

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CULTURAL PRACTICES WOMEN IN CAPOEIRA

By

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To women all over the world fighting to conquer space.

“Mulher guerreira, mulher guerreira, na capoeira sua história vai
contar
E ela luta a vida inteira, pro preconceito e o machismo acabar”

-Juiz De Fora (capoeira song)

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Empowerment discourse and projects have often focused on economic and political aspects of women's inequality, neglecting the most basic levels which include self-esteem, self-expression and the ability to recognize and challenge unequal power relationships. This research focuses on the Brazilian martial art of capoeira as an empowerment activity for women. It is based on interviews and observations conducted in Goiânia, Goiás in the summer of 2008.

I found that capoeira reflects and in some instances perpetuates gender inequality by reinforcing patriarchal attitudes. For example, women are often responsible for both the home and paid work, leaving less time for recreational activities than men have available. There are also perceived differences between men's and women's physical capabilities.

At the same time, capoeira also challenges these gendered assumptions. In this study, I find that women do experience empowerment through their participation in capoeira. Benefits include an increased self-esteem as well as a stronger and healthier body. Capoeira also provides women an outlet for self-expression, exposes them to a philosophy of resistance to oppression and often allows women to engage in community building. Furthermore, women's participation in this male-dominated martial art transgresses traditional gender boundaries and requires that

women take up space in male domains, calling into question perceived differences between men and women.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The empowerment of women is essential for creating equality between men and women. Most of the discourse on women's empowerment has focused on economic and political aspects of women's inequality, neglecting the most basic levels of empowerment, which include self-esteem, self-expression and the ability to recognize and challenge unequal power relationships. I use capoeira as a case study to illuminate how cultural activities may empower women by increasing their self-esteem, fostering self-expression, transgressing gender boundaries, challenging gender perceptions, relieving stress, building community, local and international networks, and more. Capoeira is a traditionally male Afro-Brazilian cultural practice that incorporates martial arts, dance, music, acrobatics, history and philosophy. I argue that participation in a traditionally male-defined activity, capoeira, provides an avenue for women to recognize traditional power structures and challenge gender stereotypes and roles.

For the purposes of my research, empowerment is defined as the processes through which one attains positive self-esteem and self-image, the recognition of the power structures affecting one's life, and the ability to make choices about one's body, health, and life in general. Capoeira offers a space where issues too often avoided, such as the discrimination women face when participating in male areas, may be confronted and challenged. As a form of physical exercise it has the potential to enhance the way women feel about their bodies. As a martial art it has the potential to make women feel stronger and less afraid. As an art form it gives women the ability to express themselves in new and different ways. As a cultural practice strongly connected to resistance to oppression, it has the potential to make women aware of the societal norms affecting them and the unequal relationships in which they engage. All of these things can be empowering.

This chapter offers a review of empowerment theory. It also offers a discussion of the development of feminist and women's movements in Brazil in order to contextualize the need for social change in support of gender equality. Chapter two offers a review of the ways in which culture can be political and how cultural practices can be expressions of, reflections of, and resistance to different types of power. It also presents a brief history of capoeira and how capoeira appears in the literature as a tool of resistance. Chapter three presents a case study of capoeira's potential to empower the women who practice it, drawing on field research in Goiânia, Brazil. It also presents an analysis of the ways in which gender stereotypes are reflected and perpetuated through the practice of capoeira. Chapter four presents conclusions, the limitations of this research, suggestions for further study and applications of this research.

Concept of Empowerment

The United Nations Decade for Women which began in 1976, put women's issues on the world agenda for the first time. One of the main goals of the Decade for Women was to identify key barriers to gender equality and bring women's issues to the forefront of discussions about development, peace, and security. Since 1976, the United Nations and other organizations from local to international levels have worked towards articulating exactly what issues are specifically important to women and how to bring about change where problems and inequalities exist. Empowerment has been suggested as the process through which these problems may be addressed and combated. However, the term empowerment has taken on several different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Furthermore, women from different cultural and historically specific backgrounds often have very different needs and goals, thus making the universal articulation of "women's issues" problematic.

The term empowerment is not exclusive to women's issues. However, I am primarily concerned with the development of this concept as it relates to gender equality and women in

development, more specifically the manifestations of these concepts in relation to Latin America. This section reviews literature on feminist conceptions of empowerment and the different levels at which empowerment must take place in order to create lasting social change. First, the concept of power is reviewed in order to come to a clearer understanding of the need for empowerment. Then the concepts of empowerment and the means through which feminist scholars suggest empowerment can be achieved are analyzed.

Power

In order to define and to understand empowerment, one must first understand the complexities of power and power relationships. Power relationships permeate all levels of society from personal relationships to relations between countries. The relationships govern daily actions and thought processes. Furthermore these power structures oppress women in different ways throughout the world. According to Jo Rowlands (1997), the concept of power was absent in feminist discussions of gender inequalities in Latin America until about 1987. However as the following scholars show, understanding power structures and one's own position within them are integral to the empowerment process.

Rowlands (1997) discusses the concept of "Zero-sum" power. With this concept of power, the more power one person has, the less someone else has. This power is exerted on many different levels from the household to the international level where the use of force, or the threat of the use of force, is used to get someone or some country to do what someone else wants them to do. However, power is not always so overt. Rowlands also presents a more hidden power relationship where manipulation, misinformation, and other ways of exerting power are used. These covert power relationships suppress what could otherwise be an open conflict. This, "unobservable conflict" prevents people from even thinking about the ways in which gender is constructed. She writes that people's perceptions, cognitions, and preferences are shaped in such

a way that “they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial” (Rowlands 1997, 10). People who have systematically been denied power in society internalize messages about what they are supposed to be like and believe them to be true. Women need to understand these hidden power relationships in order to challenge and question them. However, achieving this understanding may be more complex than the relationships themselves.

Many use the term power to mean “power over” which holds that men have power and that they exert it over other men and women. On a different level, power can be exerted by one social, political, economic, or cultural group over another. Furthermore, Rowlands questions if men have to lose power for women to get it, and if so, is that loss of power something to fear?

In “Rethinking Power,” Amy Allen (1998) argues that power is far more intricate than a dichotomous view held by many feminists of power as either domination or empowerment. The concept of power as domination perceives women as dominated by men and as victims of men’s power. Those that view power as empowerment argue that feminists should focus on the power women do have and in using that power. Allen (1998) suggests that the relationships are more complex. Others, she contends, divide power into three categories: power-over (power as domination), power-to (individual empowerment and the power to get something accomplished), and power-with (collective empowerment). According to Allen (1998), the first two are exclusionary and inadequate by themselves to describe women’s experiences with power because they tell only one side of the story. One must also consider racism and social class when examining power structures. Revealing further complexities in the conceptualization of power, Allen (1998) points out that women who have power do not always use it benevolently. Women

of higher social classes or dominant racial categories often play a role in the oppression of other women by using power as “power over.” She asserts that conceptualizing power, identifying existing power structures, and articulating their own views of empowerment are integral to women’s abilities to change power structures and to define and assert their own space in society. She finally defines power as, “the ability or capacity of an actor or set of actors to act” (Allen 1998, 36). She concludes that many feminist notions of power are inadequate in addressing the complex power relationships. Her discussion offers a new way to conceptualize power which, she hopes, will aid in the understanding of power relationships.

Power can also be explained in terms of the patriarchal power structures. When people in patriarchal societies perceive the subordination of women as normal, spontaneous change in gender relations is unlikely. Rowlands (1997) expresses this idea in her concept of “unobservable conflict.” The idea that people perceive this subordination as normal is detrimental in understanding the complexities of power and empowerment. Naila Kabeer (2005) defines power as the ability to make choices. One can compare this definition to Allen’s (1998) definition, where power is one’s ability to act. In Kabeer’s definition, she explicitly defines the powerful action as the making of a choice. Despite these differences, most authors who write about power agree on the multi-dimensional nature of power structures. One must understand these power relationships and the different types of power exerted in society in order to understand empowerment. Just as different definitions and concepts of power exist, so do corresponding notions and levels of empowerment.

Empowerment

The United Nations has addressed the empowerment of women through a number of conferences since the 1985 Nairobi conference. Of particular importance to this discussion, The Platform for Action was adopted by the United Nations (UN) at the 1995 Fourth World

Conference on Women in Beijing, China. This platform called for the end of gender discrimination and states that, “the Platform for Action is an agenda for Women’s empowerment. This means that the principal of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the work-place and in wider national and international communities” (UN 1995). The UN presents the idea that power relations permeate different levels of society and so empowerment should be addressed on those levels. The Platform recognizes the diverse situations women come from as well as the diverse barriers to empowerment. Furthermore, human rights and fundamental freedoms are also necessary for women’s empowerment. The success of the Platform requires the involvement of governments, international organizations, and institutions at all levels. It is the State’s duty to protect human and fundamental rights regardless of cultural and religious backgrounds. The UN further asserts the necessity of achieving gender equality in order to achieve sustainable development.

Barriers to the achievement of the Platform include poverty and political instability. Neoliberal policies implemented in Latin America such as structural adjustment resulted in a huge setback for development goals. As a result of these neoliberal policies, the majority of people living in poverty are women. Women continue to lack access to or are denied access to education and vocational training, employment, housing and the means for economic self-sufficiency. They are continually excluded from decision-making processes and denied the opportunity to contribute to their communities.

Melanie Becka and Marga Dorão-Moris (2005) contend that since 1995, macroeconomic thinking, which ignores the structural nature of poverty and gender inequality, has hindered the realization of the Platform for Action. They lament that, “since Beijing, the market-driven policies, particularly changes in trade and finance rules, and the deregulation and privatization of

public goods and services have in some instances increased poverty and intensified inequalities between and within nations, with women being the major victims” (2005, 10). For example, privatization makes it more difficult for women to own land, especially in developing nations. The income gap between men and women is another example of the existing inequalities. In the United States, women are 40 percent more likely to be poor than men and in Latin America women earn about 39 percent of what men earn (Becka and Moris 2005). Other barriers still exist in the areas of education, health, access to information, economic independence, and respect for roles considered to be traditionally female, such as child rearing. Even though 90 percent of United Nations members have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, most governments have not translated the Convention into action.

Similarly, Carmen Deana Deere and Magdalena León (2002) assert that changes in laws regarding women’s ownership of land in Latin America have changed, however, the implementation of these laws and policies has been poor due to persisting patriarchal social systems. How can people begin to challenge patriarchy? Through what processes can people achieve empowerment? The UN model of empowerment does not explicitly explain the empowerment process. The following scholars attempt to describe that process.

Deere and León (2002) argue that empowerment is a social transformation of women’s access to goods and property as well as to power. Furthermore, empowerment entails a change in gender relations and is a precondition of the attainment of equality between men and women. Empowerment is sometimes confused, especially in the context of Third World development, with social welfare or poverty reduction. These efforts focus on fulfilling basic needs or providing people with practical skills. However, as Melkote and Steeves suggest, “any

discussion of development must include the physical, mental, social, cultural, and spiritual growth of individuals in an atmosphere free from coercion or dependency” (2001, 332). As such, democratic, participatory spaces such as women’s organizations are just as, if not more, important to women’s empowerment as poverty-reduction and social welfare. Real transformation must result in changes in both women’s and men’s roles. As women’s roles change they are free to become more involved in traditionally male roles such as financially supporting the family. This, in turn, frees the male for new emotional and practical experience of being able to participate in rearing of children and care of the home.

Many questions still exist. Deere and León present two difficult questions. Can one person empower another? Is this against the very idea of empowerment (2002, 55)? The writers suggest that no simple answer exists because empowerment has taken on different forms depending on the context. Therefore, there is no infallible model of empowerment, nor is empowerment linear, with a definite beginning or end that is the same for every woman or situation. It happens differently based on the individuals’ or groups’ lives, contexts and histories, and how they are subordinated within the different levels of relationships including, personal, family, community, state, national, and even international. Furthermore, Deere and León’s (2002) study of property rights and rural life shows that rural women’s goals differ in many ways from women living in the city. Thus, there is a need for case-specific evaluation and policy.

Rowlands (1997) defines empowerment as a process that brings people who are outside of the decision-making process into it. Similar to Allen’s (1998) categorization of power, Rowlands separates responses to power structures into three different categories: power to (increases one’s ability to respond to and resist power over), power with (when a group tackles

problems together), and power-from within (self-respect and spirituality which lead to respect for others). These categories are helpful when considering different definitions and models of empowerment. She also critiques the Women in Development model of empowerment, which calls mainly for economic empowerment. She argues that, “this approach did not question the existing social structures or the causes of women’s subordination, focusing instead of women’s role in production...it instrumentalizes women, using them as a resource for meeting other development goals such as population control, sustainable development, and so on”(Rowlands 1997, 5). She argues along with Deere and León (2002) and others, that there is little work being done to try to change men’s perceptions and include them in work traditionally considered to be ‘women’s work’ so that women can participate in other spheres and expand their choices. She contends that patriarchal structures must be evaluated within a society and then challenged in order to create lasting change.

