

***Bimba's Rhythm is one, two, three:***  
**From Resistance to Transformation through Brazilian Capoeira**

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
University of Toronto

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**BIMBA'S RHYTHM IS ONE, TWO, THREE:  
FROM RESISTANCE TO TRANSFORMATION THROUGH BRAZILIAN  
CAPOEIRA**

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**Abstract**

Capoeira is a Brazilian fighting art with roots in slavery that blends live music, dance, play and ritual. It is also an embodied form of knowledge that is holistic and sometimes profoundly transformative – a way of seeing and being that embraces an Afro-Brazilian vision of the world. Using personal lived experience and collected oral testimony related in a story-telling form, the study explores the knowledge embedded within capoeira through the lives of practitioners and through practitioners' explanations of their teachings. The question of whether capoeira has a common essence, or more specifically, whether the capoeira of twentieth century Bahia from which all modern schools ultimately trace their origins has an essence, is explored.

In the thesis, capoeira is discovered to be an expression of resistance and transformation. Capoeira, the author discovers, is a form of *resistance* in that its traditional teachings reflect a communal, non-materialistic and sensuous stance, in opposition to the dominant individualistic, capitalistic, techno-scientific approach that has dominated the industrialized West. Capoeira is also a source of *transformation* in that it allows individuals to develop to their fullest expression – a self that encompasses the physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual dimensions – and helps people integrate within a web of relations, human, animal, or other.

Using a Transformative Learning approach informed by an Indigenous framework, this dissertation attempts to bring the reader on a journey of the mind, body and spirit. In three books, each one describing a separate fieldwork trip to Brazil, the author weaves a tale that is both personal and profound in its planetary implications.

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*Merci, Maman, pour tout ton amour inconditionnel.*

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## GLOSSARY

**academia** = capoeira school

**afiliado** = someone to whom one is related; Mestre Bimba used the term to denote family-like relationships in capoeira

**água** = water

**aipim** = kind of root eaten widely in Brazil, part of the staple diet of many indigenous people; *pirão de aipim* is mashed aipim

**aluno/a** = student

**aluno formado** = graduated student

**Amazonas** = a rhythm played by Mestre Bimba on the berimbau

**Angoleiro** = practitioner of Capoeira Angola

**agogô** = cowbell

**água de côco** = coconut water

**apelido** = nickname (also known as “Nome de Guerra” in capoeira circles)

**arrastão** = take-down where attacker grabs behind the knees and lifts the opponent

**arrocha** = modern style of pop music from Bahia

**atabaque** = tall drum used in many cultural manifestations in Bahia

**aù** = cartwheel

**axé** = “good vibes, positive energy” (African concept)

**azulejos** = Portuguese blue tiles

**Baiana/Baiano** = a person from Bahia

**balões** = throws created by Mestre Bimba where one partner throws the other (and the one thrown must land on his feet)

**bananeira** = banana tree; hand stand in capoeira

**banda/banda de costa** = take-down using a rapid heel strike

**banguela** = slow rhythm created by Mestre Bimba and played on the berimbau

**barracão** = kind of structure where capoeira used to be played

**bateria** = capoeira orchestra

**baqueta** = stick used to strike the berimbau wire

**Belém do Pará** = capital city of the state of Pará at the mouth of the Amazon River

**benção** = a “blessing”; a powerful kick to the solar plexis used in capoeira

**benguela** = modern variation on Mestre Bimba’s Banguela rhythm

**beriba** = a kind of wood used to make berimbaus

**berimbau** = a bow-like musical instrument of African origin used mostly in capoeira

**blocos** = Carnival groups

**boa viagem/Boa Viagem** = have a good trip (sung in many capoeira rodas at the end); also the name of a neighbourhood in Salvador

**cabaça** = berimbau gourd which is pressed to the stomach to create an echo

**cachoeira/Cachoeira** = waterfall; also the name of a small town of the Recôncavo region of Bahia

**calça** = pants

**cana de açúcar** = sugarcane

**Candomblé** = Bahian religion with strong African roots

**canivete** = a type of capoeira movement where one supports the weight on one hand and folds the limbs like a switchblade

**capitão do mato** = “Captain of the Forest”, a man who was hired to capture runaway slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

**Capoeira Angola** = the “older” capoeira; also called “Primitive” capoeira

**Capoeira Estilizada** = modern capoeira also known as “Capoeira Contemporânea”

**Capoeira Regional** = the style of capoeira created by Mestre Bimba (the term is often erroneously used in reference to modern styles of capoeira)

**capoeirista** = A capoeira practitioner

**Capoerê** = a capoeira project for disadvantaged kids created and run by Mestre Nenel in Salvador in which children learn capoeira and other Bahian cultural manifestations

**carnaval** = Carnival (a huge party that takes place before Lent in February or March over the course of several weeks)

**carne** = meat

**carteira de trabalho** = a form of identification that workers of certain professions carried on themselves.

**cavalaria** = the cavalry; the name given to a rhythm in capoeira that was played when the police was coming to arrest capoeira practitioners in the early part of the twentieth century

**cavaquinho** = small banjo-like guitar

**caxixí** = shaker; used in capoeira to accompany the berimbau

**centavos** = the equivalent of cents in the Brazilian currency

**chapa** = side-kick

**Chapada Diamantina** = a large natural park in the interior of the state of Bahia

**chapa de costa** = back kick

**charanga** = capoeira orchestra (word used by Mestre Bimba)

**chibata** = Kick

**Cidade Alta/Cidade Baixa** = Upper and Lower City in Salvador

**cinco salomão** = five Star symbol used by many capoeiristas as a good-luck charm and chosen by Mestre Bimba to represent Capoeira Regional

**cintura desprezada** = throws created by Mestre Bimba (also known as “balões”)

**cocorinha** = defensive stance in which one crouches on the ground (derived from “de cocora”, the squatting position assumed when going to the bathroom; coco is poop)

**contemporary capoeira** = modern capoeira styles

**contra-mestre** = a rank below Mestre

**cordel/cordão** = belt system adopted by many modern capoeira groups

**corrido** = regular songs sung in the roda that follow the opening quadra.

**cruz/cruz presa** = the cross; a movement used to catch one’s opponent’s leg

**curso de especialização** = specialized course; taught by Mestre Bimba (and now Mestre Nenel) to advanced students; includes self-defense techniques

**dá volta do mundo** = “go around the world”; expression common in capoeira rodas where the roda is likened to a world

**deslocamento** = back walkover

**dobrão** = coin used to play berimbau

**ECAIG (Escola de Capoeira Angola Irmãos Gêmeos)** = Mestre Curió’s capoeira school

**encontro** = capoeira event

**esquenta banho** = a tradition started by Mestre Bimba in which students waiting to take a shower in cold water kept warm by playing hard games with each other

**esporão** = side-kick

**estrelas** = stars; evaluation system used by Mestre Nenel to keep Mestre Bimba's techniques alive

**FBEC (Filhos de Bimba Escola de Capoeira)** = Mestre Nenel's school

**fechar o corpo** = to "close the body" figuratively and literally in a capoeira game; associated with magic

**feitice** = spell

**feiticeiro** = magician

**forró** = type of northeastern music; a couple's dance

**forró pé de serra** = traditional type of forró

**formado** = a graduated student in Bimba's Capoeira Regional

**formando** = a student who will be graduating in Bimba's Capoeira Regional

**formatura** = graduation ceremony in Bimba's Capoeira Regional

**Forte da Capoeira (Forte Santo Antônio)** = a fort in Santo Antônio, Salvador da Bahia dedicated to capoeira

**FUMEB (Fundação Mestre Bimba)** = a non-profit organization created by Mestre Nenel and Frederico Abreu to preserve and continue the work of Mestre Bimba

**galopante** = open-palm strike to the face

**GCAP** = Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho; created by Mestre Moraes

**ginga** = a basic, dance-like movement in capoeira

**giro** = spin

**giratório** = head spin

**godeme** = back-hand strike (derived from "God damn it!")

**guarda baixa** = also known as "cocorinha"; squatting defense

**gunga** = largest berimbau in a Capoeira Angola orchestra

**hino da Regional** = Regional anthem created by Mestre Bimba

**Iansã** = Orixá of the wind and storms whose colour is red; also known as Santa Barbara

**Idalina** = rhythm in Capoeira Regional (game is played both up and down)

**Iemanjá** = Orixá of the Sea and the patron saint of the city of Salvador da Bahia

**Ijexá** = one of the basic rhythms played in Candomblé

**Itapoã** = neighbourhood in Salvador da Bahia

**iúna** = rhythm played in Capoeira Angola during which all formados must play and perform the throws or balões

**jeito** = having or finding a "way" to do something

**jogo** = game

**jogo de cintura** = "game from the hip"; an ability to do things

**jogo do dia** = Game of the Day; chosen at the end of the rodas in the Fundação

**ladainha** = opening song in Capoeira Angola rodas

lençol azul, amarelo, vermelho e branco = blue, yellow, red and white scarves; symbolic of levels of knowledge in Bimba's Capoeira Regional; chosen by Mestre Bimba in homage to the old capoeira practitioners of the early twentieth century who used them

**Luta Regional Baiana** = Bahian Regional Martial Art

**maculêlê** = stick-fighting dance that came from the Recôncavo region of Bahia and is linked to sugarcane plantations

**mãe de santos** = "mother of saint"; the head mother in the Candomblé religion

**malandro** = a cunning, shrewd, streetwise person

**malícia** = street smarts, cunning, shrewdness

**mandinga** = magic (comes from the Mandinka people who were known to use spells)  
**mandingueiro** = magician  
**mangue** = a type of tree with airborne roots found in swampy areas  
**maguezal** = a type of ecosystem with many mangue trees  
**martelo** = hammerkick  
**médio** = middle berimbau in the Capoeira Angola orchestra  
**meia-lua de compasso** = half-moon kick  
**Mercado Modelo** = old market in the Lower City in Salvador  
**mestre** = capoeira master  
**mestre/mestra/mestranda** = female capoeira master  
**Mestre Bimba** = creator of Capoeira Regional, a Bahian who lived from 1899 to 1974  
**mulher barbada** = alcoholic drink created by Mestre Bimba (ingredients are a secret)  
**molejo** = suppleness  
**motorista** = driver  
**namorado/namorada** = boyfriend/girlfriend  
**namorar** = to go out with someone or to have sex  
**negativa** = to negate an attack; defensive move in capoeira  
**nego/nega** = black man/black woman; used affectionately in Bahia to call one's boyfriend, girlfriend or friend  
**negão** = big black man  
**nome de Guerra** = "war name", or nickname  
**OFSJ (Organização Fraternal São José)** = religious organization where my students and I stayed in Boa Viagem, Salvador da Bahia  
**ogã** = honorary post in Candomblé given to a man who is expected to give protection to the temple in the form of money and prestige  
**Ogúm** = Orixá of war; opens paths  
**Oxossi** = Orixá of the hunt and the forest  
**Oxún** = Orixá of fresh water and beauty  
**Orixás** = African ancestors who are deified and worshipped in the African-based religion Candomblé; human spiritual archetypes  
**padre** = Father (church)  
**pagode** = type of modern samba  
**pai de santos** = "father of saints"; Babalorixá, caretaker of an Orixá  
**pandeiro** = tambourine  
**patuã** = good luck charm often used by capoeiristas (worn about the neck in a pouch)  
**Pelourinho** = "whipping post"; old historical part of Salvador da Bahia  
**Petrobrás** = a Brazilian oil corporation  
**Piedade** = old square of Salvador da Bahia where capoeira rodas often took place  
**pivete** = Street Kids or kids who spend a lot of time on the street, steal, get into petty crimes, etc.  
**ponta da costela** = kick to the ribs  
**ponteira** = kick to the solar plexus  
**Praça da Sé** = a square in the Pelourinho neighbourhood  
**professor/professora** = teacher  
**puxada de rede** = traditional fisherman's dance (using fishing nets)  
**quadra** = opening song in traditional Capoeira Regional rodas  
**queda de quatro** = falling on all fours

**rabo de arraia** = stingray's tail (a kick in capoeira)  
**rasteira** = footsweep  
**reais** = Brazilian currency  
**reco-reco** = scratchboard  
**Recôncavo** = area around the Bay of All Saints in the state of Bahia  
**Regional** = a practitioner of Capoeira Regional  
**relógio** = technique from the old capoeira in which the player spins on his hands  
**roda** = capoeira circle  
**rolê** = escape technique where the player rolls away  
**salto mortal** = front handspring  
**Salvador da Bahia** = capital city of the state of Bahia  
**samba de roda** = traditional samba from the state of Bahia performed in a circle  
**Sambista** = samba musician and/or dancer  
**Santa Maria** = rhythm created on the berimbau by Mestre Bimba  
**São João** = "Saint John"; big Brazilian festival in June in which people dress up as farmers, perform square dances, dance to forró music and eat corn dishes  
**São Jorge** = Saint George; protector of capoeiristas  
**São Bento Grande (Angola)** = basic rhythm in Capoeira Angola rodas played by the largest berimbau  
**São Bento Grande (Regional)** = rhythm created by Mestre Bimba played in Capoeira Regional for fast games  
**São Bento Pequeno** = rhythm played by the middle berimbau in Capoeira Angola rodas  
**São Salomão** = Saint Solomon, a fictitious entity representing wisdom and justice, like the Biblical King Solomon  
**senzala** = slave headquarters on plantations  
**surdo** = large drum played in many types of Brazilian music  
**tambourinho** = small tambourine played in many types of Brazilian music  
**Terreiro de Jesus** = a square in the Pelourinho neighbourhood of Salvador da Bahia  
**tesoura de frente** = front scissor take-down  
**tesoura de costa** = back scissor take-down  
**Tijubinas** = affectionate name given by Mestre Bimba to his female students  
**UFBA** = Universidade Federal da Bahia; Federal University of Bahia  
**viola** = smallest berimbau used in a Capoeira Angola orchestra

## MAP OF BRAZIL<sup>1</sup>



### Mestres/Professores and their Cities

- 1. Salvador da Bahia (Bahia)** – Frede(rico) Abreu, Mestre Augusto, Mestre Cafuné, Mestre Curió, Mestre Janja, Mestre Jararaca, Mestre Mica, Mestre Nene, Mestre Olavo, Mestre Pelé, Mestre Piloto, Mestre Santa Rosa, Mestre Zé do Lenço, Professor Anum, Professor Berimbau, Professora Lilú, Professora Nalvinha
- 2. Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul)** - Mestre Farol
- 3. Feira de Sant'ana (Bahia)** - Mestre Marinheiro
- 4. Aracajú (Sergipe)** - Mestre Adolfo (Lobo Mau)
- 5. Belém (Pará)** - Mestre Bezerra, Mestre Ferro
- 6. Olinda (Pernambuco)** - Mestre Sapo
- 7. Recife (Pernambuco)** - Mestre Curisco and (Contra) Mestre Betão
- 8. Manaus (Amazonas)** - Mestre KK Bonates
- 9. Santo Amaro (Bahia)** - Mestre Evan

<sup>1</sup> Map by Mark J. Francisco

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# - *Introduction* –

## **Capoeira and Transformative Learning**

Capoeira, a Brazilian fighting art with roots in slavery, blends live music, dance, play, and ritual. It is enacted in a circle made up of practitioners and on-lookers, and it is a form of knowledge that is embodied, holistic and sometimes profoundly transformative in all senses of the word: physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and socially. Capoeira is a way of *seeing*, a way of *being* in the world, a paradigm fundamentally different from the one we live under in the West. Using my lived experience and those experiences relayed to me through collected oral testimony, my thesis attempts to explore the knowledge embedded within capoeira through the lives of practitioners and through practitioners' explanations of their teachings.

Although I set out to find whether capoeira has a common *essence* – or more specifically, whether the capoeira of twentieth century Bahia, from which all modern schools ultimately trace their origins, had an essence – my thesis quickly became more about the transformative potential of capoeira. I came to the conclusion that *capoeira was and is a powerful expression of resistance and transformation*. It is a form of *resistance* in that its teachings run counter to many of the ideological currents of our times – it is fiercely communal, fundamentally non-materialistic and unabashedly sensuous, which puts it in opposition to the individualistic, capitalistic, techno-intellectual bend of our times. It is a source of *transformation* in that it allows one to develop into one's fullest expression – a self that encompasses the physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual dimensions, and one in which the individual is integrated within a web of relations, human, animal, or other.

According to the authors of *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning* (2003), a collection of essays by professors and students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto:

Transformative Learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body-awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.

In his essay, “Transformative Learning and Transformative Politics: The Pedagogical Dimension of Participatory Democracy and Social Action”, Daniel Schugurensky (2003) writes that Transformative Learning happens when “reflection and action happen together” (p.63) and that it occurs over a long period of time, propelled at times by trauma, at times by a long process of searching, of exploration for something that is missing in one’s life (2003, p.69-70). Anne Goodman (2003) adds that Transformative Learning can occur on a personal, local/regional or global planetary level (p.186). I believe that capoeira can affect change on *all three levels*.

In a similar vein, Professor Roxana Ng at OISE writes that in North America we live in a society that “upholds white male supremacy”, colonized as it was by Europeans who subordinated Aboriginal peoples and other groups seen to be different (2009, p.2). Thus, we have internalized the values and knowledge construction of the colonizers. In fact, we are so immersed in this Cartesian view of the world in which the body and mind/spirit are seen as separate that its values and knowledge construction have come to appear “normal”, thus remaining largely invisible and unquestioned. Integrative Critical Embodied Pedagogy (also known as Embodied Learning or EL for short), Ng continues, seeks to integrate the mind, body,

emotions and spirit, and strives to fundamentally shift the way we relate to the world, to each other and to ourselves by developing the critical faculties. It also does so by developing a greater consciousness through body/mind/spirit practices. Ng calls this a way of “decolonizing the body” by “freeing us from the shackles of compartmentalized education endemic to our current system of knowledge construction (2009, p.2)”.

Ng’s area of expertise is Traditional Chinese Medicine and Qi Gong, but her words could very well have been written about capoeira. Although there are many points of intersection between the fields of Embodied Learning and capoeira, and EL contributes much to the discussion particularly in the areas of race and class, since it does not delve as deeply into the environmental and spiritual dimensions, I only touch upon it in the conclusion. Another thesis could be written about capoeira through the lens of Embodied Learning, but for reasons of space, I merely raise issues of class, gender and race throughout my thesis, leaving it to others to take up the subject at a later date.

**A Note on the Terminology:** I use the term “Afro-Bahian” throughout my dissertation, because although Bahian culture is arguably rooted in an African cosmology, it has been influenced and shaped by Indigenous and European cultures particular to Brazil, or more accurately, to the region of Bahia. Similarly, I chose to use the term “Western” to describe a mode of thinking and of life that is grounded in a techno-scientific industrial worldview, a paradigm linked to the industrialized West. Of course there are many other currents of thinking that exist in the West, some of them very holistic, but they are not nearly as widespread, dominant or influential. Last but not least, although there is a great deal of difference within the approach of Western-trained academics, the institution – the university – shapes much of what is currently deemed possible in the conception and dissemination of knowledge. When I speak of

“the university” or of “academia”, I am referring to the larger academic system of which we are a part, a system whose roots lie in a colonial past, and where change is slow and fraught with difficulty.

I am grateful for the presence of so many Indigenous scholars, non-Indigenous scholars studying Indigenous knowledge, and Elders who have managed to crack open the doors of the university so that some of this knowledge, denigrated until recently, might come to infiltrate the university milieu and bring with it a breath of fresh air. Although such alliances are often uneasy and potentially fraught with conflict, challenging as they are of the implicit assumptions on which the university is built, they bring with them important questions that are crucial in our modern world.

## ***Methodology***

*I knew I could not study Bahia as I would an art gallery... I should have to persuade the Bahians to take me into their life. I should have to force my way into the flow and become a part of it. To study the people I should have to live with them, to like them, and I should have to try assiduously to make them like me.*

(Ruth Landes, 1994)

Capoeira can be, and has been, approached from an almost infinite numbers of directions: it can be analyzed anthropologically, socially, historically, politically and economically. Its study can focus on aspects such as dance, movement, music, song, ritual, sport, or spirituality. Delving into the capoeira literature, I found that book writers could be placed into two broad categories: academic and non-academic. Mostly Brazilian, non-academic writers like Bira Almeida, known as Mestre Acordeon (1996) and Mestre Bola Sete (1997) wrote for a general audience. They focused their discussion on the history of capoeira, related personal experiences, and touched upon certain philosophical questions. Academics, Brazilian and non-Brazilian

(some, but not all of them practitioners), like Thomas Holloway (1993), Frederico José de Abreu (2005), Augusto Januário, known as Mestre Augusto (2003), Carlos Eugênio Líbano Soares (1994, 2002), and Waldeloir Rego (1968) focused on the historical dimensions of capoeira, while a few scholars, such as Letícia de Souza Reis (1997) and Pedro Abib (2004) were interested in theory – the discussion of historical events in their political and social contexts. J. Lowell Lewis (1992) and Muniz Sodré (2002) bridged several genres, exploring the historical dimensions of the art form, but also writing highly personal and passionate accounts of their experiences in capoeira. Nestor Capoeira (1992), stood apart to me as a scholar who explored philosophical issues in depth, without adopting a traditional academic approach. Mestre Angelo Decânio Filho (2005), a doctor by trade and arguably Mestre Bimba’s most trusted student, wrote a fascinating portrait of life in the early days of the academy, blending insights from his studies in Traditional Chinese Medicine and Asian martial arts, with life lessons learned through Mestre Bimba’s stories, teachings and philosophical musings about capoeira, as well as scientific discussions. Overall, however, the writers who opted for a personal tone were non-academics, while academics chose a “detached” approach.

When it came to theses and dissertations, the impersonal approach I came across was even more striking (D’Aquino, 1983; Head, 2004; Ottier, 2005; De Souza Vieira, 2004). Aside from Gregory Downey, Ph.D. (1998) – a notable exception – scholars concentrated on historical, political and social dimensions, but rarely spoke in their own voice. They opted for a neutral tone, in which personal experiences, vulnerabilities and weaknesses were rarely discussed. This was surprising to me. In a passionate art form such as capoeira I expected the authors to be lifted by the spirit of their words and to forget their academic propriety at times. Although some of these academic works did address themes like resistance, power, freedom, transformation,

education, and so on, they did so in a manner that I found profoundly disconnected and that undermined the very message they proposed. Capoeira might be joining the academic “discussion”, but it was having the very life taken out of it in the process! Thus, although I learned a lot about the history, social and political implications, as well as the technical aspects of capoeira through these scholarly works, I knew that I wanted to take my explorations in a very different direction and would have to look for a different kind of research.

Just what was I trying to do? Was my dissertation ethnography, narrative inquiry, phenomenology, auto ethnography or some other category altogether? I discovered that it was to be none of the above and a little bit of all of them. I was not doing participatory research, since my research did not result in a collective initiative, yet I was still very much concerned that the people I worked with benefit from my research in some way, and this, more than anything else, would guide me throughout the process. In the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Study*, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) wrote, “a blurring of disciplinary boundaries is taking place” (p. ix). That, to me, was a very good thing, because I needed to stretch my wings beyond the confines of the dominant research paradigm and see where *capoeira* wanted to lead me, to use my intellect in the service of a greater wisdom that capoeira had taught me to see.

Although the positivist view in which it is assumed an external “truth” exists – “a stable, unchanging reality that can be studied using the empirical methods of objective social science” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.8) – has been challenged by many scholars, fundamentally, it still shapes the world of higher learning in many ways, big and small. This dissertation is my effort to “bring capoeira into the academy”, so to speak. Capoeira often challenges traditional academic ways and is, in fact, sometimes *contrary* in its conception of knowledge. Choosing a narrative format – a kind of auto ethnography blended with ethnographic influences – for most of

the thesis was in keeping with this idea. Weaving many threads together from various approaches, while creating a tapestry that was uniquely my own, felt right. In fact, I came to understand that *all* of the approaches I describe in my dissertation reflected a facet of the crystal – an essential aspect that would help me, and thus the reader, form a more vibrant and textured understanding of capoeira. In the end, I found the Transformative Learning approach developed by scholars at OISE to be the best fit. Not only did it complement the Indigenous framework and paradigm that I was adopting, it also valued and encouraged the adoption of “Other” voices. In many ways, Transformative Learning would become the umbrella under which I would develop my work.

Although I borrowed liberally from the field of *arts-informed research*, as I will explain later, the paradigm and the methodology that most suited my work was an Indigenous one. Still, I find myself needing to acknowledge here the aspects of arts-informed research that resonated. As Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles (2003) write in their article entitled “Transforming Research: Possibilities for Arts-Informed Scholarship”, although it is rooted in qualitative inquiry, arts-informed research is “imbued with qualities of process and form grounded in the arts” (p.200). It does not follow traditional modes of academic discourse, exploring instead the language of fiction, poetry and drama, to name a few, follows alternative inquiry processes, embraces subjectivities and ambiguities, attempts to make scholarship more accessible and relevant to the public, honours research participants in fundamentally respectful and ethical ways, and tries to demystify the processes and representational forms of qualitative research. Arts-informed research tries to “more closely render the aesthetic of lived experience” (Cole and Knowles, p.203). It is organic, fluid and passionate. At the same time, the more I delved into my thesis, the more I felt that there was a fundamental gulf between arts-informed research and

capoeira. The former still adhered to an essentially Western vision of the world, while capoeira was, at its heart, Afro-Bahian.

I knew that adopting an Afro-Bahian approach in my thesis was going to present a host of challenges. In his thesis, Professor Jean-Paul Restoule (1999a) quotes J. Couture in saying that “the university values intellectualism over intuition, academic vs. colloquial languages, elitism vs. people-in-communities, knowledge of the professionals vs. indirect knowledge; and written vs. oral tradition” (p.165). Thankfully, there has been a greater and greater clamouring for a more vibrant, more holistic and ultimately more *humane* form of research. As we observe the predicament of our planet, we can no longer deny that the ways of the industrialized West are not working, and that change is needed at a deep level. We need to search for and to be open to new solutions in learning and sharing this knowledge.

While OISE is a place of intellectual openness, it still embraces many aspects of a Western paradigm. It was a constant struggle in my research to stay true to the spirit of capoeira, while writing a dissertation that would be accepted by the university. I sought professors whom I felt would be sympathetic to my need to explore new ways and found books to support me. The Sage Handbook showed me that many other scholars were leaning in the same direction, wanting an engaged form of research that pushed the boundaries of knowledge within the university context. Although a discussion about the reasons for similarities between women’s and Indigenous ways of knowing remains outside the scope of this dissertation, there were intriguing parallels between the two. This was not entirely surprising, given that the dominant knowledge model in the West is a patriarchal one, enmeshed within a capitalist system. Angela Miles (2002) writes in “Feminist Perspectives on Globalization and Integrative Transformative Learning” that capitalism grew “through the often violent colonization and exploitation of

nature, women, workers, Indigenous peoples, and traditional cultures and communities” (pp. 23-33).

In his dissertation, Professor Jean-Paul Restoule (2004) suggested that institutional research ethics guidelines are sometimes in contradiction with the customs of Indigenous people or frequently protect the researcher and the institution, without taking into account the values or needs of the people under study (p.53). In a similar vein, Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) about the inherent suspicion of many First Nations people towards research, one of the “dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p.01). I was particularly interested by Smith’s assertion that research had had an inherently *colonial agenda*, while work done by people in their own communities had different concerns. Indigenous scholars were replacing traditional words like “data”, “hypothesis” and “methodology” with concepts like “cultural survival”, “self-determination”, “healing”, “restoration” and “social justice”. In Bahia, the majority of capoeiristas were descendants of slaves and continued to experience the effects of colonization, and these critiques resonated with me. I, too, felt that a thesis needed to be, above all, inspiring and healing.

When I read Shawn Wilson’s *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (2008), I knew that I had found my missing piece. Wilson argued that Indigenous research has its own ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology, and that what binds it all together is *relationship*. From the Indigenous perspective, relationships do not simply shape reality, they *are* reality. If the shared aspect of Indigenous ontology and epistemology is *relationality*, then the shared aspect of Indigenous axiology and methodology is *accountability* to relationships. These insights fit perfectly with my own experience in the Bahian world of capoeira and helped to explain many of my difficulties in fitting my research within an academic paradigm (p.7).

Wilson wrote, “Indigenous epistemology is all about ideas developing through the formation of relationships. An idea cannot be taken out of this relational context and still maintain its shape” (p.8). Standard academic writing, therefore, “may not be able to express these ideas in a way that is respectful of their intent” (Wilson, p.14). Since social science theory arose out of a “male-dominated, Euroamerican and ethnocentric model” (p.16), then it is natural that the dominant research paradigms would reflect this way of seeing the world.

Wilson further discussed the ways in which dominant positivist and post-positivist research paradigms have many things in common. They both propose that there is *one* reality with laws. Although in the former case, objective thought is believed to help discover that reality, and in the latter case, the bias of the researcher is recognized and attempts made to correct for it, there is a shared belief in objectivity as an attainable goal. Critical theory, on the other hand, is already more in line with Indigenous ways. It sees reality as fluid and shaped by culture, gender, and social values, recognizes the influence of the researcher, and strives for an improved society by promoting change. Constructivism sees the existence of many realities, each one specific to its people and locations, and perceives the coming together of researchers and subjects as crucial to the creation of a mutual reality. Here, too, knowledge is being valued not for itself, but for the change it might bring about (p.36).

