



Axé on Instagram: Capoeira in an increasingly global and digital world

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Introduction

From gravity defying kicks that capture the attention of millions to grounded negative evasions landing on hot concrete, capoeira embodies the tensions of cultural transmission in our digital age. The Afro-Brazilian martial arts form encompasses not only physically demanding combat, but also a dance, game, music, spirituality, and a conversation that represents the interplays within human life whether everyday situations, interactions in relationships, or societal tribulations. Now that capoeira is practiced worldwide from its origins in Bahia, greater digital connectivity presents the art form with interesting tensions as it extends beyond its point of emergence, raising questions of authenticity. This ethnographic research explores capoeira in London, the Southeastern United States (U.S.), and online, seeking to understand how algorithmic influence changes the way capoeira is portrayed and practiced. Moreover, it will examine diasporic capoeira pedagogies and how they are used in community building, and how meaning is made locally in the U.S. Ultimately, I argue that in a deterritorialized era—whether digitally or transnationally—and under the unique pressures of the attention economy, capoeira requires practitioners to be more reflective and intentional, a positionality that often realigns itself with the original principles of the art form.

Background and Literature Review

Capoeira is a fusion of a dance, martial art, and game originating from Afro-Brazilian folk tradition, but formed under the specific urban pressures of European colonialism and slavery (Lewis, 1992; Browning, 1995; Capoeira, 2002). Nestor Capoeira, a highly influential Mestre (the highest rank in Capoeira) in the popularization of capoeira globally, explains the game as a microcosm of society and life itself as it is a physical manifestation of opposing energies and positive and negative forces. It is rife with metaphor and irony, with the game serving as a framework for understanding society. Although manifested as a struggle and fight, it is experienced by practitioners as act of liberation—whether from class dominion, slavery, the banality of daily struggle, or even the limitations of the human body (Lewis, 1992; Capoeira, 2002).

Capoeira is split into two significant styles, Angola and Regional. While some players argue that Angola is the more authentic game and truer to its African roots unlike the whitewashed Regional, defenders of Regional claim that if not for its “modernization” by Mestre Bimba, who

is credited for its creation, the art would be extinct today (Frigerio, 1989; Browning, 1995; Vieira and Assunção, 1998). Browning argues that the syncretic ability of African culture to survive and adapt itself to local conditions is part of its ingenuity; and it's doing so in the case of capoeira as a survival tactic is in accordance with the principles of the game itself (1995). This claim should be adapted to Afro-Brazilian culture more specifically, or a characteristic found in diasporic African cultures, as African culture is not a monolith. Many groups today practice a fusion of the two styles, what Lewis calls capoeira Atual- which can be interpreted as the postmodern expression of the game- emphasizing interesting aspects of the game such as its “temporal alinearity, entanglement in the global cultural exchange, and indecipherable self-irony” (Browning, 1995).

Capoeira Atual has been popularized and is practiced worldwide, a trend facilitated by globalization and increases in digital media. The global diffusion of capoeira illuminates questions about how different places adopt the practice, interpret it, and the degree of continuity and change the art form undergoes in a diasporic context. In Togo, the capoeira group Nukunu uses capoeira as a means of racial self-making, connecting with the concept of global Blackness while simultaneously adopting the practice to represent local legacies of oppression and resistance such as the Ewe exodus; a mytho-historical narrative of the Ewe villagers tricking and escaping from the tyranny of King Agorkoli in Notsé, Togo into present day Ghana. Nukunu capoeiristas see colonialism and racial struggle as temporally elastic, and capoeira as an expression of shared black resistance and heritage (de Sá, 2023).

Capoeira’s representation of the local and global is also explored in terms of Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ concept of “insurgent cosmopolitanism” in globalization, with capoeira groups embracing capoeira for community and personal development (Vianna Neto, 2017). Santos proposes that insurgent cosmopolitanism represents the second mode, or counter-hegemonic production of globalization, which arises in response to “globalized localisms” and “localized globalisms” (2006). Furthermore, he argues that globalizations are a set of clashing processes between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces rather than an inevitable linear progression (de Sousa Santos, 2006). García Canclini, a Latin American theorist, argues that cultural hybridities are central in the modern world, opposing antiquated notions of culture as reducible to simplistic binaries. Noting that today’s globalizing processes lead to multiplying hybridizations, he connects this to cultures becoming deterritorialized yet gaining in communication, complexity, and nuance (García Canclini, 2005). Diana Taylor extends this discussion to cultural memory, and the interplay between archive and repertoire, or the stored body of knowledge and the embodied practices of song, dance, and tradition in their practice and