Kabeer (2005) evaluates the United Nations Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on the empowerment of women. The third of eight goals is for gender equality and women’s empowerment. The three indicators used by the UN to monitor progress are: closing the gender gap in education at all levels, increasing women’s share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector, and increasing the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. In order to evaluate the extent to which these indicators can really measure empowerment, Kabeer (2005) first defines power as the ability to make choices. Disempowered people have been denied that choice. It follows that empowerment necessarily entails a change in power structures whereby those without the power to make choices gain the power to do so. Like Rowlands (1997), Kabeer (2005) argues that power relationships are more effective in shaping

people's actions and perceptions when they are not apparent. She contends that women first need to realize that alternatives exist.

Essential to Kabeer's (2005) discussion of empowerment are the interrelated concepts of agency, resources, and action. She defines agency as the process through which choices are made and put into effect. Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised. Achievements refer to outcomes of agency. Restrictions to choice include institutional bias and cultural or ideological norms. Agency implies exercising choice in a way that challenges power relations. This process begins from within; empowerment is rooted in how people see themselves. Resources are distributed from various institutions and relationships in society from the home to the international level, from what food to buy to funding for health care. The ways in which these resources are distributed often depend on the ability of individuals or groups to define priorities and enforce claims. Elites often have the money, time, and political power to push through their own agendas. Agency can be both passive and active, however the most powerful kind of agency is transformative agency where achievements "suggest a greater ability on the part of poor women to question, analyze, and act on the structures of patriarchal constraint in their lives" (Kabeer 2005, 15). These changes can be effectively passed on from one generation to another; however, left unchallenged, inequalities can also be passed on.

Empowerment involves a long-term process of change in patriarchal structures. Change within the individual is a starting point but will do little to change institutionalized inequalities. Institutional change also requires a range from individual to collective agency, private negotiations to public action, and the questioning and resistance of power in informal and formal spheres. Finally, gender inequalities cannot be reduced to a single and universally agreed upon set of priorities. Kabeer states clearly that, "it is the social relationships that govern access to the

resource in question that will determine the extent to which this potential is realized” (2005, 13). Goals such as the MDGs have been accused of being too narrow; however, they do have potential for change if accompanied by real changes in subordinating social constructs.

Thus far, this chapter has reviewed some of the literature on feminist conceptions of empowerment and the different levels in which empowerment must take place in order to create lasting social change. Oppressive power relationships exist within interpersonal relationships all the way up to the international sphere. Therefore, attempts to empower women must also address these different levels. Furthermore, women’s heterogeneity and their individual and collective needs also must be addressed in creating and establishing empowerment models. Women must be careful not to project their needs and values upon other women. The ideas about power and empowerment presented in this review do not contradict each other. They mainly diverge in their arguments as to which levels of power structures must be addressed and to what extent they should be addressed in order to achieve gender equality.

Finding ways to challenge and change social constructs which subordinate women remains the most elusive challenge to empowerment. Deere and León’s (2002) question of whether or not someone can empower someone else brings an important part of these challenges to light. In many places, resources are controlled by entities other than the individuals they are meant to empower. These entities have the power to direct activities with or without the aid of their target population. Further study of empowerment requires case studies of different empowerment projects to help understand and evaluate the actual effectiveness of different empowerment processes.

Feminist and Women’s Movements in Brazil

This section provides a brief history of feminist and women’s movements in Brazil beginning in the 1970s in order to contextualize contemporary women’s empowerment in Brazil.

First, I distinguish between the different types of movements that developed and how women chose to organize. Next, I discuss how international funding can compromise empowerment goals. Finally, I discuss how the new social movements that arose during the late 1980s and 1990s approach the issues of gender equality and women's empowerment.

Sonia Alvarez asserts that, "women's movements can be defined as those sociopolitical movements, composed primarily but not necessarily exclusively of female participants that make claims on cultural and political systems on the basis of women's historically ascribed gender roles" (1990, 23). Women's interests depend upon varying factors such as race, class, religion, sexual preference and ethnicity. Alvarez argues that, "women's gendered experience in the world cannot be separated out from her experience as a member of a specific racial-ethnic group or social class" (1990, 26). In addition, we cannot ignore the power relationships that exist among women on the basis of class and race.

It is useful to distinguish between the different ways women politicized gender roles. According to Alvarez (1990), in Brazil women organized around gender issues and needs in two main ways. Some women organized around their socially constructed feminine roles and pressed for political rights on the basis of those roles. Lower-class women tended to organize more around practical needs, such as community organizations that seek to address issues that include urban services, education, and health care. For example, women's struggle for day care centers and better schools (for their children) represent practical interests. To demand these things, women do not necessarily have to confront their socially prescribed role as caretakers of the family.

Others sought to transform women's roles in society and to challenge "existing gender power arrangements" (Alvarez 1990, 24). Alvarez conceptualizes those organizations addressing

women's political gender interests as feminist. Feminism encompasses the many different strategies women use to combat exploitation and oppression. Alvarez (1990) admits that most feminist groups in Brazil consist of middle-class white women. Though, not all middle-class women engaged in the movement were feminist. In the 1970s a Western feminist focus on patriarchy and victimization directed much of feminist discourse in Brazil to the exclusion of race and class-based issues. The so-called third-wave of feminism during the 1980s and 1990s first began to challenge these white middle class feminist paradigms in Brazil. Women of different races, classes, and sexual orientations began to articulate their own agendas. This pluralism has meant that the Brazilian women's movement has had a difficult time articulating a unified agenda.

Despite the disarticulation of a unified movement, women have made progress towards political, social, and cultural equality. However, questions remain as to what extent civil society and grass roots organizations can influence policy and make lasting changes in society. Gianpaolo Baiocchi's (2005) study of participatory democracy in Porto Alegre suggests that the state can open up at least limited spaces at the local level for citizens to participate in policy making. Women have gained greater access to political space through such forums and many issues once considered private, such as day care, domestic violence, and education of children have been propelled into the public sphere. Alvarez argues, "the very process of claims making and organizing altered participants' self perceptions and enhanced their consciousness of themselves as women, as a subset of "poor people" with particular rights and needs" (1990, 135). This personal level of change and transformation also played a central role in altering, no matter how little or slowly, social perceptions of women and women's roles in society. It is important

to value this individual transformation when discussing changing societal practices and prejudices.

Though some gains have been made by the state creating quota laws for party representation and providing other progressive rights for women, there remains a gap between women's abstract and concrete rights (Htun 2002). Social movements and women's involvement in the state and political parties have served to bring women's issues to the public sphere and have made legal gains for women's rights. However, in practice women still do not have the same access to power as men. They continue to suffer oppression both at the hands of the state and in their everyday lives.

International Support and Funding

The proclamation of the United Nations International Women's Decade (1975) and the Percy Amendment (1973) in the United States, served to heighten international feminist networking and to draw women's equality further into the international spotlight. According to Alvarez, "these new international pressures provided women in Brazil and elsewhere in the Third World two key political resources" (1990, 81). These resources were new sources of funding and the new development discourse that legitimated women's claims for gender equality. However, this new funding created both advantages and dilemmas.

Vargas and Mauleón observe that funding, "created problems with the relationship between money and decision making power, with defining strategies and assigning priority to certain issues or aspects of the agenda as opposed to others" (1998, 56). International funding sources caused many grassroots organizations in Brazil to shift their focus from mobilizing and educating the masses to performing service roles formerly occupied by the State. The economic crisis of the 1980s further diminished state spending and women often had to assume a greater role in providing for their families. The Brazilian State also encouraged women's groups and

organizations to provide social services, such as cleaning up parks and streets, providing medical care, and handing out milk to children. Are women empowered through these organizations?

Does the provision of services address unequal power relationships? Molyneux argues that,

more than 40 years of research and activism on gender issues has shown that if women's subordination is to be tackled in development and welfare programmes, these must have some potential to empower women and enhance their capabilities in ways that enable them to challenge relations of inequality..." (2006, 438).

As such, organizations and programs set up to simply provide services do not meet empowerment goals because they do not enhance women's abilities to challenge their subordinate status.

New Social Movements

Women's groups reorganized in what Alvarez characterizes as new social movements. In Brazil these movements were based on, "the politicization of daily life, the practice of consensus politics and direct democracy, community-building and consciousness-raising" (Alvarez 1990, 225). Alvarez further asserts that,

what distinguishes autonomous social movements from traditional interest groups, political parties, and state-linked women's institutions is that movements have cultural and social, as well as political and policy goals. They seek normative as well as structural transformations of society more actively than do traditional interest groups or political parties (1990, 216).

Her interviews with women in the late 1980s and early 1990s showed that women were looking for alternative ways to influence society. These alternative ways such as through culture, art, and film sought to change the way that people see and think about the world. The increasingly global nature of the economy and interaction among people of different cultures present unique opportunities to communicate new ideas in alternative forums. While these alternative ways may not directly pressure changes in policy, they may be more effective in changing perceptions of women and women's roles in society. They offer new ways to think about unequal power

relationships and serve to reach wider audiences of people who do not participate in more traditional community organizations.

What direction should activists in social movements take? Is it possible that through cultural expressions articulated above by Alvarez, women could potentially circumvent the disarticulation of their goals caused by institutionalization and working within the clientalistic and patriarchal state? Teresa Caldeira (1998) argues that the institutionalization of spaces for women does not mean much. She articulates that, “the success of a women’s agenda depends both on the organization of autonomous women’s movements capable of demanding and monitoring feminist action inside the state and on political support from the governors and the presidents” (1998, 78). Social struggles must be made on many fronts. Thus, women must continue to work through community organizations, with local and national governments, and within their own homes. Women are not a homogenous group and that the diversity within the movement requires in itself different modes of expression and sets forth divergent agendas.

Jaquette *et al* (1994) insists that women must find ways to be more effective politically, strengthening the connection of civil society to the state. However, social change also depends on the ability of ordinary people and the organizations they create to open up new spaces for themselves in which to act and advocate. While this may not change macro-political and economic structures, it might serve to elevate the importance of gender and other types of equality and offer new ways to express and think about these issues.

The civil rights movement in the United States accomplished a great deal, especially politically towards creating equality on the basis of race. However racial prejudice, discrimination, and social stereotyping still exist. Similarly women’s and feminist’s movements in Brazil have done great work towards creating legal protections against discrimination and

carving out space from which women can voice their opinions. However, gender remains a fundamental basis of discrimination and oppression in Brazil and most other places in the world.

We must, as Alvarez suggests, look to new ways of thinking about these issues and new ways of acting. Dagnino (1998) suggests that cultural transformation is a critical place where the political struggle to build citizenship might occur. In Dagnino's view, citizens must transform their consciousness and become active social subjects. I propose greater investigation of the ways in which culture can empower women and change social perceptions. In what ways do women in their everyday lives confront and overcome gender inequality? How are gender differences expressed, reinforced, and challenged through cultural practices? As Paley (2001) suggests, we must look at the changing ways in which power relationships exert themselves over us as individuals and as social groups. I also argue that cultural activities, like capoeira, transcend many of the boundaries that divide the women's movement in Brazil, creating a new space, more independent from state politics and bureaucratic institutions, from which women can challenge unequal gender relationships.

CHAPTER 2 CULTURE, POWER, RESISTANCE AND CAPOEIRA

This chapter will contextualize capoeira in the literature on cultural resistance. I use the term culture in a very broad sense. Culture can be understood as both a way of life and as a set of practices that are all interactive and historical. For the purposes of this thesis it is useful to employ Raymond Williams' characterization of culture as, "the signifying system through which necessarily a social order is communicated, reproduced experienced, and explored" (1981, 13). Culture encompasses ideas, attitudes, languages, institutions, texts, artistic forms, and more (Alvarez *et al.* 1998, 3). The meanings produced by culture change over time.

Culture can also be political. Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon discuss cultural politics as, the legitimation of social relations of inequality, and the struggle to transform them, as central concerns of cultural politics. Cultural politics fundamentally determine the meanings of social practices and, moreover, which groups and individuals have the power to define these meanings. Cultural Politics are also concerned with subjectivity and identity, since culture plays a central role in constituting our sense of ourselves...The forms of subjectivity that we inhabit play a crucial part in determining whether we accept or contest existing power relations moreover for marginalized and oppressed groups, the construction of new and resistant identities is a key dimension of a wider political struggle to transform society (1995, 5-6).

