

Dancing Through Difficulties: Capoeira as a Fight Against Oppression

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Capoeira is difficult to define. It is an African form of physical, spiritual, and cultural expression. It is an Afro-Brazilian martial art. It is a dance, a fight, a game, an art form, a mentality, an identity, a sport, an African ritual, a worldview, a weapon, and a way of life, among other things. Sometimes it is all of these things at once, sometimes it isn't. It can be just a few of them or something different altogether. Capoeira is considered a "game" not a "fight" or a "match," and the participants "play" rather than "fight" against each other. There are no winners or losers. It is dynamic and fluid: there is no true beginning or end to the game of capoeira.

In perhaps the most widely recognized and referenced book dealing with capoeira, *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira*, J. Lowell Lewis attempts to orient the reader with a fact-based, straightforward description of this blurred cultural genre:

A game or sport played throughout Brazil (and elsewhere in the world) today, which was originally part of the Afro-Brazilian folk tradition. It is a martial art, involving a complete system of self-defense, but it also has a dance-like, acrobatic movement style which, combined with the presence of music and song, makes the games into a kind of performance that attracts many kinds of spectators, both tourists and locals. (xxiii)

An outsider experiencing capoeira for the first time would undoubtedly assert that the "game" is a spectacular, impressive, and peculiar sight, due to its graceful and spontaneous integration of fighting techniques with dance, music, and unorthodox acrobatic movements. The players form a

circle, clapping their hands and making music as two capoeiristas¹ enter to begin the game. Kicks fly and contact is avoided not by blocking kicks but by dodging them using maneuvers resembling break dancing moves or exaggerated movements intended to sweep the opponent of his/her feet. The players intuitively perform interesting and unique flips, cartwheels and other movements, swift takedowns and head-butts, avoiding at all costs touching the ground with any part of the body, except for the hands, feet, and/or the top of the head.

Physical ability is undoubtedly a necessary component of becoming a true capoeirista, but it is by no means the most important. The physical skills one develops through the process of learning capoeira – exceptional agility, flexibility, strength and control – are just a few of the benefits of training capoeira. The philosophical element of capoeira is so crucial that, without acquisition of the philosophical principles on which the art form is based, even the strongest, most physically capable student could never be considered a ‘good’ capoeirista.

Essentially, the philosophy of capoeira is a way of looking at life, a way of understanding reality. Those who completely dedicate themselves to capoeira practice will eventually assume this distinct worldview through years of study in the ‘school’ of capoeira. The underlying principle of the philosophy of capoeira is commonly referred to as *malícia*, which is impossible to understand or define in a rational way. *Malícia* would literally be translated in English to ‘malice,’ but in the context of capoeira it does not carry the same negative connotation. In the physical game of capoeira, one who has *malícia*, or is *malicioso*, is deceptive and tricky, does not outwardly show emotions such as anger, and is almost impossible to attack or take down. He/she is quick-witted and graceful, always outsmarting his/her opponent, regardless of physical

¹ a person who practices, or trains, capoeira

strength or ability to perform all techniques perfectly (although a capoeirista who has *malícia* is almost always very skillful in the physical sense as well).

Having and using *malícia* in capoeira means “deceiving the expectations of the onlookers as well as of one’s opponent...[and] being able both to feign anger and to throw off the pretence at the appropriate moment” (Fryer 29). Accomplishing this requires that the capoeirista be extremely aware and observant at all times. He/she must always be prepared for attack at any moment, anticipating the opponent’s intention to attack while pretending to be unaware of the threat of the situation. The opponent will execute an attack because he/she is under the impression that the adversary is oblivious to the situation. However, the move will not be executed efficiently: the capoeirista who truly understands the philosophical principles of the game will begin a counter-attack before the initial attack is completed, or will dodge the attack altogether. Due to the *malicioso* player’s impeccable ability to sense danger while making the opponent believe it is safe to attack, he/she is almost impossible to defeat or knock down. He/she instills fear and gains the respect of others by letting them know that he/she is *capable* of violent attack without necessarily *showing* them. As a result, the capoeirista who has *malícia* maintains a position of power in the realm of capoeira, as well as in real life, as we are about to see.

