

INTRODUCTION

“EVERYTHING THE MOUTH EATS”

“Capoeira is everything the mouth eats.”

In the capoeira world, Mestre Pastinha’s often quoted aphorism leaves much to interpretation. The famous capoeira teacher seemed to suggest that, like food, capoeira sustains the body. That it is life-giving energy, or perhaps life itself, resonates with how many capoeiristas experience and speak about their practice; more than a physical or aesthetic activity, capoeira is an artful way-of-being in the world.

For me, “capoeira is everything the mouth eats” attests to its transformative potential. We take the world inside us when we eat, and the act changes us, physically, emotionally, socially. Around the world, eating brings people together to nourish, to celebrate, to mourn, to mark life transitions, to create bonds, and even to compete. Capoeira brings people together in similar ways.

The conjoining of food, sociality, and capoeira was driven home to me by a *mestre* in Rio de Janeiro.¹ As a novice capoeirista and anthropologist, I began asking my teachers “what is capoeira?” Like the moving target of capoeiristas in play, definitions were elusive, shifting, and paradoxical: game, fight, dance, play, self-defense, art, sport, expression, resistance, liberation, education, culture, history, identity, energy, philosophy, a gathering, a dialogue, a prism, a vice, a way of life. One teacher, Mestre Touro, told me, “capoeira is you coming to my house and eating my rice and beans one week and me going to your house and eating your rice and beans the next week.”

I first interpreted Mestre Touro’s definition literally. Capoeira is a gathering and a social event. The *roda* (wheel or circle) refers to both the physical space, or ring, in which capoeira is played as well as to the event of bringing capoeiristas together to “play.” Capoeiristas do not “fight” or “dance,” but “play” (*jogar*), and a match between two capoeiristas is “a game” (*jogo*). A *roda* can last a half hour or four hours; be preplanned or spontaneous; occur in public or private spaces; be closed only to friends or open to strangers;

stay friendly or turn rough. In one of the Rio de Janeiro capoeira networks in which I move, each group—consisting of a mestre and students—hosts a monthly roda.

For at least the last twenty-five years, as long as I have known him, Mestre Touro has held his roda without fail, unless he is traveling, every first Saturday of the month at 5:00 p.m. Held on the cement patio in front of his house, the roda lasts one to two hours and is followed by food and drink: *churrasco*, the famous Brazilian barbecue, grilled and served by older students, and plenty of beer and *guaraná*, the national soda, distributed by younger students. Conversations and fraternizing continue until the circulation of meat and drink—determined by Mestre Touro’s cash flow that month—slows. A close comrade of Touro’s until his death in 2011, Mestre Nacional held his roda in a samba school rehearsal space on the last Sunday of the month and always served *angu* (corn grits) and beef stew. So, one weekend Touro and his students along with mestres and students of other groups would be at Nacional’s “house” playing in his roda and eating his food; and the next weekend Mestre Nacional and the others would be at Mestre Touro’s house. And so it goes year-round, playing and eating together.

Mestre Touro’s definition thus appears to refer to the great reciprocal potlatch, or kula ring, of the monthly rodas.² Hosting a roda is a way to display and share “wealth” in the capoeira world. At rodas, reputations are made and unmade, stories birthed, and bonds of sociality woven. However, Mestre Touro referred to “rice and beans” rather than the beer and meat I and others have enjoyed plenty of at his rodas over the years. Rice and beans are the iconic Brazilian *everyday* food. On any morning, walk into any house in Brazil—rich or poor, rural or urban—and good chances are you will see, smell, or hear beans (black or red depending on the region) steaming in a pressure cooker for the midday meal. While generally prepared in the same simple way, with plenty of garlic, every pot of beans tastes slightly different depending on the kitchen and cook.

Defined as food sharing, capoeira becomes a practice of “making kin.”³ Nourishment is essential work of kinship, and sharing food creates belonging and obligation. A capoeira group is a supportive (if also hierarchical and at times dysfunctional) family. Mestre Touro, like many of the capoeira mestres in Rio’s peripheral neighborhoods and *favelas* where they live and teach,⁴ rarely receives payment from his students, at least in cash: a student who is a baker brings fresh morning rolls to the mestre’s house, while one with a motorcycle runs errands. Unremunerated for most of its history, capoeira is primarily a gift and a tool, a pleasure and release, an act of protest and camaraderie.

