a popular street roda in the suburbio, Caxias; each of them has a distinctive style, none of which looks exactly like that of their mestre.

\(^11\) Some capoeiristas complain that this style of teaching the ginga produces a “mechanical” and “identical” ginga among all students. Those within groups that use such pedagogy, however, usually claim that though similar in style, every player nonetheless has a distinct ginga. I can attest to this: after training and playing with the same group of Abadá students for two and a half years, I could easily distinguish advanced players from afar, or on a video tape, just from their ginga.
tactic. It disguises the fact that even when the body is in an apparently relaxed or playful
stance, the capoeirista is prepared to deliver or receive an attack. Mestres will remind
their students that even as their torsos sway and buck, every muscle should be flexed and
ready for action.

As important as maintaining a balance between being relaxed and prepared, and
one of the first lesson novices learn along with the ginga, is controlling the gaze. While
playing capoeira one must keep one’s eyes on the opponent at all times. Even in inverted
moves, such as cartwheels and handstands, the head is kept in line with the spine so that
eyes can remain looking forward towards the opponent rather than down at the ground.\textsuperscript{12}
Similarly, when performing a move in which the back is momentarily to one’s opponent,
the head whips around quickly (like spotting in ballet) in order to maintain visual contact.
The purpose of eye contact is to ensure that one is not surprised by an attack. Because
attacks can be launched from any direction with any part of the body, focus should never
be fixed on one point, such as the feet or face, but should roam, taking in the entirety of
the opponent and the environment.

Like the ginga, the gaze can be deceptive. A common tactic among experienced
players is to feign distraction while playing a novice; to look away and then, using
peripheral vision, suddenly launch an attack.\textsuperscript{13} Thus new students are reminded to be
watchful and attentive at all times, not only when playing. The mestre with whom I
learned my very first steps in capoeira made it a practice to play with each and every
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} This is particularly difficult to master as it disturbs the sense of equilibrium of the inner ear. Gymnasts
ameliorate this problem by performing inverted moves with the head tilted back so that they are looking at
the floor. See Downey (2005:36) for an interesting discussion of the neuroscience of this phenomenon and
the experience of “learning to fall” in capoeira.
\textsuperscript{13} A master at this is Mestre Curio, an angoleiro from Salvador whose game is pure theatre (and in fact his
Friday night rodas usually draw a crowd of spectators). He will feign fear, distraction (e.g. by another
spectator entering the academy), anger and even tears in order to confuse his opponent, and of course,
entertain the crowd. For a discussion of such theatricalities in Capoeira Angola see Downey 2005.}
student in the roda at the end of class. He would use the opportunity not only to encourage us to speak capoeira with an expert, but to teach about being prepared: if he noticed a student on the sidelines waiting to play appeared to not be paying attention to what was going on in the roda, he would suddenly launch a kick in his direction (striking him if he did not duck) without ever looking away from his opponent or breaking the flow of their game. This lesson, often reiterated verbally, is that one is a capoeirista at all times, not just when in the roda. Mestres in Rio de Janeiro often refer to the notorious dangers of the city -- from potential muggings to reckless driving -- when encouraging their students to maintain their alertness and preparedness in the street. Capoeiristas claim to use their peripheral vision to guard against attack from dark alleys and to strategically situate themselves when in a bar or restaurant so that they have full view of the room, including entrances and exits (cf Downey 2005).

Practitioners claim that years of training capoeira fundamentally shape their perception and movement in the world, and that this transformation is visible in bodily mannerisms. Echoing Mauss’ observation that from a distance a Frenchman is distinguishable from an Englishman by his gait (1973: 72), capoeiristas claim they can identify a fellow practitioner in the street by the ginga in his walk: the sway and lightness of a capoeirista’s tread telegraphs alertness, self-preservation and readiness for action. From the very first lessons -- the ginga and the gaze -- students take away the importance of self-protection, preparedness and deception, strategies they are told are essential for survival, not only in the roda but also in the streets.
Defenses

From the ginga, students progress to defensive moves. Learning defense before attack emphasizes that self-protection is more important than confrontation, something to be avoided when possible. This is further highlighted by the fact that to defend oneself is expressed by the verb *esquivar*, meaning to “escape, “dodge,” or “evade.” Unlike in other fighting arts in which blows are blocked with the hand or body, in capoeira, physical contact is largely avoided. Defenses move in the same direction as the attack and transform into counterattacks. The continuous flow of motion, avoidance of physical contact and the fact that many of the attacks and defenses do not immediately appear as such, disguise the dangerous potential of capoeira.

*Esquivas:* The most basic and natural defense is the esquiva. In Abadá the esquivas fall into four categories – front, side, diagonal and free. In the first three, the legs take a front, sideways, or diagonal stance to the incoming attack and are planted wide apart, knees bent. The torso is held low, almost touching the thigh, and the arms are up to protect the head that is tucked in, though eyes stay on the adversary. The safest position for these esquivas is close to the body of one’s opponent, so that one actually steps towards rather than away from one’s adversary, simultaneously ducking below the attack. From these esquivas it is easy to launch an immediate counterattack. The free esquivas are implemented when one does not have time to step into one of the other esquivas and so, similar to a boxer’s torso, the upper body twists or dodges the attack with a good dose of swing.

*Negativa:* The negativa (“negation” or “refusal”) is the safest defense as it takes the body to the ground, well away from the incoming strike. In some styles the negativa
consists of having one’s weight back on one bent leg, foot flat on the ground with the other leg stretched in front. In the Abadá style the weight is brought forward over the bent leg, the body balancing on the ball of the foot. This second variation allows for greater mobility: to avoid remaining in a vulnerable position on the ground in front of a standing partner, the negativa is a transitional movement from which one moves around on the ground, launches an attack or comes back up to standing. Another similar defensive/transitional move specific to the style of Abadá is the descida básica (basic descent). This is a deep lunge with the hand closest to the front knee on the ground, and the other raised for protection in front of the face. One can launch an attack directly from the descida básica or else transform it into the negativa and proceed from there.

**Floreios:** The floreios, or “flourishes,” are acrobatic moves that range from simple cartwheels (aús), handstands (bananeiras or “banana trees”) and back handsprings (macacos or “monkeys”), to elaborate head and hand spins, backbends and front and back flips. While floreios appear to be just that, flourishes that make the game pretty and demonstrate physical prowess, when appropriately executed they also become escapes and defensive moves (discussed further below).

**Attacks**

Attacks in capoeira can be executed with any part of the body: feet, hands, elbows, head, and full body. They are categorized as golpes or “strikes” and entradas or entrances. The latter also fall under the category of counterattacks.

**Golpes:** The golpes consist mainly of straight kicks, circular kicks and to a lesser extent, strikes with the open hand, elbow and knee. The circular kicks -- *queixada* (jaw), *armada* (armed), *meia lua de frente* (half moon to the front), *meia lua de compasso* (half
moon to the back) -- are elongated and gracefully executed, contributing to the dance-like quality of capoeira. With the exception of the meia lua de compasso, the circular kicks are moves that are said to *chamar* or “call”: less effective as attacks than straight kicks as they leave one more vulnerable to counterattack, these moves are used in games that are less aggressive or in situations in which one player wishes to set up another: one can “call” the adversary with a graceful circular kick that transforms midway into a sweep or other more aggressive move. The meia lua de compasso, on the other hand, though a circular kick, is one of capoeira’s most characteristic and most deadly moves. It is performed with the arms placed on the ground and one leg swung upwards and around in a backwards arc. In some styles of capoeira this move is called *rabo de arraia* or “stingray tail,” a name which aptly captures the swinging force of the kick that if it meets its target -- the heel against the soft temple of the head -- can be fatal.  

The most characteristic straight kick that is found in all styles of capoeira is the *benção* or “blessing.” It is a front kick executed with the flat of the foot pushing against an opponent’s chest. A popular anecdote told by instructors introducing this move is that the name refers to the violence of forced religious conversion of the slaves, or alternately that this kick was the response slaves gave to the priests who were blessing them. The *cruz* (“cross”) is a response to the benção in which the one being attacked comes up under the attacking leg with outstretched arms and lifts the standing leg of the opponent off the ground. Similar to anecdotes about the bençao, legends suggest that the cruz was named after a tactic used by escaped slaves who would make the sign of the cross with their bodies when they spotted bounty hunters in the distance so as not to be shot.  

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14 A capoeirista I know in Rio de Janeiro was nicknamed Fatal when, while still quite new to capoeira, he managed to send a fellow student to the hospital with a meia lua de compasso. The injury was not fatal, but the capoeirista, a peaceful soul, could never, much to his regret, shake the nickname.
The other straight kicks - *martelo* (hammer), *gancho* (hook), *pisão*, and *ponteira* (metal tip) - are similar to kicks in Asian martial arts and thus some practitioners consider them to be corruptions (cf Downey 2005:182).\(^{15}\) Even more controversial than these kicks are strikes with the hands. Some practitioners maintain the story that slaves were shackled by the wrists and so had to develop fighting techniques that utilized the feet and head rather than hands as weapons (see Introduction). Utilizing the feet, and especially the head, is also what most closely links capoeira to its predecessors in Africa, where such techniques predominate in fighting arts (cf Desch-Obi 2000). Thus many groups consider hand strikes to be a corruption of “traditional” capoeira. Mestre Bimba introduced hand strikes into his Regional style and many groups today, including Abadá, use them, though usually they are not emphasized.

**Counterattacks**

Many capoeira moves can be used as both defense and attack, or as “counterattacks.” For instance, an *aú* or cartwheel, used mainly as an escape, can become an attack if while upside down, the player shoots a leg forward and strikes with his foot an opponent who is attempting an *entrada*. Entradas, or “entrances” are responses to attacks in which the receiver moves in on the attacker. Best described in the move called *vingativa* (“vindictive”), these counterattacks take advantage of the attacker’s vulnerable position during an attack, and use the whole body to knock him off balance. Other similar moves are the cruz mentioned above and the *tesoura* (“scissors”),

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\(^{15}\) The martelo resembles what is called a “roundhouse” in Asian martial arts; the gancho is similar to the martelo but is particularly effective as it changes direction, delivering the strike in a hooking motion; the pisão is similar to the benção but delivered from a sidewise orientation; and the ponteira is also similar to the benção but delivered with the ball rather than the flat of the foot. This last kick, also known as *bico*, a term taken from Brazilian soccer, became particularly controversial after a capoeirista died upon receiving one (see Chapter Five).
which uses the legs like a pair scissors across the attacker’s body -- anywhere from calf to neck -- to knock her down. Bodies do touch during entradas, but players attempt to execute them cleanly so that physical contact is as brief as possible.

Two of capoeira’s most characteristic moves, the *rasteira* or “sweep” and the *cabeçada* or “head butt,” can be categorized as entradas. From historical documents, such as the writings of A.P.G.D., Placido de Abreu and Mello Moraes Filho presented in Chapter One, we know that head butts and sweeps have been a part of capoeira repertoire since the early 19th century. These moves are also found in other fighting arts of the African Diaspora (cf Desch-Obi 2000) and in other Brazilian folk dances such as *samba dura*. The historical evidence and African aesthetic of these moves lead many practitioners to consider them to be defining elements of “traditional” capoeira, and to decry styles that de-emphasize them in favor of other types of full body take downs also found in other martial arts.

**Rasteira:** The rasteira is a leg sweep that can be executed from the ground or from standing. From a standing or crouched position, the one executing the rasteira sweeps an extended leg out along the ground and hooks his opponent’s ankle with his foot and pulls. When applied at a precise moment during a kick, the rasteira will easily unbalance the one delivering the kick. Though simple in execution, the rasteira is difficult to master as it demands perfect timing and precision: if the sweep pulls swiftly at the apex of a kick, the rasteira can lift a body into the air and bring it crashing to the ground. In a well-executed rasteira, the victim will not even feel the pull and will be left with little more damage than a bruised body and ego. The elegance of the move, and its potentially humorous effect, make the rasteira extremely popular. I once heard a mestre, frustrated
by the aggressive and not very effective games during his roda, admonish his students with “I want to see a good rasteira that makes a player fly up in the air and land hard on his butt so that everyone here laughs at him!” An elegant rasteira should be accompanied by an elegant fall: an experienced capoeirista will break his fall with his hands, not allowing the rest of his body to touch the ground. In teaching students to “fall well,” instructors often refer to the tradition of wearing all white uniforms, a custom that apparently arose among the late 19th and early 20th capoeiras who wore white suits, shined shoes and hats even while playing capoeira in the filthy city streets: proof of the most skilled player, therefore, would be the cleanest suit after hours of play.

**Cabeçada:** The cabeçada is a blow executed with the head. A strike with the hard part of skull just above the forehead, a “head butt” can be deadly if delivered with an upward thrust to the nose or chin. In capoeira, the cabeçada is most often delivered to the chest or side, so that like the rasteira, while knocking an opponent to the ground, it usually does not do excessive damage. The cabeçada is most effective when executed while one’s adversary is in a vulnerable position such as delivering a kick or in a cartwheel or handstand. The cabeçada puts one momentarily in a precarious position because of the proximity to the other. Therefore, though a simple move, like the rasteira, the cabeçada must be executed with perfect timing and unwavering intent.

The moves described here just skim the surface of a rich vocabulary of movements that constitute the capoeira language. Yet with this basic vocabulary students are ready to form sentences, however tentatively, and communicate with other players. The space for doing this is the roda.
THE RODA: A RITUAL SPACE OF POSSIBILITY AND MASTERY

If mastery involves improvisation and adapting skills and knowledge to new circumstances, then it is only in playing, and playing in the roda, that a capoeiristas truly begins to master capoeira. The majority of a student’s time may be spent learning moves and combinations of moves individually and with a partner, but it is only when she enters the roda that she begins to understand and, in the words of practitioners, “incorporate” the game. The term roda (‘wheel’ or ‘circle’) refers to both the physical space -- the ring -- in which capoeira is played, and to the event of bringing capoeiristas together to play. Rodas vary in structure, venue and intent: they can be pre-planned or spontaneous; occur in capoeira academies or on the street; are part of larger capoeira performances and rites of passage, or are their own event; are restricted to members of one group or are open to all and any; are held at the end of each training session, once a week, or once a month; last fifteen minutes or five hours; are led by one instrument (or on rare occasion none) or by an orchestra of eight.

An essential aspect of every roda, however, is its leader. This leader, usually the most experienced capoeirista present, designates the start of the roda by taking up the lead berimbau (see below) and positioning him or herself at what will be the top, or entrance, to the roda. In some academies or public outdoors places where rodas regularly occur, the physical space of the ring is marked by one or two concentric circles painted on the ground. The other musicians take up their positions alongside the leader and the rest of the participants fill in the edges of the circle. The orchestra strikes up and after a
musical interlude, the leader indicates that games may begin by a verbal “Iê!” and by lowering his berimbau into the center of the ring.

Games begin in front of the orchestra, at the feet of the lead musician. As described in the field note that began this chapter, two players crouch *ao pé do berimbau* ("at the foot of the berimbau"). This crouched anticipation is a moment of personal and shared ritual: the players may cross themselves or make some other sign asking for protection: bringing a crucifix or image of a saint worn around the neck to the lips; touching a hand to the ground or the tip of the lead berimbau and then to the heart; tracing symbols on the ground with the hands or feet (explained below); or raising outstretched arms to the sky. Individual rituals dispensed with, players then turn their attention to each other. They shake hands and, depending on the anticipated cooperation or antagonism of the game, may make some other sign -- prolonged eye contact, smiles or frowns -- to indicate the expected mood of the game. This is a crucial moment: each player sizes up the other and attempts to determine his or her intention. Each player’s assessment then determines how each enters the roda to begin play: if the ensuing interaction is expected to be friendly and cooperative, players may begin with a more vulnerable movement such as an elongated cartwheel; if the interaction is expected to be more aggressive, players proceed cautiously, sometimes hesitating a moment to see how the other enters.

In the roda, games are directed by the rhythm and speed of the instruments (discussed below). The music may remain the same for the duration of the roda or may alter, thereby changing the style and intent of the games. In some rodas, just as games begin at the foot of the berimbau, so they also end. Termination of a game is marked in
one of two ways: either the lead musician will indicate to the players to stop by calling out a loud “lé”, playing a series of rapid notes on his berimbau, or lowering the instrument into the middle of the roda; or else the players themselves will break off play, shake hands and briefly return to the foot of the berimbau. The next couple, who may already be waiting near the orchestra, will quickly crouch at the foot of the berimbau, shake hands and enter to play. In this way there are no pauses in the music; even when musicians rotate, so those on the instruments can take a turn playing in the roda, the music remains a constant.

Another way in which players replace each other in the roda is through a procedure known as *comprando o jogo* or “buying the game.” With two players already engaged in a game, a third enters the roda and positions himself between the two players facing the one with whom he wishes to play. The player who has been “bought out” removes himself from the roda. In this situation, most popular during faster rhythms, the games tend to be fairly short and roll into one another with no break, each player usually playing two games before being bought out. In keeping with her analysis of the roda as a bounded ritual space, both profane and sacred, Letícia Reis interprets “buying the game” as a “symbolic payment” for entering the separate world of capoeira (Reis 2000:171). However, there is another equally, if not more, persuasive, interpretation. I believe that *comprando o jogo* is a reference to the Brazilian colloquialism, *comprando a briga*. Literally translating as “buying the fight,” this expression is used when someone takes sides in an argument, or steps in to defend someone in a physical fight. That “buying the game” perhaps refers to coming to the defense of a comrade in the roda, will become more apparent in Chapters Four and Five in which I discuss group loyalties, protective
fictive kinship ties between members of a group, and games which tip the scale from play to fight. Suffice it here to say that contrary to Reis’ interpretation of “buying the game” as a further sedimentation of the symbolic space of the roda as separate from everyday life, I believe that the expression in fact re-enforces the connections between the ritual space of capoeira and everyday life, a notion I return to below.

Regardless of the intentions of the players and mood of the game, entering and playing in the roda should be approached with caution. Unlike in training, when combinations of moves are pre-established, in the roda games are always improvised, unchoreographed and thus unpredictable. For this reason, entering the roda for the first time can be intensely intimidating, as is evidenced by the fact that many novices take months to build up the courage to do so. Along with a frustrating and often debilitating sense of disorientation as one attempts to improvise movement in response to another player, now also an adversary, there is the fear of possible injury or humiliation. While the handshake that begins the game acknowledges a consensual contract that participants agree to enter the loosely rule-bounded space of the roda and play capoeira, it is no guarantee of what will go on in that space.

Novices, anxious about what to expect and about how to conduct themselves properly in the roda, will often ask instructors to explain “the rules.” While certain rules do exist, they tend to be flexible and vary across group: for instance in the Abadá school, players must never leave the foot of the berimbau during the verses of a song, but must wait for the chorus; in some schools, or rodas, all games must start and end at the foot of the berimbau; in other schools players may “buy the game” but must never “buy out” a mestre who is playing. Less explicit are the rules governing appropriate conduct and
interaction during a game. While some mestres are quite vocal about what they consider “un-capoeira” and thus, in a sense, dirty playing (discussed in Chapter Five) they almost all will bracket any such statements with, “but anything can happen in the roda.” This is a reminder to students that they must never trust their partner and must be prepared for unexpected dangers at all times.

Novices, because of their still “peripheral participation” (Lave and Wegner 1990), tend to spend more time on the sidelines, rather than in the roda, and are less likely to be subjected to truly unexpected conduct. During the roda at the end of class, Mestre Camisa would sometimes set parameters -- e.g., allowing only beginning students to play with each other or with advanced students -- so as to ensure that everyone had a chance to play. But more often than not, the roda would be dominated by advanced students, all vying to play. However, students were reminded that participating from the sidelines is as important as playing in the roda: in all types of schools and rodas I constantly heard the admonishment that hand clapping and singing were essential for creating and maintaining the “energy” and axe. The roda is after all, a participatory and performative space and so when not performing participants must be the appreciative spectators.

The roda is a ritual space bounded and regulated by certain rules of behavior, yet its boundaries are shifting and permeable: what goes on within the roda is affected by life outside and vice versa. Anthropologists have shown that rituals reflect, and are often deeply critical of, everyday life, social order and social structures (cf Sharp 1993; Drewel 1992). The capoeira roda, it has been suggested, enacts a “ritual or reversal” that critiques Brazilian social order and norms of behavior (Lewis 1992; Reis 2000). Letícia Reis suggests that the custom of entering the roda with an inverted move (such as a
cartwheel or movement on the head) symbolizes entry into a world where things are viewed from an upside down position (2000:174). In this reading, within the roda social order is momentarily suspended, those on the bottom rising to the top. This interpretation draws from the analysis of another popular Brazilian cultural phenomenon, carnival. In DaMatta’s oft-cited analysis, carnival is a ritual of reversal in which social order and cultural norms are suspended for four days in an atmosphere of “anything goes.” The downtrodden become kings and queens of the city, only to return to their places on Ash Wednesday when the proper order of power is restored (DaMatta 1991).

In an interpretation similar to Reis’, Lewis (1992), drawing on Geertz’s analysis of the “deep play” of the Balinense cock fight, reads the roda as a cultural text that critiques the fabric of Brazilian society: the overt, ritualized violence of capoeira rests on underlying cooperation (play can happen only if both parties agree) that inverts and critiques a national discourse of social “cordiality” and racial harmony masking underlying tensions and violence. Capoeira is a “mock combat” in which participants experience “liberation from slavery, from class domination, from the poverty of ordinary life, and ultimately even from the constraints of the human body” (Lewis 1992: 2).

While adepts may in fact experience a sense of freedom from the constraints of ordinary life while playing capoeira, they also often describe the roda as a microcosm -- the world writ small -- and a “training ground” for life. Within the microcosm of the roda, the daily struggles and gambles, victories and losses of the outside world are not absent or forgotten but rather are dramatized and played out. This emic interpretation of the roda resonates with Schep-Peters’ analysis of Brazilian carnival: challenging DaMatta’s notion of carnival as a ritual of inversion in which the poor find momentary

16 I will further explore this interpretation in Chapter Five.
release from social constraints and the suffering of everyday life, Scheper-Hughes suggests that carnival is equally a “ritual of intensification” in which social injustice and misery are grotesquely magnified and dramatized (1992: 480-505).

Falling somewhere between DaMatta’s and Scheper-Hughes’ analyses, my understanding of the roda is as an arena in which struggles are played out and possibilities for action explored. Each game begins anew, a recreation in which to explore new avenues of action and affect different outcomes. Furthermore, though contained within a bounded ritual space, what goes on in the roda is affected by and can spill over into outside life. This relationship is best expressed when capoeiristas insist that lessons learned in the roda are lessons for life and that training and playing capoeira fundamentally transforms who they are and how they move in the world. To understand the transformative power of their practice, we must begin with the music, where everything starts.

MUSIC: LEARNING THE UNTAUPTH

In capoeira some things are not taught, they are learned
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Music is the heart of capoeira. It pumps the blood and drives the energy of a capoeirista’s body. It is often the music, rather than the movement, that first attracts: many capoeiristas claim to have been magically or spiritually called by rhythm of the berimbau; others describe being first touched and moved by the melody and lyrics of the songs. These initial feelings, often described as an emotional tingling on the skin, do not go away but are recreated every time there is a roda. It is the emotional power of the
music that teaches one to play with expression and, according to Mestre Camisa, “incorporate the game.”

While initiates and spectators may be mesmerized and enchanted by the music, in order to have it move you to “incorporate the game” you must have an intimacy with the instruments, particularly the berimbau, which establishes the rhythm. Though the berimbau was not introduced to capoeira until the 20th century (see Chapter One), today it is the most important instrument and a symbol of the art form. While a roda can be held without the other instruments, the berimbau is considered indispensable. As an icon of the practice, berimbau are worn by capoeiristas on their bodies -- as tattoos or jewelry -- as a marker of identity. Capoeiristas are expected to know how to play all of the instruments and to lead the singing. Yet, among many groups, including Abadá in Rio, music is rarely if ever taught in class. As Top explained:

Mestre Camisa always tells us that in capoeira some things are not taught, they are learned. I believe the berimbau is one of those things. It is rare that an instructor will help you. If you wait for him to teach you, you will never learn. It has to be part of you, you have to be interested in it; you have to get a good berimbau and put on a CD at home and sit there scratching (arranhando) on it. And ask someone to help you. The berimbau is a knack (jeito). Once you get the knack then you take off it with it.

Top here suggests that knowledge and skills are not spoon-fed; acquiring proficiency in all aspects of capoeira necessitates self-motivation and self-learning. Mastering the berimbau, by no means an easy task, is thus seen as a sign of one’s dedication to becoming, and being, a capoeirista.

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17 Sometimes, for training purposes instructors will hold what they call “dry rodas” in which no instruments are used. During these dry rodas games are accompanied by and often stopped for verbal commentary and instruction by the teacher. These “training rodas” have a very different feel and intent from other rodas.
18 I noticed this tendency in a lot of small Zona Norte groups as well. Capoeira Angola groups on the other hand often include music classes as a part of their weekly training. Music classes have also become common among Abadá groups abroad, as foreign students, often less exposed to percussive music than Brazilians, ask to be explicitly taught.
Learning to play the berimbau

The berimbau consists of six separate parts. The verga, or body of the instrument, is a long stick about an inch in diameter and 4-5 feet long. The verga is traditionally made from berimba, a tree found in the forests of Bahia whose wood is hard but flexible. Today, in areas where berimba is hard to find, bamboo is often used. The verga is strung into a bow with a single wire or arame that is cut from the inner side of a steel-rimmed car tire. A hand-width distance from the bottom of the bow, a hollowed out gourd, or cabaça, is attached by a string. The cabaça resonates the sound produced by hitting the wire of the verga. The shape and size of the cabaça and the length, weight and diameter of the verga must be well matched -- or as capoeiristas say, “married” -- in order to achieve a full, rich tone. The opening of the cabaça faces the player and resonates the sound as it moves between the open position away from the body and the closed position against the body. The dobrão, a large coin or smooth flat stone, is held against the wire to create different notes which are drawn out by the vaqueta or short stick that strikes the wire above or below the dobrão. Finally, the caxixi or wicker rattle is held in the hand that strikes the wire (see Appendix B for an illustration of the berimbau and other instruments).

Though a simply constructed instrument with a limited number of tones, the berimbau is difficult to learn. To string, or “arm” (armar) the berimbau is in itself a daunting task. Pressing the middle of the verga against one’s thigh or knee to create an arc, one must pull the wire taut, wrapping it around the top of the verga and securing it with a short string. During this process the sharp wire can cut painfully into one’s hand, the stiff verga can resist bending into an arch, and in the worst case scenario, too much
pressure is applied and the verga snaps in half. After months of practice, one manages to achieve a decently strung berimbau only to face figuring out how to hold the instrument correctly. One must balance the berimbau on the strength of one pinky finger cocked under the string that holds the cabaça in place. That same hand secures the dobrão between the thumb and second figure with just enough pressure so as not to let it slip, yet allowing it to move smoothly within the small space between the wire and body of the berimbau. The other hand secures the vaqueta and caxixi, again not too tightly, so that the vaqueta bounces against the wire and the caxixi has a full rattle. While keeping the berimbau in an upright position without allowing it to wobble back and forth, one must alternate the pressure of the dobrão on the wire while hitting it with the vaqueta, and simultaneously move the entire instrument away from and against the belly or chest so that the cabaça alternates between the closed and open position.

Now to produce a sound: by hitting the wire with the stick three tones or notes can be produced depending on the position of the cabaça and the dobrão. When the dobrão is held lightly against the wire there is a vibration and the tone produced is a tinny Tchi sound. When the dobrão is pressed firmly against the wire the tone is a closed note, producing a high-pitched Dim. When the dobrão is removed from the wire, the note is open, producing a low-pitched Dom. A final note is produced by pushing the dobrão on and off the wire. The best way to learn the toques, or rhythms, is to begin by imitating the sounds with one’s mouth. Like air guitarists “playing” Jimi Hendrix riffs, capoeiristas raise their hands in front of their chest grasp an invisible berimbau and with their mouths string together Tchis, Dims, Doms, mimicking the various toques. Once you

19 Some schools keep their berimbaus strung all the time. Abadá capoeiristas believe this ruins the berimbau as the verga becomes viciada or “addicted” to a particular shape and loses the variability of its tone.
have mastered the rhythm with your mouth, imitating the sounds of more experienced players, it is easier to produce them on the instrument.

In his study of capoeira, Waldemir Rego recorded 34 different toques played by capoeira mestres in Salvador in the 1960s (1968: 65-68). The sound and uses of only a fraction of these toques are still known today. *Angola, Benguela, Iuna* and *São Bento Grande* are the most frequently played in Abadã today as they drive the distinct games, discussed in detail below. Other toques are still played today when particular contexts or situations demand. *Cavalaria* (cavalry) is a rhythm that mimics the sound of horse hoofs and is said to have been used as a warning signal in the days when capoeira was still persecuted: when those playing capoeira heard the sound of Cavalaria, they knew that authorities were approaching and would quickly transform fight into dance (see Chapter One). The first time I heard this toque played was in a roda in Times Square in New York City: fired up after class one Friday night, we decided to hold a street roda. The roda was underway when suddenly our teacher, glimpsing two New York police officers approaching, changed her rhythm on the berimbau to Cavalaria. After satisfying the curiosity of the policemen, who allowed us to continue, our teacher used the opportunity to tell the story of the rhythm.

Another rhythm that is usually only played in capoeira presentations and shows is *Santa Maria*. It accompanies a game played with *navalhas* or straight razors, believe to have been part of 19th century practice. Another popular toque, especially among street performers, is *Panhe Laranja no Chão Tico-Tico* ("Pick up the orange from the ground, sparrow"). The rhythm calls for a game in which each player attempts to outmaneuver
the other and pick up in his mouth from the ground an object such as a handkerchief, coin or banknote. This game is used to encourage spectators to throw money into the roda.

**Playing in the Orchestra**

Having mastered a number of the toques on one’s own, the next step is to brave playing in the orchestra. An unwritten rule in Mestre Camisa’s class is that only when students are fully competent on the instruments can they venture to take a turn in the orchestra. As music is the life force of capoeira, Camisa would explain, a strong and consistent rhythm is necessary to produce good games. As one’s skill increases, one can move up the hierarchy of instruments. At the top of this hierarchy, and situated at the apex of the roda, is the *gunga*. The gunga is the largest of three berimbau that play together in the orchestra. A long, heavy verga is “married” to a large cabaça to produce a rich deep tone. The gunga sets a steady rhythm and pace for the games, and whoever plays it commands the roda -- dictating when games should begin and end, when toques should change and even sometimes controlling who plays with whom. The second berimbau, which stands to the right of the gunga, is the *médio*. This medium sized berimbau plays the reverse rhythm of the gunga as well as minor variations. The third and smallest berimbau with a high-pitched tone is called the *viola*. The viola player

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20 The composition and arrangement of the orchestra as well as names of some of the instruments vary from group to group. For other discussions of capoeira music and instruments see Lewis (1992), Downey (2005) Almeida (1986) and Bola Sete (1989).

21 An intolerance of poor musicians on the instruments during a roda is common, especially among Capoeira Angola groups and other groups that privilege music. Groups who do not seem to care as much about the music are less rigorous. At rodas or events by these groups, visiting capoeiristas who are more sensitive to music often make a show of looking pained or even refusing to play.
stands to the right of the media player and is given free range to improvise variations as long as he or she stays within the cadence set by the gunga.\textsuperscript{22}

To the left of the berimbau is the \textit{atabaque}, or drum. After the gunga the atabaque is the second most important instrument in the orchestra as it maintains the steady beat. The rhythm of the drum varies only in speed across the different toques of the berimbau, and only the most experienced players are allowed to introduce variations. To the right of the atabaque stand two \textit{pandeiros}, an \textit{agôgô} and a \textit{reco-reco}. The pandeiros, or tambourines, are large and made with wood and animal skin rather than plastic like the ones used in samba. The agôgô, which marks time, is either a two-tone clapperless bell or made from two coconut shells nailed onto a stick. The reco-reco, used infrequently in Mestre Camisa’s rodas but usually present in Capoeira Angola rodas, is a notched stick or gourd across which a short stick is dragged. The pandeiros, agogo and reco-reco, less difficult to master, rotate freely among the less experienced students. As with the other instruments, variations and improvisation are allowed as long as the rhythm is not muddied or confused. Led by the gunga, the instruments set the style, speed and cadence of the games. Equally important to setting the mood of the roda, and at times even directing interaction between players, are the songs.

\textbf{Songs and Songwriters}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Zum, zum, zum
  \item \textit{Capoeira mata um!}
  \item Zum, zum, zum
  \item \textit{No terreiro fica uma}
  \item \textit{Ai ai aidée}
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Zum, zum, zum
  \item Capoeira kills one!
  \item Zum, zum, zum
  \item Only one remains
  \item Ai, ai, aidée
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{22} For a discussion of how playing the berimbau mirrors playing capoeira in terms of improvisation and deception see Lewis (1992: Chapter Five).
Capoeira songs follow a call and response format. A leader singer, or soloist, sings a series of verses and the other participants respond with the chorus. As with the instruments, any participant can take a turn as the lead singer as long as he or she can keep the rhythm and maintain a strong melody. Many songs, like the ones above, are considered “traditional” and in the “public domain,” meaning they have been sung for so long that the authorships have been forgotten or never were known. Some are recreations of folklore songs from other domains. The songs embrace a wide variety of themes including God, playing capoeira, slavery and slave resistance, famous mestres, women and womanizing, love, the sea, cachaca (sugarcane rum), vadiação (idleness or “bumming around”) fighting, and manual labor. These “traditional” songs tend to have few set verses so that the soloist often improvises new ones in the moment. The improvisations can provide a running commentary on the roda. For instance, a soloist might acknowledge the arrival of a new capoeirista to the roda by incorporating his name into a song and inviting him to play. Or the singer might comment, with humor, sarcasm or criticism on the game between two players: if a novice manages to trip up a more experienced player, the soloist may quickly change his song to A baráuňa caiu! (“The baráuňa tree fell down”), creating a verse to describe the particular situation. Some songs, like the ones above, are purposely directed towards the players: Zum, zum, zum or the song with a chorus quebra (“break”) provoke players to play more aggressively; alternately Ai ai, aidée or a song with the chorus Por favor meu mano, eu não quero
barulho aqui não (“Please, my brother, I don’t want any problems here”) calms tempers and reminds players of the aesthetics of the game.23

Musical play is as important an arena for developing self-expression and skills as is physical play. In Abadá, musical creativity is almost as valued as physical innovation. Students are encouraged to develop improvisational skills on the berimbau and to write new song melodies and lyrics. Thus, capoeiristas who struggle to incorporate the physical game can excel and gain prestige in the musical arena. Some practitioners who play little in the roda have nonetheless achieved fame in the group as composers and singers. The trade in songs is as eagerly pursued as learning new movements. Every year at the National and International Games, a week of workshops and competitions (see Chapter Five), there is a music competition during which songwriters showcase their new songs. The winning songs are usually those that have already been disseminated by word of mouth and sung in rodas around Brazil and the world.

Song lyrics in the new genre embrace a wide range of topics. Some adopt themes from earlier “traditional” songs, mentioned above, such as God, famous mestres, the sea, and the life and loves of a capoeirista. However, other older themes, such as cachaça drinking, idleness, street fighting, manual labor and womanizing, rarely, if ever appear. This absence does not mean that these activities are no longer pursued by contemporary capoeiristas; in fact, the gusto with which older songs with such themes continue to be sung in rodas would suggest otherwise. But that they do not appear in new songs, at least as far as I observed, suggests that it is no longer considered appropriate to publicly acknowledge and celebrate what was once accepted as integral aspects of a capoeirista’s

23 For a discussion of verbal play in capoeira -- and examples where two singers will take turns in a kind of dueling match, -- see Lewis (1992).
character. New themes -- training and teaching (rather than just playing) capoeira, living abroad, female capoeiristas, world peace, ecology and child-appropriate lyrics, to name just some -- reflect the shifting focus of capoeira and the changing life conditions and (at least publicly acknowledged) values of capoeiristas. Songs are also written to commemorate particular events or to communicate a message to other practitioners regarding certain issues: for example, one mestre I knew from the Zone Norte who was perturbed by what he saw as the devaluing of the title mestre (see Introduction) wrote a song cataloguing all of the characteristics of a “true” mestre. On a number of occasions I heard him sing this song at rodas at which was present a young mestre from another group who, in his opinion, did not believe deserved the title of mestre.

Also common in contemporary songs is a eulogy of a particular capoeira group. Whereas older songs praise capoeira in general or eulogize famous individuals, many songs today express the importance of, and a pride in, group affiliation. The following song, which could be considered the Abadá anthem, is exemplary:

\[
\begin{align*}
Vou lhe-dizer o que me alegra numa roda & \quad \text{Let me tell you what makes me happy in a} \\
De capoeira quando começo a tocar & \quad \text{Capoeira roda when I begin to play} \\
Três berimbaus, gunga, médio, uma viola & \quad \text{Three berimbaus, gunga, médio and a viola} \\
Atabaque e o pandeiro e dois cabras & \quad \text{Drum, tambourine and two “goats” to play}^{24} \\
pra jogar & \quad \text{to play} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
Capoeira Abadá & \quad \text{Capoeira Abadá} \\
Vou jogando capoeira & \quad \text{I am going to play capoeira} \\
Até o dia clarear & \quad \text{until dawn} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
Capoeira Abadá & \quad \text{Capoeira Abadá} \\
Se você é capoeira & \quad \text{If you are a capoeira} \\
Nunca pare de treinar & \quad \text{never stop training} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
Cante um corrido & \quad \text{Sing a song} \\
um coro bem respondido & \quad \text{With the chorus well responded} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\footnote{\textit{Cabras} or “goats” was originally a derogatory label in Brazil, similar in connotation and use to “mulatto.” It is occasionally still used as a slang word much like “guys” or “dudes.”}
Uma energia imensa
Que parado não vai dar

Capoeira Abadá
De segunda a sexta-feira
Tem Roda no Humaitá

Capoeira Abadá
Capoeira que é bamba
Joga em qualquer lugar

Um jogo duro
Uma armada e uma ponteira
Meia-lua e uma rasteira
Continua a jogar

Capoeira Abadá
Se você é capoeira
Nunca deixe de treinar

Capoeira Abadá
Joga em cima joga em baixo
No que o berimbau mandar

-- Lampleia, Macaco (Abadá 1997: 187)

What is most interesting in this song is that though the new values of training and group affiliation are emphasized, older values are not completely absent. One the one hand, the message is that to be a true capoeirista one must train, and train with Abadá: the location of Mestre Camisa’s classes is provided and the particular configuration of an Abadá roda (number of instruments, strong chorus, and “low,” “high” and “hard” games) described. The line “if you are a capoeira, you will never stop training” delivers the message that besides playing capoeira, being a capoeirista takes discipline, determination, hard work, and group affiliation. Yet on the other hand, the line “a capoeira who is a bamba, plays anywhere” hints at a different set of values. The vocabulary -- calling capoeiristas *capoeiras* and *bambas* -- evokes the language used in the early 20th century. *Capoeiras*
of this era were admired for their individual skills, feats of physical prowess and bravery, and for their rebelliousness (see Chapter Two). Bamba was a term not only for someone who was expert at what he did (e.g. capoeira or samba), but also for a “rowdy braggart” or “tough guy.” This line, in a sense, contradicts the earlier value placed on discipline and hard work within one’s school: to truly become a masterful capoeirista, one must be rowdy and unruly, and play outside the boundaries of one’s academy and group. The tension in this song, praising discipline while flirting with rebellion, will re-emerge in subsequent chapters.

While ambiguities and contradictions exist in the new capoeira songs, one trope endures: through songs capoeiristas express their belief that lessons learned in the roda are lessons applicable to life outside of capoeira. Though certain perceptions appear to be unchanging -- most notably that the world and those within it are treacherous and untrustworthy -- what is to be done with this knowledge is in flux. The various responses and avenues for action are most notable in the four styles of game created and elaborated by Mestre Camisa and his students, to which I now turn.

PLAYING CAPOEIRA

In explaining what led to his development of four distinct capoeira games or styles of play, Mestre Camisa told me:

I began to notice that in capoeira, while there are different musical rhythms I wasn’t feeling a difference in play. There were differences in terms of a faster or slower game, a game that was lower to the ground or higher up, a game that was more playful or more aggressive. But I wasn’t seeing the characteristics of the game change. So I said to myself, “is the rhythm just there to change the velocity and intensity of the game, not the intention as well? Is the purpose of the music
just to animate the capoeiristas? ” And I began to question this. I saw that capoeiristas were limiting themselves to one form of play. Because in comparison, in other activities that use music to give rhythm to corporal movement, each rhythm dictates a different kind of behavior. In popular dances (samba, bumba meu boi, frevo, maculêlê), in conventional dances (ballet, tango, waltz) or in the dances of Candomblé, each rhythm dictates different behavior, movements and steps. And in capoeira I wasn’t seeing this. In Mestre Bimba’s school, where I learned, it was different. Mestre Bimba changed the intention and movement of each game. [In his academy] it was three games – São Bento Grande, Benguela and Iuna. And each of these three had different characteristics and different goals as well. So it was this that I wanted to revive. Because if a capoeirista trains different rhythms like this he is going to have a much broader vision of capoeira.