Jordan and Weedon (1995) identify the importance of understanding the ways in which culture creates meaning for social practices. They also point out that certain groups and individuals have the power to create these meanings. Marginalized and oppressed groups and individuals can resist this power by creating new meanings. Dance is an example of cultural expression in which meanings, subjectivities, identities, and power relations can be inscribed, portrayed, expressed, changed, and contested. The meanings produced through certain dance forms change depending on historical context and circumstance. In her work Yvonne Daniel writes that, "the search for meaning reaches from the visions of the creators and intentions of the performers to the content and context of the performance, to the participants or audience members and usually to the entire

social community” (2005, 52). For example, dances historically and contemporarily used to invoke deities may be used at different times as performances for tourists. Similarly, the context in which capoeira is played and performed has changed over time. The meanings capoeira produced as an illegal practice and the capoeira produced in gyms and in professional performances today have different meanings both to society and to the individual practitioners.

While the meanings produced by culture differ throughout space and time, they continue to interact in many ways. Rather than just a form of cultural representation, Henry, Magowan and Murray suggest that, “dance is an intensely generative site in which cultural and social identities are being performed, contested, constructed and/or reformulated” (2000, 256). Politicians and leaders have used and continue to use dance forms towards forming national identities. They codify certain dances as part of their “traditional” culture. Thus in some settings dance is being performed as tradition and helping to perpetuate a desired national identity. However, people can also challenge and reconstruct their identities through dance.

Henry *et al* insist that “dance is a site in which there is continuous movement between political, personal, social, and cosmological realms” (2000, 256). Here they try to capture the idea that dance transcends boundaries and can take place in one or all of the aforementioned realms. They argue that “specific socio-cultural histories and discourses, creative embodied subjectivities, and local, national and global politico-economic tensions, are constituted and mediated through specific choreographies of bodily expression” (2000, 256). Dance can produce new meanings which simultaneously constrain and empower the bodies involved. Dance can also be used as a form of direct or indirect political resistance.

Whether it is for one’s self, deities, or an audience, dance is found in many different contexts. Dance can be understood as any type of embodied movement. It can be done with or

without music, though often music plays an integral role in the movement. Judith Hannah explains that, “dance merges body, emotion, and cognition” (2005, 11). This merger allows for the bodily expression of emotions and ideas. These emotions can be deeply personal and at the same time make political commentary about society and power relations. Daniel explains that, “while dancing, the human body underscores quantities of force and power that it has at its disposal. The dancing body is truly politic, wise, and ingenious” (2005, 261). Through dance, participants can express emotions, ideas, and political struggles. Dance provides a space for artists and audiences to express ideas about social change, identity, and more. In writing about theatrical performance, feminist anthropologist Dorinne Kondo writes, “performance not only constitutes a site where our identities can be enacted, it also opens up entire realms of cultural possibility, enlarging our senses of ourselves in ways that have been, for me, especially powerful” (1995, 50). Furthermore, she suggests that cultural practices offer sites for expression and analysis outside of traditional academic texts.

Historical View of Capoeira

As stated earlier, capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian art form which incorporates martial arts, dance, acrobatics, music, philosophy and more. It is described and referred to as a sport, martial art, dance, and art form. There are two main styles of capoeira practiced today: capoeira Angola and capoeira Regional. There are fundamental differences in the music, rhythm, speed, and movements in these styles of capoeira. The historical view, below, demonstrates the development of capoeira in general with a subsequent focus on capoeira Regional. The case study for this thesis was carried out with individuals who practice capoeira Regional.

Brazilians use several verbs such as, *jogar* (to play), *praticar* (to practice), and *treinar* (to train) to describe what they do in capoeira. To practice and to train are used most often in reference to the process of learning capoeira movements. However, most practitioners use the

term *jogar* to describe the actual interaction among capoeiristas in the *roda*. *Roda* (see figure 2-1) literally translates as a circle. Capoeira and other Afro-Brazilian cultural forms are practiced inside of circles. The term *roda*, when applied to capoeira, encompasses the participants playing instruments, clapping, and singing as well as the two people playing in the center.

The history of capoeira is important in trying to understand its current manifestation as an art of resistance. While its exact origin is disputed, most scholars and capoeira masters agree that capoeira evolved through the extensive Portuguese slave trade between Brazil and Africa. Little documentation exists on the slave trade between Africa and Brazil because Rui Barbosa ordered the destruction of all documentation related to slavery in 1890 (Rego 1968, 9). Rego (1968) estimates that the first Africans were brought to Bahia, Brazil as slaves around 1538. The oldest surviving document legalizing the trafficking of human beings is dated March 29, 1559 (Rego 1968, 12). Rego (1968) concludes that the majority of the Africans originated in West-Africa, specifically Angola.

The most popular, though debated account, contends that the slaves developed capoeira as a way of dealing with the pressures of slavery, specifically, to fight oppression. No matter which historical account one adheres to, it is certain that, “capoeira developed as a way of dealing with very immediate, material historical and political pressures” (Browning 1995, 109). Thus, capoeira as an art form has undergone many transformations since its conception. The meanings associated with capoeira have changed through these transformations as well as with each individual expression.

Theories about capoeira’s origins also vary in the emphasis they place on the African contribution. Nestor Capoeira (2002)¹ who holds a Ph.D. from the Universidade Federal do Rio

¹ Nestor Capoeira will be cited as Nestor so as not to confuse the reader by using his surname, Capoeira

de Janeiro, presents a view accepted by many historians and *mestres* (masters) that capoeira was a result of African rituals which were changed through time and interactions with native Brazilians, the Portuguese, and other Africans. Nestor suggests that historians and folklorists, such as Luis da Câmara Cascudo, connect this early form of capoeira to the *N'Golo* (2002, 119). Said to originate in what is today southern Angola, the N'Golo, was a ritual dance fight between two men ceremonially vying for a woman. Still other capoeiristas insist that capoeira evolved as a technique the slaves used to fight for their freedom. Bira Almeida suggests that Augusto Ferreira's assertion that capoeira was "born out of a burning desire for freedom" resonates strongly among young contemporary capoeiristas (a capoeirista is an individual who practices the art of capoeira) (1986, 15). This gives them a sense of pride in their history. While it has been documented that slaves periodically escaped, particularly during the Dutch invasion of Pernambuco in 1630 when large groups of runaway slaves fled and took cover in the Brazilian interior, the role of capoeira in their escape remains unknown.

Runaway slaves formed communities called quilombos, the most famous of which, the Quilombo dos Palmares, lasted over 60 years. The great leaders of Palmares, such as Zumbi and Ganga Zumba, are heroes among capoeiristas today. Wallace Souza (2003 *Capoeira Arte Folclore*, Aipice Grafica e Editoria) insists on the importance of quilombos in the development of Capoeira. He suggests that these collectives were mainly composed of runaway or freed slaves of Bantu origin, and traces capoeira's roots to the Bantu people. Souza (2003) further asserts that Zumbi of Palmares is considered to be the first capoeira master. This theory supports capoeira as a direct form of resistance against oppression. Similarly, Couto (1999) suggests that slaves would use capoeira to protect themselves against *Capitães do Mato* (slave catchers) who were hired by the *Senhores de Engenhos* (plantation owners) to collect runaway slaves.

Capoeiristas and scholars continue to debate the historical truth of these accounts. However, many capoeiristas draw inspiration from stories of slaves using capoeira to resist oppression. This is particularly true for disadvantaged Brazilians who continue to live in a society where prejudice based on race and class persists. Whether or not Zumbi really existed, he remains a hero and symbol of freedom to most capoeiristas.

Rather than tracing capoeira to one particular ritual, specific ethnic group, or place, scholars such as Rego (1968) and Nestor (2002) argue that capoeira, as it is known today, emerged as a result of the mixing of different cultural traditions of the various African tribes and ethnic groups in Brazil. In reference to the addition of musical instruments to capoeira, Nestor (2002) points a description of the art by Moitz Rugendas in 1835 which did not include the musical instruments present in contemporary practice. Similarly, writing around the same time as Rugendas, a Frenchman named Jean Baptist Debret did not mention capoeira in his description of the berimbau, an instrument containing a bow and gourd, central to contemporary capoeira's musical ensemble. While it appears as though instruments were not originally central to capoeira practice, they later became an integral part. Talmon-Chvaicer (2008) contends that musical instruments were introduced into capoeira as early as 1818. The first instrument associated with capoeira was the conga drum. In describing the way that music has changed overtime Talmon-Chvaicer writes,

at first it was not needed and therefore nonexistent. Later it was meant to deceive and was not an integral part of capoeira. Today it has become an organic part of the activity, an accompaniment that, according to Capoeiras, infuses them with energy and reassurance (2008, 31).

This suggests that despite African practices being outlawed, at some point using instrumentation made practicing capoeira less risky.

Based on interviews with Muniz Sodré, Nestor suggests that the ways in which the Africans in Brazil resisted their masters changed between 1810 and the 1830s from militant revolt to more cultural resistance and that this change contributed to the evolution of capoeira (2002, 121-27). Documentation of slave revolts exists as early as 1558, when the first quilombo was formed in Pernambuco. Slaves revolted several times all over Brazil. One of the largest revolts occurred in Salvador, Bahia in 1835. The leaders of the rebellion were West African Moslems known as Malês. This rebellion, along with increasing numbers of freed slaves had the effect of increasing whites' fears of Africans and their descendants (Talmon-Chvaicer 2008). After the rebellion, laws and policies regarding blacks became increasingly more repressive and the increasing power of the republic made further militant rebellions more difficult. The rebellion also had the effect of transforming black militant rebellion into a form of cultural resistance. One popular capoeira song illustrates the passive resistance that took place during slavery, "vou dizer ao meu senhor que a manteiga derramo" (Anon). This song describes a slave purposely spilling the butter he milled for his master and telling him that it was an accident. Slaves found ways like this to hurt their masters economically without risking their lives with overt rebellion. This passive resistance and way of going around the thing being confronted provide examples of capoeira's philosophy of malicía, always trying to see the world in a different way. According to Nestor (2002), this form of cultural resistance was aided by the extensive social and cultural networks that had been created by African based religious cults, such as candomblés. Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion closely associated with capoeira in the past.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries capoeiristas were viewed negatively, labeled as thieves and vagabonds. The lack of economic opportunity after the abolition of slavery in

1888 resulted in poor conditions for former slaves and their descendants. Rather than recognizing that socioeconomic problems were the cause of high crime, poverty, and other social ills, capoeira and its practitioners who often formed gangs, were blamed for these problems (Nestor 2002). The status of capoeiristas changed slightly in the later quarter of the 19th century as politicians employed different capoeira gangs for political means (Talmon-Chvaicer 2008). Gang members would serve as body guards to politicians and often engage in intimidation tactics. However, after 1892, the authorities sought again to diffuse what they termed as black aggression by outlawing the practice of capoeira. Capoeiristas who continued to play capoeira faced severe penalties if caught by the authorities. A few years later, penal agricultural colonies were set up for “the correction of vagrants, outlaws, and capoeiristas through work” (Nestor 2002, 145). The severity and enforcement of the laws varied by region.

In Rio de Janeiro, capoeiristas formed gangs called *maltas* that reportedly terrorized the people of Rio. The *maltas* were organized similarly to contemporary gangs in Rio’s *favelas* (shanty towns) with hierarchies from leadership roles to small children used as look outs. They purportedly had code names so as to hide their true identity from the police. This may account for the use of nicknames in capoeira practice today. Politicians also used capoeiristas to do their bidding or as body guards in Rio. Due to their political connections, these capoeiristas were to some extent able to escape persecution by the police. However, shortly after the government outlawed capoeira in 1892, the large scale eradication of *maltas* took place in Rio, virtually extinguishing capoeira there.

The persecution of capoeira in Salvador, Bahia had a different character. Gangs were not organized politically as they were in Rio. They also had loose affiliations with the Afro-Brazilian religions such as the aforementioned *candomblés*. Punishments, however, were harsh.

Mestre Bimba (Manoel do Reis Machado), the creator of a capoeira style known as Capoeira Regional, reported that one way to punish a capoeirista was to tie each of his wrists to a different horse and set the horses running to the police headquarters. Many deaths resulted from this punishment. Capoeiristas were punished as individuals rather than exterminated in gangs. Despite persecution, capoeira was able to survive in Salvador whereas it was exterminated in Rio. Almeida (1986) suggests that the persecution played a part in changing the character of capoeira from a more aggressive means of survival to a game. The survival of capoeira in Salvador as well as the predominance of African descendants living there, has led many to accept it as the home of capoeira in Brazil.