These qualities that are obtained through years of intensive study are considered the essence, or founding principles, of the art of capoeira. They reflect a general mentality of slyness that carries over into the everyday reality of the player. As the student learns the most important philosophical lessons of capoeira, which entails the acquisition of a worldview founded on the concept of *malícia*, he/she will naturally develop new personality traits and skills that will apply to daily life. Change is inevitable, because capoeira requires one to become “more cunning, treacherous, playful, supple, artistic, quick-witted, and aware of the body” (Downey 131).

In her children's book, *Capoeira: a Martial Art and Cultural Tradition*, Jane Atwood mentions what she considers to be the most beneficial side effects of learning the *malícia* of capoeira:

Capoeira trains you to battle difficult experiences while staying flexible and open. It prepares you to respond to social violence with evasion and grace. It helps build physical and spiritual strength. Finally, capoeira teaches you to use wisdom to create a balanced and productive life. (Atwood 56)

In other words, a true capoeirista knows how to outsmart any opponent and avoid attacks through an ability to be tricky, observant, deceptive, and to use his/her knowledge in an appropriate but not necessarily violent manner. Therefore, he/she can apply these philosophical principles to any difficult or oppressive social situation in real life, and will be able to respond or fight back calmly and effectively. The ability to overcome life's worst difficulties while maintaining a sense of humor is a psychological side effect on capoeiristas who learn the physical ability to "dance beautifully when they play, however heated competition becomes" (Downey 22). The power a capoeirista gains through learning the worldview that is central to the art is likely to carry over into the player's reality inside and outside the world of capoeira.

The philosophical aspect of capoeira is what manifests its function as a complete educational system. Experts view capoeira as a "school of knowledge of life," in this case Nestor Capoeira, who also wrote that capoeira is not merely a dance, a fight, a game or cultural expression, but a "form of 'seeing' and living life. It is a specific point of view about the world and mankind, transmitted from teacher to pupil throughout the generations" (*Capoeira* xv; *Street-Smart* 41). This notion of capoeira as an educational system, to which the acquisition of a non-western worldview is crucial, is central to the focus of this paper, which essentially explores how the

knowledge of capoeira can and has served as a weapon against oppression in various historical and cultural contexts.

First, I will explore the origins of capoeira in Africa and Brazil, and how the martial art was developed by slaves in Brazil as a weapon they used to fight for their freedom. Then, I will discuss how capoeira continues to teach its pupils, in Brazil and elsewhere, how to fight – without using direct violence – to break down the system of oppression in their society, despite the significant changes that the art form has undergone since the abolition of slavery in Brazil. I will focus on capoeira in this country, and how it can benefit Afro-Brazilians and African Americans, as well as other discriminated groups in terms of opportunity for success within mainstream United States. Through this investigation of the origins and contemporary context of capoeira in terms of its underlying function as a fight of resistance, I intend to show that the growing presence and popularity of capoeira worldwide can be an effective means of promoting a more powerful and respected role of oppressed groups more power within the dominant society.

The story of how capoeira originated is a highly debated issue, due to a lack of a well-documented history of Brazil during the period of slavery, and because of the almost exclusive reliance on oral transmission of history among slaves and their descendents (Almeida 4; Lewis 18-21; Downey 71-2; Atwood 21). The most common oral tradition recognizes capoeira as a completely Brazilian cultural expression created by slaves from Africa, therefore influenced by elements of African culture (Atwood 19). A less popular theory claims that capoeira arrived in Brazil already formed as a ritual previously practiced in Africa for some time, although maybe by a different name. This is because of some of the perceived similarities between capoeira and

other African war dances, rites of passage, and/or dance rituals that were used in Africa before the Brazilian slavery period, such as *n'golo* and *batuque* (Lewis 25; Capoeira *Capoeira* 184; Assunção 26; Atwood 17-19; Downey 65). Whether it began in Africa or Brazil, the sophisticated art expression is and has been an important part of Brazilian culture since at least the eighteenth century, and it has undeniably African features.

In its beginning stages, during the period of colonization in Brazil, the main purpose of capoeira was to prepare the slaves to be able to escape from their masters, or for war against their Portuguese oppressors (Fryer 28). Although an unlikely scenario, one of the most frequently circulated explanations of the origins of capoeira claims that this cultural genre was first and foremost a fighting method as opposed to a dance, a weapon that would enable the slaves to fight for their freedom. According to this theory, the dancing, singing, instruments, and unique acrobatic movements were added only as a disguise to fool their masters into mistaking their war training for an innocent African cultural dance ritual (Lewis 40).

