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## History, Community, Corporeality: Uses of Capoeira for Two Groups of Practitioners

The art form known as Capoeira defies easy definition. It has been characterized as a dance, a martial art, a sport, and a game. Known as the national sport of Brazil, and having developed among the African slave populations during Portuguese colonial rule, it is historically composed of a cultural mixing. Having been incorporated into Brazilian mainstream notions of nationality, it has now spread across the globe to develop within communities abroad. My interest is in exploring the articulations of Capoeira consumption for members of two communities of practitioners located in the United States. The first community located in San Francisco, California is called *Abada Capoeira SF*. The second located in Austin, Texas is called *Luanda Capoeira*. Through ethnographic observation and online interviews, I examine how the practice of capoeira reveals articulations of identity and how forms of mediation help shape these articulations, specifically through use of the Internet. In this paper I argue that the practice of capoeira has become a global phenomenon which has allowed members of practicing communities to articulate gender, sexual identification, and alliance that contrast with mainstream western understandings of these notions. In the first part of the paper, I lay out the theoretical framework of the work. In the second, I give historical background to the manifestations of the practice. In the third, I outline my methodology and findings, which includes an analysis of the music of capoeira, and examples of how capoeira is used to re-articulate identity formations.

**Theoretical framework:**

Within the competing forces of the postmodern condition of globalization, Arjun Appadurai's description of the various "flows" and the particularities of their influence are helpful in setting the stage for the practice of capoeira within a global framework. Particularly useful is his notion of "ethnoscapes," or the flow of people as they migrate according to the "financescapes," which are the flows of money that make certain regions more palatable for financial gain. For example, the flow of Brazilian migrants to Western nations as they follow the financial opportunities of teaching abroad helps to explain the prevalence of Capoeira in western locations. Further, in the proliferation of technologies and the flow of ideas through these technological means of transmission, Appadurai's mapping of the mediascapes and technoscapes is helpful in understanding flows of ideas and images. The flow of popular imagery in relation to capoeira is reflective of the mainstream movies that utilize capoeira either marginally or centrally, along with video games such as *Capoeira Street Fighter* (downloadable on the Internet), and Internet sites dedicated to instruction in the basic movements of capoeira. The flow of YouTube clips depicting capoeira movement reflects the movement of the practice across territorial boundaries. Similarly, the use of online networks by capoeira members demonstrates Appadurai's theory of the flow of ideas through proliferation of the technologies of communication. Several of the practitioners I interviewed mentioned seeking out capoeira classes abroad through use of the internet in order to attend classes while traveling; indicating the ways in which internet sites and networking provide accessibility to communities across the globe.

Central to the theoretical framework of this piece is Stuart Hall's articulation theory mapping how identity production varies in relation to local and global networks and historical positionality. (Hall, 1997). Articulation theory is particularly useful in the analysis of capoeira because of the global reach, and the diversity of populations participating in the practice. Articulation theory helps to map the different sphere's of influence that inform any one practitioners particular uses of the art form. Hall's discussion of hegemonic incorporation is helpful in understanding the institutionalization of capoeira as it transitioned from an illegal practice to a performance constitutive of national identity. Incorporation is also helpful for understanding the new forms that capoeira has taken as it has been marketed globally. Specifically Hall's notion of ruptures within hegemonic incorporation helps us recognize the ways in which practitioners can use the art form to articulate new and resistant forms of identity.

Articulation has been defined as an epistemology, a political move, and a strategy (Daryl Slack, 1996). Most basically, articulation can be understood as the process of linking disparate elements within a particular location in time, and within a specific historical framework.

[Any one articulation] carries with it 'traces ' of those forces in which it has been constituted and which it has constituted. To understand the role of articulation in cultural studies is thus to map that play of forces, in other words, to track its development genealogically( Daryl Slack, 114).

Therefore, a historical positioning of the forces at play within the practice of capoeira within communities that are situated in North America can be done through the use of articulation theory.