Wanting to broaden his students’ repertoires, Mestre Camisa re-introduced four rhythms to the roda and elaborated four distinct games -- Angola, Benguela, Iuna, and São Bento Grande -- to accompany them. Distinct in movement and intention, these games entail different ways of expressing with one’s body and negotiating space. As illustrated in the field note that began this chapter, during a Benguela game Camisa admonished me to defy my size and become small; during the São Bento Grande rhythm, on the other hand, he would encourage me to flaunt my size, using my long legs to my advantage. Returning to the metaphor of language, the four games represent different accents or dialects that allow players to communicate in distinct ways. While some new movements have been created and introduced by Mestre Camisa and his students, it is most accurate to think of the four styles of play as highlighting different aspects that are already embedded in any game of capoeira. Practitioners believe that becoming adept at these games opens up different avenues of self-expression and movement in the world.
**Jogo de Angola**

The game of Angola is the mother of all capoeira…it is a game of free expression of attack and defense within a language of play (brincadeira) and mandinga – you are playing (brincando), no you are not, yes you are, no you are not….it is a game of deception, mockery and jeering. It is playful but in a treacherous and disloyal way.  

-- Mestre Camisa

**Tchi, Tchi Dom Dim.** The toque de angola is slow and full of nuance. A slight pause before the last note and a longer one before the phrase begins again are like breathing spaces, reminding the body to stay attentive and prepared, yet loose and relaxed. Angola games almost always begin and end at the foot of the berimbau. Often Mestre Camisa will choose who he wants to see play together, indicating with a tilt of his berimbau that the partners approach and crouch at the foot of his berimbau. Angola games are not part of every roda in Camisa’s school, but when they are, they begin the roda, and are restricted to advanced students. Angola games are difficult for many accustomed to playing the faster, more athletic game of São Bento Grande, which until Mestre Camisa introduced the four styles of play, dominated Abadá training and rodas. The Angola games played by Abadá, though similar in structure and music, are different from the game played by angoleiros or practitioners of Capoeira Angola. The style of capoeira played by Capoeira Angola groups today is arguably as much a contemporary style of play as is Abadá or others groups in the Capoeira Regional lineage. When he says that the jogo de angola is the “mother of all capoeira,” Mestre Camisa is not referring to any contemporary capoeira style, his own or others, but to an imagined style of play that predates (and generated) contemporary styles.\(^{26}\)

\(^{26}\) In the 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries capoeira was alternately known as the jogo de Angola. (see Chapter Two).
and jogo de angola into the roda was less a reproduction than a re-invention of this earlier game.

The Angola game is accompanied by what Downey (2005: 74-78) has called a three part “song cycle.” The first phrase consists of the ladainha, sung by one of the musicians or one of the players about to enter the roda. The ladainha, or “litany,” is a solo song that often praises God, historical figures or famous mestres. Ladainhas vary in length, some going on for five or ten minutes with much improvisation, and some quite short such as this one written by Mestre Pastinha:

- *Iê! Maior é Deus* Ye! God is great
- *Pequeno sou eu* Small am I
- *Tudo que é tenho* Everything I have
- *Foi Deus que me deu* Was given me by God
- *Na roda de capoeira (ha, ha)* In the capoeira roda (ha ha)
- *Grande e pequeno sou eu* Big and small am I

The *Iê* at the beginning is a hearty invocation that starts all ladainhas and which is also used by the leader of a roda to terminate games (see above). The words of this ladainha verbally express the religiosity that many capoeiristas corporally demonstrate by making the sign of the cross or some other protective invocation before entering the roda. The final line of the ladainha lends itself to several interpretations. In Mestre Acordeon’s translation of the above ladainha the last two lines read “but in the capoeira roda I discover my own greatness.” (Almeida 1986: 94). A more literal translation would suggest that in the roda during a game of Angola, which is played both on the ground and standing, one’s body must become both large and small. Yet another interpretation could
be that Mestre Pastinha was paying tribute to two of his students who often played
together in the roda and were known as João Grande and João Pequeno.27

The ladainha is followed by what is called a chula, canto de entrada (entry song)
or louvação (praise), in which the singer improvises a series of short phrases that are
repeated by the chorus: The series often include:

\[
\begin{align*}
Iê, vive meu mestre & \quad Ye, long live my mestre \\
Vive meu mestre camarada & \quad Long live my mestre, comrade^{28} \\
Iê, quem me ensinou & \quad Ye, Who taught \\
Quem me ensinou camarada & \quad Who taught, comrade \\
Iê, galo cantou & \quad Ye, The cock crowed \\
Galo cantou, camarada & \quad The cock crowed, comrade \\
Iê, Vamos embora & \quad Ye, Let’s go \\
Vamos embora, camarada & \quad Let’s go, comrade \\
Iê, Volta ao mundo & \quad Ye, go around the world \\
Volta ao mundo, camarada & \quad Go around the world, comrade
\end{align*}
\]

This series begins with praise for the singer’s mestre and the knowledge he imparted.

Next, the invocation of the cock’s crow symbolizes the dawn of a new day and the
capoeiristas’ imminent entrance into the world of the roda. That the roda is conceived as
a world unto itself is captured in the last line with the expression volta ao mundo (“go
around the world”) which directs the players to enter the roda and begin playing.

The music then moves into the third phrase of the song cycle, the corridos, which
are structured like the chulas but have slightly longer verses and choruses. For example,
one corrido often sung during a game of Santa Maria, in which players attempt to pick up
money from the ground, has the simple repetitive chorus,

\footnotesize{27} Today both in their 80s and the most famous Capoeira Angola mestres still active, João Grande lives and
teaches in New York City and João Pequeno continues to live and teach in Salvador.
\footnotesize{28} Though the literal translation is comrade, in the context of capoeira this word most closely signifies “pal” or
“chum” rather than its usual political and ideological implications.
Me da meu dinheiro, Give me my money,
Me da meu dinheiro, valentão Give me my money, tough guy

interspersed with standard and improvised versus such as:

Te dou um rasteira, te jogo no chão I’ll sweep you, I’ll throw you on the ground
No meu dinheiro ninguém bota mão On my money, nobody lays a hand

This song expresses the implicit treachery of capoeiristas who will steal each others’ money and throw each other to the ground. Traição (treachery, betrayal or falseness) and desconfiança (mistrust, suspicion or jealousy) are tropes that appear repeatedly in capoeira songs and in practitioners’ discussions of what it means to live as a capoeirista both in and outside of the roda. As one mestre of a Capoeira Angola group told his students, one’s mistrust should be so deep-rooted, in other words so much part of one’s habitus, that one should mistrust even oneself. Another mestre of a small group in the Zona Norte expresses the treachery that defines capoeira in a ladainha that he wrote and sings frequently in rodas:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Capoeira tem perversidade} & \quad \text{Capoeira is peverse} \\
\text{Tem maldade} & \quad \text{Full of malice/trickery} \\
\text{Capoeira tem fundamento} & \quad \text{Capoeira has principals} \\
\text{É verdade} & \quad \text{It is true} \\
\text{Capoeiristas sempre diz} & \quad \text{Capoeiristas always say} \\
\text{Que eles são irmãos} & \quad \text{That they are brothers} \\
\text{Vão ao pe do berimbau} & \quad \text{They go to the foot of berimbau} \\
\text{E dão aperto a mão} & \quad \text{And shake hands} \\
\text{E na roda, e na roda} & \quad \text{And in the roda} \\
\text{Eles dizem são irmãos} & \quad \text{They say they are brothers} \\
\text{Mas um tenta pôr o outro no chão} & \quad \text{But one tries to put the other on the ground}
\end{align*}
\]

-- Mestre Biquinho
The way in which to deal with the betrayal of one’s “brother” in capoeira is to respond in kind: with treachery, cunning, and deception. Encompassed in the terms *mandinga*, *malandragem* and *malícia*, these concepts are the defining ethos of the jogo de angola.

*Mandinga, Malícia and Malandragem: Protection, Deception and Self-Preservation*

I like the jogo de angola because of the theatrics and the mandinga. A capoeirista hides danger with mandinga. You watch a capoeirista and he is dancing, but he is dancing mockingly (*debochando*). He is planning something in order to get you. -- Top

Mandinga, malícia and malandragem form a tripod on which capoeira stands. They constitute the fundamental code of ethics of the art, yet like the music, are not taught but must be learned. Though not exclusive to capoeira, these three concepts are central to how practitioners define and incorporate their practice and inspire much discussion (cf Downey 2005; Lewis 1992; Wilson; Reis 2000; Travassos 1998). Closely aligned, and at times used interchangeably, mandinga, malícia and malandragem are nonetheless distinct concepts both within the arena of capoeira and the larger Brazilian context.

The word mandinga derives from the name of a group of Muslim Africans from the Niger Valley who, once brought to Brazil as slaves, became known as Malê. These Muslim slaves were infamous for their organized rebellion, practice of magic, and the making of protective amulets (Reis 1993). Thus, the term mandinga became associated in Brazil, and in capoeira, with magic, protection and making things happen. Malícia is most readily translated into English as malice or maliciousness. However, unlike its English gloss, in Brazil and especially in capoeira, malícia has a decidedly ambiguous
value. One the one hand, malícia, like malice, means holding and acting upon bad intentions towards others. In its most negative manifestations malícia is aligned with *maldade*, “evil,” “wickedness” or “badness.” In its positive manifestations, however, malícia is best conceived of as mischievousness, cunning, mockery and acumen. Encompassing both these positive and negative aspects, malícica can be understood as a type of cultural agency that emphasizes self-preservation and survival, even at the expense of others.

Malandragem also expresses this particular form of Brazilian cultural agency, and in a sense encompasses both mandinga and malícia. Malandragem is the code of ethics of the malandro, the lower class rogue, the artful dodger, who roamed the streets of early 20th century Rio de Janeiro playing samba and capoeira (see Chapter Two). Malandragem is the art of survival with nothing more than the clothes one’s back by hustling, conning, and charming one’s way through various segments of society. Malandragem came to hold a central place in the social imagination of Brazilians, and especially in the self-portraits of cariocas. Today the art of malandragem, and its central component of *jeitinho* or “little way,” is construed as creative resistance and manipulation of Brazil’s rigid bureaucracy and social hierarchy. Glorified as a kind of cultural agency that transgresses class, gender and racial boundaries (cf Mello e Souza 1993), what gets lost is the moral ambiguity and political economy of malandragem and the malandro. Along with its connotations of cunning, deception and “making things happen” for oneself, malandragem reflects a deep distrust of the world. Such mistrust, it has been argued, is a fundamental aspect of Brazilian’s worldview (Da Matta 1991: 163) especially among the lower classes (Sarti 1995, Schepers-Hughes 1992). According to
Scheper-Hughes “a lack of basic trust…has its origins in an experience of insecurity that occurs so early that it is ‘naturalized’ and is part of the habitus of the moradores [inhabitants of a favela]…and it is later reinforced by the structured relations of inequality, dependency, and police violence…” (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 516).

This habitus of mistrust is developed and dramatized in the jogo de angola: one learns to cultivate one’s own malandragem while simultaneously protecting oneself against the malandragem of the other, and of life itself. Described by one mestre of a Capoeira Angola group:

Malandragem and malícia are the center of capoeira. Capoeira without malandragem and malicia is not capoeira. It is just movement. The spice of capoeira is malicia and malandragem….It is very difficult to explain. If you pick up a dictionary you see it is a masculine noun, malandragem is the providence of the malandro, of that person who cons (enrolar) another. But malandragem is survival. Malandragem is you surviving the fight of life everyday. This is malandragem. Not being taken by surprise by life itself. Malandragem is a whole mix of things, some simple, some more complex.

In elaborating on the polyvalence of malicia and malandragem as the art of survival, practitioners use a variety of synonyms: intelligence, foresight, manipulation, awareness, improvisation, flexibility, mistrust, opportunism, creativity and strategy. D’Aquino supplies a particularly helpful definition: “malícia entails an idea of cleverness and an awareness of self, existing circumstances and environment affecting self. To be malicioso (having malícia) is to be deceitful, suspicious, watchful, prepared, flexible, opportunistic, clever, knowledgeable” (1983: 92). As the art of self-preservation, malicia must begin with protecting one’s body.
**Protection: Corpo Fechado**

A key strategy for protecting oneself in the roda is to develop and maintain a *corpo fechado* (“closed body”). A concept that also exists in the Afro-Brazilian spirit possession religion of Candomblé, a “closed body” is a body that is invulnerable to evil spirits, the evil eye, or the evil intentions of others. While squatting at the foot of the berimbau before a game, many capoeiristas perform a symbolic act of mandinga, thereby closing and protecting their bodies before entering the roda. This act may take various forms: tracing with one’s hands on the ground in front of the orchestra the *pontos riscados* (scratched points), symbolic designs in Candomblé associated with divination and calling down the deities; making the sign of the cross; rasising one’s arms to the sky, or performing any religious or otherwise invented act. Once in the roda a closed body is maintained by keeping one’s body drawn in and protected. The best example of this is in the *aú*, or cartwheel. In other games, the aú can be executed in an open, elongated fashion (similar to a cartwheel in gymnastics). In the jogo de angola the aú is performed with the knees drawn in protecting the torso.29

Another key to staying protected is to mask one’s intentions. While being expressive is essential to playing capoeira well, this is quite distinctive from being “transparent.” (*transparente*). One should avoid telegraphing one’s next move. This is best exemplified in the ginga during an Angola game. The body remains loose and relaxed, some players even emulate a stumbling drunkenness, so as to disguise a potential for attack. Theatrics are employed to further distract, intimidate or disorient an adversary, as well as to elicit reactions from the audience, thereby adding to the excitement of the game. Adepts may feign fear, anger or mockery, but will not show

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29 For an extended discussion of the “closed body” in capoeira see Downey (2005).
how they are truly feeling. The mestre whom I heard tell his students that their 
*desconfiança* should be so great that they mistrust even themselves, went on to explain 
that this would improve their malandragem: if they mistrusted their own actions and 
reactions they would surprise even themselves, and therefore their opponent as well.

**Deception: A Chamada**

The concept of mistrust is dramatically amplified and explored in the ritual of the 
*chamada*, present only in the Angola game, and constituting what Lewis (1992: 120-7) 
calls a “game within the game.” The chamada, or “calling” (distinct from the movements 
called chamadas discussed above) is the only time in a game that the flow of action is 
purposely arrested and players approximate each other, standing close enough to touch 
and synchronize their movement. It is also the only way in which players can 
acknowledge that something significant has occurred in a game; in others words, though 
“points” are not officially tallied in a game of capoeira, players and spectators are 
certainly aware when one player has demonstrated the upper hand in a situation. The 
ritual of the chamada acknowledges this and provides an opportunity to either increase 
the imbalance or settle the score. For example, if one player delivers a successful sweep 
or head butt that knocks his partner to the ground, either he or his partner can execute a 
chamada. The chamada is performed by one player standing still and raising his hands 
away from the body, thereby “calling” the other player to approach and place his hands 
against his own. If he chooses to respond, the “called” player cautiously approaches and 
one his hands are touching those of his partner’s the two walk forwards and backwards
together in a bizarre waltz. The chamada ends when the one who called it breaks off physical contact and indicates to his partner that play can begin again.

The reason behind the chamada and the physical proximity of the two players during its execution makes it potentially the most dangerous moment during an Angola game. Whether the one who “scored a point” or “lost a point” calls it, both players go into the chamada suspecting that the other will attempt to take advantage of the situation to either further the imbalance or settle the score: the one who already has the upper hand might want to further the humiliation, and the one who has already suffered might want to exact his revenge. Or, alternately, the two may choose to use the ritual as a way to simply acknowledge the progression of the game, re-establish their connection as partners as much as adversaries and, not unimportantly, catch their breathe and steal a moment of reprise during an intense game. The chamada is thus the supreme moment to demonstrate malandragem -- feigning goodwill during the ”waltz” one can suddenly take advantage of the proximity of one’s partner and knock him down; or alternately, one can feign threat, and then allow the chamada to be performed in harmony. The chamada distills the essence of capoeira, walking a fine line between cooperation and antagonism and demanding instances of trust (e.g. bringing one’s body close to one’s adversary) while never wavering in a constant vigilance against potential betrayal.

**Self Preservation: Guarding against Ciúme**

The ways in which the lessons of the Angola game extended beyond the boundaries of the roda were evident in how capoeiristas dealt with me, with each other, and with social situations. I was often chided in Brazil for being “transparent.” My
Capoeira friends often told me not to so readily show my feelings on my face—frustration at being teased; impatience with bureaucracy; disappointment when a promise was not met; enthusiasm for something—and advised to be more guarded with my emotions. I was told that being open with my feelings would make me vulnerable to the bad intentions, rivalries and ciúme (jealousy; envy or rivalry) of others, especially those in power. Shortly after my arrival in Brazil I displayed exasperation with a bureaucrat over some tedious red tape in the visa office of the Federal Police. For the next two and a half years, whenever I visited the office to renew my visa, this official relentlessly gave me a hard time. My friends pointed out that I had erred in my initial interaction with him: he had not forgotten how easily I was frustrated and lorded this over me any chance he got.

However, it is not only officials, or those in positions of power, who should be approached with caution: one’s friends and colleagues should receive the same treatment. Using a metaphor for life as “a pail of crabs, each clawing those below in order to get to the top,” several capoeiristas warned me never to underestimate the ability of my friends and colleagues to knife me in the back in order to get ahead. They would blame this kind of behavior on ciúme, or jealousy, which I sometimes felt was as much a kind of cultural agency in Brazil as was malandragem or malícia. Many claimed that they had only one comrade, and sometimes none, whom they truly trusted within their capoeira group. Their deep suspicion of others was apparent in the way they guarded advantageous information and kept silent about minor successes. Quick to vocalize, and often make a joke out of, a stroke of bad luck, they kept mum about good fortune: for example, when the dilapidated boarding house in which Top rented a room burnt down, it
became a running joke between him and his students. However, in private he told me that it pained him to have to temporarily move back to his mother’s home in a favela, so soon after finally becoming financially independent from teaching capoeira classes. The way in which others seemed to derive delight from Top’s bad fortune, enjoying the joke rather than voicing sympathy, suggested a relief to see that he had not in fact “made it.” This was confirmed to me by a 30 year old capoeirista who had also finally managed to move out of his mother’s house in the poor housing complex in which he and most of relatives had spent their entire lives: in private he told me that his greatest fear was that “something would go wrong” and he would have to return home. When I asked why, he explained that everyone was jealous that he was earning enough income from capoeira (an occupation none of them had thought would come to much) to be financially independent, and were hoping to see him fail. In this instance, not even family are deemed trustworthy, or “on one’s side.”

While the literature has tended to focus on mistrust as integral to the habitus of the poor (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Sarti 1995), from my experience, this sentiment, along with the accompanying emotion of jealousy, crossed class. I especially noticed this in my discussions with educated, middle class women about their romantic relationships: I was told one must mistrust not only one’s boyfriend, but also one’s best female friend who could steal that boyfriend. Here too, not even family were exempt: echoing the sentiments of the capoeirista mentioned above, a middle class, female capoeirista who lived on her own, told me she was dismayed to learn that her mother had moved into her neighborhood. When I expressed surprise (both at her reaction and her mother’s failure
to inform her of this move) she explained that they had an antagonistic relationship and that she did not trust her mother, who was often jealous of her.

One might wonder why, if capoeiristas are so guarded, many of them (but certainly not all) opened up to me. The reasons for this, as I understood them, further reinforce my argument: I was generally perceived as not being a threat. Though apparently a dedicated member of the group, my other career as an academic meant I was not necessarily vying for status within the group and competing for teaching venues. Besides this, I showed no favoritism towards any of the instructors (attending as many of their classes and presentations as I could) that might have created jealousy. Nor was I known to gossip, a tactic for disseminating negative rumors and viewed with great suspicion (see Chapter Five). Thus I was seen as a trustworthy and neutral person and someone who, as my friends in capoeira would remark in amazement, “has no enemies!”

In sum, in a world peopled by untrustworthy agents, the jogo de angola teaches the importance of “closing the body,” guarding emotions and intentions, and when need be, engaging in one’s own tactics of deception and treachery. The deep mistrust that defines the Angola game is somewhat tempered in the other styles of play which, while continuing to acknowledge the betrayals of life, develop different approaches.

**Jogo de Benguela**

Benguela is a game of transformation and transition; and it is a game that demands constant thinking.

-- Mestre Camisa

The toque de Benguela is similar to the toque de Angola with an added top note: \textit{Tchi, tchi, dom, dim, dim}. It can vary in speed but generally falls between the slower
Angola and faster São Bento Grande rhythms. Like the game that accompanies it, the toque de Benguela is played in a smooth continuous flow with few breaks.\(^{30}\) According to a former student of Mestre Bimba, the toque de Benguela was used by the mestre to cool down his students after training the intense games of São Bento Grande (Almeida 1986: 117). With similar intentions to those of Mestre Bimba, Camisa created a game to accompany the rhythm that would calm his students. He wanted to introduce the Angola game to his students and created Benguela, in his words, as an educational tool (uma educativa) in order to prepare them for this slower, more thoughtful game. Benguela would force a student to use his or her head while playing: literally, by placing it on the ground to explore the lower levels of a game, and figuratively by using it to think through the game.

Unlike the São Bento Grande game in which the majority of time is spent standing, the Benguela game is played almost exclusively on the ground. The body is made small and held low, with one or both hands or the head on the ground at almost all times. Departing radically from the other games, there is almost no ginga in Benguela. The ginga is replaced by cadeira (chair), a stance in which, as if straddling a chair, the legs are spread wide, knees bent and the torso, weaving and twisting, held slightly forward. This solid, low base is an offensive and defensive position and a gateway to the ground. A metaphor Camisa uses for the Benguela game is that of sewing: bodies are closer to each other than in any of the other games as they weave in and out of each other’s space in a smooth pattern, like thread sewing a line. Another analogy I find helpful is a puzzle: like contoured pieces, the two players fit together and break apart.

\(^{30}\) According to Lewis (1992: 149) Bimba’s toque de Benguela was virtually identical to what other mestres of his time called Angola. Lewis suggests that Bimba, who did not include the toque de Angola in his repertoire, renamed the rhythm Benguela to fit his new style of capoeira.
creating new configurations. These metaphors illustrate how the game is a *jogo de passagem* or “game of passage,” that is a game of transition and transformation. The body constantly changes its shape and transmutes one movement into another. For example, an attack can become a defensive move in midair: if I execute a spinning backward half moon kick and my partner launches a sweep to the standing foot, I lift myself up into a handstand to avoid the sweep; if my partner then transforms her sweep into a headbutt to my inverted torso, I drop into a headstand pulling my knees into my chest, and as she advances, launch a forward kick from my upside down position.

Transforming movement can be spontaneous, such as the situation describe above, or strategically planned: for example, I can begin a half moon kick knowing that my adversary will most likely enter a rasteira (sweep) and so, before completing the kick, transform it into a tesoura (full body take down). In either case, the game of Benguela requires, as Camisa says, “constant thinking.” Besides using their heads to explore the floor, Benguela forces students to use their heads to think through the game rather than reacting automatically or emotionally. One must play, as is often heard, with a “cool” rather than “hot” head; or as Camisa says, one “wins” a game of Benguela not with force but by *convincing* one’s partner, as if in a debate.31

Benguela is difficult to master, and many of the older generation of Abadá students struggled to incorporate the new game when it was first introduced. Now an integral part of most rodas, it has become a popular venue for creating new, intricate moves that are worked out and elaborated in training sessions.32 Benguela is also the

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31 This has a particularly nice ring in Portuguese as the two verbs -- *vencer* and *convencer* – have the same root.
32 For example recently, *transas* (braids), in which the legs twist around each other in various formations, have become popular.
arena in which most musical innovations occur. The toque has inspired a whole new
genre of songs. These songs are more melodic and have longer verses and choruses than
the “traditional” shorter songs sung during Angola and São Bento Grande games. One of
my favorites, written in 2002 by a capoeirista in his early twenties from the central state
of Goiania captures the ethos of capoeira, and the Benguela game in particular:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portuguese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A volta de mundo</td>
<td>The turn of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>É como maré</td>
<td>Is like the tide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quem não acompanha</td>
<td>Whoever doesn’t accompany it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Não fica em pé</td>
<td>Won’t remain standing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O mundo da voltas</td>
<td>The world turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maré vai e vem</td>
<td>The tide comes and goes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Um bom capoeira</td>
<td>A good capoeirista</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabe cair bem</td>
<td>Knows how to fall well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maré traçoeira</td>
<td>Treacherous tide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Já quis me levar</td>
<td>Already wanted to take me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mas a capoeira</td>
<td>But capoeira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunca vai deixar</td>
<td>Will never let it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O mundo da voltas</td>
<td>The world turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quis me dar rasteira</td>
<td>Wants to give me a rasteira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cai, levantei</td>
<td>I fell, I got up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pois, sou capoeira</td>
<td>Because I am a capoeirista</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A volta de mundo</td>
<td>The turn of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vai mostrar pra ti</td>
<td>It is going to show you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Você está por cima</td>
<td>You are on top</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mas pode cair</td>
<td>But you can fall</td>
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</table>

Life, like the changing tides, is full of unexpected ups and downs. Life will
inevitably give one a rasteira (sweep) or two. The expression, “dar uma rasteira” is not
exclusive to capoeira; Brazilians use it when the unexpected stuns them or leaves them
hanging. For instance, if someone is suddenly dumped by a partner or fired from a job
he/she might say “me deu uma rasteira” (“I was given a rasteira”). Though life’s rasteiras are common and frequent, a capoeirista, thanks to her training, knows how to fall down and get up again. Furthermore, life, like the people in it, is treacherous and deceitful: life may deceive you into thinking you are “on top” but at any moment you might topple. In the game of Angola ones prepares and reacts to unexpected rasteiras in kind: not only by being closed and guarded, but by being treacherous and deceptive. In the game of Benguela, on the other hand, one overcomes rasteiras by rolling with the punches, or going with the flow. Just as you surrender to a powerful wave, knowing that eventually it will pop you up to the surface again, in a game of Benguela you must stay cool and collected even in the most unpredictable or dangerous of situations.

Avoiding rather than engaging in confrontation, as highlighted in the game of Benguela, is a lesson often taught in capoeira. Mestre Bimba famously instructed his students:

Boys, do not get mixed up in brawls. If you hear that something is happening in a street, turn back and take a different route. But should there be no means of avoidance, proceed with confidence. You cannot come out the loser and return home to lick your wounds. Iodine and arnica are expensive and your father is no thief to spend money in vain (quoted in Pires 2002: 49).33

This philosophy of avoidance was illustrated to me one night when I went out dancing with a group of capoeiristas. A slightly tipsy, belligerent young man was harassing one of the women in our group, insisting she dance with him. As the women became visibly uncomfortable, the male capoeiristas in our group pretended not to notice what was going

33 “Meninos não se metem em brigas. Se souberem que numa rua qualquer, está acontecendo alguma, voltam, passem por outra. Mas se no atalho, também houver, sem que haja meios de evita-la, vão em frente, com segurança. Vocês não podem sair perdendo e voltar para casa pra fazer tratamento na cara. Iodo e arnica custam caro e o pai de vocês não é ladrão para gastar dinheiro a toa.”
on. Finally I told the man to leave her alone and he turned hostile and threatening. At that point one of the male capoeiristas intervened, calming the guy down with some joking words and a few pats on the back. Later the capoeirista reprimanded me for almost “creating a situation” in which he may have been obliged to fight. He told me that in the future, I should “let things work out on their own.” In interviews, when I asked capoeiristas if they ever used their capoeira skills to fight in the street, they would tell me that fighting is always only a last resort because once you begin to fight you are obliged, at whatever cost, to win. In their attitude and words, these capoeiristas were echoing the lesson of Mestre Bimba.

A crucial distinction between the Benguela and Angola games, as explained by Mestre Camisa, is the relative lack of mandinga in the former. As he explained, Benguela is a game to “re-educate the body,” allowing it to explore the ground, experiment with transformations and develop strategy. As such, partners are encouraged to help rather than hinder each other in this process. One does not “break” (quebrar) the flow, or “lock” (trancar) or ”impede” (travar) the movement of one’s partner as one does in Angola. One “marks” (marcar) or demonstrates where one could enter an attack but leaves an exit or saida for one’s partner. As such, Mestre Camisa explains, Benguela is a much less dangerous and more cooperative game in which “one plays allowing the other to play.”

In sum, the lessons of Benguela include realizing that sometimes the cruel give and take of life is best approached with acceptance rather than resistance; giving in, as one might to the power of a wave, is sometimes the only form of survival. Such a surrender can open up possibilities for transformation. Furthermore, the game of
Benguela reminds that learning and “getting ahead” sometimes involves competition tempered by cooperation.

**Jogo de Iuna**

Iuna is a game of harmony  
--Mestre Camisa

The delicate and melodic toque de Iuna has a long repeating phrase of alternating notes into which many variations are woven. Its intricacy demands full attention and so is accompanied by hand clapping but no singing. The toque is said to mimic the call of the Iuna, an Amazonian bird with an elaborate mating ritual. The game that accompanies the rhythm is a game of seduction: like birds primping and preening to attract a mate, each player does his best to outdo the adversary with beautiful, difficult moves. The body is displayed in all its expressive glory, even becoming airborne.

In Mestre Bimba’s academy the toque de Iuna, played at the end of the roda, was restricted to advanced students. According to Bimba’s student Mestre Acordeon, the toque “called for a slower-paced, refined and elegant jôgo…using movements of the cintura desprezada to show impeccable techniques and body control” (Almeida 1986: 118). Cintura desprezada best translates as ‘flexible waist’ and relates to the expression jogo de cintura, meaning to be quick on one’s feet or capable of juggling various tasks at once. Another of Mestre Bimba’s former students, Muniz Sodré, describes the cintura desprezada as “a systematic practice invented by Bimba in order to prepare the capoeirista for situations of grappling fights, conditioning him to always fall on his feet.” (Sodré 2002: 69). The word desprezada, derivative of the verb desprezar meaning to
“disdain,” or “throw away,” also connotes risk and defiance. According to Mestre Acordeon “…the main innovation of Mestre Bimba’s style was the cintura desprezada which means casual use of one’s waist in throwing with ease. This name reflects the generally free attitude of application of these techniques, a sequence of acrobatic throws trained recklessly without spotting to help the students lose their fear of falling.” (1986: 115 n1). While encouraging risk taking, the acrobatic throws, known as balões (balloons), also depend on mutual trust. The throws consist of one partner entering an attack and the other grabbing or holding him in order to arrest the attack, and then throwing him. The throw is only successful if the one being thrown does not remain passive but actively launches himself far from his partner’s body. In this way, according to Sodré, the balões were a lesson in “neutralizing” an attack acrobatically or with a “defensive torsion of the body” (Sodré 2002: 69).

Maintaining the custom begun in Mestre Bimba’s academy, Camisa plays the toque de Iuna at the end the roda and games are restricted to advanced students. While balões are still periodically learned and partners sometimes incorporate them into a game, today Iuna is characterized by floreios or acrobatic moves performed independently by each player. Floreios demand supreme flexibility, strength and self-control, and can be breathtakingly beautiful and awe-inspiring. They are one of the characteristics of capoeira that have made it so popular. During capoeira shows, and in cameo appearance in television ads, Hollywood movies and video games, it is usually the acrobatic moves that are highlighted. However, the name itself, floreios, or “flourishes,” suggests that they are just that, garnishes rather than essentials to the game. A beautiful game of Iuna can be achieved without a single floreio. Consequently, usually a relatively small amount

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34 Among some groups, during the toque de Iuna only mestres can play.
of time is dedicated to teaching floreios as many instructors prefer to focus on the 
essentials of attack and defense. In Mestre Camisa’s classes in Rio, floreios, like music 
and mandiga, are not usually taught. Yet they are often some of the first moves that 
young male students learn to become proficient in; seduced by the beauty and daring of 
the movement, and eager to impress their peers (and especially the girls) young, male 
ovice students spend hours training amongst themselves on the beach where the sand 
forgives their mistakes.35

Basic floreios in the form of cartwheels, headstands and arm balances have been 
part of the capoeira repertoire at least since the early 20th century. Over the past several 
decades floreios have become more and more elaborate, so that today there exists a 
remarkable array of head and hand spins, arm and head balances, front and back flips, 
leaping kicks, and near contortionist variations on back bends. Some believe that this 
elaboration of floreios began in the 1970s when capoeira arrived in New York City and 
there interacted with the burgeoning new urban art form of break dancing (Dossar 1988; 
De Shane 1988). Today crossovers continue between the competitive break dance of hip 
hop culture and capoeira. Besides the similarity of some of the movements, there is a 
similar drive to create signature moves or sequences of moves so as to distinguish 
individual style and make one’s mark.

A helpful way to think of floreios is as improvisation upon improvisation or play 
upon play.36 Though technically unnecessary, they add spice and flair to the game and 
demonstrate a player’s creativity and individuality. Iuna is thus, more than any of the 
other games, a vehicle for showing off. Yet one must display supreme self-control, a

35 The gender politics of these kinds of informal student apprenticeships is discussed in the next chapter. 
36 I thank Hervé Varenne for pointing out this interpretation.
value enforced by the rule of restricting the game to advanced students. While it may be easy to perform a florieo on one’s own, it is a lot more difficult to know when and how to integrate it appropriately into a game so as to maintain harmony. In Iuna partners work together filling the space with their bodies and making synchronized patterns. They must use up the entire space of the roda without crashing into each other or the surrounding players. “Iuna is a game of harmony and elegance,” Camisa reprimands overzealous students, “it is no good doing a beautiful head spin if at the end of it you fall on your ass! If you can’t end it with elegance and control, better not to do it at all.” Hence the oft-heard directive during Iuna games, “segura!” or “hold it!”

More difficult than maintaining self-control is knowing how to appropriately integrate florieos into a game. A player that performs too many florieos in a way that arrests rather than enhances the flow of the game is criticized for “playing alone,” being an “egotist” and “having no dialogue.” Florieos should serve a purpose, and not be introduced just to show off. Top is a master of this: his ever-coiled body ready to spring executes a perfectly timed back flip to evade an incoming sweep to his leg. His back handspring -- or pulo de gato as it is known in capoeira because, as the expression suggests, a “cat’s leap” gets you out of trouble in the blink of an eye -- sails him away from a head butt.

As in any game of capoeira, in Iuna players must be prepared for an unexpected attack. However, the game is characterized by an implicit contract between the players that they will give each other space for self-expression. Just as in Benguela, in Iuna there is an understanding that attacks will be marked, stopped short of the target, and exits made available. In Iuna players do not take advantage of the vulnerable positions into
which players place themselves when executing a floreio. A player might test his partner
(by marking a head butt on an inverted move to see if his partner is ready to protect his
face with a hand) but the attack will not be completed. Thus, as in the balões described
above, mutual trust in Iuna is essential if players are to allowed to take risks in order to
develop their game.

The reward of taking risks while playing Iuna can be a momentary sensation of
airborne freedom. Where Lewis (1992:2) suggests capoeira to be a metaphoric liberation
from “ultimately even the constraints of the human body,” it is in performing floreios that
capoeiristas may literally, if momentarily, experience this liberation. No better place is
this expressed than in a popular chant voiced by young capoeiristas when a player is
demonstrating acrobatic adeptness or they want to see a show of mortais or “flips”: They
will cry, over and over again, “Vai, vai, vai, voa!” (“Go, go, go, fly!”).

One does not have to know how to execute a flying front flip, however, in order to
feel this sense of release and expansion. The beauty of Iuna, and capoeira, is that for
each player individual achievements, however minor to others, may result in an uplifting
sense of accomplishment and freedom. This is evident during the Iuna portion of the
roda in Mestre Camisa’s classes. An outside observer may not understand why a sudden
cheer goes up when a certain student successfully executes one of the less difficult
floreios. But for the others students in the class, who know this student’s physical
challenges and have watched her struggle for months to perfect an aú de frente their
cheer is a sign of support and victory.37 Aú de frente, similar to a front walkover, is a
fairly straightforward and easy move for many. I, however, struggled to master it. “It’s

37 This is not to imply that a supportive environment is always fostered among students. In the next
chapters we will see that fierce rivalries exist between capoeiristas. But on the whole, in the training
environment I was often struck with how helpful and supportive students were with one another.
all in the hips, thrust them forward” other students would advise me as they watched me end in a crouch rather than on my feet. “You are almost there” they encouraged, “you just have to have faith in your body and throw yourself into it.” And then one day I got it. Just like that, it suddenly happened. My body understood and I sailed over, landing on my feet. At no point during an au de frente does one’s body become completely airborne. Yet, in finally accomplishing it -- when my body finally overpowered my mind and its fears -- it did indeed feel as if I were flying.

The Iuna game distills one of the most deeply gratifying aspects of learning and playing capoeira: the sense that one has accomplished something one never imagined possible for oneself. In the words of one nine year old female student, “when I play capoeira I feel I am traveling to the moon.” Along with lessons in self-restraint from showing off just for the sake of showing off, Iuna teaches that risk taking, hard work, and sometimes overcoming one’s inclination for mistrust, can result in deep satisfaction and a sense of release.

**Jogo de São Bento Grande**

São Bento Grande is our specialty, dammit!
You have to play it well!

--Mestre Camisa

*Tchi Tchi, Dom Dom, Dim!* As the rhythm speeds up, so do the games and the heat is on as everyone clambers to jump in the roda. More than any other game, Mestre Camisa hates to see his students play São Bento Grande poorly. The São Bento Grande rhythm is what characterized Mestre Bimba’s Capoeira Regional, and the game, as played by Abadá students, is the oldest element of the group’s repertoire. The fast
exchange of kicks and counterattacks means that often strikes hit their mark, intentionally or not. Tempers can flare and the games can push the delicate boundary between play and fight (see Chapter Five).

Mestre Camisa explains the game as one that combines all elements of capoeira but particularly emphasizes the martial aspect:

São Bento Grande is a free game that can be played on the ground and standing, but you never stay in one place. A good player is constantly changing levels. Within the game you can show the beauty of capoeira, the agility of the capoeirista, the capacity for artistic and acrobatic movements depending on your capacity and reaction time. It is a game about the physical potential of the strikes and about speed, so you have to have good esquivas, good resources, or you will get hit a lot. You can play (brincar) as well, depending on your capabilities. But it is a more bellicose game. You can use all the movements but you try to use movements -- fighting movements -- that give results.

Strategy is key to São Bento Grande and made difficult by the velocity of the game. Before entering the roda one must observe a player’s habits or recall previous games played with him. For example, I might note that a player always responds to my aramada (a spinning circular kick) with a standing sweep. So I fake an armada, transforming it at the last minute into a martelo (straight kick) that catches my opponent off guard as he goes in for the sweep. While the other games can be guarded (a player can hold back and still play a good game) this is impossible in São Bento Grande. One must play with one’s all -- body and soul -- knowing that, unlike in Iuna, one will take a fall and receive a strike. That is an essential part of the game. Camisa often reminds his students that to receive an attack or counterattack is much more difficult than to give one. One must immediately get back on one’s feet and keep playing with a cool head. One must not let anger fuel the game. The São Bento Grande game epitomizes knowing how to fall and get up again.
One of the first songs that Abadá instructors teach children and foreign students, and one that is often sung during the Angola and São Bento Grande portions of the rodas, has a simple and easy chorus. Its simplicity captures a fundamental aspect of capoeira and life in Brazil.

Oi Sim Sim Sim  
Oh, yes, yes, yes

Oi não, não, não  
Oh no, no, no

Mas hoje tem, amanhã não  
Today there is some, tomorrow none

Mas hoje tem, amanhã não  
Today there is some, tomorrow none

O sim, sim, sim  
Oh yes, yes, yes

O não, não, não  
Oh no, no, no

Olha pisada de Lampião  
Look at the footprint of Lampião

Olha pisada de Lamipao  
Look at the footprint of Lampião

O sim, sim, sim  
Oh yes, yes, yes

O não, não, não  
Oh no, no, no

The most immediate interpretation of this song is that the contradictory chorus of “yes and no” reflects the paradoxes of the game itself: a game and a fight, a balance of cooperation and antagonism; a relationship that demands mutual trust and mistrust. Yet the verse, “today there is some, tomorrow there is none,” deepens the interpretation. While other song lyrics, movement and the ethos of malandragem portray the deep treachery and betrayal of social agents, this song captures the systematic instability and inequality of life in Brazil. A social system based on structures of inequality creates a constant atmosphere of uneasiness and mistrust. The song clearly states that what is here today may be gone tomorrow: today there is food on the table, tomorrow there is nothing; today there are jobs, tomorrow none; today there is money in the bank, tomorrow it is
gone. The final verse evokes the historical figure of Lampião. The subject of many songs and legends, Lampião was the most famous of the *cangaceiros*, “cowboy outlaws” who roamed the *sertão*, or arid interior of Northeastern Brazil during the period of political unrest in the early 20th century. Lampião began his reign of terror after swearing revenge on the wealthy landowner who killed his parents. For nearly two decades he and his gang remained a thorn in the side of the state as they robbed, killed and terrorized the populations of the sertão. In his mythologizing, portrayed as part villain part Robin Hood, stealing from both the rich and the poor, Lampião symbolizes the interpersonal violence that can arise as a response to the structural violence of an unequal social and political system.

In sum, if the game of Iuna provides a sense of accomplishing the unimaginable, the game of São Bento Grande bestows the feeling of being prepared, through direct confrontation and overt aggression if need be, for the brutal inequalities and give and take of life. In Chapter Five I will return to the game of São Bento Grande, and in particular a type of game known as “hard play.” Hard play, I will argue, pushes the ritual boundaries of capoeira, and illuminates enduring structures of violence, so much a part of life in Brazil.