The major difference between the dominant paradigms and an Indigenous paradigm, according to Wilson, is that in the former knowledge is individual, and is spoken of as something that can be owned, like property, while in the latter, *it belongs to the cosmos of which we are interpreters*. There may be multiple realities, but they are not “out there”. Reality is found in the relationship one has with the truth. In other words, the object or thing is not as important as the *relationship to it*, and this goes not only for relationships to other people, but also to that with

animals, plants, spirits and the very cosmos itself (p.74). Words like “validity” lose their meaning, since the fulfillment of a role and of obligation in a research relationship becomes more important, making “respect, reciprocity and responsibility” the foundation of relationship (p.77).

Wilson’s ideas have profound implications for strategy of inquiry and further add to the complexity of doing research in a university setting where many assumptions are taken for granted. In Indigenous methodology, for example, there is *no separation* between art, religion and education. As Mayan scholar Carlos Cordero (1995, p. 30) explains, this means, “the (Indigenous) knowledge base [...] integrates those areas of knowledge so that science is both religious and aesthetic. In the western tradition, we find an emphasis on approaching knowledge through the use of the intellect. For indigenous people, knowledge is also approached through the senses and the intuition.”

Thankfully, Indigenous researchers are not the only ones questioning conventional paradigms in education and learning. Many post-modernists and post-structuralists are clear that there is no such thing as “neutral” or “unbiased” research. Class, race, gender and ethnicity, amongst many other factors, all shape inquiry. They point out that scientists tell stories as well, only their stories are seen as the “Truth”. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) wrote: “We have left the world of naive realism, knowing now that a text does not mirror the world, it creates the world” (2005, p. xiv). Reality, they suggest, is more like a *crystal* onto which light strikes, reflecting a variety of perspectives (p.6). Furthermore:

Many members of the critical theory, constructivist, poststructural, and postmodern schools of thought reject positivist and postpositivist criteria when evaluating their own work. They see such criteria as irrelevant to their work and contend that such criteria reproduce only a certain kind of science, a science that silences too many voices. These researchers seek alternative methods for evaluating their work, including verisimilitude,

emotionality, personal responsibility, an ethic of caring, political praxis, multivoiced texts, and dialogues with subjects (p.12).

Qualitative researchers “stress(ed) the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (p.10). Empirical knowledge is an important way of knowing the world, but it is not the only way. Thus, Wilson’s approach to research as “a life changing ceremony” (p.61), a journey that is both intuitive and metaphorical in nature, means that learning is not only experiential and participatory, but it is also deeply spiritual, relational, emotive and physical. Learning in the Indigenous sense requires that the context and the relationship between teacher and learner be right. “You could say that the specific rituals that make up the ceremony are designed to get the participants into a state of mind that will allow for the extraordinary to take place” (p.69). As we will see, capoeira is also steeped in ritual. Thus, my storytelling, ritualistic in its own way, is part of honouring that way of teaching.

### ***Indigenous Knowledge***

*Most of those who now assert the centrality of the body in any understanding of the mind – those who argue that it is really the body as a whole, and not an isolated brain, that is the true locus of awareness – still remain trapped within the confines of an unnecessary presumption.... that awareness, or mind, is a special possession of our species, a property that isolates humankind from the rest of material nature. The primary dichotomy in Descartes’ philosophy, after all, was not the division between mind and body, but rather the divide between the mind and the whole of the material world.*

David Abram (2012, p.108)

The more I allowed capoeira into my life, the more it challenged the paradigms I had grown up with. Like others of my generation, I had been immersed from a tender age in a scientific world saturated with beliefs about materialism, individualism and competition. Since I had also grown up atheist (in a society where organized religion had been depleted of much of its original life force), I felt little attraction to institutionalized religions. I remember trying to read

parts of the New Testament as a child, wanting desperately to connect with it and to fill a kind of inner void. In capoeira, however, I discovered a worldview that is closer to its Indigenous African roots than to the dominant colonial society. Capoeira echoed many of the ideas I had begun exploring – ideas that had changed my hardcore atheism into a new awareness of the subtle mysteries of life. As torn apart as the Afro-Brazilian communities and the descendants of slaves were, they had somehow managed to hold on to this dimension and capoeira was still imbued with its energies – at least in Bahia. Like other earth and body-based knowledges, it reflected many of the teachings found in Indigenous cultures all over the world. In such a view, human beings are part of a vast and rich Universe, shared with other creatures, spirits and beings.

In searching for ways to engage in my research, I saw numerous parallels between the teachings of many Indigenous peoples and those of capoeira. I had read Jerry Mander's book, *In the Absence of the Sacred: the Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations* (1982), and his discussion about the underpinnings of many Indigenous cultures. Mander differentiated between technological societies like the Aztecs and Incans, whom he saw as more akin to Western societies, and traditional Indigenous societies. This similarity between traditional Indigenous cultures and capoeira was not surprising, because although capoeira came out of a *Diaspora*, its roots are principally African and grounded in what capoeira masters like Mestre Augusto call a “tribal” essence.

OISE scholar George J. Sefa Dei (2003) writes in “Spiritual Knowing and Transformative Learning” (2003, p. 121-133) that in the African vision of education, spirituality is fundamental, and that “African spirituality stresses mind, body, and soul interactions.” Furthermore, “In the Ghanaian/African systems of thought, the ontological viewpoint stresses that [...] to understand reality is to have a complete holistic view of society [...] a harmonious

existence among nature, culture, and society [...] This view also stresses the physical and metaphysical connection [...]” (p.125)

Njoki Nathani Wane’s article, “African Women and Spirituality: Connection between Thought and Education” (2003, p. 135-150), explained that for the Embo women of rural Kenya spirituality is “lived, not written” and that it is “a way of being, of connecting with the land, the universe, and creation [...] manifest in their everyday activities and relations (p.136)”. These ideas certainly find resonance in capoeira.

A discussion about the similarities and differences between Indigenous people and people of the Diaspora is clearly beyond the scope of my thesis, but I was intrigued by these common recurrences. The original “primitive” capoeira of early twentieth century Bahia from which all modern strains of capoeira emerged embodied values that closely resembled those of many traditional Indigenous societies. Despite the fact that the art form came out of the Diaspora, from people who were uprooted from their land and therefore did not have the same degree of intimacy with the new land that Indigenous people have with theirs, Afro-Bahians managed to hold on to many of the old ways. It was obvious to me that, through its teachings, capoeira was transmitting much more than *techniques*. It was sharing an alternative vision of the world.

In his thesis, Professor Jean-Paul Restoule (2004) explored the idea that identity is *fluid* and capable of shifting in response to the context. Restoule felt that First Nations people had managed to hold on to certain core values, even when displaced in different environments. Capoeira had been created by African slaves who had been forcibly separated from their land, and their people, beliefs, customs and teachings had been under assault. They had, somehow, succeeded in passing on these values, beliefs and ways in spite of the horrors of slavery. Although the teachings were not always *uniform* – the need for survival in a new environment

and the contact with other cultures had undoubtedly introduced many changes to the old “tribal” ways – certain elements had survived.

### ***Storywork***

*The form of writing in this book differs from the dominant style in that it does not follow a linear process (i.e. describe what I wanted to do, describe how I did it, then describe what I found out) but rather a more cyclical pattern that introduces ideas or themes, then returns to them at intervals with different levels of understanding.*

Shawn Wilson (2008, p.42)

I knew that if I hoped to capture something of capoeira’s essence, I would need to approach the art form on its own terms. Jean-Paul Restoule (2004) had made use of an “Aboriginal methodology” in his research, gathering data through a *healing circle* that met regularly. Circles, according to Restoule, were a “methodology” used traditionally by many Aboriginal cultures for different purposes, employed for “decision-making, healing, sharing, talking, educating or learning” (p.67). They were an important symbol for many Aboriginal peoples on the North American continent, a Medicine Wheel divided into four quadrants – East, South, West and North – often explained as the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual realms, and the basis of teachings for the *Anishinaabe*<sup>1</sup> and many other Indigenous peoples (p.67). Was it a coincidence that this wheel, which symbolized *balance*, was a symbol found in many cultures all over the world, including in capoeira, where the *roda* – the capoeira circle – was central? Might it point to a different way of *conceiving of* the world and of living and learning within it?

Restoule explained that, in Indigenous societies, relationships were fundamental to the learning process. Citing Simpson (2000) and her work on Anishinaabe ways of knowing, he listed four important aspects of learning: collaboration or immersion in the community,

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<sup>1</sup> *Anishinaabe* is the name that Ojibwe people call themselves.

apprenticeship with an Elder, learning by doing (direct experience) and storytelling (p.171). Intuitively I had been engaging in *all* four of these activities during my trips to Brazil.

It was Jo Ann Archibald (2008) who, in her book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, let me know that I was on the right track as my thesis progressed. I had felt it important to keep the interviews whole and to imbue them with a “story-telling feel”, although I could not quite explain why. I knew I did not want to dissect the stories and interviews in my thesis, nor analyze them in the traditional sense, but again I was at a loss as to how to explain my reasoning. It had something to do with the idea of a *journey* – of taking the reader on a metaphorical voyage that would hopefully captivate her and from which she would emerge somehow *changed*. I wanted the reader to be provoked and inspired, perhaps even shaken, and when I read Archibald’s book, I understood why.

Archibald, a First Nations professor at the University of British Columbia in Western Canada, also struggled with conflicting cultural views and came to a conclusion of sorts. She described teachings as, “the cultural values, beliefs, lessons and understandings that are passed from generation to generation” (p.01). Although she felt it was important to bring Indigenous cultural teachings to universities and schools, for the benefit both of non-Native and Native students, she was also quite clear that the basic principles of Native teachings should not be compromised in order to fit into a Western structure.

Indigenous teachings, like Afro-Bahian teachings, rely heavily on storytelling as a central way to pass on knowledge – a knowledge that is not merely intellectual, but also physical, emotional and spiritual. Since Indigenous knowledge is ultimately about *healing* the mind, body, heart, and spirit (Archibald, 2008, p.ix), in order to be understood, stories not only have to be engaged with a person’s whole being, but a relationship must also be developed between the

storyteller and the listener. In fact, in Indigenous societies, storytellers have an enormous responsibility, because knowledge is power. Implied in this vision of storytelling is the idea that rather than knowledge being a fixed object, stories contain *core truths*, but also leave a lot of room for personal interpretation. In addition, understanding does not necessarily come at the time of the telling – it might come years later – because the listener is an *active* participant, bringing his own experiences, emotions, thoughts and reflections to bear. Thus, Indigenous stories are often metaphorical and there are several layers to a tale (p.84). To understand the meaning of the story, one must wait for it to unfold, “listening with the heart”, as well as the ears. Information is passed on, as well as energy and strength, with the potential to heal and to revitalize the body, mind, spirit and emotions.

I knew these ideas to be true of Bahian stories as well, and felt that this was what I wanted to do with my thesis. While oral stories could be adapted to the listener and to the context and mood of the teller, a flexibility that the written word lacked, writing, when done from the heart, could still transmit something of the original feeling. Archibald was writing about Indigenous people and I was writing about Afro-Bahians, but the two had much in common. Like the Native elders, the elderly masters of capoeira known as the *velha guarda* – the old guard – or simply the *mestres*, were the keepers of the old knowledge in Bahia. It was to them and their students that I would turn to for guidance in my search.

Archibald (2008) wrote that the researcher must undergo a kind of “cultural initiation” to be deemed culturally “ready” or “worthy” of receiving the knowledge. She must live or interact with the culture for a long time, proving through involvement and commitment her understanding of the cultural context and framework (p.26-27). I had been going to Bahia for many years, living there and immersing myself in the life of the capoeira community. By

entrusting their stories to me, the mestres and teachers of capoeira were showing me that they believed in me. I did not have to be perfect, only to speak from the heart, recognizing all the people who had walked with me on the journey. I had listened as best I could to the stories and now it was time to make them my own, hoping that something of the Bahian people's spirit would shine through in my writings. In the end, it was to the words of a Laguna Pueblo Elder, Leslie Marmon Silko (1996) from northern Mexico, quoted by Archibald, that I turned:

For those of you accustomed to being taken from point A to point B to point C, this presentation may be somewhat difficult to follow. Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web – with many little threads radiating from the centre, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made (p. 48-49).

### ***The Interviews***

I have been inside the world of capoeira in one way or another for over seventeen years. I had been teaching capoeira with my husband for four years in Toronto when we separated in 2004, and as I was just starting out in my doctoral studies, the timing was right to go to Brazil to do research on capoeira. Three trips followed in 2004-05, 2006-07 and 2008. I hoped, during these trips, to merge my interest in capoeira with my need to understand where I fit in that world, and how, if at all, capoeira might still be a part of my future.

Since I was interested in exploring the essence of capoeira – its underlying teachings – it made sense to observe the ways in which these teachings were being lived by practitioners of the art, to conduct interviews with mestres and professors, and to write of the numerous informal interactions I had had with them in Brazil. I also wanted to share my own experience in the world of capoeira as a practitioner and a researcher, in view of the fact that in capoeira *you are*

*the teachings*. This is a difficult point to express if one sees knowledge as isolated from its context, but in capoeira, knowledge is expressed and brought to life through the people's bodies.

Every dissertation is a creative endeavour, the result of an exchange between a researcher and a people. My experiences in Bahia changed me profoundly, and I am not the same Lang who landed in Brazil in December of 2004. My contact with the Brazilian people, especially with the Bahians who were a part of that capoeira community, undoubtedly changed them, as well, in some manner. The stories I tell and the interviews I weave into the narrative, therefore, are both of me and of the other, something new that emerged from our long association and from the love and texture of our experiences together. As Shawn Wilson observes (2008), if research does not change you, then you have not done it right!

In December 2004, I left Muiraquitã Capoeira, the school that I had carefully nurtured with my now ex-husband (and that had sucked a good deal of my life energy), embarking on what was to become an eight and a half month trip to Salvador. During this time, I trained in two traditional styles of capoeira, Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional<sup>2</sup>, both of which have recognized lineages. (There are many other styles of capoeira which often fall under the label "Contemporary Capoeira", for lack of a better word.) When I returned to Brazil a second time to further my research in 2007, I elected to spend half of those four months travelling throughout Brazil in order to meet capoeiristas I knew in other states, and the other half in Salvador, training with the Filhos de Bimba School. On the third and final trip in 2008, which lasted three months, I stayed mostly in Salvador to train and conduct interviews. When the three trips (and the research) came to an end, I had some answers. The bulk of this dissertation is the story of what happened.

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<sup>2</sup> Mestre Bimba, the creator of Capoeira Regional, originally called his style "*Luta Regional Baiana*" (Bahian Regional Martial Art).

In a way, each trip had a unique flavour, a different set of challenges and different “themes”. There always seemed to be several layers to a trip – layers that mirrored and complemented each other: the university theme, the capoeira training theme and my personal relationships. In between each trip, I went home to Toronto, took courses at the university, worked on graduate assistanceship jobs, taught capoeira and struggled to get the disparate pieces of my life together. Although these moments are also incorporated in the narrative, they are given a more cursory attention, the focus of this thesis being my capoeira experiences in Brazil. This dissertation, therefore, is divided into three parts – *Bimba's one, two, three* – reflective of my three trips to Brazil during the research, and with a prologue, epilogue, and appendices.

For the sake of narrative flow, I chose to insert some of my interviews at different moments than those when they occurred, but the interviews themselves and the events have not been otherwise altered in any significant way. Most of the interviews were done in the practitioners' academies, and a few at their workplaces. (Mestre Mica, the street capoeirista, had his interview done, fittingly, in his workplace – the street.) It was important to me that the interviewees feel comfortable and as unselfconscious as possible. By then, I had established a strong friendship with my participants, and once we began, things flowed well. I purposely made the interviews open-ended, keeping in mind certain basic questions and ensuring that a conversational, rather than a formal structure, be adopted. There was no hard and fast rule as to what I chose to keep from the interviews and what I left out in the final dissertation. I mostly followed my instinct and tried to keep in mind certain basic topics:

- 1) Practitioners' life stories, particularly how capoeira influenced their lives and was woven into them.

- 2) Practitioners' understanding of capoeira – the teachings, philosophy, methodology and principles.
- 3) Themes related to *resistance and transformation*.

Again, there was no hard and fast rule about how much time I spent on the interviews. Most Bahians *love* to talk! They would happily have met a second or third time to deepen certain subjects, but I was limited by my time in Brazil and worried about the dissertation's length. Our conversations usually lasted one to two hours, sometimes longer. They were always enjoyable for me, and I believe, for my interviewee! Although I was hesitant at first, never having conducted interviews before, I came to greatly appreciate these moments of uninterrupted attention in which to better get to know my friends/teachers/fellow capoeiristas. The participants were always keen to answer, their initial shyness giving way to enthusiasm as we talked.

When I finally wrote my dissertation, I became aware that it was a *creative* undertaking, as much about me as about the people I was interviewing and learning with. This, I soon realized, is in fact common to *all* academic work, but it is certainly more *explicit* in artistic work. The language and conventions of scholarship can give an appearance of objectivity, but a dry piece is no less the creation of its author!

Translation is an art, not a science, so I did my best to find ways of rendering the wisdom and stories of the mestres in English. I attempted to give a feeling for the flavour, rhythm and style of their speech, while avoiding tedious repetitions. The bulk of the interviews were reproduced in the text, but for the sake of length and coherence, there was some editing.

The participants I chose were capoeira practitioners whom I became close to in Brazil and especially in Salvador da Bahia. Usually, in the course of a conversation, the subject of my thesis came up – they were as curious about my life as I was about theirs – and most practitioners

very much wanted their story to be heard. Many were from disadvantaged backgrounds and struggled with visibility. I wanted to bring a variety of experiences and voices to the thesis, because it was obvious that a young Bahian with a working-class background would have a very different tale and understanding of capoeira than a middle-aged, educated man from Manaus. Each story that called to me had some unique aspects that I sensed would shed light on capoeira's many facets. There were a few people, like my Capoeira Regional teacher, Anum, whom I instinctively knew I wanted to include in my work. I came to see that in spite of commonalities, every capoeirista had a vastly different personality, experience, expression and vision, proof that capoeira is generous enough to encompass *everyone*. Each interview represents a different aspect of capoeira – a facet of the crystal – and came to impress my own understanding and lived experiences of the art form. I have included a short description below of why I chose to include each participant and raise some of the themes that struck me in each interview.

Throughout my research, I struggled with my place in capoeira and in Bahian society – with my *right* to do research about capoeira. I began to see my dissertation, however, as an expression of my own fumbling path in capoeira, rather than as an authoritative text. The many personal and professional crises I struggled with during the research kept me humble and drew me closer to the capoeira community. This tension between my identity as a researcher and that of a capoeirista is a constant throughout my work, and I believe, a necessary one. The university has a long and troubled history with Indigenous and colonized people, and therefore questions as to its presence in these communities must be asked, and asked again. It is not enough to say that things have changed for the better in academia. There are still many troubling practices, beliefs and deeply engrained behaviours that must be constantly debated and discussed. Indigenous

people have much to contribute to the field of education if we are open to their teachings, but a deeper change will require a lot of soul-searching within academia. As Roxana Ng writes (2009), we have *all* internalized colonialism to some degree, and our challenge is to gain clearer insights into the ways in which these beliefs and behaviours are expressed. There is no question that good work is being done within universities, and that these places of learning offer tremendous opportunities to share important knowledge, but we have a long way to go before universities become accessible places of learning and healing for all.

The people I met in Brazil spoke to me, taught me, counseled me, criticized me, encouraged me and believed in me, shaping both the capoeirista I am today and my understanding of capoeira. The names of the mestres and teachers have not been changed, according to the participants' own wishes, but I have changed the names of others in my narrative (friends and acquaintances, including my lover, the so-called "Miguel"). Exceptions to this are Maria (my soul-sister) and some of the Brazilians who made my experience sweeter: my friends, Cleidson (in Bahia) and Sônia (in Belém), my Bahian "family" (João and Viví), and some of the characters in my Santo Antônio neighbourhood who made it home. I chose to use my Canadian students' capoeira nicknames.

Miguel's character has been left deliberately vague for reasons of privacy, yet I cannot stress enough how central he was to my experiences in the capoeira community. Many people have asked me whether I was sure I wanted to include so many personal details about my relationship with this mestre, and to that I can only answer that if we are to speak of ourselves and of knowledge holistically, we cannot afford to hide our all-too-human foibles and struggles, for they are woven into the very fabric of our experience. In addition, according to the Indigenous perspective, knowledge and relationship are *one*. There is no knowledge "out there",

but instead a creation emerging from the rich tapestry of our continually evolving exchanges. My relationship with Miguel not only shaped my day-to-day experiences and understanding of capoeira, but when I fell in love with the man, I also fell in love with Bahia and capoeira. It is no exaggeration to say that my journey in Bahia was profoundly shaped by our relationship.

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*I conducted 22 interviews, 3 of which were placed in the Annex (Professora Lilú, Professor Berimbau and Mestre Ferro) for reasons I explain below. One interview was lost to me and later reconstituted by phone (Mestre Zé do Lenço) and one was not taped (Mestre Diôgo), the reason of which is explained below. Mestre Curió, Mestre Jararaca and Mestre Sapo from Olinda were never formally interviewed, although their story also appears in this dissertation.*

### ***1. Mestre Augusto***

There are always key figures in any story and Mestre Augusto was definitely one of them. The mestre organized yearly events called *Encontros* in which he invited respected Capoeira Angola mestres of the “old guard” to give workshops and talks. When we met in 2003, he quickly became my entry point into the Salvador Capoeira Angola community. Despite growing up in a working-class Bahian family, he had gone to university and travelled extensively thanks to capoeira. I was touched by this gentle giant’s love for his people and his culture, as well as by his genuine openness towards foreigners. Thanks to Mestre Augusto, I met and interviewed many Angola mestres and trained with Mestre Curió – his own mestre – and Mestre Jararaca during eight months in 2005. Mestre Augusto’s vision – his understanding of the art form – was rich and multi-layered, and I will always be grateful for his support, friendship and guidance.

### ***2. Mestre Santa Rosa***

I met Mestre Santa Rosa, Mestre Augusto’s “partner in crime”, when I arrived in Salvador in December of 2004. The two mestres organized three Capoeira Angola Encontros

together in 2004, 2007 and 2008. I participated in all three. An Angoleiro from a working-class background, with little formal education, Mestre Santa Rosa had a deep understanding of capoeira, which he shared generously. He had a wonderful sense of humour, and as a poet he taught me much about the lyrical nature of the art. I was moved by this man of so few material means who fought to keep alive the spirit of capoeira, even when it meant losing out on opportunities for personal advancement.

### ***3. Mestre Pelé of the Golden Throat***

I met Mestre Pelé in 2003 at Mestre Augusto's Encontro and he was quick to befriend me. A self-described elderly man from *jegue-jegue do penico* – the boonies – he had an incredible vitality. His grasp of popular knowledge and his story of coming to the big city to work as a boy shed light on some of the pivotal moments in Bahian capoeira. He was a renowned *sambista* – a samba musician – whose incredible voice earned him the nickname “Golden Throat”. Whenever I was in Mestre Pelé's presence, I felt as if I was breathing in the air of the old Recôncavo region around Salvador, of the Bahian towns that had been so influential in the local culture.

### ***4. Mestre Marinheiro from Feira de Sant'ana***

I met Mestre Marinheiro, the “walking encyclopedia”, at Mestre Augusto's first Encontro in 2003. This man in his sixties was from Feira de Sant'ana, a medium-sized city of the Recôncavo. He was a great storyteller and I included most of our lengthy interview, as a lot of this knowledge is being lost. These stories help recreate the atmosphere of a time long gone and give hints about the shifting values in Bahian society. Mestre Marinheiro's visit to a mestre in São Paulo, for example, transmits something of the rhythm and feeling of the interactions of capoeiristas in the early decades of the twentieth century.

### ***5. Mestre Zé do Lenço***

Mestre Zé do Lenço was a humble and gentle soul. His lengthy interview was, tragically, lost to me, so I called him up much later and asked him to recapitulate some of the main points of his capoeira trajectory. I was relieved to see that this wonderful man came through my narrative in other ways, thanks to the many interactions we had during my trips to Brazil. As an Angola mestre in his late fifties from a respected lineage (Mestre Espinha Remoso), Mestre Zé do Lenço straddled the old and the new generations and had access to a lot of knowledge. I felt remarkably at home in his academy when I visited, the magic of his rodas marking me deeply.

### ***6. Mestre Olavo from the Suburbs***

I met Mestre Olavo, a former Angoleiro and student of Mestre Waldemar da Paixão, at Mestre Augusto's 2003 Encontro, but it was only upon my return in 2004 that I got to know him. This Bahian in his sixties from Santa Mônica – a suburb of Salvador – was an accomplished instrument-maker with a passion for the main instrument in capoeira, the berimbau. He led a weekly roda in front of his home, acting as a kind of “community father” to many of the disadvantaged children of his neighbourhood. The chaotic rodas of Santa Mônica left a deep impression on me. Despite a lack of formal education, Mestre Olavo was articulate and intelligent, and his descriptions of the art of berimbau-making, as well as his stories about Besouro and the *patuás* – the amulets traditionally used by many capoeiristas – give insights into the spiritual beliefs of the Bahian people.

### ***7. Mestre Curió and Mestre Jararaca***

Sometimes I regret that I did not pursue more assiduously an interview with Mestre Curió, but my opportunity to do so came at a time when I was dedicating myself increasingly to the Filhos de Bimba School and was struggling with health issues. Mestre Curió was Mestre

Augusto's teacher – I had wanted an Angola mestre who would take me deep into the world of Capoeira Angola and I knew that Mestre Curió, as a student of the revered Mestre Pastinha, was well-respected. I trained most often with Mestre Curió's student, Mestre Jararaca – the ferocious Bahian “snake”, as her name suggests – but had many occasions to learn from the man himself. I loved having a female mestre, and found both mestres to be tough, warm and generous. Through them, I learned a lot about Bahian culture, a culture that they embodied with such grace.

### ***8. Frede the Historian***

I met Frede – Frederico Abreu – at my first Encontro with Mestre Augusto. Frede loved to talk, had a biting wit and was endlessly fascinating. Although he was a historian and not a practitioner, Frede was widely respected in the capoeira community. He was always incredibly generous in sharing his knowledge with others. A white Bahian man from a working class background who had received a good schooling, Frede challenged my concepts of capoeira. Although I did not always agree with him, we shared many ideas and values, and our talks helped me hone my own concepts around capoeira, globalization and resistance.

### ***9. Mestre KK Bonates from Manaus***

Mestre KK, a respected mestre from Manaus, was the author of a capoeira book on the Iúna bird, a symbol of capoeira. He travelled often to Bahia and was a close friend of Mestre Augusto. Like Mestre Augusto, Mestre KK also had a foot firmly planted in two worlds – capoeira and academia. Like so many mestres, he was approachable and eager to exchange ideas. His ideas around capoeira's African/Indigenous *cosmovision* became central to my thesis, as well as his understanding of the importance of Bahia as a cultural Mecca for capoeiristas.

### ***10. Mestre Adolfo from Aracajú***

I met Mestre Adolfo – *Lobo Mau* – from Aracajú, Sergipe, at Mestre Augusto's 2003

Encontro. Our paths intersected again at Mestre Augusto's 2004 Encontro and led to a visit to Mestre Adolfo's hometown with my students in 2007. A black man in his early forties from a working class background, he had managed to gain access to the local university, first as a capoeira teacher and later as a student. His struggle for recognition and respect in the face of prejudice was moving, a story echoed in various ways by many mestres. His discussion about the distinctions between capoeira as a sport and capoeira as an art form, and the tensions between popular forms of knowledge and academic knowledge, were also illuminating.

### ***11. Contra-Mestre Betão<sup>3</sup> from Recife***

Contra-Mestre Betão from Recife, Pernambuco, was familiar to me due to his links to the Ottawa capoeira group Dendê do Recife (formerly *Chapéu de Coro*) led by Professor Fabinho<sup>4</sup>. My friend Maria Isabel had told me many stories about Chapéu de Coro and its enlightened mestre, Mestre Curisco, so I was thrilled when we ran across Contra-Mestre Betão during the 2007 Recife carnival. (Unfortunately, my interview with Mestre Curisco did not materialize due to a lack of time.) A boisterous man from a middle-class background, Betão had experienced the early capoeira scene of Recife – a violent period – and seen its evolution into a cultural expression of greater social acceptance. His understanding of the philosophy of capoeira, passed on to him by Mestre Curisco, was also beautiful.

### ***12. Mestre Sapo from Olinda***

Although I did not conduct a formal interview with the Angoleiro Mestre Sapo from Olinda, we spoke briefly in his academy. Mestre Sapo defended an African origin to capoeira and rejected the focus on Bahia as the motherland of capoeira, despite his high regard for Mestre Pastinha. It was interesting to hear from someone who adhered to strict Capoeira Angola

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<sup>3</sup> Now *Mestre* Betão

<sup>4</sup> Now Contra-Mestre Fabinho

teachings while insisting on its non-Bahian background.

