

# Coming to Voice through Capoeira: Black Woman Embody a history by Ana Paz.

This structure of reflections and analysis is here to mirror the essence of Capoeira which is always in conversation with the past, present and potential future. Finding a way to evoke different memories from our embodiments. The reader should try to flow and surrender, consider this being read in the form of cycles. The word Iêê which is an act of calling attention and attracting energy before the ladainha (litany/prayer). To conclude the word Iê is repeated to close the ritual.

Iêê

Tudo que ficar no silêncio  
tudo que ficar no silêncio  
um dia vai ouvir  
tudo que ta no silencio  
um dia vai ouvir  
Ay um dia vai chegar  
Que você vai encontrar  
o valor da sua voz  
Toda luta toda dor  
Que também carrega amor  
Ai o tempo vai mostra  
Por que o tempo e nosso pai  
Capoeira a nossa mãe  
A semente de resistência  
Que não dá pra rá negar  
se você é mandingueira  
se você é mandingueiro  
bota lá a mão no chão  
vai sentir a vibração  
yeee a força que vem de baixo  
o ya ya  
nosso mundo ancestral camará  
viva meu deus!

Iêê

Everything that remains in silence  
everything that remains in silence  
one day you will hear  
everything that remains in silence  
one day you will hear  
one day it will come  
That you will find  
the value of your voice  
All the fight all the pain  
That also carries love  
Oh, time will show  
Because time is our father  
Capoeira our mother  
The seed of resistance  
That you cannot deny  
if you are a mandingueira  
if you are a mandingueiro  
put your hand on the ground  
you will feel the vibration  
yeee the strength that comes from  
below  
o ya ya  
our ancestral world camará  
long live my god!

Capoeira called me through an audition. An audition for a play called 'Firecracker' by Xinha Morias. It was an interwoven non-linear story and at the heart was this Afro-Brazilian martial art, Capoeira. The story jumped through time between events during the beginning of the trans Atlantic slave trade, focused on the reign of Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba (modern-day Angola) and the assassination of Brazilian Councilwoman Marielle Franco.

This all-female cast depicted the black women as warriors and integral to the fight for justice whether reflecting on the past or the present. I did not get the role but when the show premiered I was moved to tears. It was at that point, one of the most important art pieces I had ever seen that awakened something in me. The movement, the music, the stories felt like they were embodiments of resistance that I recognized in myself. Somewhere in my body I knew it. It was after this experience that I decided to go to my first Capoeira class.

Capoeira is an afro brazilian martial art that is widely understood as a form of black and indigenous resistance that incorporates music, spoken word, storytelling and rhythmic acrobatic movements. Using Capoeira, many enslaved people were able to find refuge from their oppressors to formulate communities and create strategies of resistance to fight against conditions of slavery.

My particular introduction to Capoeira set me up to believe that Black women and Capoeira were two things that would go hand in hand however, when I began to practise Capoeira and even till this day more often than not, I am the only Black woman or even black person entirely. This posed a question in my mind as to why?

*Interlude*

*Dona maria do Camboata*

*Ela chega na venda dá um salto mortal*

*Dona maria do camboata*

*E do camboatá é do camboatá*

*Dona Maria from Camboata*

*She arrives at the market giving a somersault*

*Dona Maria Do Camboata*

*From Camboata from Camboata*

Deciding to focus on the invisibility of black women in the space, that feeling that was felt each time, it opened an opportunity to widen my understanding of not only Capoeira but specific histories that speak to who we are today. What it also highlighted was that my experience could actually be important to balance the inequalities and biases still held in how our histories are recorded and how they inform our futures.

There are unique references in Capoeira of black women being present songs that explicitly talk about women playing Capoeira or becoming the embodiments of resistance within revolutions. Dona Maria do Camboatá, Maria Felipe De Oliveira, are some of the women documented to have fought for freedom in Brazil and they often represent many other women whose stories may have been erased or not documented.

bell hooks writes in “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” that “spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice”(1989).

Perhaps in this frame of radical openness together with engaging in decolonial methodologies, Capoeira could be a tool that can be relevant in combating the inequalities we face today, not a hobby, not art for art's sake but a space that can “tell

stories, unfold histories”(hooks 1989).