CONCLUSION

Training and playing capoeira develops an expressive, intelligent body: a body that thinks, processes, and responds to changing situations; a body not limited to moving

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38 In other capoeira schools I have not heard the verse about Lampião sung and this rendition may be an amalgamation of two or more folkloric songs. For example see those recorded by Mestre Sete Bola (2001: 160,163)
or expressing itself in one way, but one that can think through and respond to various encounters, confrontational and cooperative. While much of a capoeira apprenticeship involves learning and practicing the basic movement vocabulary, it is only in playing spontaneous, improvised games in the performative space of the roda that students move towards mastery. As a game of physical prowess and strategy, often compared to a dialogue or a game of chess, capoeira presents opportunities for exploring new ways of self-expression, communication and action. Furthermore, practitioners translate the lessons they learn in the roda to other areas of their lives: sometimes life must be approached with a good dose of mistrust and mandinga as in the game of Angola; sometimes with cooperation and trust as in the games of Benguela and Luna; and sometimes with direct confrontation as in the game of São Bento Grande.

The innovations Mestre Camisa has brought to capoeira -- in particular developing four distinct games and styles of play -- have arisen not from a top-down ideology of what he believes capoeira to be, but from observing the habits, desires and needs his students bring to their practice. Students who switched to Abadá from other groups (of whom there were quite a few during the time that I trained at the CIEP) explained that they did so because they felt they had reached a limit in their knowledge and skills; they found training with Mestre Camisa and Abadá exciting and challenging, pushing them to explore new ways of thinking about and playing capoeira.

Despite the obvious emphasis on corporal knowledge, and nonverbal communication, I was repeatedly struck by the number of times students expressed awe and admiration for Mestre Camisa’s verbal abilities; it was not only Mestre Camisa’s ability to play well (for which he has a wide reputation), but also his ability to speak well
that so impressed and inspired them. For Elton, the decision to move to Rio and train with Camisa was solidified when he heard the mestre speaking about capoeira on a video tape. Mestre Camisa certainly does seem to have, as his students say, *o dom de falar* ("the gift of the gab"). I once heard him speak for six hours straight without a break. Even more remarkable was the audience, a room full of capoeiristas from different groups, stayed quiet and attentive the whole time; even I, who by the end of my two years of fieldwork had heard him speak often about capoeira in various contexts, never grew bored as he always found new ways of engaging this topic for which he is so deeply passionate. In the words of Top:

> The first time I heard him talking about capoeira I thought, “geez, this guy is the god of capoeira.” I had never seen anyone talking about capoeira like he did. I thought, “this man really talks well about capoeira.” I had never heard anyone talk like that before. It made my mouth hang open. And since that moment, Camisa has been like a father, my idol in capoeira.

Many students like Top, who commanded a confidence and breath-taking eloquence in the roda, became timid and tongue-tied when trying to express themselves verbally outside of the roda, even to Mestre Camisa, with whom some of them had been training since adolescence; while they pushed forward eagerly to play in the roda under Mestre Camisa’s critical eye, they dodged verbal interaction with him. I, on the other hand, who had no trouble conversing with Mestre Camisa despite my far from perfect Portuguese, would become embarrassed in the roda. Sometimes my reluctance to display my bumbling ineloquence in front of everyone was so great that I would avoid playing and inevitably be reprimanded – how did I expect to improve?

The sentiments expressed by many of Camisa’s students suggest that while they claim capoeira as a transformative practice, affecting how they perceive and move
through the world, they identify domains in which social capital from the capoeira arena is not readily transferable: playing well and with confidence does not necessarily translate into speaking well and with confidence. Many Abadá students expressed their admiration for Mestre Camisa’s ability to do both, and their hope that training with him would effect similar transformation in themselves. Like many of his students, Mestre Camisa has little formal education, having only completed primary school. He refers to himself as autodidata (self taught), an identity he claims as having been produced through his life-long commitment to capoeira. This and other notions of capoeira as a site for constructing identities is the topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR

BECOMING AND BEING A CAPOEIRISTA: IDENTITY AND COMMITMENT

Rio de Janeiro
November 30, 2001

It is the last Friday of the month and I have brought Jorge (age six) Anderson (age seven) and Daniela (age seventeen) to their first aulão (big class). The two boys are overwhelmed by the number of students -- close to 150 -- excitedly milling around the CIEP greeting each other, and at first stick close to Daniela and me. But I lead them over to a group of children I know from Spider’s classes in Rocinha who are practicing floreios in the corner and soon the boys are proudly showing off their back flips and handstands. Mestre Camisa arrives and leads a short warm-up of stretches, ginga and kicks. Because of the number of students, there is not enough room to work in pairs, so after the warm-up we make a huge roda. The music starts and the singing is so energetically loud I am sure we can be heard across the street. Mestre Camisa calls us by cord level to play in the center -- beginners with advanced, intermediate with intermediate, advanced with advanced. After about an hour we form six smaller rodas, the one in front of Camisa and the orchestra reserved for the children. Daniela and I watch proudly as Jorge and Anderson play in the roda, impressing everyone, even Camisa who watches the children’s games with as much interest and intensity as adult games. Eventually Camisa passes on his berimbau to an instructor and walks around observing the different rodas, shouting out encouragements and criticisms. By 10:30 pm I am exhausted and glad when the rodas stop. But the aulão is not over. Camisa tells everyone to gather around and sit, and then proceeds to talk for an hour. Among other things he tells us, “capoeira is not just about training, playing and getting a beautiful body. It is about knowing your place and role in society.” Throughout its history, he says, capoeira has been tied to social issues and problems and so he strives to continue to connect it to current concerns. This year’s campaign is about raising consciousness about the environment and he says he is offering a free course in environmentalism to instructors. He hopes this course will help them incorporate environmental issues into their teaching. He ends by asking instructors if there are announcements for batizados and presentations that weekend. To close the aulão Camisa tells us to open a big roda again because he has a bag of t-shirts, capoeira magazines and cds to give away. A playful competition ensues: who can do the most continuous spinning kicks, the best head spin, the highest flip...the crowd decides the winners with their loudest cheers.
Mestre Camisa’s *aulão*, or “big class,” is held at the CIEP the last Friday of every month. It brings together anywhere from 100 to 300 Abadá students who train with instructors around the city. The *aulão* is a convivial and competitive occasion: a chance for students and instructors who do not normally train at the CIEP to talk and play together. Students eagerly demonstrate and test out their new skills and instructors proudly show off the quantity and quality of their students and observe those of other instructors. It is also a time for Mestre Camisa to talk about upcoming events and projects, and generally check in with his group. Thus a good portion of the *aulão* is usually dedicated to Mestre Camisa talking about his ideas and concerns, not only about the state of Abadá and capoeira in Rio and around the world, but about any number of issues or current affairs concerning Brazil. For example: before the presidential elections in November 2002, Camisa spent several *aulãos* talking about the political future of Brazil and his support of Lula. The June 2002 *aulão*, which fell two days before the World Cup (which Brazil won for the fifth time), was a festive affair -- the CIEP was decorated with green and yellow balloons, students encouraged to wear soccer jerseys or green and yellow, and a special song was written and sung to ”send energy” to the Brazilian team. As usual Mestre Camisa brought the occasion around to capoeira and used it as an excuse to prod his students: he warned them if they were not careful, just as the Brazilians “stole soccer from the English,” capoeiristas in other countries, whose knowledge and skill increase every day, would “steal capoeira from Brazil.”

The *aulão* is an opportunity to observe the wide array of people who are attracted to and train capoeira with Abadá. Instructors bring students from their classes around the city that cater to senior citizens, toddlers, the physically and mentally disadvantaged, as
well as students from their classes in favelas and at ritzy health clubs. While this display is evidence of the enormous popularity of capoeira today across race, class, gender, and age, not everyone who trains capoeira comes to identify as a “capoeirista.” Those who do describe capoeira as more than a physical activity: they say it is a “way of life” (*modo de vivir*) or a “way of being” (*modo de ser*), and talk about capoeira as a transformative practice that affects the way they feel, act and move in the world. This transformation occurs, as we saw in the last chapter, through the incorporation of a set of body techniques. It is also the result of their induction into a capoeira group, and the large amount of time they spend training, teaching and playing capoeira, and socializing with other capoeiristas.

While instructors talk about their classes in health clubs and schools as sustaining them financially, it is not usually in these contexts that the transformation of student into capoeirista occurs. Instructors would often tell me: “you don’t make capoeiristas in health clubs and schools; capoeiristas come out of the favelas.” The partial truth of this statement is revealed in the statistics of Abadá. Of the 40 advanced ranking students who are originally from Rio and were teaching in Rio or abroad during my fieldwork, 29 are from favelas in the Zona Sul and Zona Norte. Capoeiristas are not only essentially seen as lower class or favelados, but also as male. This again is revealed in Abadá statistics: of the 40 students from Rio who were teaching at the time of my fieldwork only nine were women and only two of those were from favelas. As we will see in this chapter, despite growing numbers of female students, capoeira is still largely perceived as a male activity and dominated by macho attitudes. This makes it difficult for women, especially
black women of the lower classes, to stick with their practice and rise through the hierarchical ranks of their groups.

The previous chapter explored the process of learning and incorporating the body techniques of capoeira. Continuing with Lave and Wenger’s model of learning as a situated activity (1991), this chapter explores how, as students increase their mastery of skills and knowledge, they move into positions of “full participation” in their community of practice, in this instance a capoeira group. More than mastering new activities and new understandings, reaching full participation involves becoming a member, or a certain type of person. In other words, “learning involves the construction of identities…” learning is not merely a condition for membership, but is itself an evolving form of membership” (1991: 53). Given that identity is never essential, fixed or complete, but rather an ongoing process of interaction, capoeira is an ideal arena in which to view how “people define themselves in practice” (1991: 53-54) such that “learning and a sense of identity are inseparable” (1991: 115).

In capoeira, the construction of identities is most visible in the rituals, behavior and language that define group affiliation. Many practitioners use the metaphor of a “family” when talking about their capoeira group, an analogy that is reflected in fictive kinship ties that exist among members. By examining the stages of an apprenticeship that move a student from novice to full participant, this chapter explores what it means to “make” and become a capoeirista. Furthermore, it examines the ways in which this identity is constantly evolving and experienced in new ways. As an illustration I begin with the story of three youth whom I came to know well over the course of my fieldwork. The story of Jorge, Daniela and Anderson is typical of the narratives of poor youth who
are introduced to capoeira on the streets of their neighborhood, are seduced by it and develop a passion for it.

THE “BIRTH” OF A CAPOEIRISTA

At the first curve in my street was one of Rio’s still standing 19th century cortiços, or boarding houses.¹ The narrow façade of the two-story building -- tucked in next to a one room Baptist church and flush against the cliff of an old quarry -- is deceptively small. Upon passing through the dilapidated doors one discovers a third, subterranean level and a long walkway flanked by one-room apartments leading to an outdoor courtyard and communal toilet. Among the forty families housed in the cortiço lived Jorge, Anderson and Daniela. At six, Afro-Brazilian Jorge was physically small yet mature for his age: the lingering baby fat of his cheeks and belly contrast sharply with his muscular strength and brash independence. Anderson was Jorge’s best friend and quite his opposite. A year older, Anderson was tall and lean, his white skin deeply tanned and his long blond hair bleached from hours spent with Daniela and Jorge at the nearby beach. While Jorge was a bundle of energy, unruly and disdainful of adult authority or affection, Anderson was quiet and contemplative, ready to tuck his hand into yours as you walked down the street. Daniela was Anderson’s seventeen-year-old cousin and despite a sour expression and badly cared-for teeth, possessed a lanky beauty.

Daniela had dropped out of high school and, as she was not working, spent all of her time looking after her younger siblings, nieces and nephews. She had also adopted the care of

¹ See Chapter One for a description of the 19th century cortiços or “beehives,” and the Introduction for a description of my neighborhood.
Anderson, whose mother was sick, and of Jorge, whose mother, burdened with 7 children under the age of 10, was rather neglectful and abusive.

On the hill next to the one on which Jorge, Daniela, Anderson and I lived, was another larger favela (several thousand families), called Santo Amaro. 26-year old Zeca -- a light-skinned Afro-Brazilian with a well-sculpted, tattooed body and warm smile -- was born and raised in that favela and at the time of my fieldwork continued to live there in a house with his wife, daughter, mother, grandmother, brother and niece. Zeca was one of the first people I met at the CIEP, where he had just returned to training after a seven-year hiatus following the birth of his daughter, whose mother he had met in capoeira and had also just returned to training. During his time away from capoeira Zeca had spent several years in the military, held various jobs and had tried to go back to school. But he found he missed capoeira and resolved to begin training again and rekindle the children’s classes in Santo Amaro. Zeca told me his story on our bus rides home at night from the CIEP. Along with a half dozen other Abadá capoeiristas now in their twenties and thirties who grew up in Santo Amaro and on the long street leading up to the favela, he first saw capoeira in the street roda held Sundays at the local outdoor market. One of the capoeiristas who frequented the roda and lived in the neighborhood began teaching classes in a small boxing gym in the favela. The classes stopped when the teacher moved to the United States to teach capoeira. Classes began again several years later with another student from the street, who eventually moved to Europe along with his two capoeirista brothers. Zeca decided it was time for him to carry the torch.

Zeca began teaching free classes at the casarão, a one-room community center at the entrance to the favela. The response was immediate and popular, and soon the single
class became three hour-long consecutive classes for four to six year olds, six to twelve year olds and teens and adults. Over two years I watched his work flourish from just a handful of students to close to one hundred. Among Zeca’s most dedicated students were Jorge, Anderson and Daniela. Daniela, who grew up in the favela until moving to the cortiço on my street, knew Zeca and began taking Anderson and Jorge to class. On Tuesday and Thursday evenings the four of us would meet at the short cut alley between our hill and Zeca’s and trudge up the steep road to the casarão. Jorge was Zeca’s most physically gifted student. His strong squat body was a perfect match for the movement of capoeira. He would see something once and after a few attempts could imitate it perfectly, quickly moving on to more difficult variations. Jorge’s pride and pleasure in mastering each new move was palpable. He would eagerly show me a new acrobatic move he had perfected at the beach over the weekend crying out “Look, I’m Zeca!” Jorge worshipped Zeca, imitating his every move inside and outside of the roda. Watching the sway of his body and manner of play was like watching a miniature Zeca and, except for his size and the tip of his tongue peeking out of his mouth in concentration, one would almost forget Jorge was only six years old and a novice in capoeira.

Jorge’s facility for capoeira, strong little body and stubborn nature gained him the nickname Little Ram within weeks of beginning classes. With his nickname and his new pair of abadá (capoeira pants) held up by a piece of corda crua (raw or uncolored cord that signifies an “unbaptized” student) Jorge’s identity as a capoeirista took off. He began to imitate older capoeiristas not just in his game but also in his everyday behavior: he took to climbing the hill up to class with his t-shirt tucked into the back of his abadá,
his chest bare except for a beaded necklace I had brought him from Angola, which he wore with great pride, explaining that it was from the “ancestral homeland” of capoeira. With the encouragement of Daniela, he bragged of his many “girlfriends” in capoeira and school. Coming back from class he would casually spin out a series of cartwheels and back handsprings down the steep incline, his surefootedness never faltering. The men sitting with beers outside a little bar would egg him on calling out “Manda salta ai, capoeirista!” (“Show us a flip, capoeirista!”). Soon people in the neighborhood were calling Jorge by his nickname. After a number of months I had become so used to calling him Little Ram that I realized I had forgotten his other name.

As Zeca’s work with capoeira developed he began to introduce his students to the larger Abadá group, taking them to the monthly aulãos at the CIEP, to other instructors’ events and to street rodas. Little Ram’s skills were quickly recognized and applauded. The other instructors and adult capoeiristas enjoyed playing with him and often invited him to perform solos, showing off his best acrobatic moves, which were always a crowd pleaser. Instructors began to request his presence at events and Daniela was kept busy on the weekends accompanying the boys to different locations in the city. They were sometimes rewarded with a t-shirt from the event, a perk usually reserved only for instructors, and they wore those to class with great pride.

As Little Ram’s self-confidence and pride in being a capoeirista grew, so did his swagger and rebelliousness. Never particularly interested in school, he became less so, insisting he only wanted to play capoeira. After her son began acting up in school, Little Ram’s mother forbade him to go to capoeira class. Distressed at losing his best student and concerned for Little Ram, Zeca surprised the boy by showing up at his school one
day to talk to his teachers. Little Ram briefly reformed his behavior, but shortly thereafter broke a window while playing in the street. His mother again barred him from capoeira classes, ripping up his uniform for emphasis. Reluctant to talk to me about her son’s involvement in capoeira, Little Ram’s mother would shrug her shoulders and say, “Dunno, I just prefer soccer.” Despite his mother’s resistance, Little Ram tenaciously carved out his place in the group.

By Little Ram’s side, and slightly outside of his limelight, Anderson and Daniela also quietly developed as capoeiristas. Though both eventually received nicknames, these did not stick and they continued to be known by their given names. Somewhat overshadowed by Little Ram in physical capability, Anderson developed in other areas. Coming down the hill from my house one afternoon I heard the sound of a berimbau and, rounding the last bend in the road, was surprised to find Anderson in front of his house playing a child-size berimbau. Learning to play the berimbau was not an explicit part of Zeca’s capoeira class. Anderson had taught himself to play the instrument by listening, observing and awkwardly picking up Zeca’s large berimbau after class and asking for pointers from one of the adults. Another Abadá capoeirista who also lived in Santo Amaro and made berimbaus, made a child-size one for Anderson when he saw the boy’s interest and dedication to learning.

Daniela’s initial involvement with capoeira was as the boys’ guardian. As she sat watching them in class I could tell she was intrigued and I encouraged her to join in even though she was twice as old and twice as tall as the other students. She reluctantly started training. Her athletic proclivity hampered by laziness, quick temper, and self-consciousness, Daniela was slow in her progress. But as Little Ram’s skills and
Daniela's reputation grew and she began accompanying him and Anderson to events and rodas, she herself became known by other capoeiristas in the group and she became more animated. With pestering and encouragement, Daniela began to take her own training more seriously, especially when Zeca asked her to help out with the younger children.

Daniela's mother, a tired looking woman with five children, was unsure how she felt about her daughter's involvement in capoeira. She was worried that it encouraged Daniela's rough, "masculine" side and her propensity for being a brigona (fighter). She explained that Daniela had always been a tomboy and was quick to get into brawls in the street, the evidence of which -- bruises and scratches from fighting with her older brother or other boys -- was often in sight. Daniela's mother was also discouraged that her daughter had dropped out of school, was not working and was spending more and more time on capoeira. As Zeca gave Daniela more responsibility in the classes at the casarão and suggested that eventually she might become his teaching assistant at one of the private schools where he also taught, her mother reluctantly admitted that there might be a future for Daniela in capoeira, remarking that her daughter was, after all, very good with children. Her optimism increased when, right before I left Rio, Zeca convinced Daniela to return to high school.
“Born Naturals”

Zeca’s classes at the casarão were a bit of an anomaly for a capoeira class in a favela, in that he had more female than male students. This was due to several factors. To begin with, he had grown up in the favela and was known, liked and trusted by many parents. This, together with his remarkably gentle and nurturing attentiveness towards young children and the fact that his own young daughter was a student in the class, created a safe environment for young boys and girls. Alongside these factors, the pre-teen and teenage girls admitted, through giggles, that they came because of Zeca’s good looks, a fact that probably also contributed to the crowd of young mothers and female spectators who would come to watch.
Despite the overwhelming presence of girls in the class, that Little Ram immediately became the star pupil is telling. Zeca explains his relationship to Little Ram:

Little Ram is the cream of the crop, the essence of capoeira. Capoeira is in his blood. I see myself in Little Ram. I look at him and I see myself as a kid. If we could go back in time, you would see that I was exactly like him. He’s problematic, a troublemaker (*bagunceiro*), but he learns quickly. He has a lot of family problems -- his mom wanted to give him away at birth -- and he has had to grow up fast. He is a needy child. And I know that he admires me a lot and that is a concern of mine. When he plays those games kids play, he always pretends to be me. He wants to do whatever I do. Sometimes he tells people that I am his father, and I will play along and say he is my son. He wants to be just like me so I have to worry about that, be careful about how I act. I want to inspire him not only in capoeira -- I bought him a notebook to use in school. But even if he stops training today, he will always be capoeira.

The special father-son bond that Zeca believes exists between him and Little Ram is one often repeated by male capoeiristas who refer to their mestre as a father figure. This bond is often explained as particularly strong among teachers and students in favelas where many children grow up in households with absent fathers. Zeca acknowledges the problematic nature of Little Ram’s home life and his own responsibility in becoming a male role model for the boy. At the same time he hints that there is something inside his little protégé that transcends even their relationship: capoeira is “in his blood” and no matter what happens or what anyone does, Little Ram will “always be capoeira.” In his view the physical characteristics and lived experience of Little Ram renders the boy an embodiment of the art form.

This sentiment was echoed in instructors’ responses to the question of what they meant by the statement “capoeiristas are made in the favelas”: they would reply that children in favelas have a natural disposition for capoeira and that it is “in their blood”
(capoeira está no sangue). Loic Wacquant noted a similar discourse among boxers in a Chicago ghetto who would talk of “naturals” or being “born a boxer.” He suggests that

The native myth of the gift of the boxer is an illusion founded in reality: what fighters take for a natural capacity (‘You gotta have it in you’) is in effect this peculiar nature resulting from the protracted process of inculcation of the pugilistic habitus, a process that often begins in early childhood, either within the gym itself -- where one routinely sees children brought in by members of the club trying their hand at boxing -- or in the antechamber to the gym that is the ghetto street (Wacquant 2004:99).

Being “born with the gift” means being born in a socio-economic environment that gave rise to boxing, or capoeira, and in which it is readily accessible not only in its pure form but also in a range of other social practices. In other words, it means being born into a life situation that demands certain skills and attitudes for survival. These skills and attitudes come to be seen as “natural” or innate character qualities. In talking about the difference he sees between his students in the favela and in private schools, Zeca inadvertently exposes this naturalizing process:

In the community\(^2\), it is really impressive. From the beginning the children have a knack (levam jeito). I think this is the basic difference. In the community, it is an interesting thing, it appears as if, I don’t know, the children, I am being a little confused but later we will organize my thoughts. Children in the community, despite being deprived/alienated (alheia), they have a lot of ginga, it is a very natural thing. A child sees others doing something and he is going to do it too, because he isn’t scared, he has no limits. The truth is, children in the community have no limits. It is as if, I don’t know, because of life, because of the way they have to live. They are always having to overcome things. So if you give them a little reassurance, they are going to do something. In the beginning, they might be a little inhibited, they see all the other children doing it, but pretty soon they are doing it too. I feel that children in private schools are more spoiled/pampered (mimados) so it takes them longer to get past their personal barriers. This isn’t so in the communities. Children are always having to overcome, or become accustomed to, things. So when you start to give classes, when you start to encourage this in them, they learn really fast. One day you are teaching them to

\(^2\) People who live in favelas rarely refer to them as such, preferring the term morro (“hill”) or comunidade (community). The latter term comes from the ecclesial base communities (CEBs) that were implemented in favelas by the liberation theology movement in the 1960s and 70s.
put their head on the ground, the next you are teaching them how to do a headstand. It is the natural sagacity of children in the community, and from what I have seen this is true in general, in all the communities it is like this. It is really very natural.

Zeca is conscious of his own confusion or uncertainty: while realizing environment and childrearing produce differences between children in favelas and in private schools, he nonetheless uses language that suggests these differences as innate or natural.

That children in favelas “have no limits” is often explained by the fact that they are fearless when it comes to risk-taking. Private school children, who are often told by classroom teachers and parents to keep their shoes on during capoeira class and to avoid moves that risk neck or back injury, may be scared to try even a cartwheel. In contrast, children in favelas, whose only shoes may be a pair of flip-flops, eagerly throw themselves into new moves, practicing barefoot on concrete floors. These kinds of physical risks are par for the course in an environment where their only playgrounds are the streets, where they play barefoot soccer, climb telephone poles and fly kites from rooftops. Beyond daring and physical dexterity these activities foster resourcefulness and self-reliance, qualities necessary for survival. Unsheltered from the violence and precariousness of life, children learn to fend for and protect themselves. Holding onto scarce resources, sometimes nothing more than a kite or a sense of self-worth, might entail physical fighting. As Wacquant notes with boxing (2004), some youth bring to capoeira fighting skills honed on the streets; others turn to capoeira to develop those skills (see Chapter Five).

Another area in which children from the favelas are said to be “born with capoeira in their blood” is music and rhythm. Brazil is a country of music: there is an incredible
array of musical genres and a strong national music industry. Certain popular regional music, such as samba in Rio, often cut across class. While children of the middle and upper classes may be familiar with samba, they probably are not surrounded by it as are children in favelas, where live music is often a visible and frequent event. Children not only hear the music but also observe the musicians and may even be encouraged to try out some of the instruments, several of which are also used in capoeira. While capoeiristas often recognize the influence of practice in poor neighborhoods, they also naturalize the talents of Afro-Brazilian children; capoeiristas claim that Afro-Brazilian children learn capoeira quickly because, as noted by Burdick in his study of Afro-Brazilian religions, the ginga is viewed as a “semi-mystical, deeply felt internal rhythm supposedly inherited from Africa” (1998: 58).

Gendered Domains of House and Street

These early childhood experiences -- fighting, playing barefoot in the streets, listening to percussive music outside the local bar -- cultivate physical dexterity, rhythm, creativity and daring. While these activities are not exclusive to boys, they are nonetheless perceived as “masculine” because they pertain to the domain of the “street.”

Among his various theoretical distinctions between the domains of rua (street) and casa (house) in Brazil, anthropologist Roberto DaMatta (1991) posits that the street is a masculine arena in which disorderliness, violence, passions, anonymity and unpredictability prevail. The house is the feminine domain (though ruled by a patriarch)

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3 Within the genre of samba, however, there are different styles that do mark class taste. For example, pagode, an electrified samba that is hugely popular on the radio and in dance halls, is considered lower class and a corruption of old style samba. The term pagode also refers to a gathering where any style of live samba is played, often accompanied by food, beer and dancing.
in which protection, organization, hierarchy and authority reign. Whereas every-man-for-himself and impersonal laws rule the street, patriarchy and relationships of patronage define the house.4

DaMatta goes on to link the domains of casa and rua to the sociological categories of “person” and “individual.” A person, associated with the house, is a known entity connected through social ties of family, friendship and patronage, and therefore commands protection, respect and privilege. An individual, associated with the street, is an anonymous, unconnected being, and therefore vulnerable to unpredictable events, violence and impersonal laws. A person has a particular place in a hierarchical order that demands obligation but that also bestows protection and favor; an individual is cut loose from that order, providing autonomy of action but also an absence of reciprocity. The difference between person and individual (and a deep distrust of the state) is captured in the popular Brazilian saying “to our enemies the law; to our friends, everything!” (DaMatta 1991: 168).

The dichotomy of house and street, DaMatta acknowledges, is not absolute: members of a household, women and children in particular, are often subject to violence, and the street can and does foster relationships of familiarity, patronage and protection. In this chapter I argue that capoeira is a social arena in which the categories of house and street, person and individual, blur and blend. It is exactly the tensions and contradictions that are created in this blurring -- and the possibilities they offer for reinventing oneself -- that make capoeira a particularly attractive and powerful social practice for boys and girls

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4 First identified by Gilberto Freyre and later elaborated by DaMatta, the theoretical categories of casa and rua have informed numerous studies of Brazilian society including master/servant relations in 19th century Rio (Graham 1988), affective relationships (Rebhun 1999), sexuality (Parker 1991), and street children (Hecht 1998).
and young men and women, especially in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. These contradictions are best viewed and understood in the ceremonies and ritual language that comprise the distinct phases of a capoeira apprenticeship, as well as the code of ethics and values associated with being a capoeirista.

“IDENTIFYING” WITH CAPOEIRA

Capoeira is so rich that anyone can identify with something among its elements

-- Mestre Camisa

I am poor, but I have a wealth (riqueza) that is capoeira

-- carioca street capoeirista

The first step in entering a capoeira apprenticeship is, in the words of practitioners, to “identify” with it. Talking about his students, Zeca explains that “those children who identify with capoeira are the ones who are really going to develop.” For some, like Little Ram, this identification is immediate and visceral. Many older practitioners describe a physical reaction to seeing capoeira for the first time that approached a spiritual or emotional epiphany. For many it is the music that first attracts them; they describe the berimbau as calling them (“me chamou”) and the music as an “energy” entering their bodies and forever affecting the shape of their lives. Some even equate their passion for capoeira to an “addiction” or a “vice,” comparing it to cachaca (sugar cane rum) or women; others say they are “married” to capoeira.

Top (nicknamed thus for his ability to spin on various parts of his body) is a 27-year-old Afro-Brazilian who grew up in a favela in downtown Rio and has been playing capoeira for half his life. During my fieldwork, he was one of the highest ranking
instructors who trained consistently with Camisa at the CIEP and also taught at various locations around the city. During an interview Top explains to me that as one of seven children of a mother who was a domestic worker and a largely absent alcoholic father, he had a childhood “full of suffering”: at times he and his siblings barely had enough food to eat or clothes to wear. He never finished primary school, as he saw nothing in it for him. He shows me a latticework of scars on his shins, proof of a childhood spent “playing in the street.” It is in the street that Top found capoeira, or rather capoeira found him:

Capoeira appeared in my life there on the hill (morro) where I lived. One time I was playing out in the street and I saw a friend of mine coming up with a berimbau in his hand, playing. I saw the berimbau and I felt that energy. He didn’t even know how to play anything, just made some scratching noises, but I thought it was cool.

His friend explained that he was taking capoeira classes at an after school program and, intrigued, Top accompanied him to class where he heard the berimbau played properly:

The first time I heard the berimbau played it was the São Bento Pequeno rhythm. I went crazy, it was to die for (fique louco, para morrer). I said “My God, I have to learn this.” I thought capoeira was the most beautiful thing in the world, in the whole world. I heard the rhythm of the berimbau and thought, “My God, I have to learn this.”

Top began training, but three months later the after-school program ended. He started hanging around some capoeiristas who held a roda once a week at an outdoor market and one of them, a student of Mestre Camisa’s, invited him to train.

Osprey, a 34-year old Afro-Brazilian who grew up on the Rua Santo Amaro and currently teaches in Spain with his twin brothers, describes a similar physical reaction to capoeira:

It was the first time I felt those shivers on my body. You know what we feel today when we hear the music? That was what I felt, but I didn’t know what it was.
These feelings, which according to Osprey never leave, are often described by others as a quickening heartbeat, goose bumps on the flesh and shivers down the spine when one hears the “call of the berimbau” upon arriving at a roda. This deep connection to capoeira is articulated in a recently written song in which the singer describes capoeira as a force larger than himself, driving and directing life and expressing his every sentiment.

Capoeira, eu não sou daqui  
Eu sou de outro lugar  
E minha vida é a capoeira  
Eu vou onde o berimbau chamar

And in my hand I carry my berimbau  
In my heart are my principles  
What commands the game of life  
I go wherever the berimbau calls

E na mão levo meu berimbau  
No peito meus fundamentos  
Quem comanda o jogo da vida  
É a força de meus pensamentos

And my life is capoeira  
What commands the game of life  
Is the force of my thoughts

Meus pensamentos estão nela  
No peito ela palpita  
Quando vejo uma roda eu chego  
E meu corpo logo se arrepia

My thoughts are in her (capoeira)  
In my breast she beats  
When I see a roda I draw close  
And my body immediately tingles

Capoeira é harmonia  
É saudades de quem nos deixou  
É a chora duma viola  
O lamento dum cantador

Capoeira is harmony  
The longing for those who have left us  
The cry of a viola (small berimbau)  
The lament of a singer

Ouço o som do berimbau  
Treinando consigo ver  
Capoeira é minha vida  
Sem ela não sei viver

I hear the sound of the berimbau  
Training I manage to see  
Capoeira is my life  
Without her I do not know how to live

--Sabia de Goiânia, Abadá-Capoeira

Part of the magic and attraction of capoeira is its performative nature: it holds out the tantalizing possibility of momentarily being or perhaps becoming another person. This other type of person is a performer who, like a pop star or famous soccer player, is admired and applauded. Speedy, a 28 year old Afro-Brazilian from a favela and member
of a group in the Zona Norte group, who works as a night security guard in a hotel in Copacabana, explains that though he was first attracted to the physical movement because it reminded him of Kung Fu movies, he soon became enamored of the music:

> In the beginning I just wanted to *pular*. Then as time went by I started to know more about the rhythm, the songs and I thought “I am going to arrive [at the roda] and I am going to sing! I am going to feel like a singer!” [he chuckles]. And you think, “Hey man, I’m here! I can do everything! I can sing, dance and [chuckling] be applauded!”

I witnessed the infectious desire to perform in Little Ram: as he discovered first his ability to *pular* and then the applause and admiration this ability brought him, his interest and pride in his new-found talent grew. As we saw in the last chapter, the pleasure and self-confidence garnered from learning and performing a new set of skills is an important reward in and of itself. However, in the masculine street culture of the favela, these physical skills are also a valuable type of cultural capital.

**Masculine Bodies and Street Capital**

Identity didn't come easily in my neighborhood. It was painfully clear to all of us that our identities were constructed out of daily battles waged around masculinity, the ability to mediate a terrain fraught with violence, and the need to find an anchor through which to negotiate a culture in which life was fast and short-lived. I grew up amid the notion and force of mostly working-class male bodies -- bodies asserting their physical strength as one of the few resources we had control over. (Giroux 1996: 4)

> In *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence and Youth*, Henry Giroux argues for a critical understanding of the multiple contexts and discourses in which youth as a concept and category is constructed. However, he urges us not to lose sight of the fact that beneath political, social and psychological abstractions lies the “lived experience of being

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5 *Pular* literally means to jump. Capoeiristas use it to refer to the more acrobatic moves – flips, hand springs, flying kicks. *Pular* also refers to rowdy fun or messing around as in the expression “*pular um bloco de carnaval*” which means to accompany a street parade during carnival.
young” (1996: 4). In an opening essay, Giroux reflects on his own experience growing up a working class white youth in urban United States in the 1960s. Cognizant early on of his white privilege that allowed him to cross borders impermeable to his black peers, Giroux nonetheless found common ground with them in the sensual experience of the body. As the primal material for constructing masculinity and negotiating the hard reality of the streets, the physical body becomes a kind of social capital on the basketball courts in playgrounds and gyms. The body was a source of sensuous pleasure and a currency for forging relationships:

Job or no job one forever feels the primacy of the body: the body flying through the rarified air of the neighborhood gym in a kind of sleek and stylized performance; the body furtive and cool existing on the margins of society filled with the possibility of instant pleasure and relief, or tense and anticipating the danger and risk […]. We weren’t smart enough to see the contradiction between the brutal violence, sexism that marked our lives and our constant attempts to push against the grain by investing in the pleasures of the body, the warmth of solidarity, and the appropriation of the neighborhood spaces as outlaw publics. As kids, we were border crossers and had to learn to negotiate the power, violence and cruelty of the dominant culture through our own lived histories, restricted languages, and narrow cultural experiences (1996: 5).

As the only public place for working class and poor black and white youth to perform and be admired, the basketball courts became trading grounds of cultural capital and spaces of possibility: physical skills were exchanged for respect and camaraderie (and also conflict and competition), and the tantalizing mirage of avoiding a life of low paying menial jobs was dreamed of. For most, the dream was shattered when no athletic scholarship materialized at the end of high school.
Like the basketball courts in inner city United States, capoeira rodas in Rio’s favelas are often the only space for youth to perform and be admired in front of their peers and sometimes an even larger public. Osprey articulates:

The truth is, I started to train capoeira to occupy the time I had as an adolescent, because until then I didn’t do anything, I didn’t have any activity and I didn’t do anything, I lived in the street, you know? I didn’t have anything to do so I would go to the beach or other activities, but until then I didn’t identify much with anything. I was really young, 13, so I was discovering things. By chance I met a person who lived in our neighborhood who already did capoeira. I knew about capoeira but it never entered my head to do it. [And then this person] had a roda in the street in Glória. I went to watch the roda and the thing that made the biggest impression on me was I saw these kids, practically my size and my age, playing and doing all those things and I thought, “Damn, I got to do this!”…I practically lived in the streets, you know. I didn’t stay at home and capoeira is from the streets. And I thought, people are going to respect me, they are going to see me all tiny small playing capoeira, it is going to be something, damn, totally cool, and I identified with that. I said to myself, “I have to be part of this. I am going to do capoeira, I am going to learn to do a macaco, I have to learn to do a meia-lua, I have to do these movements.” Because when a person comes along and he is not playing capoeira, you don’t know who he is, who the guy is. And then suddenly the guy enters the roda and starts to play and then you are going to see the guy in a different way, and he is going to leave respected. So that is what I wanted. To have respect in the place where I lived, which isn’t a place, well there are a lot of poor people and crime and marginality and children, people, adolescents have a tendency to go in that direction. And so maybe capoeira gave me another path, you know? For me and for other people who were born and raised in the same neighborhood and who chose capoeira.

The capoeira roda appealed to the young Osprey as a stage for showing off and gaining recognition and admiration. In reflecting back, he realizes that capoeira offered a route to respect in an environment in which the only alternative path may be one of “crime and marginality.” Many youth perceive the trafficking of cocaine and marijuana, a visible presence in the majority of Rio’s favelas today, as a fast track to respect. On several

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6 *Futebol*, or soccer, is another such field and even more popular than capoeira among kids in favelas. However soccer does not offer the same sense of belonging and identity that a capoeira group does, nor, as we will see below, does it offer opportunities for “professionalizing”: except the rare occasions on which adepts get picked up by professional teams, soccer remains for the vast majority just a pastime.
occasions Little Ram, Daniela, Anderson and I climbed the hill to the casarão to find that
capoeira class had been cancelled because of the threat of a police raid on the favela.
While we approached the favela from the back, the majority of students lived deep within
it and could only reach the casarão by traversing the main thoroughfare that connects the
labyrinth of alleyways to the paved road. An aunt who always accompanied her niece to
class explained that she did so because, though it was just a short walk from her house to
the casarão, the path was dangerous: the drug traffickers keep watch from a plaza a short
distance from the casarão and if police arrive a *tiroteio* (exchange of gunfire) would catch
in its crossfire anyone in transit.

Often it is teenagers no older than Daniela who are the stationed lookouts armed
with automatic weapons. Children the age of Little Ram and Anderson are used as
*aviãozinhos* (“little airplanes”) to carry messages and/or drugs. As a result of their
proximity and easy access to drugs, many of these children are also users. Top, who lost
one brother to a *bala perdida* (“stray bullet”) near their home, explains that the situation
today is worse then when he was a young child:

> When I was a child it was difficult to see children using – if they did smoke, they
did it hidden. Because the drug traffickers (*bandidos*) did not let us get mixed up
in it, they would send us home. If we stopped at the *boca de fumo* (place where
drugs are sold) they would send us home. This thing of kids in drug trafficking
did not exist then – the traffickers didn’t accept it, now they do. They use the kids
to watch out for the police. Where I was born and raised, today there are drug
traffickers who are eleven years old - kids with guns in their hand.

Before the introduction of cocaine trafficking in the 1970s, crime in the favelas largely
focused on the *jogo de bicho*, or illegal numbers game. Criminal activity in the favelas
was overseen and monitored by older men who would extend their protection and
contribute part of their earnings to the community; their money paid for improving the
infrastructure and cultural life of the favelas. With the growth of drug trafficking and the territorial division of Rio’s favelas among four major drug cartels, life in the favelas is increasingly affected by the “movement,” as drug trade is locally known. The geography of the favelas -- dense labyrinths perched on hills with often only one or two entrances -- makes them easily protected from police invasion. Drug lords, referred to as the *donos do morro* (“owners/chiefs of the hill”) are often young men who do not live past their early twenties. While some of them, like their predecessors, contribute part of their earnings to the favela, the “respect” they earn is built more on fear than on the belief that they have the community’s best interest at heart. One of their main contributions to the cultural life of the favela are the “funk dances,” which are entertainment and drug selling venues. To the dismay of many favelados, huge walls of speakers blast Brazilian style gangsta rap all night long on Fridays and Saturdays. That these dances are popular not only among poor youth from the morros but also among middle class youth from the *asfalto* (asphalt) has raised public concern (see Chapter Two). Funkeiros and their music – the song lyrics of which are often cries against the deplorable state of the poor in Brazil and pride in being from the favela but which also carry messages that denigrate women and glorify drugs and violence -- have been demonized in the media.

The popularity of these funk dances, and drug traffickers’ display of wealth (gold jewelry, latest style tennis shoes), large homes (one famous dono kept a tank of alligators and a pet lion), firearms and women attract young boys to their ranks. Despite the fact that many of the drug lords are prisoners to the hill, unable to leave for fear of arrest, and most likely will be dead before they reach 25, youth see their career choice as an

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7 Samba schools and carnival parades were and continue to be funded by money from the jogo de bicho.
8 For interesting discussions about the controversy surrounding funk and the multiple messages it carries as a youth movement, see Herschmann 2000; Vianna 1997; Yudice 1994.
attractive alternative to the menial, low paying jobs of their parents. In his powerful study of drug dealing in East Harlem in the 1990s, Philippe Bourgois (1995; 2004) notes a similar attitude among young Puerto Rican drug dealers. He argues that the crack cocaine and heroin industries -- the “only dynamically growing equal-opportunity employers for inner-city men” -- provided the only real possibility for upward mobility and for avoiding the daily humiliation of racism that is part of the package deal of working a low wage job in the formal sector (Bourgois 2004: 303). Rejecting the example set by their parents to accept a life of subservience, these young men chose to work the streets where they were known and granted “respect.” This respect was built and maintained out of a “culture of terror” ruled by inter-personal violence so that ultimately, Bourgois concludes, “the oppositional street culture of resistance to exploitation and social marginalization is contradictorily self-destructive to its participants.” (2004: 303).