### ***13. Mestre Bezerra in Belém***

Mestre Bezerra from Belém, Pará, was my second capoeira mestre. (The first, Celso – *Cabeludo* – from Montes Clares, lived in Minas Gerais, and although I considered travelling there to look for him, this proved impracticable.) He was in his sixties and had been my ex-husband, Renaldo's, mestre long before I met him in 1996. The elderly mestre lived in a shantytown with his wife and eight children – a meeting which left a deep mark on me – and when Renaldo arrived in Canada, in 1999, Mestre Bezerra and I reconnected. Despite little formal education, the man had the wisdom of a rich lived experience and taught me a lot about *embodied knowing*. His story also shed light on the growth of capoeira in the state of Pará.

### ***14. Mestre Diôgo of the Retiro***

One of my last interviews was never taped: my talk with Mestre Diôgo of the Retiro, Mestre Augusto and Mestre Santa Rosa. I felt at the time that it would be inappropriate to bring a digital recorder before this legend of the old capoeira who shied away from public events. I had trouble understanding the elderly man's speech and was aware that much information was being lost, but I felt as if he was teaching me about capoeira through his very being. Mestre Diôgo passed away in the summer of 2011, but being with him in the old neighbourhood where he had lived all his life, and where capoeira had once thrived, changed my understanding of Bahian capoeira. It remains one of my favourite interviews.

### ***15. Mestre Mica, Street Capoeirista***

When I met Mestre Mica, he had been struggling for decades with the aftermath of two strokes. For months, I had seen this man playing capoeira with a cane and busking in the Terreiro de Jesus Square of the Pelourinho with a dozen street capoeiristas. It was at a roda in

Santa Mônica organized by Mestre Olavo that we spoke for the first time. Mestre Mica had experienced such heartbreaking physical loss and yet somehow emerged with dignity and a profound love for life. Middle-aged, black and poor, he possessed a remarkable wisdom.

### ***16. Mestre Evan from Santo Amaro***

The trip to Santo Amaro in which I met Mestre Evan was a serendipitous event. I found myself with a dozen students from the University of Bahia – the UFBA – in a van, exploring the Recôncavo region during a weekend I can only describe as magical. The sleepy towns we traversed and Mestre Evan belonged to another time – early twentieth century small-town Bahia – where a very vibrant capoeira scene had once existed. Mestre Evan lived in great poverty, yet he was wise. Joy and passion radiated from this Angoleiro and his young students.

### ***17. Roberta<sup>5</sup> and Grupo Nzinga***

I met Roberta at a party and although I never got the chance to speak to her mestre – Mestre Janja – my talks with Roberta and some of the other female students in the same school were eye-opening. I was excited to meet women who were deeply committed feminists and who rejected the misogyny imbedded within Bahian society. The presence of women in capoeira was a relatively recent phenomenon, so there were few female mestres and professors. Although I could not focus on the topic for my dissertation, my gender shaped many of my experiences in capoeira.

### ***18. Professora Lilú***

I included a written correspondence between Lilú, a female capoeira teacher living in the Bahian suburbs, and me, but due to a lack of space, I had to place it in the Annex. Lilú was not from Bahia, but she had lived in Salvador for many years with her husband, Luciano, and both

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<sup>5</sup> Roberta was not her real name.

taught capoeira in their own school. Lilú also studied and taught at the university. She provided an invaluable perspective on women in capoeira and the spiritual dimensions of the art.

### ***19. Mestre Nenel, Son of Mestre Bimba***

Mestre Nenel was another key figure both in my research and in my capoeira trajectory. As the son of Mestre Bimba – arguably the best known figure in the modern capoeira world – Mestre Nenel was the founder and leader of the Filhos de Bimba Escola de Capoeira (FBEC) and his work focused on the preservation of his father’s teachings. Capoeira Regional, the creation of Mestre Bimba, was at the roots of modern day contemporary capoeira styles, so I wanted to explore it both for my capoeira and for my thesis. As I got to know Mestre Nenel’s teachings, however, I was increasingly drawn to his unique philosophy. Although Mestre Nenel could easily have used his father’s name as a path to fame and riches, capoeira was his spiritual calling. I found the mestre’s discussions about Capoeira Regional and capoeira in general illuminating, and I fell in love with his Saturday morning rodas.

### ***20. Professora Nalvinha***

I was glad to have had the opportunity to interview Professora Nalvinha – Mestre Nenel’s sister – as her story shone a light on women in Bahia. As the daughter of Mestre Bimba, Nalvinha had lived and experienced her father’s capoeira intimately, and she helped bring the past to life. I knew that Mestre Bimba had had many wives, in the way of the African kings, and had always reacted viscerally to this idea, so I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the mestre had been a pioneer in actively encouraging the presence of women in capoeira. Nalvinha’s discussion of samba de roda was also rich and informative.

### ***21. Mestre Cafuné and Mestre Piloto, Turma de Bimba***

Originally, I had only planned to interview Mestre Cafuné, but when the two of us finally

sat down for the interview, Mestre Piloto offered to participate. In the end, it made for a very pleasant and in-depth talk, as the two elderly men had both been students of Mestre Bimba in the first decades of the twentieth century. Mestre Cafuné was a white man from a middle-class background, and Mestre Piloto a black man from a humbler background, but they shared a similar vision. I was touched by the story of their return to capoeira after decades away and drawn to Mestre Cafuné's understanding of Mestre Bimba's teachings, as well as his emphasis on energy, music and emotion.

### ***22. Professor Anum***

Anum was my first Regional teacher at the Fundação Mestre Bimba and a strong friendship quickly developed between us. My teacher was paramount in helping me feel more at home in Bahia and in beginning to understand it. A young, black Bahian from a poor background, his story of abandon and neglect, followed by his transformation through capoeira was powerful. I felt from the first that Anum embodied Regional in a profound way, despite the scars of his past. He was a gifted teacher, and both he and Mestre Nenel were influential in my understanding of the music and philosophy of Capoeira Regional.

### ***23. Professor Berimbau***

Due to length limitations I had to place Professor Berimbau's interview in the Annex. I had a particular affection for his story of the capoeira pants – I felt that it illustrated well the many challenges practitioners from poor Bahian neighbourhoods encounter in their training, the prejudices from family members and the very Bahian sense of humour with which they encounter life's hardships. Berimbau's story of personal transformation and his experiences with the kids of the Capoeirê Project were also moving.

### ***24. Mestre Ferro***

I had not planned to include Mestre Ferro – a light-skinned, educated man in his fifties from Belém with a Catholic background – in my dissertation, due to thesis length requirements, but the middle-aged mestre generously drove me around Belém and seemed eager to share his knowledge of capoeira. In the end, I opted to put our conversation in the Annex. The mestre’s trajectory was different from others’ in that he had had to learn capoeira with the aid of books and only found a mestre much later. I was also interested in the tension between his religious beliefs and the “virile” aspect of capoeira, a tension that recurred in the tales of many mestres who had left behind a violent past to embrace a more educational vision of capoeira.

### ***The Origins of Capoeira: Slavery***

From the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, approximately 3.5 million slaves were brought to the shores of Brazil. According to Roger Bastide (1960), successive waves of Africans arrived over the centuries in the following order:

1. The Sudanese civilizations, mostly Yoruba (Nagô, Ketu, etc.), Dahomans of the Gêgê group, and Fanti-Ashanti (known as Mina then).
2. The Islamic civilizations, mostly Peul, Mandingo and Hausa.
3. The Bantu civilizations of the Angola-Congo group, the Abunda of Angola, the Congo or Cabinda of Zaire, and the Benguela.
4. The Bantu civilizations of the east coast of Africa (Mozambique) (p.46).

The fact that capoeira came out of the experience of African slaves – people who were torn from their communities and forcibly brought thousands of kilometres away to toil in the fields of Brazil as early as the sixteenth century – is of particular significance, because as the venerated Mestre Pastinha famously said, “*Capoeira é mandinga de escravo em ânsia de liberdade.*” Capoeira is the magic of slaves yearning for freedom (Capoeira 1997, p.83). This flavour and spirit of resistance still permeate capoeira to this day. It is present in songs, but also

in the expressivity of a beautiful game. Capoeira's history is murky – the exact details of its creation and original form are not known – something which adds to the mystery and power of this art form. We all have our own ideas about how it came about and I discuss my own further along in the thesis. Whatever our beliefs, however, the original capoeira played on the plantations, where slaves toiled and had short, brutal lives, undoubtedly looked very different than our modern version. Its spirit, however, may very well have been similar to modern day capoeira – song, dance, rhythm, camaraderie and playfulness, with an element of danger.

Capoeira is part dance, part fighting art, part game, part ritual, part celebration and much more. Through the body, one comes to know intimately the world – to express, debate, celebrate, yearn for and even embrace it. Capoeira is an *embodied way of knowing*, not only in that it is lived through the physical body in the conventional sense, but in that it involves the entirety of the human experience – the mind, the spirit and the emotions. Unlike in the Cartesian view which has informed much of Western thinking for centuries, in capoeira the mind is only one aspect in the various dimensions of a human being's existence. This is the conclusion that I have come to after having immersed myself in the world of capoeira for seventeen years.

## ~ *Prologue to Book 1*

<i>A palma estava errada,</i>	The clapping's all wrong,
<i>O mestre falou outra vez.</i>	The master repeated.
<i>Concerte essa palma, menino</i>	Correct that rhythm, boy
<i>Que a palma de Bimba</i>	Because Bimba's rhythm
<i>É um, dois, três...</i>	Is one, two, three...

*Música de Domínio Popolar* (Song from the Public Domain)

*A Palma de Bimba é um, dois, três...* Bimba's rhythm is one, two, three, as the capoeira song goes – in many cultures *three* is a magic number. As Elizabeth Gilbert (2006) points out in her wonderfully entertaining and moving book *Eat, Pray, Love*, three is “the number representing supreme balance” (p.1). When I read Gilbert's book, I was excited, because I had noticed for *years* that things often occurred to me in threes. She seemed to confirm what I had always believed in my heart – the Universe is not a random place in which we are left alone to struggle. There is meaning and intelligence to the pattern of our lives.

The symbolism of the number three further impressed me as I began to see this number repeatedly appearing in the world of capoeira. The hand claps that accompany capoeira music are always in threes – as the song *A Palma de Bimba* reminds practitioners – although the actual rhythm may vary. Then there is the *ginga*, the basic move from which all other responses emerge – defences, attacks and connecting movements. If you look at a diagram of the pattern that the feet make on the ground while executing a *ginga*, you will see that it is, in fact, a series of *triangles*. This dance-like movement is both what gives capoeira its ludic aspect, and on a very practical level, what allows practitioners to find their center of gravity – their balance.

Perhaps it is not such a coincidence then that Gilbert, like me, found a pattern of threes in her life when she began to pay attention to her need for balance. It is as if the universe was

leaving big clues for us to follow and patiently waiting until we noticed! I also liked the idea that balance can be found through *motion* – through change. Like in capoeira, by accepting that life is a constant state of being off-balance, we can find peace at its centre, as we learn to dance with uncertainty.

A further interesting parallel: Mestre Bimba, the creator of Capoeira Regional in the 1930's and the father of my capoeira master, Mestre Nenel, chose as the symbol of Capoeira Regional the *Cinco Salomão* – a star much like the Star of David<sup>1</sup>. The exact historical origins of this symbol in Bahia are unknown, but as many Jewish people immigrated to Bahia, it is probable that the Star of David was its inspiration. King Solomon, whose African face in Candomblé is *Xangô*, often appears in capoeira songs, perhaps because of his legendary link with the Queen of Sheba. He is a symbol of wisdom, justice and royalty (Decânio, 2005). The Cinco Salomão was used by capoeira practitioners of the early twentieth century as a talisman – a good-luck charm. The symbol – a five or six-pointed star – is made up of *triangles*. (Mestre Decânio, who designed the crest of Mestre Bimba's academy, chose a hexagram for aesthetic reasons.)

Are such synchronicities a coincidence, or do they point to a shared human experience – an intuitive understanding about the mysteries of life that is reflected in symbols like the Star of David, the Cinco Salomão, the pentagram, and the hexagram found in various religions?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although the symbol is called “Cinco Salomão”, and “cinco” means five in Portuguese, it is sometimes a six-pointed star.

<sup>2</sup> Decânio further writes, “The mixed-blood Brazilians crowned the Jewish star with the cross of Jesus, expressing deep respect and belief in the Nazarene, while the Negro do Pixe, who instills and emphasizes the magic symbol of protection, represents the Afro-Brazilian that designed it, peacefully uniting such disparate cultures!” (Translation by Shayna McHugh, 2005: 29)



The Cinco Salomão found on the Coat of Arms of the Centro de Cultura Física Regional – Mestre Bimba’s school<sup>3</sup>

In 2003, I went to Bahia with my then husband and eleven of our students. I was deeply unhappy with my life, yet afraid to make the changes that would be required to follow my heart. During the trip, one of my students gave me a *fita*, a small cloth with the letters *Nossa Senhora do Bomfim* – Our Lady of Bonfim – printed across it. It was tied to my wrist, as was the custom in Bahia. I then made a wish, asking for direction in my life and in capoeira. According to the legend, when the cloth fell off, my wish would come true. I am a general sceptic of such things, but although it took *four years* for the *fita* to fall off, I did get my answer.

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My family was unabashedly atheist and while this was liberating in many ways – I did not incorporate as many negative messages about the body as my schoolmates did, nor suspend my critical thinking because an authority had told me the way things were “supposed” to be – in retrospect, I was also lonely and frightened by this impersonal world of atoms and molecules. New Age books, although much maligned (and ranging in quality), were my salvation, my doorway into another world of possibility. In my twenties, I read a great deal and I began to

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from *The Saga of Mestre Bimba* (2006)

believe that *magic* might exist – that there might be more to reality than meets the eye. In the beginning, however, my fear was great and it was hard to listen to the subtle whisperings of my heart. It took many years, well into my thirties, before I began to feel an energy – a guiding principle some call God and I called the “Universe” or “Spirit” – a gentle, quiet presence that I found in the simplest of actions. I could feel it when I quieted the incessant chatter of my brain, and I discovered that it wanted me very much to be happy and whole. It was also linked to the ability to love and accept myself.

I had spent a good part of my adult life rejecting the person I was and trying to hide this from others. I believed that there was something intrinsically wrong with me, although I could not articulate what it was. The reasons for this are complex, but they definitely had something to do with the difficult relationship between my father and me. Like so many other immigrants, my father came from a world I could only dimly imagine, where much life and possibility had been snuffed out of him at a young age. Although he had escaped China before the Cultural Revolution, his early years had scarred him. The ghosts of his past came to haunt him, even when he was happily married in Canada.

My mother had grown up in a poor household full of love in rural France, was a talented student who won bursaries and ended up in Paris, in the midst of the student protests that rocked the country in May of 1968. My parents met there, fell in love, and within a year, were married. In 1969, they immigrated to Montreal, eventually settling in the Ottawa region, and I was born in 1971.

Although the first years were relatively peaceful, as my brother and I grew into autonomous beings, something shifted in my father. Perhaps it was the quiet life that drew out his shadows, but the flashes of anger became more frequent. I lived in fear of these outbursts –

of the barely contained possibility of violence. Although my mother encouraged me to explore my passions and supported me in every way, the wounds left by the difficult relationship with my father festered. At eighteen, I joined my brother at the University of Toronto and began, excitedly, to explore my newfound independence. Occasionally, I thought about those early years, but the anger and fear I had felt towards my father faded.

It was only when I went to Brazil, a place so far from my origins, that I began to face my darkness. In 1996, at twenty-three, I travelled there for the first time. Although I survived the four-month trip, Brazil proved to be more harrowing than I had expected. I had wandered, mostly alone, from one city to the next, armed with a list of phone numbers. I was always well received and generously hosted, as I made my way up and down the coast from Rio to Belém – four intense months in which Brazil revealed itself to me, beautiful and poignant – a country of extremes. Brazil tore me open with the hands of a rough lover and laid bare all my insecurities and wounds, stripping away the predictability of my world. The trip made me realize that *fear was deeply rooted inside me*. I felt, with some embarrassment, that I was far too *thin-skinned* and “sensitive” to hack it in a place like Brazil, where poverty, violence and all manner of excesses seemed to thrive. And yet, Brazil persisted in my life in the form of capoeira.

I trained capoeira in Toronto and wherever I went. On my first trip to Brazil I had met and befriended a man, who would eventually become my husband (and whom I will call Renaldo), in a capoeira class in Belém – a city in the northern state of Pará. Our friendship flirted with romance, but never quite made it. Three years later, however, to my surprise, Renaldo disembarked in Toronto. Within a month, we were romantically involved and capoeira, which until then had been a mere passion, became my livelihood. Suddenly, I was a capoeira

teacher and a group leader. For five years, I dedicated my body and soul to this art form. By the time my relationship with Renaldo disintegrated, Brazil was deeply anchored inside of me.

In 2003, during our last year together, Renaldo and I undertook a three-week trip to Brazil with our students. My first contact with Salvador, in 1996, had been a dismal experience as a tourist trapped in the historic Pelourinho, but this time, things were different. Through the guidance of Mestre Augusto, the Capoeira Angola master who had organized an event, I began to fall in love with this city of African spirits. A year later, I was back in Bahia, battered from my separation, yet bubbling over with excitement at the thought of a new adventure. I touched upon Bahian soil on December 14, 2004, the beginning of my long and arduous journey into the world of a Ph.D. in Education at OISE, at the University of Toronto.

Officially, I was going for school, but on the last trip with my ex-husband, I had met someone who had swept me off my feet. Not only was this man a capoeira master, but there was another problem: *he was married*. Although it went against every fibre of my being and would complicate the research process in ways I dared not think of, I knew I would not resist. I was head over heels in love, and for the first time in a very long time, I felt absolutely alive.

*The following three books chronicle my three trips to Brazil. They include the interviews with various mestres and professors of capoeira, and a brief discussion of what happened in between each trip. They end with a theoretical discussion – a summary of what I learned about capoeira’s teachings – my search for the essence of capoeira – as well as a revising of my original thesis question.*

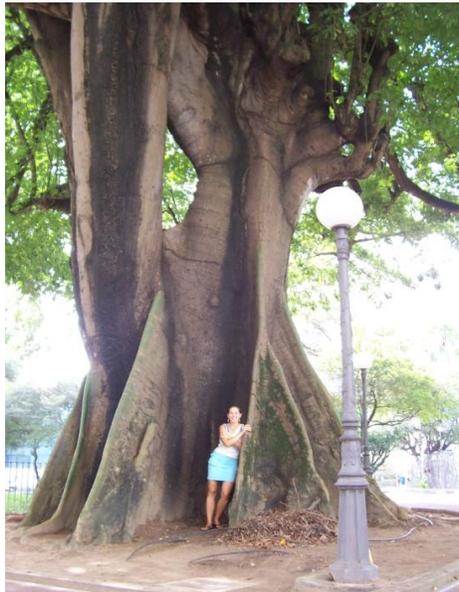
# Book One

*Salvador da Bahia (December 2004 – August 2005)*

*We don't know all the reasons that propel us on a spiritual journey, but somehow our life compels us to go. Something in us knows that we are not just here to toil at our work. There is a mysterious pull to remember [...] it can be a longing from childhood, or an 'accidental' encounter with a spiritual book or figure. Sometimes something in us awakens when we travel to a foreign culture and the exotic world of new rhythms, fragrances, colors, and activity catapults us out of our usual sense of reality.*

Jack Kornfield (2001, p.5)

## *~ Part One: Graça*



Lang in Salvador da Bahia – 2005 (Photo: Maria Isabel Rondon)

### *1. Voltei (I Came Back)*

As the plane door opened, humid heat assaulted my throat, pressing on my skin. Although I had dreamt of this place for so long, for a moment I wavered, wondering if I was about to make the biggest mistake of my life.

My capoeira student, Christine, had promised to meet me at the gate, assuring me that a place could be made for me in her apartment until I had a chance to get my bearings. She had

come to study Portuguese and settled in the wealthy neighbourhood of Graça. We did not know each other that well, Christine and I, but just before she had left for Salvador, the two of us had met over an espresso and *pasteis de nata* at the local Portuguese bakery, and in the space of an hour, I had filled her in on my desperate love situation.

As we rode the bus, I drank in greedily the sights and smells of the coconut coastline. Salvador traffic roared chaotically outside our bus window, but something in the cheerful messiness made me sigh with audible relief. My joy, however, was short-lived. My ex-husband, I learned, had been in town and my worst fears had come true.

“Renaldo has been spilling the beans,” Christine told me grimly, “telling everyone he knows in the capoeira community about your feelings for that married man.”

Fear crawled up my spine. What had I thought coming here, thousands of miles away, to spend three months in a place where the rules were so different? His wife could humiliate me – it was *her* territory, after all. I was a fool. Suddenly, I wanted to turn back.

Christine’s apartment was a small, cosy space, boasting a miniature balcony and a view overlooking Graça’s luxury towers. In such a wealthy neighbourhood, I did not stick out nearly as much as I had feared – most people seemed to be of Portuguese descent – and although I did not know it then, I was being protected, allowed to ease into my surroundings until I was ready to dive into more interesting waters. I had been running like a madwoman for months, dealing with the separation from my husband and my departure from our capoeira group. The good-byes had been emotional, since I was embarking on a new chapter of my life after years of teaching and working for the capoeira community. I was not sure that I would ever teach capoeira again and I had agreed to leave everything concerning capoeira to my ex-husband – years of accumulated material – including our school, Muiraquitã Capoeira, in his care. For five years I

had nurtured the group like my own child and I had aged. I could see it in the furrows between my brows, born of too many fights and too much work. *What was my future now? What did capoeira mean to me now that I was on my own? Would it have a place in my life?* There were so many unanswered questions, but I quickly pushed them away. There would be time for this later.

When Christine left for the afternoon, I sat on the cool floor and surrendered to the tears, sending a quick prayer up to the *Orixás* – the spiritual entities of Bahia. *Please help me find my way.* What was *my* little capoeira here? I had no mestre and no group, and I feared that I would never synchronize myself with these Afro-Bahians who looked so different from me. Then there was the small matter of *Miguel* – the married man I had fallen for. We had planned, over email, to meet at Mestre Augusto's *Encontro* – a Capoeira Angola event that he organized every year – but I was no longer sure if I should go.

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The next day, Christine and I headed for the *Pelourinho* – the picturesque historic neighbourhood where the capoeira school of Mestre Bimba's son, Mestre Nenel, was situated. The Pelourinho had been revamped in the nineties through government funding and many cultural groups were based there. The place always evoked conflicting emotions within me. Although it was undeniably beautiful, slavery was not a distant memory. Its very name, *Pelourinho* – whipping post – was a testament to the fact that only a century before, posts had been erected in the public squares and slaves put on display to be castigated for misdemeanours. The walls of the buildings were thick – heavy, humid stones imbued with the suffering of countless souls.

I followed Christine as we descended a narrow, cobbled street, finally arriving at a small door. It was easy to miss: a simple, hand-carved sign hung above the doorway with the words *Fundação Mestre Bimba* – Mestre Bimba Foundation. Inside, it was dark, like so many of the old buildings dotting the historic city. We followed the winding stairs down and found ourselves in a small, square room not more than ten by ten metres. My eyes tried to take everything in from the stone walls adorned with pictures, to the dark-coloured *berimbaus* – bow-like instruments of African origin that had come to represent capoeira – and *pandeiros* – the tambourines hanging beside them. I could not believe that we were going to train in such a tiny space.



The Fundação Mestre Bimba in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil (Photo: Mark J. Francisco)

My capoeira teacher, Professor Anum, introduced himself. He was a slim Bahian in his mid-twenties with an uncanny cat-like grace. Christine and I found a spot in the small room facing the instrument-laden wall. There were only two other students at this hour, but the moment I heard the berimbau and we began to do the *ginga* – the dance-like swing from which all other capoeira movements emerge – I could feel my breath deepen. The style was a bit different from the capoeira I had trained in the past, but Anum taught well and I could keep up.

After that, it was as if a piece of Bahia had finally entered me. I was no longer as afraid, not even of the young boys who came to me with troubled eyes in the streets of the Pelourinho, begging for money. I no longer jumped at every noise, at the music that poured incessantly from stereos, or at the crush of bodies that had unnerved me – I had found my centre and my stride, only the first of many times that capoeira would save me.

## ***2. Mestre Augusto – Encontro at Itapoã***



Mestre Augusto (right) and Mestre Santa Rosa (left) playing in a street roda – 2007 (Photo: Kim Ceurstemont)

Back on my first trip to Brazil in 1996, I had seen the tourist face of Salvador, but Mestre Augusto had changed all of that. In December of 2003, when my ex-husband and I had arrived with our students, I had met the gentle giant, Mestre Augusto, the student of the famous Angoleiro, Mestre Curió. *Augusto Januário Passos da Silva* was a rare capoeira practitioner with both decades of lived experience and an academic background. As the eldest of ten children, he had been the first person in his family to receive a formal education – biology with a minor in history – and to publish a book – on capoeira, of course.<sup>1</sup> By the evening of the first day, I knew that something magical was happening. Doors were opening, changing my original

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<sup>1</sup> Augusto Januário Passos da Silva, *A Capuêra e a Arte da Capueragem: Ensaio Socioetimológico* (Salvador da Bahia: Fundação Bibliográfica Nacional, 2003).

impression of Bahia. Mestre Augusto, our guide and protector, had brought together old *Angoleiros* – Capoeira Angola mestres who were part of the fabric of life in Bahia – for our benefit, and instead of the arrogant men I had expected, these living repositories of knowledge were funny and friendly. As for Mestre Augusto, he was a blend of vulnerability and cunning, dignity and playfulness, a man whose love for his culture and people was evident. By the end of the week I knew I had found a good capoeira source.

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I caught an early bus to Itapoã, an hour-long ride that filled me with trepidation and excitement. Mestre Augusto's Encontro was scheduled for late morning and as our bus hugged the Recôncavo coastline, I gazed out dreamily at beach after beach unfurling before me. From Barra to Itapoã, the sea was a blinding blue dotted with waving coconut trees. I could see the rocky cliffs of Itapoã, and suddenly, I was not sure that I *wanted* to see Miguel – the man I had been dreaming about for months. The sight of him, standing next to the other mestres, sent my heart racing.

Mestre Augusto's event, back in 2003, had been such a transformative experience that I had been eager to reconnect with the mestres, but I had not expected to be one of only two foreigners, nor the *only* female capoeirista in the midst of these boisterous men. Thankfully, I had been needlessly worried about Miguel – there was to be no angry confrontation with his wife and the other mestres did not seem the least concerned with my private life. That afternoon when we played in the roda, I blushed with pride as Mestre Augusto exclaimed, “You have *malandragem* now, Lang!” I had always thought my capoeira to be quintessentially “Canadian” – *naïve* – so a compliment about my cunning, a fundamental quality in capoeira, was unexpected. That evening, I chatted happily with Mestre Augusto.

“I was born in the town of Caboto on July 10, 1956,” Mestre Augusto explained, in response to my queries, “a town of fishermen founded around 1870 that lies at the end of the Bay of All Saints.”

“When did your family arrive there?” I interrupted.

“At the very beginning of Caboto’s foundation. My great-grandparents came around 1880-90. They were of Portuguese, Indian and African descent. I’m a typical Bahian, you know – the product of miscegenation,” he said proudly. Looking at this dark man with strong African features, a person whom a friend of mine had once described as looking like the “quintessential Bahian”, I was surprised to learn of his mixed origins.

“My ancestors were farmers. My father was a *marítimo* – a sailor. He started working with his own father on a boat when he was eight. Later, he worked on a military base and eventually for Petrobrás<sup>2</sup>, until his retirement. My mother has always been a housewife. Most of my grandparents, if they weren’t sailors, worked the land around Caboto. I was born in 1956 and then in 1962, our family moved to Salvador. We lived in the Fazenda do Retiro neighbourhood for nineteen years. Today, I live in Boa Viagem and I have four children. My son’s in the police. One daughter studies geography, the other one studies zoology and the third studies electrical engineering,” he finished proudly.

Mestre Augusto described how he had watched capoeira as a young boy in Caboto. “Many famous *capoeiristas* – capoeira practitioners – were from Caboto, including my own mestre – Mestre Curió’s – father. It was only in 1975, however, when I began studying at the UFBA – the Federal University of Bahia – that I started training capoeira. First, I trained Capoeira Regional with former students of Mestre Bimba’s – Xaréú and Afonsinho. Afonsinho was a student of Mestre Ezequiel, who was a student of Mestre Bimba. In 1980, I became a *monitor* – a Capoeira Regional teacher at my university and at Mestre Xaréú’s academy – but I often frequented the academy of a Capoeira Angola mestre called Virgílio. This went on for four years. Back then, there wasn’t really any *training* in Capoeira Angola, per se. We just sort of learned as we played. I really liked Capoeira Angola, so eventually I started training with *Curisco* – that’s what I call Curió – and I dropped Regional entirely. I played and played. It was already in my body, but when it got into my soul, that was it! Once your spirit starts to feel capoeira, there’s no way out.”