Because of the very corporeal nature of the practice of capoeira, Judith Butler's notion of vulnerability as it relates to embodiment, and how this is articulated within

different locations and communities of consumption lends itself to this study. Butler outlines in her book *Precarious Life* how physical vulnerability is variable, and dependant on elements of identity such as gender, race, nationality, and sexuality. Butler writes,

This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and Vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure (P.20)

Locating political violence within the framework of the body, her analysis is helpful for understanding the ways in which capoeira is used within specific communities as a form of articulating forms of resistance within a continuum of vulnerability.

### **Historical background:**

In Stuart Hall's work he outlines how elements of marginal practices can be absorbed into the national narrative in order to incorporate and thus pacify formerly subversive practices, referring to this as a hegemonic move (Hall, 1997). He goes on to explain that while hegemony consistently needs to work to absorb subversive cultural practices, ruptures continually occur within which rearticulated forms of resistance arise (Hall, 1996). The historical trajectory of capoeira reveals these processes described by Hall in its transition from a marginalized practice, to an illegal practice, to a national project, and ultimately, to a global phenomenon.

The very origin of the practice is a disputed topic to this day. Many think that Capoeira began in Africa, more specifically Angola (Capoeira, 2002). Others, while not

denying that it is a practice that began within communities of slaves native to Africa, claim that the practice of Capoeira began in Brazil. (Assuncao, 2005) Those who hold this opinion often take care to provide continuities between aspects of the practice and cultural production in Africa, such as the undeniably African influenced rhythms of the music. Similarly, many of the movements can be traced back to those found in certain African dance forms (Downey, 2005, Assuncao, 2005).

Regardless of the debate over which country saw the first manifestations of capoeira on Brazilian soil, most scholarly work agrees that the history of the practice can be categorized into three important periods of development. The first began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during Portuguese colonial rule. This is characterized by the importation of African slaves from mostly West Central Africa. This phase lasted up until emancipation of slavery in 1888 (Capoeira, 2002, Ebony Rose, 2008, Maya 2008, Wesolowski 2007).

This first part of capoeira's history is shrouded in myth (Assuncao, 2005), often because of a lack of formal documentation. (Lowell, 1992) some of the more prevalently circulated myths are that many of its basic movements do not require the use of the hands, because of the way that slaves hands were bound. Another is that the dance-like aspect of the practice was used to disguise the martial art component from plantation owners. Yet another significant myth is that capoeira originated and was spread from its inception in the quilombos (communities of escaped slaves) and in particular the quilombo of Palmares, a famous community made up of thousands of slaves (Capoeira, 2002). This last myth has been further emphasized in the music of capoeira where mention of Palmares, and of Zumbi, a famous escaped slave and king of Palmares, are re-invoked as the original sites of capoeira. The narrative of Zumbi and the founding king

Gagazumba within the quilombo of Palmares is further embellished in the movie *Quilombo* that depicts escaped slaves who practice capoeira for self-defense purposes (*Quilombo*, 1984). Regardless of the myths in circulation, most scholars agree that in its initial phase, African slaves practiced capoeira exclusively (Talmon-Chvaicer, 2008, Assuncao, 2005, Downey, 2005).

The second phase of capoeira began post-emancipation in Brazil in 1888. In 1892 the republic's first penal code declared capoeira to be illegal. (Capoeira, 2002, Mattha Rohrig, 2005, Maya, 2008) During this period, capoeira was attributed to lawlessness, violence and vagrancy. Capoeiristas banded together in warring groups called Maltas and were known to fight each other for territory while consistently defying the police. Those who were caught were severely punished by public floggings and imprisonment (Talmon-Chvaicer, 2008, Assuncao, 2005).

The third phase occurred when Brazil, grasping for a national identity, elevated capoeira to the status of a national sport (Capoeira, 2002, Wesolowski, 2007). Central to capoeira's inscription in the narrative of nationhood was its decriminalization, which was awarded in 1937, during the presidency of Getulio Vargas (1951-1954) (Assuncao, 2005). Regulation of capoeira was achieved largely through the work of Manuel dos Reis Machado; know as Mestre Bimba and Vincente Ferreira Pastinha (Mestre Pastinha). Bimba is said to have created the style of capoeira known as Regional, and Pastinha the style known as Angola. Both men strived to disassociate capoeira from notions of lawlessness by creating academies, which sought to create standards and norms of capoeira within institutional settings.