In Rio de Janeiro, the self-destructiveness of the oppositional culture of drug trafficking is evidenced in the high rate of homicide, the leading cause of death in the favelas for males between the ages of 15 and 24 (Goldstein 2003: 170). Thus it is no exaggeration when Top, Osprey and other capoeiristas who grew up in favelas claim that if it were not for capoeira, they would be dead today. Top began our interview with an acknowledgement:

First I need to thank God, second capoeira and Mestre Camisa, for being alive. Being born and raised in a favela, the majority of my friends died in the favela from a life of crime. So, if it were not for capoeira, I wouldn’t have had any other option than a life of crime.

In order to offer an alternative to the powerful pull of drug trafficking capoeira must appeal to these youth on some of the same grounds. As expressed by Osprey in the
earlier quote, the possibility of demonstrating that despite his small size he could perform and, because of the martial aspect of capoeira, protect himself, was a major draw. He saw the roda as a stage for proving he was not a nobody but a somebody that deserved respect. In the language of DaMatta, capoeira was a venue for moving himself from the category of an anonymous “individual” to a known and respected “person.” At the same time, the fact that capoeira was in and of the streets maintained its edge of excitement and danger. This flirtation with danger and the respect and admiration garnered (especially from women) for their displays of masculinity and strong, sculpted bodies make capoeira an attractive activity.

For some youth, their interest in capoeira never expands beyond an initial seduction; the immediate returns may be too low for them to stick with it or to engage it as anything more than an occasional hobby. Others, who perhaps develop a particular bond with an older capoeirista, like that between Little Ram and Zeca, may come to see capoeira as a way to move beyond the streets of the favela. They discover that teaching capoeira, unlike menial service jobs, can provide a decent income without working a grueling 12-hour day and without having to adopt a posture of subservience. Though the monetary gain is not that of drug traffickers, one’s likelihood of survival is much greater and one can display the latest Adidas fashion somewhere other than on the morro. Getting to this stage entails more than just identifying with capoeira, one must also commit to it.
COMMITTING TO CAPOEIRA

I do not feel like a capoeirista and I don’t think I ever will because I don’t want any commitment to capoeira.
- 23 year-old, female student training at the CIEP for one year

Being a capoeirista depends on others
-Mestre Ox

Becoming a somebody in capoeira involves developing a *compromisso* (commitment) to it. Capoeiristas often describe this compromisso as a commitment to capoeira in general, “living the life of a capoeirista” as they say. But it also usually involves committing to a particular mestre and group. While more often then not youth start capoeira in their neighborhood with a local teacher, as they become more involved they may look for another mestre and group with whom they “identify” more, drawn by the philosophy, style, pedagogy, or personality of the mestre, or the sociability of the group. To understand what it then means to develop a compromisso to this group and what comes of such a commitment, it is helpful to return to the slippery categories of street and house, and a quick recap of some crucial capoeira history.

Until the 1930s, the practice and transmission of capoeira occurred exclusively in the streets. Rio’s 19th century maltas -- or gangs of young male *capoeiras* -- emerged, organized, trained, played and fought in the streets. For the most disenfranchised of Rio’s inhabitants -- slaves for hire, free blacks, and recent immigrants -- the maltas were mutual aide societies: unconnected to the safety of a wealthy household and dependent on the impersonal and hostile public domain of the street for their livelihood, young men joined maltas as a way to build affective, reciprocal and protective ties. The capoeira gang was a “casa” in the “rua.”
With the changing political climate and the opening of the first official academies in Salvador, Bahia, the practice and transmission of capoeira moved from the streets to indoors. This initiated a shift in the public image of capoeira as a criminalized activity to a socially acceptable sport and cultural manifestation. Despite this transformation and the increased popularity of capoeira classes offered in a variety of venues, capoeira continued to have a presence in the street. Into the 1980s, *rodas de rua* (“street rodas”) held weekly or monthly at designated public spots around Rio de Janeiro brought together a wide variety of capoeiristas. These notoriously rough streets rodas were the stage on which capoeiristas’ reputations were built. The often aggressive play and occasional outbursts of violence meant that in the eyes of the public capoeira was still a marginal and dangerous activity.

The growing national and international popularity of capoeira in the 1990s promoted an image of it in Rio as, among others things, a great way to stay in shape and an excellent form of physical education for children. The number of capoeiristas who make a living teaching capoeira today in schools and health clubs has created concern over any venue that might encourage aggressivity that could taint its reputation. As a result, rodas de rua have all but disappeared. Most rodas are held within academies and are open only to students of that group. There are still rodas that are *held* in the street but they are of a very different nature from the street rodas of twenty years ago. This difference is noted by a linguistic differentiation: unlike a roda *de rua* that emerges from and is dependent on the street for its existence, a roda *na rua* is only temporarily staged, or brought, into the street. Rodas *na rua* are sponsored by one group, usually held only

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9 A similar linguistic distinction can be made in terms of street children in Brazil: *menino de rua* is a child who lives permanently on the streets while a *menino na rua* is a child who lives at home but works or
once in a while, perhaps on holidays, or once a week for the duration of a few months. Held because they are enjoyable and give students a chance to play capoeira outside of a class setting, the rodas are also publicity. Often they are staged in the neighborhood in which the mestre or instructor teaches, and fliers are distributed and announcements made to attract new students. These rodas are popular among capoeiristas because they provide an opportunity to perform in front of a wider audience in a public space they might otherwise not occupy. For instance, during my fieldwork, several instructors from a favela hosted a weekly street roda in front of Ipanema beach not far from the health club in which they taught. The other strong attraction of these rodas is the element of unpredictability and possible danger: because they are staged in the street and not in the private space of an academy, any individual might turn up to play. This flirtation with danger approximates what capoeiristas call the old “traditional” street rodas and make them particularly exciting (see Chapter Five).

Even with such attempts as rodas na rua to reconstruct the way in which capoeira used to be practiced and transmitted, today it is all but impossible to exist purely as a “street capoeirista,” or as a capoeirista who does not train with a group but just plays in the street.\(^\text{10}\) This was expressed by a capoeirista in his late 30s I met at a stall in the Mercado Popular in downtown Rio that sells capoeira paraphernalia. Describing himself as a “street capoeirista” he complained that it was becoming harder and harder to find

\(^{10}\) There are street performers who incorporate capoeira into their routines. Sometimes they are or have been in the past affiliated with a group, but may or may not identify as capoeiristas as set out here.
street rodas and so he was considering joining a group so as to have more opportunities to play.

Rivalries and identity politics have always been core aspects of capoeira. In the 19th century rivalries that arose between maltas were an expression of group solidarity, a form of entertainment, and a survival tactic (protecting the exclusive use of scarce resources such as water fountains or clientele for street wares and services). Today rivalries between groups endure for much of the same reasons, albeit with some updates: fostering intra-group competitions solidifies in-group identity, unity and pride; rivalries add excitement and tension to rodas where members of various groups are present, and with the increase in professionalization, groups jockey for teaching venues and publicity. In order to make themselves visibly distinguishable, groups establish and maintain distinct sets of skills, knowledge and rituals. Everything from style of play and pedagogy to how instruments are made, cared for and played, to uniforms and if and how hierarchical ranking should be earned and designated, is contested ground. Among Abadá members, there is even a term -- *saroba* -- which refers to the “bad” habits of other groups. Everything from another group’s style of play, uniforms or berimbaus can be “saroba,” implying sloppiness, a lack of professionalism and being behind the times. ¹¹

How rank is achieved and designated is of particular concern as it dictates how a group is organized and reproduces itself over time. At the very minimum a distinction between students and mestre exists. ¹² Some groups observe “baptisms” and “change of

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¹¹ I was told that the term was put into circulation by a capoeirista in Goiânia, where saroba is slang for a useless, forgotten object in a broom closet. As an example: in Abadá painted berimbaus -- popular among many groups and a hot tourist item -- are considered saroba because the paint supposedly ruins the sound. Abadá berimbaus are varnished only.

¹² I did hear a representative of the Anarchist Federation of Capoeira Angola (FACA) speak at a conference in Campos, SP but was unable to ask him about the organization of the groups in this federation.
cord” ceremonies by which novices are inducted into the group and students incrementally move higher up the ranks. Other groups, most notably of the Capoeira Angola style, oppose these ceremonies as Mestre Bimba’s inventions and an importation from Asian martial arts. Whether or not ceremonies and visual indications such as cords are used, most groups recognize distinct categories of students. These categories often included beginning, intermediate, and “graduated” (graduado) or “formed” (formado) students. In most groups graduados can begin teaching and as their expertise increases their title changes from, for instance, “instructor” to “professor.” One step below a mestre is usually called a contramestre or mestrando and some groups recognize different levels of mestre (see Appendix C for a chart of the two most common graduation systems).

Whether ritually recognized or not, beginning a capoeira apprenticeship involves committing to, and being accepted as, a member of a community of practice. As we saw in the last chapter, this apprenticeship consists not only of learning the physical and musical play of capoeira, but also in a whole array of knowledge and behavior (e.g. rules of the roda, historical anecdotes and life lessons) pertaining to that group. As a novice increases his mastery, moving from the periphery to full participation, his identity as a capoeirista deepens, as do his social ties with other members. Reciprocity is a defining aspect of these social ties, especially if the student wishes to eventually step into the role of teacher. In Abadá, as in many groups, one’s acceptance into the community of practice and entry into an apprenticeship is marked by two rites of passage: the batizado,

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13 I would point out however, that the historical record suggests that, at least in 19th century Rio de Janeiro, initiation rites and hierarchical ranking were an essential aspect of the capoeira street gangs (see Chapter One).
or baptism ceremony, and the giving of a nome de guerra ("war name"), or apelido ("nickname") as it is more widely known.

The Baptism

About a year after Zeca began teaching at the casarão, he announced to his students that preparation for their batizado would begin. Still several months away, the ceremony, Zeca explained, would be a public recognition and celebration of their accomplishments. Each new student would play with an invited Abadá instructor and receive a colored cord. At these words a tremor of excitement courses through the students. Many of them had heard stories about some of the Abadá instructors or met those who lived in the neighborhood, and over the next few months there was much speculation about who would get baptized by whom.

Until the event, Zeca dedicated a part of each class to prepping his students. First they practiced the moment in which they would be baptized and receive their cords: their new nickname would be called and they would go to the foot of the berimbau and briefly kneel and make the sign of the cross or some other blessing if they so desired. They would rise and walk counterclockwise around the inside of the roda while the orchestra played until all the students’ names had been called. Then they would squat in lines on either side of the musicians and one at a time play with an instructor. This game, Zeca warned them, would be their baptism and as such the instructor might knock them to the

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14 Over my years in capoeira I have probably attended and participated in close to 100 batizados of various groups, both in Brazil and the United States. During my fieldwork I attended at least three dozen Abadá batizados and about a dozen batizados of other groups. The batizado described here is a typical Abadá batizado.

15 The children’s cord system mirrors the adult system (see Appendix C) with only the tips of the cord being colored. Whereas with adults (starting with teenagers) color designates time training and ostensibly one’s skill level, with children it is dictated purely by age.
ground. After the game the instructor would tie the doubled over cord around their waist and secure it with a *boca de lobo* (wolf jaw) knot. Eventually, Zeca reminded them, they would have to learn to tie the knot themselves. The children solemnly practiced the ritual, some imitating gestures they had witnessed in older capoeiristas such as touching the ground or the tip of the berimbau before making the sign of the cross.

The children also began to learn and practice *maculêlê* and *puxada de rede*, two folk dances from Bahia that are often performed at batizados. *Maculêlê* is said to have developed among slaves in the sugar cane plantation region of Santo Amaro. Performed to drumming, it is an energetic dance in which two dancers hold wooden sticks or machetes and face each other, striking their “weapons” together on the forth beat. Following Camisa’s suggestion as part of his recycling awareness campaign for that year, Zeca had the youngest children bring in empty liter soda bottles with which they practiced and performed. During the performance the older children would use sticks and the adults, machetes. *Puxada de rede*, a group dance also performed to drumming, emerged among fisherman and mimics the collective rhythmic work of pulling in a heavy fishing net. Zeca also encouraged the children to practice their *samba de roda*, a traditional samba danced by a man and woman in a circle to drums, tambourines, singing and handclapping. Though most of the children could imitate to varying degrees the fast three-count step accompanied by vigorous hip and shoulder shaking, they were shy to enter the roda with a peer of the opposite sex. Zeca teasingly berated them, saying samba was part of *nossa cultura*, (“our culture”) and thus nothing to be ashamed of and something every capoeiristas should know how to do.
Finally, the week of the batizado, Zeca dyed the cords in big pots of boiling clothes dye and made sure that every student had a pair of abadá and a t-shirt that had the group logo on the front and on the back, his name and the date of the batizado. Zeca reminded his students to show up on time that Sunday at the CIEP down the hill, where he had secured the outdoor athletic court for the afternoon. 16 Sunday morning I picked up Daniela, Anderson and Little Ram and we headed over to the CIEP. As we walked Little Ram and Anderson ran ahead excitedly swinging their abadá which, in order to keep them clean until the ceremony, Daniela had neatly folded and tied with the raw cord that was soon to be replaced by one with yellow tips. The court was a bustle of activity with some invited guests already sitting in the bleachers. While many parents, due to work schedules or lack of interest, were not present, most of the younger students had at least one relative or friend in attendance. Some of the older students were hanging a large banner with the Abadá logo, female relatives and friends were setting up a table with fruit, soda and cake, Zeca was setting up microphones and speakers he had borrowed from a friend and, per Zeca’s request, I set up my video camera.

Moments before the designated starting time, instructors and students other than Zeca’s began trickling in. Grumbling that capoeiristas were so irresponsible, always showing up at the last moment, but pleased at the high turnout, Zeca quickly passed out free t-shirts like those worn by his students to all the instructors. The music began and a roda livre (“free roda”) of about thirty minutes allowed students and instructors to warm

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16 Depending on their size, groups will hold batizados once or twice a year, so that just about every weekend it is possible to find at least one, and usually several, capoeira batizados occurring somewhere in Rio. They are usually held in public spaces — schools, samba school rehearsal spaces, civil servant associations, public parks or squares — and can last anywhere from two to six hours depending on the number of participants. They are usually free (unlike in the United States where it is common to sell tickets) and open to the public. Mostly friends and relatives of the participating students and members of other capoeira groups attend.
Eventually Zeca yelled “IÊ!” to end the music and games, and he announced the ceremony would begin. He talked briefly about Mestre Camisa, the mission of Abadá and the significance of a batizado. He thanked Mestre Camisa for guiding him and giving him the opportunity to teach, explaining that though he taught in various schools around the city, it was in the favela, where he was born and raised, that he was most proud of his work.

The batizado began, and as Zeca had promised, the instructors ceremoniously baptized the students by gently knocking them down to the ground. Some employed humorous tactics: pretending to see something over the student’s shoulder, an instructor would make the student look away and in that moment, sweep him up his arms and mime throwing him down, at the last minute gently placing him on the ground. Others, including Little Ram, were treated with a less gentle touch, pushed into the laps of squealing friends sitting in the roda, with a flat-footed shove or head butt. Other students thought they had been spared only to be brought down at the moment in which the instructor gave them their cord, quickly dropping it from their waist to their ankles and giving a yank. As a student received his or her cord, a relative or friend might come down from the audience to snap a picture. The capoeirista who tied the cord around the newly baptized student’s waist was now the student’s padrinho (“godfather”) or madrinha (“godmother”).

What the relationship between a godparent and student entails after completion of the batizado ceremony is somewhat ambiguous. First introduced by Mestre Bimba (see Chapter Two), the god-parenting practice in his academy was largely symbolic: the

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17 Until recently Mestre Camisa used to attend every Abadá batizado in Rio. As the group grew and numbers increased with sometimes three or four batizados in one weekend, this became impossible and so as to avoid jealousy among the instructors he no longer attends any but his own.
designated godparent was usually a godmother, a female relative or girlfriend, and hence a non-capoeirista. Some groups in Rio still observe this method, asking students to chose a female friend or relative to be the godparent who comes up from the audience and ties the cord around their waist. Other groups, however, believe that this fictive kinship tie establishes a bond of protection – a godparent is supposed to watch out for his godchild, helping him out if he gets into trouble in a roda, and therefore must be a capoeirista. While I did frequently witness situations in which members of the same group “had each others’ backs” in a roda (see Chapter Five), I never saw this kind of behavior enacted specifically between a godparent and godchild. Thus, for the most part god-parenting in capoeira, at least today, seems to be little more than a symbolic act at the time of the baptism. Nonetheless, that it is considered an important moment in their transformation of self is evidenced in the fact that most capoeiristas can recall, no matter how distant in the past, who baptized them and how.

After all the students had been baptized, Zeca again stopped the music. Since this was his very first batizado Zeca had only new students, and thus the event was limited to a baptism with no troca de cora (“change of cord”). Had there been more advanced students, at this point they would have played amongst themselves and received their next colored cord. As it was, Zeca preceded to an important aspect of the ceremony: introducing and thanking all of the participating instructors and graduated students. At every batizado I attended in Rio de Janeiro introductions were crucial, the officiating mestre or instructor going to great pains to make sure nobody was overlooked. At events where many groups are present, these introductions would include the mestre (if he were present) and the name of the group. At Abadá events, where usually only Abadá students
are present, introductions included all the instructors and graduados, in this instance forty of them. Zeca invited them to form a line in front of the audience, and then proceeded to introduce each one by nickname, and for those who taught, in which neighborhood they held classes. The roda began again, this time restricted to instructors and graduados, some of whom first performed solos to demonstrate their best moves; for the next forty-five minutes the four distinct rhythms and games were played (see Chapter Three), to the great pleasure of the audience and participants alike. This was followed by the students’ performances of maculêlê and puxada de rede. The event finished with a roda de samba, the audience being encouraged to join in. The fruit, cake and soda were quickly devoured, and word went around that a churrasco (barbeque) would soon begin at someone’s house in the favela. Those who lived nearby went home to shower and change, those who didn’t headed straight up the hill. Meat, beer, dancing, flirting and rehashing of the day’s event flowed late into the night.

Nicknames

Ostensibly given at the batizado to symbolize transformation from an outsider to an insider, nicknames often spontaneously arrive beforehand inspired by an idiosyncrasy of the student. My own experience is illustrative. On my first trip to Brazil in 1995, I was with my teacher Mestre Beiçola, visiting his mestre, Mestre Touro, in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. I took a class with Mestre Touro on the cement patio in front of his house that serves as his academy. Though late in the afternoon, it was the height of summer just before carnival and temperatures were in the 90s. After the class Mestre Touro pointed at my face, bright red from heat and exertion, and chuckling said
“Camarão!” Mestre Beiçola cracked a smile and translating for me said “Shrimp! Now it’s your nickname!” Despite the fact that this became my official nickname, Mestre Touro, Beiçola and the capoeiristas in the Zona Norte that I knew rarely addressed me as Camarão, and then usually in jest.

When I began fieldwork with Abadá everyone wanted to know not my name but my nickname. When I told them, they thought it was exceedingly funny, some explaining that they thought it a “male” nickname: not only is the word camarão masculine, and rather gruff sounding, but the tag so blatantly pokes fun. In contrast, the nicknames of most female capoeiristas in the group my age or younger were pretty sounding words with feminine connotations – e.g. Sereia (Mermaid), Branca de Neve (Snow White), Juma (Panther), Indaé (a bird). One woman who, like me, had a fair complexion that easily blushed, was called Moranguinha (Little Strawberry). If a woman had a boyfriend in capoeira her nickname may be linked to his (e.g. Cafeína (Caffeine) was married to Café and their son was Cafezinho or “Little Coffee”). Some young women, like Daniela, were either never given nicknames or the nicknames never stuck. Almost all the older generation of female capoeiristas in Rio, including the few mestras, are known by their first names.

In contrast, the majority of male capoeiristas have and are known only by their nicknames. Usually bestowed by a mestre or teacher, these nicknames often refer to or poke fun at physical attributes or personality quirks. Some nicknames seem a perfect match: Little Ram’s moniker reflected his strong, stout body and stubborn personality.

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18 In Brazil, it is not common to call a small person a “shrimp” as it is in the U.S. so the irony that I am almost 6 feet tall was lost on Brazilians.
19 However, some capoeiristas, like the famous Mestre Pastinha, are known by their last names and others, for some reason or other were given nicknames that never stuck or are known by already existing childhood nicknames.
Others, however are rather random, having arisen out of a temporary condition or situation: a capoeirista I know from the Zona Norte is saddled, much to his displeasure, with the name Cara Suja (Dirty Face) because on his first day of class as a little boy his face was covered in dirt.\textsuperscript{20}

No physical characteristic -- skin color, facial features, height, weight and even disability -- is off limits, so that a capoeirista with an atrophied arm is called Bracinho (Little Arm); a fat capoeirista is Pesado (Heavy), a deaf capoeirista is Mudo (mute); Afro-Brazilian capoeiristas are called Chocolate, Urubu (Vulture), King Kong, Beiçola (Fat Lip) Pretão (Big Black Guy) and Pretinho (Little Black Guy); white capoeiristas are often known as Russo (Russian) or Galego (a person from Galicia) and capoeiristas with Asian or Amerindian features may be called Sushi, Saki, Peixe Cru (Raw Fish), Eskimo, Índio, Tupi or Pocahontas. To North Americans many of these nicknames come across as quite shocking and politically incorrect. In Brazil, identifying or describing someone by skin color or ethnic features is not considered rude or disrespectful but to the contrary may communicate intimacy or affection. In some instances, epithets have become widespread terms of endearment so that a white husband might call his white wife \textit{minha negrinha} (my “little blackie”).

This is not to say, however, that such labels, no matter how affectionately bestowed or socially acceptable, are free of racist or sexist ideologies.\textsuperscript{21} This is partially revealed in the fact that though nicknaming is a widespread practice in Brazil, cutting

\textsuperscript{20} That students have little say in the choice of their nickname is illustrated by the story of a Russian student who trained with me in New York. He took to wearing a large medallion of a polar bear around his neck during class once he learned that he would at some point receive a nickname. He explained to me that he hoped the instructor would notice this necklace and nickname him after his favorite animal. The teacher picked up on another idiosyncratic detail of his wardrobe instead: the bandana he wore on his bald head and his Russian nationality led her to start calling him Babushka. The nickname stuck.

\textsuperscript{21} Current racial discourse in Brazil is a vastly complicated discussion that I cannot get into here. For recent literature see (Sheriff 2001; Goldstein 2003; Burdick 1998; Twine 1998).
across class, gender and race, types of nickname can vary across social status and context. For example, the term Negão (“big black guy”) is used affectionately between friends but also may be used in a situation of patronage -- a white man in a car may use the term to get the attention of a black man on the street trying to make a living parking cars. Perhaps people were surprised by my nickname because it was out of step with my social standing. This was clearly articulated by the woman who cleaned my house twice a month. Maria, an evangelic Northeastern immigrant in her 40s with whom I became quite close, never could figure out my interest in capoeira, something her rambunctious step-grandsons enjoyed. She was appalled by my nickname and would scold any capoeira friend who came over for calling “a pretty, educated woman” such a thing!

The class “appropriateness” of nicknames were also evident in the names given to students in different learning contexts: while a young capoeirista in a favela might receive a teasing, slightly derogatory nickname such as cabeção, “big head,” in private schools instructors were much more cautious, often drawing on children’s popular culture or even asking the children themselves to choose a name. Even then, parents were prone to get upset: one instructor was reprimanded by a mother for calling her four year old son “Frankenstein Junior” even though the child himself had chosen this name from a popular cartoon character.

Anthropologists have noted that nicknaming practices can reveal much about social order and communal life. In a small Spanish village, for instance, Brandes (1975) notes that nicknames identify people in a context where few first names are in circulation and last names are not known or used; establish and maintain affective ties outside of the family; and re-enforce proper social conduct. Even in a large country, such as Brazil,
where nicknaming is a widespread and diverse practice that takes various forms, it is still possible to observe patterns. The most common form of nicknaming is to alter a first name by shortening it or adding a diminutive: Ronaldo becomes Naldo or Ronaldinho. These nicknames are often received in childhood as a way to distinguish children from a relative or household member with the same name, or to communicate love and affection. Famous people -- movie stars, athletes and politicians -- are also given (or referred to by already existing) nicknames as a way to communicate the public’s affection or infatuation. Nicknames also create an illusion of intimacy and familiarity; hearing about President Lula or soccer player Ronaldinho on the television somehow brings them into the immediacy of one’s living room and social milieu.

Along with public figures such as politicians and soap opera stars, drug dealers in Brazil are also notoriously known by nicknames. For this reason several capoeira mestres told me that they do not use nicknames among their students because of this association with drug traffickers; in the context of favelas where drug trafficking is a visible practice nicknames can communicate marginality rather than respectability (cf Downey 2005: 230 n 7). The connection between the nicknames of criminals and capoeiristas is not completely fortuitous; nomes da guerra, or “war names” as they are officially known, are said to have come into use during the time when capoeira was outlawed as a way to disguise a capoeira’s true identity and protect him from his enemies and the law.

While perhaps at one time disguising “true” identity, nicknames, both in the past and today, also promote and advertise the capoeirista as a public figure. Along with

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22 Brazilians compulsively use diminutives: everything from one’s hand, to a cup of coffee, to a night out on the town can become “little.” This practice often strike non-Brazilians as rather amusing and endearing.
symbolizing a novice’s completion of the rite of passage of the batizado and establishing social ties into the community of practice and surrogate family, nicknames advertise identity to a larger public. And they confer individuality: while the same nicknames appear in different groups -- certain ones, such as Borracha (Rubber), are particularly popular -- within one group once a nickname has been given it will not re-appear.23 Furthermore, the nicknames of famous contemporary or historic capoeiristas are off limits -- I know of no young Bimbas, Pastinhas, Besouro Mangangás or Camisas.

In the case of the Spanish village presented by Brandes, nicknames -- often recycled and used for several members of the same family -- are mainly external identifiers; villagers tended not to self-identify with their nicknames, rarely using them to introduce themselves. In contrast, in the capoeira world, nicknames emphasize uniqueness and individuality (over mere identification) and often become integral to a capoeirista’s own conception of self. Capoeiristas are known by their nicknames not only in the capoeira arena but often in other social domains as well. I learned to discern how salient the capoeira identity was to an individual by how comfortable he or she was being known by his or her nickname in other contexts -- on the street, at non-capoeira jobs and at home. Of course others also have to comply with calling them by their nicknames. I found that children, spouses, co-workers and bosses often did. Mothers seem to be the only people consistently resistant to calling their sons by their nicknames, indicative of either their dislike of the teasing, derogatory implications of the nickname, or of their disapproval of their son’s involvement in capoeira (see Chapter Two). The fact that I had

23 Even if a capoeirista leaves the group or stops training and especially if he is fondly or negatively remembered, his nickname will not be recycled. Family members who all play capoeira may be given variations of the same nickname; i.e Mestre Perna, an extremely long-legged capoeirista has an equally tall son named Perninha (little leg); and Mestre Camisa is from a family of 5 brothers who all played capoeira and all had nicknames on the variation of “shirt.”
all but forgotten Little Ram’s given name after a few months suggests that he was well on
his way to self-identifying and being known predominantly by his nickname; his mother
however, who disliked his involvement in capoeira, never used it.

Besides conferring individuality and solidifying identity, nicknames in capoeira
can communicate certain codes of conduct and values of the practice. Two popular
nicknames, Zumbi (the famous African warrior king of the 17th century quilombo of
Palamares) and Jinga (also known as Nzingha, a 17th century African warrior princess
from the Angola region) communicate Afro-Brazilian pride and the value of being a
warrior. But, as noted above, as often as not, nicknames are humorous and deprecating
rather than regal. Teasing, I came to realize, was a central aspect of socializing among
the capoeiristas. I sometimes wondered if nicknames that poke fun also re-enforced the
lessons learned in the roda, that life is never fair but always treacherous, and social agents
untrustworthy and full of ill intent.24 The fact that teasing nicknames that bordered on
the derogatory were not common among female students is, I believe, evidence that
women have not completely been accepted into the “boy’s club” of capoeira. Restricted
by social norms of femininity, and uncomfortable with a teasing relationship, teachers
endow female students with nicknames with feminine or neutral connotations or simply
continue to use their real names. Nicknaming practices in capoeira in general may be
shifting away from teasing, derogatory labels as it increasingly becomes internationalized
and professionalized.

24 In a similar vein, Downey suggests “hard jokes,” another form of teasing he witnessed among male
capoeirista in which, for instance, they “accidentally” tripped or knocked each other over while changing
clothes, were lessons in being cautiously aware of the ill intent of others (Downey 2005: 156-157).
Uniforms

Once integrated into a group, a capoeirista is usually expected to wear a uniform. In most groups uniforms, consisting of long, loose fitting or stretchy pants and t-shirts displaying the group name and logo, are worn for training, batizados and presentations. Groups like Abadá that follow the Bimba’s Regional style, use all white uniforms and a colored cord, and play barefoot. Most Capoeira Angola groups wear shoes (light weight sneakers, loafers or sandals) and wear all white, or black pants with yellow shirts. Like nicknames, uniforms are a marker of identity: within groups that observe varying levels of graduation, the colored cord is a visible indication of rank, and among groups, uniforms indicate group affiliation. At batizados or events where members of different groups are present, students are often required to display their group logo and rank. As explained by several mestres, this helps keep the roda under control as they can tell the level of those present, and identify any student who causes problems.

Within the supposed meritocracy of the capoeira group, uniforms override other identities (imposing uniformity) and rank becomes the only distinguisher. But uniforms also indicate identity as a capoeirista in the larger social arena, and here experience varies significantly across context, social class, gender and ethnicity. The following stories illustrate some of the various ways capoeiristas strategically deploy their uniforms. For Little Ram, his capoeira uniform was a badge of honor: from a moleque playing in the street wearing nothing but a swimsuit, he became a young boy with a set of clothes, a title

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25 Black and yellow were the colors used in Mestre Pastinha’s academy, as they were the colors of his favorite soccer team.
26 Downey notes that the mestre of a Capoeira Angola group in Bahia forbade his students from wearing their uniforms or otherwise displaying the group logo outside of the academy. He explained that this was for their own protection from attacks by members of rival groups and from what he perceived as the continued social stigma attached to capoeira (2005: 158).
and a talent. When Zeca’s classes began to be sponsored by an NGO (discussed below), and he was able to have abadá made for all the students, he told them that as a sign of respect to themselves and capoeira they must keep their uniform clean and well cared for. Zeca explained to me that he hoped this would involve the parents too, encouraging them to be proud of their child’s commitment to capoeira. When one mother failed to care for her son’s uniform, Zeca arranged for a neighbor to keep the uniform, washing and ironing it after each class. His tactic apparently work: when the child’s mother learned of the arrangement she came and apologized to Zeca, telling him she was ashamed and would try harder.

I observed this emphasis on clean, well cared-for uniforms among many small, poor capoeira groups throughout Rio. Mestres would scrape together what little money they had to produce elaborately silk-screened shirts for their students. In part an advertisement for their group, these shirts also convey respectability — a sign that the student is not a vagabundo, or “good-for-nothing,” but part of a social organization that demands hard work and discipline. In contrast, among certain Capoeira Angola groups in the Zona Sul, which were made up predominantly of middle class university students, an unkempt appearance was often cultivated: baggy pants held up by a bit of string, t-shirts full of holes, worn out tennis shoes, perhaps outwards signs of a bohemian politics and lifestyle, which may have attracted them to the Angola style in the first place. Many of these students expressed disdain for the “militarized” look of other groups. Whatever their reason for adopting a ragged style, their social class and the contexts in which they moved did not necessitate outward signs to disassociate them from “bums” or “criminals.”

27 Moleque, glossed as “urchin,” is a rather derogatory label most often applied to street children
For those practitioners who do deploy the capoeira uniform as a sign of respectability, it becomes not only a badge of honor but also a coat of armor. Among other things, it may protect from the ruthless, arbitrary violations of the police. Top explained this to me through a narrative of a traumatic experience from his adolescence growing up in a favela that had heavy drug activity and strong police presence. One day while with friends in the street, some policemen passed and told them to go home as there was going to be trouble. Ignoring the warning, Top and his friends stayed where they were, and moments later heard gunshots; the policemen returned, carrying the still warm corpses of two boys. Angered that Top and his friends had not heeded their instructions, they made them carry the bodies the rest of the way down the hill. Top will never forget the experience, crying and covered in blood, the heavy feet of the dead body of a young kid slipping from his grasp. After receiving his first capoeira uniform, Top told me, he made sure to keep the uniform on as he returned to the favela late at night after training. This way, if there were a stationed police check that night he would not be harassed or searched. To the contrary, the policemen would often stop him to chat, asking about capoeira, and when hearing he was a student of Camisa’s nod their heads in admiration and approval.

While Top strategically deploys his uniforms for protection from violence by those within the law, other capoeiristas deploy them for protection from those outside of the law. A white, female student who described her family as having fallen from the upper to middle class, explained her reason for wearing her uniform home late at night. She told me as we were leaving the CIEP one night that she felt more secure in her uniform; that it is protection from being mugged or attacked on the way home. Rather
incredulous, I asked whether she really believed her status as a capoeirista would intimidate an attacker. “No, Camarão!” she said pointing to her baggy, dirty uniform, flip-flops and make-up free face, “it’s because I am so unappealing and it is obvious I have no money with me besides my bus fare!”

Another story that draws on the attractiveness of the capoeira uniform is one Camisa loves to tell: a group of foreign Abadá students visiting Rio were almost mugged from behind late one night. When their attackers saw the Abadá logo on the front of their shirts, however, they changed their minds, shaking their hands and welcoming them to Rio. A capoeira mestre from the Zona Norte told me a similar story of having his car break down late one night in a deserted area of downtown Rio de Janeiro as he was returning home from teaching class. A group of young men approached with intentions to rob him but when they saw his uniform and discovered he was a mestre, instead offered to help push his car.

For capoeira to become integral to an individual’s sense of self takes more than a nickname and uniform; it also involves establishing and maintaining relationships. While I heard many such stories like the above ones that allege the protective powers of a uniform to convey identity to threatening strangers, more often stories revolved around established social ties through the capoeira network. Another story Camisa repeatedly tells is about having his car stolen from outside his house when he lived at the mouth of a large favela in which he taught capoeira. He complained to some friends in the favela and shortly thereafter his car was returned with apologies that the thieves did not know to whom the car belonged. A similar story was told to me by a middle class white woman

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28 Another young female student from Ipanema was not so lucky. On her way to the aulão one month she was mugged by a group of kids near the entrance of a favela. They stole her t-shirt and cord (and would have stolen her abadá if she had not pleaded with them), jeeringly telling her that Abadá was a bad group.
in her 30s who used to train and teach with Abadá: while stopped at a red light in
Copacabana her car was approached by a group of youth. One of them shoved a gun
through the window and into her face and then quickly lowered it when he recognized
her, saying “desculpa tia” (“Sorry, auntie”) and called off the highjack. The youth had
been a student of hers when she had taught capoeira at a project for street children.

The protective ties described in the above anecdotes begin with establishing social
relationships within the group. Beyond the arduous task of learning to play capoeira
students must embrace their place in a web of social relations that circulate around ties of
hierarchy, loyalty and reciprocity. High attrition rates -- most groups are bottom heavy
with beginners -- suggest that the physical and emotional challenges of commitment are
not always easy. Often the most contentious and problematic relationship is with the
person who occupies the central position in the social web -- the mestre.

THE “TOUGH LOVE” OF A MESTRE

Menino quem foi teu mestre
Boy, who was your master?
Teu mestre foi Salomão
Your master was Salomão
Que andava com o pé pra cima
Who walked with his feet in the air
A cabeça no chao
And his head on the ground
Ensina capoeira
Who taught capoeira
Com a palmatória na mão
With a switch in his hand
- public domain (Sete Bola 1989)

At the end of my first class at the CIEP I watched as Mestre Camisa demonstrated
a move over and over again on a student. He had given us a partner exercise consisting
of kicks and rasteiras or “sweeps.” When delivered with perfect technique and timing, a
rasteira will easily lift an opponent into the air and bring him crashing to the ground.

29 Tio/a, “uncle” or “auntie” is a title used by children to convey respect and affection for an adult.
Mestre Camisa was frustrated watching our ineffective training -- nobody was falling. Shouting for everyone to stop and watch, he grabbed one of his top male students -- a twenty year old who trained with intensity and commanded incredible speed and strength -- and told him to deliver a kick. Without a moment’s hesitation the student threw a fast kick and suddenly found himself on the ground: with perfect elegance Camisa had delivered a rasteira. Without giving him a chance to catch his breath Camisa shouted at the student to get on his feet and throw a different kick. The student, already dripping sweat and dirt from the two hours of training, responded immediately with enthusiasm, again and again. Each time, though he knew the sweep was coming, the student delivered his kick with full speed and force and each time Camisa brought him down with a sweep. Not always successful in catching his fall with bent arms, each time the student landed heavily on the ground a collective groan arose from the other students.

Encouraged by the reaction and the student’s own unflinching smile, Camisa kept going, eventually stopping and telling us “now that is the kind of training I want to see.”

The roughness of this lesson was pedagogical on several levels. First and most visibly, Camisa was demonstrating an effective rasteira and reminding us of the kind of training he expected; it is often tempting, especially at the end of a long class, to slack off. Camisa would often shout out encouragements to keep up flagging energy.

Furthermore, he would admonish us that to fail to attack or counterattack with full force and intent was not only ineffective but dangerous, as it would ill-prepare us for real situations. Secondly and more subtly, Camisa was demonstrating the beauty and power of capoeira and his own effectiveness as a capoeirista. Here was a strong swift man, thirty years younger, who still could not touch Camisa with his powerful kick. Lastly and
more hidden, a different lesson may have been geared towards the student Camisa chose for the demonstration. Though I did not know it at the time, the student was an aggressive player, prone to losing his temper in the roda. Camisa may have simply chosen him because his strong, fast kicks would best highlight the efficiency of the rasteira and Camisa’s own effectiveness as a capoeirista, or he may have been punishing or testing the student. Whether this was the case or not in this situation, over the course of my fieldwork I witnessed many disciplining tactics by Camisa and other mestres and instructors that were pointedly rough in delivery and which I came to understand as a type of “tough love.”

In her discussion of childrearing techniques in a favela, Goldstein describes a “tough ethics of care” (Goldstein 1998; 2003). Harsh discipline, including verbal and physical abuse and even expulsion from the home, might appear to some caregivers as the only option for keeping a child from falling into a life of crime or laziness and apathy. In a survivalist environment these tactics, while perhaps not entirely effective, are born not from a rejection of a child but to the contrary, from an intense “holding on” (1998: 411). Thus, Goldstein observes, a home can be “a revolving door of extended family through which…blood and fictive kin and the hungry can find shelter and be informally adopted and cared for..[and]..from which one can all too easily be thrown out for a minor infraction” (2003: 171).30

On numerous occasions I was privy to disciplining tactics similar to a “tough ethics of care” in capoeira groups. A mestre or instructor might stop a class or roda and berate the entire group or an individual for inappropriate conduct. Anything from failing

30 For a discussion of the wide acceptance across class of corporal punishment of children by family members in Brazil see Caldeira (2000).
to follow training instructions, to arriving late to an event, to “bringing a bad name to the group” because of aggressiveness or poor conduct at other groups’ rodas could provoke verbal humiliation or physical punishment in the roda. Extreme infractions could result in expulsion from a group. Individuals singled out for the harshest type of public humiliation or physical punishment were almost always lower class, male students in their teens or early twenties. Such treatment was brought on by conduct perceived as lazy, criminal or aggressive. I watched as students hung their heads and silently accepted being called a vagabundo (bum), burro (idiot) or marginal (criminal). A sixteen year old boy from a small group in the Zona Norte was temporarily suspended from capoeira class when word got back to his mestre that he had been regularly attending funk dance parties on the weekend in order to fight.31 Another sixteen year old who trained in a small group in a favela showed up one day with a black eye. I asked him what had happened he told me his instructor had played roughly with him in the roda the day before. I queried the instructor who explained that he had punished the boy for stealing.

When I questioned instructors and students who were on the giving or receiving end of this type of discipline they would shrug their shoulders and say, “it’s normal” and that certain individuals “deserved it.” When I suggested the discipline could be administered differently -- in private conversation rather than public humiliation and physical punishment -- they would shake their heads and say such tactics would not work. They insisted that capoeiristas must have self-control and self-respect and that sometimes the only way to drive this home is to physically intimidate them, humiliate

31 In the 1990s bailes de corridor were popular in some favelas in which warring gangs of funkeiros called bondes would line up on either side of the dance floor and enter a “corridor” to fight and try to drag members across to the other side (cf Herschmann 2000).
them or bar them from doing what they love best. As expressed by Mestre Ox, who grew up on the streets and has a small group in the Zona Norte:

I punish my students. Do you know what the punishment is? Not to train capoeira for one or two years. Capoeiristas must be disciplined. Do you know why? Because I am teaching them to be fighters, warriors. If I’m not able to control them, who will? So all of my students must have self-control, they must be capable of stopping and stop. So the most important thing is discipline. If the military does not prepare soldiers, “Bang, bang bang!” they kill. It is the same thing. Fighters. If I prepare them to kill and later they attack me and I don’t have control to make them stop? They must obey the mestre. They must have discipline.