Born in the state of Bahia in 1900 and remaining an important figure in capoeira practice today, Mestre Bimba grew up practicing a style of African martial art called *batuque*. He began practicing a form of capoeira that most resembles Capoeira Angola when he was twelve years old. Mestre Bimba sought to evolve capoeira by infusing *batuque* and other martial arts with it (Rego 1968, 33). He also systematized training methods. Furthermore, in an effort to encourage the national legitimization of capoeira, Mestre Bimba opened an academy for upper class Brazilians around 1932. According to Nestor (2002), Mestre Bimba continued to offer capoeira class to lower-class Brazilians. Mestre Bimba's efforts were aided by the military takeover of Getúlio Vargas in 1930 and by the writings of Gilberto Freyre, Arturo Ramos, and other scholars in the 1930s and 1940s, who sought to demonstrate the positive influence that African and Native cultures had on Brazilian society in the. Influenced by these ideas, President Vargas sought to create a collective national identity for all Brazilians. According to Talmon-Chvaicer (2008), this meant legitimizing aspects of African culture and incorporating them into Brazilian national identity. She asserts that, "the intention was to integrate blacks into Brazilian society, to

legitimize and nationalize their culture, thereby reducing their antagonism toward the privileged class” (2008, 114). Thus, Vargas succeeded at taking a cultural practice used as a form of resistance to the Brazilian state and turned it into the only authentic national Brazilian sport (Talmon-Chvaicer 2008).

Theresa Buckland (2006) explains that we can explore national and colonial histories by combining ethnographic and historical accounts of dance practices. Similarly, Janelle Joseph suggests that, “at this time the government harnessed the activity for cultural exhibitions to promote Brazil as a mixed race nation and to symbolically affirm the importance of the Afro-Brazilian population in the history and culture of the country” (2005, 31). While this appropriation of the art by the state can be viewed as a corruption of the art by hegemonic forces, it may have served to open up spaces for participation by more diverse groups, including women, and even assured the survival of the art.

Mestre Bimba has been accused by many of having adulterated capoeira by introducing some foreign elements and selling it to the middle class. However Muniz Sodré explains that, “Bimba had an understanding for what power was and how he could expand it by using the middle class. At the same time he hated the System” (in Nestor 2002, 190). Just as the slaves and their descendants realized that armed military resistance would not work, Mestre Bimba sought to go through or around the system and to use it to his advantage. Furthermore, Almeida (1986) argues that the formalization of training routines and rituals did not extinguish the spontaneity or creativity in capoeira. He explains that the, “spontaneous and original performances will always arise whenever a berimbau invites the capoeiristas to play” (1986, 56).

Even though Mestre Bimba created a formalized training and teaching system, he respected capoeira’s roots and required his students to learn the history of the art. He also

maintained the importance of always keeping your guard and never trusting people too deeply—lessons learned through centuries of mistreatment and oppression. Nestor includes some of Mestre Bimba’s advice to his students in his own writing. Mestre Bimba advises, “don’t turn a corner too close to the wall because the *malandro* (hustler) may be waiting for you” (in Nestor 2002, 181). This expresses a philosophical aspect of capoeira which holds that you should always be aware and never let your guard down, not in capoeira or in life.

Rejecting Mestre Bimba’s innovations, others continued to practice capoeira as they had before. They began to call their style Capoeira Angola in order to distinguish it from Regional and established a strong connection to capoeira’s African roots. According to Couto, “a capoeira Angola nasceu de um contexto étnico com raízes na escravidão” (Couto 1999, 21). This means that capoeira Angola was created in an ethnic context with roots in slavery. One of the most famous capoeira mestres, Mestre Pastinha, believed that Capoeira Angola remained true to capoeira’s roots. Mestre Pastinha systematized Capoeira Angola similarly to how Bimba had systematized Regional. He inaugurated his first academy in 1949 (Couto 1999).

Thus, the two main styles of capoeira, Regional and Angola, were established in Salvador, Bahia, and later spread throughout Brazil and the world. As mentioned earlier, there are fundamental differences in the music, rhythm, speed, and movements in these two styles of capoeira. For example, the traditional instruments used in Capoeira Angola are, three berimbaus a *pandeiro* (tambourine), and an *atabaque* (conga drum). This configuration was codified by Mestre Pastinha. The original ensemble created by Mestre Bimba for Regional includes one berimbau and two pandeiros. Today, as Capoeira Regional has evolved into other divergent training styles, variation in the ensemble does exist. Most contemporary Regional academies

include three berimbaus, two pandeiros, and an atabaque in a full ensemble. However, regardless of the style in which one trains, the essence of capoeira remains the same.

Capoeira extends beyond the realm of the body by also developing the mind. Many capoeiristas have compared capoeira to a game of chess, always trying to see ahead of the opponent's next move. This strategic thinking may have evolved from the oppression faced by capoeiristas first as slaves, then as marginalized members of society.

Central to capoeira's philosophy, the concept of *malícia* dates back to cultural resistance to slavery in the 16th century. Talmon-Chvaicer defines *malícia* as, "cunning, trickery. A key feature of capoeira philosophy" (2008, 204). Mestres agree that to succeed in capoeira one must have *malícia*. Good capoeiristas do not overpower their opponents with violence and force, rather they outthink and trap them using agility, speed and knowledge. Capoeira is the school of life and *malícia* is a way of dealing with the world. Nestor asserts that,

by its own nature, capoeira is a mirror of life, a mini-theater where people stage and dramatize archetypes of situations, relationships, and energy exchanges. And because of that, the capoeira game embodies everything that is characteristic to human beings, both the bright and the shadow sides (2002, 18).

Along those same lines, he explains that *malícia* does not always take morals into account. He describes it as a kind of knowledge that is gained through life experience, which in the case of the past oppressed capoeiristas and many of the poor people who practice capoeira in Brazil today, can lead the individual to view life cynically, thus using his *malícia* as a form of survival, to cheat, lie, and steal. However, the capoeiristas who adopt this side only will not lead a happy life. Accordingly, one also must learn to dance, play, and smile, while at the same time understanding the dangers and hardships in life (Nestor 2002).

The importance of *malícia* and capoeira's history of resistance are evident in capoeira music. Many capoeira songs are passed down through oral traditions. Almeida explains that,

“capoeira songs reflect a variety of themes, such as superstition, Catholic and African Saints, geographic locations, and historical events” (1986, 86). While the dates and composers of many of the capoeira songs predating the 1990s remain unknown, the invocation of these different themes creates varying emotional responses in capoeiristas. The following song represents the importance of past struggles in capoeira:

Ta na hora de lutar
Now it is the time to fight
Para ajudar meu irmão
To help my brother
Ja é tempo de acabar
Now it is the time to fight
Acabar a escravidão
To finish slavery (Almeida 1986, 93).

This song inspires the fighting spirit in the capoeirista and causes him/her to remember what capoeira has passed through. Nestor (2002) explains that the gap between rich and poor continues to widen in Brazil and that discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and class persists. Thus, the struggles faced by slaves are all too familiar to most capoeiristas today. Capoeiristas also continue to fight the stereotype of the vagabond or thief and establish themselves and capoeira as valuable members of society.

The change in the space in which capoeira was practiced in the 1930s, from the streets to indoor academies, had important implications for capoeira’s reputation. The academies were seen as more respectable places where middle class Brazilians could also take part in the now national Brazilian sport. Since its legalization as an authentically Brazilian national sport, capoeira has evolved and gained more respect as a cultural art form. On July 15, 2008, capoeira was officially recognized by the Brazilian government as part of the country’s cultural inheritance (patrimônio cultural). Capoeiristas hope that this will make capoeira more valued by the government and general population in Brazil. Browning (1995) suggests that there is still the

conception that capoeira played in the streets is for troublemakers and that the academy is the respectable place to practice capoeira. Capoeira is practiced in many spaces in between as well. For example, in order to demonstrate the art to the public, groups of capoeiristas will gather in populated areas to have a capoeira roda.

Identity based on race, gender, and class and other factors often determine how and where capoeira is practiced in Brazil. Many capoeira groups still train outside as the participants are poor and cannot afford to pay tuition or rent for an indoor space. Unlike many other sports which cost money, capoeira is still accessible to the Brazilian poor. Other groups practice in academies or schools in buildings of varying quality. The wealthiest tend to practice capoeira in posh gyms and mainly as a form of exercise. The space in which capoeira is practiced will affect the way in which the practitioner is acculturated into the art. For example, wealthier people who practice in nice gyms or closed condominiums tend not to participate in events held outside of their enclosed space, which diminishes the sense of community that capoeira usually fosters.

Resistance

Donna Goldstein (2003) presents Marshall Sahlins' critique of the trend in anthropology and other social sciences to try to explain many things in terms of power and resistance. From Sahlins' critique we are meant to question which acts we view as resistance and why. However Goldstein asserts that every act, "is ultimately political in the sense that every act, as well as the analytical practices we employ to understand these practices, reflects, reinforces, and enacts class relations" (2003, 9). Here we could insert gender, race, or other social identifiers in place of or along with class. At the same time, as scholars and writers, we must be careful when ascribing meanings, such as resistance, to the actions of others. We should not ignore the political context in which they occur.

The extent to which practitioners use capoeira as a form of resistance has changed over time. As described earlier in this chapter, it was first used as a form of direct resistance to white authority by enslaved Africans and their descendants in Brazil. Today, many capoeiristas believe that through their practice of capoeira they embody the history of slavery and resistance and transform it to resist current economic, racial, and class based oppression. Almeida suggests that, “capoeira is an art that allows people to see life’s injustices and at the same time offers a strategy with which to confront them” (in Joseph 2005, 31). Several Brazilian capoeiristas I have spoken with during formal and informal interviews suggest that capoeira remains a sport of the lower-classes. A number of capoeira instructors stressed the importance of social projects to teach capoeira in poor communities.

Hannah argues that, “dance and all its conversations and conflicts, is enmeshed in a broader cultural milieu. It is in viewing dance’s multi-faceted discourses that we can see how it both reflects and influences key societal issues” (2005, 12). While capoeira can ‘speak’ about many societal issues, such as race, class, education and marital status, I focus on gender.

Women in Sports and Capoeira

Soccer, Brazil’s national sport provides a good example of how machismo creates obstacles to women’s participation in areas traditionally considered to be male. Women were forbidden by law from playing soccer until 1979. The entrance of women into traditionally male sports accompanied the development of the women’s movement in Brazil that began in the 1970s. Still, women’s soccer did not receive much attention or resources, and it remained largely socially unacceptable through the 1980s. Votre and Mourão explain the oppression faced by one player when they write, “she faces a lot of prejudice in her daily life, mainly from the macho-biased, who cannot understand why such an attractive girl has decided to play football” (2003, 257). Women in sports must constantly try to balance their identities as females and the

socially constructed ideas of femininity, with their participation in areas traditionally considered to be male.

Women's progress in sports has gone backwards as well as forwards. Displaying the dominant machismo attitude, men shout at the players such things as "You should be in the kitchen" (Votre and Mourão 2003, 263). Similarly, people often equate women's playing soccer to their masculinization. Furthermore, women who play well are also often thought to be lesbians. However, women have proved that they are capable of using their bodies in ways men claimed they could not. Hannah (1988) argues that the body is the first means of human power. Thus, having ownership of the competitive and expressive uses of one's body can be empowering.

As for capoeira, histories to date make little reference to women. Authors most often make reference to women's roles in samba (a Brazilian dance style) rodas or in candomblé rituals. Only a few women, such as Maria Doze Homens (Maria Twelve Men), are mentioned as being capoeiristas and the few mentioned are characterized as masculine women who like to fight. Assunção (2005) reports that Maria Doze Homens is part of capoeira's oral history. She gained her nickname by purportedly beating up twelve police officers one day who tried to arrest her (Assunção 2005, 109). Assunção also found documentation of a court case in 1900 which involved two washer women. One of the women was reported to have invaded the shop of another and beat her, "in gestures of who plays capoeira" (Assunção 2005, 109). Mestre Bimba trained his daughters in the art of capoeira, so women were practicing in the 1930's as well (Nestor 2007). Assunção (2005) admits that the evidence of women's historical presence in capoeira is thin and that women are masculinized in these accounts. He writes, "the

reinforcement of traditional gender roles through capoeira explains why, later, women had to struggle hard in order to be fully accepted in the roda” (Assunção 2005, 109).