However, Nestor Capoeira suggests a more probable theory, which gives more value to the dance and music aspect of the fight: “The black community’s use of culture as a weapon perhaps influenced capoeira as well. The fighting, a weapon inlaid in the body of the player, would tend to something more ‘cultural,’ thus being a more effective weapon of resistance, inlaid in the ‘body’ of the black community itself” (*Capoeira* 136). Nestor points to a general tendency after 1830 of the black communities in Brazil, specifically in the state of Bahia, to prefer the use of various cultural forms rather than armed rebellion as a system of resistance (*Capoeira* 140). Regardless of the function of the element of dance and rhythm in the original form of capoeira, it was definitely, since the very beginning, intended to be a tool for the oppressed to fight for their liberty and gain power.

Until the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888, slaves found many different ways to resist captivity. One very prominent strategy was to escape into the surrounding areas of wilderness where the Portuguese had not yet colonized. There they formed and maintained semi self-sufficient villages of runaway slaves, called *quilombos*. Capoeira is associated with these fugitive communities; it is almost always included as part of the famous legend of the Palmares. Palmares was the largest of the fugitive communities that lasted for over 80 years during the seventeenth century and was known for the outstanding ability for its occupants to fend off attacks from their Portuguese oppressors. One common belief is that the Palmares was so successful because Zumbi, the courageous warrior and leader of the Palmares, and his army trained capoeira to use it as one of their weapons. (Lewis 38; Downey 66-7; Crook 181-2). The legend of Zumbi and the Palmares is very frequently retold through the lyrics of many capoeira songs. The following song provides one example of how the history of slavery, particularly this famous legend, continues to be passed on to today's capoeiristas through word of mouth:

Zumbi negro valente guerreiro, que fugiu do cativeiro, para uma luta começar.
Ele fundou o Quilombo dos Palmares,
onde tinha liberdade, e poder de se expressar.
Lá eles viviam em grande comunidade,
não existia desigualdade, nem tronco pra apanhar.
Mas certo dia, em uma noite tão sombria, todos esperavam ele. Nada de Zumbi chegar,
e de repente, no meio da multidão, uma ecoava forte,
“Aconteceu a traição!” Zumbi morreu, mas nada disso adiantou.
Hoje fazem 300 anos, todos cantam em seu louvor.
Iê, viva Zumbi, Iê, guerreiro de Palmares, Iê, viva meu mestre.....

*Zumbi, brave courageous black warrior, escaped from captivity to start the battle.
He founded the Quilombo of the Palmares,
Where there was freedom, and liberty to express oneself.
There they lived, one big community.
There was no inequality; nobody's bodies were being beaten.
But, one day, on a very dark night, everybody awaited him, but he never arrived.
Then, suddenly, from the middle of the crowd, a voice echoed out loud,
“The betrayal has been done! “Zumbi died, but this didn't really change anything.*

*Now 300 years have passed, and everyone still sings your praise.
Hurrah! Zumbi, Hurrah! Warrior of the Palmares, Hurrah! My mestre!*

Whether or not this legend is historically accurate, the association of capoeira with the communities of runaway slaves demonstrates how capoeira symbolizes rebellion against oppression. Lewis attributes the association of capoeira with Palmares that continues even today to the desire for players to “identify themselves with what they consider to be the purest and strongest form of resistance to oppression, and Palmares has become a symbol of such total and successful resistance against great odds” (39).

After the official abolition of slavery in 1888, capoeira continued to evolve. No longer existing in the context of captivity and physical war in the name of liberation, capoeira nevertheless maintained its function as a freedom fight. For the purpose of my argument, I will consider the start of the contemporary period of capoeira to be during the 1930s with, because of the fundamental shift that occurred as a result of the work of Mestre Bimba, which included the creation of the first official capoeira school, or ‘academy’. It was during this time that capoeira began to emerge out of its status as a highly discriminated, persecuted, and illegal practice that occurred only spontaneously and in secret in the streets of Salvador, Bahia, the unofficial ‘headquarters’ and reputed birthplace of capoeira. Continuing well into the decades after the end of the period of slavery, capoeiristas were considered to be the scum of society, thieves, dangerous bums, and violent outlaws.