This quote reveals a crucial difference between a mestre’s tough love and a mother’s tough love as described by Goldstein. Goldstein argues that a mother’s tough ethics of care is in large part to train her children for a life of subservience. She wants to prepare her children to follow in her footsteps by learning to accept their position in Brazilian society where the only “honest” and “decent” jobs available to them are ones of service to the upper classes. She hopes to steer her children away from resisting their lot in life because the only act of resistance she sees in the favela is “dropping out” of the system through crime, drug addiction, alcoholism or laziness. While Mestre Ox certainly expects obedience to him, he does not necessarily expect his students to take a subservient posture to society at large; he expects to train warriors, not servants. This distinction is most clear in the paradoxical code of the ethics of these warriors that simultaneously values loyalty and betrayal, obedience and rebellion. This paradox allows capoeiristas to keep one foot in the “street” and one foot in the “house”: while feeling the protection and familiarity of the mestre and group, maintained through loyalty and obedience, they simultaneously hold onto a sense of pride and autonomy through acts of rebellion.
THE WARRIOR’S CODE: LOYALTY AND BETRAYAL

Capoeira demands a certain mysticism, loyalty to fellow players, and absolute obedience to the rules that direct it

- Mestre Pastinha

The law of the capoeirista is betrayal

- Mestre Traíra (quoted in Downey 2005: 230)

Perhaps these statements by two of capoeira’s most famous mestres are not as contradictory as they first appear. If, according to Mestre Pastinha, capoeira demands absolute obedience to the rules that govern it, and if the first of these rules is betrayal, then to be loyal to one’s fellow players is in fact to betray them. This paradox is played out both in the code of ethics of malícia in the roda (see Chapter Three) and in the social organization and reproduction of the capoeira group. Upon receiving his first cord, a student enters a web of social relationships shaped by hierarchy, loyalty and reciprocity. As a student moves up the hierarchy his prestige, as well as his obligations and responsibilities, increase. The elaborate ritual of introduction I witnessed at every batizado is not simply a formality but an essential means of establishing and maintaining status, and creating a web of reciprocity. Hosts will take great pains to make sure everyone deserving an introduction receives one, even stopping the ceremony to present someone who arrived late or was overlooked during the formal introductions. Some mestres also give out certificates, medals or ribbons to members of other groups who participate in their events.

32 “A Capoeira exige um certo misticismo, lealdade com os companheiros de ‘jogo’ e obediência absoluto às regras que o presidem” (1964: 35).
33 Traíra is a variant on traidor or traitor.
34 This is evidenced by the fact that the host will take great pains to make sure everyone deserving an introduction receives one, even stopping the ceremony to introduce someone who has just arrived or was overlooked during the formal introductions. Some mestres also give out certificates, medals or ribbons to members of other groups who participate in their events.
Usually for an event to be successful and enjoyable for the participating students, visiting capoeiristas, and the audience -- it is essential that mestres from other groups be present, or in the case of Abadá, many instructors and graduados. These more experienced capoeiristas may help with the event (for instance “baptizing” students), but more importantly they confer prestige on the hosting capoeirista: a large crowd displays that a mestre or instructor is liked, his work supported, and his events enjoyable. Many instructors and mestres will host a party with beer and churrasco (barbeque) after the event in order to further his reputation as a good host. Having many guests, however, also establishes a bond of reciprocity: the hosting mestre or instructor will then be expected to attend his guests’ events, thereby returning the favor. Of course those guests, now turned hosts, will be expected to return in kind an enjoyable experience, including a party afterwards.

According to DaMatta (1991), in Brazil reciprocity is one of the things that distinguish a person from an individual: a person is beholden to others through ties of favor-giving; an individual is not and thus is dependent on the untrustworthy, corruption-riddled law and bureaucracy. In her study of morality in Rio de Janeiro, Mello e Souza suggests that the centrality of dependency in social relations and the practice of jeitinho (“little favor”) constitute a moral code by which power and agency function: “…privilege and material gains can only be achieved by adhering to the rules of the game: reciprocity in granting favors. Moral obligation in such relationships is based on the value of loyalty, a value which serves self interest at least as much if not more than the group's interest.” (1993: 8).
Many practitioners of capoeira expressed allegiance to just such a moral and ethical code that centers on the value of loyalty, but a loyalty that ultimately serves oneself. As expressed by one mestre of a Capoeira Angola group in the Zona Sul when asked what he thought was the most important thing he could transmit to the students:

Loyalty. In any relationship, whatever it is, you need to be loyal. If I can motivate that feeling in each of my students, I will be satisfied. I believe it has to be a loyalty that is not just students for their mestre. It also has to be the mestre for his students. It is not a unilateral thing. It has to be an exchange.

Yet he then goes on to suggest that ultimately a capoeirista’s loyalty is to capoeira itself, transcending loyalties to any one person or group: “I am talking about a much broader loyalty. You must be loyal to the teachings of capoeira. You have to be loyal to her principles. You have to be loyal to her history.” And he, like many capoeiristas, claim that malandragem is the defining principle and ethos of capoeira: “maldandragem and malícia are the center of capoeira. Capoeira without malícia and malandragem is not capoeira. It is just movement.” As we saw in Chapter Three, maldandragem is the art of self-preservation at all costs, even betrayal. If a capoeirista is thus to stay loyal to the principles of capoeira, he might have to eventually break the ties of loyalty to his group and mestre.

This contradictory code of ethics creates a tension between being a student (bound by ties of reciprocity and loyalty) and being a capoeirista (bound by rules of self-preservation and autonomy). In other words, the best students will not always become the best capoeiristas, nor do the best capoeiristas make the best students. Mestre Ox expressed this contradiction when he insisted his students follow his dictates yet claimed
“a capoeirista does not accept the rules of his master because a capoeirista is free!”

Capoeiristas often pride themselves on personal acts of rebellion that ensure their freedom and autonomy: they might excuse their propensity for being late to appointments as “not being slaves to the clock”; their career choice of teaching capoeira as a desire to “not work for ‘the man’”; or their inability to remain faithful to one woman as their need to be without a tether. For some, the ultimate act of rebellion is against the mestre. This rebellion often leads to a conflict resulting in a voluntary or forced break from the group. An expelled student can either give up training capoeira (and some do, saying that even though they disagree with their mestre they are too “loyal” to him to train with anyone else), join another group, or form their own group. Anthropologists in Brazil have observed that in practices that are not inserted into the formal social structure and are not bureaucratized -- e.g., certain religions -- conflict is an important means of reproduction (Brown 1992; Maggie 1975). Even when the conflict is not the source of separation some groups adhere to a philosophy of division. Mestre Ox explains:

I don’t let them [students he gives the title of mestre to] use the name [of his group] because they have to do their own work and not use mine. The boss (dono) of my group is me. Each student has to form his own group in order for me to be proud, to be happy. That means I have really taught and he has really learned. It’s that old story: I don’t give him fish, I give him a rod to fish with. I teach my student to fish so he isn’t spending his whole life working for me.

Rather than mere reproduction of his own group, Mestre Ox wants to see capoeira grow and diversify through his students. Sounding like a progressive educator, Bull expresses his desire to see his students not simply acquire knowledge but develop skills: with the analogy of the fishing rod he suggests that rather creating dependency he develops self-reliance. Of course, this philosophy is also driven by a desire to stay in control; as he

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35 A similar claim was made at the Third National Capoeira Congress when capoeristas began a second “unofficial” roda to the cries of “capoeira is freedom!” (see Introduction).
later explained to me, he does not want to be responsible by association (i.e. group name) for any problems or damaged reputations his students-cum-mestres might experience. Nonetheless similar to his view on disciplining, Mestre Bull’s teaching philosophy revolves around preparing his students not for a life of subservience working for others, but as autonomous warriors working for themselves.

Ironically, despite the embedded masculinity of the capoeira identity and mestre/student relationship, the one individual at the CIEP whom I repeatedly heard called a guerreira or “warrior,” was not a young man but a woman. I use her story as an entry into a discussion of some of the difficulties facing women in capoeira.

**WOMEN WARRIORS**

During my fieldwork in Rio, the breakdown of gender within Abadá was as follows: the two grandes mestres and three mestres are men; of the 9 current mestrandos (one step below mestre) two are women and both live and teach in the United States; of the 23 professores/instrutores (highest ranking cords before moving up to mestrando) in Rio 4 were women; of the 30 or so graduados (graduated students) who teach, 6 were women. Of the close to 100 graduated students who do not teach (are not yet qualified or are not interested) maybe a dozen were women. It is no surprise, then, that I immediately noticed Raven at the CIEP. Not only was she one of the two female instructors who regularly trained with Mestre Camisa, but she was also one of only two extremely dark-skinned Afro-Brazilian women at the CIEP.
Though usually showing up late, the short, powerfully built 37-year old Raven would be at class at least twice a week, often accompanied by her 6-year-old son, Little Raven. Unlike most of the other instructors who had made a point of introducing themselves and inviting me to visit their classes and who always greeted me with a handshake or pat on the back when I arrived, for the first few months I had few interactions with Raven. She would greet me with a curt nod of the head only after I had greeted her, and she never suggested we pair up to train together.

Intrigued and a little intimidated, I asked other students about Raven. Their most immediate response was, “ela é guerreira” (“she’s a warrior”). When I asked what they meant they would go on to say “é favelada, suburbana, pobre, velha, negra, mãe solteira mas batalha mesma” (“she lives in a favela, is from the subúrbios, is poor, old, black, a single mother, but she fights just the same”). In other words, despite all odds against her Raven had not given up the struggle or let the hardships of life defeat her. She has not taken the path of least resistance for a woman who embodies a nexus of identities that place her at the lowest rung of Brazilian society. After spending her youth working in factories and service jobs, with encouragement from Mestre Camisa, Raven returned to school. Having received her high school diploma by attending night school, she was currently working towards a B.A. in physical education. She worked fulltime as a capoeira instructor, teaching in a private school and health club and giving free classes in the favela where she lived in the Baixada Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro’s poorest municipality with the highest index of criminal and police violence.

When I eventually asked Raven if I might visit her class in the favela and do an interview, her demeanor changed immediately. Her initial surprise quickly turned to
deep pleasure and with a smile and almost girlish giggle she said, “Me? You want to interview me? You are going to come all the way out to the Baixada to visit me?” With lingering disbelief Raven greeted me at the door of her home on the following Sunday. It had been a three bus, two and a half hour trip from the South Zone, a journey Raven made two or three times a week to train with Mestre Camisa. My hostess ushered me through a gate to a tiny courtyard with an outdoor kitchen around which clustered several barracos (huts). As we entered her home she gave me the apology I often heard from inhabitants of similar dwellings that, “está em obra” (“it is under construction”). The two rooms, made of cinder blocks, had no doors and only a few pieces of dilapidated furniture. She introduced me to her mother and to Little Raven’s teenage half brother (same father, different mother) who lived with them. Raven insisted that we conduct the interview in her sister’s house behind her own because, with tiled floors and doors, she said it was more comfortable and presentable to guests. We sat on the floor in the bedroom with our backs against the bunk beds in which her sister, brother-in-law and their children slept. Her brother-in-law discreetly kept us supplied with snacks and soda throughout the two-hour interview, during which Raven openly, eagerly and often with great emotion, expressed her experiences and opinions. I quote the interview at length because her words best capture the gender and sexual politics at play in capoeira.

K: How did capoeira enter your life?

R: I started capoeira like this: I was young. I was 13 years old and it was here in this neighborhood where I lived. There used to be a samba school that doesn’t exist anymore and there was a mestre who gave classes there. I used to always go with my girlfriends to watch and there was a day that we decided to start training but I didn’t have any way to pay because my mother raised four children alone. My father died when we were really little and my mother didn’t have any way to pay. So I always watched. First I went just to check out the cute guys (gatinhos) [chuckles]. But the mestre would always watch me, and one day he asked if I
wanted to do capoeira. And after he offered to let me train I started to get interested and I started to do it. My mother didn’t want me to do it; she used to grab the broom handle and want to hit me.

K: why didn’t she want you to do capoeira?

R: Because she worked and I stayed at home taking care of my brothers. So she was scared that something would happen to me. She didn’t have any way to look after me. And capoeira was a guy thing (coisa de homem). At that time there were few girls. So she was scared, do you understand? But I kept going, and going and I ended up identifying with it and I am still here today with 25 years of capoeira.

K: What do you mean you identified with it?

R: Why did I identify with it? Because, you know, we who are of the lower classes, we who are poor don’t have a lot of options, we don’t have a lot of things. So capoeira is a sport that is much easier for you to do because it is not something from an affluent area (lugar luxuoso), understand? You can do it anywhere, any place in the Baixada, in the suburbíos, anywhere in Brazil, in any out-of-the-way corner, you can find capoeira. So capoeira became a pastime (diversão) for me. I didn’t have anything. I didn’t have a father, my mother worked, so it became a recreation for me. I kept going and I ended up really liking it, I identified with it, do you understand? I saw that it was exactly what I wanted to do because generally you do something because it grabs your attention. You start because it is exciting but with time you see that you really like it. Ten girls started with me but I am the only one who stayed.

K: Why do you think you were the only girl who stayed?

R: It is a hard thing to explain. It’s like I said, it’s something that comes from inside you, understand? I identified with it, I liked it and I did it for pleasure. It wasn’t something that I started because everyone else did. I started because I wanted to learn. When you do something because you like it, you end up getting more out of it.

K: Do you think it is more difficult for girls and women to stick with capoeira even when they really like it?

R: I think so. At the time that I started capoeira there were hardly any women. The group I started with, women, men, children were all the same. You got beat up, the game was really rough (o jogo era para dentro mesmo). Every day I arrived home with swollen shins, it was punches (porradas), hard play (jogo duro) the whole time, understand? And there was always that preconception, that capoeira wasn’t something for women, that women should do jazz or ballet, dance. At that time it was weird [for women to play capoeira]; only dykes
(sapateiros) did. Some people thought I was a lesbian because I did capoeira and did not have a boyfriend. There were lots of barriers. And there still are today, only today women have overcome more. If you take a look today you will see that there are more women than men in capoeira. But women have a problem with getting pregnant, or their boyfriend doesn’t let them [train] or if she meets her boyfriend in capoeira after awhile the guy wants her at home taking care of things and doesn’t want her to go to capoeira, or on the other hand if the guy doesn’t do capoeira he thinks she doesn’t have any time for him, understand? Or the woman gets pregnant and doesn’t have time to train because she has to take care of her son. It’s lots of things. There are lots of barriers that thank god I have managed to overcome.

Raven’s childhood was shaped by the same constraints of racism and poverty as that of her male counterparts. In similar language to Osprey, she described capoeira as one of the few organized leisure activities available to her, though at first she did not realize this. She assumed capoeira was a purely masculine activity, and so stuck to the role of watching and admiring the gatinhos (literally, “little cats” or cute guys) from afar. When the mestre broke the barrier and invited her to train, she found resistance at home. Unlike boys growing up in the favela who are given more free time to play in the streets, girls are expected to fulfill the feminine role of housechores and childcare. Raven persisted despite her mother’s badgering, only to run up against larger societal stereotypes: unless they are homosexual and thus categorically men, women are not supposed to engage in masculine activities that detract from their proper feminine roles, in particular, being subservient to and taking care of the men in their lives.

The preconceptions that women are naturally feminine and subservient to men play out in various ways in the capoeira arena. First, for many young women initial access to capoeira is only possible through a male figure in their lives. Today this figure may be a brother, friend or even a son. For example, Daniela became involved with capoeira via Little Ram and Anderson who were essentially her filhos de criação
(children she raised); and as Zeca’s classes progressed, some of the young mothers of his students began taking the teen and adult class. For many female capoeiristas however, especially those who began training at a time or in a place where there were few female students, access often came through a sexual relationship. In these situations, the stakes are higher.

**Sexual Politics**

I met Gabriela, a white, working class woman with a high school education from the Zona Norte, in 1996 when she was 23 years old and had been training capoeira for several years. Gabriela first saw capoeira while visiting family in Bahia, and though she thought it beautiful never imagined she could learn to do it. Her thinking changed when she started dating a capoeira mestre from a favela in her neighborhood. She became his student, group “manager,” and eventually his wife. I lived with Gabriela and her parents and siblings for several months, during which time her still relatively new boyfriend was never allowed in the house. Gabriela’s father was disappointed in his daughter’s choice of a partner, fearful that he would live up to the reputation of capoeiristas as “good-for-nothing womanizers” and hurt his daughter.

Her father’s fears were apparently premonitions. When I reconnected with Gabriela in 2004 she had recently separated from her husband and was living alone with their young son. When I asked about the separation she said it was because of his womanizing. She had suspected for a while that he was unfaithful, but since it never came to her attention or affected her family, she did nothing about it, explaining to me “*rua é rua, casa é casa.*” (“the street is the street, the house is the house”). But when he
got sexually involved with one of his students and everyone in capoeira knew about it, his infidelity had entered the domain of the “house” and she left him. Since then she had not trained. When I suggested that she train with another group she said she would not want to exacerbate already existing rivalries as her ex-husband and his students would certainly cause problems with any group she joined. Besides, she added after reflection, it would feel disloyal to her style of capoeira to train with another group.

I heard numerous stories that mirrored Gabriela’s: young women and girls who had either voluntarily or involuntarily abandoned capoeira after a sexual relationship within the group soured. One woman told me that after dating and eventually living with another higher ranked student in her group for several years she discovered that he had been cheating on her with his former girlfriend the whole time. In retaliation she cheated on him with someone else in the group. Word got back to the mestre who confronted her. Calling her a slut he chastised her not only showing disrespect her boyfriend but also for damaging the reputation of a student higher up in the group hierarchy. He told her she was no longer welcome to train with him.

These incidents illustrate a double standard that exists not only in the capoeira arena but also in the larger Brazilian society: unfaithful women are piranhas (literally man-eating fish) or sluts, whereas a man who is being unfaithful proves his sexual voraciousness and thus bolsters his masculinity. For male capoeiristas (whether they have many sexual partners or not) promiscuity is encouraged as a positive aspect of their identity. Qualities of male sexual virility, promiscuity and independence are evident in the lyrics of “traditional” capoeira songs, many of which are not exclusive to the capoeira arena and so suggest that these are also valued in other domains of Brazilian life. In these
songs women appear to admire and to satisfy the sexual appetites of male capoeiristas: the popular song “me leva morena, me leva, me leva pra seu bangalô” (“take me dark girl, take me to your bungalow”) speaks for itself; and the song with the chorus “conta minha mulher que capoeira me venceu” (“Go tell my wife that capoeira beat me”) suggests that a woman, even a wife, will always play second fiddle to a capoeirista’s first love, capoeira.

Women also appear in capoeira songs as a trope in a cautionary message: they are portrayed as weak, submissive, jealous, possessive, conniving, nagging and whiney, all qualities that are anathema to a male capoeirista. The song with the chorus “eu sou homem, não sou mulher” (“I am a man, not a woman”) is sung to taunt a player thought to be showing any of these qualities in the roda. Lewis (1992: 95) describes a roda in which a capoeirista broke off a game in disgust with his opponent’s attempts to grab and hold him with wrestling moves, and sang the following song to reprimand his opponent for playing like a grabbing, nagging woman:

\[ \text{Dona Alice não me pegue não.} \quad \text{Dona Alice don’t get me, no} \\
\text{Não me pegue, não me agarre,} \quad \text{Don’t clutch me, don’t grasp me} \\
\text{Não me pegue não} \quad \text{Don’t get me no!} \]

This song also carries a warning that while a strong sexual appetite is admirable and desirable, entrapment by the opposite sex is not. While cunning and betrayal are essential components of malandragem and thus of capoeira, a female who displays these qualities, especially when trying to secure her man, is given the derogatory label of snake (cobra). One advanced female student who had fallen out of favor with her mestre for standing up

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36 Another popular way to taunt a player is to suggest he is being childish by singing: Chora menino, o menino chorou. É porque não mamou, menino chorão. Hên, hên, hên (“Cry baby, the baby cried. It’s because he didn’t nurse, cry baby.”), or “Cala a boca, moleque, olha tu que é moleque; Moleque é tu” (“Shut up street urchin, looks who’s the street urchin, the street urchin is you”).
for another student whom she believed to have been treated poorly by the mestre, was feeling pressured by him and other members of the group to leave because she had proved herself disloyal. The final straw came, she told me, when during a roda they sang a series of song that mentioned cobras. She interpreted the songs as an indirect accusation leveled at her and, no longer feeling welcome in the group, she gave up capoeira.

Values of sexual virility, infidelity and autonomy are instilled in Brazilian males from a young age, and it is often women as much as men who are the enforcers. I witnessed Daniela egging on Little Ram to encourage, and then reject, the crushes of the little girls in his capoeira class. Though only talk from someone so young, Little Ram used a bragging and disparaging tone to say things like “that girl still likes me. I liked her before but now I don’t,” or “I have lots of girlfriends.” The little girls, similarly egged on by Daniela and the older girls in the class, held fast to their crushes on Little Ram. This attention from the opposite sex, and more importantly the talk about it, added to Little Ram’s growing pride and self-confidence, as well as his perceived identity as capoeirista; and the identities of the little girls, in turn, hinged on his fleeting attention.

While male capoeiristas are encouraged to flaunt their sexuality, female capoeiristas carefully strategize theirs, knowing that their actions are also observed and evaluated, but with different criteria. Without condoning their boyfriends’ behavior, nor conforming to their own expected faithfulness, women often take measures to keep up good appearances. In discussing their own affairs with me, women commented that they only did so with men well outside of the social and work orbits of their partners. One married middle class capoeirista told me she had had various affairs with male members
of her group but that she did not worry about them getting back to her husband as she kept her involvement in capoeira separate from her home life. In discussing the affairs of their partners, many women told me they ignored the philandering as long as it did not come to the attention of their acquaintances, friends or families. In Gabriela’s case, as soon as her husband’s infidelity became common knowledge in the capoeira group, causing her to lose face, she left him. The price also included losing capoeira.

In order to hold on to capoeira, female capoeiristas, consciously or not, sometimes adopt certain strategies. Some avoid sexual relations in the capoeira arena altogether. Even though males in the group might still flirt with them, this option more or less puts them out of the game. Many women, however, griped that they were attracted to capoeiristas -- many in fact, like Raven, sheepishly admitted that their first involvement in capoeira was as voyeurs, “checking out” the guys -- and could not imagine dating non-capoeiristas. Others complained that capoeira was too central to their life to allow for an “outside” boyfriend: while such boyfriends might tolerate capoeira as an occasional hobby, they become jealous when their girlfriend’s commitment grows. Unlike men, whose identity as capoeiristas can take precedent over other identities and roles such as boyfriends, husbands or father, for women this would be unacceptable. This unacceptability is indicated by the fact that nicknames among female capoeiristas often do not stick, especially outside of the capeira context (see above). In order to get around this problem some women seek to maintain monogamous relationships within the group with men who accept their involvement. If these women remain faithful, at least to all appearances, they are considered “good women” and off-limits: others males in the group usually resist any obvious flirting with them so as to avoid conflict with the boyfriend.
Women in such relationships sometimes complain that they feel constricted in their behavior, fearing that they are constantly watched by others in the group and that any disapproved of conduct (i.e. flirting) will get back to their partner. Finally, there are women who follow the path of their male counterparts, sleeping with whomever they want in the group. However, they are usually discreet rather than boastful, and must have thick skin to endure the gossip that often circulates nonetheless: while males in the group enjoy having them around, for obvious reasons, many disparage them behind their backs and would not consider them for serious relationships.

It should be evident from the discussion so far that the macho culture of capoeira is decidedly heterosexual. While there are several well-known male Brazilian mestres rumored to be homosexual, they have never made any such public statement. This does not surprise me, as from what I observed among capoeira groups in Brazil, homosexuality was not openly accepted. I witnessed capoeiristas displaying homophobic attitudes, telling jokes and calling each other “gay” as an insult. Lewis witnessed an incident in which a player humiliated another player during a game by grappling him to the ground and mounting him in a mock demonstration of the sexual act (1992: 95). While gay men are accused of being effeminate and submissive, gay women are accused of being too “manly,” and of not being “real women,” as reflected in the derogatory label for lesbians -- *zapatão* or “big shoe.” While there are Brazilian gay women in capoeira they have not, as far as I could tell, come out in any explicit way to their groups. An atmosphere of “don’t ask, don’t tell” made the topic of homosexuality one that I chose not to pursue during my fieldwork.
Gender Politics

For women who manage to stick with capoeira beyond the novice stages, another set of problems presents itself. As shown throughout this chapter, the capoeira apprenticeship is still a predominantly masculine relationship. Much learning -- acrobatic moves, playing the instruments and more aggressive games (see chapter Five) -- occurs outside of formal classes. Older capoeiristas will often adopt younger ones as their protégés, for example, Zeca and Litte Ram. It is difficult for this type of relationship to exist between a male and female, where close friendships are predominantly single sex.

When I asked women why these types of mentorship did not occur among female capoeiristas they referred to the intense competition among women. Contrary to logic, the relatively small number of female capoeiristas increases rivalry, often fed by the presence of male capoeiristas: rather than sharing their knowledge woman guard it so as to be “the only one” among the female capoeriitas to perform a certain move, play the berimbau or sing a song. Raven explains:

Among women there exists something called jealousy. If one woman is getting better, the other women are uncomfortable. Especially if the men are watching and praising her, “look she is playing well!” Then the jealousy hits.

She continues by saying how she is trying to change this amongst her own students, many of whom are female, including her top two students:

I am trying to change this [competition] in my academy. I always tell the girls, “look you cannot want to be better than the other girls. If you are better than one of the other girls then you have to help her get better. I tell the girls and I tell everyone, “Here no one is better than anyone else. You have to help each other, everyone needs to grow together.” That is the climate I create.
Raven continues by claiming that more than anything it is women themselves who create obstacles for females in capoeira. She makes a claim, which I heard repeated by male and female practitioners, that capoeira is one sport in which males do not necessarily hold a physical advantage over women, except in one situation:

A woman has to occupy her space. Of course, if she tries to play a “hard game” with a man, she is going to have trouble being his equal. But if it is a technical game...if she trains harder than a man, if she has better technique, she is going to do better. So advantages and disadvantages don’t exist. What matters is for women to find their space. Now, if I don’t know how to claim that space, you know how some women say “oh! Poor thing, you can’t touch a woman!” No that is not my culture: I come from below where women take a hit that can shove them out of the roda. I don’t think there are a lot of barriers for women. Who makes the barriers are the women themselves.

In the next chapter we will see that “hard games” are particularly problematic for female capoeiristas not only because of physical disadvantage but because of what such games symbolize: at some point in the capoeira hierarchy students usually enters a stage of what they call “self-affirmation,” which involves testing their skills and proving their abilities as effective fighters. For women this type of “hard play” presents a double bind: too much aggression will detract from their “femininity” and too little will detract from their effectiveness as a capoeirista. In this quote Raven suggests that having been raised in an environment where women are not spared has given her a physical toughness that allows her to stand up for her own. Yet, immediately afterwards she became emotional in admitting that despite her philosophy that it is up to women to claim their space, external obstacles exist:

Now, there is prejudice. Many things happen that [pausing as she tears up] I can’t even talk about them. I will tell you once you turn the tape player off. Real prejudice. There are many places, many groups, many situations in which women are just in second place (segundo plano).
After the interview, in describing some of her experiences with prejudice, it was apparent that Raven saw her race and class as aggravating her second class citizenship as a woman in capoeira. She pointed specifically to the fact that she had never been invited to travel to capoeira events outside of Brazil, explaining that while it worked to a male capoeiristas advantage to be poor and black because everyone wanted to see the negãos (big black guys) from the favelas perform. But no one was interested in seeing a poor black woman play capoeira.

Despite all the obstacles, Raven did manage to rise up through the hierarchy of her group, and entered a stage that for many (but not all), is the culminating goal in a capoeira apprenticeship: becoming and being a “professional” capoeirista.

“PROFESSIONALIZING” IN CAPOEIRA

“Before capoeira he could not read, write or speak properly.
He had no teeth, no documents, no citizenship.”
-- Mestre Camisa, talking about a student who was a former street kid

In explaining what catalyzed his return to the CIEP after a seven-year hiatus, Zeca described both a saudades (yearning) for capoeira, and the realization that his beloved activity could provide a livelihood. Shortly after receiving his “graduado” blue cord when he was 20 years old, Zeca was in a motorcycle accident that left him incapacitated for several months. Though he recovered fully, increasing duties in the military where he had stayed on after his one year of obligatory service, and the birth of his daughter, kept him from going back to train. He drifted from job to job after leaving the military but quickly became bored and restless with each in turn. He describes
feeling an absence in his life, as if something was missing from inside him. One day he ran into a friend who had begun training capoeira at the same time as Zeca. The friend was near a nursery school where he was employed as a capoeira teacher. Zeca described his feelings after talking to the friend, who encouraged him to return to the group:

I was already wanting to return to train and all because there was something inside me that was calling me to back to capoeira. It was as if capoeira was calling me. But I had this idea that Camisa maybe wouldn’t receive me well because he had given me a scholarship when I started training with him and then I just left and never went back to talk to him. Understand? So I was embarrassed (sem jeito) to go talk to him….but the idea stuck in my head, “I have to go, I have to go back.” So I went [to class] all embarrassed and watched, just watched and then left. I went two or three times I think….And then [the next time I went] I said to myself “if I don’t talk today, I never will.” So I waited until after class to talk to Camisa, to mestre. When class ended, like always, there were a lot of people wanting to talk to him and I approached him and said “Mestre I would like to speak to o senhor [formal form of you].” He was talking to I don’t know who but he told that person “hold on” and turned his attention to me. I said, “Mestre, I want to train again. I am unemployed but I will find a sponsor to pay for [my classes]. I believe that now this is what I want in my life, I want to train, I want to professionalize in capoeira, give classes if possible, live from capoeira. And he said, “You can train again. You were really young before. I understand. I understand that when we are young we don’t exactly know what we want. I gave you a scholarship but you disappeared. Go ahead and train again.” And I said, “Wow, great mestre! I really want to train. I seriously want to dedicate myself to capoeira. If I can, I want to live from capoeira. Now I am no longer a child, I have other ideas.” And he said “alright then.” And I said, “Mestre, I’m unemployed. I am going to find a sponsor to pay for me but I don’t think it will be possible to pay the entire fee.” He said “I am going to give you a scholarship of 50%, pay 30 reais.” I said “Wow, thanks” and he said “Start coming around, start coming around” in that way of his [chuckling]. He said that and the very next class I was there training. And I only paid one month of the fees and after that didn’t pay anymore [chuckling again]. And I am still here training, and today I am doing good work with capoeira.

In this narrative it is clear that while Zeca felt as if capoeira was “calling” him back, it was running into another student who was making a living from capoeira that catalyzed his return. While most youth do not begin capoeira with thought of eventually making a
living from it, there comes a point that they begin to realize that with the popularity of capoeira in Rio de Janeiro today, this is a possibility. Top explains:

I began capoeira because I wanted to learn. I never though I could live just from capoeira. I began to imagine that I could be a capoeirista who worked just with capoeira once I entered Abadá. That was when I began to believe in capoeira as a profession. Once I saw Mestre Camisa’s work. I saw more advanced students with less potential than me giving classes. Not that I want to speak poorly of anyone, but I thought, “gosh, if this guy is giving classes…” There was one student in particular who is a lot like me: born and raised in a favela, and was giving classes even though he always has had difficulty learning capoeira. So I had him as an example. I thought, “gosh, this guy lives in a dangerous favela like mine and he lives just from teaching capoeira. If he is reaching his goal, than why can’t I?” I watched him play and I thought, “gosh, I have more of a knack at it than him.” So I have always had him as a mirror.

That Top realized that he could make a living as a capoeirista once he began training with Abadá reflects the group’s mission statement (see Introduction), which in part is to encourage the “professionalization” of capoeira. Though not explicitly stated, this aspect of the group’s mission is particularly targeted at students such as Top, Zeca, and Raven, who because of their level of education, economic status and ethnicity, have few employment options. The process of “professionalizing” in capoeira often begins, as it did for Zeca, Top and Raven, with teaching free classes in the communities in which they lived. If they are lucky, instructors will sometimes eventually get paid for these classes if they become affiliated with an NGO or government program. In Zeca’s case, after a year of teaching for free at the casarão, he became affiliated with an NGO whose mission was to bring free sports programs to kids in favelas. Another student of Mestre Camisa’s who worked as a physical education teacher in a private school had been hired as a program coordinator of the NGO and it was through him that Zeca and a number of other Abadá instructors began to be paid for their work in favelas. Along with receiving minimal funds for events and supplies, instructors were paid 200 reais a month (around
While not a bad salary, slightly more than minimum wage and the equivalent of what a domestic worker might make for a 6-day work week, NGOs in Rio are notorious for losing funds and folding without notice. So Zeca joined the ranks of other Abadá instructors looking for work in private schools and health clubs around Rio with the hope of eventually receiving his carteira assinada.

Raven was one of the few Abadá instructors in Rio who had received her carteira assinada (signed card), otherwise known as the carteira de trabalho (work document) or carteira profissional (professional identification). The carteira is an official record of an employee’s work contracts and ensures such things as minimum salary, paid leave and social security (cf Goldstein 2003: 286 n 6). Because of these benefits and the fact that a full carteira is a material record of one’s employment history helpful in securing future jobs, they are highly desirable and not easy to obtain. It requires that the employer is a fixed and established institution and that the employee has been working with them for some time. Raven had her carteira signed by a private catholic grammar school where she had been teaching capoeira for two years. Raven taught four days a week at the school’s two locations -- one in the West Zone of Rio and the other in a subúrbio of Niterói, a city across the bay from Rio. Her combined salary at the two schools was $R280 (around $100). Though work at the schools meant a grueling commute that started at 5:00am, it was worth it to Raven, especially because her son received free tuition in the school. More than half of her salary ($R158) went directly to her university fees. However, upon receiving her B.A. Raven expected her salary to increase as she would be able to teach physical education as well as capoeira classes. Along with her work at the schools, Raven taught two nights a week at a gym in a subúrbio where she
received 50% of the student payment of R$35 a month. She also taught for free one night a week at a favela near her university and on the weekends near her house.

Raven’s schedule, which required as much time traveling as teaching, was typical of Abadá instructors who “vivir só de capoeira,” (“live just from capoeira”). She was lucky to have her carteira assinada from the school as it guaranteed her a steady salary from month to month. Others, without a carteira, could make a decent hourly wage of between $R15 and $R25 at schools and health clubs, or else a percentage of students’ tuition. Jobs in the Zona Sul that pay by percentage are more desirable than those in the Zona Norte as a student’s monthly tuition can range between R$50 - R$65 rather than the R$15 – R$35 in the subúrbios. These jobs are precarious, however, as student enrollment fluctuates from month to month and classes are cancelled when numbers get to low. Thus a large part of a capoeira instructor’s job description is the never-ending search for new teaching venues. Top explained that though he can make up to $R800 between his various teaching jobs with an NGO, three nursery schools and a health club, there is no guarantee of this salary from month the month. But even during those times in which he makes only half of this, he is still earns double his mother salary as a domestic worker.

More than ensuring regular income and improving one’s chance at future employment, the carteira assinada in Brazil is proof of citizenship. In her study of crime and citizenship in São Pâulo, Caldeira write, “The carteira profissional is the workers’ most important proof of citizenship. Other signs are the marmita -- the lunch container -- and calluses on their hands as proof of manual labor (2000: 183). Though they may not necessary protect from police harassment and violence, for the working class and poor these visible signs “prove their identities as workers,”(2000:183) thus demarcating the
thin line between “honest citizen” and criminal. Similar to the lunch box and callused hands of the manual laborer, the capoeira uniform, especially when backed with a cateira assinada, is a visible sign for a favela youth that he has a legitimate occupation. Beyond the benefits of external indicators, however, many view professionalizing in capoeira as an opportunity for self-improvement. To return to the issue raised at the end of the last chapter, in the following quote Top expresses how he has learned through his work as a capoeira instructor to speak properly, or more accurately, to *not* speak in certain contexts:

I was giving classes in a space in a university [in a subúrbio] and everyone who did capoeira with me was a university student. And today, when I think about it, oh my god, if I had a tape recording! I had no idea how to speak. I made a lot of errors in Portuguese. I didn’t know how to do anything. Today, I have learned a lot with capoeira. The mother of my daughter has taught me a lot. I associate with people of culture, like you. I listened to Mestre Camisa speaking, I listened to him conversing and I put this idea in my head, “I have to mix with people who have culture so they can help me. Not that I want to speak poorly of people without culture, but I have a lot to learn….I erred a lot because I had not studied. The little I have learned to speak has been in capoeira, with all of you. The mother of my daughter corrected me a lot and that was how I learned…I had difficulty when I began teaching capoeira. But I always had intelligent people helping me. People conversing for me, with the director of the nursery school. I am a person who doesn’t speak much. I avoid opening my mouth. Because I am scared of making a mistake. I always try to speak as little as possible, especially in the places that I work. When I started teaching I spoke a lot of shit. A lot of stupid things (*besteiras*). But now I have consciousness, you have to speak little and correctly. But I still have a lot to learn.

In her work with educational projects in Brazil anthropologist Lesley Bartlett (2001) noted what she calls literacy shame: illiterate Brazilians reported feelings of shame at their improper Portuguese, often choosing silence over losing face in certain social situations. Top expresses a similar sentiment, acknowledging that it was not until he began teaching in venues other than his own neighborhood that he learned to be ashamed of his speech. In this quote, he retrospectively realizes that in these new environments he had “no idea how to speak,” leading to his exaggeration, “I didn’t know
how to do anything.” Though his superior knowledge and skills in capoeira landed him in these teaching jobs, he felt as if this were not enough: ironically, while Top, like many capoeiristas, waxed eloquent about capoeira as an important manifestation of “our Brazilian culture” here he equates “having culture” not with playing capoeira well, but with speaking well; culture here is equated with formal education, and by extension class and race. Top views his involvement in capoeira as an alternative to returning to school, something he has no aspirations to do, in that it gives him access to educated people who can fill the role of teachers. In particular he mentions as one of his teachers a female student with whom he was romantically involved. In a reversal of what Goldstein (2003: Ch 3) noted with poor, Afro-Brazilian women hoping to marry up the social ladder, poor male Afro-Brazilians hope to use their cultural capital as capoeiristas (macho identities and strong, fit bodies) to win a white female student of higher social and educational status then they. Thus, along with a relatively fixed income and a legitimate status as a “productive citizen” in society, a major attraction of professionalizing in capoeira is the opportunities it provides for moving in certain social arenas and associating with people of a higher class and level of education. Many capoeiristas of the underclass believe that through this access and association they may improve their places in life.

37 I was repeatedly struck with a similar paradox in Brazil: on the one hand there is a strong discourse on the importance of having pride in “national culture,” yet “being cultured” was not necessarily related to things Brazilian. During my fieldwork there were large billboards all over Rio advertising a language school: the ad urged, “get some culture – learn English or French!” This is proof of the enduring image of Europe as more “cultured” that so influenced the shape of Rio and Brazil in the 19th century (see Chapter Two).
In incorporating the body techniques of capoeira, participants are also simultaneously engaged in the production of identity. As they move from the periphery participation of a novice to the full participation as a complete member of a capoeira group, their identity as a capoeirista becomes more salient. The beginning stages of an apprenticeship -- a baptism ceremony, the giving of a nickname and the establishment of fictive kinship ties revolving around the father figure of the mestre -- marks a novice’s induction into a community of practice and initiates the production of his identity as a capoeirista. For some male youth in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, this community of practice is an attractive alternative to drug trafficking: while creating a tough, macho image and social capital on the streets, they also establish bonds of belonging and protection. As a metaphoric home or surrogate family, the capoeira group is built on relationships of obedience and reciprocity, competition, rebellion and tough love. Young women, increasingly attracted to the practice, struggle to establish and maintain a foothold in this still male dominated domain.

As capoeiristas increase their participation in a group their commitment and responsibilities grow, and some reach a stage in which they realize the possibility of professionalizing in capoeira: moving from teaching in their own neighborhoods to teaching in health clubs and schools in middle and upper class areas of the city, they come to the realization that the capital that serves them well in the roda does not readily translate to these new arenas. Many see the interactions with students of a higher class and educational status as an avenue for self-improvement and fuller participation in
society, a notion that is verbalized in the mission statements of groups that talk about
resgatando cidadania (“rescuing citizenship”) or fazendo cidadãos (“making citizens”).
While certainly an admirable project, this rhetoric reveals the deeply troubled notion of
citizenship in Brazil, one based on exclusion rather than inclusion. The structures of
violence that have produced and perpetuate exclusion in Brazil, and how they are played
out in the capoeira arena, are taken up in the next and final chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

VOLATILE BODIES:
HARD PLAY, FIGHTS AND VIOLENCE

November 16-18, 2001
Rio de Janeiro

The 3rd annual Zumbimba, was held, as every year, at the CEMB (Centro Educacional Mestre Bimba), a two-hour drive from Rio de Janeiro. The several acres of rolling hills owned by Mestre Camisa has a small pond, a modest main house, an outdoor kitchen, small corrals with horses, geese, peacocks, and fowl, a dormitory and a large outdoor training pavilion. At 10 am on Friday morning forty of us -- 34 men and 6 women of a wide range of ages (19 to 40), class and ethnicity hailing from Rio and other states -- descended on the farm in an assortment of rented minivans, cars and motorcycles. We gathered on the porch where Mestre Camisa made some introductory remarks: the weekend of specialized training, study and bate papo (discussions) would be a time to reflect on and commemorate Zumbi de Palmares and Mestre Bimba, for whom the event is named.