Capoeira remains a male dominated sport at the higher levels. It was only in the 1970s that women began to enter in greater numbers into the art. It is important to remember here that the political economy, globalization, and other macro-forces shape cultural expressions. The 1970s and 1980s were a time of transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in Brazil and citizens mobilized politically in great numbers. The feminist movement also flourished during this period and women entered into new spaces in social movements, politics, and society in general. One of the instructors I interviewed, Instructor Fabio, explained that historically women were associated with capoeira in making food and preparing the *terreiro* for candomblé ceremonies and other things that were considered to be just for women. The *terreiro* is the ritual place in which the afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé is practiced. Women have historically had a central role in candomblé which extends beyond preparing the ritual space. Capoeira was historically and in some places is still associated with Candomblé and many capoeiristas also practiced candomblé. Instructor Fabio said that women only began breaking prejudices as recently as the 1980s and 1990s. This also supports the perceptions of others who attribute the lack of women in capoeira to their lack of historical presence in the actual practice of the art.

Mestre Edna Lima is one of the few female masters of capoeira in the world. She contends that when she started capoeira in Brazil in 1974 she was the only female in her group who stuck with it long term. At first, she had to hide her participation from her parents because she knew that they would not approve. While she was accepted by her fellow capoeiristas, her friends outside of capoeira made many jokes about her participation (Nestor 2007, 179). While more women practice capoeira today, they are still far fewer in number at the more advanced levels

(Dunning 1998). Thus, similar to the experiences of female soccer players, women face obstacles to practicing capoeira on the same level as men.

Gender in Lyrics

The lyrics to capoeira songs demonstrate some of the gender constructs present in the art. As noted earlier, the study of capoeira music is complicated by the lack of evidence of dates and composers for many of the songs. The following song was created by a male capoeirista circa 2000 in honor of women in capoeira.

É por amor que ela joga capoeira
It is for love that she plays capoeira
Quem conquistar seu espaço você vai me entender
Who has conquered their space will understand me
Gosta da ginga dessa musicalidade não lhe falta qualiddde se esforça pra vale
She likes the sway of this music; she does not lack quality if she tries with her whole heart
E a capoeira que era coisa de homem
And capoeira that was something for men
Era preso camarada quem tentasse aprender
Those who tried to learn it were imprisoned
Presta atenção hoje tudo está mudado
Pay attention today everything is changed
A mulher na capoeira está mandando seu recado
Women in capoeira are sending their message
No som do berimbau na ginga na brincadeira
With the sound of the berimbau, in the ginga in the game
O batam palmas pra mulher na capoeira
Clap your hands for women in capoeira
No som do berimbau na ginga na bricadeira
In the sound of the berimbau, in the ginga, in the game
embelezando a roda de capoeira
Making the capoeira roda beautiful (Professor Bira unknown date)

The lyrics in the chorus refer first to women's role in music and in playing the berimbau. Next, in the ginga, the song refers to women's movements and how they express themselves through their bodies in the roda. The ginga is the most basic capoeira move and literally means to sway. The game refers to how women play with other players in the roda. In all of these ways, the song insists, women make capoeira more beautiful. Is this association of women with

beauty a barrier to women's full participation in the art? I suggest that it doesn't have to be if beauty is valued equally with physical strength and women can also be associated positively with physical strength. The author of this music said that he wrote the song sometime in the late 1990s at a time when there were many women training capoeira. He wanted to recognize that women too were fighting for and conquering their space in capoeira.

Other songs reflect women's more traditional roles in Brazilian society. They refer to women as lovers of great capoeiristas or to the way that they dance sensually, or at times as nagging wives who do not want to let their husband go to play capoeira. The following lyrics demonstrate this point.

Leva morena me leva me leva pro seu bangalô
Take me morena take me, take me to your bungalow
Eu sou Capoeira já disse que sou
I am capoeira, I already told you I am (*Anon*)

The song presents the idea that the male capoeirista wants to be taken in by the beautiful woman. The following song suggests that the place for women is on the outside of the circle clapping hands, while the place for men is in capoeira.

Minha mãe tá me chamando,
My mother is calling me
Oh! que vida de mulher!
Oh what a woman's life
Quem toca pandeiro é homem,
Who plays pandeiro is a man
Quem bate palmas é mulher.
Who claps hands is a woman (*Anon*)

These types of songs perpetuate machismo in capoeira and relegate women to a secondary place within the art. However, it is also important to recognize women's absence in historical songs about capoeira and the relatively small number of female composers. If women are underrepresented in the art of capoeira in general, they seem to be even more underrepresented

playing instruments and singing in rodas. Today, I have heard more songs being sung that present women as capoeiristas in their own right. A more in-depth feminist analysis of lyrics and the role of music is needed to view the intricate ways in which race, class, and gender are constructed in capoeira.

People of many different ethnicities, nationalities, and socio-economic statuses now practice capoeira all over the world. Capoeira's symbolism as a fight for freedom against oppression resonates strongly with many of those who practice it today. This symbolism is evident in capoeira philosophy and music. Songs sung during capoeira rodas often contain messages of the struggle for freedom during slavery and of contemporary oppression in Brazilian society. Almeida writes, "capoeira also developed as a means of self-development and an expression of freedom for anyone dealing with his or her own social constraints, especially for those who struggle to survive in the present economic situation of Brazil" (1986, 5). Thus, individuals practicing capoeira have different experiences and express themselves uniquely. For some, capoeira is a fun form of exercise, but for many others, it is a way of life and a philosophy for seeing the world (Almeida 1986; Nestor 2002).

Capoeira often has a profound effect on the lives of the people who practice it. Janelle Joseph writes, "the world of capoeira...is an all-encompassing lifestyle, philosophy, sport, martial art, dance" (2005, 31). The next chapter is dedicated to describing the ways in which capoeira, as an art form, affects the lives of the men and women I interviewed in Goiânia during the summer of 2008. I will demonstrate some of the ways in which gender is challenged and perpetuated through capoeira as well as the ways in which capoeira empowers the women who practice it.



Figure 2-1. This picture shows two capoeiristas playing in a capoeira roda.

CHAPTER 3 CAPOEIRA IN GOIÂNIA

This chapter presents the results of a case study of women practicing capoeira in Goiãna, Goiás. The central question is: how does women's participation in capoeira challenge Brazilian gender roles and identity? Both gender roles and identity are social constructs deeply embedded in culture. Brazilian women's participation in male-defined sports like capoeira challenges these constructs. Since capoeira is a cultural form, Brazilian social and cultural constructs of gender and identity are embedded in its discourse. How do Brazilian women who practice capoeira view themselves and how are they viewed by male practitioners and their families? What challenges do women face to their participation in capoeira because they are women?

I hypothesized that women who practice capoeira are empowered by increased self-image, self-esteem, and self-expression, by a greater ability to make choices about their body, their health and other matters, and by recognizing traditional power structures and challenging traditional gender roles. To what extent do women attribute positive aspects of their self-image and self-esteem to their participation in capoeira? How has capoeira changed their lives by enabling them to recognize traditional power structures, challenge traditional gender roles, and make other key choices?

Methodology

I spent four weeks in Goiânia, Goiás carrying out a case study on women in capoeira. I used qualitative methods, principally semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I created a semi-structured interview guide with a list of topics and questions to be covered in a specific order. The interview guide was translated into Portuguese and approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty female capoeira practitioners. Practitioners of capoeira are organized into different groups. Groups differentiate on the basis of philosophy, style of play, and individual personalities of their leaders. These women came from three different capoeira groups in Goiânia. Two of the groups I worked with were founded by students of Mestre Suíno. Mestre Suíno founded his capoeira group in Goiânia in 1977. The majority of his students were of the lower classes. I am not sure of the exact number of groups in Goiânia; however, I identified more than I was able to study.

Mestre Bimba moved from Salvador to Goiânia in 1973 to teach capoeira (Nestor 2002, 193-4). Capoeira has since flourished there. My mestre, Jelon Vieira, highly recommended Goiânia as a location for my study and attested to the quality of the capoeira there. The highest ranking female, called Professora Jaca in this study, also visited Gainesville, Florida in March, 2008 to lead a women's capoeira event. Thus, I had already established a relationship with her.

Each interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder. These interviews took place in capoeira academies and in individual homes. I interviewed fourteen women from Group A, the principal group I observed and spent time with. I interviewed four women from Group B and two women from Group C. All three groups share similar styles of capoeira and interact with each other. While I intended to work with only Group A, the leaders of Group A suggested that I interview some women from the other two groups because, for various reasons, they did not have as many females training during my period of fieldwork as they have had in the past. Further, they suggested, these women from other groups would provide valuable insights.

I use these interviews to assess the ways in which women identify themselves, and what role capoeira has played in the construction of their identities. One might argue that only empowered women participate in capoeira. I address this potential selectivity bias by asking

respondents what prompted them to begin practicing capoeira in the first place and to recount in detail the changes that they have experienced within themselves since then. I also use these interviews to assess participants' concepts of gender roles both within and outside of capoeira, and how they feel they are treated differently by other women and men in capoeira.

I also interviewed nine male capoeira practitioners, all from Group A. I interviewed men who had either been in capoeira for more than four years or are instructors. I interviewed these men in order to assess their opinions about women who play capoeira, and gender roles both within and outside of capoeira. By interviewing mostly instructors and long-time participants, I was able to observe how the teachers treat women in their classes and how women's roles in capoeira have changed over time. Questions regarding gender may have produced response effects: because I am a woman, they may have told me what they believe I want to hear as a woman.

In a traditional experimental design, I would also assess the empowerment levels of a control group of women in the same community who do not practice capoeira or measure levels of empowerment before and then again after some time practicing, in order to assess the change that can be attributed to practicing capoeira. However, this was not feasible given the time constraints and resources available. Instead I used semi-structured interviews of female capoeira practitioners to assess empowerment before participation in capoeira and after via retrospective questions.

In addition, I engaged in participant observation, observing interactions between the capoeira practitioners. I attended three weekly capoeira classes with Group A, attended two classes with Group B and one class with Group C. I both participated in classes as a capoeirista and observed classes. I also attended group social events and demonstrations. These

observations helped me to analyze whether there were differences in the way in which women treat each other, men treat each other, and the ways they treat members of the opposite sex.

I take into account the sex and age of all respondents in my analysis. I also account for the length of time practicing capoeira as this may have an effect on their responses.

I transcribed each interview with translation assistance from a native speaker, Wellington Porto. The identities of the participants are disguised for their privacy and I have assigned fictitious names to each of the participants.

My Position

I enter into this project as a self-proclaimed feminist and a capoeirista. My perspective and positionality thus will affect my analysis and what I choose to pay attention to. I have been practicing capoeira for over seven years and have become a strong proponent of the art. For the purposes of this research, I focus on gender. I am myself looking for answers and inspiration as to why I see so few high-level (See Appendix B for an example of a graduation system) women teaching and participating in capoeira. I also confront my own ideas about femininity through the practice of a martial art which requires me to be strong and often times combative when society has taught me that these things are not feminine.

At first I did not want to admit that there were fundamental physical differences between men and women that affected their participation in capoeira. I wanted to believe that the general lack of strong female players had more to do with society. Patriarchal norms seem to socialize women to believe that they are the weaker sex and inscribe unequal gender roles into our consciousness. For example, many people believe that men will not desire physically strong women and that it is not proper for women to enter into physical altercations. Such sentiments arose in my interviews and observations during research and throughout my seven-year participation in the art. Despite these social constructs and the need to examine the ways in

which power exerts itself through them, biological difference between men and women do seem to matter in physical sports. The extent to which they matter is beyond the scope of this paper, but will, I hope spark further research, discussion, and debate.

Description of Respondents

The respondents in my study varied by class, gender, age, and education. Many respondents either opted not to define their race or responded “Brazilian” to the question of race. This study does not include an extended discussion of race, though the subject will appear in places. For now, I will state that while race does matter as a social category in Brazil, though it is conceptualized and practiced differently than it is in North America.

Participants’ education levels and occupations varied as well. I interviewed women with high school diplomas, bachelor’s degrees, and doctors, domestic servants, teachers, students and more. This case study is too small to try to correlate race, education, and occupation for analysis. I did notice that in many cases women with more education were able to articulate in more detail the philosophy of their group and discuss the current application of capoeira’s historical roots. However, these observations were not true for all participants.

I interviewed men and women ages ranging from eighteen to forty-five years of age with anywhere from one to over twenty years of experience in capoeira. Those with more time in capoeira, as expected, were able to relate more about the ways in which women’s role in capoeira has changed overtime.