transmission. The archive has historically been privileged in Western epistemologies over repertoire to confer existence and legitimacy and has been used by colonial powers to diminish indigenous knowledge, despite them being co-creative and interdependent forces (Taylor, 2003). Cover (2016) explains that digital media plays an increasingly important and mutually constitutive role with the physical realm, primarily exploring selfhood, and the influence of neoliberal consumer culture in a postmodern era.

As capoeira enters the realm of short form media and global cultural exchange, questions emerge about how embodied knowledge translates across digital platforms, and whether the game's traditional emphasis on community dialogue and physical presence navigates algorithms and the digital world.

Methodology

This project aims to study how the practice of capoeira is changing in a more global and digital world, as well as inquiring about local meaning-making of capoeira's practice outside of Brazil. The research was undertaken comparatively, drawing on interviews from participants based in London as well as in the U.S., primarily in the Southeast region. Methods used included eleven semi-structured interviews, participant observations through attending events and classes, and digital ethnography via social media analysis. Interviewees included capoeira students, teachers, contramestres (advanced teacher, second highest ranking), and mestres (master, highest ranking), recruited through personal and online contact. Consent forms were provided and signed, and participants were asked how they would like to be referred to in the project.

This research methodology is shaped by my positionality as a Gen Z researcher habituated to algorithmically curated feeds and immersion in online activity that inform my analysis and have potential to introduce certain biases. My participation in capoeira, though still limited by my status as a relative beginner, allows me to be aware of the nuances of embodied practice. However, I am aware that my interpretations are nonetheless influenced by my cultural location and academic background, and acknowledging this helps clarify the reflexive lens through which I view the practice.

Scrolling the Roda: Capoeira in an Increasingly Digital World

While increasing awareness and resources for practitioners and general audiences alike, digital platforms and social media algorithms also reshape how capoeira is presented by prioritizing visually striking movements over culturally significant practices. An ever-expansive digital world and rapid changes in technology bring with them interesting dynamics and

implications for capoeira's transmission, as the digital and physical are mutually constitutive, rather than mutually exclusive realms (Cover, 2016). Mestre Fantasma, the first non-Brazilian Mestre in all of Europe illuminated that cameras have not been commonplace in filming rodas (circular ring of people and music where capoeira takes place) until very recently, and filming capoeira games was much more likely to be perceived as a breach of established norms, especially without prior approval. However, as global availability of technology increases, as well as the ubiquitousness of social platforms, the art form no longer operates from a place of secrecy but has captured the attention of millions with its enrapturing exchanges and visually striking movements (Vianna Neto, 2017). Extending an archival dimension to the practice that roots itself in oral tradition, while not replacing repertoire, technology can entangle embodied encounters with the digital record and reshape cultural memory, from websites meticulously noting sequences from Mestre Bimba to vast catalogues, short form games and *florieos*, or new online subcultures featuring acrobatic tricks (Lewis, 1992; Taylor 2003). In an era where social media and the attention economy are becoming dominant strategies of awareness, connection, and recruitment, capoeiristas (capoeira practitioners) hold varying perspectives, from social platforms being positive tools, negative influences or simply the necessary realities of contemporary practice.

While increased awareness and celebration of the art are beneficial, once short clips of capoeira enter online platforms—whether Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube—attention and visibility are no longer governed by community norms, but through algorithmic metrics and recommendations. These often prioritize the most broadly aesthetically appealing movements, which place more emphasis on the sport and acrobatic aspect of the practice. Such trends have been historically associated with the creation of capoeira Regional, celebrated as modernizing capoeira, but critics claim it whitewashes and “sportifies” the art (Frigerio, 1989; Browning, 1995; Vieira and Assunção, 1998). Supervening on this tension, capoeira's shift online represents an additional layer of complexity as its movements are often seen in other dance and art forms and further decontextualized. “When you take away the meaning and history of the movement and just show it on a screen, I think it loses a lot of power” noticed Contramestre Japão, a London based practitioner.