A grueling pace was set for early morning, afternoon and evening trainings interspersed with rodas, discussion groups and minimal leisure time for riding horses and lounging in hammocks. By Saturday night I was exhausted and the cool weather and light rain sealed my decision to forgo training that evening. At 8pm I headed up to the pavilion armed with a sweater and notebook. The evening’s class, like all the trainings during the retreat, was a recreation of how Mestre Bimba taught in his academy in the 1930s and 40s. Partners practiced the Seqüências de Bimba, a series of eight combinations of attacks and counterattacks, and the Cinturas Desprezadas, or acrobatic throws between partners.

At around 10:30pm as energy lagged and bodies grew tired, Mestre Camisa announced it was time for the esquenta banho. The atmosphere under the thatched roof of the pavilion was suddenly electric with nervous energy and adrenalin. Since the van ride to the retreat I had heard excited rumors and anticipatory remarks about the esquenta banho, or “heat up the bath” and the emboscada or “ambush” – two training elements in Mestre Bimba’s academy. For the next two hours as the rain increased outside the pavilion, volunteers stepped forward to engage in the more aggressive games of the esquenta banho: students squared off – one against one, two against two, and several short lived matches of two or three against one. With a guarded ginga, not dissimilar to the shadow dancing of boxers, opponents circled each other launching quick attacks of kicks and galopantes (open handed jabs and slaps) and an occasional cabeçada (headbutt), rasteira (sweep) or tesoura (full body take-down using a scissoring motion of the legs). These last, more characteristic maneuvers of capoeira when successful were met with cheers from Mestre Camisa and the watching students. With the blow of a whistle and a loud “Ie!” Mestre Camisa signaled an end to the match if one opponent became injured or the fighting digressed from capoeira
into boxing or grappling. Students shouted out encouragements from the sidelines and egged on reluctant participants.

By midnight, after the majority of students had engaged in at least one esquenta banho and there were several broken noses and dislocated fingers, I was sure that the evening’s “special training” was over. But as we prepared to head back down the hill, tired and hungry, Mestre Camisa split us into two groups, one to go on ahead to “defend the dormitory,” the other to “prepare the ambush.” A few minutes later I found myself with the other female, and several male, non-participating students sitting in the dark on the dormitory porch waiting tensely as the rest of our teammates restlessly paced the length of the porch waiting for the attack. Suddenly, out of the dark, war cries preceded bodies bounding from the bushes in front flips, cartwheels and back handsprings. Our group ran off the porch to meet them on the grass. The mass of flying bodies became enmeshed in one-on-one and several-on-one combat. As with the esquenta banho, the rules were to keep the fighting within the boundaries of capoeira, yet there were transgressions: several capoeiristas had grabbed thick sticks from the forest and brooms from the bathrooms and were beating each other; others were exchanging closed fist punches; and several were planting kicks to the ribs of those who had fallen. As the bodies moved en masse towards the porch I hastily moved back to avoid being swept into the fighting. The first blow of the whistle by Mestre Camisa to indicate the end of the ambush was ignored. Students appeared too excited to curtail the fighting. After several moments and a few more blows of the whistle, the fighters disentangled themselves and reluctantly gave up their impromptu weapons. Threatening stances and suspicious glares slowly transformed into smiles, laughter, hand shaking, back slapping and animated discussion of the night’s excitement.

The esquenta banho and emboscada were all anybody could talk about for weeks after. Students who had not attended Zumbimba fired questions at me about the weekend, and then, lowering their voices to a conspiratorial tone added, “and the emboscada?” Those who had participated rehashed with great relish the blow-by-blow of particular fights. Individuals who had braved more than one esquenta banho or had been particularly fierce in the emboscada were hailed as temporary heroes. And everyone delighted in describing the fear they had read on my face during the emboscada. All in all, that year’s Zumbimba was rated a great success.

The fear my fellow Zumbimba attendees read on my face during the emboscada was not misinterpreted. I had been scared, shocked, and I must admit a little excited, by this “play” that seemed, in its overt aggression, to transgress the boundaries of capoeira. The orchestrated violence of the games and the ambush appeared gratuitous, verging on the out-of-control and completely unlike the stylized violence of capoeira to which I was
accustomed. One of the most compelling characteristics of capoeira is its ambiguous tension between fight and play. Incorporating dance, acrobatics, ritual, drama and cunning, capoeira does not at first seem to invite displays of overt aggression. The martial aspect of capoeira can be so overshadowed, in fact, that it is not uncommon for observers, especially those outside the social context of Rio de Janeiro, to ask, “but is it really a fight? Can you defend yourself with capoeira?”

At times referred to as “mock combat” (Lewis 1992: 14) or “ritual fighting,” in its stylized movement the capoeira game indicates a latent or covert rather than explicit violence. Violence is something forbidden. Lurking just around the corner, it threatens to break, to use Bateson’s terms, the frame that denotes the activity as play (Bateson 1972). It is this implied potential for violence that in part enhances the experience for players. Not only does it heighten the excitement of the game, but it also dramatizes the capoeira roda as a re-enactment of the art form’s emergence from the violence of slavery and struggle for liberation (cf Lewis 1992). According to Downey, the roda is a “commemorative performance” haunted by the violence of its past: “This past gives capoeira play gravity, revealing that capoeira once was a ‘deep and sinister business’ and menacingly suggests the possibility that it still may be” (1998:121). This menacing evocation of the past frames violence as something that once was, no longer is, but may be again a necessary aspect of the practice: while keeping alive through their play performance the memory of the violent struggles of the oppressed, practitioners today print slogans on their uniform t-shirts with messages such as “pratique capoeira não a violência” (“practice capoeira not violence”).
When capoeira’s play frame is ruptured by overt aggression, practitioners will often say the unwritten rules of the game have been violated. Such violations are often chalked up to emotions running high in the heat of the game and players losing control; similar to a soccer field during an intensely competitive match, a capoeira roda can become the theater for a spontaneous brawl. However, the fact that capoeira is a martial art -- a game of strategy and cunning and a sparring match of physical prowess -- somewhat troubles this comparison to a sport such as soccer; whether overtly acted upon or not, aggression and fighting is not a byproduct but an integral aspect of capoeira.

While a certain amount of cooperation between players is necessary in order to let a game of capoeira develop (see Chapter Three), it is also the competitive edge that makes capoeira such a compelling and exciting practice for many. Competition is generated in part from the implicit acknowledgement that players are willing and able to act on aggression if need be.

This being said, it is also true that the myriad interpretations and practices of capoeira today mean that some practitioners may never desire or experience overtly aggressive games. From my observations and discussions with capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro, however, it was evident that for many, aggressive play is an important and valued part of their practice. Furthermore, how aggressive play is enacted and interpreted by these practitioners is polysemic and demands a close and careful reading. Depending on the intentions of the players and unfolding of action, aggression in the roda can be described as a loss of emotional control in the heat of the game, the settling of a score, the defense of honor, the testing of skills, preparation for confrontation, or an alleviation the pressures of everyday living. In this chapter I disarticulate and analyze these various
enactments and interpretations of aggressive play in capoeira. Understanding the roda as not completely bound off from but contiguous with ordinary life (see Chapter Three), this analysis leads to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro. In particular, by exploring the gray area of aggression in capoeira I hope to contribute to a discussion of the many ways in which cariocas are affected by and respond to the complex workings of violence in Brazil.

**TALKING ABOUT VIOLENCE**

Along with analyzing actions, this chapter pays close attention to the language capoeiristas use to talk about aggression and violence in capoeira. The most crucial linguistic distinction I learned to make was between what capoeirista call a *briga* or “brawl” and what they call *jogo duro*, “rough game,” or “hard play” as I choose to translate it. Analyzed in depth below, brigas and jogo duro were visible and not infrequent occurrences throughout my fieldwork. The most extreme example of hard play that I witnessed during my fieldwork was the special training at Zumbimba (also analyzed in depth below) that is described in the field note at the beginning of this chapter. What at first shocked and confused me I came to understand not to be so much a transgression as a pushing of the outer limits of capoeira play.

Making up a relatively minor percentage of the time spent in training and playing, hard games and brawls are nonetheless often eagerly discussed afterwards, rehashed blow-by-blow. In interviews, however, capoeiristas were not always willing at first to talk candidly about these incidents. Part of their reluctance, I believe, was their concern
over how their words would be interpreted; this has weighed heavily on me in writing this chapter. Yet not to have addressed aggression and violence in this study would have entailed mental gymnastics as they are present in various shapes and colors throughout my field notes. To ignore this issue would have meant failing to fully address the complexity of capoeira and the lives of its practitioners.

Capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro were particularly sensitive to how aggression and violence in capoeira might be interpreted and talked about in the public realm after a particular incident gained national media coverage. In October 1996 a 20-year-old male capoeirista died during an event that brought together several capoeira groups from the states of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais. A video segment showing the sequence of games that led up to the kick to the abdomen that brought on the player’s cardiac arrest shortly after he played in the roda was broadcast on national news. Though such fatalities are extremely rare in capoeira, the newscaster described the incident not as a tragic accident but as the inevitable consequence of an atmosphere in which “capoeira took a back seat” to gratuitous aggression and violence. Newspaper articles entitled “Capoeira Roda Murders” and “Capoeira Presentation Causes Death” reported that the crowd encouraged the players with cries of “pega o otário!” or “get the sucker!”

The media coverage emphasized that it was the presence of rival capoeira groups - of which the two players were members -- that led to the death. That capoeira was described as “taking a back seat” suggested that group rivalries were an extraneous and corrosive aspect of the practice. Yet, as we have seen in previous chapters, ever since the formation of capoeira maltas in Rio in the 19th century, group identity and rivalry has

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1 O Dia, October 22 and 23, 1996. Homicide charges were dropped when intention to kill could not be determined.
been a constitutive aspect of the practice, and continues to be an attractive force for youth of the underclass. To divorce capoeira from its sociological formation and shape is to divorce it from the conditions of extreme racial and socio-economic inequality and exclusion out of which it arose.

Media coverage of the death spawned fear among capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro who were concerned over negative repercussions on their teaching jobs. I was in Rio in the summer of 1997 and the incident was still much discussed; several instructors told me that parents had pulled their children from capoeira classes in schools. Groups adopted “anti-violence” mottos and sponsored panel discussions at their events about using capoeira as a “tool to teach non-violence.” In the search for scapegoats, accusations flew and rumors blossomed regarding groups that supposedly promoted “violent” capoeira.2

Despite their concern over misinterpretation, when pushed to discuss violence in capoeira, practitioners in Rio de Janeiro would offer enigmatic statements such as “anyone who says capoeira is not violent is a liar. Capoeira has always been violent. But you need to know how to use violence -- to use violence for a just cause”; “capoeira is violent, but not with hatred”; “nobody likes violence, but people need it to survive.”

The ambiguity expressed in these statements is revelatory of a deeply troubled view of violence in Brazil, and more generally, the slipperiness of the concept (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 1). What exactly is meant by violence? The very word, used in a multiplicity of contexts, evokes different interpretations: a hurricane is “violent” as is genocide, as is love; violence is “premeditated” and “cold blooded” or “thoughtless” and “hot blooded”; violence is discussed in terms of its “banality” or “aesthetics.” As a way

2 Abadá -- present at the event even though it was the victim and not the perpetrator who was one of its members -- was at the center of these accusations and an attempt was made to “boycott” the group (cf Lacé 1999: 141-144).
to theorize this slippery concept, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois propose as a conceptual model a “continuum of violence.” A continuum allows for a disentanglement of various types of violence (structural, interpersonal, political, symbolic) and its forms (legitimate, illegitimate, visible, invisible) while at the same time maintaining sight of the many continuities and intersections: one form of violence may beget the same or another form.

Furthermore, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois urge us to address the “very human face” of violence; biological factors -- drives, instincts, hormones, genes -- may “contribute to human behavior, accelerating, amplifying, or modifying human emotions,” but they alone cannot explain violence (2004: 3). From an anthropological perspective, emotions -- of which aggression is a visible manifestation -- are socially learned ways of experiencing and communicating with the world (cf Lutz 1988; Rosaldo 1980; Burbank 1994). We must understand violence in a similar way: in interrogating its social construction and meanings we must avoid adjectives such as “senseless” or “meaningless,” often used in media and popular speech to describe violence. Violent and aggressive acts are in fact extremely “meaningful” in that they communicate something, most often discontent with a situation and the desire for change (Aijmer and Abbink 2000).

In his study of youth, popular culture and violence, radical educator Henry Giroux theorizes that "violence is not merely a function of power; it is also deeply related to how forms of self and social agency are produced within a variety of public spheres" (1996: 84). Working within this theoretical framework, this chapter explores the slippery terrain between fight and play in capoeira, and the subjective readings of violence offered by participants. What do capoeiristas consider “violent” in capoeira? How do capoeiristas
relate expressions of violence to their sense of self and social agency? What was the significance of the training I witnessed at Zumbimba? Was it violence? What did it mean for the participants? And what does this kind of “play” tell us about the larger structures and workings of violence in Brazil?

VIOLENCE AND BRASILIDADE

As a point of entry to the topic of violence in interviews, I would sometimes show capoeiristas the above cartoon.3 Responses were mixed: some capoeiristas chuckled and nodded their head in agreement; others looked displeased and, while not entirely dismissing the representation, implied that it perpetuated a negative image of capoeira. One 25-year old capoeirista from the Zona Norte summed it up: “capoeira is our culture, part of our society. And Brazilian society right now is a big mess. Other martial arts are trained only in academies, behind closed doors. But capoeira spills out into the streets, into our everyday lives.” Capoeira is part of the everyday lives of its practitioners and thus is inevitably touched by the interpersonal conflict and violence of that life.

3 Thank you to Elvin Geng and Thad Dunning for finding this cartoon on the Internet many years ago and sending it to me. Unfortunately, the address and source are unknown.
The humor of this cartoon is in fact based on irony: it hinges on an incongruity between the assumptions that capoeira is “play” and that brasilidade, that elusive notion of “Brazilian-ness,” is harmonious. Yet, it is only when the play turns to violent confrontation that the spectator recognizes what his friend means by saying capoeira is quintessentially Brazilian. It exposes the incongruity between the “imagined community” of Brazil -- a nation of racial harmony and social cordiality -- and the hard reality of life. Perhaps more than the capoeira or the ensuing conflict, it is this ironic recognition of self that is most “Brazilian” in this cartoon.

“Irony,” Daniel Linger has written “is a hallmark of Brazilian self-portraits” (1992:3). Two classic texts by Brazil’s most famous social critics, Gilberto Freyre and Euclides da Cunha, are what Linger terms “national self-representations” in which the “intimacies of slavery” and the “savageries of civilization” are paradoxically and ironically coupled. Diametrically opposed portraits of Brazil, Cunha’s Rebellion in the Backlands written in 1902 and Freyre’s The Master and the Slaves, written in 1933, made their indelible marks on the social imagination during a time of intense national soul-searching and state building. Brasilidade, or national identity, became hotly contested terrain in the cultural wars among politicians, artists and intellectuals over notions of “modernity” and “tradition” (cf Williams 2001). Would Brazil stay connected to the legacy of its colonial, patriarchal, and in the eyes of some “barbaric,” past, or move forward into “civilized” modernity?

Cunha’s Rebellion in the Backlands exploded the false dichotomy of “modern / civilized” and “backwards / barbaric.” Journeying as a reporter to cover what was intended as a quick military campaign to disband a messianic community in the arid
interior of Bahia, Cunha came away to write a horrifying and scathing account of what would come to be known as the Massacre at Canudos. Led by a Catholic mystic, Antônio Conselheiro, the encampment of impoverished religious pilgrims and agriculturists was established after the fall of the Empire in 1889 in protest of the new Republican order. Cunha’s account began as a deprecating portrait of a devastated terrain inhabited by religious fanatics and barbaric madmen whose alternative community, the population of which reached 30,000, threatened the modern progress of the nation. By the end of his account, after the campaign dragged out for months resulting in the killing of everyone at Canudos including children and women, Cunha had turned the tables: it was the modern state that was barbaric in its murder of marginalized innocents who protested government neglect. The massacre at Canudos highlights the fact that though Brazil’s transition from Empire to Republic occurred without war, it was far from peaceful. The small urban and rural rebellions that shook the country before and after Canudos were testimony to regional divisions and widespread popular discontent. The government responded to civil unrest with military action, a strategy that established an enduring legacy of violence as a legitimate tool for maintaining social order and enforcing national unity (Williams 2001: 2).

By the 1930s Brazil was in desperate need of new political leadership and a new social imaginary; these were provided by dictator Getúlio Vargas and sociologist Gilberto Freyre (see Chapter Two). In his re-telling of colonial history in *The Master and the Slaves* (1933), Freyre constructed a Brazilian myth of origins: the unique character of Brazil was born on the sugar plantations where slaves and masters lived in ambiguous harmony, a mix of cruel and loving patriarchy, sexual lust and nurturing. Freyre
proposed that the widespread practice of miscegenation led to peaceful emancipation and Brazil’s fulfillment of its destiny as a “racial democracy” and harmonious blending of cultures. In Freyre’s portrait, Brazil has found a happy medium between that which was unique and fortifying about its colonial past -- the mixing of African, European and Amerindian blood and culture -- and that which was progressive and modernizing. The “mulatto” and his cultural practices, including samba and capoeira, became the defining symbol of this harmonious brasilidade. Freyre’s work presented Brazilians with an enduring self-portrait that, while not denying the legacy of suffering and violence of slavery and colonization, allowed for a belief in progress. With this sociological feat, transmuting slavery of the past into an uplifting element of brasilidade, the continued violence of racial discrimination became untenable: many Afro-Brazilians themselves continue to maintain the myth of “racial democracy,” attributing the social suffering they endure to economic hardship and class discrimination rather than racism (cf Twine 1998).

With these conflicting national narratives and the daily reality of life in Brazil, it is no wonder that, as Linger observed of the Brazilians with whom he worked in the Northern city of São Luís, “they have a sharp sense of irony, of the absurd, of the deceptiveness of appearances and (consequently) the necessity for keen attention and incisive interpretation. Not surprisingly, this attitude often shows itself as playfulness or wit, but the play can be deep and the humor dark” (1992: 7). Such dark humor in Brazil has been observed by other anthropologists, most notably Donna Goldstein in her ethnography Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown (2003). Goldstein argues that what she calls “black humor” -- the darkest of humor that targets violence and misery -- is a source of resilience and resistance among
favelados. Along with alleviating anxiety and pain over topics otherwise avoided in conversation, the humor is a way of testifying to life’s hardships and social injustices; a political act “of bearing witness to the tragic realities of life and an expression of discontent” (ibid: 16). Goldstein urges us to understand the aesthetics of humor “in place”: in the context of extreme social marginalization, where there are few recourses for speaking out against the pain and anger of social suffering and for seeking retributions for injustices, even the rape of a daughter might become the subject of this black humor.

An aesthetics of humor that targets violence and misery is also, I believe, an indicator of the extent to which violence and suffering have become normalized in a society. I was struck by this on a number of occasions in terms of public humor that appealed across classes: while I was in Rio 1997 the newspapers had a heyday printing cartoons and humorous commentary on the news that Mike Tyson had bitten off part of his opponent’s ear during a boxing match. In 2003, escalating incidents of car hijackings and kidnappings in Rio cast a pall of fear and anxiety over the middle and upper classes. On the widely popular Planeta e Casseta, Brazil’s equivalent to Saturday Night Live, a “new products” skit featured car models with extra large trunks equipped with wet bars, couches and televisions so as to make car kidnapping a more comfortable and pleasurable experience. On a more private register, I was daily aware of the joking among capoeiristas that would often accompany news of misfortune (see Chapter Three). Expecting sympathetic sighs and condolences when telling friends about a bad day, I was often met instead with laughter and teasing. These examples certainly do not reach the magnitude or gravity of those described by Goldstein, but they do constitute part of the social fabric in which violence and social suffering, foundational to national history as
as the daily lives of many Brazilians, have become normalized. The quotidian aspects of violence in Brazil have been theorized by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992; 2004) in her concept of “everyday violence.” Similar to Bourdieu’s symbolic violence, “everyday violence encompasses the implicit, legitimate, and routinized forms of violence inherent in particular social, economic and political formations” (2004: 21). Violence is, again in Bourdieu’s terminology, “mis-recognized”: seen as part of the normal workings of social life, mundane violence is not recognized as such and individuals become complicit in their own subjugation.

Life in Rio is accompanied by a running catalogue of the various visible signs of violence. Daily newspapers report on such incidents as: the shutting down of favelas and surrounding neighborhoods by “drug wars”; assaults, car jacking and kidnappings; bystanders killed by stray bullets; street vendors beaten by police; revenge killings by death squads and policemen; judges murdered during homicide trials; homes destroyed and people killed in favelas by the unavoidable mudslides during the rainy months; newborn babies abandoned in dumpsters; and buses toppling during high speed rides, killing multiple passengers. These stories graphically illustrate the diverse ways in which inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro are affected by violence; what is left invisible is the social injustice of racial, social and economic inequality and exclusion that breeds such violence. Media focus remains on the resulting actions that come to represent the root source rather than consequence of violence: thus pedestrians and shop owners are fearful of or annoyed by street children rather than questioning how they ended up on the streets; property owners blame favelados for rebuilding shacks on precarious hills that will dissolve again during the next hard rain rather than interrogating economic conditions
and the city’s infrastructure that allow for no alternative; newspapers condemn local drug traffickers for destroying communities rather than investigating how the international drug trade keeps them in business; and parents of the middle class label youth in favelas who enjoy loud funk music with lyrics glorifying guns and violence as dangerous and marginal, rather than attempting to understand the discontent communicated through their music. The poor are consistently criminalized and victimized. When blame is thus misdirected, underlying structural violence of poverty, hunger, social exclusion and humiliation remains invisible and enduring.

Compared with the many violences that exist in Brazil, fighting and aggression in capoeira may appear minor and insignificant, or perhaps not violent at all. Yet from the perspective that violence never works in isolation, but is part of a much larger fabric of social life, I believe something is to be learned from the way in which capoeiristas talk about and enact aggression in capoeira. Similar to Goldstein’s urging that we scrutinize humor for what it has to say about the social context in which it arises and for what it communicates, so must violence be interrogated: when is an act considered “violent,” why and by whom? What other violences do these acts point to but which may be less visible?

HARD PLAY, FIGHTS AND THE VIOLENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Here in the subúrbios, in the Baixada, people suffer, people struggle. [Capoeira] mestres and instructors work all day and come to capoeira just at night. Capoeira is a leisure activity, a place to relax. So the violence comes from the culture, the actual culture of the person. A person is a fighter, a sufferer, unemployed, lives badly, sleeps badly, eats badly. So I think that everything bad a person experiences in life, she lets it out in capoeira, understand? So that is where that aggressive, that violent game comes from....For example, my mother always worked and we were always left alone. We never had anything; we were often
hungry. I would wake up to no breakfast, no lunch and then I would go to capoeira like that. So then when I got there I wanted to play, I wanted to beat up and I got beat up. Beating up for me was a relief from that weight that I had arrived with. I went home lighter.

In this quote, Raven, whom we met in the last chapter, reminisces about her early years in capoeira training with a mestre not far from where she lived in a favela in the Baixada Fluminense. She suggests that the aggression that was an integral part of their training and playing was a byproduct of the everyday violence of poverty and hunger. “Beating up and getting beat up” was a way to alleviate the pressures of “living badly.” The irony -- that she goes home “lighter” as if she were not light enough from hunger -- is a brutal reminder that the relief is a temporary salve to the deep structural violence of poverty and discrimination. Life beats you down and you beat back on whoever is near at hand, if for no other reason than to feel a temporary “lightening.”

Raven frames her discussion of aggression in terms of class: in her opinion, besides the “weight” that poor capoeiristas of the Zona Norte bring to the roda that manifests in aggression, their lack of “technique” leads to injury: “They don’t have technique, understand? A foot comes from any direction, and you get out of the way of the kick anyway you can. That, is, they don’t have technique for attacking or escaping but if the kick gets you, it really hurts.” It was partly this lack of technique, and what she describes as getting as much as she could out of the training with her group in the Zona Norte, that sealed Raven’s decision to train with Mestre Camisa. Unlike her experience with the capoeira group in the Zona Norte, training with Mestre Camisa in the Zona Sul exposed Raven to an array of students from various socio-economic classes and
neighborhoods in the city. Her narration of her early days of training at the CIEP is framed in terms of her gender, class and race:

When I started there at the CIEP there was a lot of prejudice. First because I was black, from the subúrbio and I played sloppy capoeira. People talked shit about me. Most of the girls in the Zona Sul they have those nice low cut capoeira pants, and there I was with my nappy hair (cabelinhos duros), my ugly pants. But I had determination in my game. Most of those other girls didn’t and they aren’t there anymore. So when I would arrive I wouldn’t greet anyone. I only talked to people if they talked to me first. And I didn’t have a pretty game, it was a rough game (porrada mesma). And I got into a lot of fights in the roda.

While Raven has achieved a certain amount of respect in the group, rising up through the ranks, she continues to experience class prejudice, causing her, as she says to “ficar na minha” (keep to myself).

Mestre Ox, whom we also met in the last chapter and who has a small group in the Zona Norte, expresses a different opinion from Raven’s. He describes the “violence” of capoeira in the Zona Norte as stylized or ritualized and blames newer developments in capoeira for producing a different kind of violence:

Look, capoeira is violent, but not with hatred. If I have to knock you down, I will, but I will do it carefully so as not to hurt you. I am not going to hurt you because you have to work tomorrow. I am not going to kill you because someone who kills is a criminal and a capoeirista is not that. So, in the roda I have to beat you and you have to beat me, but we do it with elegance. The game of capoeira is elegant. In my time, that is twenty years ago, I used to beat people in this way and they liked it: they would say “wow, you beat me good. I liked that!” Today, no. Today, capoeiristas hit in order to kill. They hit with hatred, wanting to destroy the other. They deliver those upwardly thrusting bicos (type of kick). What is that?! It is because they have a bad head (aquela cabeça mal). A bico will break ribs, break everything. So even if you know how to do it, you can’t. You can’t play capoeira hating the other guy, wanting to kill him. Because capoeiristas depend on each other to play, you need the other guy.

Mestre Ox’s opinion, expressed by many older capoeiristas in the Zona Norte, reveals anxieties about what he calls “modern” technique and disregard for values in today’s
young capoeiristas. In his view aggression in the roda should be tempered; being beaten
should hurt one’s body (I can attest to that having felt the strike of his heavy foot many
times) and pride, but should not do serious or permanent damage. Speedy, a
contramestre in Mestre Ox’s group expresses a similar opinion:

I come to capoeira in order to relax. I work at night [as a security guard in a
Copacabana hotel] so capoeira is a time to relax. Sometimes I take my students to
Mestre Bull’s roda and they are scared. But I tell them “play with him! Until
now I have never seen him hurt anyone.” That’s to say, he will beat up on you,
but he is not crazy, he’s not going to break your head. But there are rodas out
there – Saturday I went to one and this guy just socked another guy in the nose.
He broke his nose and the blood was just coming down and coming down and I
thought “How is this guy going to work tomorrow?” Well, maybe he isn’t
working right now, but how is he going to do the things he needs to do? Or what
if one of them had pulled out a gun and started shooting? This only happens with
a hot head (cabeça quente).

Like Raven, Mestre Ox and Speedy suggest that capoeira is a place to relax and let go of
the stresses of work and life. Part of this relaxation may be to beat up on each other, but
within limits. Their quotes reveal an anxiety over increased levels of violence in society.
While perhaps it is an exaggeration that capoeiristas today “hit to kill,” the point Mestre
Ox wishes to make is that capoeiristas today demonstrate certain attitudes and behavior in
roda that runs counter to the feel for the game. He refers to innovations influenced by
other fighting techniques, in particular the bico, also known as ponteira, which was the
kick that killed the capoeirista in 1996. The bico is a variation on the bençao, the most
basic attack in capoeira (see Chapter Three), with a subtle but significant difference. The
bençao is delivered with a forward shoving motion of the leg landing the flat of the foot
on the chest or stomach of one’s opponent. Effective in pushing someone away, it will
not do internal injury. The bico, like kicking a soccer ball from which this name comes,
is delivered with the ball of the foot in an upwardly thrusting motion. If purposely and
forcibly delivered, this blow to a smaller striking area can do considerable damage to internal organs or rupture ribs, as in the case of the death in 1996. In Mestre Ox’s estimation, because of the potential danger of this kick it should not be included as part of capoeira repertoire.

The debate over appropriate technique in capoeira was foregrounded in 1997 when a well-known capoeira mestre from the Zona Norte won a Vale Tudo competition. Vale Tudo, “anything goes” or “no holds barred” ultimate fighting competitions, have become extremely popular in Brazil, especially among jiu-jitsu fighters. Mestre Hulk, a white capoeirista in his 40s from the Zona Norte, whose nickname aptly describes his six feet stature of brawn, knocked out his opponent with a *meia lua de compasso*, one of capoeira’s most dangerous and most characteristic kicks (see Chapter Three). Mestre Hulk became a local hero for some, while others criticized his use of capoeira in a Vale Tudo competition. Mestre Hulk’s temporary stardom instigated a fad among young capoeiristas in Rio to train jiu-jitsu and incorporate moves, especially body locks and take-downs, into their capoeira game. Many mestres discouraged this and the fad more or less died out.

While Mestre Ox considers certain innovations to be making capoeira more violent, others, often capoeiristas of a younger generation, consider these innovations to be making capoeira *less* violent than it once was. While acknowledging that certain techniques are more dangerous now, they say their training better prepares them: they claim that they have greater control of their movement, that they know how to escape attacks more efficiently, and that their strengthening and stretching exercise protects their bodies from injury. They claim that in order to keep capoeira competitive with other
fights, such as jiu-jitsu, which are drawing more and more youth, it must incorporate new
techniques. They often look at the less dangerous, but nonetheless hurtful tactics of older
capoeira mestres’ ritualized violence that targets even young students, as messy and
disrespectful.

Mestre Ox’s accusation of the violence of “modern” capoeira reflects several
anxieties: the fear of increasing levels of violence in society; the fear of a new generation
of capoeiristas who do not have respect for the older generation; anxiety over the
marketing of capoeira and the loss of what they perceive as its “tradition,” which among
other things emphasizes ritualized violence and social ties. On the other hand, the
concerns of “modern” capoeiristas reveal anxieties about being competitive and prepared
in today’s market-driven and more violent society: they want fit, strong and well-toned
bodies and they want to be efficient and effective fighters.

Regardless of the style of capoeira they play or their views on what is appropriate
or acceptable in the roda, capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro expressed a common opinion that
training capoeira prepares one for life. While we saw in Chapter Three that this can take
various forms -- e.g. learning to be attentive, deceitful, strategic, flexible and/or
confrontational -- such preparation is primarily geared towards the unpredictable and
often brutal give and take of everyday living. Drawing on an expression common among
cariocas, that life is a fight (*a luta que é a vida*) or an everyday struggle for survival, one
mestre explains his interpretation of capoeira as a modern day form of resistance:

*Life in Brazil, especially in Brazil and perhaps all over the Third World, is a fight.
Life is a constant struggle. We “kill the lion” everyday. And capoeira is a fight.
So we use the fight of capoeira to combat life itself. It is a fight for life, for survival. This is resistance.*
For some, this resistance translates into physical self-defense. According to Wolf, a twenty year old male capoeirista,

When I was a kid I fought a lot. But I wasn’t any good so I wanted to learn so I could do better in fights. One time I was playing -- no fighting -- with another kid in the street. And he kicked me hard. A year and a half later he showed up in capoeira class to start training. And there I was, I was already training so I knew some things. So that was when I got back at him for beating me up.

Similar to other male capoeiristas I spoke with, Wolf describes his initial attraction to capoeira as a desire to improve his skills as a fighter and thus hold his own, maintain respect and exact revenge on the streets. While many capoeiristas may initially view their training as a way to deal with interpersonal conflict, as we will see below, over time they come to understand it as a way of developing self-awareness and control that eventually leads to a more balanced, and ultimately less aggressive, approach to life.

In trying to understand the opinions expressed by capoeiristas -- that capoeira is a place to fight both for and against life -- I have been helped by Loic Wacquant’s ethnography of a boxing gym in the black ghetto of Chicago. In a sensitive analysis of a sport vilified as the violent pastime of poor blacks, Wacquant argues that the highly ordered and ritualized violence in the ring stands in stark contrast to the arbitrary and chaotic violence of the street. In his analysis, the gym exists in a relationship of “symbiosis and opposition” to the ghetto: it draws members from the street where codes of masculinity, physical toughness, bravery, individual honor and group solidarity are valued, yet it is a safe, ordered space in which to perform these codes and to dream of rising to the top of the pugilist hierarchy and gaining socio-economic mobility.

As we saw in the last chapter, as a social practice among youth of the underclass in Rio de Janeiro, capoeira draws on many of the same street codes -- masculinity, honor,
bravery, solidarity -- as boxing in the U.S. ghetto. In this chapter I argue that as in Wacquant’s findings, experience of aggression in capoeira stands in contrast to the violence of everyday life in Rio de Janeiro. However, there are significant differences. Wacquant describes the gym as a “sanctuary” where problems from the outside world are left at the door; once in the gym not only sparring but everything, including conversations and social interactions between trainers and trainees, is ritualized and regulated. In contrast, the capoeira academy, I argue, stands in a relationship of osmosis with the external word. The space of the capoeira “academy,” in favelas often the open-air courtyard of a samba school, contrasts with the closed, windowless boxing gym: while visitors and spectators are discouraged in the all-male boxing gym, they are encouraged at capoeira trainings; in contrast to the ritualized and restricted conversations among boxers and trainers, capoeira mestres and their students will often bring up personal and societal problems to be discussed during class; in opposition to the highly regulated, impersonal sparring that goes on in the boxing ring, the roda can be a place to settle personal disputes; and while boxers pride themselves on disciplined and controlled bodies, even abstaining from sex during intense training, capoeiristas seek the pleasure of volatile, and sexual, bodies.

While beliefs regarding sexual activity and training capoeira was not an avenue of questioning I actively pursued, the sexually charged language capoeiristas use to talk about the aggressive games, as we will see below, suggest a linkage between the two. A central aspect of the male capoeirista’s image is that of a virile and promiscuous heterosexual (see Chapter Four), and from what I did observe and hear, sexual abstinence is definitely not a valued aspect of their practice. The few opinions I was privy to
regarding the ramifications of sex prior to training or playing, were somewhat contradictory. I have heard male capoeiristas remark that having sex beforehand relaxes their bodies and produced a more focused, playful and harmonious game. On the other hand, I have heard capoeiristas joke that a player is being too aggressive in the roda as a result of too much sex; similar to spending too much time lifting weights, having a lot of sex, though certainly not a bad thing, is said to produce high levels of testosterone that discharges as aggression in the roda. Both these views -- that the right amount of sex helps one’s game and too much might detract from it -- run counter to those held by boxers, who claim that abstaining from sex keeps bottled up in the body the vital energy force needed to perform well in the ring. These different claims regarding sex and performance are revelatory of a fundamental distinction between the two fighting arts: while boxers are dependent on high levels of discipline and controlled aggression, capoeiristas oscillate between disciplined and relaxed bodies and temper their aggression with play. And as much as they may enjoy a controlled or harmonious game, they may also crave the occasional uncontrolled explosion of bodies. This desire is an undercurrent in the language capoeirista use to describe such volatile situations.

The Dangerous Pleasure of “Venting”

Included in the rich vocabulary capoeiristas in Rio de Janeiro use for talking about playing capoeira, are numerous terms and expressions for describing aggressive games. Along with a list of verbs and nouns for beating up, receiving a beating, and collective brawls --

4Though female capoeiristas certainly talk about sex and capoeira (see Chapter Four), I was never privy to conversations among them (nor thought to ask) about the linkage between having sex and playing.
**bater**: to beat

*african*: to receive a beating

*atingir/acertar/pegar*: to hit

*socar*: to punch

*agredir*: to attack

*ajuntar*: to jump, or gang up against

*pancadaria*: a beating; a collective brawl

*bagunça*: confusion; mess; disturbance; brawl

*barrulho*: noise; tumult; uproar; brawl

--- there are evocative expressions that describe games or rodas that become dangerously aggressive:

*Fechar o jogo*: close the game

*Jogar encima*: play on top

*Jogar para dentro*: play inside

*Trocarse pancada*: exchange blows

*Trocarse pau*: exchange blows

*Sair no pau*: fall into blows

*Quebrarse pau*: break out into blows

*Pau come*: the blows eat

*Trocarse porrada / pancada*: exchange blows

*Pegarse fogo*: catch fire

*A chapa esquentou*: the grill heated up

*O bicho pegou*: the vermin/worm bit

*Desabafar*: to vent

*Botar para fora*: to throw out; to expulse

The language of these expressions -- some of which are not exclusive to capoeira but are popular slang in Brazil -- reveal an ambiguity: they can describe both dangerous
situations to be avoided, and ones that are arousing, exciting and pleasurable. For example, when talking about whether a favela is safe to enter on a particular night, inhabitants may warn that *está pegando fogo* or *chapa esquentou* meaning that increased trafficking or police action could lead to gunfire. These same expressions --“catching fire” or “the grill (as in one full of sizzling meat) heated up” -- can also describe a sexual encounter or a steamy pagode with lots of close dancing. The popular expressions for aggressive games that use the terms *pau* also have a sexual connotation, and one that is decidedly male in register. Pau, which can be glossed as “blow,” “strike” or “sock,” refers to a wooden stick or cudgel; pau is also slang for penis. The expression *pau come* (literally “the penis eats”) evokes the male sexual act. In Brazil, positions in intercourse are distinguished between those who *comer* or “eat” and thus are in the active, dominant position (heterosexual men), and those who *dar* or “give” and thus are in the passive and submissive position (women or homosexual men). Along with the image of men battling with, or in defense of, their manhood, the sexual implications of these expressions suggest a close association, or intermingling, between violent confrontations and exciting and pleasurable encounters.

Two other popular expressions used when talking about the pleasure of aggressive games are *desabafar* or *botar para fora*. Literally translating as “to vent” or “throw out,” these expressions convey a sense of expulsing pent-up emotions. These expressions are used to describe the alleviation of the weight and stress of everyday life. In *Dangerous Encounters: Meanings of Violence in a Brazilian City* (1992), Daniel Linger analyzes the term *desabafar* in his discussion of the ambiguous pleasure of

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5 See Parker for a discussion of metaphors of heat when talking about desire and sexual activity in Brazil and the ambiguous associations with danger and violence they evoke (1991:Chapter Five)
potentially violent confrontations in the context of carnival. Within the framework of what he calls the “folk psychology” of inhabitants of a northeastern city, Linger argues that for some revelers a flirtation with violence enhances the excitement of carnival. “Dangerous encounters” between strangers on the street are culturally scripted interactions in which a “peacekeeper” steps in at the last moment to ensure that violence does not erupt. These rituals of performed violence allow revelers to desabafar within proscribed boundaries. A dangerous encounter gone awry is one in which the script is disregarded, boundaries broken and the resulting briga, or “brawl” results in injury or even death. In Linger’s final analysis, carnival is not, as is popularly construed, an experience of total freedom from social order and mores in an atmosphere of “anything goes” (cf DaMatta 1991). Rather it is a situation of “controlled release” in which revelers experience catharsis by bringing dangerous passions -- psychological and social -- under control. During a successful carnival in which there are dangerous encounters but no brawls, revelers experience the individual and society temporarily in harmony. This sense of personal control and equilibrium provides catharsis and a temporary release from the chaos and dangers of everyday life.

In terms similar to those used by Linger’s carnival revelers, capoeiristas talk about good games and rodas as ones that “heat up” (fica quente), while maintaining a “good climate” (clima boa) or “good energy” (energia boa; muito axe). Good rodas are ones in which participants experience the pleasure of desabafando, or perhaps, as we will see below, settling a score, within a relatively safe environment. The ritualized and regulated space of the roda and the presence of other capoeiristas provide such a venue. Games are allowed to build in intensity without spiraling out of control. Similar to Linger’s carnival
“peacekeepers,” other participants at the roda will intervene in a game if it threatens to explode. The most essential figure in this scenario is the capoeirista said to be “commanding” the roda and usually playing the gunga, or lead berimbau. This leader, a mestre or the most experienced capoeirista present, controls the roda through strategic use of the music (see Chapter Three). He or she can change the rhythm, thus demanding a different style of play or, as a last resort, stop the music altogether. Sometimes an aggressive game will be allowed to play itself out. In these situations the players, though desabafando, are displaying a certain level of self-regulation. An essential key to a pleasurable desabafo, then, rests not only a proper venue -- a roda in which others participants play the role of “peacekeepers” to prevent situations from exploding -- but also most importantly, on maintaining one’s own self-control. Self-monitoring allows for controlled rather than uncontrolled release, which capoeiristas distinguish with the terms jogo duro (“rough game” or “hard play”) and briga (“fight” or “brawl”).