Bimba is known for having combined capoeira with different styles of martial art, notably the Asian martial art of Ju-Jitsu. His goal was to sanitize the art form through the production of regulation and the introduction of uniform techniques of instruction. (Wesolowski, 2007). This attempt at regulation created a storm of protest, arguments over loss of tradition, and debates over authenticity related to issues of class and race that continue to this day. Similar debates often arise between practitioners of the two different styles: Regional and Angola, where Angola is hailed as having more emphasis on tradition, in comparison to Regional that is more self-consciously hybrid. Narratives of authenticity that emerge in debates between the two styles continue to propagate. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the style of capoeira known as regional.

The global production and consumption of the cultural practice of capoeira has many implications, particularly in relation to class, race, and nationality (Wesolowski, 2007. Joseph, 2008, Assuncao, 2005) and, I would argue, sexuality as well. The historical development of Capoeira and its growing popularity abroad has led to many conversations over notions of authenticity, debates that wrestle with the implications of cultural hybridity and cultural purity. As opposed to those who would celebrate all forms of hybridity in a sort of post-modern free for all, many theorists attempt to root these movements of cultural expression within historical frameworks (Shohat and Stam, 1994, Hall, 1996, Gilroy, 2008, Maira, 2000).

Janelle Joseph, in agreement with the fallacy of pure cultural production, outlines the various ways that authenticity is marketed to a capoeira group she observed in Canada. She writes, “the suggestion that there is a single, fixed, real capoeira in Brazil or anywhere else is a fiction”(500). As mentioned above, the form of practice known as

regional is itself a hybrid art form, combining aspects of African dance, African martial art, and Asian marital art. Reflecting Joseph's concept of capoeira as an unfixed practice, Mestre Camisa, who studied under Mestre Bimba, articulates the fluidity of capoeira in his 1997 mission statement.

It [capoeira] is a living expression of the liberty of a people and so we believe it 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 (Cited by Wesolowski, 137).

Although attitudes around notions of authenticity differ depending on the school and the Mestre, the practice of capoeira reflects this fluidity while still maintaining certain consistencies.

Janelle Joseph analyzes the different motivations for practicing capoeira depending on racial and ethnic identification. Within a particular school, she locates tropes of authenticity used to package and market the practice to Canadian consumers. Part of her analysis of white consumption outlines an exoticization or flattening out of difference for the benefit of Western consumption. This part of Joseph analysis reflects that of other theorists, who argue that certain forms of appropriation reaffirms hierarchies of dominance (Hooks, 1992, Hall, 1995, Joseph, 2008, Maira, 2008). Associating the practice of capoeira with white Western eroticization of the other, Joseph uses the metaphor of tourism to trace the uses of capoeira as an exotic form of white self-realization.

Conversely, in another study done on the same group, Joseph outlines the multicultural possibilities of the practice of capoeira. She locates her analysis within the confines of three main groups of consumers: Brazilian immigrants, black practitioners



and white Canadians. Acknowledging the historical significance of systems of dominance as they relate to white appropriation, she writes of the shifting of identities within the contact zone of capoeira as a potential venue for a “racialized democracy”(Joseph, 2005)

### **Methodology:**

My method of research is as a participant observer. I have been training in Capoeira for just under four years, in several locations and abroad. I use the experiences I’ve had to place capoeira within these theoretical frameworks. I will focus primarily on two different locations within the United States, as I continue to maintain ties to both schools. The first location is in San Francisco, California with a group named *Abada Capoeira*. The school is taught and run by Menstranda Marcia Cigarra, a Brazilian native of mixed race. The second group, which is located in Austin, Texas is run by Seitu Beck, an African American man from Houston, Texas.