Through my interviews, I perceived that while there are similarities, the way one responds to capoeira is very individual due to life choices, physical capabilities and other factors. The extent to which capoeira has an impact on an individual’s life also depends upon the person doing it. For example, Instrutora Esquerdinha responded that her life in summary was capoeira. She met her husband through capoeira, she pursued a degree in physical education because of

capoeira, she teaches capoeira, and her children do capoeira. Ratinha claimed that while she loved the art she did it more for the exercise and as a hobby. Exemplifying different levels of participation, women practice capoeira anywhere from once a week to five or six times per week.

Gender and Barriers to Participation

Women had various reasons for starting and stopping capoeira. Instrutora Narizinho completed her undergraduate research on women in capoeira. She surveyed female capoeiristas in Goiânia, Goiás asking them among other questions, why they start and stop capoeira (see table 3-1). The reasons women start capoeira presented by Instrutora Narizinho concurred with the results of my interviews with the exception that none of the women stated that they started in order to find a boyfriend. For example, Professora Jaca explained that, “I started capoeira because I thought it was esthetically pretty.” She told me the story of how her cousin started capoeira and she would go to watch her cousin at events. Eventually, as a result of her cousin’s constant pleading with her to come to a class, Jaca started capoeira. Once she started, she became much more involved in capoeira. She said, “I began to see it [capoeira] had many things that it included. I felt the energy of the people that came together in the group, a lot of happiness and energy.” So, what was at first something she began because she thought it looked neat and wanted to get into shape, became a major part of her life, even extending her the opportunity to travel to the United States to give capoeira workshops and lead a discussion on women in capoeira.

Measuring empowerment in this study is difficult. I tried to do this by asking women why they started and how they felt before and after they started doing capoeira. As Jaca’s case demonstrates, capoeira had a significant impact on changing the course of her life. Without her cousin’s pleading she admits she might not have had the courage to start capoeira. However once she did, she reported gaining self-confidence, physical strength, and much more. Her case

is not unique; however, she is the highest-ranked female in her group. She has made many sacrifices in order to be a full-time working mom and continue her work with capoeira. I argue that many of the reasons why women stop participating or diminish their level of participation are because of barriers embedded in capoeira and in society. It is to these barriers that I now turn.

The responses to questions about differences between men and women in capoeira reveal some perceptions about gender and specifically, femininity. It is difficult to determine which notions of gender are held by most people in Brazilian society and which challenge these notions. Perceptions might vary based on class, education, gender, and region. Because of this variation, I rely on my own observations as well as my respondents' to provide limited information about the role of gender in their lives and in their capoeira practice.

Many women reported that while the situation continues to improve, machismo is still a prevalent attitude. When asked to define machismo, Instrutora Esquerdinha responded that "machismo would be a man who thinks that only he can accomplish things. Like fighting is not for women it is for men. So there exists a lot of this; for another example, cleaning is not for men it is for women and cooking is for women so it is this type of machismo that I am talking about." Professora Jaca agreed commenting that, "generally society is a little macho, men are always on top, and they want to command in the home and in life. They want to be the boss." Tarântula commented that "society discriminates, when I say I am a capoeirista, many people laugh in my face...they think that a woman has to be delicate...that capoeira was made only for men, but yes, capoeira was made for women too."

However, Caju suggested that sometimes in training men "don't accept that we can be better than them." Cavallo added that, "I have already seen many men be taken down by women

in a capoeira roda.” Takedowns are movements that one player uses to bring another to the ground. The reaction that the man will have generally depends on his personality. If he is too proud, he might feel angry or embarrassed. If he is humble, he will congratulate his opponent and then train harder for the next encounter. I have noticed that some men watching a woman taking down a man usually act surprised or laugh then make fun of the man who was taken down. The surprise, whether it is pleasant or not, suggests that it is not common to see women taking men down and that inequality still persists. Several Brazilian women noted that women still generally earn less for doing the same job as men and women are perceived as being too fragile for contact sports like capoeira. For example, Ratinha explained that perceived competency was one of the barriers women face in society, principally in professional areas. She said that, “for being a woman, people do not give you credit.”

Professor Bira explained that wanting to or not, women are still largely responsible for the home. Though this is changing and more men help out with these responsibilities it is still very rare to see a man whose full time job is to stay at home. After women enter into committed relationships and begin families it becomes difficult for them to find time for capoeira. It is especially so now, as women continue to find work outside of the home, while remaining responsible for the home as well. Women are even less likely to continue their capoeira training if they have a relationship with a man who does not do capoeira or understand the commitment it takes to achieve and sustain a graduated level in capoeira. These men are reportedly more likely to pressure their girlfriends or wives to leave the art. Professora Jaca attested to the effect machismo can have on women’s participation when she said that, “the women who marry people who are not capoeiristas have difficulty because they are not able to walk together. There is

machismo and jealousy because of all of the men in capoeira and then the women cannot stay because their men do not feel secure.”

Similarly, Sabía explained that, “men get more involved in capoeira than women, principally here in Brazil; there are few (women) who stand out. Women more or less stop at a certain level.” When I asked her why she replied, “work, women have to fight for this, to enter the workforce and study. Besides this some are married and take care of the house and kids. There is not time left to dedicate themselves as much as men.” Instrutora Esquerdinha echoed this point. She expressed the difficulty in continuing her training between working full time, teaching capoeira, and fulfilling her role as a wife and mother.

Mestre Janja, a professor of Education at the Federal University of Bahia, said that, “ser mulher na capoeira é uma canseira. Temos que matar um leão por dia” (to be a woman and a capoeirista is tiring. We have to kill one lion per day) (Lemle 2008). Her sentiments indicate the struggles women face in capoeira academies on a daily basis from conquering movements, to space and time playing in the roda, to standing up for themselves and their art to naysayers.

Women also struggle to claim their space in capoeira rodas. Depending on the number of people participating in a roda, it can be difficult to get playing time. At events where many people participate, one must be aggressive in trying to enter into the roda. Preference is given to players with higher graduation levels. In most groups you cannot buy the game when two players with higher graduations than your own are playing. The term “buy the game” is used to describe how one player interrupts a game between two people to take one of the players out and then play with the remaining player. As there are fewer women at higher graduated levels, this often means that men get significantly more playing time than women.

When asked what message she would give to women wanting to reach high levels in capoeira, Paulinha advised, “if she wants to be someone she has to have a lot of will power and give a lot of her time and pass through many things in her life. In truth women have to be dedicated. Men already do this... men have more disposable time.” Paulinha chose to make capoeira a weekly activity where she goes to socialize and to relieve some stress. She chooses to dedicate her time to church, her new job working in a salon and her duties as a wife and mother. What I did not ask, and would have been helpful here, is if given the chance would she want to dedicate more time to capoeira? If her husband shared in the housekeeping, would she use her time for capoeira? The fact that for many women, they would play more with more time, suggests that they still confront many barriers in their ability to participate fully in capoeira.

Several women, such as Guierra, Professora Jaca and Ratinha mentioned that the lack of female role models at higher levels may also discourage women from participating in capoeira. Guierra explained that, “women do not feel attracted to capoeira because there are few [of them]. If there were more, there would be more incentive.” However, at the same time that it discourages some women from participating, it motivates others. Instrutora Narizinho commented that “women do not want to be seen as fragile, and want to get rid of discrimination in the roda. This motivates many women to continue to train.”

Because women have been historically underrepresented in capoeira, many of the respondents claimed that the absence of high-cord women has a lot to do with the limited number of years that women have been participating in the art. It takes time to create masters and graduated cords. In most groups, it takes a minimum of five to seven years to reach the level of a graduated cord. To reach the levels of Instructor and Professor, it can take anywhere from eight

to twenty years. Most mestres have a minimum of twenty years practicing capoeira. This suggests that in time more and more women will reach these higher levels in capoeira.

Embodied Difference

The difference in muscular strength between men and women presents barriers to women training capoeira. Women reported having more difficulty with movements which required upper body strength. While women can do all of the same moves as men, men tend to learn these movements faster than women. When the women see how quickly the men acquire the ability to do the movement, they often get discouraged.

Women reported having more facility, in general, with movements requiring lower-back flexibility. Caju perceived that, “women are more disposed to the dance aspect and men for the hard games.” A hard game or “jogo duro” refers to a competitive game where players have the intention to make contact through attacks and perform takedowns. Babaloo thinks that, “women can do more movements with their lower backs and have more flexibility and men are stiffer. Women have more sway and beauty in their games.” However, the extent to which women identify with the dance or martial side has a lot more to do with individual preferences. For example, Vigilante said that she likes the hard games and there are many women who share her sentiment. Desmond argues that, “by looking at dance we can see enacted on a broad scale, and in a codified fashion, socially constituted and historically specific attitudes towards the body in general, toward a specific social group's usage of the body in particular” (1997, 32). Even though individual expression varies from person to person, noting perceived differences can help us to understand commonalities in the way the men and women view gender in capoeira.

The starkest difference I observed, and that women reported, was in the interaction between men and women in the roda. Men do not usually play as aggressively with females as they do with other males of the same level. This is due to the general belief that women are

more fragile than men. Is this a manifestation of machismo or does it have basis in biology? How might this thinking affect the progress of women in the art? Most women agreed that women cannot compete with most men when it comes to fighting. However, there are teachers, such as *Contra-Mestre* (CM) Guierro who encourage their female students to play aggressively and stress the martial aspect to all of their students. According to CM Guierro, most teachers want all of their students to be warriors and more women are fulfilling this role.

In the interviews, many women felt the need to assert their femininity. In her response to how capoeira has changed her, Yemanjá stressed that capoeira had not altered the beauty and femininity in her character. Even though she can play a hard game, capoeira has not changed what she believes makes her a woman. According to Votre and Maurão (2003), women who wished to participate in sports were told that men would not marry them. Some people believe that women's participation in male arenas resulted in their 'masculinization' (Votre and Maurão, 2003, 264). Women who do not display socially accepted and constructed feminine qualities were viewed by some as being less womanly or even undesirable by men. Votre and Maurão's study of women in soccer in Brazil suggests that media and public focus was on the women's physical appearance rather than their actual skills. Sorvete noted, "for men to notice you, you have to have some characteristic; be beautiful or play well. Perhaps after a long time and with a lot of dedication, maybe you can win their respect and consideration as a woman and as a capoeirista." This suggests that women often determine their self worth based on the men in their lives. To be valued as a woman, at least initially, you must be beautiful. Social and cultural restrictions on what actions are appropriate for women weigh on the minds of many women who desire to participate in capoeira.

Jane Desmond asks, “what skills are demanded of each dancer, and what do they imply about desired attributes ascribed to men and women” (1997, 32)? According to the vast majority of my respondents, though some exceptions exist, while men in general have more physical strength than women, women have an advantage in grace and flexibility. In explaining how men and women are different, Instructor Fabio reported that men have more testosterone so they have more strength. However, he said, socially and culturally, women are equal to men.

Several of the male and female instructors claimed that women have the role of bringing more beauty to capoeira. Contra-Mestre Apache claimed that women have a very important role today in capoeira because they have the responsibility of finding the non-violent expression in capoeira. Men, he said, are more aggressive and often make capoeira too violent. Thus masculinity is associated with aggression and strength and femininity with grace and beauty. My capoeira instructors have always told me that in relation to takedowns, speed, agility, and timing matter more than strength and muscle mass. Given this, women definitely have the capability to compete with men in the roda regardless of biological differences.

I observed women playing more aggressively with each other than with other men. I believe that one of the reasons that this did not come up in many of the interviews has more to do with the questions that I asked than with the perceptions of my participants. Nestor (2007) reports that, “women players agreed that aggression and excessive competition exists between women in capoeira, but they consider this the legacy of a certain type of education and the position women were relegated in society” (2007, 181). In informal conversations with female practitioners, I asked them why they believe that women sometimes play more aggressively with each other than they do with men. A few main themes arose during these conversations and at women’s events I have attended here in the United States. For example, women might be more

competitive with each other than with men. They do not feel they are as strong as most men so they do not feel that they are in direct competition. With other women, however, they want to assert their superiority or prove they are better players. Another possible explanation relates to size. Women feel that playing with other women, in general, is a more even match. Just as men are more aggressive with other men, so too are women more aggressive with other women. This complicates the idea that women have the role of bringing beauty to capoeira.

Empowering Benefits

Healthy Minds

The ways in which women are treated in and experience capoeira may depend to some extent upon these philosophies passed down from different instructors. Through different philosophies of learning women may experience more or less empowerment with varying impacts on the ways in which women and men from the group view gender roles. Capoeiristas form groups based on philosophy, style, and individual leaders. These groups often become like extended families. This is one of the many ways in which capoeira can influence different aspects of the practitioner's life as they take relationships made through capoeira outside of the training academy. I suggest that because capoeira has the potential to affect many aspects of its practitioners' lives and because it has a rich history spanning over 400 years, it presents itself as particularly useful in inciting individual and social change.