**Jogo Duro versus Briga**

A briga occurs in a roda when one player, because of an emotional loss of control (descontrole emocional) becomes unbalanced (perde equilibro) and begins to act in an inelegant way, in a disloyal way that abandons the principles of capoeira. Because you can fight (lutar), play hard (jogar duro) within the rules of capoeira. If you want to get (atingir) your adversary, to get (acertar) him on purpose, you don’t need to fight (brigar) or digress from the rules of capoeira. If you have a jogo duro -- two capoeiristas of the same level who want to have this jogo duro for some reason using capoeira to settle an argument -- they can really play well, fight (lutar) capoeira without brawling (brigar). A briga has no rules. You pick up a bottle, a piece of wood, a chair, a gun. A briga does not have rules; a briga is a briga. -- Mestre Camisa

In Portuguese two words designate what in English we refer to as “fight”: the verb brigar, and noun briga, refer to fighting as in a street brawl; lutar and luta designate
fighting as in a sport fight such as a martial art. The expression jogo duro -- rough game or hard play -- refers to the notion of luta or lutar; capoeirista describe jogo duro as a match with objetividade, “objectivity” or “purpose.” It is a game that pushes the side of fight over play but stays within the techniques of capoeira. During a “purposeful” (objetivo) game players do not mark, or hold back on their attacks but rather deliver kicks, hand strikes and take-downs with full force. The intention is to stall one’s opponent’s counterattack, injuring him if need be. As we saw above, “proper technique” in capoeira is contested terrain. Besides the obvious infringement of the rules of pulling a weapon, generally a “hard game” slips into a “fight” when the ginga is abandoned and closed fisted punches are thrown. Top explains:

T: I have played hard in the group and I have also brawled (brigai) when it was necessary. But that is a consequence. I do not enter the roda with that intention, thinking I am going to attack my opponent (agredir meu colega). Understand. It is a consequence. I have fought in the roda, but it wasn’t my fault. If someone attacks me I am going to attack back. But a briga in capoeira happens as soon as a capoeirista disrespects the rules of the game. That is, as soon as he closes his fist to throw a punch he digresses from capoeira. If that happens, he is calling you to fight (brigar). On occasion a capoeirista has spoken badly of me behind my back and I started a jogo duro with him.

K: you mean in that case you entered the roda with the intention of playing hard because of something that happened outside?

T: Exactly

K: In that kind of situation isn’t it hard to maintain a jogo duro and not start brawling?

T: Depends. Depends on the heads of the two capoeiristas. A real capoeirista respects the game; he will play capoeira; he will play hard, but within capoeira.

Recognizing the thin line between hard play and fight, Top closes his statement by saying it “depends on the heads of the capoeiristas,” a phrase echoed in some of the
quotes earlier in this chapter. The head in capoeira is considered the site of self-control. Capoeiristas distinguish between players with “good” or “cool” heads and players with “bad” or “hot” heads. In its metaphoric use, the head is not only the seat of rational thought, but of emotions. While a game may “heat up,” and, as we saw above, become more exciting, players must keep “cool.” Capoeira, it is said, must be played with “a hot foot and a cool head”: one’s body is always ready and willing to react, but must be tempered by cool thoughts and emotions. Wolf, who as we saw above was first attracted to capoeira in order to learn how to fight more effectively, recognizes situations in which he has difficulty maintaining a cool head, and thus risks a danger in desabafando:

Every time something bad happens to me during the day and I go the capoeira in order to let it out (botar para fora), something bad happens…. So if I have a problem I prefer to hit a glove or bag, discharge my anger there. Because if I get rough with just anybody in the roda I run the risk of wanting to really kick him in order to hurt. And he blocks with his elbow and I end up breaking my foot. I do something and end up hurting myself.

Maintaining a cool head in capoeira, even when one is affected by external factors, is often couched in terms of maturity. Learning to control one’s reactions takes experience. Mestre Camisa is fond of reminding his students that “it is much easier to give than to receive”: that is to say, it is harder to receive a kick, a sweep or a take down as it demands greater emotional self-control. One must accept the attack as part of the game and continue playing, biding one’s time for an opportunity for appropriate retaliation. As one female capoeiristas explains it: “If you react on an impulse that can be a big mistake. If you keep cool and wait for the other player to make a mistake you will be able to put yourself at an advantage.” A cool capoeirista is patient; a hot-headed capoeirista retaliates immediately, the easiest recourse being to throw a punch.
Most importantly, the proper place to retaliate should always be within the roda, even if this means biding one’s time for another day, month or even year until one encounters one’s adversary again. Speedy tells of an experience with a capoeirista who violated this code of ethics in the most egregious way: playing in a roda one day with someone he did not know, Speedy claims he was showing the upper hand by marking but not striking or taking down his opponent. The other player became increasingly frustrated by Speedy’s control and his own inability to get close enough to retaliate. The game ended and Speedy took his place at the side of the roda. Moments later, the other player snuck around and, taking Speedy by surprise, knocked him out with a punch. For Speedy this epitomized a cowardly and immature act of revenge.

In my observation, a loss of cool can also result when a player does not have a mature game: that is, if a player’s physical or strategic skills do not yet match what he would like to accomplish in the roda, he may react with aggression. This is itself a kind of desabafo, a releasing of pent up frustration at not being able to command one’s body to do what one wants. It can also be a way to make up for limitations: as we saw in Chapter Three, the variety of skills that capoeira encompasses allows students to develop competency in one area if another eludes them. If a capoeirista has trouble developing a full game -- perhaps never mastering the acrobatic moves or the difficult take downs -- he may instead develop a game that relies heavily on strikes and grappling holds. This was explained to me by a mestre in the Zona Norte who had one student who had started training late in life and now, in his 30s, had a stiff and uncooperative body. He often instigated brigas in the roda by throwing a punch or grabbing his opponent. When this student entered to play the mestre would often sing a song with the refrain, “jogo bonito
que eu quero ver” (“A beautiful game I want to see played”), as a reminder to the student to temper his play. I wondered if this song did not in fact further the student’s frustration as a beautiful game continued to elude him.

When brigas occur in a roda, there are several scenarios that can unfold depending on the context of the roda and the players. The lead musician might immediately call a halt to the music and call “Iê!” as an indication for the players to end their interaction. More often than not, the signal goes unheeded and other players at the edge of the roda will step in and physically separate the two players. Sometimes the leader of the roda will indicate that the players should return to the foot of the berimbau and begin a second game. The game starts with both players on their guard. To enter the roda they will not execute a cartwheel or other movement that leaves their body vulnerable, but rather move out cautiously with a guarded ginga. Often within a few moments, the fight breaks out again. If the players manage to maintain their cool, another player will usually step in quickly to buy the game. This does not necessarily mean the exchange is over.

Capoeiristas remember every strike they receive and, as I mentioned above, often wait as long as a year for another roda in which to retaliate. Sometimes, however, especially when students are of the same level, fights are left to take their course. This might be a test to see if the students can regain their composure and return to a jogo duro. Or allowing such a game to progress might be an implicit acknowledgement that a score is being settled from a previous game or from something that occurred outside of the roda: one player flirting with another’s girlfriend; a failure to show up at an event; or a nasty piece of gossip.
That gossip can be a reason for fighting in the roda was something I heard repeatedly. In fact, I was told by a number of capoeiristas that, “gossip in capoeira is a form of violence.” Among capoeira groups, gossip is a means for building and destroying reputations. It is one way in which information circulates and keeps individuals and groups in contact (cf Maggie 1975), but it can also be a passive-aggressive venting of anger, envy and frustration, and an attempt to equalize “limited goods.” This was expressed by an Afro-Brazilian capoeirista in his twenties from the Zona Norte whose nickname, rather appropriately, means “drive” or determination.” He had recently started training for a Vale Tudo, in hopes of having his five minutes of fame. He explained to me that rivalries and gossip among capoeiristas are a result of estrelisma (“stardom”) and individuals querendo aparecer (“wanting to be seen”). He went on to explain that for poor blacks in Brazil one of the only ways to gain social mobility is by becoming a star athlete or a star performer. Gossip and rumors are feared as a way that others can counteract success. Top explains:

One of the things that gets me down (desanimar) in capoeira is the gossip. There is a lot of gossip in capoeira. A lot. [It happens] because a mestre is scared of losing students to another mestre or group that is doing well and so he tries to ruin the reputation of that mestre (queimar o perfil) so as not to lose students to that group.

Negative gossip, and the threat it brings of destroying one’s reputation and diminishing one’s space, can create the desire to physically defend one’s honor in order to maintain status in the roda, in one’s group or in a network of groups.
Defending Honor and Place and Testing Skills

Despite claiming that getting into brigas in the roda is a sign of immaturity, many capoeiristas explained to me (not without a trace of pride) that such “immaturity” is an essential phase in the development of a capoeirista. They call this period one of auto-afirmação (self-affirmation) in which a capoeirista proves his courage, skills and willingness to defend at all costs his personal honor and the honor of his mestre and group. New groups are also said to experience similar growing pains, or periods of auto-afirmação, during the process of claiming territory. Reminiscing about the epoch of Rio’s notorious street rodas in the 1970s (see Chapter Two), one mestre described the necessity of violent confrontation:

People who are saying that capoeira has to go back to being playful, like it was before, are mistaken. Because in the 1970s, if we angoleiros had been only playful, we wouldn’t exist today. Capoeira would not be what it is today. In the 70s in Rio de Janeiro we had to use violence itself, martial knowledge in order to establish Capoeira Angola….sometimes violence in capoeira has to arise in order for you to survive. You may not be a violent person, but you might need to be in order to say “this is mine, this is my house and you cannot do that here.” Sometimes violence has to arise in a roda, in a game. Because someone arrives wanting to confront you, wanting to suppress you, wanting to cause a problem with you, and you have to say “No, here I am in control (aqui quem manda sou eu).

Though street rodas do not exist in Rio in the same way that they did in the 1960s and 70s (see Chapter Two), territorial disputes between groups still exist. During my fieldwork, a capoeirista I knew from a subúrbio in the Zona Norte held a roda in a plaza near his house a few days before carnival. He was later jumped in the street and beaten up by two capoeiristas from a different group who lived in his neighborhood and whom I also knew. When I asked about the incident the aggressors explained that their victim
had held a roda in the spot where their group “traditionally” held a roda every year at carnival. They felt it was a sign of disrespect, and a challenge to their group to hold a roda in the same spot. The victim expressed to me a similar view to that of Speedy’s above: he protested that the other capoeiristas had displayed cowardice by attacking him in the street, and that to contest his right to hold a roda in a certain public space they should have confronted him and his students in the roda.

The above quote and incident are illustrative of how street rodas are a venue for claiming, conquering and maintaining territory. A mestre and his group establish their right to hold a public roda by proving their ability to defend their space. The nature of street rodas -- staged in the unpredictable, anonymous and open arena of the street (see Chapter Two) -- means that known or unknown capoeiristas may appear and challenge those in charge. These challenges, affording capoeiristas the opportunity to test their skills and defend their names, are what make street rodas particularly exciting. Also reminiscing about the late 1970s and 1980s, one of the few female capoeiristas active at this time in Rio describes a similar sentiment to the one expressed by the mestre above:

It is just in the nature of people – you know we are different groups, so we defend our group. When you get together it is a time for challenge. Not that we didn’t have challenges within our own school, you know. But it was a way to really test each other’s technique because there are so many different techniques. That is totally natural. It also happens in terms of defending one’s teacher. You know, if I don’t do well I am putting down my teacher. And we had that kind of adrenalin going. That was the excitement. We would go and everyone was saying “Yes, ok. – we need to get beat up.” You know, saying “yes! It’s fun!”

Here the pleasure of beating and getting beaten up in defense of one’s group and style of capoeira is heightened by the anonymity and “otherness” of the rival capoeiristas.

Expressed in another way, Wolf says:
Generally I don’t like to get rough (*sair no pau*) with a friend. With people I know, I don’t like to. I like to play a strong game (*mais firme*) but not a rough game (*jogo duro*). Now, getting rough with a person I have never seen in my life, now that I like (*dar vontade*). You can test yourself to see if you are well trained. You see if you are good at escaping. You see if your training is having results. If it isn’t you keep training (Wolf)

The anonymous and unpredictable theater that street rodas provide is the best place to test one’s skills as a fighter and preparedness for unforeseen dangers. Along with the exciting possibility of “dangerous encounters,” to return to Linger’s language, street rodas provide a stage for performing to a large crowd and for occupying certain city spaces. In this capacity, as I will demonstrate with a particular incident, confrontation with strangers can take on larger symbolic significance.

One summer during my fieldwork, two Afro-Brazilian instructors from a favela in Zona Sul held a weekly street roda in front of Ipanema Beach on Sunday afternoons. Part advertisement for the classes they taught at a nearby health club, the roda was also a space for performing in front of a large, exciting crowd and inviting strangers to participate. Avenida Atlântica, the wide boulevard that runs along the beachfront from Leblon to Leme, is closed to traffic on Sundays. It is a continuous parade of the tanned and well-toned bodies of cariocas and tourists jogging, biking, shopping, strolling and checking each other out, and thus a ready-made spectator public. Teaching at a chic health club and holding the street roda in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Rio gave these two instructors a sense of being, as they would joke, “playboys.” This English word has been appropriated by cariocas to refer to the young well-to-do residents of the Zona Sul who spend all their time at the beaches and nightclubs, drive nice cars and wear the latest fashion in athletic shoes and sunglasses.
One afternoon a young tanned and muscular man wearing nothing but a bright green sunga (male swimsuit) and mirror sunglasses joined the roda. After watching briefly he tucked his sunglasses into the band of his sunga and jumped in. While he seemed familiar with some of the movements of capoeira he was out of synch with the São Bento Grande rhythm and game that were being played. Furthermore, his movements and attitude were comical to the point, whether his intention or not, of mockery. He repeatedly bought the game, and the other capoeiristas were becoming visibly irritated and frustrated as they did not know how to respond. Finally, one of the instructors in charge of the roda bought in to play with him. After a few minutes of play the instructor suddenly launched a spinning kick that landed with full force on the man’s hip. The force knocked him backwards, and probably broke his sunglasses, as the kick had been directed at the exact spot where he had tucked them into his swimsuit. The young man got the message that he was not welcome at the roda, and after a few more attempts to play (perhaps to salve his wounded ego and demonstrate that he had not been intimidated) wandered off. In this episode the instructor was demonstrating his status and power within that particular arena of the roda. Perhaps aggravated by the apparently jeering attitude of the stranger, his calculated strike to damage the other’s sunglasses emphasized that although they were in the territory of the “playboys” the roda was his to command. In this incident an encounter with a stranger in a street roda afforded a particular type of desabafo: an anonymous venting of pent up frustration targeting larger social issues of inequality.

Hard play and fights do also often occur among members of the same group as a way to test skills, to defend honor and status or to desabafar. The stakes are higher in
these encounters because the two capoeiristas know each other, train and play together on a regular basis. Not only is the players’ status within the group known to everyone, but often aspects of their lives outside of capoeira are known as well. Confrontations can be sparked when a student of higher status feels challenged by a student of lower status, or by factors external to the roda. I offer several situations as an illustration. During a class I observed a male student flirting with a female student whom another student had recently begun dating. Later in the roda the two engaged in a jogo duro that quickly transformed into a briga. The two players, both of the same level and long-term members of the group, broke off the fight themselves and returned to the foot of the berimbau. They entered again and maintained a jogo duro until another player bought in. In contrast, several weeks later one of these players was in the roda with a capoeirista who had recently joined the group. A skilled and experienced player, he had just entered from another group and thus, during his period of transition, had been temporarily placed on the bottom rung by being assigned the corda crua (raw cord) given to novices. During the game this player suddenly let loose a galopante (openhanded slap) against his opponent’s ear with such force that it produced a trickle of blood. His opponent responded by pummeling him with his fists, knocking him out of the roda, and the two had to be separated and the game terminated. Later, while nursing his ear, the capoeirista told me that he had no idea why his opponent had lashed out at him. Perhaps he felt the need to prove himself to the group. It was his opinion, however, that this new student had made a grave mistake in showing disrespect for a more established member of the group. He angrily told me that he couldn’t wait to see his adversary in the next roda to settle the score. Perhaps the newcomer realized his mistake -- maybe he had just been
caught up in the moment of the game and lost control -- and was not up for the subsequent challenge; for the rest of my fieldwork he never returned. The difference between these two episodes illustrates the strength of group bonds and the importance of social ties: in the first incident the two players, who had been training with each other for many years and would continue training and working together in the future, maintained a jogo duro, using the roda as a way to settle a dispute. In the second situation, an anonymous capoeirista, new to the group, threatened the status of a more established member of the group. The more established member of the group felt no compulsion to curtail his response, as there was no pre-existing relationship. Furthermore, because his opponent was from another group, his actions were interpreted by the established member as an affront to the group as a whole.

I offer one final incident involving two female students as a way to introduce the next section that examines women’s precarious position vis-à-vis jogo duro and brigas. This incident, like the previous one, involved students of different status within the group. It also demonstrates how external factors are often implicated and played out in the roda. In this case, which took place during class in a group in the Zona Norte, Carol, a white middle class woman in her late twenties with a high cord was playing Vilma, a black woman in her forties who lives in a favela and whose cord and skill level were below Carol’s. During the roda at the end of class Vilma and Carol suddenly began screaming, pushing, shoving and socking each other. Another student stepped in to break up the fight and several other male students jeered at them, telling them to take their “cat fight” out to the street. Later I questioned both women about the incident. Carol claimed that Vilma had shown disrespect for her higher cord by hitting her in the ribs with a
marlelo (hammer kick). If this were true, it was a perfectly legitimate move, and Carol had, as capoeiristas say, reacted with a hot head. She further went on to complain that Vilma had threatened her by saying “I live in a favela and can get people to avenge me.” When I talked to Vilma, she had a different interpretation: she claimed Carol was the first to attack, hitting her with a martelo and that this was uncalled for considering Vilma’s age and lower level of skill. She went on to claim that Carol had added insult to injury by saying “you have to defer to me (baixar cabeça) not just because of my cord but because you are from a favela.” These interpretations are an illustration of the way in which class and racial divisions and the anxieties they produce are not left at the edges but rather are read and responded to within the roda. However, Carol and Vilma, like the capoeiristas in the first incident above, had been members of same group for a number of years, training together several times a week. The strength of these social ties eventually allowed them to apologize to each other for their actions in the roda, and continue to train together without further incidents.

Female Capoeiristas and Hard Play

I like to exchange blows. I don’t feel scared. I like a strong training but I don’t like to go in other people’s rodas to hurt them, to draw blood. No, none of that - just a strong, healthy training. Because, how should I put it, I feel equal to men. I like to get beat up (apanhar). I feel better, I feel more secure. [I say to myself] “today I got beat up and I cried but tomorrow I will be here again, I am going to try again and I am going to succeed.” (Gabriela)

Female capoeiristas often express similar feelings about aggressive games as their male counterparts, yet female aggression in the roda is received quite differently. Similar to male capoeiristas, Gabriela, whom we met in the last chapter, describes a tough
training as giving her a sense of release and a feeling of strength. She further qualifies her experience by saying it makes her feel “equal to men.” Yet, as with other elements of capoeira, such as sexual conduct (see Chapter Four), women are not on an equal footing with men when it comes to displaying aggression. They find themselves in a double bind: too aggressive a game will detract from their prescribed behavior as women, and too little will throw doubt on their effectiveness as capoeiristas. That female capoeiristas are expected to be less aggressive players is evidenced by the fact that, when rodas become too rough, in order to calm things down leaders will often temporarily fechar (“close”) the roda, restricting games only to female players. At the same time, female capoeiristas are perceived, by both men and women, as “naturally hot headed” and unable to maintain a jogo duro:

Women have a short fuse. They get nervous in the roda and do something stupid. Men do as well but the prejudice against women is greater. If a guy throws a punch or pulls the other guy’s hair, nobody is going to say anything. But if a woman does that everyone will say “Did you see what she did?” (Raven)

Women complain that male capoeiristas, despite their criticisms, will nonetheless often egg on, rather than break up, aggressive interactions between female capoeiristas because they find “cat fights” humorous and entertaining to watch. This was evident in the fight between Carol and Vilma in which the suggestion was made that they “take it out into the street”; the implication here was that, while fun to watch, their quarrel was inappropriate for a roda. Compounding the notion that women engage in “cat fights” while men engage in jogo duro is the claim that female capoeiristas do not know how to “keep it in the roda.” Along with allegedly resorting to hair pulling, screaming and biting, female
capoeiristas, it is said, will continue to fuel the feud outside of the roda. Male capoeiristas claim they are able to play roughly with each other in the roda and then enjoy a beer together afterwards and talk about the game. Female capoeiristas, on the other hand, are said to take rough games too “personally,” and will hold a grudge after the roda is over, refusing to interact with their adversaries or spreading nasty rumors about them.

Despite the notion that women only engage in “cat fights,” as female capoeiristas advance in their training they can become, like their male counterparts, quite skilled at and desirous of playing technically aggressive games. Due to their physical stature, women may hold a disadvantage in terms of force, but this does not bar them from being on an equal footing in terms of technique. To the contrary, less reliant on strength and speed, female capoeiristas often develop greater strategy and vision. Independent of the force of its delivery, a well-timed and well-placed kick or sweep can easily destabilize a larger, stronger opponent. In fact, that physical stature is not a determinant of playing well is celebrated as one of its most compelling aspects of capoeira: anyone regardless of size and shape can excel (see Chapter Three). Yet when a female capoeirista increases her skills to the point that she becomes a challenge to male capoeiristas, problems arise. While men may find jogo duro or a briga between two women enjoyable or amusing to watch, such encounters between a female and male capoeirista arouse different emotions. Preconceived ideas about appropriate gender roles and interactions between men and women make it difficult for many men to accept cross-gender aggression. On the one hand they may be reluctant to display aggression towards female capoeirista, and on the other hand they may equally find offensive the idea of female players showing aggression.

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6 I have seen male capoeiristas resort to such tactics and, as illustrated by Speedy’s story above, neither are they immune to taking the quarrel outside of the roda.
towards them. This can be frustrating and detrimental for female students as they advance in skills and find themselves training predominantly with men, who make up the majority of the higher level students in capoeira groups. Their training suffers if male students refuse to play a hard game with them. Males complain that they do not enjoy more “objective” games with female capoeiristas because they have to hold back so as not to hurt their partners, while their partners can play full force knowing their male partners can handle it. This rubs the male ego the wrong way, especially when a female player demonstrates good technique. Often the offense of being struck or taken down by a woman outweighs any reluctance to hit a woman, and men will use their greater force to retaliate. Raven explains:

If you sweep a guy, he is not going to accept it. He is going to become brutal with you. You see this in the academy. If a woman marks a strike on a guy, that’s it. That’s a motive to give her a kick in order to hurt or throw her out of the roda.

Another female capoeirista who trained almost exclusively with men during her formative years in capoeira expressed a similar frustration with the imbalance of power:

It is part of your growth, you know if you don’t get challenged, you are going to end up quitting because nobody wants to be treated differently. [The guys would say,] “Come and train with me because I am going to be easy with you.” I don’t want that. If I train something, I am supposed to try it too! But they would get offended. They would say “You are rude (abusiva)” joking with me but to hurt my feelings. And you know, lots of times in the roda I got kicked harder than I’ve seen any man kicking another man just because they were frustrated that I had given them a vingativa (take down) during training. They would come back with a hard strike that would knock me out.

The notion that female students should defer to male students, resisting any display of superior skill or knowledge, extends beyond the roda. In one incident an advanced female student verbally challenged a male student of the same level in class one day, correcting him on something he had said in front of other students. Later, during the
roda, he gave her a legitimate take down but applied more force than necessary, spraining her knee and preventing her from training for six months. In her opinion, he took advantage of her slighter build, intentionally applying the extra force so as to cause injury, but doing it in such a way that it did not appear that he was being overly aggressive towards a woman. In this incident the roda was an arena for the male capoeirista to retaliate against the female student’s refusal to defer to him not as a more advanced member of the group (which he was not) but simply as a male.

Attitudes about gender and aggression become particularly problematic for female capoeiristas who rise through the ranks and eventually want to teach. Raven explains:

There are some male students who respect their professor because they know that if they don’t the professor will beat them up. So I always tell them “Look, I am a woman. You are stronger than me. If you want to punch me you will hurt me. And if we are playing capoeira I am going to retaliate. But I believe you need to respect me not because I can beat you up but because I am your professor.” Fear is one thing, respect is another. One time I had this student and I was showing him a galopante (open handed strike) and I placed it on the side of his face. And he said “Are you crazy! What it this! I am a man!” He wanted to show me that I was a woman and he was a man and I had no right to do that. I told him “Look, I am explaining the strike. This has nothing to do with being a woman or a man. This is a school and I am your teacher and I explaining something to you. It is better that you learn now than get it in the street. And he said “but women don’t hit me.” And I said “no one is hitting you. I am explaining something. If you were training with a man and he hit you, you would think it was great.”… He stopped training with me after that.

In Raven’s experience, some male students want a teacher who can rough them up and cannot accept that this person could be a woman. This seems to be a common view, though on occasion male capoeiristas expressed the opinion that they would only train with a woman if she were able to prove herself physically: a young capoeirista who trained with a mestra in the Zona Norte proudly showed me a scar he wears above his
eye. He told me he received it from the mestra the first time he visited her roda. He admits that he had gone to test her, intrigued to see whether a female mestra could hold her own in the roda. Though standing no higher than 5’2 and not much more than 110lbs, the mestra knocked him down with a kick, sealing the student’s decision to train with her. For the most part however, the small number of female mestras and instructors teaching in Rio de Janeiro at the time of my fieldwork (perhaps several dozen in contrast to hundreds of male mestres and instructors) indicates that it is difficult for women to rise through the ranks of groups and, if they do begin to teach, to retain students beyond the initial stages. Many female capoeiristas resign themselves to teaching children, a traditional female occupation in Brazil, and thus not a threat to male capoeiristas. Some female instructors describe frustration and dissatisfaction at not being able develop a following of teenage and adult students as their male counterparts in Rio have done and as have several female instructors outside of Brazil.

The emphasis on training with a mestre or teacher who is physically tough is shifting somewhat as capoeira spreads around the world and as classes in Brazil become increasingly popular in the formal settings of schools and health clubs. One female capoeirista from Rio who lives and teaches in the United States explains:

Capoeira is becoming more well-rounded. How can I put it, it is at a higher level, it has higher standards today. It is as if capoeira was at the university level now and some things are not acceptable anymore. And there is no reason to go backwards. That is like saying “Oh, capoeira came from slavery, let’s go back to slavery!” No! There is no reason to go backwards, even if that played an important part in what capoeira is today. Groups understand that better and are trying to have a different approach. [Before] teachers didn’t have to be educated, they didn’t even care about school. Today you have to – it is a requirement. It is a requirement that pretty much makes or breaks a good teacher. If you are more educated you are going to be different and more doors will open for you. It is not just about doing a back flip anymore because tomorrow you won’t be able to do a back flip. What is going to count is your intellect - how much you know and if
you know how to dialogue and pass it on. And the whole thing about being a woman, being a man doesn’t count as much. Before it was like “Oh, who can beat up more” and that is why men got more support than women. Today if a woman has a better curriculum she might get the job over the guy who kicks ass! That is the big change in Brazil in terms of capoeira.

While the greater value placed on education today may be leveling the playing field for men and women in the arena of teaching capoeira, the same cannot be said for the variables of race and class. Afro-Brazilian capoeiristas from the lower classes are more likely to have little or no formal education (see Introduction) and are therefore at a disadvantage in the job market. The Third National Capoeira Congress, discussed in the Introduction, brought the politics of this issue out into the open. The fear expressed by many during the debates was that any national or state regulation of capoeira as a profession would bar the most qualified capoeiristas, in terms of experience and knowledge of capoeira, from teaching in schools and health clubs. These qualified capoeiristas, many of them from the poorest neighborhoods of Rio and with little or no formal education but who have trained capoeira for most of their lives, would lose these jobs to middle class students who have degrees in physical education but only cursory knowledge of capoeira.

In response to these threats of the regulation of the teaching of capoeira by governmental and educational institutions, many groups such as Abadá are involved in projects through which they hope to provide disadvantaged capoeiristas with some of the tools and credentials for entering this competitive job market. These projects take various forms, one of the most popular being cursos or “courses.” Such courses, held usually on weekends, offer special training in some particular aspect of capoeira: historical and sociological perspectives; pedagogy and technique; resources and strategies
for teaching particular populations such as children, senior citizens or students with disabilities; music and musical instrument manufacturing. Students who attend such courses received a certificado (certificate). These certificates are similar to ones students receive from what are called cursos superiores, open enrollment courses of higher education which are often technical training for a particular job market, or from a language school. Capoeira instructors attach these certificates to their resumes when applying for jobs.

Zumbimba, a description of which began this chapter, is one such course held every year by Mestre Camisa for his advanced students and instructors. In the next section I analyze the special weekend training retreat in terms of its explicit and implicit pedagogical agenda. The combination of pedagogy aimed at self-education and consciousness-raising on the one hand, and the opportunity to experience the volatility of bodies on the other hand, made Zumbimba a powerful experience for the participants and an intriguing event to analyze.

THE PEDAGOGY OF ZUMBIMBA

Engaged in the process of liberation, [the radical] cannot remain passive in the face of the oppressor’s violence.

I love a good fight (luta)!

- Paolo Freire (1990: 22)

-Mestre Camisa

Zumbimba, an amalgamation of Zumbi and Bimba, was the name Mestre Camisa gave to his annual November weekend retreat first held in 1999. The name symbolizes

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7 For instance, I received such a certificate from a well-established language school in Copacabana where I took a Portuguese course as a requirement for receiving a Summer Foreign Language Areas Studies Grant in 1997.
the purpose of the retreat: to commemorate the death on November 20, 1695 of Zumbi de Palmares and the birth on November 23, 1899 of Mestre Bimba. The goal of the weekend, according to Mestre Camisa, was to *resgatar* (recover) the memory of these two Afro-Brazilian heroes and reflect on their contributions to Brazilian history and culture. Zumbimba is one example of the ways in which capoeiristas evoke history and make it a central aspect of their practice. As we saw in previous chapters, the history of capoeira, intimately linked to the history of slavery and the oppression of people of African descent in Brazil, is largely communicated through origin myths, legends about famous capoeiristas, song lyrics and anecdotal explanations tied to certain moves and gestures. In the example of Zumbimba, an entire training was conceived and built around two figures central to capoeira and Afro-Brazilian history.

Zumbi was a free African born on the Quilombo de Palmares in 1665. Brazil’s largest and longest enduring runaway slave society, Palmares was an Angolan styled kingdom that existed in the Northeast state of Alagoas for most of the 17th century. Zumbi become the kingdom’s last ruler, dying in its defense. An all but forgotten historical figure left out of official history books, in the 1980s Zumbi was resurrected by the nascent Brazilian black consciousness movement. Since then he has become a widely popular symbol of African resistance and black pride in Brazil. Zumbi has also been claimed by capoeiristas as their fiercest ancestor. Despite no written documentation of the existence of capoeira on the quilombos, capoeiristas recount that Zumbi led an army of foot soldiers trained in capoeira who fought off slave captors and successfully defended their kingdom. In an updated rendition of a maculêlê song the figure of
Princesa Isabela, who signed the Golden Law of Emancipation in 1888, has been replaced by Zumbi.

Vamos todos a louvar  Let us all praise
A nossa nação brasileira  Our Brazilian nation
Salve Princesa Isabel, meu deus  Hail Princess Isabel, my God
Que nós livrou de catíveiro  Who liberated us from captivity

Vamos todos a louvar  Let us all praise
A nossa nação brasileira  Our Brazilian nation
Salve Zumbi de Palmares, meu deus  Hail Zumbi of Palmares, my God
Que nós livrou de catíveiro  Who liberated us from captivity

Here abolition, previously conceived as a gift from the monarch, is reframed as having been won through the violent struggle of Zumbi and his African warriors. In evoking the figure of Zumbi, Mestre Camisa was not endorsing the popular myths that capoeira originated on the quilombos or that it was a successful weapon against soldiers and slave captors with guns. In fact, during our discussions over the weekend Mestre Camisa pointed out the lack of historical documentation that could support such claims. Rather, in celebrating the figure of Zumbi Mestre Camisa was drawing attention to the fact that Africans slaves in Brazil did not passively submit to their oppression nor allow their distinct customs and ways of life to die out. The quilombo of Palmares, a self-sufficient kingdom that endured for nearly a century and at its height housed 30,000 inhabitants, is a vividly powerful representation of this resilience.

The second figure evoked at Zumbimba was Mestre Bimba, the founder of Capoeira Regional, the first mestre to open a capoeira academy in the 1930s, and a revered figure in capoeira history. Mestre Bimba has been called the last hero of capoeira’s “epics of heroic masculine violence” (Downey 2005) and a bridge between
historical and contemporary capoeira (Pires 2002: 37). A fierce and feared street fighter who repeatedly challenged the police, Mestre Bimba, along with Mestre Pastinha, was also a key figure in the transformation of capoeira from an illegitimate, marginalized and “violent” activity, to a legitimate, regulated and disciplined sport. Having trained as a teenager in the 1960s in Bimba’s academy in Salvador, Mestre Camisa claims direct lineage from the Bahian mestre. Though claiming that the Abadá style is derivative of Bimba’s style, Camisa contests the labeling of any contemporary capoeira style as Capoeira Regional. He believes that capoeira is constantly evolving and adapting to new social conditions and the lives of its practitioners (see Chapter Three). Therefore it is anachronistic to suggest that the capoeira trained and played in Mestre Bimba’s academy in the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s, is still in existence. The evocation of Mestre Bimba at Zumbimba was a way to pay tribute to the great mestre and for one weekend to recreate, as we will see below, some of the specific training techniques and pedagogy used in his academy.

Finally, in this discussion I argue that at Zumbimba a third figure was evoked, though unconsciously. This figure was Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who dedicated his life to fighting social inequality. Freire was born in 1921 to a middle class family in the city of Recife, the capital of one of the poorest regions in Northeast Brazil. With the economic crises of 1929 Freire’s family slipped from their middle class standing, and the poverty and hunger Freire experienced for the duration of his childhood sparked his lifelong commitment to fighting social injustice. He entered the struggle in the arena of education, where he created a radical new approach to teaching adult literacy. In the early 1960s, with the support of the then populist democratic regime, he implemented his

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8 See Chapter Two for in-depth biographies of Mestre Bimba, Mestre Pastinha and Mestre Camisa.
ideas with literacy programs in his homeland. Influenced by the Marxist theory and liberation theology popular at the time, Freire based his philosophy on a belief that while education is often put to the service of oppression, it can equally be a means to liberation. His ideas, which unite theory and praxis, are encompassed in his notion of conscientização or “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire 1990: 19). Conscientização takes place in educational projects which privilege dialogue among students and teachers and strive to introduce discussions about social and political conditions. The military dictatorship put into power by a coup in 1964 saw Freire’s ideas as revolutionary and a political threat, and he was exiled. In exile in Chile he continued to write prolifically, and today his ideas have spread around the world, inspiring movements in critical pedagogy.

Mestre Camisa is only vaguely, if at all, aware of Paulo Freire’s teachings.\(^9\) Though unfamiliar with Freirian conscientização, he nevertheless often uses the term consciência, which translates both as “consciousness” (as in consciência negra, or “black consciousness” as it is frequently used), “conscientiousness” or “sense of duty.” He urges his students to have more consciência in their work. By this he means that they should not only do socially responsible work by continuously learning about capoeira and pedagogy, but they should also educate themselves to the socio-political conditions that shape their lives and the lives of their students. Camisa reminds his students, “capoeira is

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\(^9\) After Zumbimba I gave Mestre Camisa a copy of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire’s most famous book. Without much conviction he said he thought he had heard of Freire. In her study of political agency and Malagasy youth Lesley Sharp (2002) notes a similar referencing of Freirian ideas without explicit knowledge of the educator’s work.
not just about training, playing and getting a beautiful body. It is also about knowing your place and role in society.”

Using himself as an example, Mestre Camisa urges his students to become *autodidato* or “self-taught.” Raised on a farm in the interior of Bahia and moving at age twelve to Salvador where his lifelong passion with capoeira began in Mestre Bimba’s academy, Camisa never finished primary school. Though critical of the schooling system in Brazil, he constantly reminds his students to see the value of education. As well as encouraging those who can to return to finish primary or secondary school or go on for higher degrees, he explains that anyone can educate him or herself by following his example of seeking alternative avenues for gaining knowledge and expanding consciousness. Camisa urges his students to read, to inform themselves about current events, and to converse with people better educated than they. He reminds them to take advantage of the opportunities capoeira presents with its wide draw of students. He sets the example by conversing with students on topics in which they are well versed and he knows little, and then passing on this information in class. One time, to my amazement, he stopped the roda at the end of training to talk about educator Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, asking his students what intelligences they thought capoeira engages. He explained that a student of his living in another state and studying pedagogy had sent him a newspaper article about Gardner’s theory and he had thought it applicable to capoeira.

Following his guidelines for self-education, during Zumbimba Mestre Camisa assigned us the task of teaching and learning from each other. He told us that in previous years he had invited scholars to come and speak about Zumbi, Bimba and Afro-Brazilian
history but that this year we would teach each other through dialogue. During the bate papos (“discussions”) he divided us into groups and handed out books about Zumbi and Bimba that he asked us to look over and discuss. The “study groups” culminated in the presentations of plays based on the life or teachings of Zumbi and Bimba.

In evoking Zumbi and Bimba Camisa encouraged us to reflect not only on their contributions to the endurance of African culture in Brazil but also to the socio-economic and political position of blacks in Brazil today. During one discussion he brought up what he called “Brazilian identity.” Camisa claims to be a strong “defender” of Brazilian culture: he is passionate about recognizing and celebrating the African contributions to this culture and in “defending” it from the encroachment of North American capitalist popular culture. At the same time, he is critically aware of the legacies of slavery and colonialism -- racism and economic inequality -- that continue to plague the nation and destabilize any pretenses of a “racial democracy.” Given these conditions, he noted during the Zumbimba discussion the complications of a unifying Brazilian “identity.” He suggested that the mission of capoeira was to succeed where the nation has failed: in his words, to promote “social integration” and create common “identity.”

During the physical training at Zumbimba Mestre Camisa also fostered an environment of co-teaching. As a way to commemorate Mestre Bimba and “rescue” his teaching style, classes were based around the eight seqüências, or sequences of moves that Bimba created for his students. Mestre Camisa had us create variations on the sequences and their pedagogical value. At the end of one exhausting training session, when nobody could bear to perform another sequence, one student, known for his talent as a songwriter and singer, suggested we sing the sequences, pointing out the pedagogical
value of verbal memorization. To everyone’s relief Camisa loved the idea and the class ended with various singing duels.

The climax of the weekend came on Saturday night with the *esquenta banhos* and *emboscada*, two little documented and much speculated about aspects of Mestre Bimba’s pedagogy. In Bimba’s academy the *esquenta banho* was an informal event at the end of trainings in which students engaged in more aggressive games without the ritual elements of the music and the roda. The name, “heat up the bath,” indicated its ostensible purpose of keeping students from cooling down and getting chilled while waiting to rinse off under the academy’s single cold water shower. But “heat the bath” was also, according to one of Mestre Bimba’s students, “a time to revenge a tricky sweep or an unacceptable kick during the class, and often the opportunity to experience fighting against three or more opponents.” (Almeida 1986: 118). The *emboscada*, or “ambush” was allegedly a special course Mestre Bimba held for his graduated students. Little is known about this training in “guerilla warfare” supposedly conducted in the forest surrounding Salvador (Sodré 2002: 84).

Zumbimba was a way to situate capoeira historically and within the present social conditions of oppression in Brazil and to push students to understand and incorporate hard play. The *esquento banhos* and *emboscada* allowed students to confront their desires, fears and anxieties about aggression and violence. It was an opportunity to experience the volatility and power of their bodies and to feel prepared for confrontation. It was also a means of testing their ability to control their volatility. According to Camisa, learning to fight paradoxically leads to control of aggression. As he says: “man needs to know how to fight -- the ant knows, the chicken knows, the cobra knows, the
cock knows. Man needs to know how to defend himself so as to be less aggressive and less weak.”

For the students, Zumbimba was also an important opportunity for proving themselves in front of their peers. As many told me, it was important to demonstrate not only that they were fearless but that they would “have each others’ backs” in dangerous situations. Anxieties over class status and how others perceive them were expressed to me by a number of participants. One of the fiercest capoeiristas in the esquento banho and emboscada was a 21 year old student from a wealthy family from another state. He had moved to Rio ostensibly to study law (though he was currently taking a “leave of absence”) and with his heart set on training with Camisa. He trained regularly and taught capoeira classes in several health clubs in Ipanema. He was out of commission with injuries for a week after Zumbimba. When I asked him about the intensity of his participation he told me he felt he had to prove himself:

The other guys from the favelas think I am a wimp because I am white, wealthy and educated. I have to show them I am tough, that I can have their backs in a brawl. It was the same thing when I first started training capoeira as a kid with a group in a favela near where I lived. I was always getting into brawls in the roda to prove myself.

Another white, middle class woman expressed a similar opinion. She told me she was disappointed that she had not volunteered for an esquento banho because she had been scared. She explained that several of the other female capoeiristas at Zumbimba were from favelas and therefore had an advantage over her as they “grew up fighting in the streets.” Her own sheltered childhood had not taught her how to defend herself physically. She planned, however, to train hard all year so as to be ready for the next Zumbimba.
In sum, the esquento banhos and emboscada at Zumimba pushed the outer limits of capoeira. Participants confronted their anxiety, fear and desire around violence and momentarily experienced the volatile capacity of their bodies. Like jogo duro and brigas in street and training rodas, the esquento banhos and emboscada also highlighted and dramatized status inequalities. Most immediately instigated by and representing status difference within or among groups, dangerous encounters such as these also draw on and play out racial, gender and class inequalities. In some of the examples given in this chapter, the roda is not an arena in which all difference other than one’s identity and skills as a capoeirista is eradicated -- in other words the playing field leveled -- but rather one in which preconceived notions about race, class and gender are played out and challenged.