Through use of a survey sent through the *Abada* email network, I asked the age, race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation of participants. Next I asked three basic questions about the personal uses of Capoeira in the lives of practitioners. This included, “What is the history of your practice and how were you introduced to it? What are the most important aspects of Capoeira to you, and how do you incorporate them into your life? Do you use the internet for any purpose related to Capoeira?” Because I was located in Austin, Texas at the time of my research I was able to do more follow up on questions asked to practitioners. I captured participants responses through use of an audio recording device.

**Findings:**

Abada Capoeira is located in SF, California and has been run by Menstranda Marcia Cigarra since 1991. Marcia is a very established member of the capoeira community, both within SF and internationally. She is one of the few female capoeiristas to have reached the level of Mestranda (a very high level within the cord hierarchy), and over the years, she has gained a strong base of capoeira practitioners. The studio is located in the Mission district of SF. It is large and well kept, with a springwood floor<sup>1</sup>. A significant percentage of practitioners at this school have been training for many years, achieving high cord levels that reflect their skills. *Abada San Francisco* is known for its highly skilled players and is therefore asked to perform in citywide events, boasting over 500 performances at ticketed venues, schools, outdoor performances and cultural events. Having trained there for several years, I can attest to the seriousness with which the practice is taken. However, although there are many opportunities for financial assistance, classes are expensive, costing fourteen dollars a class.

The group *Luanda*, located in Austin Texas, contrasts with *Abada*. Instructor Seitu Beck (known as Feijao)<sup>2</sup>, although very skilled, has not yet reached the status of Mestre. His group has just solidified its regular practitioners, having only begun a year ago. Accordingly, practitioners are novices, though very devoted. Classes are held in a community center in East Austin in a small studio whose floor is not very amenable to bare feet. This causes many blisters on ailing practitioners. Classes are very cheap by

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<sup>1</sup> A sprung floor is a floor that absorbs shocks giving it a softer feel. Such floors are considered the best available for dance and indoor sports and physical education. They enhance performance and greatly reduce injuries.

<sup>2</sup> All capoeira practitioners will receive a nickname at some point in their practice. The giving of nicknames is an interesting process in itself, but is out of the scope of this paper.

capoeira standards. Forty dollars for students gives an unlimited access to classes for the entire month, while non-students pay sixty dollars a month.

Both schools generally have similar structures to their classes. Warm ups, including stretches and basic moves are preceded by an hour of heavier training of different isolated moves, either alone or in pairs. At the end of the class, several members get musical instruments and the rest stand in a circle creating a *roda* (meaning literally : circle). Capoeira songs are sung in Portuguese in a call and response form with lead singers rotating among practitioners. Two players squat at the base of the Berimbau (the stringed / percussive instrument used in Capoeira rodas) and begin to “play” each other. A third player then squats at the berimbau, enters into the circle, and trades into the game, to which one of the former players will return to the circle. Another will enter in the circle and this rotation continues until the instructor deems the game should end. The game includes an exchange of kicks, escapes and acrobatic moves that form a sort of dialogue between players. This dialogue can take on many different forms depending on who is playing. The interaction can be playful, demonstrative or aggressive. Classes in both schools end with the teacher saying a few words, after which students will hang out and socialize before going home.

### **Music**

The emphasis on knowledge of music is a defining aspect of the practice of capoeira. Most interviewed from both groups stated that a large draw to the art form for them is the musical aspect of capoeira. Almost everyone interviewed spoke of going online to find lyrics to songs, translation of lyrics and to listen to the songs themselves.

Because Luanda is such a small group, the limited amount of practitioners requires that more members devote time to learning music.

The production of songs in both groups points to a level of engagement with capoeira history. Overall the songs are narratives used to tell the history of slavery and resistance in Brazil. They also serve to foreground historical figures such as Zumbi, and Gagazumba, famous escaped slaves of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Because of the themes depicted in the songs sung during rodas, the music of capoeira reflects descriptions of the diasporic genre. As John Connell and Chris Gibson describe in their piece *A World of Flows* the music of migrant populations reflects “themes such as solitude, homesickness, nostalgia, unemployment, racism (and other hardships)” (161). Demonstrating these themes, the music of Capoeira deals with the fact of forced migration, and the need to conserve an alternative history within the constraints of a hostile and racist environment. Another theme of diasporic music is the need to formulate identity, a way to literally and figuratively be heard within a context of harsh oppression, and erasure, as a necessary response to impoverished conditions. (Connell et al. 2003). Similarly, the music heard within the spaces of rodas reflects these themes of memory conservation, counter-narratives of history, and struggles with the harsh trials of racism or poverty.