Manoel dos Reis Machado, better known as Mestre Bimba, was a well-known master of capoeira and champion fighter in Salvador, Bahia from the 1920s until his death in 1974. Since then, he has become an icon within the world of capoeira for having transformed capoeira from a

highly discriminated-against street fight exclusively for poor, black descendents of slaves into an institutionalized martial art that could be taught systematically in capoeira ‘academies.’ He accomplished this through his creation of a new style of capoeira called Capoeira Regional. This re-invention, which included the addition of aggressive kicks, blows, and swipes inspired by other martial art forms, emerged as a result of Bimba’s belief that capoeira in its traditional form was not sufficient as a truly effective form of self defense. In a Brazilian newspaper in 1965, Mestre Bimba claimed that he created the regional style “para o fraco se defender do forte” (‘so the weak could defend themselves against the strong’) (da Silva 195). He developed a systematic teaching method, outlining the specific techniques that constitute the martial art, emphasizing more aggressive kicks and takedowns while downplaying the importance of dance-like moves in an attempt to improve the efficiency capoeira as a functional freedom fight.

Mestre Bimba opened the first official capoeira academy in 1932 in the heart of Salvador, Bahia, and over the years introduced a number of specific traditions that are still honored and practiced by Capoeira Regional academies all over the world.² The impact that the work of Mestre Bimba had on the future of capoeira was monumental, which would eventually lead to its international growth and inclusion of capoeiristas of all colors, cultures, and socioeconomic classes. Simply put, Mestre Bimba was responsible for making capoeira appeal to white people, or people of middle and upper classes, such as doctors, lawyers, and university students. In fact, vast majority of Mestre Bimba’s original students were affluent, white Brazilians. As a result, rather than being looked down upon and feared by people other than the descendents of slaves, Capoeira Regional began to assume a status of a respected and culturally valuable Afro-Brazilian

² For example, he established a fixed ranking system that would indicate the level of mastery of the students, and introduced the use of graduation ceremonies or *batizados* (‘baptisms’) to initiate students into the world of capoeira and (Assunção 138-9).

art for which people of mainstream society were willing to pay good money, both to watch and to learn.

Since then, the popularity of capoeira in its new, institutionalized context spread rapidly as capoeira academies began popping up nationwide, particularly during the 1960s. In the 1970s, graduated students and instructors began moving abroad to begin their own groups in other countries (Atwood 23-4, Assunção 190-1). Today, capoeira's growth continues to increase at an impressive rate both in Brazil and internationally, with the vast majority of foreign academies established in the United States and Europe. One estimate suggests that, five years ago, there may have been up to 25,000 teachers and 1,000,000 players in Brazil, and 500 teachers and 10,000 players in North America (*Capoeira Capoeira* xvii). These numbers have surely increased significantly since 2002.

This shift in the social function of capoeira after the creation of Capoeira Regional in the 1930s caused a change in the means by which capoeira would serve as a freedom fight for the descendents of the slaves in Brazil as well as other oppressed peoples of future generations. This claim is supported by Bira Almeida, or Mestre Acordeon, who is recognized as one of the founders of capoeira in the United States:

The advent of Mestre Bimba in the earlier thirties and the diffusion of his work marks the beginning of modern-day Capoeira. In addition to becoming accepted as a social activity...Capoeira also developed as a means of self-development and an expression of freedom for anyone dealing with...social constraints, especially for those who struggle to survive in the present economic situation of Brazil. (5)

We will now turn to a discussion of exactly how the dominant white society's new admiration for and participation in capoeira "has helped to check persecution and establish the

practice as part of Brazilian national culture” through taking a look at capoeira in its contemporary context (Fryer 30). Specifically, we will explore how capoeira can play a positive role in the struggle to break down the system of oppression that limits the opportunities for success of Afro-Brazilians and of African Americans in the United States

Almost all capoeira professors and mestres started out as extremely poor, black Brazilians with very little or no opportunity for education and work. This is the reality for the vast majority of black Brazilians, particularly in the state of Bahia. Most of them began to train capoeira all day, every day, at a very early age, usually because they had nothing else to do, since work and/or studying weren't usually an option. By the time they become adults, many of them are lucky enough to be able to use the knowledge and skill they acquired through capoeira to gain opportunities and relief from suffering that would never have been a part of their reality had they not been introduced to capoeira.