In bell hooks' essay on radical openness she states:

*“The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle” (hooks, 1989, p.225).*

What bell hooks expresses here informs me that there are many possibilities in which we can reclaim or recover self. When I think of an opportunity for radical openness, I perceive that through love as the standard, although the idea of love is usually disregarded when thinking about creating the futures we want. It is only through this where we reclaim our bodies. Our bodies are spaces that should interrogate structures, actions, that have been upheld, imposed or embodied. If we are to consider Capoeira as a language, how it in fact highlights how bodies are located in struggle but also the locations of that struggle. For this reason, Capoeira reveals itself as a space that can interrogate structures. Capoeira's physical orientation forces an integration of something internal as we begin to move in particular ways that we are not so accustomed to. These ways of moving begin to interrogate the layers of movement of bodies we have embodied due to a relationship between the internal self to the external self that constant dialogue from the inside out that began in our mother's womb. When we decide to resist this or uphold it, when we become more aware of our internal world, when we walk on hands, invert our world to say yes or to say no, sim o não, to resist structures that orient our bodies in particular ways that are oppressive. It is that Self-awareness that allows us to choose where we want to stand and how.

That awakening within what our bodies carry, brings about transformative ways of seeing and moving in the world around us.

*Interlude*

*Eu vim no navio da aruanda aruanda e  
Eu vim no navio da aruanda aruanda a  
Pra que me trouxeram da aruanda  
Pra que me trouxeram da aruanda  
Eu vim no navio da aruanda aruanda e*

*I came on the ship from luanda, luanda E  
I came on the ship from Luanda, Luanda A  
Why did they bring me from Luanda?  
Why did they bring me from Luanda?  
I came on the ship from luanda, luanda E*

I choose to understand Capoeira as survival.

For each time the ships left the shores of west Africa or the port of Luanda.

I choose to see it as a direct mirror of a time, place and event,

I choose to see that I am making space to embody the movement of bodies rooted in resistance from a particular time, place and event.

For this reason, there is a constant motion of shifting to the past, present and future. It is cyclical showing how it can be so many different things at any one given moment. So personally I can't just call it a martial art or dance. It is almost a very intricate, simple but complicated language that belongs to every part of my being but that I still don't fully understand.

Capoeira also is in itself, a structure that can be oppressive, since it has also inherited and become distorted by systems of oppression and violence. This just may be what you have to do to survive and as the great Toni Morrison once stated, "sometimes you don't survive whole, you only survive in parts". For this reason, the idea of standing in resistance has to be a very conscious choice, it is particular and unique to the bodies at play, where one must interrogate each microhistory occurring or that has occurred or is yet to within our bodies. The same can be said for the practice of Capoeira itself.

These different embodiments, identities, histories, and locations carried by the practice and our bodies are in constant conversation with one another in the roda of Capoeira just like in the wider roda of life.

Embodiments here are framed as **the embedded identities and corporeality affected by culture and society over several generations.**

Embodiments for me are all the identifications of self that are held in our bodies and can produce a location of struggle. For me that might be identified as being a black woman living in Malmo, raised in southeast London, master educated, artist, queer, someone who grew up in a diasporic environment of deprivation but opportunity, instability but care, abandonment yet with an abundance of community. Someone who is an immigrant, born in Lisbon Portugal, a child of immigrants, people whose bodies had escaped a civil war in Angola, a war that is an extension of the several years of occupation and colonialism that has unrooted and displaced so many lives, so many families. I hold all of this when I come into the roda. There is also love, there is also joy, things that came before, knowledge and ways of being that were forgotten, never having an opportunity to be spoken or heard because of violence that has severed relationships and memories which is just a result of what our bodies do with trauma.

There is something about the language of Capoeira, the history it holds, the music, the movement and the cyclical energy in the space that makes me aware of these embodiments.

I then recognized that in order to recover myself, to heal all the pieces and my legacies of pain, it requires a practise of remembering.

Remembering makes me conscious that I am "...not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me... When I say then that these words emerge from suffering, I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice" bell hooks, 1989, p.225). The important step is to make an understanding of these legacies of pain, it is in no way to rationalise it, and there is also an awareness that not remembering is also an action, a choice in its own right. But this

is what capoeira is and could be moving forward, more consciously, a tool for remembering, releasing and reclaiming what is held in our bodies.

It was and will always be a struggle to remember, to unpick who we are in each moment, to feel something in our bodies, to collect that memory and not forget, to interrogate or reclaim. Choosing to understand the discomfort, choosing to flow in resistance, but I found in my experience that when doing this, through me, aspects of histories may be awakened that may have been diluted, forgotten or erased. If we believe knowledge begins from where you are and the memories that we carry in our bodies helps us to understand that the past, the present and future are always in conversation with one another, just like in the roda (circle) of Capoeira.

Adeus povo bom adeus  
Adeus que já vou embora  
pela ondas do mar eu vim  
  
pelas ondas do mar eu vou embora

Goodbye people good bye  
Goodbye, I'm leaving  
By the waves of the sea I came  
By the waves of the sea  
I am leaving.

Iê!