In his piece *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy writes of diasporic cultural production as imbricated in the history of the Middle Passage. Within this production is a prevalence of imagery related to ships, oceans and travel, as it reflects forced migration, displacement, and longing, as well as the notion of return, and the circulation of ideas

(Gilroy, 2003). The music of capoeira is haunted with images of the ocean, of sailors and ships, as in the case of the following song.

Eu Não Sou Daqui marinheiro Só eu Não Tenho Amor marinheiro Só eu Sou Da Bahia marinheiro Só De São Salvador	I'm not from here Only a sailor I have no one to love Only a sailor I'm from Bahia Only a Sailor from Sao Salvador
ô, Marinheiro Marinheiro marinheiro Só ô, Quem Te Ensinou A Nadar marinheiro Só ou Foi O Tombo Do Navio marinheiro Só ou Foi O Balanço Do Mar	Oh sailor, sailor Only a sailor Who taught you to swim? Only a sailor Or he fell from the ship Only a sailor Or he balanced on the sea

Other songs depict narratives of the Middle Passage and the African diasporic influence on mainstream Brazilian culture. A song that reveals this memory is one entitled “Slave Ship”:

Que navio esse que chegou agora o navio negreiro com os escravos de Angola vem gente de Cambinda Benguela e Luanda eles vinham acorrentados pra trabalhar nessas bandas	Whose boat is that That arrives now A slave ship With slaves from Angola Came people from Cambinda Bengula and Luanda They came chained To work in the fields
faith aqui chegando no perderam a sua fe criaram o samba a capoeira e o condumble	Here they arrived, they didn't loose They created samba Capoeira and cundumble
acorrentados no por o do navio muitos morreram de banzo e de frio	Chained, in the bottom of the ship Many died of sickness and cold

As Gilroy writes:

Artistic expression, expanded beyond recognition from the grudging gifts offered by the masters as a token substitute for freedom from bondage, therefore becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation. Poiesis and poetics begin to coexist in novel forms – autobiographical writing, special and uniquely creative ways of manipulating spoken language, and above all, the music (75).

Thus the music of capoeira regularly invokes this struggle for identity within the constraints of slavery, the trials of dislocation and the erasure of history. The production of music in capoeira communities, and encouragement to either learn Portuguese or translate the lyrics, reveals the level of engagement of practitioners with this history.

Several scholars of capoeira describe it as a practice that appeals to diasporic communities (Assuncao, 2005, Talman, 2008). a large percentage of practitioners in San Francisco identified with more than one nationality and many had migrated from abroad. The lyrics to a popular capoeira song *Noa sou daqui* claims: “Capoeira, I’m not from here. I’m from another place”. The production of capoeira music that expresses sentiments of displacement, longing and “the homeland” reverberate within diasporic communities in the United States. Additionally, engagement with these lyrics within the two communities I examined depended heavily on uses of the internet, reflecting the spread of diasporic cultural production within the frameworks of Appadurai’s notion of “mediascapes” and “ideoscapes”.

### **Bodies: Mastery, fitness and re-articulation:**

Nearly everyone I interviewed expressed a changed relationship to his or her body as a result of capoeira. Long-term practice of capoeira leads to what practitioners

articulated as heightened “body intelligence” (Wesolowski, 2007). What body intelligence refers to is the need to foster quick reactions, and the ability to perform difficult maneuvers such as flips, inversions and handstands. It also attests to the learned skill of reading the body language of others, as the interaction found in the play of capoeira is often characterized as a dialogue. Among those interviewed, emphasis on the body varied from overt expressions of heightened body awareness, to pleasure in mastering specific movements, to an emphasis on health and fitness.