Capoeira, as practiced in most schools today, generally valorizes a bent-legged *au* (cartwheel with many variations) and functional *esquivas* (escapes with many variations) characteristic of Angola as much as a straight legged acrobatic more typical of Regional since schools often practice a blend of both styles, and as most capoeiristas do not identify as strictly playing one style over the other (Browning, 1995). The stylistic and embodied language of the form is also

intertwined with ancestry and diasporic heritage for many practitioners. “You can see it in the way we play” observed Contramestre Eme Eme, “the language of capoeira is not the Queen’s standard English or the standard Portuguese of Europe.” Algorithmic amplification becomes problematic when it privileges what is digestible, polished, and techniques with greater appeal to mass audiences rather than what traditionally carries more functional and cultural significance in the roda. These developments re-emphasize the importance of considering how practitioners without diasporic heritage can participate respectfully and with intentionality, particularly in an age and in places (Western cities) where time and attention are frequently scarce resources. Nevertheless, most participants agree that valuable resources can be found online that can enhance their practice, marking an interesting dynamic with content functioning in certain ways as both product and producer in the postmodern era of capoeira.

Transformation in Digital Deterritorialization

Decontextualization of capoeira movements into varying digital spaces and into short form content accelerates cultural diffusion but risks omitting cultural context. Due to the co-creative nature of digital and physical worlds, what types of content as well as whose content can attain virality do not exist in vacuums but are influenced by cultural trends, availability of resources, and social media fluency. Among some of the interesting digital cultural crossovers are *meia lua de compasso* knockouts in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) videos, “*au Bacardi*” tutorials that receive tens of thousands of likes, and “soft acro” and “movement culture” videos seeing increased levels of attention.

While art forms like breaking (popularly known as breakdancing) have cross-pollinated with capoeira for decades, the rise of consumable short-form content online has accelerated the diffusion of capoeira and created online niches appropriating the art. Although this trend is not inherently negative, algorithmic optimizations and short form content are diametrically opposed to many principles that underpin capoeira. Algorithms are characterized by being mathematical, curated, direct, and regulated, while capoeira thrives on the unexpected and contextual, employing inversions of typical movement patterns and power structures, and operating in a subjunctive realm of possible responses and “what if” scenarios rather than the concrete and predetermined. It represents liberation from hierarchical systems, conferring an interesting dynamic between capoeira itself and its online circulation.

Furthermore, many important spiritual and cultural aspects of capoeira such as *malícia* (the cultivated trickery and art of deception that allows one to disguise, reveal, and be playful with intentions), *malandragem* (a cunning resourcefulness, charisma, and social intelligence drawn

from Brazilian street culture), and axé (the spiritual life force of the roda) are highly context dependent and are therefore missing from short form online content. Even long-time practitioners struggle to cram such complex phenomena into single-sentence definitions, and my parenthetical summaries are likewise oversimplifications. Niilante, a practitioner from London reflected on how the practice translates online:

“The subtleties in person can be just as dramatic or engaging or humorous, and I think that there's some of those elements do get lost online because you don't see the context. You never capture the energy of the Roda. You can sometimes capture the noise of it, and you can get a sense of it, but to feel what it's like when you're there, that's always different.”

Moreover, the growing shift toward short form highlights risk omitting the meaning of the movements, the legacy of Afro-Brazilian resistance, and important lessons and history that make up the foundation of the art form. The increased overall awareness of the art and its beauty thus still exist within imperfect and unequal systems, which despite much societal change, remains resonant with its origins.

Axé as Pedagogy and Community Building

In capoeira communities, Axé is not just a concept, but an embodied disposition. Axé serves a pedagogical role in capoeira groups, especially in diasporic communities. It is an African diasporic concept with Yoruba roots, often used in religious or spiritual contexts, and conceptualizations vary among practitioners and scholars. Axé represents a divine energy and vitality, or “a power to transform, to make beauty, or to create a new reality” (Rosaldo, cited by Mandle 1992, 94, 97). As a longtime capoeira practitioner and teacher in Kentucky, Regina noted the ethos and pedagogical philosophy of her group, and the power for it to catalyze positive community engagement:

“There's a standard at our school in the fact that we obviously want everyone to have fun. We want to honor everybody's choices and where they are in life. And then most importantly, the axé of the group grows. Because we're able to treat them good and they go out there and do good elsewhere.”