Capoeira can help women to learn persistence and perseverance. Contra-Mestre Guierro stated that, "in a moment of difficulty instead of giving up they will get over the barrier." This idea, that capoeira helps one to overcome difficulties, resonated with many of the subjects I interviewed. The process often starts with movements. Many women reported difficulty mastering movements. However, as the popular capoeira song dictates, "quem nunca caiu não é capoeira" (if you have not been taken down you are not a true capoeirista). Teachers insist that

failing at first is part of the art. If you are afraid to try things you will never grow. This translates into everything in your life. When you do fall, you need to get back up and keep going. In capoeira this means training harder so that the next time you meet your opponent or try a movement, you do not fail. Many women reported learning this through the process of trial and error. Tarântula professes that, “in capoeira there are no victories like money and medals. But capoeira gives many personal victories.”

Another important lesson taught through capoeira is self-respect and respect for others. When I asked respondents about the philosophy of their group or their personal philosophy the most common response was the need to have humility and respect. Capoeira songs and masters praise these two attributes. Contra-Mestre Apache explained that he would rather invite a master who is perhaps small in size and humble than a big guy who treats people like they are beneath him. Girafa commented on her admiration of her capoeira master’s humility and how he extends his friendship to all of his students despite his international fame as a capoeirista. She insists that he encourages his students to do the same. She explains that capoeira is not about being better than somebody else, but about personal growth and strength. You can find your own strengths and weaknesses through your interactions with others.

However, not all capoeira players act respectfully and humbly, which is why one rule in capoeira is never to trust your opponent too much. Despite philosophy to the contrary, some capoeiristas are out to show that they are stronger and better than the rest. They demonstrate this both inside and outside of the roda. Ratinha suggests that the most valuable lesson she learned in capoeira was not to be naïve and that other people do not always have good intentions. She said through capoeira she learned to have street smarts and to identify people who have bad intent.

Self-Esteem

A common theme was the role of socialization in capoeira. Capoeira requires people to interact with each other. Instructors encourage their students to make friends, and capoeiristas in the group most often welcome and encourage beginners to participate. Many capoeira groups are like extended families, socializing with each other outside of capoeira practice. Furthermore, different groups interact with one another at events. There is constant interaction with new people. Through travel to other places and groups, capoeiristas meet new people, are exposed to new ideas, and create reputations for themselves among other capoeiristas. Thus, the extent to which the individual is able and motivated to travel will also impact her practice. Many of the women indicated that capoeira helped them to feel more self-confident because they felt less shy. They felt that capoeira helped them to communicate better with people.

Teachers often refer to the game of capoeira as a conversation. Players learn to interact and even to gauge their opponents' personalities through their interactions in the roda. For example, if a person is aggressive or shy you can tell by the way s/he expresses her/his movements. Often the level and amount of time a person has in capoeira will affect her/his confidence and ability to express herself/himself, but not always. Some capoeiristas, such as Tarântula, who have had less than a year playing capoeira, enter into the roda with confidence and do not shy away from close and often heated interaction. They jump into learning and playing the instruments.

When asked about how she translates the lessons she has learned in capoeira to her everyday life Dandara explained that, "I always take what the instructors tell me about self-esteem and putting yourself on top; you have to have capability and strength and it only takes you wanting to do it." According to Instructor Fabio, capoeira is an instrument that will motivate women to become more independent. He has seen capoeira change the lives of many of his

students. He commented that, “I have students who have visibly changed their lives; timid students who from the moment they started practicing capoeira and getting involved in classes overcame the difficulty they have.” Caju echoes this point when she asserts that capoeira, “helps your self-esteem, you feel more confident. You feel more able to defend yourself and you feel more secure and stronger.” Caju noted that she had a low self-esteem and that through her practice of capoeira she now has a much higher self-esteem.

Strong Bodies

Capoeira offers a space where women can explore their bodies’ potentials and gain confidence through acquiring physical health and strength. Sabía, who is a general practitioner, suggested that capoeira is a complete sport. “It works cardio very well as well as making your body beautiful but not as muscular as people who do weightlifting.” Vigilante said that her capoeira training makes her feel less afraid and more capable of defending herself when she walks down the street. The extent to which capoeira empowers the individual in this sense has a lot to do with the individual’s focus in training. Some individuals focus on the dance side, while others focus on the martial arts side and many more combine both aspects.

The typical capoeira class contains a warm up which may consist of jumping jacks, push-ups, sit-ups and stretching among other activities. The middle part of the class focuses on learning movements involving most muscle groups. It is a total body work-out. Participants might work with partners, go across the floor with movements or do movements as a group on the floor. Most classes end with a roda where two people at a time play each other in the center. Because it is a dynamic art form, there is a seemingly endless array of movements and combinations. Many people are attracted to capoeira for this reason. Ratinha affirmed this point when she commented that, “capoeira is always new, there is never an end. I will always have a challenge.” These challenges include mastery of new movements. One interacts with the world

through her body, thus restrictions of the body limit actions and interactions, ways of thinking—ways of being.

By participating in capoeira women are able to use their bodies to create new expressions and to explore new possibilities. They also use their bodies in ways society traditionally claimed they could not. By mastering difficult movements and becoming martial artists, women defy boundaries set up to keep them small, weak and controllable. Having ownership over the expressive uses of their bodies is empowering.

Self-Expression

Many women found it difficult to express in words what capoeira means to them and how it has changed them. For many men and women capoeira becomes an intricate part of their identities, but for others, capoeira is simply a fun way to relieve stress, socialize, and get into shape. Having difficulty in expressing how capoeira has changed the way she sees and feels about herself, Valentona responded that capoeira had changed everything in her life for the better. She offered the lyrics of two capoeira songs, “sem capoeira não posso viver” (without capoeira I cannot live) and “eu não sou nada sem capoeira” (I am nothing without capoeira).

Sorvete expressed that, “I feel like a child, for me it is a game.” When she hears the berimbau, Tarântula gets goose bumps and her heart beats faster. For Girafa, capoeira is “relaxing, tiring, but when you train you feel a lot of energy, you leave feeling invigorated, like your body is another. You are more energized.” Women are able to connect with the music, a supportive community, and their bodies in a new ways. These emotional and physical benefits enable capoeira practitioners to relieve their stress and momentarily suspend their problems and then reproach them with new energy. Girafa is studying to become a lawyer, so while she does not aim to make a living from capoeira, she schedules her work hours and school classes around capoeira training times.

One of the qualities that set capoeira apart from other forms of exercise is the importance of history in and tradition in its present manifestations. Relating to the roots of capoeira Girafa suggests that capoeira is,

the story of the Brazilian people, of suffering people who had to fight to overcome barriers, who had to fight for something better than that given by the people who judged them. I think it was a scream for liberty; it was a way to express their identity, when the black people created capoeira. I think it is very beautiful.

Many of the lyrics in capoeira songs reflect this struggle for liberty. For example one song contains the lyrics, “Sou um negro forte da periferia. Meu tataravô foi escravo e eu sou escravo hoje em dia” (I am a strong black man from the slums, my great grandfather was a slave and today I am a slave) (Vargas 2003). The combination of the music and the history behind it creates an emotional connection with many capoeira practitioners. Tears welling up in her eyes as she spoke, Tarântula commented, “the slowest rhythm, são bento pequeno de Angola, makes my eyes fill with tears and it is like I was born when the negros created capoeira.”

Transgressing Boundaries and Conquering Space

It (capoeira) is an instrument she can use to overcome machismo because she is cultural resistance (Instructor Fabio).

The presence of women in the male-dominated art transgressed many social boundaries. Joseph asserts that, “by participating in a cultural activity designed for and by men, they transgress gender boundaries” (Joseph 2005, 31). Here Joseph suggests that just by their presence in capoeira, women are confronting and crossing gender boundaries. Two of the male instructors I interviewed stated that part of women’s role in capoeira today is to assert their space and break prejudice about their capabilities in the roda. Instructor Fabio claimed that women participating in capoeira are charged with breaking prejudice that stems from paternalism and machismo.

Here we can employ the discourse on bodies and space. Jerri-Jo Idarius found through her interviews with female capoeiristas, “every second I am in the capoeira class, I am conscious that I am a woman. Women habitually make their bodies as small as possible. Capoeira reminds me to take up more space” (in Joseph 2005, 32). Through their practice of capoeira women can defy what is thought to be appropriate action for the female body. As Ratinha argued when asked if capoeira helps to overcome perceptions that women are weak, that a person can overcome prejudice “when a person does it and shows that it is the opposite.” Instrutora Esquerdinha admitted that women have more difficulty than men in mastering movements that involve upper body strength. However, she believes that a woman can do anything a man can do, even if it takes her longer to build the strength to do it. Similarly, Sabía suggested that capoeira “is one more place where women have to fight and be strong to learn to achieve at the man’s level.”

As stated earlier, societies are changing and more opportunities are opening up to women in Brazil, especially in urban areas. Cavalo, who has been practicing capoeira on and off for twenty-eight years, reported that, “before there were more prejudices...Capoeira helped to change these prejudices. We used to consider women fragile and capoeira shows that they are not.” This demonstrates that perceptions of women are changing. The exact cause of these changes remains debatable. I make no claims as to what extent the actual presence of women practicing capoeira has driven wider social change. However without the brave pioneers who have and continue to claim their space in men’s arenas, these perceptions might have gone unchallenged.

The *roda de capoeira* can be view as a microcosm. Just like women are conquering space in society, they are conquering space in the art of capoeira. Yemanjá, a female student, claims

that, “women are conquering space in whatever they do. Women found capoeira, fell in love, and now they are there to stay.”

Conclusion

This case study shows that capoeira has the potential to empower women in many ways. Capoeira is different from other activities because it encompasses physical and emotional health, fosters community, opens up spaces for conversations about gender, and incorporates history and philosophy in its practice. Furthermore, it is one of the few sports where men and women practice together. Through capoeira women learn persistence and perseverance, respect for themselves and respect for others. Women reported having an increased self-esteem as a result of their practice in capoeira. They are encouraged to socialize with others both from their group and from other groups, take leadership positions at their individual capoeira academies, and to believe in themselves. Capoeira also helps women to feel more confident and physically empowered through rigorous exercise and learning a martial art. Women are also able to express themselves artistically through movements and music. They learn how to use their bodies in new and different ways, can become composers, play instruments, and sing through capoeira. Exactly what capoeira offers varies from person to person. Some women feel empowered in all of the aforementioned ways, others in only some. Women also relieve their stress and become energized during their capoeira practice.

Capoeira both challenges and perpetuates gender stereotypes. Women’s presence in a male-dominated art form transgresses boundaries, expanding women’s options and opportunities for interacting with others in their communities. Female encounters and rodas encourage questions and dialogue about the role and status of women in capoeira and society in general. Women continue to confront social and physical barriers to their participation in capoeira.

Machismo still permeates Brazilian culture. Women's dual roles at work and in the home restrict women's participation in capoeira because they have less time.

Table 3-1. Reasons for initiating and stopping capoeira

Starting	Stopping
Knowing someone such as boyfriend, schoolmate, or friend who trains	Work or school conflicts with training schedule
To meet new people	Get married and/or have children
Saw a roda or went to an event and thought it was beautiful or interesting	Parents or boyfriend prohibit it
Need to do some kind of physical activity	Hurt themselves or have health problems
To find a boyfriend	Things got difficult and they lost motivation
	Terminated a relationship with someone from their group

Information obtained from an interview with Instrutora Narizinho by Simona Mariotto and posted on the website: www.portalcapoeira.com

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION: VAMOS DA UMA VOLTA SÓ

The research presented here focuses on the Brazilian martial art of capoeira as an empowerment activity for women. Capoeira fits Allen's (1998) reciprocal empowerment model as women must individually as well as collectively assert and claim their space in order to achieve empowerment. Women are gaining self-confidence and learning the value of perseverance in all areas of their life. They develop social skills, become leaders and learn how to use their bodies in new ways. These benefits are not exclusive to women. All capoeiristas have the potential to experience these benefits. However, women who play capoeira challenge gender assumptions and transgress boundaries set up by society through their participation in a male-dominated sport and by engaging in dialogue about the role of gender in capoeira practice. By exploring their physical capabilities in capoeira, they learn to push their mental and physical limits, take up more space and challenge their assumptions as well as the assumptions of others.