Capoeira gives many Afro-Brazilians a sense of economic security. These mestres and professors can provide a specialized service that not just anybody is capable of. Anywhere they go, they are able not only to teach classes, but also to perform in Brazilian shows at restaurants, events, and fancy parties.³ Due to an increasing demand for capoeira internationally, more and more Brazilians are presented with the unheard-of chance to begin a new life somewhere else, an opportunity to leave their *favela* (Brazilian slum), marked by a reality of extreme poverty and eternal lack of opportunity to create a better standard of life for themselves and their families.

³ Using capoeira in Brazilian folkloric shows is by no means a new phenomenon. In fact, demand for “show capoeira” continues to increase as capoeira spreads throughout the world. In South Florida, there are quite a few dinner shows featuring capoeira at Brazilian restaurants. Also, there are a few independent companies that arrange for performances at a variety of venues. Interestingly, capoeiristas who *do not* have brown skin often times will experience discrimination based on skin color and will not be hired for these jobs.

Many people from the *favelas* of Bahia never even get to travel to the downtown area of their own city in their whole lifetimes, let alone a first-world country such as the United States. Thus, capoeira becomes for these Afro-Brazilians a weapon to fight against the lifetime of suffering they were essentially condemned to at birth because of their social class and skin color.

Also, the Afro-Brazilian experience in the United States can be more positive than that of some other immigrant groups. Due to the nature of capoeira and the values it instills in the students, capoeira academies tend to become more like families than a group of students and a teacher. Not only is the capoeira teacher a role-model for the student, he also become a father-like figure, and as a result many students feel obligated to show respect by offering help in different ways and by doing favors that only family members would be expected to do. In this sense, the Afro-Brazilian experience in the United States usually includes the benefit of a family-like support system that other immigrant groups normally do not experience. Therefore, the Afro-Brazilian/capoeira professor immigrant group in the United States, which essentially exists because of the international spread of capoeira, does not suffer from the oppressive system working in our country in the same way as the majority of marginalized groups are condemned to suffer.

The Afro-Brazilians are not the only ones who can utilize capoeira's potential to aid in the fight against limited opportunity for success among non-dominant groups within a system of oppression. Due to the African nature of the martial art, all who truly dedicate themselves and strive for mastery of the art, mostly those of African descent, will experience first-hand how capoeira can still be a freedom fight well over a century after it was invented, specifically in the contemporary United States. I believe that this is because of the endurance of the African

element inherent in the martial art, even after all of the changes it has undergone since the period of slavery in Brazil.

Capoeira carries many typically African features, some of which are clearly visible, even to an outsider watching the even take place. A few examples include: the circle of participants formed around two people playing in the middle accompanied by group singing and hand clapping, the use of some African words in some of the song lyrics, and the use of distinctly African-derived instruments such as the berimbau, atabaque, and the agogô, to name a few (Lewis xi, Crook 182)). However, other African-based qualities that are of central importance to this martial art are less obvious to the outsider. A worksheet shared in class delineates a set of recurring cultural themes have been established as characteristic of people of African heritage in the United States, according to research. Pointing to the incredibly direct connections between most of these themes and the central features of capoeira, we can attain more complex understanding of the martial art as inherently African in nature.

One cultural theme, Musicality/Rhythm, deals with the interrelationship between “movement, music, dance, percussiveness, and rhythm, personified through the musical beat.” All of these components play a huge part in the game of capoeira, particularly the connections between movement, music, and song, or rhythm, which have been identified by J. Lowell Lewis as “the three main semiotic channels active in capoeira play” (9). The musical element of the game is absolutely central; it is one of the greatest distinctions between this martial art and more well-known Asian counterparts. This emphasis is reflected by a very common saying among capoeiristas: “No music, no capoeira.” The berimbau is an African-derived percussion instrument that is unarguably recognized as the symbol of capoeira, due to its paramount role in keeping the rhythm and of the game and dictating who plays, when they play, and how they play.