I asked about the mestre’s early days with Mestre Curió. “Well,” Mestre Augusto said, pensively, “Back then, there was no such a thing as a capoeira *school*. Mestre Pastinha<sup>3</sup> had changed Capoeira Angola, but there wasn’t a Pastinha *style* of capoeira. He simply *guided* people. Cobrinha Verde started teaching and Curió also started teaching, and eventually I started to teach for Curió. I never met Pastinha himself, but I met Dona Romélia, Pastinha’s second wife. I would go over to her house and we’d talk and talk. That was my capoeira path... It brought me to where I am today, which isn’t a whole lot, but it’s enough to play and to maintain the story of capoeira and *capoeiragem* – the practice of capoeira – alive.”

“So Mestre Curió made you a mestre?” I wanted to clarify.

“Curió gave me a certificate,” he explained, “but I’d already had that title for a long time. Mestre Paulo dos Anjos had given me a Mestre certificate. He oriented me *spiritually*, so to speak, in the world of capoeira. My nicknames never stuck, by the way. For a while, I was

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<sup>2</sup> Petrobrás is a Brazilian oil company.

<sup>3</sup> Mestre Pastinha is considered the father of modern Capoeira Angola, since he helped to organize the “primitive” capoeira in Bahia, in the second half of the twentieth century.

called *Demolidor* – Demolition Man – and received other names, but after all these years I’m still simply... *Augusto*.”

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The next morning, I returned to the Encontro and within minutes, was feeling like a fish out of water. Trying to understand the mestres’ rapid jokes gave me a headache. I knew it was a privilege to be in the midst of so much history and that this was a rare moment for the mestres to catch up – I could not begrudge them *that* – so I did my best to stay afloat. They had all affectionately taken to calling me *Menina Veneno* – Venemous Woman – so I knew I must not be doing badly. The night before, Miguel and I had shared our first kiss, a restrained affair that had nevertheless made my heart flutter with anticipation, but he stayed away from me that day, and by nightfall, my mood plummeted. Alone in the apartment, I let the sobs engulf me. I was feeling completely overwhelmed by the Encontro and confused by Miguel’s strange behaviour.

It took all my courage to return to Itapoã, but by the end of the third and final day, I had to concede that for all its cultural challenges – or perhaps *because* of them – the Encontro had been a huge success. Not only had I been given insights into the old capoeira, but in a few days, I had gone from being “Renaldo’s wife” to being a capoeirista in my own right. For three days I had hung out, listened to, chatted and laughed with a dozen capoeira mestres. And unlike most heavily commercialized capoeira events, I had had them almost all to myself! I caught up to Mestre Augusto, wanting to tell him how precious the experience had been. He smiled and invited me to take a seat.

“Mestre,” I said carefully, “people often speak of the energy of capoeira and Bahia – what I call ‘spiritual’ energy. What exactly is this energy?”

“Why do we kneel in front of the berimbau before going into the roda?” Mestre Augusto asked me abruptly.

“To bless ourselves...” I answered, hesitantly. “What are you saying?”

“We do it to ask for protection and as a sign of respect towards the most important instrument, the berimbau, but in how many *rodas* – in how many capoeira circles – do people actually enter at the foot of the berimbau?” He queried.

“Well, where I play, in *all* the rodas, but I know that that’s not always the case.”

Mestre Augusto nodded. “In the majority of rodas, people don’t bless themselves anymore before going in, because they don’t understand the importance of it. Even when they perform the action, what are they doing? Who are they asking for protection? Capoeira is a *ludic* thing that you learn as you mature. When you live in the midst of it, you begin to question things. Otherwise, you’re just repeating movements without understanding *why*. People kneel and pray, but to whom do they pray? They don’t know. You can tell me to pray, and I can pray to the wrong saint and make him mad!”

“What about the fact that people may have different religions? Where does *Candomblé* fit in?” I asked, thinking of the Afro-Brazilian religion.

“Religion is a *personal* question,” Mestre Augusto responded firmly. “In the old days, the guys did Candomblé spells and such, because they were in the religion. It was a part of the popular culture – from the *terreiro*, you know? This idea that capoeira is of Candomblé is simply not true. Not all black people are in Candomblé. A lot of black people are Christian, Muslim, or Protestant.”

“Can you speak a bit about the energy of the roda?” I prompted. “What is this energy?”

“The roda is a very ancient thing,” Mestre Augusto answered. “It’s a concentration of energy that you find in all tribal reunions and in the way houses are organized in a village, for example. Even King Arthur’s table was circular! The energy remains concentrated inside, so people can communicate face to face, with less effort. Capoeira is the same. *It’s a tribal activity*. Tribal activities are always done in a circle so as to concentrate the energy. It’s called *bioenergy*. The roda captures the energy of the music – the vibrations – since music itself is a fountain of energy. In capoeira, we use the berimbau and it’s vastly different from mechanical sound. If you play a CD and compare it to a live berimbau orchestra, you’ll feel a huge difference. It has to do with the way sound vibrates in the air – the notes, the string of the berimbau vibrating – it *does* something to people.”

“Mestre, how do *you* feel when *you* play in a roda and the energy is very powerful?” I wanted to know.

“I don’t want it to end,” he said, simply. “When everyone is singing and participating, you become euphoric and you feel the desire to go in the roda. The moment inspires you to reproduce that which is bringing you to life: the music. Mechanical music, on the other hand, has no *colour*. As beautiful as the material may be, it doesn’t have the *essence* of the original. Did you know that the beings that lived in the past also love circular energy and are attracted to it? Sometimes they come to the *terreiro* – to Earth.”

“Are you still talking about capoeira and the ancestors?” I asked, fascinated.

“Yes,” he nodded. “The ancestors are present because the music and the energy – the music that they liked – are here, especially when things are relaxed.” Mestre Augusto smiled.

“So capoeira music and the roda are *direct* links to the past and the future?” I ventured.

“Yes,” he agreed, “especially the berimbau. The original name for this instrument was *morumbumba*, ‘one that speaks to the dead’.”

“Like in Cuba!” I said, excitedly.

“Right,” he enthused. “The *atabaque* – the drum – has this ability, too.”

“So capoeira is a... community,” I smiled, “in the full sense of the word.”

“It is. Capoeira is stronger than we can imagine. There are even people who enter into a trance,” he added.

“Do you?” I asked, fascinated.

“No, no.” He shook his head emphatically. “But music is a source of energy – when you hear it, you feel like moving. It has many uses, some of them therapeutic. It synchronizes things within the self. You enter into a relationship with music, according to the amount of energy it is emitting. Some people identify better with certain styles like samba or rock. Others like to play with the *São Bento Grande* rhythm, some prefer *São Bento Pequeno* and so on<sup>4</sup>.”

“So how does the concept of *axé* fit in?” I wondered.

“*Axé* is a word that means strength, energy or power,” Mestre Augusto explained. “It came from Nigeria, originally – from the Nagô language. You have rodas with strong *axé* and rodas with weak *axé*. When you create an intense gathering of energy, it provokes a reaction in those who are present. If the energy of the music is not very strong, such as when you play a CD, the effect is more minimal. The *reaction* to the energy is also *axé*. When you synchronize the music and the singing, the effect is powerful – it’s doubled – while if you have music on one side and singing on the other, it won’t have the same effect, because there is a lack of harmony or synchronicity. I think the power of capoeira is greater than other martial arts. Capoeira has succeeded in penetrating into cultures that were traditionally very closed, like in certain parts of Asia. The difference between capoeira and other martial arts lies in the music and the *ginga*. Capoeira was created to avoid direct confrontation: we *ginga* to *desfarçar* – to escape – and the music helps you to do this. Capoeira stirs all sorts of things up inside of you and hones your abilities, making you capable of absorbing and transmitting more information. It enlarges your sense of self.”

“It also develops one’s capacity for relationships,” I suggested.

“One of the great strengths of capoeira is that it’s done in a collective,” he nodded. “It *must* be practised in a collective, so socialization becomes crucial. You learn *with* others. It can help unite people from different social conditions and teach them to co-exist. It’s also a tool that helps you understand people. I believe that the capoeirista, when he matures, begins to know how others think. You start to penetrate into the *inner self* of the other. Capoeira gives you this ability, because you need to know if the other guy is going to try to beat you up! Do you understand? It’s different from karate, where someone attacks you and you simply defend yourself. In capoeira, the person attacks me because *I let him*. That’s how I see capoeira, and that’s why the old guys used to turn their backs on their opponents when they played. They knew what the other guy was going to do before he did!” Mestre Augusto laughed.

“And this continues outside the *roda*,” I suggested.

“The capoeira *roda* is, in fact, an exercise to prepare you for life. You do things in the *roda* that you’d never do on the outside. If you were to do these things outside the *roda*, it would be easy, because people are vulnerable. Doing all of this *in* a *roda*, however, is much more difficult, because people in capoeira know this stuff, too. Outside the *roda*, I want to make people understand. I don’t want to *cut off* my relationships. Sometimes I know that the other person is doing me wrong, in the outside world, and I try to find a way to make them realize what they’re doing. It’s delicate and not easy to achieve.”

“But a lot of Angoleiros elevate the idea of *malandragem* – of cunning and shrewdness” I protested.

“*Malandragem* is a *way of life*,” he corrected. “How many Angoleiros do you know who actually have this characteristic and who are truly distrustful of everyone? There aren’t many.”

“Do you think that *malandragem* is a good or a bad thing?” I asked, confused.

“A bad thing,” he answered. “Usually, *malandros* – people who have *malandragem* – end

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<sup>4</sup> *São Bento Grande* and *São Bento Pequeno* (of Angola) are two rhythms played in a Capoeira Angola *roda*.

up alone. They say, ‘*Malandro de mais se atrapalha*’. If you’re too much of a malandro, you get caught in your own trap. Back in the days when capoeira was born, its practitioners had to survive and sometimes it meant running someone over. The problem is that some people took that kind of model and brought it *inside* the art, making capoeira a thing of malandragem and false relationships. They enlaced capoeira in *falsity*. Nowadays, we transmit falsity as a kind of *exercise* in capoeira, but we don’t truly transmit the *sentiment*. If I play with you, I may not give you a full foot sweep, but I’ll always have the intention of doing it and of avoiding yours. It’s in the culture.”

“So nowadays, do you think that capoeira is more *ludic* and less violent?” I asked.

Mestre Augusto nodded, “Yes, it’s more ludic. I can tell you that today I only know two Angoleiros who completely live malandragem – maybe three or four. A lot of people say that they’re malandros, but they aren’t. There are two types of Angoleiros. The first are the admirers of malandragem and the second are the true practitioners. I’m an admirer. I’m not interested in being fully immersed in malandragem.”

“It comes back to the question, then, is malandragem an essential part of capoeira?” I smiled.

“In Capoeira Angola it is, but nowadays the malandragem I speak of is *mandinga*. Mandinga is the way that you trick the other. It’s a *festinho* – a word we find in the Brazilian penal code. You trick someone with your talk and try to ‘kill’ him. You apply a *festinho*! Do you understand? Capoeira changes every thirty, forty years – with each generation. You can see it in the way it’s played, in the way rodas are organized and in the way capoeiristas converse amongst each other. People used to look to the past to find nourishment, but no one is interested anymore. They think Capoeira Angola is a bunch of old people rolling around on the ground! That’s why history has the tendency to be forgotten and capoeira loses its spirit. Nowadays capoeira is mostly about the *body*, at least outside of Bahia. You can see it in the way capoeiristas enter the roda in Bahia. You have to develop a sensitivity to see this. It’s about the spirit – the internal chemical aspect. What matters most is *energy*.”

### 3. Mestre Pelé of the Golden Throat



Mestre Sinho, Mestre Pelé (on lead berimbau far left), Mestre Zé do Lenço, Lang, Mestre Zé Pretinho and Mestre Santa Rosa at the despedida de solteiros – March 2008 (Photo: Mark J. Francisco)

It was a sweltering day when I arrived in the Pelourinho for my meeting with Mestre Pelé, one of the mestres from the Encontro. My body was in shock – still adjusting from the Canadian winter to the intense heat of a Bahian summer – but as Mestre Pelé and I wandered through the bustling streets of the Pelourinho, I found myself mesmerized by his stories. The man had been practicing capoeira for sixty years and spoke with great pride of the rodas and events that had unfolded in the places we passed.

“I never expected capoeira to appear in my life,” he said, earnestly. “I learned it to defend myself when I came to the big city. There were lots of guys who liked to fight, and here I was, this kid from the Recôncavo – from the *jegue-jegue do penico...*” he recalled, laughing. “Do you know what that means? That’s the *interior* – the countryside. We used to walk barefoot, planting manioc, aipim, bananas – all that kind of stuff. In those days, we used to call Salvador ‘Bahia’, and we’d say, ‘Let’s go to Bahia!’ I was so excited.”

Mestre Pelé – *Natalício da Silva* – was born in a small town of the Recôncavo region in 1934. As a young man, he helped his father work the land and make charcoal, which they sold at the Mercado Modelo in Salvador. Although he had seen capoeira at many festivals – places like Muritiba, São Felix and Cachoeira – it was only when he arrived in Salvador at the tender age of twelve that he began learning capoeira on the ramp of the old Mercado Modelo. His teacher – a man named Bogalho – was a porter and a skilled berimbau player.

Mestre Pelé and I stepped onto the Elevador Lacerda, a sleek structure that would take us down to the *Cidade Baixa* – Lower Salvador – for a mere five *centavos*, the equivalent of about five cents. Five minutes later, we had arrived at the new Mercado Modelo, a large modern structure brimming with clothing, jewellery, instruments and crafts. I had never liked the studied artificiality of it – a once vibrant market and centre of Salvador life, it was now reduced to a tourist attraction, and the only capoeira to be seen was a show being watched by a handful of tourists. Usually, I could not get away fast enough, but with Mestre Pelé by my side, I lingered, listening to his stories.

“This used to be one of the best places for rodas,” Mestre Pelé recalled. “I’d just arrived in Salvador and was working at the market. I was on the ramp of the Mercado Modelo, when I saw a man playing berimbau, right there, in the middle of the market. It was a place full of danger and *valentões* – tough guys trying to rob people and to start fights. I saw this man playing a large *berra-boi*. ‘Watcha starin’ at, kid?’ he asked me. I don’t remember what I said, but he took a liking to me. He’d seen me working on the ramp, carrying things, and he thought I’d benefit from learning a bit of agility. He agreed to teach me for free – to teach me how to defend myself, you know? I didn’t think anything of capoeira back then. I was a lot more familiar with boxing and jiu jitsu, but capoeira has the *ginga*. The *ginga* has everything – agility, experience, culture.”

Mestre Pelé was not sure whether he was capable of learning capoeira. “Nossa Senhora!” he exclaimed, recalling how stunned he had been watching the men playing. Once the market emptied in the evenings, however, he would train. Mestre Bugalho also taught a few sailors who lived nearby. “We didn’t call him ‘Mestre’ yet,” he added, “That came a few years later. People

started to do it spontaneously. In those days, no one held my hand to teach me capoeira, either. We just tried and tried, practised and practised, until we learned. There was no such thing as a ‘good mestre’. God is the only master.”

Soon, the two of us were ambling through narrow, grey streets and past crumbling churches and houses. I knew that I would not remember all the names and dates Mestre Pelé was reciting, but it was delightful to feel the past come alive. When the old mestre spoke of good things long gone, I felt a poignant sense of loss. As grateful as I was for the changes that had come out of the modern era – changes that had allowed women and foreigners like me to participate in capoeira – I wondered what Salvador had been like before technology became so widespread, when streets had been filled with acoustic music and rodas. Mestre Pelé’s sadness was more than nostalgia for a bygone era – he was mourning the loss of a way of life.

“Back then, festivals were rarely marred by fights,” he went on. “There was a sense of *respect* between practitioners. Today, all you see is brawls.” Mestre Pelé shook his head, “All that drinking and marijuana use leads to fighting – to this *bagunça* – this mess.” The mestre spoke scathingly of modern innovations that he felt added nothing to the richness of capoeira. He listed the movements that had been a part of the old capoeira: *rabo de arraia* – the stingray’s kick, *meia-lua de compasso* – a lower version of *rabo de arraia*, *ponteira* – a kick to the jaw with the point of the foot, *martelo* – a side-kick to the shoulders, *esporão* – a side-kick, *ponta de costela* – a low *martelo*, *benção* – a kick to the chest, *giratório* – a spinning escape, *parafuso* – a head-spin unlike the one we see today, *queda de quatro* – a crab walk on all fours, *canivete* – one hand and one leg on the ground and the other leg curled into the body like a switchblade, and *relógio* – a spin from *queda de rim* – ‘falling on your kidneys’. The names are all different today,” he winced. “The *whatever-you-call-it* strike... Those names are invented and many of the moves have also been lost. The music is different now, too. People don’t know how to sing anymore. They don’t use the right kind of voice for a particular type of music or sing songs that aren’t from capoeira. *Quando eu morrer, me interre na Lapinha...* When I die, burry me in Lapinha,” he hummed. “Nowadays, it’s rare to hear people sing it the way I do and music is so fundamental to capoeira!”

I asked Mestre Pelé to tell me more about the traditional *samba de roda* – the samba style from the Recôncavo region. I knew that he was one of the most respected and renown *sambistas* – samba players – in Bahia.

“There are various types of sambas,” he answered with feeling. “Samba de roda, samba de viola, samba dentro do cais, and others. Each one has its own particular rhythm. The samba de roda you see today is a *mess-of-a-samba!* In the old days, we didn’t use all of those instruments. We used pandeiros. You would see fifteen, ten, eight, two, or even just one pandeiro. *That* was the real samba de roda from the Recôncavo region! People would samba in the centre of the circle, one by one. We used *reco-recos* and *pratos* – scratchboards and plates – and we clapped. The women played the plates – *pra-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta* – and the men had those little *tambourins* to keep rhythm for the pandeiros. Today people use *timbaus* and *atabaques* – all that noise! It’s confusing. It’s not samba de roda anymore.”

“Do you know the origin of samba de roda?” Mestre Pelé inquired. “While people worked planting manioc, pounding it, stirring it and making flour in the *roça* – in the countryside – everyone would sing, adding a line, one by one. They were the pioneers of the Recôncavo, fugitives who didn’t have anything to feed themselves. When the moon appeared, they’d pick up a pandeiro. Samba de viola is also from the Recôncavo – from around Santo Amaro.” The mestre beat out a rhythm with his palms, “*Marê, marê, marê, marê...* The tide, the tide, the

tide... That's a samba from Santo Amaro called *dentro do cais*. It's played to the *viola* – the guitar. When the moon was out and there was no water, people would have a party on the docks. Samba of the Recôncavo is from there – from *jegue-jegue do pinico*.”

“Mestre,” I asked, “tell me about the capoeira of your youth. The capoeira rodas, were they different?”

“Very!” he said, emphatically, his face lighting up. “The old rodas were *gostosa* – a real pleasure. There were people like Mestre Traira, Olhão de Boi, Avani, Barrão, Mestre Waldemar da Silva from the island and his nephew, Totonho de Maré – so many people whose names I forget. Most of them are dead now. There was also Gerson Quadrado, who would come to the Misericórdia celebrations on August 16. I would go to play capoeira and to face off with him. I threw rodas – capoeira and samba rodas – here in the Terreiro and everyone knew me. Mestre Bimba and Mestre Pastinha didn't come, though. They discouraged their students from coming, because there were lots of fights and they wanted capoeira to become more respectable. Bimba would only come out for special presentations, like when the Governor wanted a show. The Governor would also call on me, Canjiquinha and this guy named Paulo de Satanagem, who was a *mandingueiro* – a capoeirista with *mandinga* – to do presentations for parties. We did shows at the Belvedere in the Pelourinho to show people that capoeira wasn't only for bums and *capitães da arreira*<sup>5</sup> – thieves. The old capoeira was bad, but today, it's a good path for all. In the old days, when people played capoeira and the cavalry came, people would escape into the forest. Today, capoeira is civilized and everyone wants to play it, but in the past, there were more *mandingueiros* – *real* mestres.”

It seemed to me that Mestre Pelé, like many others, had conflicting feelings about the old capoeira. “Mestre, what exactly is *mandinga*?” I prodded, trying to understand.

“*Mandinga* is an experience only a capoeirista can know,” he answered slowly. “It's hard to find, you know? I can tell you that as a *mandingueiro*. There are many things... Some people can appear and disappear at will. It's something a person has, not something you can teach. You ask for *mandinga* at the foot of the *berimbau*, when you kneel. It's a prayer you do to defend yourself from your enemies. Every mestre has his personal experience, technique, style and ritual. I had mine. Mestre Waldemar had his. Bimba had his. Pastinha had his. Traira had another one. Those guys *had* to have it. They were all *mandingueiros*.”

“Mestre,” I interjected, “a lot of people say that the old capoeira was linked to Candomblé, the Afro-Bahian religion, but that it's not a religion per se. It just has a strongly *spiritual* side. Do you agree with this?”

“Capoeira *does* have a spiritual side,” he answered firmly. “All of us have a spirit in our bodies, otherwise we'd become stiff as boards, but there's capoeira and then there's Candomblé. They are two separate things, even if many famous capoeiristas were also *ogãs*<sup>6</sup> – the majority, in fact. They were the best ones to take charge of a Candomblé.”

“What do you mean by ‘take charge’?” I wanted to know.

“When a famous master guarded the door to the Candomblé, no one caused any problems. Know what I mean? They were respected. Candomblé, *maculêlê*<sup>7</sup>, samba de roda, capoeira... *Everything* is spiritual and grows inside of spirit. I don't know all those important university words,” he said abruptly, “but you know what I'm trying to say.”

<sup>5</sup> A “captain of the sand” is a street kid.

<sup>6</sup> An *ogã* is a man with a ceremonial title in a Candomblé terreiro.

<sup>7</sup> *Maculêlê* is a stick-fighting dance from the Recôncavo region.

I found Mestre Pelé's ideas stirring, so I was struck by his sudden shyness. "Some people don't like to mix Candomblé and capoeira," I suggested mildly.

"They don't like it and they want to separate it, because they don't understand it. You don't find spiritual things only in capoeira. Today, some Believers don't want to do this, that or the other," he said, shaking his head. I knew that Mestre Pelé was thinking of certain mestres who were deeply religious and who did not like to see Candomblé associated with capoeira.

"Mestre, when people played in the past, did they try to 'close their bodies' before a game?" I was referring to the practice called *fechar o corpo* – the use of prayers and spells to protect and "close" both the physical and spiritual body.

"Definitely," he nodded. "In order to close your body, when you kneeled at the foot of the berimbau, you blessed yourself. You'd ask God to help defend you against your enemy, because the guy kneeling across from you was your *enemy*. *Pa-pa-pa!*" Mestre Pelé demonstrated gestures that might have been done in an imaginary roda. "There used to be religion in the old capoeira and it was more *sincere* – more filled with mandingueiros than today. Back then, when a *pai de santos*<sup>8</sup> did a 'job', he did it well. Today, the majority of capoeiristas have 'open bodies' at rodas. In the past, many capoeiristas were pais de santos or ogãs. I wasn't, but I never forgot to look towards Candomblé. I have a guardian angel, too. Look at Mestre Bimba. Who doesn't know about his wife – that she was a *mãe de santos*<sup>9</sup>?"

"Tell me about him, Mestre," I asked, fascinated. "Did you know Mestre Bimba?"

"Yes, Mestre Bimba was a confirmed ogã. The only reason he wasn't a pai de santos was because he didn't want to be. Who's going to tell Mestre Pelé that he doesn't know what he's talking about?" He looked at me defiantly. "I would go to rodas and play with Mestre Bimba. I went to church and to his wife's Candomblé in the Nordeste of Amaralina. Many times I went to do a samba de roda for him in the 60's and even in the '50s, in the Nordeste of Amaralina. It was really forested back then and Mestre Bimba's house was still made of straw."

Mestre Pelé had led me to the Church Nossa Senhora da Conceição da Praia, a large, elegant building in front of which, according to him, some of the best rodas had once taken place. "There was the Festival of Nossa Senhora da Conceição in the first week of December and other festivals like Santa Luzia, frequented by the dock workers, most of them capoeiristas. People swam, enjoyed samba de roda, played berimbau and capoeira. Some of the best musicians and capoeiristas came out on those days. The rodas usually ended with fights between capoeiristas and the police," he added, laughing.

Mestre Pelé told me that he had also frequented other rodas, such as Mestre Waldemar's Sunday roda in the Liberdade neighbourhood. The roda, run by two capoeiristas named Zacarias and Boa Morte, took place in a straw shack surrounded by a bamboo fence. With his quick-footed agility, Mestre Pelé soon became a renown fighter. He remembered proudly that as he arrived for the roda, Mestre Waldemar would call out, "Here comes Satan!"

"I taught capoeira for twenty-five years to many students, including men of the Fifth Battalion Military Police, and I opened an academy in Brotas," Mestre Pelé continued. "Then in 1971, I created my own school, the Grupo de Capoeira Angola Mestre Pelé. I stopped playing capoeira for twenty years, but in the late 80's, the ABCA – the Brazilian Association of Capoeira Angola – contacted me with a project that sought to bring back many of the old mestres."

"Mestre," I wanted to know, "What would you say that capoeira has brought you in life?"

<sup>8</sup> *Pai de santos* means, literally, "father of saints" – it is an important position in the Candomblé religion.

<sup>9</sup> *Mãe de santos* means, literally, "mother of saints" – it is also an important position in Candomblé.

Mestre Pelé's eyes widened. "*Rapaz*<sup>10</sup>..." he said with emotion. "Capoeira brought a great spirit into my life. I've seen so many things and so many countries that I wouldn't have without it! That's why I always say, if you can get to know capoeira, *know* it. If you don't know it yet, *look for it*. Run after it like I did! I'm an illiterate man from the Recôncavo and I haven't studied, but perhaps my beautiful words will be of value for something."

When it was time to go home, Mestre Pelé accompanied me to the foot of the Lacerda Elevator. As I hugged him, he gave me some parting words of advice. "You have a good capoeira game, Lang. Now you have to concentrate on your music."

I was honoured by the mestre's words and moved to have been graced by the friendship of this living legend who had shared his knowledge so generously with me. It made me sad to think that Mestre Pelé might feel shame at his lack of formal education. He had come from a time and place where knowledge had been primarily oral and experiential, but such forms were increasingly rubbing up against European forms of knowledge – colonial forms – that were the domain of the elite, the world of the university that in some ways, I was representing.

#### ***4. Mestre Curió***



Mestre Curió and Mestre Cobrinha – Salvador – 2005 (Photo: Leandro)

OISE had allowed me to come to Salvador on the understanding that I would take a course at the Universidade Federal da Bahia – the UFBA – but I was aghast to learn that a strike was on, an unfortunately common event in many parts of Brazil. The delay, at least, meant more time to finish a last OISE essay. Although it felt surreal to be doing schoolwork when my senses

<sup>10</sup> Literally, "boy", but is an expression of surprise and emphasis, much like "Man!"

were being assaulted by so many new sights and sounds, I had to finish the task. I would soon be starting a long-distance reading course on Popular Education with Chris Cavanaugh, a professor at York University – *Brazil and Popular Education* – and I was eager to delve into the works of Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire and Dian Marino.

It took me a while to realize after the Encontro that something was different and even longer to figure out what it was: I was no longer being supported by the close-knit capoeira community Mestre Augusto had gathered in Itapoã, and I had no idea *where* I belonged. Although I liked my Regional classes at the Fundação Mestre Bimba – working the fundamentals of Regional – something was missing. I hoped that when I started training Capoeira Angola with Mestre Augusto’s master – Mestre Curió – I might feel differently. I would be training as much for my thesis as for the chance to explore a traditional Angola school. Once I committed, I knew it would consume me over the next months.

Living in Salvador was proving to be more challenging than I had expected. It was a lot easier to hang out with my foreign friends, many of them capoeiristas, than to venture out and meet Bahians. I knew my fear was causing me to lose out on a lot of opportunities, but I was still feeling lost in this place so different than my own world. Being in Bahia was also giving me flashbacks of the Ottawa Valley countryside, where I had grown up, one of a handful of “People of Colour”. I had longed for acceptance back then, and here I was, once again, “different”.

Miguel and I had started to meet in motels – downtrodden, sad places where Bahians went to escape watchful eyes – and I knew that I was already in over my head. Not only was my lover married, older and more experienced, but he seemed to embody everything that both fascinated and confused me about Bahia. I desperately wanted to be a part of this man’s life – a

part of Bahia – but would I ever find my place? What if this experience, as powerful as it might seem now, turned out to be a mere parenthesis in my life?

To keep my mind off my sadness I kept myself busy. One Monday afternoon, I made my way to Mestre Curió's academy on Rua Gregório de Matos, a short walk from the Filhos de Bimba School. My plan was to train both Capoeira Angola, as I had done with my ex-husband for years, *and* Capoeira Regional with Mestre Nenel. I knew that this invited potential complications. From what I had gathered, a capoeira school was a community and mestres did not look kindly on students who "school-hopped". They often tolerated it from foreign practitioners, out of necessity, but if I wanted to integrate myself and to win the respect of these mestres, I would eventually have to choose a path. Both styles had been in my life for a long time and both were important to me, so I needed time. My separation and the Ph.D. were giving me the chance to explore the roots of both styles – traditional Angola and Regional.