At the same time capoeira challenges unequal gender perceptions; it also reinforces and reflects them in other ways. The lyrics in many capoeira songs demonstrate some of the ways in which women were and are perceived in capoeira. Women continue to be sexualized and noticed (by men) often for their beauty rather than capoeira skill. This sexualization becomes most dangerous when it is internalized by women and they determine their own self-worth on whether or not men find them attractive. Women and men must view women as more than sexual objects.

Furthermore, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which capoeira changes perceptions versus reflecting wider social changes. Many people believe that women are not capable of learning and executing capoeira movements. Through their participation in this male dominated art, women have the opportunity to disprove these preconceived notions. However, what other

factors contribute to changes in perceptions? Is it wider changes in society reflected in capoeira or does capoeira initiate some of these changes?

Capoeira alone cannot change gender perceptions in all of Brazilian society. However, capoeira does offer a space in which women can experience empowerment. Used as a forum for social change, capoeira has the potential to have an impact on the lives of diverse groups of people and to help to close the gap between ideological resistance and real political participation. Capoeira allows for the creation of local, state, and international networks. The integration of Brazilians of different classes, races, and genders and the international capoeira community—while offering no universal solutions to the problems caused by neoliberalism, racism, sexism and the like—nurtures a dialogue otherwise hindered by ideological and geographical boundaries.

We also need to support spaces where women and men gather together. As stated earlier, in order to achieve social equality women must be empowered. However, men and women must also change the ways in which they perceive gender and difference. Capoeira offers such a space.

Limitations

An ideal study would have measured empowerment before participation in capoeira and then periodically throughout a woman's participation in the sport for a number of years. I have instead relied on retrospective questions which have offered limited, but valuable insights. The study is also limited in that it represents a small number of people in one specific place and time. An ideal study would have been more expansive and included women from all of the different groups in a particular city as well as more detailed research on each group's philosophy. The extent to which capoeira alters perceptions about gender also remains unclear. I did not determine to what extent women in this study question the power relationships in their lives.

Informal conversations I have had with women from other cities and groups in Brazil and here in the United States, point to the fact that women share similar experiences with their practice in capoeira across race, class, socio-economic and even geographic divisions. However, the limited number of participants in the study does not allow me to make generalizations about women in capoeira all over the world, or even all over Brazil. Many women practice capoeira in Brazil whose stories should be told and are absent in the material presented in this work. More case studies would further illuminate the potential of capoeira to empower their practitioners.

Finally, my own biases limit the extent to which this study accurately reports reality. My own interests are reflected in the questions asked and quotations reported and the conclusions I draw. Only with further studies by different men and women can a more accurate representation be presented.

Further Research

At a capoeira event held in Miami, Florida in March 2009 a capoeira mestre said that women have a difficult time controlling their emotions in capoeira and in general. I did not ask it then, however my question in response is why, when men fight or make contact in capoeira, is that not considered losing their emotional control? What is it about the way that women make contact or show aggression that makes it more emotional? I do not have the answers to these questions; however I would ask them if I could revisit my participants and this study. Such perceptions merit further dialogue.

Capoeira is now practiced all over Brazil and the world. International women's conferences and events as well as travel of foreigners to Brazil have expanded women's social networks and exposed them to different people, ideas, and cultures. These events and networks have the potential to enhance women's empowerment through capoeira. The extent to which these networks empower women and promote social change should be explored.

I also question to what extent teachers impact women's participation and level of empowerment. More research could be done to investigate and analyze the relationships between teachers and students in this regard. Male and female capoeira players should investigate and question the gender politics of their own groups, ask questions of each other and themselves and should notice how the ways in which they present themselves to others are gendered. I urge them to consider their own perceptions and treatment of the opposite sex.

Will more women graduate to the level of mestre as time goes on as many of the participants in this study suggest? Have women hit a "glass-ceiling" in their participation in capoeira? Future studies may investigate the numbers of women achieving higher graduation levels.

Empowerment through Community Sport and Social Projects: Practical Applications

Why should stake-holders invest in cultural activities like capoeira? How might this activity contribute to development? Philip McMichael (2000) suggests that the field of economics does not consider human behavior. He adds that we must have a shift in thinking from things and infrastructure to people and capabilities by realizing the importance of overall well-being, not just economic prosperity. His idea of localism promotes the renewal of traditions and the preservation of human and community rights at the local level (McMichael 2000). Lawson (2005) suggests that physical activities have definite empowering effects and even facilitate community development. He argues that they accomplish this by enhancing human health and well-being, contributing to human capital development, developing collective identities and thereby facilitating collective action, and by fostering social networking that may serve to animate civil society. This case study has demonstrated the ways in which capoeira contributes to enhancing health and well-being. For example, as a result of their participation in

capoeira, women exercise more, which can lead to building muscles and improving cardiovascular health. Capoeira also makes women healthier by relieving stress.

Capoeira has the potential to develop collective identities which Lawson (2005) suggests facilitates collective action. Many capoeira groups act like extended families. One could argue that within groups and then among capoeiristas as a whole, a collective identity is shared. I did not study the potential of capoeira to form these collective identities nor the extent to which collective identity might lead to collective action. I do have two examples, one from my case study and another from Baiocchi's (2005) study of participatory democracy in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Baiocchi reported that members of a capoeira group registered as participants in the decision making processes of the Orçamento Participativo in the Norte district of Porto Alegre. The Orçamento Participativo serves as a forum for citizens to have real decision-making power over a small portion of municipal city funds. While Baiocchi does not follow this particular group of participants, it demonstrates that capoeira serves as a vehicle through which to organize people for social action outside of actual capoeira practice. Similarly, I witnessed several community meetings during my research in Goiânia where CM Apache gathered friends, family, neighbors, and fellow capoeiristas to hear about his platform and encourage them to help him in his campaign to become a city council member. He told me that capoeira was the prime motivator for his decision to run for city council. He wanted to gain recognition and support for capoeira in his community. Members and friends of his capoeira group supported him in his efforts. Further research might produce numerous and more detailed examples of the way in which capoeira groups participate in their communities.

Sorvete, Abacaxi, CM Apache, CM Guierro, Professora Jaca, Professor Bira, and others either work with or are designing capoeira social projects. These projects offer capoeira and

Brazilian cultural activities to disadvantaged youth in their communities. They believe in the importance of making capoeira accessible and available to economically disadvantaged Brazilians. Their efforts thus far have mainly focused on youth. Professora Jaca, CM Guierro, CM Apache and others strive to instill discipline, social consciousness, respect for others, respect for history and culture, and self respect through their capoeira projects. The established social consciousness already present in the philosophy of many capoeira groups makes capoeira a potential site for social change and progress. Topics such as the role of women in capoeira, nutrition, race, and more have all been discussed during capoeira seminars.

While carrying out my undergraduate research in Salvador, Bahia in 2002 I attended one such seminar. The panel was comprised of capoeira mestres, doctors, and a local police officer. One audience member asked about the mestres' opinions of women-only rodas. Women-only rodas have raised considerable debate among capoeira practitioners. There are two main identifiable sides to the debate. Supporters of women-only rodas contend that it gives women a chance to play more, because in mixed rodas they are often more shy to play or get taken out of the game by higher level male players. Women-only rodas and events give women a chance to learn from other women and develop a sense of camaraderie. It also gives them the opportunity to talk about barriers they encounter in capoeira. Opponents, such as Mestre Itapúa, argue that women's rodas actually contradict goals of empowerment and equality. He stated that, "women have to enter the roda with attitude, they must proclaim themselves. It is up to the individual to enter the roda and tell her story." Women, then, must enter the roda with men in order to gain equal access to the space.

I support women's rodas and events because it gives women and men an opportunity to enter into dialogue about the role of gender in capoeira. While, the ideal may be that one day we

do not need to have a women's only roda to give women a chance to play, society and capoeira have much growing to do before achieving equal opportunities for participation. However, I also agree that women need to assert themselves more in mixed gender rodas and conquer their space there as well. Indeed, capoeira is unique in that it is one of the few sports where men and women practice together.

These discussions serve to increase consciousness about gender relationships. For this reason, when designing an informal discussion about women in capoeira here in Gainesville, I invited men to participate. I argue that women not only need to feel and be empowered, but men must also change their attitudes and behaviors about women and women's roles in society for real equality to occur. Kabeer notes that strategies of empowerment, "entail reflection, analysis and assessment of what has hitherto been taken for granted. New forms of consciousness arise out of women's newly acquired access to the intangible resources of analytical skills, social networks, organizational strength, solidarity, and a sense of not being alone" (1991, 245-6). Through capoeira communities women are gaining access to social networks that span continents. Similarly, the internet has served as a resource to connect women capoeiristas all over the world. Websites offer interviews of prominent women in capoeira, writings and songs by women in capoeira, and blogs about issues regarding women in capoeira. It opens up a space for dialogue about the lack of women at higher levels, the challenges particular to women in capoeira, and differences between men and women in the art.

APPENDIX A
PARTICIPANT DATA

Table A-1. Female Participants

Interview Date	Age	Name	Group	Time in Capoeira	Education
7/13/08	31	Professora Jaca	Group A	13 years	Undergraduate Degree
7/13/08	30	Instrutora Esquerdinha	Group A	16 years	Undergraduate Degree
7/13/08	34	Yemanjá	Group A	7 years	High-School
7/13/08	25	Sinha	Group A	10 years	High-School
7/15/08	30	Instrutora Narizinho	Group A	14 years	Undergraduate Degree
7/18/08	18	Babaloo	Group C	6 years	High-School
7/18/08	18	Tarântula	Group C	1.25 years	High-School
7/21/08	30	Caju	Group B	9 years	Undergraduate Degree
7/21/08	23	Girafa	Group B	4 years	Undergraduate
7/22/08	18	Dandara	Group A	4 years	High-School
7/23/08	28	Moranginho	Group A	6 years	High-School
7/23/08	35	Vigalante	Group A	12 years	High-School
7/23/08	29	JuJu	Group A	5 years	Pursuit of Undergraduate
7/26/08	21	Ratinha	Group A	5 years	High-School
7/26/08	25	Sabía	Group A	9 years	Doctor of Medicine
7/26/08	29	Paulinha	Group A	9 years	High-School
7/27/08	39	Sorvete	Group A	18 years	Undergraduate Degree
7/30/08	22	Fofinha	Group B	3 years	Pursuit of Undergraduate
7/30/08	32	Valentona	Group B	13 years	Undergraduate Degree
8/01/08	18	Guerra	Group A	1 year	High-School

Table A-2. Male Participants

Interview Date	Age	Name	Time in Capoeira	Education
7/18/08	32	Professor Bira	22 years	Undergraduate
7/21/08	30	Instructor Fabio	12 years	Undergraduate
7/21/08	26	Coro	12 years	Undergraduate
7/23/08	45	Cavalo	28 years	High school
7/26/08	28	Professor Innocente	13 years	High school
7/26/08	28	Professor Zelão	17 years	Undergraduate
7/29/08	27	Instructor Abacaxi	12 years	High school
7/30/08	32	Contra Mestre Apache	20 years	High school
8/02/08	31	Contra Mestre Guierro	20 years	Undergraduate

APPENDIX B
EXAMPLE ADULT GRADUATION SYSTEM

Student Cords

1. White
2. Yellow
3. Yellow/Orange
4. Orange
5. Orange/Blue

Graduated Cords

6. Blue
7. Blue/Green

Instructor Cords

8. Green
9. Green Purple

Professor

10. Purple
11. Purple/Brown

Contra-Mestre

12. Brown
13. Brown/Black

Master

14. Black

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Majoring in Diplomacy and World Affairs, Aimee Green earned her BA from Occidental College in Los Angeles in 2003. She earned a MA with a specialization in Latin American studies from the University of Florida in May, 2009. Prior to enrolling in the master's program at the University of Florida Center for Latin American Studies in 2007, she taught in St. Louis, Missouri as a Teach for America core member from 2003 to 2005. In 2005, she moved to Gainesville, Florida to teach Language Arts at Hoggetowne Middle School.

She has trained capoeira under several great capoeira teachers. She began her training in 2001 in New York, New York under Contra-Mestre Caxias and then continued training in Los Angeles under Mestre Boneco, one of the founders of Grupo Capoeira Brasil. Pursuing capoeira outside of the training academy, she received a Richter Scholarship from Occidental College in 2002 and completed an independent research project on women and capoeira in Brazil. In 2003, she moved to St. Louis, MO, where she began training capoeira under Professor Borracha and Mestre Jelon Vieira, founder of Grupo Capoeira Luanda. She continues to train under Professor Borracha in Gainesville and has attended many capoeira workshops and events throughout the United States, Canada, and Brazil. She also taught capoeira at the University of Florida as a graduate assistant with a joint appointment from the Center for Latin American Studies and the Center for World Arts.