Anderson's notion of affective atmospheres explores being impacted by both the “determinate and indeterminate,” the subjective, labelable emotions, and pre-personal intensities (2009). This helps frame axé as not only a cultivated background energy, but an active medium where ethical dispositions are absorbed affectively before they are codified as moral values.

Instead of a simple top-down transmission with students as passive recipients of information, this resonates with Freire's conception of education as a co-creative and liberatory between

subjects (2000). “There’s just this unspoken, unwritten thing,” said Professor Paciência, a Tennessee based practitioner: “when you get together, it happens, and you may not even be speaking the same language as that person, but once you get into the energy, everyone knows what’s going on.” What begins as an affective atmosphere and unspoken, embodied literacy in rodas and classes carries forward into intentional, uplifting acts of community rituals. For example, in Atlanta, Professor Malandro holds a Mother’s Day event, where students can bring their mother or a mother in their community to practice capoeira, explaining that the event not only “highlights the mothers of the community, but also connects everyone to each other,” creating a “strong bond that we hope to continue to manifest and cultivate moving forward.” In capoeira communities across the globe, Axé may not be a phenomenon that every practitioner is familiar with before coming to the practice, but it is used as a pedagogical medium to create active subjects oriented toward connecting communities. Axé can therefore enact what de Sousa Santos terms “insurgent cosmopolitanism” (Santos, 2006; Vianna Neto, 2019).

Meaning-Making and Resistance in the United States

Many capoeira groups and community leaders in the United States align themselves with capoeira’s legacy of resistance and recontextualize it to embody resistance to present day inequalities. Regina, a capoeirista and activist based in Kentucky, recalled how her group performed capoeira throughout the Take Back Cheapside movement in Lexington. The movement, led by collaboration of local Black artists and community members, intended to remove Confederate statues from the Fayette County courthouse, a former site of horrific racial violence. While both Brazil and the United States represent distinct cultural contexts, both societies have been fundamentally shaped by parallel legacies of slavery, ongoing racial struggle, and entrenched inequalities. Performing, therefore, becomes a contextually versatile act, allowing similar experiences to be creatively recontextualized and representative of local histories and modern events, demonstrating what de Sá terms “the flexibility of coloniality” (2023). The movement was successful, underscoring the lingering question of whether the act of capoeira can catalyze improvements in material reality, a subject which remains contested and is beyond the scope of this project.

Capoeiristas can be found playing in many sociopolitical gatherings in the U.S., from Juneteenth celebrations, Black Lives Matter protests, and recently at Palestinian solidarity events, and can thus be resonant with emancipation movements. While capoeira as a practice has become more visible and popularized, many of its practitioners in the U.S. come from marginalized communities, and their experiences shape how the art continues to be a vehicle of resistance and

empowerment. While capoeira's popularization has led to a proliferation of casual practitioners, Regina's account demonstrates the profound intentionality that aligns with the form's original gravity and purpose. "They used to call us the hood flippers. Because we would go out and flip and we didn't care what gang was there. We would still go out there and do capoeira with no fear. And it's bridged a gap, it gave the opportunity for the kids to perform at UK (University of Kentucky), a different environment for them to see." In certain places in the U.S., capoeira has been embraced by marginalized communities to occupy a similar sociopolitical space as it did in its Brazilian origins. This mode of adoption shows the capacity and embodiment of capoeira to represent what Lewis describes as multiple forms of liberation, not only manifesting itself in bodily freedom, but being sufficiently elastic to represent "liberation from slavery, from class domination, from the poverty of ordinary life," even when reterritorialized outside of Brazil (1992).

Conclusion

This project examined how capoeira is being shaped by a more globalized and digital world in how it is influenced by algorithms and platforms, short form content, the pedagogical role of Axé, and its reterritorialization in communities in the U.S. It's shift online grows the art form and contains innovating potential, yet in many cases, fails to capture the nuance and cultural foundation. It's transmission to places outside of Brazil show how its essential principles adapt and are re-applied to local contexts through pedagogy, community, resistance. These dynamics highlight the complexity of cultural diffusion, and inadequacy of simplistic notions of authenticity and strict binaries of preservation and transformation, and the need for intentionality and reflexivity to stay true to the art form's values in the postmodern era of the practice.

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