Mastery of many of capoeira’s movements is difficult, and for some, impossible. Pleasure in relation to finally achieving a difficult movement is a strong motivation for those who practice capoeira. Although mastery of movement requires dedicated practice, many supplement this work with YouTube clips. Uses of the internet to observe and mimic particular moves were ubiquitous among all those interviewed. Some sites provided step-by-step instructions for certain movements.

The proliferation of websites dedicated to explaining or demonstrating capoeira movements are global in scope reflecting the “mediascapes “ and “technoscapes” (Appadurai, 2005) as they relate to the spread of images that represent capoeira movement. As observing capoeira movement does not require the use of spoken language, many of those interviewed watched YouTube clips that showcased instructors from Japan, Mexico and Brazil revealing the traffic of capoeira movement as represented in YouTube clips as global in scope.

Because observation of capoeira movement translates into alterations in practice, this flow of information has caused some discomfort among teachers of capoeira. Often, instructors will warn students against watching movement online, as they claim it can

interrupt progress and potentially encourage faulty technique according to the school's standards. This anxiety is reflective of the concern for unregulated dissemination of movements, or the rarefying of signature styles through the adoption of movements acquired on the internet. The admonition not to learn capoeira on-line was reinforced more often at *Abada*, while somewhat less at *Luanda* where a shortage of higher cords makes it almost necessary to visit YouTube clips in order to become familiarized with how more advanced games are played.

Most interviewed spoke about the health benefits of capoeira. This emphasis on health and fitness emerged as a consistent theme more among novice trainers. Longer engagement with capoeira often results in a series of injuries that reflects a devotion much deeper than the desire to "stay fit". However, the notion that capoeira was attractive because "it's a good work out" (Interview, 2009) parallels Sunaina Maira's study done on Belly dancing that revealed how Western practitioners of belly dancing in the Bay Area and East Bay erased the historical implications of the dance form in reproduce the practice for Western uses, such as fitness. Joseph articulates a similar form of erasure in her study of motivations for white capoeira practitioners, finding flattened out notions of an exoticized other for the purposes of white Western consumption.

Although the historical legacy of appropriated culture situated within systems of dominance is an important legacy to be acknowledge, the destabilized categories of identity found within the global proliferation of contact zones has produced conditions within which more complex uses of culture are at play. Destabilizing notions of the pure reproduction of capoeira begins partly with recognizing the impossibility of locating an historically pure form of the art itself. This opens up room for analysis of the proliferation



of difference found within any particular group and their specific articulated uses of capoeira within a particular time and place. As Gilroy writes,

The emphasis on culture as a form of property to be owned rather than lived characterizes the anxieties of the moment. It compounds rather than resolves the problems arising from associating “race” with embodied or somatic variation. Indeed, we must be alert to circumstances in which the body is reinvested with the power to arbitrate in the assignment of cultures to peoples (24).

Thus blanket assumptions of US consumption of capoeira as necessarily linked to irresponsible appropriation are problematic because of the diversity found within communities of capoeira practitioners. Similarly, assuming there is no “pure” Brazilian cultural production, communities practicing the art form abroad make use of capoeira to articulate shifting identities. Within my findings, this articulation can be found specifically in the uses of capoeira as a site to engage with vulnerability and forms of resistance as it relates to the body.

As Butler argues in her book *Precarious Life* bodies are vulnerable to suffering depending on how they are positioned within the influences of class, gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality. She writes, “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instruments of all these as well”(p.26). Situating the various articulations of how capoeira effects or interacts with the body within this framework is helpful in understanding uses of the art form for individuals of different socio economic backgrounds, genders, race or sexualities. Simultaneously, Hall’s notion of articulation reveals how practitioners can map uses of the art form to formulate new identities rooted in forms of resistance.