As a tool and gift, capoeira cultivates corporal skills and creates social relationships. Gifts, French sociologist Marcel Mauss taught us, produce reciprocity.⁵ Bonds between mestres and their disciples create group loyalty, build reputations, and manufacture cultural capital. As a pleasure and release, capoeira is a way to unwind from a day filled with hard labor and stress—and at times hunger and violence—and enjoy the presence of friends. As an act of protest and camaraderie, capoeira transmits a sense of pride in and ownership of a practice that was repressed for much of its history and can spark political consciousness and mobilization around social injustice. Teaching and practicing capoeira is a kind of “body work” that enhances possibility for action on the world.⁶

What then does the work and pleasure, joy and release, of capoeira look and feel like?

Playing Capoeira

“Capoeira is flying to the moon.”

I knew exactly what the ten-year-old Brazilian capoeirista meant the day I mastered the *au de frente*. I had been working for months on this particular cartwheel (*au*), which orients the body forward rather than sideways, legs shooting over the top, the chest lifting last as the eyes gaze toward the ground. The forward thrust of the hips had eluded me until it didn’t anymore, and suddenly, I popped up onto my feet instead of crashing to the ground. I shouted, clapped my hands, and repeated the move over and over until dizzy and breathless. For the brief moment when my feet reached for the ground as my hands left the floor, I felt airborne and free, my body no longer an obstacle but an enabler.

“Flying to the moon” captures not only the momentary, gravity-defying freedom one might feel when executing the more spectacular acrobatic moves or *floreios* (flourishes) as they are known: “*vai, vai, vai voa!*” (go, go, go fly!) young Brazilians chant when a player is showing particular skill flipping around the *roda*. “Flying to the moon” also communicates the aspirational possibilities of capoeira—and of even occasionally achieving the impossible—as I felt at my first *au de frente*.

This sense of achievement occurs by means of what is often considered, ironically, an “unproductive” activity. Capoeira is play. In Portuguese, “to play” translates into three verbs: *jogar* refers to game play; *tocar* to musical play; and *brincar* to the spontaneous, creative play among children or adults during moments of pleasure and release.⁷ Capoeira incorporates all three forms of play. As a physical game, capoeira, like all play, exists outside

of ordinary life, bounded in its own time and space, and is voluntary, with no goal other than the absorbing pleasure of play itself.⁸ Historian Johan Huizinga argued that culture emerged out of the creativity and innovation of humans at play. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget argued that child's play is important for imagining worlds and possibilities, experimenting with social roles and rules, and learning empathy. Freud argued that play creates the "illusion of mastery," of being in control of feelings, actions, and the world itself.⁹ In positive psychology this illusion of mastery is described as the ideal play state, or "flow," where awareness and action merge to temporarily free one from time and space.¹⁰ In capoeira, flow is the momentary liberation "from the poverty of everyday life and ultimately even from the constraints of the human body."¹¹ Or as the young capoeirista told me, "flying to the moon."

Flow in capoeira is what capoeiristas call *axé*. Like athletes "in the zone" and jazz musicians "in the groove," capoeiristas, and a *roda*, flowing right, are full of *axé*. Described by players as good energy, *axé* is sensation and emotion: it is the goose-bumping of the flesh at the rise of a chorus; tears that fill the eyes at the soulful lament of a single voice and *berimbau*; the undistracted presence when one finds unison with a partner; the pleasure of a game well played. A Yoruba term (*asè*) and an important concept in the Afro-Brazilian religious arena, *axé* also embodies a theory of action: "the power-to-make-things-happen, the key to futurity and self-realization."¹² As a novice anthropologist, I once asked a *mestre* what capoeira could do for people. "It is not what capoeira can do," he told me, "but what people do with capoeira." In the space of the *roda*, *axé* is the ability to take control of the game and make things happen. *Axé* is capacity-building. But *axé* also depends on flow for all. As capoeiristas say, "capoeira cannot be played alone": an individual singer is only as good as the responding chorus, and a player is at her best when in harmony with another.

Capoeira's play and *axé* link it to other expressive and ritual practices of the African diaspora. As an "art in motion," capoeira is a fluid exchange between participants and spectators, musical call-and-response, and improvisation.¹³ Movement is accompanied by percussive music: the thump of an *atabaque* (drum), the trill of *pandeiros* (tambourines), the ring of the *agôgô* (clapperless bell), the clack of the *reco-reco* (scraper), and the twang of the *berimbau* (one-string musical bow). The musicians, who will also take turns moving inside the *roda*, riff off of one another's rhythms and cadences. A good instrument player maintains the beat, never crosses the rhythm, yet finds spaces to improvise and embellish. Like much music with African roots, the singing is call-and-response—one voice calls and others answer.