I found myself in a small office, nervously awaiting Mestre Curió's arrival. Next to me, I could see the main space of ECAIG, the *Escola de Capoeira Angola Irmãos Gêmeos* – the Capoeira Angola Twin Brothers School – a large room situated at the top of a steep stairway, in which the classes and rodas took place. The walls of the school were painted a bright yellow, as those were the colours chosen many years ago by the venerable Mestre Pastinha – Mestre Curió's master and the man who had changed the course of Capoeira Angola. (I found it amusing that Mestre Pastinha had chosen his *soccer team's* colours to represent his capoeira school.)

As my eyes continued their exploration of the main room, I noticed a small altar nestled in a corner high above the ground, decorated with flowers, candles, incense and other objects I could not make out, possible signs of Mestre Curió's adherence to the Candomblé religion. Next

to it, a poster of *São Jorge* – Saint George, the patron saint of capoeiristas – had been pinned up. The saint was riding a horse and holding up his sword, about to slay the dragon. A bench lined the main wall where the *bateria* – the capoeira orchestra – would be during rodas, several berimbaus leaning against the wall next to it. An *atabaque* – a large drum – had been placed at the other end. I was trying to imagine what the room might look like on a Friday roda night, when Mestre Curió strode in.

The short, coal-skinned man dressed in an impeccable collared shirt, black dress shoes and pants, and a gentleman’s hat gazed at me with piercing eyes. As he shook my hand, I thought to myself that he seemed like a character from another era. Although Mestre Curió had a limp – knee problems that made it difficult for him to walk – it did not seem to affect his confidence, the overall effect softened by a pair of mischievous eyes. Mestre Curió greeted me courteously enough, but when I mentioned that Mestre Augusto had recommended the school, he opened visibly. In the capoeira world, I knew, one’s relationships – one’s kinships – were the basis of trust.

Mestre Curió – *Jaime dos Santos* – was born in 1937 in Patos Pinhares, a city in the northeastern state of Pernambuco, and raised in the municipality of Candeias, in the Bahian countryside. His father, José Martins “Malvadeza” dos Santos, was a *lavrador* – a farmhand – and his mother, Maria Bispo, a *normalista*<sup>11</sup>. He was from a family of capoeiristas: his grandfather, Pedro Virício Curío, and both his parents had been practitioners. His great-grandfather, he informed me, had been the infamous Besouro de Mangangá. At the age of six, the young Curió started capoeira, and later, became a student of Vicente Ferreira Pastinha – the great Mestre Pastinha. Only three of Pastinha’s students were still active in capoeira: Mestre

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<sup>11</sup> A *normalista* was someone who had completed middle-school, received a diploma and could teach at the primary level. The school system has changed and this title no longer exists.

Curió, Mestre João Pequeno and Mestre João Grande. The first João lived and taught in Salvador at the Santo Antônio Fort, while the second lived in New York City, where he had immigrated over a decade ago. In 1995, Mestre Curió had founded his own school, with the intention of continuing the work of Mestre Pastinha. He now travelled extensively giving Capoeira Angola workshops and was involved in the fight to provide basic legal rights to all mestres.



**Mestre Curió's Geneological Tree (Figure 1)**

Mestre Jararaca – Mestre Curió's student – had also arrived. I was thrilled to meet one of the few female mestres in Capoeira Angola. The world of capoeira was a traditional one – a bastion of male power – and Mestre Jararaca was one of three students who had received the title from Mestre Curió. (Mestre Augusto and Mestre Gafanhoto, whom I had yet to meet, were the other two.) A stout woman of thirty-one with a no-nonsense air, Mestre Jararaca introduced me to her two young boys, Pit and Zé Carlos. Under her tough exterior, I could sense kindness, and

when she joked, she had a pleasing, almost girlish laugh. She taught the morning classes at the school, while Mestre Curió taught evenings. I was excited to begin my training at the Escola de Capoeira Angola Irmãos Gêmeos.

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Friday night, I arrived at Mestre Curió's academy for my first roda and quickly changed into the obligatory black pants, shoes and yellow training t-shirt. It was seven o'clock – the heat was intense – and I began to regret my heavy clothing. After a week of training Angola and Regional, I was exhausted. While one student ran a large broom across the floor, another ascended a ladder and lit a candle at the altar. A handful of spectators had already arrived and were seated at benches along the entrance wall. I stood in a circle with fifteen others, trying hard to look like I belonged, and spotted Contra-Mestre Elias, a dozen adults and several teenagers with whom I had trained earlier in the week.

My first class with Mestre Curió had taken place on Wednesday evening, and I had barely made it through. The heat had been intense, the pace fast and my body aching. I had been nervous, too, watching Mestre Curió publicly reprimand several students. Although the students themselves had seemed unperturbed by the mestre's admonishments, I was uncomfortable with the harsher Bahian educational methods – the militaristic style of teaching, common to most capoeira schools in Salvador. Used to working hard after years in the Asian martial arts, I gave Mestre Curió few reasons to reprimand me – my mestre seemed to like the way I trained – but I could not help worrying: *I'm too old for this*. Of course, I knew that Mestre Curió and Mestre Jararaca cared deeply about their students, and that they lived their art with singular passion and dedication. Their capoeira had a depth – a soul – that made mine seem like a pale imitation.

I was shaken out of my reverie as Mestre Curió walked into the centre of the circle. It was 7:30 sharp. He placed some herbs – the identity of which I could only guess at – in a small container much like the incense burners used in Catholic mass, and lit them with a match. As they burned, their sweet smell filling the room, he swung his container by a chain in an arc, facing one direction at a time. Then, walking around our small circle, he stopped in front of each student to allow the smoke to be smoothed over the body as a form of protection. When he was done, Mestre Curió made his way to the guests seated on benches and repeated the same purifying gestures. Although the whole procedure had taken no more than five minutes, it had created a respectful silence. The whole thing reminded me of a Native *smudge* – a ritual in which sacred herbs are burnt, while participants cleanse their bodies over the smoke.

When the mestre gave a sign, the lead berimbau – the *gunga* – struck up a slow rhythm, and was soon joined by two other berimbaus and two pandeiros. Mestre Curió began intoning a *ladainha* – a mournful opening song – and I took a seat with the other students on the floor. As the other instruments joined in, first the reco-reco, then the atabaque, voices swelling in answer, I felt something stir within me. Mestre Jararaca was the first to play and she looked entirely in her element as she moved lightly in the roda, smiling dangerously as she manoeuvred around her adversary like a snake preparing its trap.<sup>12</sup> I could see the same blend of grace and strength in her children – in the devilish Pit and the older, quieter Zé Carlos – who, at eight and ten, moved with a *knowing* far beyond their age.

There were too many details to make sense of it all, so I gave up, and tried simply to soak it all in. Despite my fatigue, I played in the roda. Then, before I had a chance to regain my seat, Mestre Curió called me up. Even with his bad knees, which had robbed him of much of the agility of his youth, the man was surprisingly fast. He advanced towards me, his pelvis making

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<sup>12</sup> The name *Jararaca* actually refers to a small, deadly snake found in Brazil.

obscene grinding gestures to the great amusement of the spectators, dominating my game with a minimal number of moves. When he broke into a shrill laughter, his head thrown back in a toothless smile, I could only grin back.

### ***5. Mestre Zé do Lenço***

I realized, one day, that the crowds no longer frightened me. My skin had turned a warm copper and I was starting to get appreciative glances. Best of all, I had graduated to taking buses on my own and was enjoying my newfound independence. One Saturday, I accompanied Christine to Mestre Zé do Lenço's roda. I had never heard of this mestre before, but Christine's *Paulista* boyfriend – a man from São Paulo – who had come to Salvador to train capoeira, confided to me that after doing the rounds of the Angola schools in Salvador, he had settled on Mestre Zé do Lenço.

The three of us made our way from the Pelourinho to the *Baixa dos Sapateiros* – the Shoe Street and shopping area of the working classes. The street was buzzing with life on this sunny afternoon as we arrived at the J.J. Seabra Avenue in the Sete Portas neighbourhood, just past the Aquidabã. The sound of a berimbau wafting from a window told us that we had arrived. After clambering up a narrow flight of stairs, we found ourselves in Mestre Zé do Lenço's academy. The room was painted a lovely blue, decorated with worn pictures and instruments made by the mestre himself. Mestre Zé do Lenço strode towards us with a wide smile, a tan-coloured man in his 50's, sporting glasses and a mustache. It was still early for the roda, so he ushered us onto a bench.

“I was born in a small town of the Recôncavo in 1949,” the mestre explained<sup>13</sup>, “a place called Irará. I grew up on a farm, helping my parents cultivate the land. We planted corn, beans

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<sup>13</sup> Mestre Zé do Lenço's interview was mistakenly erased, so I had to reconstruct the interview in a phone call.

and manioc, you know? Then at nine, my mother and I joined my sisters who were living in Salvador and my father stayed behind to tend the farm. We lived in a neighbourhood called Fazenda Grande do Retiro – the *Retiro* – famous for its slaughterhouse. That’s where, in 1960, I met the family of *Elísio Massimiliano Ferreiro* – the renown Mestre Espinha Remoso.”

In the genealogical capoeira tree, Mestre Espinha Remoso was the father of Mestre Virgílio of Fazenda Grande, the man who had raised Mestre Diôgo and had also become Mestre Zé do Lenço’s mestre. Mestre Espinha Remoso, a native of Teixeira de Freitas, Bahia, lived in the Retiro neighbourhood and organized popular rodas every Sunday on Rua Jaqueira do Carneiro in an old shack called a *barracão* that drew some of the best capoeiristas of the region – famous men like Waldemar, Gigantinho and Caiçara. Crowds would gather to watch the capoeiristas play or to partake in lively samba rodas.



**Mestre Zé do Lenço’s Geneological Tree (Figure 2)**

“When Espinha Remoso died in 1960,” Mestre Zé do Lenço continued, “no one was left to lead the rodas of Jaqueira Street, but some of his former students decided to continue the tradition – the rodas are still happening to this day. I was a teenager at the time and I kept playing capoeira with my friends in the muddy streets of Jaqueiro. I got my nickname in my childhood, at the first roda where I played capoeira. My friends said that I ‘played just like Zé do Lenço’, a man who lived in our neighbourhood – a *sambador* – who played pandeiro and sambaed! The nickname stuck. In those days, I was learning to make berimbaus with Mestre Waldemar, who was considered the best craftsman, and when Mestre Espinha Remoso died, I started showing the kids in my neighbourhood what I’d learned. Since I had a berimbau and a leather pandeiro and I knew how to play them, they would always come looking for me to help them with their rodas. We had rodas on Saturdays and Sundays in front of a lady’s house – her name was Dona Joana and she’s died since – because it was the only place that wasn’t muddy. Those rodas always ended in fights, so Dona Joana would throw water at us and go after us with a broom!” The mestre erupted in laughter at the memory. “We would insult her, so she’d complain to our parents. Our parents would beat us, but we didn’t give up! We always came back. When she saw me arrive, Dona Joana would say, ‘Here comes the Master of Fights!’, so my friends started calling me ‘mestre’.”

In this way, Mestre Zé do Lenço became the *trenel* – the teacher of this group of youth – supervised by Mestre Diôgo. “Mestre Diôgo was an *estivador* – a dock worker,” he explained,

“so he was too busy to help us much. Still, I learned a lot from him and I gained a lot of experience in capoeira during those years. Together, Mestre Diôgo and I founded the group ‘Relíquia de Espinha Remoso’ – Heirloom of Espinha Remoso. In 1972, while I was still in my early twenties, my work was recognized by the community. I was given a space in which to conduct classes. I changed the name to ‘Associação de Capoeira Angola Relíquia Espinha Remoso.’”

When Mestre Zé do Lenço’s knees began to swell, he switched to working with *artesanato* – crafts – instead. “I started making berimbaus and pandeiros,” he smiled. “This gave me a lot of joy and I stopped almost completely playing capoeira. Everyone knew and liked me in the Retiro. In those days, a person learned capoeira on the street – in their community. You can buy a diploma, but not a community! Back then, you had to have experience in capoeira and to conduct yourself with dignity in your neighbourhood to be considered a mestre. Today, people sell more than their instruments – they sell *capoeira*.”

Mestre Zé do Lenço’s roda began at 6. It was small on this day, but the games were exquisite, with none of the usual tension I had felt in many Angola rodas. As I watched *Fantasma* and *André* – Mestre Zé do Lenço’s two senior students – play, their graceful, fit bodies moving in ways I had not known possible, I had to recognize that Bahian men inhabited capoeira the way a fish inhabits water.

## ***6. Life in Bahia***

My body had begun to ache with more than muscular fatigue. At the Fundação Mestre Bimba, I was often alone in class, and sometimes, when we did takedowns, I would leave the school black and blue. Some of the *desequilibrantes* – the take-downs – reminded me of jiu jitsu techniques I had once practised and drove home to me how very different this Regional style was from any other capoeira style I had trained so far. Despite the physical challenges, however, there was something familiar – something reassuring and grounding – in the movements, and I could not deny that Bimba’s music made my heart sing. I wondered idly if Angola would ever come to feel the same way. Anum knew that I also trained Angola and although he had already asked me about my plans in capoeira, he did not pressure me for allegiance. I had not yet found the courage to tell Mestre Curió about my Regional training, but I did not want him to find out

from another source. Having arrived in Bahia feeling low in confidence, my teachers' faith in me made me all the more anxious to make the right decision.

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A famous Angola mestre was in town and I jumped at the chance to participate in the Encontro. About fifty students, most of them from Salvador and São Paulo, with a sprinkling of foreigners – a middle-class crowd – gathered on the first day. The first workshop leader was a trim man in his early sixties sporting a white goatee, impeccable clothes and a fedora hat. He had something almost lyrical in the precision of his movements and I was eager to learn, but as he began choosing people randomly out of the crowd, my enthusiasm turned to fear. Ordering the petrified student to demonstrate a rhythm, he would then shake his head and exclaim dismissively (for reasons I could not discern): “*Wrong.*” I could feel the room cringe.

For a long time afterwards, I thought of the workshop, trying to make sense of my *malaise*. Perhaps the mestre had not understood the impact of his actions? We were in Brazil, where people were more direct and did not take things so personally. Yet I had *seen* the fear in peoples' eyes. Questions of power and hierarchy were clearly tangled up in capoeira, but they were not being addressed by the community. I had long speculated that slavery – a system defined by cruelty and domination – had left its mark on Bahian society, including art forms like capoeira. I had seen men from humble backgrounds, who had struggled for survival and recognition in capoeira their whole lives and who were ill-equipped to deal with the sudden access to money or status, become tyrants of the kind they had once despised. Large crowds always seemed to bring out the *worst* in people, as well, fostering an atmosphere of competition that exacerbated fragile egos. I wondered if this was part of the reason I had not been feeling as deeply connected to the world of capoeira as I had hoped, yet the thought made me sad.

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My month was filling up with activities – there were no more terrifying moments of loneliness – but I still struggled with aspects of life in Bahia. The over-sexualization of women in Salvador and the glaring inequalities between the sexes were challenges that my foreign female friends and I faced on a daily basis. It horrified me to know that I might be complicit with this state of things, as I plunged deeper into the affair with Miguel. While I told myself that this was *different*, because I was completely in love, it was hard to ignore the fact that men were openly betraying their wives and girlfriends all around me.

Bahia was a study in contradictions. I was drawn to the natural sensuality of the people and the fact that Bahians – especially those of Afro descent – seemed to inhabit their bodies more fully. People were also affectionate and expressive, something which made my heart positively expand. I was, however, unsure how to deal with the injustices I saw daily. Colonial values were still widespread, showing up in the most unexpected places. It was disturbing to notice, for example, the intensity of Bahians’ fascination for blonds, something I had not encountered since my days growing up in the Ottawa Valley. People of Colour, like my brother and me, had never fit into the blond ideal. It was only when we had moved to Toronto that I had begun to appreciate beauty in all its manifestations. Yet, here I was in Bahia – the “blackest” state of Brazil – and blonds were everywhere on television, billboards and magazine covers. I knew that the story of colonization was similar in many Latin American societies where a majority of people were Black, Native or of mixed origins: internalized racism in which European standards of beauty were deeply engrained.

I continued to struggle with capoeira. Mestre Curió and Mestre Jararaca seemed to be taking my Angola training seriously and this was both profoundly touching *and* alarming. I was

feeling more confused than ever as the old and the new teachings jostled for space. Although I could not expect to erase *ten years* of training in a few months, it was frustrating to see that every time I entered the roda, I fell into old patterns. And why was I feeling so ridiculously shy – nothing like my usual chatty self – despite having been warmly welcomed by both schools?

I toyed with the idea of training in other Angola schools, a decision that could not be taken lightly the more my bonds grew with my mestres, but nothing felt right. Not only would my body have had trouble moving in the trademark double-jointed way of lower Angola styles like Mestre João Pequeno, but Mestre Augusto was no longer teaching. I was drawn to the feline rawness of Mestre Moraes' capoeira, but the militaristic vibe of his academy kept me away. Mestre Curió's upright Angola style was the only one that felt natural to me. At times, I wondered whether my capoeira path might be *sem mestre* – without a master. While I did not want someone to *rule* me, an art form like capoeira is held in the palm of its community and to be alone is a kind of death. When my marriage had ended, it had felt natural to sever the ties binding me to Mestre Bezerra, my ex-husband's capoeira master, but after years of independence, I needed guidance. Philosophically and aesthetically, Capoeira Angola had always drawn me, yet here, in its birthplace, something did not feel quite "right". While I could do a pretty good imitation of an Angoleira, I felt like a *fake*. Anum had been badgering me for weeks to go to the Filhos de Bimba roda and I suspected my avoidance had something to do with a fear of disappointment. What would I do if I did not like the Regional rodas?

I only had a few months to get my act together – a few months to figure out what was going on with Miguel, to find my capoeira path and to get my Ph.D. research underway. I had never felt more vulnerable and unsure of myself as I did in Bahia, and I had started having panic attacks – maybe not *clinically*-defined attacks, but they were frightening enough – often

triggered when Miguel could not be reached. Where was the strong, confident adventurer I had pictured? The Pelourinho had begun to annoy me, with its predictable dynamic of tourists, shopkeepers and beggars. Instead of ascending to undreamed-of heights I felt that my capoeira had reached a plateau, like I had already hit some kind of wall, physically and emotionally. I had to force myself to train, bending my body to my will every day. Occasionally, I would have a flash of emotion – a memory of the passion I had once possessed – but mostly, I felt lost in a sea of practitioners.

## ***7. Magic in Bahia***

A friend from Toronto arrived at the end of December and came to stay at our apartment for two weeks. He was a gifted musician who filled our home with music and with whom I could laugh at life's intemperance. Some of the gloom and feelings of solitude that had plagued me over the past weeks dissipated. I had felt like an outsider, raw and vulnerable to everything that brushed up against me, but as I learned to smile at the things that had once infuriated me, something finally shifted. Bahia had begun to teach me.

The Lavagem do Bonfim, the yearly washing of the steps of the Church of Nossa Senhora do Bonfim by *Baianas* – Candomblé women dressed in ceremonial whites – was the biggest festival in Salvador after Carnival. I had been looking forward to the procession for weeks. It would snake its way along the Lower City, from the church of Nossa Senhora da Conceição to the Church of Nossa Senhora do Bonfim – a six-kilometre trek – ending in a massive party.

Soon, we were all gathered: Mestre Pelé – our guide dressed impeccably in white – Leni, his girlfriend from Belém, my two Canadian friends and me. We marched under a blazing sun, the kilometers passing pleasantly enough, but were relieved to arrive at the foot of the Church of

Bonfim. The Baianas had already gone to work cleaning the steps, watched over by priests and mães de santos, as the custom dictated, and the space around them was thick with people. We hastily tied *fitas* – our ribbon offerings – on the railing of the church, made a silent wish and wandered away in search of a place to eat.

Mestre Pelé had wanted us to stay for the capoeira and samba rodas – moments I had been looking forward to all week – but the steady stream of people, the blaring music and garbage-strewn streets had begun getting to me. While there had been magic in the morning procession, the afternoon was much like any other street party in Salvador. I could not help remembering Mestre Pelé’s stories of past festivals and dreaming of a time when the only sounds had been of voices and rhythms tapped out with hands, feet, plates and pandeiros.

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The UFBA students in Professor Pedro Abib’s class were debating the facts surrounding the legend of Besouro – the “Black Beetle” – and I wondered whether the discussion went deeper than appearances. *Besouro de Mangangá* – also known as *Besouro Preto*, the “Black Beetle” – had been a humble black man from Santo Amaro, a town of the sugar-cane region outside Salvador. He was said to have lived in the early nineteenth hundreds and to have had the ability to fly and disappear at will. The agile capoeirista had hated policemen, fought with (and frequently beat them), making him a hero of the people. Furthermore, the story went, Besouro had had a *corpo fechado* – a “closed body” that kept him safe from bullets and attackers – thanks to a protective amulet called a *patuá*. One day when he had been without his patuá, he had been stabbed with a *ticum*<sup>14</sup> blade and had died. To this day, Besouro’s name was still sung in capoeira circles and he was very much alive in the hearts of the people.

Mestre João Pequeno and Mestre Curió claimed, amongst others, to be descendants of

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<sup>14</sup> Ticum is a kind of wood said to have magical properties.

Besouro. Although in the rational part of me, I had a hard time with such claims, the more wistful side of me could not completely brush aside such ideas. Besouro had been a real man and his stories, although seeped in legend, contained kernels of truth. In Bahia and in the world of capoeira, such relations of kin were possible. Mestre Augusto – a biologist and historian – often spoke to me of the world of *magic* which the older generation of capoeiristas had inhabited quite comfortably. People readily transformed themselves into animals, flew or disappeared at will.

“The old guys,” he explained, “rarely speak of such things anymore, for they know that this art – this way of life – is no longer of our world. They say that such things are no longer needed in our day and age, so they’re disappearing.”

Such stories reminded me of cultures that were or had once been closer to nature. The Chinese had legends of martial arts masters who transformed themselves into animals, leapt above the trees and flew into combat. Many Indigenous peoples around the world told of animals who took on the appearance of humans, or of humans who became animals. Could the old animist African cultures brought over by the slaves have found a resonance in the animist cultures of the Indigenous people in Brazil?

In the scientific, positivist view of the world there was no room for such beliefs, and in Brazil, the old animist ways were increasingly bumping up against a more Westernized vision. In such a context, legends like Besouro’s were viewed as the last vestiges of an “uncivilized” and “uneducated” people. Was it any surprise that in our man-made world – a world filled with noise and flooded with artificial light – we no longer found enchantment and had lost the ability to *see*? In Bahia, magic lived on in the people, legends and sacred rituals, but even in Bahia, the modern world was beginning to invade the old ways. How ironic it was that while so many

people from the so-called “developed world” were coming to Bahia, drawn by its magical essence, developing countries seemed to be in a race to erase the old ways in their eagerness to join “modernity”!

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It took me weeks to gather my courage to tell Mestre Curió that I was training Regional, but when I finally did, he smiled kindly. “It’s not for me to decide, Lang. You need to define *yourself*. I believe that Angola is deeper than Regional and that you have everything to become an exceptional Angoleira, but you need to find your own way. I like the intensity with which you train. I like your attitude and humility in capoeira. I understand if you need time, but eventually, you’ll have to decide.”

This unexpected graciousness disarmed me. If forced to choose, I knew that I would have left Angola, but I was not ready – not yet. There was still so much to be learnt with this family, so different from me, but for whom I felt a great affection.

I finally made it to a Regional roda at the Fundação one Saturday morning. Mestre Nene was away, but by the expert way Mestre Canguru’s hands flew over the berimbau, I knew that this man had something. The music sent my heart racing with a blend of fear and excitement, filling me with the desire to *play*. When it was my turn to kneel at the berimbau, I looked around me. Two pandeiros were beating out a rhythm – Bimba’s *one, two, three* – full of subtle variations and pauses, and the small space was a blur of electricity, music echoing off the stone walls and floor of the small space. Spectators were seated at a bench along the back, the students hugging the walls of the academy, waiting for their turn in the roda. They were dressed in white Filhos de Bimba shirts and pants, bodies swaying, voices raised in chorus. A trickle of sweat made its way down my brow – it was very hot in that tiny room. I heard my breath in my ears

and for a moment, I hesitated, but then I shook my partner's hand and cart wheeled into the roda, feeling the roughness of the floor under my palms. In that instant my fear disappeared.

## ***8. Frederico de Abreu – The Historian***

I visited Frede – the capoeira historian – one morning at the Instituto Mauá, a colonial building in the heart of the Pelourinho where he worked. A short, light-skinned, mustached man, his hair always slightly tousled, Frede did not have a shred of pretension. He was always eager to share his knowledge and he had a fast tongue – an irreverence that I liked. I did not mind that he provoked me – the twinkle in his eyes made up for it – and although I did not always agree with some of his wilder assertions, I appreciated the way he pushed the boundaries of thought. Frede (pronounced “Fre-jee”) – *Frederico José de Abreu* – was born in 1946 and grew up in old Rio Vermelho, a humble, mostly black neighbourhood in Salvador.

“Back then, it was a forested and snake-infested place,” Frede recalled, laughing. “The inhabitants were called the ‘Indians of Rio Vermelho’. My father was a malandro who liked to play soccer, gamble and drink, but he did work in commerce at the port, even if wasn’t a job with status. My mother was from the countryside – she had a primary school education – and she married young. My father’s family had had money, but it was lost when I was young, so my family went through *um tempo brabo* – a rough period. Although whiteness could have conferred a certain privilege and status to our family, our poverty was a great leveler.”

At twenty-four, Frede’s mother was widowed and left alone to raise the children. “I had to work at eleven,” Frede recalled, “but luckily, I was schooled by priests and received a good education that opened doors for me. I was a *moleque* – a kid who grew up on the street – but one with good schooling. I was always playing ball and I still have a soft spot for soccer! I’ve always loved it, perhaps *more* than capoeira.”

As Frede grew up, he became politicized, and in the sixties, joined the Communist Party – a self-described “hippie” with long hair, drugs and the whole bit. “During this politicalization process, I became interested in culture. I was part of the generation that grew up listening to Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil and Chico Buarque.” Frede moved to São Paulo to work in film and lived there from 1967 to 1977, after which he returned to Salvador. “I had a friend who was a capoeirista – a student of Mestre Pastinha – and I’d go visit him sometimes, but ironically, I didn’t have any interest in Pastinha’s academy, back then. My interest was in the *cultura popular* – the culture of the people – and I went to many samba evenings and Candomblé

ceremonies. When I began to raise a family, I had to distance myself from that world. I found stable work as a civil servant, although I kept myself informed about what was happening in the world of culture.”

“Was there a strong prejudice toward popular culture back then?” I wanted to know. “No,” Frede answered firmly. “The problem wasn’t *judgment*. The Left always had lots of contact with popular culture – with the people – but whether you wanted to or not, as an academic you believed in a hierarchy of knowledge. We believed that *real* knowledge was with *us* – the academics – you know? We would talk amongst ourselves about using our knowledge to help people better their lives. Like everyone else, I assumed that as the century wore on, popular culture got diluted and people became more educated, it would eventually disappear. Those were the ideas of the Left, you know?”

In his youth, Frede saw himself as a “liberated man”, someone who broke with all cultural and familial traditions. He took part in “modernism” and *Tropicalismo*, movements that swept through Brazil. When he returned to Salvador after living in São Paulo, however, he was surprised to discover a great vitality in the cultural traditions that he had written off. Things were happening in the poor, working-class, mostly black neighbourhoods. “The cultural, theatre and samba groups were thriving. The things that were happening amongst the middle classes were being reproduced amongst the people too, but in a different form.”

Frede worked briefly for City Hall, but when things changed politically in 1973, he was sent to the Department of Culture. “I made a lot of friends within the Black Movement,” he recalled, “There was no money, so I was always trying to find things to do and I began to frequent this growing cultural movement in Bahia.” Working closely with the Folkloric Department, Frede became interested in capoeira. He wanted to study the art form in its natural element, not in the artificial world of shows. “Everyone was saying that capoeira was disappearing and that academies were less numerous – Pastinha was about to die and Bimba had just died – but I began to see that the world of capoeira had a great vitality. It wasn’t dying at all!”

Frede credited the great academic Jair Moura for helping him to find a way of approaching the study of capoeira. “Jair Moura told me: ‘Look, Frede, if you want to work with capoeira, you’ll have to go at it with profound *respect*, because you’re working with people who, in our eyes, may be rough and uneducated – they may be toughs and bad characters – but they have their own valid cultural viewpoint. Got it?’”