Because capoeira originated among African slaves, it is useful to locate capoeira's mastery of the body as connected to a resistance of regulation of bodies within the context of slavery. Post emancipation of slavery, capoeira continued to grow within the context of economically disenfranchised populations. Continuing popularity of the practice within economically disenfranchised communities in Brazil and abroad can be seen to articulate conditions in which the body is the main resource. Therefore, capoeira in relation to the body differs according to socio-economic status.

Although there is a lot of diversity found within both *Luanda* and *Abada* with respect to socio-economic background, both groups have different articulations of the practice as it relates to the body, which reflects the generalized economic status of both groups. *Abada*, a more stabilized group in terms of recognition and financial stability, emphasizes safety for all who practice. While violence is an implicit aspect of the practice, and is occasionally overtly exposed, *Abada* regularly contains this violence, thus severe injuries rarely occur. In contrast, training at *Luanda* is characteristically much rougher, and it is not uncommon for members to be kicked during any given class. Violence in the roda is more often invoked, as the instructor often admonishes his students to "kick in order to make contact." This differing relationship to violence during training could be related to differences in level of established recognition. Students at *Luanda* will often be warned of potential aggression they may encounter with other groups. It is emphasized that the school, being new, may be "tested" by more established groups.<sup>3</sup>

Another way in which the body can be seen as a defining feature of levels of

vulnerability is in gendered bodies. Regardless of class or race, historically, women were not allowed to practice capoeira. With the popularization of capoeira, upper and middle class women began to practice capoeira in Brazil. This form of practice was usually done within the context of fitness clubs as a means to stay in shape. (Wasolowski, 2008). As the popularity of capoeira grew, mediated representations of the art form proliferated, from references to it in the popular soap operas, (telenovelas) to celebrities who publicly claimed capoeira as a sport they used to keep in shape. The extensive amounts of classes offered in fitness and health clubs coincided with mediated images of sexualized women training capoeira (Wasolowski, 2008). These representations served to reflect the ways in which women's bodies were used to market capoeira, articulating an incorporation of capoeira as a way to reconstitute mainstream gender norms.

Regardless of the push to sexualize women's participation in capoeira, serious female practitioners were able to gain recognition within capoeira communities in Brazil and abroad. Although women are still in the minority within capoeira communities, particularly in regards to higher cord status, (Wasolowski, 2008) the numbers of serious female practitioners continues to grow. As a result, Capoeira is a site within which gender hierarchies can be challenged specifically within the location of the roda. This clearly resonated within the context of *Abada San Francisco* where the vast majority of capoeiristas of higher cord status were women. It can be inferred that this was due to the female Menstranda Marcia, a practitioner of very high cord status and renowned throughout Brazil. As one self-identified queer practitioner from SF stated, "Menstranda Marcia is an incredible teacher, kind, skilled, and I love that she doesn't tolerate a lot of

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<sup>3</sup> Every school has its own philosophy in regards to the violence of capoeira. Some

the negative machismo you often encounter in capoeira” (interview, 2009).

Having practiced capoeira within several different contexts, I can attest to the prevalence and reinforcement of gender norms and stereotypes from students and instructors alike. The historical exclusion of women and the potentially aggressive nature of the game can set the stage for the performance of a specific form of masculinity, based on physical prowess and competition. Often I heard mention of the “natural aggressiveness” of men at Luanda, a male dominated environment. Within the context of the SF group, however, such gender reinforcements though not entirely absent, were less likely to be explicitly expressed.

Within the alleviated constraints of gender norms, variations in sexual orientation were more present within *Abada San Francisco*. A significant queer population makes up the group of regularly practicing players in San Francisco. The practice of an ambiguously defined martial art / dance / sport resonates particularly well with individuals whose gender identification or sexual orientation differs from hegemonic, heteronormative categories of male and female. Within the context of fluid movement, shifting from dance to aggressive battle, queer and gendered identities can be articulated through the resource and mastery of the body in ways that highlight the constraints placed on these bodies.