The timing, flow, and even style of the players' physical expressions in capoeira are determined by the beat of the berimbau. The "rhythmic orientation towards life" that is part of this African American cultural theme is reminiscent of how capoeira, and therefore rhythm, carries over into everyday life.

Another central component of African American culture, Resilience, is consistent with one of the natural outcomes of successfully learning capoeira – the ability to survive difficulties while remaining seemingly unaffected no matter how disastrous the situation may be. Similarly, this cultural theme, in the African American context, is explained as "the conscious need to bounce back from disappointment and disaster and to have the tools of humor and joy to renew life's energy." The notions of humor and joy in the midst of conflict and battle that applies to the game of capoeira as well as the culture of African Americans is apparent in the sport's emphasis on 'play' as opposed to 'fight', and the common use of the term *brincadeira* ('a child's game') to refer to capoeira events (Lewis 2).

Emotional Vitality deals with how energy and spirit are reflected through song, dance, body language and oral literature in African American culture. Capoeira also emphasizes spontaneous use of movement, song and storytelling, and dance to convey liveliness and spirit during the game of capoeira. Orality and Verbal Expressiveness implies the value of the oral transmission of knowledge; likewise, the history of capoeira until very recently existed almost exclusively in the words of the songs and stories told by the mestres. Also, the martial art itself is only taught through word of mouth.

Finally, Communalism is a prevalent notion both in African American and in Afro-Brazilian capoeira culture. This cultural theme refers to the importance of one's community over one's own personal life. Capoeira academies are more than martial art schools or spaces for training

movements – they are close-knit communities that demonstrate familial qualities such as interdependence, trust, and respect for one’s elders. As one article from Ebony Magazine puts it, the main objective of capoeira is “to learn self-confidence and how to harmonize with those around you, as you become part of a community, according to the experts” (Henderson 99).

After investigating some of the strong connections between the Afro-Brazilian art form and African American culture, it seems that these similarities can only be attributed to their common African origins. Since we have previously established capoeira as a form of education through which a complex system of knowledge is passed to its students, we can now also view the game as an educational system based on African principles. The existence of such a system in a country such as the United States is an incredible asset, especially with respect to the African American experience.

African Americans and other non-dominant groups tend to have a difficult time achieving high levels of success in school and in society in general because the system was created and is maintained by a Western worldview shared by people of power in the United States. Those who share this worldview can easily relate to the system and therefore chances for success in school and in life are very high. On the other hand, those whose cultural identity is not presented as valuable or perhaps not presented at all in the school curriculum and mainstream culture are likely to inherit a low self-esteem and/or a lack of trust in teachers and other authority figures, aside from a tendency toward low grades and behavior problems, or worse. This detrimental condition arises from intercultural misunderstandings both in school and in society silences and robs many rich and intelligent souls of their true potential as human beings. All too often, these people of color who are excluded from the culture of the classroom and the curriculum seem to be sentenced to a lifetime of struggle.

This detrimental phenomenon has been extensively explored in research and literature. Some research dealing specifically with Physical Education has suggested some solutions that involve “culturally responsive pedagogy”, or teachers and curriculum that aim to “[train] students to respect cultural differences and become caring and sensitive to individual backgrounds” (Sutliff 62-3). Capoeira, constituting one example of “culturally responsive pedagogy”, has the potential to challenge the status quo through providing culturally relevant and meaningful education and character traits that empower African Americans and other disadvantaged, oppressed, and/or marginalized groups.

The specific lessons that are taught in the ‘school’ of capoeira are particularly useful in the United States for excluded, non-Western students in a similar manner that the African slaves in Brazil used their knowledge of capoeira as a weapon to fight for respect and power. We discussed earlier the main components of the capoeira worldview and the psychological changes that occur as a result of assuming this worldview. African Americans and other marginalized students equipped with the beneficial side effects of intense capoeira training – *malícia*, complete emotional and physical control, an ability to gracefully and playfully deal with difficult situations, and a special knack for observing and understanding the true intentions of others – are presented with the opportunity to use these concepts in their daily lives to their advantage, to resist becoming part of the status quo and facing a lifetime of exclusion and difficulty, and to fight for the social, cultural, and educational power they deserve.