The lead singer may improvise verses by borrowing and weaving in lines from other songs or inventing new lyrics on the spot. These spontaneous verses can comment, humorously or critically, on the game or players in the roda.

Like the music, movement is call-and-response, or as capoeiristas say, a dialogue. One player “asks a question” and the other “responds.” While movements can be performed on their own (during training or as solos in performances) they only take on meaning when played with another in an improvised exchange. Each movement is contingent on the previous one and influences the following one. The greater mastery a player has, the greater movement-vocabulary and dexterity she has in maneuvering and manipulating the conversation to affect the outcome of the game. As a “game of chess played with the body,” capoeira is about claiming, defending, and stealing space. In less competitive moments, a game unfolds like a puzzle, bodies negotiating and sharing space, fitting together in a moving mosaic.

Creating dialogue is more important than “scoring a point.” Still, there is an objective to unbalance or knock one’s partner to the ground: a foot may sweep a standing leg; a head strike the chest or ribs; the legs “scissor,” twist, and drop a body to the ground; and a well-placed kick knock a partner out of the roda. The moves must be carefully timed and not too frequent to maintain the flow and aesthetics of the game. Sometimes attacks are embellished with theatrics and humor, heightening tension and excitement. But there are no declared winners or losers. Games seamlessly enfold one another: two new capoeiristas beginning afresh at the foot of the lead berimbau or one player “buying” a game (*comprando o jogo*) by entering the roda and replacing one already playing. Like the movement of the ocean’s tides, an image invoked in many capoeira songs, games ebb and flow.

Convivência and Malandragem

Gathering people together in collective creativity—to play, to express, to dialogue—capoeira, I have come to understand, is above all else *convivência*. A Portuguese term with no singular translation, *convivência* connotes connection, coexistence, and companionship. We can have *convivência* with each other, with places, experiences, and spiritual entities. *Convivência* is the flip side of *saudades*, another difficult to translate Portuguese word and often-evoked sentiment in Brazil. *Saudades* is an intense missing, longing or nostalgia for a person, place, or time. *Saudades* marks absence; *convivência* “being-with.”

In capoeira, one has *convivência* with the practice itself and with fellow

capoeiristas. This convivência exists on multiple levels: in the evanescent relationship of bodies in play in the roda; in the day-to-day togetherness of practitioners in local groups; and in the growing “imagined community” of capoeiristas around the globe. Convivência makes one legible in the world, to oneself and to others, on a visceral level: experiencing one’s own and others’ bodies through play and knowing others’ day-to-day lives, or in other words, eating their rice and beans. As the Bantu people of West Central Africa, capoeira’s deep ancestors, say: “food tastes good only if one can taste and feel the mind and heart of the person who cooked it.”¹⁴

Convivência translates most literally as “conviviality.” There are certainly moments of capoeira conviviality—a good roda full of axé and the food shared afterward can overflow with lively friendliness and good-will. But convivência does not assume or depend on harmony. Nor does it necessarily arise spontaneously or effortlessly; convivência takes time, effort, and dedication. We may think of capoeira “conviviality” as *how we might live together in this moment*. As theorized by cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy, “conviviality” is a “radical” and always risky openness to difference. Convivial spaces such as global cities—in which capoeira increasingly circulates—encourage living “with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful or violent.” Conviviality allows difference to become “unruly,” challenging regimentation of space along notions of culture and social worth.¹⁵ Conviviality can be messy but is necessary for moving toward a more egalitarian and shared world.

Imagining the futures made possible through conviviality, anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh suggests that it “encourages us to recognize our own incompleteness” and dependency on others.¹⁶ Conviviality, he writes, “challenges us to be open-minded and open-ended in our claims and articulations of identities, being and belonging . . . to reach out, encounter and explore ways of enhancing or complementing ourselves with the added possibilities of potency brought our way by the incompleteness of others.”¹⁷ Playing in the roda reminds us that only when we are in motion together may we experience something close to completion.

Axé creates the conditions for convivência, and the possibility of momentarily experiencing completeness in unison with others. But axé operates in a field of multiple players, all jockeying to make things happen so that outcomes are uncertain.¹⁸ According to dance scholar Yvonne Daniel, in the Afro-Brazilian religious arena, axé is divine energy that manifests in worshipping dancers “to push forward individuality and independence” but also demonstrates “our need for social exchange, solidarity, acknowledgement, and love.”¹⁹ A similar tension between the individual and social exists in the