Butler’s notion of bodies made vulnerable outlines how queer and female bodies are regularly made vulnerable to physical violence. Katya Wasolowski’s study of *Abada Capoeira* in Brazil, writes of how the controlled violence of practicing capoeira could be a relief to the structural violence of poverty and discrimination. While, I would not claim

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schools are more known for their aggressive style than others.

that members of the queer community or the women of SF Abada constitute people suffering from the violence of poverty in the same way as practitioners in Brazil, I would however argue that the violence of homophobic and sexist discrimination as experienced by queer and female capoeiristas echoes the framework outlined by Wasolowski. This exposes the structured arena of controlled violence within which to learn skills of defense and attack, as a site of relief. Therefore, use of capoeira and the skills taught within its practice resonate as a way to articulate the gendered or queered body, vulnerable though it may be, as powerful and adept, providing a context within which to negotiate queerness and femininity within a patriarchal, and homophobic society.

### **Community**

Another consistent theme I found running through the responses to those interviewed, was the theme of community. The Abada community maintains ties with dispersed members and each other through use of the online network, from which I was able to get answers to interview questions. Online conversations often center around the organizing of social events related or unrelated to capoeira. Several times, I witnessed the invitation on line of new members, to which they received welcoming responses. Often, practitioners described members of their particular group as “family”. Although I would not claim that tensions did not arise, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race or class; strong friendships and loyalties consistently arose across identifications. This is also manifest in the diversity of those involved in the online community.

As Capoeira requires the presence and skills of many in order to be performed, community development is seen as a key component to the art form. As a result, strong bonds develop in capoeira groups. The inclusiveness of the art form can be connected to

the fact that regardless of one's ability to master the more difficult movements, one can learn the techniques of escape and attack in a way that strategically works within personal, physical constraints. Further, knowledge of capoeira history and music is highly valued. Mastery of the variety of skills involved in the practice is considered a contribution to the group as a whole. This develops strong group loyalties and a general sense of inclusiveness.

*Abada Capoeira* and *Luanda* are both made up of members of varying socio-economic classes, races, ethnicities and sexualities. They include variations of gender presentation and in the case of *Abada*, includes a significant queer population. Within this diversity, group loyalty provides an example of alliances that can be made across identity distinctions. Such strategic alliance that formulates within and across identity differences reflects Stuart Hall's conceptions of articulation theory. As often members of a group will articulate part of their identity in relation to capoeira: "I am a capoeirista" in certain contexts such as *Abada Capoeira*, it is established that the term "capoeirista" includes members of all positionalities. Thus, use of identification through the term "capoeira" can reflect Hall's notion of articulation theory as strategic forms of alliance.

## **Conclusion**

Although capoeira is framed as the national sport of Brazil, its history reveals the mixture of cultures that contribute to what it is today. Its progression from being an outlawed practice to a global practice makes it something worth analyzing in the context of ongoing conversations regarding globalization and culture. In the two groups *Luanda* and *Abada*, there were general themes as to why practitioners find capoeira attractive.

These included engagement with the music and history of capoeira, pleasure in the corporeal challenges of the practice, and community. All of those interviewed used the internet to supplement these motivations for practice. Lyrics to songs can be found with their translations online. Instructional videos for many different movements can be found on YouTube. Finally, community building and organizing occurs through online networks such as the one for the *Abada* group, in which there is a consistent flow of communication.

The emphasis of music in the practice of capoeira was a big draw for capoeira practitioners. Translation of the lyrics of capoeira songs reveals themes that reflect diasporic expression. These themes are invocations of the ocean and boats, a sense of displacement and longing, and a desire to return to the homeland. As music was a regular attraction for those interviewed, I infer that capoeira communities are motivated to actively engage with the history of capoeira.

Within the integrated elements of capoeira, the corporeal aspect of the practice is a particular form of articulating identities, as they are located within differing spaces of vulnerability. The practice of capoeira, which includes rituals of contained violence, can be a site within which female and queer practitioners can challenge restrictive gender norms. Simultaneously, providing the space for contained violence, allows players to engage in the realities of structured violence, such as homophobia or patriarchy. Reenacting violence to the body within a contained space allows for the articulation of ways of resistance in the form of escapes, diversions or attack associated with the practice of capoeira.

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