It was the very darkness within capoeira that attracted Frede. Since he already knew certain capoeiristas, he did not idealize the world of capoeira – a world of violence, fights and general disorder. “I knew that I had to walk lightly and I liked it,” he said simply. “Capoeira may have risen to undreamed-of heights of popularity today, but it’s never been a world of Saints, has it? Much to the contrary, it’s a world of dangerous people – not danger in the *physical* sense of the term but, let’s say that theirs is a different sense of *ethics*. That difference enchanted me. It was like an exaltation of *falsity* – a labyrinth. Today, it’s a bit different, but back then it really was like that. I met some really interesting capoeiristas – people like Cobrinha Verde and Mestre Waldemar. Capoeira teachings aren’t *dry* – they aren’t just about *capoeira* – so even if you’re not an avid practitioner and you’re not *inside* the capoeira world, you can still partake in its culture. You can learn to do a cartwheel and to be on your guard – that kind of thing. I learned a lot in capoeira and it was very helpful for me. I was a very shy person and I learned to express myself with capoeira. My life concepts were really frozen. As I learned to work with the art form, it helped me stretch myself. That’s the wisdom of capoeira –

there's something 'virile' about it. It takes courage to go into a roda. You have to learn to *defend* yourself and to deal with the challenges of life. In exchange, I got closer to that world, which I think of as very beautiful today. I feel deeply honoured to have been a part of it."

"Frede," I interjected. "Tell me more about your early days in the capoeira scene."

Frede nodded. "I had a strategy. I'd organize capoeira events with the help of a few trusted mestres – symposia in which I invited other mestres to participate. I wasn't interested in capoeira academies, which had been radically transformed by the pressures of performance and by folkloric shows. I was more interested in *traditions*. My position of relative neutrality helped me bring together many mestres and capoeiristas. Mestre Canjinquinha used to work in the same department as me and he teased me every day. Whenever I walked by, he'd call out: 'There goes that guy who knows nothing about culture!'" Frede roared with laughter. "I came from Canjinquinha's world, you know? I knew how to deal with working-class folk and didn't think myself 'above them'. It was true that I knew nothing of folklore, but I had the willingness to learn and the humility to perceive it. Their mistrust suited me just fine!"

Seeing my surprised look, Frede nodded, "This mistrust was good, because it forced me to question myself constantly – not to think I had 'the truth'. It prevented my work from becoming *mediocre*. It was okay to make mistakes, but I could absolutely *not* fall into the trap of moralizing. Capoeira has a surprising side. You're working with something traditional, and at the same time, there's a whole global web that exists. No matter how traditional these mestres may be, they're extremely responsive – they react well to any environment you put them in! Eventually, I started visiting academies and working with various mestres. My first partnership was with João Pequeno. Afterwards, I worked with Canjinquinha and then with NeneL."<sup>15</sup>

"Frede," I interrupted, smiling. "What about you – did *you* ever practice capoeira?"

"When I was young," Frede answered, "I'd get into a *lot* of fights! I had a girlfriend who lived in another neighbourhood – a tough one – so I had to impose myself. 'I'm gonna get hit, but I'll hit back, too!' I don't remember ever having *won* a fight – I think I lost them all!" He chuckled. "I didn't have time for capoeira back then, because I had to work at a young age. Besides, what I *really* loved was soccer! As an adult, I did train in João Pequeno's, and later, at NeneL's. I remember this one game I played with Paulo dos Anjos in NeneL's academy – I used to train there at eight in the morning, and guys like Itapoan and Curió would drop by to play. Well, one morning, Paulo dos Anjos was there. That guy had a *violent* capoeira! When I went to give him a head butt, he swiveled out of the way and I hit the post, instead!"

## ***9. Maria, Porto Alegre, and Getting Sick***

I had met Maria Isabel in an Ottawa capoeira class in 1999, the year I had lived with my mother and written my Master's thesis, and we had hit it off immediately. Like me, Maria had grown up in Canada and was of mixed heritage, her mother *Québécoise* and her dad from the

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<sup>15</sup> In 2008, Frede created the *Instituto de Capoeira*, a documentation centre that is housed in the Casa da Mandinga, the school of Mestre Sabiá who practices a contemporary style of capoeira.

Dominican Republic. Unlike me, she could pass for a Baiana. I knew that my friend's arrival would herald a new chapter in my Salvador experience, and that having such a close friend would not only make life much easier, but give me a much-needed emotional foundation until I felt more at home in this foreign land that often frightened me so much.

I opened the door and there she was with her long, flowing braids. My friend wrapped me in her arms and we laughed breathlessly, slipping into our familiar French. At twenty-four, Maria had decided to train dance intensively for the first time in her life. She would be taking classes of the *Silvestre Technique*, a blend of modern and Orixá dance, in the Pelourinho. Unfortunately, I was leaving for Porto Alegre to take part in the World Social Forum the very next day.

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Porto Alegre was like a strange dream. I was in Brazil, but an entirely different Brazil where fair-skinned people, many of German descent, populated the city. I had barely arrived and already I missed the soulful, irreverent spirit of Bahia. Most of the time, I wandered the Social Forum in a haze, beaten down by the humid heat of the city. I had wanted to be moved, shaken and challenged, but instead, I felt lost in the immensity of the Forum. With so many travellers from Brazil and abroad, I had expected it to be easy to connect with others. We had all come to find solutions to the dilemmas that plagued our planet.

Despite the good intentions and the care that had gone into planning the event – the use of eco showers at the camp, the efforts to recycle and many other laudable initiatives – I was shocked by the waste that could accumulate in mere days with the presence of several thousand human beings. And I could not take my eyes off of the workers. A veritable army of people had been hired to clean, sweep and serve. Entire families had seized the opportunity to sell home-

cooked food. No doubt, they were thrilled to be making money, but why did they *all*, without exception, have to be *poor and dark*? We, the Forum-goers, on the other hand, were almost all light-skinned, well-fed and well-educated – middle-class participants. True, the Forum had arisen out of a need to speak up for the poor and underprivileged of this world, but did it have to reproduce the very social stratification it criticized?

Struggling to stay awake under the suffocating noonday heat, I was disappointed by the workshops, which I had expected to be creative and participatory. Instead, the ones I attended were like university lectures of the worst kind. A friend, who had come as a representative of a Canadian non-profit organization, told me stories of meetings where big decisions and projects were being launched. Meanwhile, I was stuck in stuffy tents.

I found myself increasingly lured away to the city of Porto Alegre. During my first escapade, armed with phone numbers that Mestre Augusto had given me before my departure, I was led to Mestre Farol and Professor Jurandin's capoeira academy. The two men generously offered to drive me around the city, and soon, I was chatting with my new *Gaúcho* friends (pronounced *ga-oo-shoo*), as the inhabitants are called. I moved from the youth camp to the home of one of Mestre Farol's students. Tall, thin Mestre Farol had intimidated me with his gruff manner at first, but as he began sharing some of his extensive experiences with capoeira, his eyes softened.

"I realized over the years that when I work with capoeira, I'm teaching people about *life*," he smiled. "Anything can be an entry point, you know? When I teach kids how to make a berimbau, for example, they learn about nature and their place within it. They learn how to find the wood, when and how to cut it, about the cycles of nature and their place within it, and about history and injustice. Capoeira shifts their relationship to the universe."

My eyes shone. I had come to Porto Alegre's World Social Forum hoping to find a community and some answers, and found it in the capoeira world instead. I was beginning to appreciate the true transformational power of capoeira.

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Maria and I talked often about our childhood and teenage years. We had both grown up in Canada, she in Quebec City and I in the Ottawa Valley, and we had both experienced racism, she amongst French-Canadians and I amongst Anglo-Saxons, struggling with the sometimes conflicting desires to be accepted and to develop our own identities. From the age of sixteen to twenty, I had lived and breathed jiu jitsu, training first in Ottawa and later in Toronto. Although at times punishing, jiu jitsu had provided me with my first experience of a community outside of school and of a world that celebrated Asian culture. Jiu jitsu had felt instinctive and left me feeling confident at my core, but four years into it, it lost its magic. Although I tried other martial arts, nothing felt quite right. I had all but forgotten about the fighting arts when Brazil came into my life. It was a hot summer in Portugal and I met a Brazilian man who introduced me to the music and dances of Brazil. I was smitten. In the process of making plans to travel to Brazil, I saw my first demonstration of capoeira at the University of Toronto, and my life became a frantic search for capoeira, a rarity in mid-nineties Toronto.

While culture may be in the "blood", I discovered that we are all capable of being moved by art – our human ancestry is common ground enough – and I had a passion for rhythm. From the first disco music I had heard at my neighbours as a child, my ears glued to the floor of our apartment, to the music of Michael Jackson and Madonna – songs deeply imbued with the rhythmic influences of African-Americans – music made my heart race with joy. My body moved in ways it should *not* have known, but these were mysteries I just came to accept. I had

come to Bahia on a search to understand this Afro-based rhythm, in capoeira and in music, but by doing so, I had once again placed myself in an environment where I was *different*. Why was I making life so difficult for myself? Perhaps, I mused, something inside me sought to explore – to push – the boundaries of identity and to reach a *core* of humanity. In seeking to bridge these differences, might I find the true spirit of community, one not merely defined by blood?

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Two of Maria's capoeirista friends from Ottawa came to join us in Christine's tiny apartment – there were now five of us and every inch of the apartment was crowded with people and belongings. On a typical week, I had Capoeira Angola on Monday and Wednesday mornings – two-hour classes – and Monday to Thursday I trained Capoeira Regional for a surprisingly exhausting hour each afternoon. Anum had been working me hard and although my body was suffering, I was *finally* getting the training I had come to Bahia for – I was receiving compliments about my game now, a good sign that I was on the right track. Could I be pushing past the personal barriers that had limited my capoeira for years?

Mestre Jararaca was tough, but by now I could do the short sequences she threw at me at every class. I was stronger, despite the fact that I found myself regularly overheating during her two-hour, sparsely-attended morning class. I looked like a drowned rat in my sweat-soaked yellow t-shirt and heavy black pants. Thankfully, I was not taking my mestre's occasional jabs personally anymore – I had gotten used to her style of teaching – and for someone who had always had the tendency to be overly sensitive, this was encouraging. Friday evenings I attended Mestre Curió's roda, Saturday mornings Mestre Nenel's roda, and there was the occasional capoeira event.

Despite all I was doing, I still felt, irrationally, that I could be doing *more*. In comparison

to Bahian capoeiristas, whose stamina and skill seemed “otherworldly”, I felt slow and lazy. Mondays and Wednesdays – my double class days – I often awoke with a sense of dread, knowing the pain that awaited me, but when I had successfully completed yet another day of hard training, I felt on top of the world.

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I resigned myself to lying in the hammock, as the usual madness of our apartment hummed around me. No two ways about it – I was sick. I knew that my weak state had something to do with my sadness at the realization that Miguel would not have much time for me until his holidays. I had also been pushing myself too much in my training. It was ridiculous, this “macho” need to prove myself. Just when I had begun to feel more at home in Salvador, to feel that I was *living* here instead of simply standing on the edge looking in, my body was calling it quits.

It was all I could do to get through my capoeira classes. Despite ten hours of sleep a night – my dreams filled with bombs and chases – I was permanently exhausted. The weekly essays required for my course in Popular Education were one of my few sources of relief. Not only were the readings enjoyable, but writing helped me gain perspective in a life that felt out of control much of the time. It was exciting to plunge into Dian Marino’s *Wild Garden*, where I saw parallels with capoeira. Marino, a former York University professor who had been a force of nature by the looks of it, and who had died an untimely death from cancer, wrote of the ways in which art, culture and politics were intimately linked, challenging her students to reclaim their power by surviving, if necessary, in the cracks of society. Art, Marino insisted, could be a powerful weapon of resistance and her ideas echoed those of authors like Augusto Boal (*Theatre of the Oppressed*) and another Brazilian, Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). The

concepts I read about in the pages of my books were being mirrored all around me in this environment where great inequalities existed between the rich and the poor.

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Although I was three hours late for Mestre Curió's yearly celebration, I had not wanted to miss the celebratory *feijoada* – the typical Brazilian feast of beans and pork – which would be taking place at the mestre's home. After a long and winding bus ride through the heart of Salvador's suburbs, I was finally in Castelo Branco. The mestre's house was flush in the centre of a densely inhabited neighbourhood with no street signs. I found the roda on an unpaved street, skinny dogs and children looking on. My body still aching with fever, I played as well as I could under the blazing afternoon sun and was relieved when we clambered, tired and hungry, to the house.

Mestre Curió lived in a large, brick structure with his extensive family. They had been preparing a veritable feast for hours, the top floor decorated with flowers and balloons, plastic tables and chairs rented for the occasion. While the food was being served by the mestre's wife and children, I asked one of the daughters – a slim woman with a ready smile who was leaning over to fill my cup – how many brothers and sisters she had.

“Twenty-two,” she giggled.

Once we had eaten, the samba began – a samba unlike any I had ever seen. It was slow and soulful, yet somehow joyous, and when Mestre Curió played pandeiro, his hands darting like a black bird on the tambourine's surface, I realized how happy I was to be in this intimate moment steeped in the traditions of the past.

## *~Part Two: Santo Antônio*



Lang at Rua dos Marchantes, Santo Antônio – 2005 (Photo: Maria Isabel Rondon)

### *1. The Move*

I sent a quick prayer to the Orixás, thanking them for keeping me safe, piled my belongings next to Maria's and waved good-bye to Christine from the taxi. A new chapter was about to begin. I would miss the majestic trees of Graça, and our small veranda with its view on the sea, but thankfully, the new place was wonderful. From my bedroom I could see the sweep of red-tiled roofs and walking the streets of Santo Antônio was like being whisked into the pages of a Jorge Amado novel – winding roads filled with colourful colonial homes where working class and middle class families lived, with a sprinkling of *gringos*. We were a ten-minute walk from the Pelourinho and from my capoeira classes.

A few weeks after our arrival, Sereia, an Ottawa capoeirista, moved down the street from me and Maria. Every day, as I dragged my tired body to class, I could not help feeling that she embodied the woman I had hoped to be in Salvador. She was a good capoeirista, strong and

flexible, with a seemingly insatiable appetite for training. What had happened to my own fire? I might be faster and more fluid than her, but I had *ten* years to her *two* in capoeira. She was a shooting star, while I was in the autumn of my capoeira. My body was not taking to the harsh training regiment I had imposed on it and I was sure that I was disappointing *everyone*. I had begun to skip Mestre Curió's roda. The truth was that my life was a yo-yo, alternating between moments of hope and despair, as I juggled the demands of school and capoeira, tried to heal my weak body, and struggled to keep alive my fragile relationship with Miguel. I was waking up in the wee hours, crying now, and although on the outside I looked fitter than ever, I was not *well*.

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I had not gone to Mestre Curió's roda in weeks, so despite my fear that I would feel out of place, I gathered my capoeira clothes one Friday evening and headed for the Pelourinho. The roda was small and intimate that night, and I was relieved to experience a grounding familiarity, sitting amongst the other yellow t-shirts. Listening to the lilt of their voices, a feeling more than a thought came to me: *I've come to know these people far better than I realize*.

When it was my turn to play, I knelt by the berimbau across from Contra-Mestre Elias, a burly man with bushy eyebrows who moved with surprising agility. I was proud of our game, but after the roda, Elias approached me sternly, "Good game, but you jump too much."

The comment deflated me. Once again, no matter how much I tried, I could never seem to get it right. Only days before, my lover had commented to me, "You play capoeira the way you live your life, Lang – too openly." I had been stung, unsure about whether to read this as a critique about my capoeira or about *us*. Was it better to be closed and suspicious?

"Good people, especially, have to protect themselves," he had continued.

"I don't know how to *be* like that," I had protested.

“That’s what worries me,” he had sighed. “Someone could give you a head butt by mistake and you could get hurt.”

I had to admit it – on separate occasions, both Professor Anum and Mestre Curió had remarked that I threw too many attacks and that this left me vulnerable. “Try to *ginga* more,” Anum had suggested. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps my problem was that I was all about the *doing* – always trying so hard. I needed to stop my mad rush and let the chips fall as they may.

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For weeks I had been waiting in anticipation for the big *Caminhada da Capoeira* – the Capoeira Walk – a parade organized by the city of Salvador. It was going to wind its way downtown, ending in the Pelourinho, and although I was dressed in the uniform of Mestre Curió’s school, I had also brought along my white Regional clothes, planning to play in both rodas. When Mestre Curió had invited me to join his school for the walk, I had felt honoured – we were to be first in the parade – but I discovered, to my horror, that the Filhos de Bimba were to be *second*. I would be marching in front of Mestre Nene’s school in my yellow and black colours... I was the world’s biggest idiot.

In a strangely perfect way, life was manifesting my inner turmoil – my great indecision – for all to see. I could analyze capoeira schools all I wanted, but I only had one body and could not be in all places at once. As we marched, Mestre Curió’s school in the lead, the Filhos de Bimba behind us, I navigated uneasily between the two, standing on the literal border between the yellow and blacks, and the whites. On this day, when all capoeiristas were being given the opportunity to proudly proclaim their identity and to show love for their school – their family – I realized that I had never felt less *sure* of myself. Was I an Angoleira, daughter of the Escola de

Capoeira Angola Irmãos Gêmeos? Or was I an impostor, sitting amongst these good people, dressed in their colours, when my heart beat more strongly for Regional?

Afterwards, as I trudged home dejectedly, I stumbled into a doctoral student I had befriended. He listened with compassion to my tale of woe, insisting that I had done nothing wrong, and that as a researcher my role was to navigate *between* worlds. “An academic should never take sides,” he emphasized. How I wanted to believe my friend! There was one small problem... I might be a researcher, but I was also a capoeirista.

## ***2. Professor Anum***



Lang with Professors Anum and Chapinha at the Fundação, December 2007 (Photo: Meredith Kenny)

Laughter filled our patio on a warm Saturday night. Sereia had moved in with Maria and me, and Anum liked to jokingly refer to our trio as “Charlie’s Angels” – the blond, the Asian and the mulata. I was thrilled with the growing bond, but our teacher would be leaving for Italy soon with Mestre Nenel and eight other students, doing capoeira workshops and giving performances in the south of Italy – the first time he would be travelling.

After dinner, Sereia offered to make tea, and our teacher’s distaste was so evident that we

insisted he explain it. Anum waited until we had settled comfortably before beginning.

“It’s a long story... My childhood was a happy one. I had everything a child could want, materially, in guidance and schooling. My mom and dad – my family in general – never left me wanting for anything, but things started to get difficult when my parents separated. I was twelve when my father moved out and stopped contributing to our home. Since my mom didn’t work – she was a housewife – it was really hard. Sometimes, we’d go hungry and eventually my mom had to bring my dad to court. You can imagine how I felt when I’d had my father by my side all my life, a male figure that had always been respectful towards me... I’d wanted to become *exactly* like him. To see him leave, to see my mother cry, the troubles in our house and the hope that he would return one day which never materialized... As time passed, my mother and I started getting used to the situation and to the idea that my father wasn’t coming back. My mother was able to receive a small pension, but things started to go bad for me. I was a bit traumatized by my dad’s departure and I didn’t want to go to school. I just didn’t care anymore. I’d always taken care of myself – you know, showered, worn shoes, dressed well – and suddenly I was walking around barefoot and staying out until eight or nine at night. My mom tried to discipline me, but it was tough, because a boy is always closer to his father. After a while, my whole family began trying to talk me into studying, telling me that I was headed for trouble, especially in my area, with crime the way it is. My father and my whole family had always talked to me about right and wrong. It was around that time that a girl offered me a job selling *picolé* – popsicles – on the street. I accepted and my grandmother gave me an ice box. I started selling picolés and newspapers and went back to school. I got my head screwed back on right. Unfortunately, with my father gone, my mother had started going out with other men and I didn’t accept them. In many ways, your father’s irreplaceable, right? I’d see these people trying to get close to my mom and we’d argue. My mom eventually met a man who convinced her to leave home. In a way, she deceived me. She told me to go to my aunt’s house for a weekend, but when I got back, the house was empty.”

“*Empty?*” the three of us echoed, aghast.

“*Empty.* She’d taken *everything* and just left my clothes and a bed frame. I had to go to my dad’s house and ask him to break the lock open for me. From then on, my father and my grandmother decided to help me. My grandma’s a really important person in my life, because without her, I don’t think I would have survived. I didn’t have anything. No stove, no refrigerator – nothing. I ate lunch at my grandmother’s and, eventually, my father told me that I had to learn how to cook. ‘I’ll buy you a stove and a *bujão* – a gas container – and you’ll have to make do,’ he said. So, he did and I went to my Grandma’s to learn how to cook beans and prepare a chicken – I learned! At first I wasn’t great, but I got better. I had uncles who lived alone and my godfather inspired me – I told myself that if he could do it, I could do it, too! I started to learn how to take care of my house – of myself – and I’ve never depended on a woman since. At that crucial moment, capoeira appeared in my life, about a year after my mom left.”

“How old were you, Anum?” I interrupted.

“I was about sixteen when she left,” he answered. “My dad invited me to live with him, but I didn’t want to, because he had remarried and had new children. I told my dad that I was going to stay at the house but that our family was around if I needed them. They could keep an eye on me. At the beginning I was afraid of capoeira!” Anum laughed at the memory. “I used to play soccer at the Social Urban Centre of Naranjiba and I’d see and hear the classes, but I didn’t dare get close. If the soccer ball happened to fall near the class, I’d grab it and run! I

guess I was scared. But sometimes, I'd hear the berimbau and it moved me. I could *feel* it in my body. One day, I asked my uncle what you had to do to train capoeira and he told me it was free for children – all I had to do was sign up – so I started the following week. I joined the *Capoeirê Project*<sup>1</sup> on April 13, 1998. When I began training and saw the professor sharing the teachings with us – the philosophy of capoeira – telling us that one day we would be the ones to pass it on as professors and to 'do good', it really captivated me. I thought, 'This is what I want to do! This is the path I'll follow until the end.' I became friends with my teacher – the teacher is like a brother, a friend or a father figure. I told him my story and he said, 'You know, Anum, if you really want this, keep coming and one day you'll get there. But know that there will be *lots* of hurdles.' I decided not to work, so that I could train. I wanted so badly to get paid to work in capoeira and I told my dad, 'Look, I got offered a small job, dad, but if I take it, I won't be able to do capoeira anymore. I really want to keep training. I'm going to become a teacher and work with capoeira one day.' From then on, my dad began encouraging me, in spite of the difficulties. There were times when I'd train without any breakfast, and times when I came home and there was nothing to eat. I'd have a small snack for lunch and train again in the afternoon. I'd eat at my grandparents' house when I could, but sometimes when I got there after class at night, there was no food in the fridge, just a small piece of bread. Bread doesn't fill you up, right? I was a growing boy. So I'd make two or three cups of tea, to fill my stomach. Sometimes, I'd buy this artificial juice powder called *kisú* – the only thing in Brazil that hasn't gone up in price and that still sells for ten *centavos*. I'd make myself a big jug of juice and drink it all."

"Wow, Anum!" Sereia whispered. "We had no idea! How terrible..."

Anum nodded. "Some weekends, my capoeira teacher would invite me to his house for lunch – he knew of my hardships and always gave me a bit of money so I could buy myself a proper meal. I kept training, even though many times I wanted to give up. Is there *anyone* who hasn't thought of giving up in our school? Capoeira Regional is tough, because there's a tradition and principles. It's not like contemporary styles where at any opportunity, you can sell yourself. We follow lineage teachings, a tradition – the Mestre Bimba tradition. I told myself, 'If it gets too tough, I'll leave,' but every time I thought of stopping, I'd ask myself, 'If I leave capoeira, what will I do? I'll get some job and be thinking about capoeira all the time! I'll stay until I can't anymore.' I started to have some problems in my classes – every family has its problems, no matter how unified it is – so I left Naranjiba and came to train with Mestre Nelnel in the Pelourinho. Mestre always told us that if we ever need him, he's there for us. If someone ever needs a place to crash for a few days, his house is always open. Mestre told me that I didn't need to pay the monthly fees – I trained twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays at 6 p.m, with him – and I started to help around the school. A neighbour lent me his bicycle so I could get to class. Eventually, Mestre lent me the money and I bought the bicycle. About six months later, the contract with the Capoeirê came up and from then on, everything my professor said *did* happen. The majority of our school's teachers came from the Capoeirê, you know? When I was able to pay back the money Mestre had lent me, I knew, '*This is it.*' I started going after opportunities. I trained and tried to study the theoretical aspects of capoeira – not just the practical parts. I was only in the Capoeirê for a year, because I had come of age and had to train in the regular school, but I spent four years teaching there. There were all kinds of kids – friendly kids, rebellious kids, kids involved with crime – and I had to learn how to deal with them, so I spent the biggest part of my apprenticeship there. When I trained with Mestre Nelnel, I

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<sup>1</sup> The Capoeirê Project was begun by Mestre Nelnel, Mestre Saguim and Frederico de Abreu in the 90's in order to provide free capoeira classes to kids from underprivileged backgrounds in Salvador.

learned a lot from him – about his way as a Mestre and about the philosophy of Capoeira Regional. Regional is not just about the *movements* – it’s a way of life. Each person passes things on in his own way, but from what I can tell, the only person in our school who truly follows the philosophy of Regional is Mestre Nene. He lives it in *everything*, not only in capoeira, but also as a citizen, a man, a father, a friend and a mestre. Of course, we all have the potential to become honest human beings and to follow the philosophy one hundred percent. I don’t know a third of Regional and I’ll die without having understood it all, but if I can learn just a little bit every day, I’ll be happy. I try to share my knowledge with my students, not just the techniques, but to help them *feel* Capoeira Regional.”

“Anum,” I asked, pensively, “Why do you think that the Capoeira is so successful? There are lots of capoeira projects out there, but many don’t have the same impact.”

“I think it has to do with the philosophy of Regional,” Anum answered quietly. “It touches you at the core. Even in Mestre Bimba’s time, many people only practised capoeira as a sport. It seems to me that a lot of capoeiras just focus on the sportive aspect. Mestre Bimba was the first one to develop its educational aspects. In the Capoeira Project, it isn’t so important if the child can or can’t do a cartwheel. We’re more interested in helping people become full members of society. They might learn to do cartwheels, depending on their ability, but it’s more important to us that they learn the philosophy of Regional and the concepts of citizenship. Becoming a good capoeirista is just a *consequence*.”

“Anum, when we met you, you had just gotten your *formatura* – you had just become an official teacher – is that right?” Maria asked.

“Ah, the *formatura*...” A smile spread over Anum’s face. “I spent *three years* dreaming about it. I wondered if I would ever get there. A person can be an amazing player, but if Mestre doesn’t think he or she deserves the *formatura*, they won’t be summoned. Knowing how to play capoeira isn’t enough to become a *formado*. It involves a lot of other things. Mestre’s reasons for inviting each person are different – each person had a different quality. My *formatura* was more than I could have hoped for. Mestre paid a huge homage to me that day – he talked about my efforts and challenges, about my attempts to understand Regional and the philosophy of Mestre Bimba. I was chosen as ‘Regional of the Year’, not just for my game, but also for my dedication in trying to follow the teachings. I cried the whole time. It was as if a film was running through my head of everything I’d gone through – all the hardships I’d endured. I was also a bit sad, because my dad hadn’t come. His wife didn’t like capoeira. The only family member who came was my grandmother and she acted as my ‘godmother’ for the ceremony. She got emotional, too, because she knew what I went through better than anyone else. Today, I’m proud of my family. I’m going to Italy and everyone is happy for me because it will be my first time travelling. If you ask me about life before capoeira, I don’t remember much. I remember the parts *after* capoeira came into my life, because I lived them so intensely. Capoeira has been my ‘father’ in life, in many ways.”

“Has capoeira changed the way you see yourself?” I asked Anum.

“There’s still a lot of prejudice in Bahia. I experience it every single day. I still get mistaken for a *marginal* – a criminal – sometimes,” Anum added, bitterly. “My own race discriminates against itself, but in many ways, it’s not peoples’ fault. I began to understand a lot when I started capoeira. I learned to value myself and Afro-Bahian culture. The subject of slavery is hidden. We may have a Day of Black Consciousness, when everyone celebrates in the streets, but the truth is that most people don’t *know* their history or that the fight for social justice continues today. So, it’s tough when the prejudice is inside of us and we have more respect for

light-skinned people than for our own brothers and sisters.”

“What do you feel when you play in the roda, Anum?” I prodded gently.

“I forget everything,” Anum smiled. “I go into a trance and nothing else exists. The roda *becomes* my world... Like any job, there are stresses in capoeira, but in the roda, the world can be ending, I forget all my problems. The roda is a moment to relax and to find what you’re searching for. I don’t have a particular religion, but I believe in God. I know that I owe everything to God. He knows what I went through. I’ve always had someone with me, call it an angel, God, a saint, or a spirit, and been taken care of. I can tell you that I don’t go hungry anymore,” Anum finished softly, his smile flashing in the darkness of the patio.

### 3. *Mestre Jararaca*



Mestre Jararaca and Lang in ECAIG – August 2005 (Photo: Maria Isabel Rondon)

I had been at the Angola school for six months by now and found it touching to be privy to the intimate life there. Mestre Curió, Mestre Jararaca and the two boys spent their days in the academy, and sometimes, mid-class, Mestre Jararaca would duck into the kitchen at the back of the room to check on rice, defrost a cut of beef, or stir a pot, the enticing smell of beans wafting into the room. I always admired her ability to balance the widely disparate duties of mestre and homemaker. Towards the end of class, Mestre Curió would return from teaching at *Ara-Ketu* – a social project for underprivileged kids – dressed in a perfectly ironed shirt, dress pants and hat.