This same argument is portrayed, or better yet, exaggerated in the 1992 film *Only the Strong*. The movie tells the story of a group of students in a high school with a graduation rate of twelve percent. The group of students that the movie focuses on are the “bottom of the barrel,” i.e. the students who are marginalized, culturally excluded and consequently doomed for failure. They

show the chaotic classroom, taught by a white male who is obviously not successful in communicating with, much less passing on knowledge to, his students. Then, they send in a capoeira professor to begin a program with them as a last hope, a final administrative attempt to improve the educational situation of these students. At first, the students resist this new form of education and show signs of intergroup conflict rather than community. Finally, they give in, intensively study capoeira under their professor, and face and overcome difficulties together as a family-like community. In the final scene of the movie, every student of the capoeira group graduates high school. In other words, they use capoeira as a weapon to fight against the oppressive forces built in to their educational/social system, and as a result, they challenge the status quo by gaining power and success.

Capoeira also fulfills this function outside the context of capoeira as a system of education culturally relevant to African and other marginalized groups. This becomes clear when we approach the same issue from the perspective of capoeira as an African form of cultural expression. Within the social, cultural and/or literary realms of the United States and elsewhere, we have seen a growing tendency to focus on the importance of the common African heritage shared by all people of African descent, regardless of nationality. The notion of Afrocentrism refers to “an emphasis on shared African origins among all ‘black’ people, taking a pride in those origins and an interest in African history and culture – or those aspects of New World cultures seen as representing African ‘survivals’ – and a belief that Eurocentric bias has blocked or distorted knowledge of Africans and their cultures” (Howe 1).

In this sense, capoeira serves as an affirmation of an African identity, a means for students to celebrate and honor their heritage, therefore increasing self-esteem among black communities, which in turn leads to more cultural and social power. For example, because of the African

connection between black Americans and Brazilians previously discussed, African Americans tend to have a natural tendency to acquire the skills and philosophic principles of capoeira that is very rare among non-Brazilians who take up the martial art, especially those who identify as white. However, white people seem to make up the majority of capoeira groups in foreign settings, or at least in the United States. As a result, in the context of capoeira, the African American student will actually be in a more powerful position, which will likely lead to a more positive self-esteem.⁴

Afro-Brazilian professors, performers and mestres become role models to their students and admirers and maintain positions of power that cannot be taken away by a more-privileged white American. These talented brown Brazilians, who provide examples of people of color in role-model positions and/or positions of power, will undoubtedly become more visible to the mainstream culture, especially as the representation of capoeira in mass media continues to grow.⁵ This constitutes more evidence of how capoeira as a black cultural expression can increase self-esteem and therefore power within the oppressive system.

One final, but equally as important, aspect of capoeira's role as a freedom fight in the new millennium deals with the notion of community that is central to the practice of capoeira.

Capoeira academies essentially become multicultural communities based on African principles.

⁴ One school recently experimented with a program called MAAR (Martial Arts Anger Reduction) used as an attempt to help African American young boys to deal with anger through martial arts. One of the interesting things they found was that the program "illuminated the weaknesses of some high-status boys" because of the natural ability for martial arts that served as an advantage for African American boys. They reported increased levels of self-esteem and less problems with anger management among the low-status boys at the end of the program (Stevenson 124-5).

⁵ Aside from the movie *Only the Strong*, Capoeira has been more recently popping up in many manifestations of popular culture, for example, movies such as *Catwoman*, *Ocean's Twelve*, *Idlewild*, Television commercials, an Usher video and video games such as Tekken 3, ("Rhythm of Capoeira" 99).

Capoeira tends to attract an impressively multicultural following, in contrast to other mainstream sports in the United States. Within these capoeira communities, whites and non-whites alike potentially assume the non-Western worldview associated with capoeira, as well as engaging in communication on a regular basis. Many recognize the crucial role of building functional intercultural communities in order to break down oppressive systems that exist within the larger society, and the growth of capoeira throughout the United States promotes this active measure to build a more equal society. Also, the more white people who understand non-western ways of seeing reality, the less intercultural miscommunication we will see. Especially in the school systems, where white people are usually the people of power, the presence of capoeira will contribute to the ability for people of dominant groups to be sensitive and knowledgeable about other cultures. The potential for capoeira to create positive multicultural communities in mainstream settings will undoubtedly contribute to the struggle for a less oppressive system in the United States.