In the next and final section of this chapter I discuss a fairly recent development in the field of capoeira: organized competitions. These tournaments introduce written rules and regulations, and the titles of winners (and losers) into the practice of capoeira. In the timed and rule-bound games of tournaments competitors are required to maintain total control of their aggression in a way that sharply contrasts with the experience of everyday rodas. The strict codes of conduct and rules of competitions are in part an attempt to truly level the playing field and create an ethos more consistent with that of other sports. This regulation and sportification of capoeira is a highly polemic issue among practitioners. In order to bring this chapter back to the larger issue of violence in Brazil I look briefly at one way in which the intersection of sport, violence and nation formation has been previously conceived.
“**OS JOGOS**”

Sport is the controlled uncontrolling of emotions
- Elias and Dunning (1986: 44)

In their study *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, Elias and Dunning explore transformations in sports and leisure activities within projects of nation building in Europe. Nations were consolidated in part through the state monopolization of the use of force and violence. Coupled to this was a process of transformation in social behavior and norms. Affecting personal habits and communal activities, this “civilizing process” stressed self-control in such areas as the physical body, aggression, sexuality, emotions and interpersonal relations. Thus leisure activities and sport became more controlled and mimetic, especially in the areas of danger and violence. For instance, in England the emphasis in fox hunting shifted from the kill to the chase, and in boxing the use of gloves over bare fists lessened injury. In this way, the pleasure shifted from the goal or victory to the “enjoyable tension-excitement of the forepleasure” (1986: 25). This tension-excitement produces a cathartic experience through the dramatization of emotions: “imaginary danger, mimetic fear and pleasure, sadness and joy are produced and perhaps resolved by the setting of pastimes" (1986: 42).

Elias and Dunning suggest that levels of interpersonal violence in sport and leisure activities vary across the social habitus of members of a society, and respond to fluxing degrees of tension and violence in society at large. They argue that when the “level of hostility and hatred between different groups rises in good earnest, the dividing line separating play and non-play, mimetic and real battles may become blurred. In such cases a defeat on the playing field may evoke the bitter feeling of defeat in real life and call for vengeance" (1986: 43).
The history of capoeira, it would appear, has involved just such a civilizing process: from the street violence of the 19th century maltas to the Vargas’ 1950s proclamation of capoeira as the one true national sport, the practice has been increasingly tamed. In the 1970s, under the military dictatorship, the regulation of capoeira was intensified and included the formation of leagues and federations and the conception and implementation of organized tournaments (see Chapter Two). The first tournament, open to all groups in Brazil, was held by the Brazilian Boxing Confederation in Rio de Janeiro in 1974. As one can imagine, the enormous variety in styles across groups created much debate over rules and regulations: everything from what rhythm to play on the berimbau, to length of games, to disqualifying movements was hotly contested. The difficulty of resolving these issues means that when tournaments are held today, they tend to be limited to one group or groups that have similar styles. Many capoeiristas are vehemently opposed to any kind of competition. Critics tend to be of the opinion that competition destroys the very ethos of the game: that overt competitiveness encourages aggressive rather than cooperative play; that the integration of music and movement is lost; that regulations and rules restrict creativity and spontaneity.

I too was rather skeptical. Having never seen a competition before, I expressed my doubts to Mestre Camisa before the Abadá National Games in 2002. As eagerly anticipated and talked about as Zumbimba each year, Os Jogos, or the Games, are competitions held since 1997 at the national and international level in alternating years. Conducted in Rio de Janeiro in August and restricted to Abadá capoeiristas, the Games include not only a two-day tournament but also a week of workshops and fraternizing. Each year they draw hundreds of students from around Brazil and the world. My first

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10 To my knowledge no Capoeira Angola groups hold tournaments.
experience of the Games came on the heels of almost a year of training and playing with Abadá students in Rio. Having seen my share of brigas, I could not imagine that competitions would not bring out the most aggressive of competition. Mestre Camisa assured me: “No, Camarão! You are going to see São Bento Grande as it is supposed to be played. During the Games a player has to accept a sweep, a take down. He cannot respond with a punch because if he does he will be disqualified. So, you will see fast, hard games without any of the mess.”

The Games are structured to encourage players to work together, even while competing, and to highlight the distinct characteristics of each game (see Chapter Three). Competitors are divided into *chaves* (“keys”) of four players. In each round the players play each of the four rhythms. Each game receives one score according to how well the players stayed within the particular characterizations of the game, showed creativity and spontaneity, kept within the rhythm and cadence of the music and executed successful attacks and counterattacks. The two players with the best scores go on to the next round, playing within a new key.

The 2002 Abadá Brazilian Games were held in the National School of Circus not far from the Maracanã Soccer Stadium in Rio de Janeiro. Inside the bigtop, that seats around 300, the energy was intense and ear-splitting. Spectators had organized themselves by states and by Rio neighborhoods, and had brought along banners, air horns and samba instruments with which to root for their fellow capoeiristas. For twelve hours the audience sat glued to its seats watching the games which were devoid of brigas. One of the champions that year was a 20 year old male who is admired for his speed and precision, but is also known to have a “hot head.” All year training with him I had
repeatedly seen him get into brigas. During the Games, even from the distance of the stands, I could see his body straining to control his reaction when he received a sweep or a take-down.

The Games are still in their infancy and much is still to be worked out. One of the problems is objective scoring. Because this is an event only for Abadá students and specific knowledge of the Abadá style is required for judging, those who judge are inevitably judging their own students against those of other judges. There is usually grumbling about favoritism each year. Another difficult area is pairing partners. The process is done randomly (only advanced students can compete so there are no novices) and many believe this is unfair and that such things as weight, size and gender should be taken into account. However, many adamantly resist this idea on the grounds that what makes capoeira different from other sports, as we saw above, is that strength and size are not determinant; creativity, spontaneity, vision and strategy are equally important.

Distinctions are made, however, in the final awards: besides 1st through 4th place champions, there are categories for each cord level and for women. Until 2006, a woman had never made it into the final round. In August of 2006 a woman in her 20s from the favela of Rocinha not only made it into the final rounds, but won 4th place overall. This is evidence not only that women are increasingly matching the skills of their male counterparts, but also that male capoeiristas are slowly beginning to accept and acknowledge this.

The winners of the Games enjoy national and international distinction until displaced by others the following year. Winners are often invited abroad to attend events put on by mestrandos and instructors living in other countries. Because of these perks
and the temporary fame of being a champion, the Games are eagerly anticipated and trained for each year. The competition is one more venue for distinguishing oneself within the growing global field of capoeira. Yet the Games constitute only one small component of the practice, lasting one week out of a year of training and playing capoeira. Many of the carioca champions of the Games told me that though they enjoy the competition, their heart and soul are in the games that occur on a daily basis in training and in rodas. The most gostoso (delicious) of all are the rodas de rua with their special mix of performing to an anonymous crowd, possibility of dangerous encounters, and taste of freedom from the restrictions and rules of the academy.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I investigated one of the most compelling and intriguing aspects of capoeira: the ambiguous tension between fight and play and the gray zone of aggression. The balance between competition and cooperation and creation of tension is not unique to capoeira, existing to various degrees in many games, sports and leisure activities. In this chapter, however, I have attempted to examine this aspect of capoeira in terms of the particular historical and contemporary conditions of structural violence in Brazil. Throughout the dissertation I have drawn on the model of “disjunctive democracy” (Holston and Caldeira 1998) as a way to think about the case of Brazil. Contrary to the model of state formation suggested by Elias and Dunning (1986), despite democratic consolidation in the political realm, levels of violence and violation of civil rights continue to rise in Brazil. Not only have crime and police violence risen but so have private security forces, fortified gated communities and vigilante death squads. The
widespread support of the death penalty (currently illegal in Brazil), the popular view that prisoners do not deserve civil rights, and the repeated defeat of disarmament referendums, most recently in Rio in 2005, are evidence of many Brazilians’ disregard for individual rights and a deep distrust in the rule of law; in a system that does not inspire confidence, protection must be taken into one’s own hands, inspiring a belief in the justified use of violence (cf Caldeira 2000).

Within the violent and instable geography of Rio de Janeiro the practice of capoeira flourishes. On a daily basis capoeiristas are confronted and affected by routine violence in the city. Sometimes expressing opinions that resonate with this notion of the “justified use of violence,” capoeiristas repeatedly told me that they see their training as preparation for life: this entails, at times, direct confrontation and defending “what is yours.” When one has little, defending the honor of one’s place in the hierarchical organization of a capoeira group, or one’s right to temporarily occupy a certain city space, take on gravity. On the one hand a place to experience a cathartic and symbolic release from the pressures and anxieties of everyday life, on the other hand the roda is an arena that dramatizes and intensifies social inequalities. Race, class and gender are not left at the edge of the roda but are brought in and played out. Jogo duro and brigas allow practitioners to test the disciplined and volatile capacities of their bodies. It is this that makes capoeira such a particularly attractive practice for many youth in Rio de Janeiro.
CONCLUSION

THE GLOBAL RODA: TRANSFORMATIONS IN PLAY

Luanda, Angola
October 23, 2002

It is the largest roda I have ever participated in. At first, just a small group of capoeiristas, we are lost in the enormous Primeiro de Maio Plaza not far from the Luanda Airport. Dusk is falling as we begin the music. Spectators slowly emerge, creeping forward to form an enormous, perfectly round circle around us. Before long there are hundreds of Angolan youth, children and adults clapping hands and singing with immense energy and jostling to see the action in the middle of the ring. Mestre Camisa speaks briefly, telling the crowd that what they are seeing “belongs to them and their land.” He then indicates to us to spread out and invite some of the spectators in to play. Children and youth jump in, spontaneously and fluidly performing the ginga and giggling as they attempt to imitate the more difficult moves. After the roda we stay in the plaza for hours talking to the crowd and signing autographs on scraps of paper and t-shirts.

As a means of closing this study, I return to the global arena, the point from which my work began. In my own spatial journey in pursuit of capoeira I have traveled from Berkeley to Rio de Janeiro to Luanda. Arguing that capoeira is a transforming and transformative social practice, in this study I have focused on how the practice has adapted and responded to changing political conditions in Brazil, and social geography of Rio de Janeiro. Through strategic use of their bodies – sometimes their only resource -- capoeiristas navigate an urban landscape shaped by the structural violence of social inequalities, negotiating class, race and gender boundaries.

Today capoeiristas are also navigating international borders. The rapid spread of capoeira around the world is accompanied by transformations in the practice and in practitioners’ relationship to it and to each other. One result from the global consumption of capoeira is a dilution of specificity. This transformation is indicative of processes of globalization that create “radical changes in our relation to goods, institutions and
practices that emerge when boundaries (territorial, social, political) that gave specificity -
- local meaning -- to life are stretched to the point where they no longer produce
specificity” (Fabian: 82). Recently, while waiting in line outside the University of
California at Berkeley’s Wheeler Auditorium to hear Gilberto Gil speak in his capacity as
Minister of Culture in Lula’s administration, I was handed a flier advertising a local
capoeira academy that read:

**CAPOEIRA**

**A Brazilian Art Form and Self Defense Martial Art**

Have you seen the movie *Ocean’s Twelve*?
Have you seen the movie *Catwoman*?
Have you seen *Only the Strong*?
Have you played the video game *Tekken*?
Ever heard of a character named *Eddy Gordo*?
If the answer to any of these questions is **YES**
then you are familiar with Capoeira!
Come to our academy today and meet
the real Eddy Gordo, one of our instructors!

Referencing Hollywood movies and Japanese video games, this advertisement appeals to
its target audience (youth) through mainstream popular culture. As capoeira appears
increasingly in movies, advertisements and music clips, it is cut loose of any regional,
cultural or ethnic indicators. On the other hand, in many capoeira academies outside of
Brazil there seems to be a concerted effort to create specificity: “Brazilian-ness” is
evoked through decorations such as Brazilian flags and murals depicting Brazilian
carnival, beaches and street scenes. The result, however, is often a generic and exotic
Brazil where the sun always shines and everybody dances samba and plays capoeira (cf

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11 In two of the three movies and the video games mentioned in the above ad, capoeira is displayed in its
most spectacular elements as a martial art divorced of any historical and cultural context. The exception is
*Only the Strong*. The story in this, the first Hollywood movie about capoeira that came out in the early
1990s, revolves around a young Chicano from Los Angeles who learns capoeira while serving in the
military in Brazil. Later, as a teacher in a public high school, he teaches his students capoeira so they can
defend themselves in gang warfare on the streets of L.A.
Travassos 2000). In other academies it is not Brazil but Africa that is evoked, allowing practitioners to experience their practice as part of a larger Pan-African world.

Along with flattened or hyper-real images of capoeira, there are also ways in which practitioners, especially youth, create new local meaning and specificity. It was in Angola that I was most struck by this: in embracing the practice, Angolan youth are in the process of transforming capoeira so that it resonates deeply with their own lived experiences. One year into my fieldwork Mestre Camisa invited me to accompany him to Luanda, where he had first traveled to present capoeira in 1992 at the invitation of a Brazilian journalist living there. The trip was cut short when the civil war, raging since the country’s independence in 1975, reached the capital. After tentative peace accords in 1996 Mestre Camisa returned with a group of students to spend a month traveling and performing. One of the students remained afterwards, living and teaching capoeira in Luanda. With the instructor’s departure after a year, the students, in their teens and early twenties, continued training on their own. Unlike Europe, the United States or Israel, where the popularity of capoeira provides lucrative incentives for Brazilian capoeiristas to immigrate, Angola offers living conditions more difficult than those in Brazil. So that while a constant stream of Brazilian capoeiristas travel to and from other parts of the world, there is little traffic in capoeira between Angola and Brazil. Mestre Camisa’s visit in 2002 was the first in four years for the young members of Abadá in Luanda, who for the most part are self-taught and trained.

I was impressed by the fierce intensity with which the Angolan youth dedicated themselves to capoeira. During Mestre Camisa’s workshops they worked hard to mimic the movement and learn the music, yet also eagerly demonstrated their own individual

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12 A version of this section on Angola was previously published in *Anthropology News* (Wesolowski 2006).
styles and performed original songs of their own composition. They peppered Mestre Camisa and me with questions about the history and development of capoeira, and organized interviews and presentations at universities and radio stations so as to reach larger audiences. The street performance they organized in an enormous public plaza (described above) drew hundreds of spectators, many of whom had never seen capoeira, yet eagerly joined the circle, clapping hands, singing, and attempting to play.

In the United States, Sweden, Poland, France, Israel or Japan practitioners might find in capoeira a way to connect them to Brazil or to the African Diaspora. In Angola, the students talked about capoeira as a vehicle for recuperating the history and traditions of their own land, devastated by a near half century of war. One of the leaders, a passionate 26-year old woman in a group of mainly young men, envisions capoeira as a tool for healing a communal wound left by civil war. She told me:

Our country experienced a huge identity crisis because of the war. Youth were lost. They did not have anything to identify with, so they were turning to North American rap and reggae and rock, looking for acculturation here and there. And then the rhythm of capoeira -- that is already in their blood -- calls them, and they see the movement of capoeira, and they hear, ‘this is yours, this was born here like you. This is your history.’ And so they become more interested and begin to find themselves in capoeira and feel that they have a place in the world.

The students created connections between themselves, their land and capoeira in a theatrical piece they presented during the batizado. The play began in an imagined past in a village of fishermen on an island that makes up part of present day Luanda. The actors performed *bassula*, a wrestling game created by these fishermen, a few of the descendants of whom continue to live and practice the fighting art in Luanda today. The play progressed to Brazil where these fishermen, now slaves, encountered Africans from other regions of Angola with different fighting techniques. Together, they melded their knowledge and skills to create capoeira as a form of entertainment, competition and
rebellion. Through their own myth of origins, the students tied capoeira to Angola, to Luanda and to their ancestors. Balú, a descendent of these fishermen expressed this positionality in a capoeira song he wrote and entitled *Terra Mãe* (Mother Land):

\[
\begin{align*}
A \text{ ilha da Luanda} & \quad \text{The island of Luanda} \\
Terra \text{ da Bassula e Kalundo} & \quad \text{Land of Bassula and Kalundo} \\
\text{É terra de mãe Kainda} & \quad \text{Is the land of mother Kainda}^{13} \\
E \text{ também seu Balú} & \quad \text{And also of Balú} \\
\text{Também tem capoeira pura} & \quad \text{It also has pure capoeira} \\
\text{No pé do berimbau} & \quad \text{At the foot of the berimbau} \\
\text{Para voce lá jogar} & \quad \text{For you to play there} \\
\text{Tem que ser bom jogador} & \quad \text{You must be a good player} \\
\text{Eu não sei como falar} & \quad \text{I don’t know how to speak} \\
\text{Não sei como dizer} & \quad \text{I don’t know how to say it} \\
\text{Na roda de capoeira} & \quad \text{In the capoeira roda} \\
\text{Quem fala alta sou eu} & \quad \text{The one who speaks loudest is me}
\end{align*}
\]

In the chorus and opening verse, the composer and singer situates deities, bassula, “pure” capoeira and himself on the island of Luanda. In the final verses, he evokes capoeira as way of transitioning from a place of voicelessness to one of voice.

Six hundred kilometers south in the former slave port city of Benguela, other youth were constructing other local ties and meanings of capoeira. After a grueling twelve hours’ journey on a road pitted by potholes that could have swallowed our jeep and edged with handwritten warning of landmines, I arrived in Benguela with a French man who was living, working and training capoeira in Luanda, and his Angolan fiancée, also a novice capoeirista. There we were met by a small group of youth interested in

\[^{13}\text{I am not sure if I accurately recorded the Kimbundo words, as I scribbled the song in my field notebook as Balú sang. Kalundo might be Kaiongo, one of the wives of Mutakalombo, god of sea creatures (Ribas 1989:179).} \]
capoeira and eager to add to their small fund of knowledge, pieced together over the past several years from a few videos, books and the occasional visits of Brazilian capoeiristas. They had also developed local resources: when I asked about their distinctive berimbaus and drums, which they played beautifully, they explained that they had made them with local materials. In the process of looking for appropriate wood to make the vergas these urban youth had explored the rural area around Benguela and established ties with a particular village. The next day they took me to this tiny village surrounded by a forest of indigenous trees that allegedly grow only in that one locale. The wood of Pau Elefante (Elephant Wood), they had discovered, had the perfect combination of flexibility and strength required to make a good berimbau. With permission of the soba (headman) and the help of his eldest son, we cut and stripped some saplings. In thanks we offered cigarettes, money and at their request (and much to their amusement and delight) a capoeira demonstration outside of their huts. Gourds from the local market completed our berimbaus, that subsequently traveled from Benguela to Luanda, Rio de Janeiro, Paris and Berkeley.

Besides igniting an interest in their own history and culture, perhaps by recuperating collective memory through movement and music, capoeira has connected these Angolan youth to a global network that provides new social and economic avenues. At the Abadá World Games in Rio de Janeiro in August of 2005, among the capoeiristas from the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East were a number of the youth I had met in Luanda and Benguela who had obtained sponsorship to attend the competitions. They spoke eagerly about their futures – some planning to stay in Brazil or travel to

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14 Along with Abadá, other capoeira groups have made inroads in Angola, largely through international NGOs and usually of short duration. The students told me that one source of information for them had been a Brazilian capoeiristas who had spent several days in Benguela with a group of Luta Livre fighters.
Europe to study and eventually teach capoeira, others planning to return to Angola to continue developing what they hope will become their own brand of capoeira.

These Angolans capoeiristas are just some of the many youth around the world who have discovered through the international network of capoeira avenues for crossing geographic, cultural and social borders. Recent studies on the impact of globalization on youth have suggested that with diminished educational and employment opportunities young people are increasingly turning to other arenas, such as music movements and gangs, for constructing meaning, forging identities and creating social ties (cf Hagedorn 2007; Maira and Soep 2005). As these arenas in turn become increasingly transnational, youth become border crossers, sometimes without leaving their neighborhoods: “often confined to ghettos, barrios, or the more affluent but equally contained world of the suburbs [youth] dance their way out of their constrictions, accessing entry in local sites to processes, practices, circuits and networks that are global in scope” (Lipsitz 2005: xi). Perhaps this is an overly optimistic view that even those who are “dancing” would endorse. A talent for dance may not materially move many youth out of the ghetto, but seeing their art form on MTV instills pride, generates visibility and “validates local cultures of space.” (2005: xiii). Still reeling from the international popularity of capoeira, many practitioners in Rio expressed deep appreciation of, and almost disbelief in, the value and prestige their practice is given abroad. Furthermore, while only a few Brazilian capoeiristas make it abroad, many are exposed to foreign capoeiristas who pilgrimage to Rio. In turn, these foreigners, largely middle class youth, are exposed to a very different Brazil from the one offered through guidebooks. Eschewing hotels along Copacabana Beach, they stay with local capoeiristas in their homes in favelas and travel
far out into the subúrbios to train. They come away with a deeper understanding of the social reality of Brazil and the lived experience of Brazilians.

With these examples from the global roda I return to the concepts of play, bodies and space that have been key to this study. My use of the emic term “hard play” re-enforces the notion that social practices, even those considered “non-serious”, “non-productive” or non-consequential” such as games, dance or sport, are always informed by relationships of power. Within the various “spheres of play” that constitute social life -- whether these be politics, economics, family, academia, ritual or sports -- the differing positions social agents occupy, and the various desires and needs they bring to the field, create ongoing struggles to maintain, manipulate, change or break the rules of the game (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 17). Such social games are in fact not dictated by imposed rules but rather are always shifting fields informed by the strategies agents bring to cope with unforeseeable change. Capoeira has provided a lens to view this in action on several levels: within the microcosm of the roda, players struggle to outmaneuver each other, using intelligence, cunning and physical prowess to claim space; within the network of groups, capoeiristas vie for territory to promote their particular interpretations and practices of capoeira; within the larger arena of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil, changing political and social conditions have positioned capoeira differently within a contested and shifting terrain of national identity.

The study has also been concerned with the lived experience of an embodied activity such as play. The roda is an arena in which to explore, through the body, various avenues for self-expression and interaction: to claim space through indirect cunning or direct confrontation; to show off; to experience a cathartic release from the pressures of
everyday life; to develop cooperative relationships and camaraderie; to forge identities; to
develop respect and cultural capital on the streets; to provoke; to test limits; to explore
aggression; to perform and challenge notions of masculinity and femininity; to
experience control and loss of control; to transform harmonic flow into volatile
explosion; to accomplish what did not seem possible. Capoeira, like all play, is not
something cut off from everyday life; to the contrary, it is a way of engaging with the
world, an arena for exploring and expanding possibilities for action, and an avenue for
self-transformation.

I close with one final story as an illustration. During my fieldwork I became
acquainted with Bobcat, a 29-year-old Afro-Brazilian capoeirista who had never
completed primary school and lived in a Zona Sul favela notorious for its drug
trafficking. Over a period of about ten years Bobcat had worked to establish himself as a
capoeira instructor in the favela where he lived and at several health clubs and a private
grammar school in the Zona Sul. Towards the end of my time in Rio a drug war broke
out between two of Rio’s rival cartels vying for dominance of a large favela in the Zona
Sul. As the situation quickly spiraled out of control, with drug traffickers closing down
business and hijacking motorists in the neighborhoods surrounding the morro, the police
were desperate to boost public confidence in their efficacy by making arrests. On a false
lead the police raided Bobcat’s house, beat him up, wrongly accused him of alliance with
one of the warring drug lords, and arrested him. The next morning his picture was on the
front page of the newspaper and all over televised national news. After several weeks in
the windowless, overcrowded, dangerous jail near the city ports, with the help of the
mother of one his students, who was a lawyer, Bobcat was released, underweight and
traumatized. Expecting the worst because of the publicity, he learned that the parents at the school where he had been teaching for five years insisted on having him back. It was not capoeira they wanted -- they could have hired any number of other instructors, complete with university degrees -- but Bobcat. Their children adored his humor and compassion and his fun, yet strict teaching. The parents and school administrators were able to look beyond the social conditions that shaped Bobcat’s life to see the person he was.

As embodied play and an enduring social practice, capoeira is testimony to the many creative and potentially liberating ways, even within the severest constraints of social inequality, in which people re-shape their bodies, themselves, and their relationships to the world and those around them.
Abadá: from the Arabic word, *aqbada* or *agbada*; long white prayer frocks worn by Muslim slaves in Brazil; stretchy white pants that constitute part of a capoeira uniform; t-shirts worn by carnival groups during parades.

Abadá-Capoeira: *Associação Brasileira de Apoio e Desenvolvimento da Arte Capoeira*; The Brazilian Association for the Support and Development of the Art of Capoeira. One of the largest capoeira organizations today with groups all over Brazil and the world.

Angoleiro: a practitioner of the style of capoeira known as Capoeira Angola.

Arame: wire cut from the inner side of a steel-rimmed car tire, used to string a berimbau.

Armar: to arm; to rig; to string and tighten the wire of the berimbau in order to play it.

Aí: cartwheel.

Auto-afirmação: self-affirmation; proving oneself.

Autodidato: self-taught.

Agôgô: two-toned clapperless bell that makes up part of the capoeira orchestra. Can also be made out of hollowed coconut shells nailed to a stick.

Axe: from the Yoruba term *asë;* life force; energy; potential; ability to make things happen; in capoeira, *axe* describes a roda or capoeirista full of positive, balanced energy.

Atabaque: drum used in the capoeira orchestra.

Bamba: tough guy; someone extremely good at what he does, usually in the area of music, dance or capoeira; sometimes also used as a synonym for *malandro.*

Bate Papo: informal discussion; chitchat.

Batizado: baptism; a ceremony observed by some capoeira groups to marks a novice’s induction into the group.

Baixada Fluminense: the poorest municipality with the highest index of homicide in the greater metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro.

Benguela: rhythm of the berimbau and a style of game characterized by flowing movements close to the ground.

Berimbau: musical bow of African origin introduced to capoeira some time in the 20th century and today the central percussive instrument in the capoeira orchestra.

Benção: a forward kick delivered with a shoving motion of the leg and landing the flat of the foot on the chest or stomach of one’s opponent.

Berimba: a tree indigenous to Bahia, the hard yet flexible wood of which is used for making berimbaus.

Bico: a variation on the benção in which, like kicking a soccer ball from which this name comes, the strike is delivered with the ball of the foot in an upwardly thrusting motion.

Botar para fora: to throw out; to expel or alleviate pent up emotions.

Brasilidade: “Brazilian-ness”; national identity; national culture.

Briga: brawl.

Brincar: to play like children.

Cabaça: hollowed gourd affixed at the end of the verga of the berimbau, through which the sound resonates.

Cabeçada: a strike with the head.

Candomblé: Brazilian spirit possession religion. Some branches syncretize African deities with Catholic saints.
Capoeiras: the title given to practitioners of capoeiragem in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Capoeiragem: an alternate name for capoeira used in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Capoeiristas: a name adopted some time in the 20th century for practitioners of capoeira.

Capoeira Angola: a style of capoeira created by Mestre Pastinha.

Capoeira Regional: a style of capoeira created by Mestre Bimba.

Carioca: resident of Rio de Janeiro.

Cavalaria: a berimbau rhythm that imitates the sound of horse hoofs and was allegedly used during the time of capoeira’s persecution as a warning of approaching authorities.

Caxixi: woven rattle held in the hand while playing the berimbau.

Chamada: ritual break in a game in which players momentarily touch and synchronize their movements while still guarding against attack.

Chula: also canto de entrada (entrance song) or louvação (praise); song with short verses and choruses sung after the ladainha.

Ciúme: jealousy; envy; rivalry.

Clima: atmosphere or climate; used to describe the feel of a place or an event such as a roda.

Comprar o jogo: to “buy the game”; one capoeirista takes the place of another player in the roda so that the games continue without stop.

Comprar a briga: to take sides in an argument; to defend someone in a confrontation.

Comunidade: community; the name for favela preferred by those who live there.

Conscientização: consciousness or conscientiousness. A central concept in Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of liberation. Through conscientização people become aware of the conditions of oppression in which they live and learn to take action against them.

Convivência: friendship, intimacy; cohabitation; an understanding of the life experiences of your companions.

Contramestre: in some capoeira groups the highest rank below mestre.

Corda: thick colored cord worn with abadá that indicates rank in some capoeira schools.

Cordel: another style of capoeira belt to indicate rank, made from thin braided cord.

Corrido: capoeira songs structured as a call and response.

Cortiço: beehive; 19th century boarding houses in Rio de Janeiro; the title of the 1890 novel by Aluísio Azevedo the action of which takes place in one such boarding house.

Churrasco: Barbeque.

Desabafar: to vent; to expel or alleviate pent up emotions.

Dobrão: the coin or small stone used in playing the berimbau.

Embsocada: ambush; special training course conducted by Mestre Bimba for his graduated students that allegedly involved guerrilla warfare techniques in the forests surrounding Salvador.

Esquenta Banho: “heat the bath”; another name for jogo duro or rough games; a custom in Mestre Bimba’s academy in which, after class so as not to get chilled while waiting to rinse off under the one cold shower, students would engage in rough play.

Esquiva: escape; dodge; evade; a defensive move in capoeira.

Favela: shantytown.

Favelado: inhabitant of a favela.
**Fechar:** to close; to restrict. A roda fechada is a roda in which only certain players are allowed to play.

**Floreio:** flourish; the acrobatic moves in capoeira.

**Formado/a:** formed; the title given to advanced students in Mestre Bimba’s academy.

**Futebol:** soccer.

**Galopante:** an open handed slap directed at the side of the head; one of capoeira’s few hand attacks.

**Ginga:** swing; hipness; cool; the most basic capoeira move, comparable to walking; a continuous swaying side-to-side step that keeps to the beat of the music and ties attacks, defenses and acrobatics into a seamless circular whole.

**Golpe:** strike; blow; attacks in capoeira.

**Gostoso:** delicious as in food, people, sexual encounters or enjoyable events.

**Graduado/a:** graduate; another name for formado used in some capoeira groups to designate advanced students.

**Gringo/a:** foreigner; can have affectionate or derogatory implications.

**Gunga:** the lead berimbau. Made with a large cabaça, the gunga has the deepest and loudest tone and keeps the rhythm with little variation.

**Iuna:** berimbau rhythm and a style of game characterized by elongated, graceful kicks and acrobatic movements.

**Jeito:** knack; habit; way of being.

**Jeitinho:** “little way”; favors given to get around bureaucracy and other social restrictions.

**Jogar:** to play, as in a game or sport.

**Jogo:** game; a game of capoeira; describes a capoeirista’s style, as in “she has a nice game.”

**Jogo duro:** rough game or hard play; a more aggressive capoeira game.

**Ladainha:** Litany; the introductory solo song that begins the song cycle in the Angola rhythm.

**Lutar:** to fight, as in a martial art.

**Macaco:** monkey; an acrobatic move in capoeira similar to a back handspring.

**Maculêlê:** a dance performed with sticks or machetes, said to have been created among slaves in the fertile plantation area of Reconcavo around Salvador and which mimics the cutting of cane; often accompanies capoeira performances.

**Macumba:** in Rio de Janeiro a derogatory term for Candomblé or Umbanda that implies “black magic.”

**Malandragem:** cunning; deceitfulness; the art of self-preservation; the code of ethics of the malandro.

**Malandro:** hustler; con artist; artful dodger.

**Malícia:** malice, cunning, mischievousness; along with malandragem, the defining ethos of capoeira that encompasses the notion of self-preservation through trickery, inventiveness and foresight. In the larger Brazilian context malícia has both a negative and positive value.

**Maldade:** evil; wickedness; badness. Malícia in its most negative manifestations.

**Maltas:** 19th century street gangs of capoeiras in Rio de Janeiro.

**Mandinga:** magic. Derives from the name of a group of Muslim Africans from the Niger Valley who, once brought to Brazil as slaves, became known as Malê, infamous for
their organized rebellion, practice of magic, and the making of protective amulets; forms part of the code of ethics of capoeira that connotes the art of survival through magic, protection and deception.  

**Manha:** swing; used to explain how the ginga, capoeira and life in general should be approached.

**Marginal:** criminal.

**Martelo:** hammer; straight kick in capoeira similar to a roundhouse in Asian martial arts.

**meia lua de compasso:** a spinning half moon kick; one of capoeira’s most singular and dangerous attacks.

**Médio:** the middle size berimbau that plays the inverse of the gunga rhythm.

**Menino da rua:** a child who lives in the street.

**Mestre/a:** master. Top rank in capoeira.

**Mestrando/a:** in some capoeira groups the highest rank below mestre.

**Moleque:** urchin; a rather derogatory label most often applied to street children.

**Morro:** hill; the name inhabitants of Rio’s Zona Sul favelas often use when referring to where they live.

**Navalhas:** straight razors used by 19th century capoeiras.

**Negativa:** “negation”; “refusal”; a defense in capoeira in which the body is held close to the ground to avoid an incoming kick.

**Negros de ganho:** Slaves who were hired out by their owners to work for others.

**Pagode:** a style of pop samba played with electric instruments. Also refers to a gathering of musicians to play acoustic music, often accompanied by dancing.

**Palmares:** the largest and most famous Brazilian quilombo that endured for most of the 17th century in the Northern state of Alagoas and at its height had thousands of inhabitants.

**Pandeiro:** tambourine used in the capoeira orchestra, usually made from wood and animal skin.

**Pau:** wood; a wooden cudgel; slang for penis; slang for a blow or strike.

**Ponteira:** another name for a bico.

**Povo:** people of the popular classes.

**Porrada:** slang for a blow or strike.

**Puxada de rede:** a folkloric dance performed to drumming and mimicking the collective rhythmic work of pulling in a heavy fishing net.

**Quilombo:** runaway slave societies that existed throughout Brazil in urban and rural areas from the 17th century until abolition in 1888.

**Rasteira:** a sweep; one of capoeira’s most characteristic take-downs.

**Reco-reco:** instrument in the capoeira orchestra that consists of a notched stick or gourd across which a stick is dragged.

**Roda:** wheel; ring; physical space in which capoeira is played; the event of bringing capoeiristas together to play.

**São bento grande:** berimbau rhythm and a style of game characterized by high, fast kicks and take-downs.
Saudades: intense yearning or longing for something or someone; nostalgia; melancholy.
Senzala: slave barracks on the sugar and tobacco plantations; name of one of the largest capoeira groups that formed in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s.
Subúrbios: suburbs; predominantly working class and poor neighborhoods.
Telenovela: extremely popular prime-time Brazilian soap operas.
Terreiro: Candomblé house of worship.
Tesoura: scissors; a take down in capoeira that involves “scissoring” one’s opponent’s body with one’s legs and twisting so as to cause a fall.
Tocar: to play a musical instrument.
Toque: rhythm of the berimbau.
Umbanda: spiritist religion popular in Rio de Janeiro that blends elements from Candomblé, Catholicism, Kardecism, mysticism and Eastern Religions.
Vadiar: to bum around; to hang out; to be idle.
Vadiação: idleness; another name for capoeira, especially popular in the early 20th century.
Valentia: courage; bravery.
Vagabundo: vagabond; in Rio a derogatory term for a man with no job or occupation; a “good for nothing.”
Vale Tudo: anything goes; the name of “no holds barred” ultimate fighting competitions.
Vaqueta: the long, thin stick used in playing the berimbau.
Velha guarda: Old Guard; a term of respect for the older generation of samba musicians or capoeiristas.
Verga: the body of the berimbau made from a long stick about an inch in diameter and 4-5 feet long.
Viola: the smallest berimbau that plays many variations.
Vestibular: college entrance exam.
Volto ao mundo: go around the world. A break in the action during a game in which the two players walk or jog counter clockwise around the inside of the roda before commencing play again. Can be used to indicate that a “point has been scored” or to catch one’s breath. This term is also invoked during the chula to indicate that the players waiting at the foot of the berimbau should enter the roda and begin playing.
Zona Sul: South Zone; the wealthy beach front residential neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro.
Zona Norte: North Zone; working class and poor industrial suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.
Zumbi: 17th century African king who ruled the famed quilombo of Palmares; today a popular symbol of Afro-Brazilian pride and cultural resistance.
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Lock, Margaret.  

Lutz, Catherine A.  

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Maggie, Yvonne.  

Mauss, Marcel.  

Meade, Theresa A.  

Mello e Souza, Maria Cecilia de.  

Mendoza, Zolia S.  


Needell, Jeffrey D.  

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Novack, Cynthia.

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Ortner, Sherry B.

Parker, Richard.

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Sassen, Saskia.  

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy.  

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Sharp, Lesley.  

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Zarrilli, Phillip B.

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APPENDIX A
MAPS OF RIO DE JANEIRO

“La France Antarctique” 1666 Map of Rio de Janeiro.

Source: www.brazil.com/riomaps.html
19th Century Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro’s 19th Century Capoeira Maltas

Rio de Janeiro Today
APPENDIX B
CAPOEIRA INSTRUMENTS

BERIMBAU
with caxixi, vaqueta
and dobrão

ATABAQUE

APPENDIX C

RECO-RECO
**RIO DE JANEIRO CAPOEIRA FEDERATION GRADUATION SYSTEM**

The first official graduation system, which used colored belts to designate level, was designed in 1972 by Mestre Mendonça and adopted by groups of the newly formed Capoeira Federation of Rio de Janeiro. Belts, called *cordéis*, are made out of braided nylon or yarn. They are strung through the belt loops on capoeira pants and knotted on the right side, the free ends hanging down to the knees. The colors mirror those of the Brazilian Flag moving from the edges to the center: green, the bottom rung on the hierarchy represents an “unripe” or “immature” novice (personal communication Mestre Mendonça). Groups of the Federation, the majority of which reside in the Zona Norte, use this system. Other groups across Brazil and abroad have adopted it with or without modifications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLOR</th>
<th>LEVEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No cordel</td>
<td>Iniciante: Un-baptized Beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verde: Green</td>
<td>Baptized Beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verde / Amarelo: Green / Yellow</td>
<td>Aluno: Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amarelo: Yellow</td>
<td>Aluno: Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azul: Blue</td>
<td>Graduado / Formado: Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azul / Verde / Amarelo:</td>
<td>Contramestre: Assistant Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue / Green / Yellow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branco / Verde: White / Green</td>
<td>Mestre: 1st degree Master (10 years)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branco / Amarelo: White / Yellow</td>
<td>Mestre: 2nd degree Master (20 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branco / Azul: White / Blue</td>
<td>Mestre: 3rd degree Master (30 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branco</td>
<td>Mestre</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* time designation is not usually adhered to, evident in the fact that many mestres who are at the 3rd degree or higher are in their 40s.
ABADÁ-CAPOEIRA GRADUATION SYSTEM

The second graduation system to be implemented in Rio de Janeiro was that created by the Senzala group. This system continues to be used by Senzala and Abadá and many other groups have adopted the systems with modifications. This system differs from that of the Federation in name, material and number of belts. *Cordas* (cord) are made from cotton cord of a ½ inch diameter the ends of which are frayed and tied into a *no de rosa* (rose knot). The cord is doubled, threaded through the belt loops of the capoeira pants and secured with a *boca de lobo* (wolf-jaw knot) on the left side with the loose ends hanging to the knees. The cord colors designate phases in the apprenticeship with two-toned cords representing transitional stages. The 17 distinct cords (as opposed to the Federation’s 9) allow students to change cords almost every batizado, with the rate slowing down after becoming a graduated student (for example the transition from professor to mestrando may take ten years. The song on the next page describes each phase in the apprenticeship as conceptualized in the Abadá philosophy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLOR</th>
<th>LEVEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Crua</em>: Raw</td>
<td><em>Iniciante</em>: Unbaptised beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Crua / Amarela</em>: Raw / Yellow</td>
<td>Baptised Beginner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Amarela</em>: Yellow</td>
<td><em>Iniciante</em>: Beginning Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Amarela / Laranja</em>: Yellow / Orange</td>
<td><em>Aluno</em>: Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Laranja</em>: Orange</td>
<td><em>Aluno</em>: Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Laranja / Azul</em>: Orange / Blue</td>
<td><em>Aluno</em>: Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Azul</em>: Blue</td>
<td><em>Graduado / Formado</em>: Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Azul / Verde</em>: Blue / Green</td>
<td><em>Graduado / Formado</em>: Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Verde</em>: Green</td>
<td><em>Graduado / Formado</em>: Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Verde / Roxa</em>: Green / Purple</td>
<td><em>Instrutor</em>: Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Roxa</em>: Purple</td>
<td><em>Instrutor</em>: Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Roxa / Marrom</em>: Purple / Brown</td>
<td><em>Professor</em>: Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Marrom</em>: Brown</td>
<td><em>Professor</em>: Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Marrom / Vermelho</em>: Brown / Red</td>
<td><em>Mestrando</em>: Becoming a Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vermelho</em>: Red</td>
<td><em>Mestre</em>: Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vermelho / Branco</em>: Red / White</td>
<td><em>Grande Mestre</em>: Great Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Branco</em>: White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX D:
PHOTOGRAPHS
(all taken by Katya Wesolowski)

Figure 1 & 2: The Roda

Figure 3 & 4: Waiting to play “buy the game” at the foot of the berimbau

Figures 6, 7 & 8: The Chamada in a Jogo de Angola

Figure 9-12: Different Styles of Ginga

Figure 13 & 14: Different Styles of Negativa
Figure 15 & 16: Jogo de Benguela

Figure 17: A floreio during a game

Figure 18: Playing Instruments in Benguela