Leaning on his cane, perfumed and smiling, he always stopped to joke or comment on the latest news. I would stand a little awkwardly, grateful for the short break, sponging away at my sweat. Soon, the kids would come home from school and when class was over, the family would sit down to lunch.

My Angola classes passed peacefully for the most part, but occasionally, when Mestre Jararaca was in a bad mood and I had made a mistake, she might snap at me, “Lang, this is *not* Regional!” Most Angoleiros confused Regional with contemporary styles – “Regional” made a convenient scapegoat in the Capoeira Angola world – but overall, Mestre Jararaca had softened noticeably over the months we had spent together.

One morning, we were halfway through the class – my heavy black pants, long sleeves and socks already soaked in sweat – when Mestre Jararaca began a tale. I had been doing a tiring combination alone around the painted circle and stopped in mid-movement. My mestre did not seem to notice from where she sat on the bench, her face dreamy.

“The first time I saw Mestre Curió play,” Mestre Jararaca grinned, “He was a lot shorter than I expected! I’d seen his picture, but he looked different in person. There was something about the way he moved... I fell in love with his capoeira.”

Mestre Jararaca described a roda in which she had had the audacity to play with Mestre Curió. There had been a lot of older mestres in attendance that day, but the young woman had gone ahead of them, placing herself across from Mestre Curió at the foot of the berimbau.

“He was surprised,” she laughed. I could imagine the fearless young Jararaca – a woman whom an American student had once jokingly referred to as Mike Tyson, in reference to her strong arms and shoulders – being so gutsy. There was pride and tenderness in her eyes. “*Eu gosto muito deste homem.*” I like this guy a lot, she added.

Mestre Jararaca – *Valdelice Santos de Jesus* – was born in Salvador on August 4, 1974. She was the daughter of a washerwoman named Antônia Maria dos Santos and a dock worker named Manoel Moreira de Jesus. At eleven, Jararaca began capoeira under the tutelage of the revered Mestre João Pequeno – the disciple of Vicente Ferreira Pastinha – at the “Centro Esportivo de Capoeira Angola João Pequeno de Pastinha”. She trained with Mestre João Pequeno for more than five years. Her father, who felt that capoeira was for men, eventually forbade her to train, but when he passed away in 1989, the young woman returned to capoeira and was soon put in charge of some of the classes at the Santo Antônio Fort. Her sister, Ritinha – a short, tough woman I saw regularly at rodas – also trained and taught classes at the school. When she met Mestre Curió in 1994, however, everything changed in Mestre Jararaca’s life.

“I joined Mestre Curió’s school and began an apprenticeship with him,” she explained. “I had to relearn everything from scratch. He took apart *everything* I knew and rebuilt it.” In 2001, Mestre Jararaca received the most prestigious title of all. She was made a *mestre* – one of three students to whom Mestre Curió had conferred the title.

I wondered at the dramatic switch it must have been for Mestre Jararaca to have gone from Mestre João Pequeno’s low, flowing game, to Mestre Curió’s higher, combative Capoeira Angola. The clear differences between the two mestres had always mystified me, since both of them – Mestre Curió and Mestre João Pequeno – had both been students of the famous Mestre Pastinha, although Mestre João Pequeno was older and had begun training at least a decade before Mestre Curió. Was it that this reflected an evolution in Mestre Pastinha’s capoeira or was it that his two students had eventually developed their *own* styles?

My conversations with various Angola mestres and my observation of the differences between Mestre João Pequeno’s and Mestre Curió’s capoeiras confirmed my impression that

even Capoeira Angola – the “mother capoeira” – had undergone profound changes over the course of its history. Perhaps some of these changes had arisen out of a desire to emphasize the differences between Angola and Regional. The *ginga* had certainly changed, according to Mestre Augusto, who often remarked that the low, “back-bent” style characteristic of many modern Angola schools was a *stylistic* innovation. While some of the old Angoleiros might naturally have moved that way, legions of students had imitated them – copying the *form* rather than the essence – resulting in a host of knee and back injuries. I had believed for years the stereotype that “Capoeira Angola is played low to the ground and Capoeira Regional is played high”, but it was evident from the old footage – like the game between a young João Grande and a young João Pequeno – that the two styles had not quite been so different when Bimba first created Regional. Bimba had been an “Angoleiro” and had based his Regional on the “primitive” capoeira – removing elements he did not find essential and adding others from *batuque*, an old Bahian fighting form – so this made sense. Modern-day Capoeira Angola was much more linked to complex historical, political and social factors than I had believed. It might have roots in the old capoeira, but it had changed in a way that was not being acknowledged in the capoeira community,

#### ***4. The Clever Body***

*When driving our cars or while sitting in airplanes, we’re accustomed to fairly mechanical operations that require little strenuous effort. Whether sequestered in our offices, tickling the keys on a keyboard, or simply turning the pages of a good book in bed, we spend much of our time deploying a very rarefied form of intelligence, manipulating abstract symbols while our muscled body is mostly inert. Hence, thinking, for us, seems entirely independent of our body and our bodily relation to the biosphere... Other animals, in a constant and mostly unmediated relation with their sensory surroundings, think with the whole of their bodies.*

(David Abram, 2012, p.189)

My friend Laurie and I had decided to take a samba class with Nalvinha at the Fundação, but for someone who had always prided herself on her samba, I was being thrown for a loop. The traditional style from the Recôncavo region was nothing like the Rio de Janeiro style I had learned in Toronto – the one I had been dancing for close to a decade – and I was having a rough time trying to keep my feet flat, my hips parallel and my knees relaxed. I felt ridiculous – anything but sensual – as we circled the small room over and over. Laurie glanced at me and stifled a laugh. I was grateful for her cheerful presence. It was silly, when I thought about it, getting worked up over a dance that was meant to relax you and to be *fun*.

Growing up in the countryside, dance had often been my only link to the city. Spinning in the living room to radio tunes, I discovered that I had rhythm and that when I relaxed, my body seemed to *know*. Something took over – a deeper wisdom that defied all logic – and dancing gave me a sense of euphoria unlike anything else I had ever experienced. It always took time to overcome my shyness in public, but being in Bahia – a centre of dance and rhythm – surrounded by so many sensual men and women, I was shrinking to teenage levels of self-consciousness.

Every Saturday morning at the Fundação before the roda, a core group of students rehearsed samba, maculêlê, and *puxada de rede* – a fisherman’s dance – in preparation for future cultural presentations. It was a sweaty, explosive affair that I watched in wide-eyed amazement from the safety of the bench. Where did they get their boundless energy? And how could the maculêlê dancers, machetes in hand, perform such intricate choreography in such close quarters? The samba de roda was no less spectacular. While the men played atabaque, pandeiro and agôgô, the women danced flirtatiously, heads thrown back, a smile gracing their lips. Unlike

*pagode* – the modern equivalent of traditional samba – this was a study in subtlety and seduction. I yearned to feel such ease.

The truth of the matter was that although I did the Sun Salutations every morning – a set of twelve yoga poses that worked the major muscles and organs in the body – there was no question that I had gotten stiffer since my arrival. The intensity of capoeira training had worsened whatever initial problems had been there, but I kept my worries on the periphery of my consciousness, too frightened by what it might all mean. It was not until I had attended one of Mestre Jararaca’s evening classes that I had an inkling of how much pain had become a part of my experience. When I trained that night, there were none of the usual aches, a tantalizing taste of what being free of physical and emotional pain might feel like.

Then the day Julie – a friend visiting from Ottawa – arrived, gave me further insight into the mysteries of the body. Maria and I had gone to the airport to pick Julie up, so I decided to make up for my missed morning class at the Fundação that evening. Most Bahians worked during the day and trained at night, but I had never been to one of the later classes. The pace was break-neck – I barely made it through and stumbled home feeling chastened. Until that moment, I had not fully grasped how *differently* people learned in Salvador. It was true that my Canadian students had always needed to *understand* everything intellectually before attempting it with their bodies. The Brazilian students, however, seemed to throw themselves into the moves, trying and trying again, until they got them. There was definitely no “babying” in Bahia! It might be a harsh teaching method, but I had to concede that in terms of quality, they were onto something. My upbringing in Canada had taught me to view the body as a nuisance – the mind was assumed to be superior – an object to be controlled or overcome, and certainly not

something to be *trusted*. The problem was that it “got in the way” at times, like in a capoeira game when the body *knew* things the mind could not comprehend.

I was excited to find my ideas confirmed by Gabor Csepregi – a professor at the University of Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg. On the back cover of his book, *The Clever Body*, Csepregi wrote:

Western civilization has come to regard the body as an instrument or a machine that responds to external challenges but does not have a life or creativity of its own. *Thanks to some of its inherent capabilities, however, the living body can act in a highly intelligent and creative manner.* [Italics mine]

Csepregi described the body’s innate abilities as “sensibility, spontaneity, mimetic faculty, sense of rhythm, memory, and imagination”. He also argued that the rapid spread of technology, “gives rise to the loss of immediate and intuitive contacts with tangible realities”, which leads to a growing abstractness where “‘embodied knowledge’ is traded for the ‘mental involvement’” (2005, p.3), and that:

The swelling abundance of computers, cellular phones and other similar devices produces some very beneficial effects: they create instant connection between people living great distances from each other, promote collaboration of all sorts, and even nurture friendship and love. But the expansion of electronic communication also reduces the number of face-to-face, spontaneous encounters on the streets and generates a web of disembodied forms of communication. It also erodes social skills (2005, p.4-5).

When our senses are dulled, Csepregi felt, and are limited to the two-dimensional world of the television or the internet, we experience *disembodiment*. “Disembodiment is... an ‘unworldly’ way to exist. It produces the tendency to ignore the subtle resonances of the body, and as a result, to relate to objects and people with emotional detachment. Furthermore, insensitivity arises from the routine of daily life, the lack of immediate contact with the concrete,

and the inability to invest activities and objects with a symbolic content. One's sense of inner emptiness becomes more acute in the presence of an environment that appears impersonal and insubstantial" (2004, p.6).

Was this perhaps why capoeira captivated so many of us in the industrialized world? Capoeira was primal, instinctual, immediate, social, and very, very *physical*. It was, I was increasingly convinced, an act of *deep resistance*. Modern forces were pushing us all towards greater levels of consumerism and technology – and thus towards isolation and desensitization – and in contrast, capoeira was a celebration of the body, the senses and community.

Living in Bahia was making me aware of the degree of physical repression I had experienced growing up in Canada, where bodily expressions were defined by a dominant norm rooted in Judeo-Christian cultures. We had been taught that to move in certain ways was not acceptable and had learned to limit – even freeze – the use of particular muscles in the hips, backs, shoulders and smaller facial muscles. The impact of this over a lifetime was much more profound than I had suspected. I was beginning to believe that such teachings not only instilled a sense of *shame* in the body, but affected one's enjoyment of life at the most basic level. Heterosexual men in Canada, for example, were made to feel ashamed of moving their hips – something associated with feminine qualities – resulting in many Canadian men never developing a *full* range of motion. Over the years, this led to a permanent stiffness in the hips – something that had not been present at birth – and to a restriction in the expressiveness of the body. Culture was, literally and figuratively, *shaping* our bodies!

I had noticed that all Bahians, even those who did not practice capoeira, *inhabited* their bodies differently. Not only were bodies looser and less fragmented, but they were also *joyful and expressive*. No, the “stiff gringo” was not merely a stereotype. Rather, it was an accurate

observation about the lack of physical sensuality in a culture imbued with judgements about the body. There would be resistance to acknowledging such a reality, since doing so would be to admit the need to question an entire way of *being*, but for anyone wishing to delve deeper into capoeira, this was an issue that would eventually have to be faced. I was convinced, moreover, that culture was more of a defining factor than genetics: if a black boy grew up in a white community or social class that frowned upon sensual expressions, and learned to associate it with the working classes, such a person would almost certainly come to adopt the “stiffness” of his white peers, just as a white Brazilian in Bahia learned to adopt the “looseness” of the Afro-Brazilian culture, rather than the more rigid mannerisms of his Portuguese ancestors. In the Americas, where European notions of the body were dominant in the upper classes, sensuality was often equated with poverty and with black, immigrant or Indigenous cultures.

It made sense that Bahia would be known as a centre of music and dance, since artistic expression was dependent on spontaneity and expressiveness. Improvisation required a *trust* of the body – a willingness to let go and to see what emerged. In the roda, with no time to think, one could only react, surrendering to the body’s intelligence. The ability to analyze was not the culprit – it could, of course, be useful and necessary in many circumstances – the problem was one of balance and context, of having the full range of human experience and expression at our disposal. In many ways, I was reclaiming my body through capoeira, undergoing a kind of *decolonization* of my own body and *unlearning* years of conditioning.

## ***5. Winter***

The clouds were hinting at rain and once again, I had slept in my pants, socks and sweater. I had not expected to be cold in Salvador and had not brought nearly enough warm

clothing. The city had that end of summer feeling that made me want to stay home. I had been taking grape seed extract and vitamins, in addition to eating huge piles of fruit for breakfast every day, and thankfully, I had not gotten sick since March. It had occurred to me that I might be able to prolong my stay in Salvador by a couple of months – there was a list of people to whom I would have to ask for permission, but it was worth a shot. Every month that passed, Bahia felt more intimate – another layer was added to the picture – but there was still so much to learn, and my university class was also about to begin.

The *Ethnocenologia* class – the study of the “ethnography of performance” – would be taking place in the Ondina neighbourhood once a week. I arrived for my first class after a short bus ride, making my way to a building half hidden in a tangle of trees. Although it had nothing of the wealth or grandeur of the University of Toronto, I liked the open windows and untamed surroundings. Our teacher, Professor Carla<sup>2</sup>, a bright woman in her late forties from Rio, told us that she had been living in Salvador for many years. Looking around me at the other students, I felt a wave of gratitude for the opportunity to study at the Federal University of Bahia. I was proud to have made it despite a host of obstacles that included bureaucratic hoops, a long strike, and my own shyness at the idea of studying in Portuguese. The students – white, middle-class Bahians, a few from other states, and two foreigners – had a wide range of interests. Had I finally found my place?

By the second class, however, it became apparent that Professor Carla did not take kindly to differing opinions. Every time I attempted to voice an idea, she silenced me with a few choice words. After the more participatory climate of OISE, I was at a loss how to react. OISE might not be representative of the University of Toronto – there were probably huge differences *within* OISE itself – but the recognition that students could participate in a discussion and even

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<sup>2</sup> This is not her real name.

challenge a professor's ideas was something I had always taken for granted. I had assumed that in this Department of Education, there would also be a basic awareness of power dynamics in a classroom. While it was not entirely surprising that a tradition of dissent was not as developed at the UFBA – a university located in a deeply stratified country like Brazil – I was still shocked. In Salvador, studying might be the privilege of a tiny population, but for this very reason I had expected issues of poverty and social justice to be forefront amongst its thinkers. I was going to do my best to enjoy the class, but with the semester barely underway, I was already having serious misgivings, and none of this was making it any easier to think of my thesis.

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Our little community of foreign capoeiristas grew – Maria had begun training at the Filhos de Bimba – and there was an easy camaraderie, my week made up of capoeira and UFBA classes, punctuated with long dinners and the occasional outing. The freedom that I experienced in Bahia, the rubbery nature of my days and the way in which life was about the next dance or capoeira class, made the experience all the more vivid. I was not rich – not even close by Brazilian standards – but I was privileged, because I could focus on the things I loved and had the opportunity to experience life thousands of miles from home. This temporary state of grace brought something infinitely more human to life. Although I could see that Bahians worked hard – many people juggled two or three jobs to survive – they never seemed too busy to chat. Connections were the backbone of their lives, perhaps the only certainties in an uncertain world. In comparison, life in Toronto had begun to look more and more like a mad race, an endless rush from work to home. We might be far richer materially in the West than in almost any other country on the planet at any other time in history, but we were also more stressed and more emotionally disconnected from each other than ever before. I did not see, in Canadians, anything

close to the simple joy Bahians seemed to have in such abundance, and I could only pray that I would be able to bring back something of this spirit to Canada.

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Although life in Bahia could be sweet, I continued to struggle with my inner demons. My body was wearing down, my confidence in capoeira seesawing, and Miguel's disappearances were demoralizing, I was beginning to wonder at the wisdom of extending my stay in Bahia. It seemed absurd, however, to rush home to read *about* capoeira, when I was in its homeland and it was all around me, vibrant and immediate. One evening, as Maria, Julie and I gathered around the patio, teas in hand, a veritable flood of anxiety and pain came pouring out, to my great dismay. My friends listened as I described, in between sobs, my feelings of inadequacy in capoeira. When I had fallen silent, Maria spoke gently.

"Lang, it's obvious to everyone that you play a beautiful capoeira, but you just don't believe it, no matter who tells you."

Julie nodded, "Of course the *desequilibrantes* are hard for you. You're just *learning* take-downs! Besides, there are other things that matter in capoeira."

"Lang," Maria smiled, "don't you see how incredible it is that you've come so far in capoeira? You're not Brazilian and this isn't your culture! *Of course* it's going to be a lot more challenging for you than it is for them. They've grown up in this music and culture. Even the *ginga* is something they've seen since they were children. They have different challenges, so you have to stop comparing yourself to them."

The tension left me as quickly as it had come. I had known that something was off, but I understood then that I lived with the demon of perfection – a perpetual and relentless striving for excellence – and that unless I changed my thinking, I would never come to enjoy life.

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When Anum played the Regional anthem at the end of class, I was surprised by the lump in my throat. My former teacher would soon be leaving for Italy and we had a new teacher: *Professor Berimbau*<sup>3</sup>. Mestre Nenel had guided me, his philosophy and teachings imbuing the school, but Anum had been the one there for me every day, sweating with me, seeing me grow in Regional. As my dedicated teacher and my first Bahian friend, he had also given me a glimpse into the lives of Bahians, and for all of that, I would always be immensely grateful.

The new teacher, Berimbau, a tall, lanky man I had caught glimpses of at rodas, seemed serious and *fast*, both in his teaching and his movements. Whereas Anum had moved like a cat, Berimbau was all *snake* – quick and objective. Would I be able to keep up? My new teacher and I played together at the end of class. Although I kissed the floor more than a few times, afterwards he patted me on the back. “*ta arretada!*” *You’re on fire*, he grinned, his face lighting up with a wonderfully warm smile. I knew then that he had been as nervous as me.



Professor Berimbau at the Fundação Mestre Bimba, 2005 (Photo: Lang Liu)

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<sup>3</sup> To read Professor Berimbau’s interview, please refer to Annex 3.

## 6. *Malícia*

I had been training with Mestre Curió for five months, but I did not feel like I was “getting” Angola at all, and I was feeling less and less motivated to play in rodas. In my struggle to find a place in capoeira, had I become blind to its beauty? I was not alone in my mixed feelings for Capoeira Angola, however. Frede Abreu, the capoeira historian, complained to me that in contrast to their early twentieth century predecessors – virile, playful and irreverent affairs – modern Angola rodas had a heavy, “quasi-religious” atmosphere. I wondered if part of the problem might be *ego*.

Malícia and malandragem are often touted as the “underpinnings” of capoeira, but what do the terms really mean? If, by malandragem, people are describing the fact that slaves developed strategies for self-preservation – including dishonesty – when *necessary* for survival, and that many Bahians still live in an unjust world today, I will agree. Sometimes, one has few options but to steal or lie, but these are tools of *desperation*, not concepts to aspire to. Ultimately, they are self-defeating, because they do not change a system – they perpetuate it – guaranteeing that the very people who would gain the most by coming together to fight their oppressors remain fragmented. Because this is what we are really talking about, is it not? We are talking about malandragem as *selfishness* – tilting things to one’s own advantage – and how this has become elevated in the capoeira discourse. The concepts of malícia and malandragem are proud symbols of Bahian resiliency and creativity – at times of the larger Brazilian identity. Ingenuity in times of crisis is laudable, but the problem arises when these concepts are twisted into a glorification of selfishness that teaches people to look out for themselves at the expense of their community. Daily life, on the other hand, is made of basic building blocks like *cooperation* and *trust* – concepts which are often, not surprisingly, equated with women and the home. These

practices, as well as compassion and kindness, ensure the survival of a community, capoeira academy or home, not the more glorified ideas of war and fighting.

In Bahia, there is a story told in capoeira circles about a Japanese competitor who faced a capoeirista in the ring. When the Japanese fighter bowed before his opponent, as is custom in the fighting arts of Japan, the capoeirista took advantage of this moment of vulnerability to strike and knock his opponent out before the match could even begin. This story, celebrated as an example of Brazilian craftiness, has always saddened me. These rituals arose out of a desire to keep alive basic ideas of human decency and respect, even in the midst of horrific conditions such as war, and the *erosion* of these values ultimately undermines a society, leading to a savage state where “anything goes”. In a world where “survival of the most cunning” is the rule, what then happens to the most vulnerable, the needy and the weak? There is no place for compassion. When a state or a country fails to protect its citizens, it is natural and necessary for its people to find cracks in which to navigate the waters, but they must eventually go beyond this survival mode if they wish to create a more just society.

I had always felt uncomfortable with the glorification of *malandragem* in capoeira, so I was excited to stumble upon an article by J. Lowell Lewis entitled “Sex and violence in Brazil” (August 1999, Vol. 26, No.3, pp. 539-557). Pushed to its logical conclusion, Lewis argued, *malandragem* is a self-destructive concept that ensures the preservation of the status quo. Roger Bastide, the French anthropologist who studied Candomblé religion in the 1940s and ‘50s, also spoke about the transformation of African cultures under the strain of slavery. He wrote of a “reorientation of collective representations brought over from Africa” that changed the significance of the Orixás:

(In Africa) the divinities had been worshipped on behalf of the whole community – a community of cattle raisers or farmers.

Prayers were offered that the cattle, the women and the fields might be fruitful... But what was the good of making women fruitful when they could bear nothing but infant slaves? Better to pray that their womb might be sterile... (1978, p.67)

Bastide asserted that many of the gods were thus discarded and forgotten by the twentieth century, and that some gods like Ogún – once the protector of blacksmiths and iron farming implements – became the god of *war*:

In short, the African culture ceased to be the communal culture of a global society and became the exclusive culture of a social class, of one distinct group in Bahian society – a class that was economically exploited and socially subordinated (1978, p.67).

I wondered if this distortion of African values that had arisen out of a necessity for survival was being echoed in concepts like *malícia* and *malandragem*, and might explain the persistence of values that consistently elevated the self-preservation of the individual over the communal good. Cooperation has *always* existed in the capoeira world, but its place in the popular imagination has been eclipsed in favour of a selfish narrative of the individual who is cunning and shrewd. Although the *discourse* in capoeira elevates the concept of *malícia* and underemphasizes the presence and necessity of cooperation, the reality may be very different. If *malandragem* were to triumph, there would in fact be no capoeira academy, no community and no family! Without cooperation, capoeira would cease to be a game and turn into a brawl.

It took me a long time to realize that the *way* people talked about their lives or about capoeira in Bahia was not necessarily the way they *acted*. (This is not unique to Bahia, of course, but is part of the human condition!) In communities that have long been oppressed, such as those founded upon slavery and colonization, humiliation adds another layer of complexity to the story. When traditional roles are destroyed, there can be a greater need to create a positive self-image. I suspected that for men, in particular, whose sense of identity was strongly tied to

the public realm, a popular narrative of the man as a warrior, resistance fighter and malandro was important. Warrior men who fought the authorities did exist, of course – men like Zumbi, Besouro and many others who were regularly evoked in capoeira circles – and these men proudly shaped the history of Bahia. Their presence in capoeiristas’ discourse, however, often reflect the needs of practitioners than a true representation of reality.

### *7. Mestre Mica<sup>4</sup>*



Mestre Mica in the Terreiro de Jesus, 2007 (Photo: Lang Liu)

I was at Mestre Olavo’s weekly roda, when amidst the usual pack of jostling capoeiristas, I recognized the black, middle-aged man who busked and played capoeira with a cane in the Pelourinho’s Terreiro de Jesus Square: Mestre Mica. We had never spoken before, but as we shared a ride back to the Pelourinho, I knew I wanted to tell his story.

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<sup>4</sup> Sadly, Mestre Mica passed away in 2011 at the age of forty-six.

Days later, I crossed Mestre Mica on the steps of the old church of the Terreiro de Jesus, resting between shows. He waved me over, gesturing for me to sit next to him. The mestre, I learned, was the head of the ragtag group of performers that I saw daily in the square – lean, muscular men whose tough lives were reflected in wary eyes. I passed them every day, busking in the square, and usually, I rushed by so as to avoid the flirtatious come-ons and pleas for money. I had always felt ashamed of the wall I had erected between us and this time, at my friend’s side, safe from unwanted approaches, I could finally watch.

As traffic roared by, Mestre Mica told me that he was born in 1965, the son of Valdericia de Santos and Antônio Mel.

“My mother was arriving in the maternity ward and she hadn’t even gone inside!” he laughed. “I was born in the street and given two names – Waldemir and Mica – but I became known as ‘Mica’.”

Mestre Mica’s mother was a washerwoman and he accompanied her to people’s homes. “I went everywhere with my mom,” he remembered, “and I’d see the old mestres playing capoeira. My mom was a capoeirista, too,” he added proudly, “known as *Nega Beth*. She was also involved in Candomblé for a while as a mãe de santos and it was in a terreiro where lots of mestres went – men like Mestre Caiçara. That’s where I learned to ginga and to do a few moves. I played capoeira, but I didn’t really know what I was doing. My mother was a capoeirista, but she’d say, ‘If you become a capoeirista, you’ll be a bum!’ She wanted me to carry on our family name and she was afraid to let me play.”

“Few women played capoeira back then,” I suggested. “So why did your mom play?”

“My mother was a warrior!” Mestre Mica answered, proudly. “She was *gutsy*, you know? No one dared to challenge her. Nowadays, people learn capoeira in an academy, but back then, it was something done by black people, a *vadiação* – a game or pastime – and seen as something vagabonds did. It was discriminated against. I had lots of run-ins with the police. They’d interrupt our rodas and attack us, calling us *marginais e vagabundos* – marginals and bums. They’d threaten to beat us. It was terrible, but I kept going. Eventually, I showed my mother that I *wasn’t* a bum and that capoeira wasn’t bad. I met a man named Mestre Dedo and began to learn from him. Together we founded the group ‘Dedo da Bahia’. We did lots of shows and became famous. We played *Capoeira de Rua* – Street Capoeira – a ‘calça de açúcar’ kind of capoeira.”

“Calça de açúcar?” I asked, quizzically.

“We wore pants made from the bags in which sugar had been sold. When the bag was empty, you could wash it and make clothing from it. We didn’t have *abadás* like today! Playing here and there, teaching a student here and there, I kept going. I was seventeen when Mestre Dedo and I formed our group. He was just a kid, but he was really *smart* and he had a strong philosophy. He died young, so then I trained a bit with Mestre Mario Boca Frita in a

neighbourhood called Sete de Abril. My brother wouldn't let me come to the Pelourinho back then, because he didn't want me to get involved in 'bad' things. I trained boxing with my brother, who was good, and became a teacher, but eventually I dropped boxing to focus on capoeira. I earned a reputation as a good capoeira teacher. I play Street Capoeira, you know? It's neither Angola, nor Regional. I play both up and down – that's how I learned it. Our capoeira wasn't violent, but you could apply the moves fully. People started calling me 'Mestre'. *Mestre Mica, Mestre Mica!* It stuck. I was only thirty, but I'd already had a lot of experience with capoeira. I'm 43 now and I've been in capoeira for over *thirty years*, if you count my childhood. I was first exposed at six, but I started for real when I was ten. I've had a lot of students, some in Castelo Branco, where I used to teach, and others in the Sete de Abril neighbourhood. I have a student in Germany who's a Contra-Mestre now. Things were going pretty well, when I suffered a big blow: I lost my mother. Still, I continued on my capoeira path until I received the biggest *rasteira* – the biggest foot sweep – of all."

"What happened?" I asked, intently.

"I suffered a stroke," Mestre Mica responded, quietly. "It paralyzed my whole body. In fact, I suffered *two strokes*. I was getting ready to travel to Italy when it happened the first time. I was confined to my bed – paralyzed. My ex-wife abandoned me, but many of my students came to my rescue. My Contra-Mestre in Germany used to take me everywhere with him and I started to recuperate, little by little. I got the idea that since I'd learned capoeira and taught it, I could also teach *myself* how to function again, so I started teaching myself how to walk and play. I did physiotherapy – *capoeira-physio!* I put some weight on my hands and started to move my body – to *ginga* – and thank God, capoeira helped me a *lot*. I regained most of my range of motion. The music helped me regain the sensation in my face. You can see how my face is twisted. Singing in the *roda* and playing *berimbau* helped, too. Then, I had the second stroke."