Even though we now have sufficiently observed how capoeira functioned as a fight against oppression during the period of slavery and in contemporary society, I cannot attest to the ultimate truth to this argument. There are significant limitations to the claims I have made about the positive potential of capoeira throughout history. First, although capoeira, by nature, intends to empower the powerless, there is still an undeniable system of oppression intact within the world of capoeira. Although the problem is increasingly getting better with the inclusion of a variety of kinds of people as capoeiristas since the days of slavery, the woman who trains capoeira is still likely to face a reality of silence and exclusion. Due to its origins as a cultural practice strictly for African male slaves in Brazil, capoeira is an extremely male dominated

institution even today. The positive side is that with each woman who becomes an instructor or a professor, or fights for the opportunity to perform as a capoeirista in a cultural show, the more we can work together to break down the oppressive male forces that, until recently, have molded the art form and carried it through time and space. The her article “Transgressing Boundaries and Crossing Borders,” Janelle Joseph shares this optimistic perspective, stating that women capoeiristas use the sport to:

subvert the hegemonic structure of society and capoeira culture as they play amongst men; they continue to challenge notions of the form and meaning of the cultural activity, defy which actions and behaviours are considered ‘natural’ and appropriate for the female body, and alter the ways some women think about and react to violence.” (32)

Another limitation is the threat of the dissipation of the African element in capoeira. As capoeira continues to evolve in the new millennium, it is becoming more and more of a commodity marketed toward middle and upper class mainstream societies, at least in the United States. Workout DVDs based on capoeira movements are now available, as well as capoeira aerobic classes and gyms all over the nation. This changing face of capoeira is highlighted in a 2005 article that appeared in *Ebony* magazine that called capoeira, “a high-energy aerobic workout that fuses martial arts, dance and African and Brazilian music, is the latest exercise to explode onto the group fitness circuit” (96).

Traditionalists fear that the emphasis on capoeira as part of the latest ‘fitness craze,’ as a way to lose weight fast, will strip the art of its African element that has survived for so long. Should this occur, it is true that capoeira’s potential to continue as a means of fighting for success and opportunity for the oppressed will be severely limited. However, along side this trend is the tendency toward a greater appreciation for the traditional form of capoeira previously

unmentioned in this paper, Capoeira Angola, which emphasizes only the African elements of this cultural expression. Also, there has been a recent international trend among capoeiristas and scholars toward a need for the adequate documentation and preservation of the history and cultural value of capoeira. It is my belief that whether or not capoeira succumbs to the death induced by commoditization depends on the goals of those who continue to pass it on to future generations.

Lastly, capoeira's true potential to benefit marginalized, especially African American, groups is also limited due to the exclusion of extremely poor communities. The people who would benefit the most from being part of such a community, the poorest, most struggling communities, are denied access to capoeira because of lack of money. In the United States, nobody teaches for free, and capoeira is no exception. In big cities such as New York, professors and mestres have been known to charge well over one hundred dollars per month for capoeira classes. This excludes anyone not of middle or upper socioeconomic status. Something needs to be done to make capoeira accessible to the people who could benefit the most from it.

Even considering the all-but-insignificant limitations to the claims made as the focus of this paper, capoeira still has served a specific but dynamic purpose since its creation in nineteenth century Brazil: to help the suffering feel well, to help the poor feel rich, to help the weak feel strong, and to help the captive feel free. This malleable manifestation of Afro-Brazilian culture has been a blessing for Afro-Brazilians themselves, Africans across the Diaspora, other marginalized groups around the world, and for society as a whole. And as long as those who inherit it understand its true potential, take care of what they have, value it, and nurture it, we can be sure that capoeira will become in the future an even more powerful defense weapon for people of all nationalities, colors, genders, cultures, and classes to use in the growing war against

oppressive systems that deny non-dominant groups of access to privilege, power, and opportunity.

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Capoeira is a combination of martial arts, sport and popular culture that developed in Brazil, by African slaves and Brazilian natives, starting in the 16th century. It was made to give slaves a chance to escape and to survive. Capoeira was illegal in Brazil until the 1930s. Capoeira uses strong and fast kicks, dodges and fast counter-attacks. It also uses acrobatics and simple take-downs.