Mestre Mica paused, but there was no self-pity in his voice. "That's when I got a bit down. I had so many problems and no way out, you know? I couldn't work anymore. When a human being is faced with this kind of situation, he goes crazy. Some people have the money to help them through an illness, but I didn't have this! I'd ask myself, 'My God, how will I survive now?' I became desperate, but once again, capoeira helped me. When I was training with Mestre Dedo, he'd always say to me, 'Mica, you've gotta learn to *lose*. You're not gonna learn how to beat someone up right away. You have to learn how to take a foot sweep first!' Mestre Mica laughed. "So I applied that lesson to the situation I was facing and I hung on. I kept working with capoeira to regain my range of motion and to help myself heal. I think I would've died without capoeira in my life. It helped me find the will and the means to live. My friends didn't abandon me, either. They saw me struggling and decided to help me. They still do to this day. I have serious health problems and I'm still fighting to regain the range of motion I lost, but I play capoeira on the street every day. Life isn't about avoiding death. *It's about facing the truth of your circumstances.* I fought for my life."

I looked at the man before me. He was thin and ravaged by two strokes, yet he spoke with clarity and wisdom I found humbling. "I've learned to live life in the present, knowing that this moment is all we have. Capoeira taught me to do this. Sometimes I'd cry and feel so angry. Other times I'd laugh. There were days when I couldn't walk, but my companions – my friends – would come to my house and bring me to the academy. They'd hold my legs and help me do the movements, so I didn't give up. This happened nine or ten years ago. There are things I've forgotten, because of the strokes. At one point, I had amnesia and didn't remember anyone, but capoeira helped me to regain a lot of memory. Playing in the *roda*, playing the instruments and



## 8. Mestre KK - Luís Bonates

Walking home through the Pelourinho one Friday night, I stumbled upon Mestre Augusto, seated at a bar with a Mestre KK Bonates from Manaus. “Mestre KK is a student of Mestre Miguel from the capoeira group *O Cativoiro* in Manaus,” Mestre Augusto explained, as he presented me to an athletic man in his late forties with light skin.

I was excited to discover that this was the same K.K. Bonates author of *Iúna Mandingueira* – a slim book with an intriguing blend of science and mysticism that detailed the existence of the iúna bird, a symbol of capoeira. The mestre invited me to join him for an *acarajé* – the spicy deep-fried chick pea ball for which Bahia is famous – and I agreed eagerly, thrilled at my good fortune. In Salvador, one ran into writers, historians and capoeira masters – legendary characters – and for the most part, they were actually friendly, accessible people. If for no other reason than this, I knew I had made the right decision in coming to Bahia.

Luiz Carlos Nonato Bonates – *KK Bonates* – biologist and capoeira mestre, told me that he was born on October 19, 1958 in the city of Manaus, state of Amazonas. It was a city with a past intimately tied to the rubber trade – a city that “dreamt of being European”, in the mestre’s words. “In 1958, there were 200,000 inhabitants. Now the population is over two million,” Mestre KK continued. “The globalization process came *violently*. From stone and steel, we went to technology almost overnight. My brother and I grew up in a remote, forested area playing with wooden swords.” Then, one night, their father arrived with a box of electronic toys.

“My brother and I didn’t sleep for *three days!*” he recalled, laughing. “We’d lived like Indians up until then, but after that our lives were changed. At some point in my late childhood or early adolescence, I had an identity crisis. I didn’t know if I was Indian, British or Brazilian. We drank coffee sweetened with English orange-sugar and Dutch milk, and wore the latest fashions of the São Paulo high society, all as a result of the *Zona Franca* – the Free Zone.”

KK described his upbringing as otherwise typical of a “Third World boy”. “I grew up on the street,” he recalled. “In those days – it’s still the case now – poverty came with a kind of solidarity. Everyone knew each other and helped each other out. We fought a lot, but it was thought of as a good thing. We’d horse around, trying capoeira moves – hand stands, foot sweeps, you know? Those kinds of things were a natural part of capoeira culture.”

Capoeira, Mestre KK explained, was the best thing that happened to him in his life. “Capoeira is very complex. It freed me. Not ideologically – I was already an artist by training and I read a lot. I love literature and my father came from a long line of theatre actors. He was a

banker, but he went out to the theatre a lot. I had *many* options in life and other experiences that inspired freedom in me, but none as dense as capoeira. Not even poetry comes close. Capoeira is also poetry! It makes you complete. The knowledge I acquired in capoeira and that I'm still acquiring, I did find in university, as well. There was philosophy in university – I was able to read and reflect – but that knowledge was something *hidden*. There's a saying I like that goes like this: 'Since they ordered me to be silent, I learned to speak with my body.' *Capoeira transforms you*. It opens your mind and develops your sensitivity. I won't say that it's *rational*. To me, capoeira's core is feminine. It has a whole dimension that isn't feminine, but its negotiation and its capacity to negate *are*. On the surface, it looks fragile, but that's a big part of it. Mestre João Pequeno uses the archetypes of water and snakes. To understand art, you need sensitivity and this is very developed in capoeira. It has an *anima* – a feminine soul – despite the fact that it's a virile, warrior thing."

Mestre KK paused. "Furthermore, for me capoeira is strongly linked to a polytheistic vision of the world, in the sense that it's very different from the Occidental Judeo-Christian vision. *There is no difference, fundamentally, between the indigenous world view and the African world view*. They are both oral peoples. If we talk about Marx and Weber – about the sociology of religions – they differentiate between the secular and the sacred. *In contrast, everything is sacred in the polytheistic vision*. The spirit is in everything. This less dichotomous – less messianistic – vision of the world came from Africa to Brazil. The Native people had it, too, this capacity to imbue everything with the sacred. The profane – the body – is similar. What worries me a lot in contemporary capoeira is that it exists on a single plane: *efficiency*. It's concerned with pressure, speed and the demonstration of strength – things that are actually *hidden* in capoeira. I always say that for me, a capoeira roda is good when you see neither a game, nor a fight. It needs to retain this duality. Now, I'm not saying that everyone has to become a Candomblé practitioner! But to understand the core of capoeira, you have to understand a bit about Candomblé, you know? Capoeira is a form of *popular education*. The mestres who created the game shared in this cosmivision – this theology and divine vision of the world – and this, in my opinion, is what allowed a certain generosity in capoeira. *Maudade* – 'badness' – and violence still exist in capoeira to this day, of course. It's just well managed. The roda is a helluva psychodrama, isn't it? Yes, there is paranoia in capoeira, but it's placed within an 'ecosystem'. There's an *axé* – a force that coordinates it all. To understand *axé*, you have to experience it. I've had the opportunity to travel outside Brazil and to teach capoeira, and I've realized that there *is* capoeira out there."

"There is?" I repeated, wanting to know what he meant.

"Yes. People do play. Of course, they're missing the *dendê* – the spice – not just abroad, but in Brazil, too. It lacks substance. Look, I don't believe that capoeira is limited to a particular ethnic group. It's a *carrier* of ethnicity, due to historic, sociological and anthropological reasons. It was a way of life for black people in Brazil. So for you to bring it to another place or social class successfully – to integrate it – you don't have to have black skin, but you have to have *feeling*. You have to feel something when a *ladainha* is sung or when the guy talks about freedom, the experience of slavery and capoeira. Otherwise you just remain on the fringes. It has to have *meaning* for you. There isn't just one way of passing it on and it's not enough to have black skin. It's a whole conjunction of complex factors that creates capoeira. Bahia is a place – a *Mecca* – because you find all of the factors here. Despite the tourism, despite the existence of capitalism and the fact that people live within a capitalist system, there's still an African feeling – an Indigenous *feeling*. The best word to describe this is *axé*, not *axé* in the

religious sense – the axé of Candomblé – but axé in capoeira. Trying to explain this axé to someone who practises Candomblé is easy, but to explain it for *all* of capoeira... That's tough!"

Mestre KK paused for a moment, searching for words. "You know," he said, finally, "I was on a trip to England in 2000 with Mestre Moâ do Cantendê – I've been there five times – and after the workshop, we went out to a little pub. Everyone sat down and ordered. Moâ and I looked at each other – it was very odd for both of us. Brazilians have this community thing – this camaraderie. If someone doesn't have money, they can still eat and drink. The next day, someone else may have more money. I'm not saying that they acted with bad intentions, you know? It's the system! The system is telling you all the time that *you have to be independent! You can't ask for help.* It's a pressure to survive alone in the world and it breaks anything communal."

"That's why capoeira is so powerful," I added, excitedly. "It teaches you another way of being – it teaches about community."

"Exactly! It shows you that you need *others* to share in the joy. There's no such thing as a sad roda, where people are closed. The collective becomes animated. The body is trained for that and becomes dependent on it. Sometimes when you arrive at a roda, you feel bad, but when the roda's good, it animates you. This energy, this knowledge – all of this stuff – comes from experience and familiarity. Maybe your thesis will help to decodify the little mysteries – to make them clearer. Capoeira is out in the world, but not everyone can come to Bahia."

"What was capoeira like when you first started, Mestre?" I wondered.

"I come from a time when capoeira was very different," Mestre KK answered. "I've had three masters in my life and two of them were fighters. Gato de Silvestre was a mestre and the two fighters were Vermelho Boxeur and Miguel Machado, both Bahianos. My education in capoeira was only deemed complete when I could 'put an end' to a roda. Do you know what I mean? My mestre would tell me to go to a roda and put an end to it. If I made it out alive, I was a formado! Nowadays, we don't do things like that anymore, but there are still mestres in Bahia whose test was to go to a bar with nine other students, say, and after everyone had eaten, drank, and all that, the mestre would say, 'Pay this bill, I'm leaving,' knowing the guy in question had no money. In other words, it was something very *practical!* If you chose to wash dishes, to run or to fight, it was *your* choice! The mestre would watch how you got out of the situation. The old capoeira was a different era. The nature of the conflict is different today. Capoeira is no longer about fighting. Today, when people fight, they pull out a gun, so physical conflict won't resolve anything. I fought a lot and maybe it wasn't a good thing, but it is a part of capoeira and it prepares you for any situation. Sometimes I fought for respect or out of jealousy. At the bottom of it, whether that's good or bad, I don't know – it's a dialogue. African cosmology enters here, too. In the preface I wrote to Mestre Augusto's book, I talk about capoeira as a kind of *Madame* – an old prostitute who runs a brothel and who knows everyone. She knows the Father, the government worker and the street sweeper. Every mestre has his own way of seeing things – his own experience and his own way of expressing and teaching capoeira. Even though the mestre is the keeper of wisdom, he can't understand everything. Now I have a question for you..."

"Sure, what is it?" I responded, surprised.

"If capoeira tries to instill certain kinds of behaviour and values for you to fit into society's demands – whether that be work, the family, whatever – do you think that with its educational principles capoeira has the ultimate objective of transforming you into a 'good citizen'?"

I hesitated, remembering Mestre Bimba's struggle to help people become healthy, contributing citizens. While I shared this vision of using education as a tool to increase people's possibilities in life, I knew that society's role could also be repressive. "Sometimes, but not always," I ventured. "Capoeira can help a person's integration into society but it can also provoke a deep questioning of it."

"I agree with you," Mestre KK nodded. "Capoeira is difficult to explain, because it's an art form, not so much in the aesthetic sense, as in the way it *enriches* people's lives. Capoeira *re-educates* and when it does so, it strips away a good part of the 'no's imposed by society. The ideological machinery of the State never completely succeeds in managing the human being, despite the fact that it exerts a big pressure on a person's life. In other words, capoeira *decontaminates* and helps break with the 'no's, despite the influence of the State's machinery. Capoeira is a powerful culture of its own – a culture of the body. The body is its repository and it gives pleasure. This is where words fail us... The way in which capoeira is lived by each person is unique. If there's anything one can generalize about, it's that through their work mestres unite various people around them and instill feelings of freedom. It's in capoeira's very *pedagogy*. The mestre has knowledge, but not in a rational form. It comes out of his experiences in capoeira. Of course, capoeira can be dangerous too. It can become too individualistic. Someone can use their knowledge to harm another. Like capitalism, it can make you forget about the collective."

"But doesn't capoeira teach the opposite?" I objected. "When you train capoeira, you realize that you can't play without a community. You're not just learning movements. You're learning a whole new philosophy."

"It is community-based," KK agreed, "but there's a saying in capoeira that goes like this: *Capoeira gives and takes*. Capoeira gives you a whole set of possibilities, but you can get lost if you don't know how to deal with the opportunities it gave you. You weren't 'capoeira' enough! The mestre brings people together around him. He's the thread that unites people, but one day, you may turn against him. So capoeira has these two aspects."

I was thinking over what Mestre KK had said, when he declared suddenly, "I think your thesis is fascinating! Pedrão – Pedro Abib – did something similar. Of all the books I've read on capoeira and education, his was, in my opinion, the best in terms of theory. He tried to give a new perspective on popular culture and he did this very well, but he was too emotional at the end."

"Why is that a bad thing?" I demanded. "I want to go even farther than he did. I want to bring popular culture *into* the academy, not just in the discourse. I've been asking people to tell me their life stories, because I believe that inside each person's tale, lies a life philosophy."

"I agree completely with that," Mestre KK nodded.

"I'm suggesting that there's a different way of approaching knowledge," I clarified.

"I come from the life sciences," the mestre explained, "so I can separate myself from my object of study. Pedrão built this whole theory and succeeded in encoding capoeira in an academic language, but I think he was too 'emotional' for a scientific study. In a system based on reason, this kind of work can contribute to the process of *mundialização* – bringing capoeira to the world. People who don't have the opportunity to see capoeira may not be able to *feel* it, but at least they will understand it a little better."

"I agree with you, KK," I continued, "that what Pedrão did was valuable. Someone has to share this knowledge and to show the value of capoeira. The difference is that in my thesis, I want to go further than this." I gave KK the example of First Nations Elders in the university. "I

find it fascinating that these Elders are being recognized for their knowledge, despite the fact that it's a completely *different* way of seeing the world and challenges the university's framework. It is a kind of knowledge in which intellectual ideas are not divorced from practice. It's 'dangerous' work, not in the 'physical' sense, but in its implications. It's a kind of revolution!"

"The university as a system has existed for six or seven hundred years and likes to call itself the universal possessor of knowledge – to suggest that it contains all knowledges, right?" the mestre smiled.

"Right!" I agreed, eagerly. "It's fundamentally Eurocentric, but it doesn't have to be that way. There are cultures with other ways of seeing the world that have nothing to do with this rational system. When you look at the way we learn, stuck inside buildings and cut off from society, and you compare that with, for example, the very vibrant way a young Native man traditionally learned about life while hunting with his grand-father in the bush... That young man was learning practical survival skills, but he was also learning a *philosophy* of life. We are taught a philosophy in school, too, but we think of it as "the Truth". We're being taught to *disconnect* from our feelings and from each other, while elevating all that is intellectual. True knowledge is much more and the way we're educating people is *dangerous* because it separates people from life."

"You're trying to make a contribution. It's going to be hard for you to explain, though. How you're going to structure your thesis is a problem you'll have to resolve," Mestre KK chuckled. "Maybe in this obsession to generalize, we lose something. How will you translate this knowledge?"

"I don't know," I answered, pensively, "but I cannot fall into the trap of using academic language. It will kill capoeira."

"Then you'll be doing literature," he countered.

"Will I? Maybe," I smiled. "Or maybe it won't fit in any categories – not exactly literature, not exactly art. A bit of everything – just like capoeira."

## ***9. Spring in Salvador***

It was spring in Salvador and the light drew the edges of buildings into sharp relief. I was getting tired of the city – tired of the perpetual culture shock and emotional roller coasters – and my injuries continued. People played hard in Brazil, sometimes at the expense of control. Ironically, for a culture so in tune with the physical realm, long-term *preventative* care of the body was not its *forté*. Bahians, I had come to realize, lived very much in the moment and they lived intensely. This was understandable in a place where life was so uncertain, but it did not make sense for me. Over the next few days, I turned in desperation to tai chi exercises I had learned years before and the power of these gentle movements astounded me. I realized how

much I missed the warm-ups in my Toronto capoeira class – not just the *physical* preparation, but the emotional and mental transition they provided. Warm-ups were a way of leaving behind “regular life” and entering into the complex world of capoeira. Bahians had no such need, because it was their *way of life* – a mere extension of their day-to-day selves. I, however, was looking forward to digesting these myriad experiences at my own pace over the next months in Canada. My progress in capoeira was being slowed down by old wounds – physical and emotional – and I suspected that I might be able to cure myself with ancient traditions like tai chi and yoga.

The acupuncture clinic I found was tucked away in a small residential street next to the Hospital Jorge Amado. Master Li Hong, a tiny man with a gentle face and a heavily accented Portuguese, had created an unexpected piece of Asia in Salvador. As we sat at the reception desk sipping tea and exchanging stories of our past, I was touched to see that our common ancestry created an instant bridge. For thirty reais – about fifteen dollars – I then received a massage and acupuncture. Traditional Chinese Medicine works on energy blockages in the body and was I in need of balancing! I knew then that I would go back for weekly treatments until my departure.

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Professor Carla had waved aside the essays. Our marks were to be based solely on our presentation and class attendance. I headed for the luxurious *Palácio* – an ornate building next to the Elevador Lacerda where the class presentations were going to take place. Although I had never done a presentation in Portuguese, I was determined to speak from the heart. Barely glancing at my notes, I talked about the educational dimensions of capoeira and my love for the art carried me across the sea of my fear. I was proud – I had faced many fears over the semester

and successfully taken on the challenges of the course, participating fully in the discussions, doing my readings and making the presentation with grace.

We came together one last time to receive our evaluations. Judging from the others' notes, I expected that I would receive at least 8 out of 10, so I was stunned when Professor Carla read out my note. "*Sete* – seven," she said distinctly. Had I heard wrongly? I had been one of the students who had participated most actively in the class discussions and I had done a strong presentation. Professor Raimundo defended me, going so far as to disagree with Carla's critique that I had romanticized capoeira. He liked the fact that I had made my presentation personal, using my experiences and focusing on capoeira's educational potential. Professor Carla, however, would have none of it. With a ruthless thoroughness, she took apart my presentation – I had not been "objective enough" (an ironic accusation, given that one of my biggest struggles in Bahia was feeling like an *outsider*) and my analysis had been too superficial. Although she had never played capoeira, Carla's capoeirista friends had told her of the art's essentially *malandro*, dark nature. I had painted an overly positive vision of capoeira.

I felt demoralized. My professor had attacked me with a viciousness bordering on pleasure and I could not help wondering, *what if she was right?* Maybe I did not "get" capoeira and never would. I wanted to hide and bury my pain in the privacy of my home, but I had promised Mestre Curió that I would attend his roda. That night at the ECAIG School, I sought out Mestre Augusto. As I told him about the evaluation, he shook his head and laughed, "Capoeira *is* romantic! You *know* capoeira, Lang! Trust yourself. You understand the culture here, so don't let that professor get to you. She didn't like the way you challenged her in class or the fact that a foreigner was teaching *her* about capoeira!"

Mestre Augusto had often voiced his faith in my capoeira, but at that moment, I had never felt more grateful.

## ***10. Mestre Olavo***

I made my way to Mestre Olavo's house in Santa Mônica, a package of bills carefully tucked in a pocket. The money, collected from my foreign friends in Salvador, was for Mestre Olavo's birthday party the following Sunday – the yearly celebration had almost been cancelled, as the mestre's wife was ill and her medication costly. Mestre Olavo welcomed me warmly and as we waited for people to gather for the weekly roda, he began to tell me his story.

“My full name is *Olavo Paixão dos Santos* – Mestre Olavo. I was born in 1943 and raised in Muritiba, Bahia. As a child, I saw capoeira in my home town, but I didn't know what it was. I'd often see guys with berimbaus playing capoeira, but I didn't even know what a berimbau was. They were Angoleiros – good capoeiristas, but trouble-makers. They had a game where they would put money on the ground and try to pick it up with their mouths. The quickest one, the one with the most *mandinga* – the most cunning – would get the money. I'd see them sitting on the sand and sucking back *cachaça* – the sugar cane alcohol. Since I saw them fighting a lot, I thought to myself, ‘This is *not* something for me!’” Mestre Olavo chuckled. “But when I turned eighteen and came to Salvador, I saw capoeira again and started to get interested.”

“The first capoeira roda I ever saw was in Salvador in the Pelourinho in Mestre Pastinha's academy. I started training capoeira – João Pequeno usually taught the classes. Eventually, I moved to the Perovaz and went to live in Pé de Ouro, in the Liberdade neighbourhood, where I met Mestre Waldemar. He had a roda every Sunday above a supermarket where I met legendary capoeiristas like Mestre Traira, Mestre Boa Morte – *Zacaré Boa Morte* – and many others. I was Waldemar's student, and for me, it was the *best* roda in all of Salvador. His rodas were definitely the most famous. They started at three in the afternoon and went until six. People came from all over – foreign capoeiristas, people from Salvador and the countryside. Sometimes we played until seven at night. There was no violence like nowadays – no fighting, or anything like that – and they were beautiful, clean games with great music. Waldemar was a great *ladainha* singer, too. I started capoeira at eighteen – now I'm in my late sixties – and I can tell you, there have been a lot of good mestres, but none like Waldemar. He had a *mandingueiro* voice and a strong sense of rhythm. I stayed about eight years with him. When he got sick and couldn't come anymore, I started running the rodas. At one point, he stopped coming altogether. I lead the rodas for about a year after that. Eventually I stopped going and Waldemar's rodas ended.”

Mestre Olavo paused and then went on, “The year that Waldemar died, I met Mestre Acordeon in Vitória do Campo Grande, where I lived. Acordeon had gone there to do a show in a hotel with his students and I was sitting against a wall at eleven at night, playing my berimbau softly so as not to bother the neighbours, when Acordeon heard me. He liked the way I was

playing – rhythmically, slowly, *choroso* – mournfully, and he thought it was *gostoso* – lovely. I thought he didn't like what I was doing, because he sat beside me without as much as a 'good evening', but then he started to play, too! We played berimbau for a long time and afterwards, he asked me whose student I was. 'I'm Street Capoeira,' I answered. 'I was a student of Waldemar, but I don't have a school anymore.' He gave me his address and told me to drop by his academy in Brotas. I was suspicious, but I went a week later. The rhythm Acordeon played in his classes was different, because I played Angola and he played Bimba's Regional. I learned to play the São Bento Grande de Regional rhythm and started hanging out with those guys. I trained the movements with Acordeon for a little. Although I participate in the life of both capoeiras, Angola and Regional, my training has been mostly in Angola. I go to all the rodas – Angola, Regional, Abadá – it doesn't matter. I'd trained with Waldemar at his Sunday rodas and knew the techniques, but I didn't know their names. I just knew *rasteira*, *rabo de arraia*, *meialua de compasso* and *cabeçada* – foot sweep, stingray's tail, half-moon kick and head butt. With Acordeon, I learned the names of the other movements – *galopante*, *martelo*, *ponteira* – hand slap, hammer kick, pointed kick, and perfected my capoeira. I've known Acordeon for about forty years now – since 1967 – and he's still my friend. He's always helped me in capoeira and in everything. He's been living in the States since 2001, but I still send him my berimbaus to sell."

"When did you start making berimbaus?" I asked Mestre Olavo.

"In 1958," he answered, "but I perfected my berimbau-making with Waldemar. One day, back when I was still living in the countryside, I decided to make my own berimbau. I didn't know the first thing about it, so I used a wood called *joema*. It is used to make berimbaus, but in the winter, it gets dry and it's full of thorns. I cut the wood from the forest and used it just like that. I did the same for the *cabaça* – the gourd. I used it straight from the forest. The sound was terrible! When I came to Salvador and started training at Waldemar's, he told me that the best woods to make berimbaus are *beriba* and *caipoca*. Nowadays, I make berimbaus from caipoca – good ones. I kept perfecting my berimbaus after Waldemar's death and today, they're better than the ones I made in those early days. I've learned how to work the wood better and I've familiarized myself with other materials. I *have* to do things well, since this is how I make my living! I've experimented with all kinds of woods – *caipoca*, *beriba*, *pitia*, *candurú*, amongst them. Beriba is the most famous wood, because of its name, but it isn't the best. Caipoca is much better, but you have to be persistent in stringing it and then it conserves well. Beriba is better insulated, but the caipoca's sounds better and beriba is about three or four times heavier. Once I started making berimbaus, I didn't stop," Mestre Olavo continued, "and I never will. Even if I won a million dollars, I wouldn't abandon my berimbaus! They are such a part of my life and now they've conquered the world. In capoeira, whether you have a voice like *Roberto Carlos* or you're totally off-key, it doesn't matter! You can sing and play berimbau."

We laughed and Mestre Olavo continued, "Isn't that the truth? The important thing is that you're singing and expressing yourself – you're letting go. Some people don't like capoeira, but they love the sound of the berimbau. It conquers them! A lot of people in Brazil sell berimbaus, but their craftsmanship is terrible. They want to get rich quickly and they will do *anything* just to make money. Further down the road, their students meet someone who's knowledgeable and makes them look bad. Many capoeiristas don't even know how to relate to others. You don't have to have a formal education, but you have to know how to deal with people."

"Do you still play capoeira, Mestre?" I smiled.

“Yes,” he nodded, “but my game isn’t what it was. I stopped training a long time ago, because I played berimbau – not *that* well, but well enough – and in most academies of Salvador, ninety percent of the mestres didn’t know how to play or sing. They’d pay me to liven up their rodas and that’s how I came to frequent other academies pretty much from Monday to Monday. I stopped training and my body got heavy. Now I get tired after five minutes in the roda! I used to have a fast, beautiful game full of mandinga.”

“So how did the rodas start in front of your home, Mestre?” I asked.

Mestre Olavo sighed. “Santa Mônica is a poor neighbourhood and I wanted to bring a bit of joy here. There are a lot of poor kids with nothing to do. Their parents don’t really care. Although some of them make a decent living, they still allow their kids to roam the streets. I came up with the idea of doing a roda for children, but adults began to stop by and wanted to join in. I tried to tell them that the roda was only for kids, but the word got out. Now, the roda is known all over the world! That’s how the tradition began. In a way, it’s like Mestre Waldemar’s roda. I feel like I’m continuing his work – playing berimbau, making berimbaus and running the Sunday roda. I work every day, but when Sunday comes, I have to find the energy to do my roda. I don’t think this tradition will end any time soon, because every week, the roda grows a little more.”

“People love it, don’t they?” I smiled.

“Yes,” he nodded. “It’s a remnant of the past – of the street capoeira that once existed. At the same time, it’s completely different. Nowadays, we only *imitate* the old rodas. Sometimes to add a little something or to relax people, I’ll play the ‘money game’. I explain to people that it’s an old game where you can only grab the money with your mouth.”

“Do the kids learn in the street or do they have classes elsewhere?” I wondered.

“They learn on the street, right at the Sunday rodas. That’s how I learned, too, in Waldemar’s rodas. I don’t have a space to teach kids. If I did, it would be a lot better for them and for me, but we have to make do. I did succeed in finding a space in a Catholic Church, but when the Father left for France, the new guy wasn’t willing to lend us the space. I’m persistent, though. I’ll keep looking. I would like to teach the kids both Angola and Regional. One of my sons teaches capoeira and there’s Contra-Mestre Glaúrio. People tease him and call him *Neguinho de Olavo* – Olavo’s *Neguinho*<sup>5</sup>. There’s also Nego Velho who teaches Regional. We just need a space. We have one in another neighbourhood, but it’s too far for the kids from Santa Mônica to get to on foot.”

“You know, Lang,” Mestre Olavo added somberly, “the government doesn’t help people from the *periferia* – from the suburbs. People who live downtown get some financial aid, but people in the suburbs are forgotten. There are many good capoeiristas and mestres here, but no one pays attention to us, because of where we live. With my knowledge of capoeira and berimbaus, if I lived downtown, they wouldn’t call me Olavo, they would call me *Sir* Olavo! I’ve had to fight in life. Everything I got was with my own blood and sweat. I worry about the children – I have something like sixty-plus kids under my care. I try to organize the rodas, but people want to play any old way. What can you do? I keep working. The kids love it. Sometimes, things get out of control and I have to stop the roda. Once, things got so bad that I told everyone there would be no more roda in the future. The kids were crying and the mothers yelling at me. It was total chaos! Eventually, I relented and brought the roda back.”

“Mestre,” I wanted to know, “Why do you think capoeira is so important for those kids and teenagers? What does it bring them?”

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<sup>5</sup> *Neguinho* means, literally, “Little black guy” and is a common nickname.

“They *grow* a lot in capoeira,” he answered softly. “Some kids are inhibited – they’re shy – and capoeira allows them to be themselves. They learn to speak to everyone, even to foreigners. They develop more confidence and the capoeira music is very important, too. They learn to sing and to play the instruments. I always have samba de roda at the end of the rodas, so they start to feel comfortable expressing themselves. Most of these kids are very poor. Sometimes, they don’t even have enough to eat – they skip every other meal, which isn’t good. In school, they can’t afford a uniform. A few of them live in better conditions, but most have *nothing*. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had to give them shoes and clothing – even capoeira clothing. I was able to give away *sixty* capoeira pants to the kids and adults! I had to run after the people of the Capoeira Fort for four months and I spent something like \$240 reais of my own money on phone calls and trips, but I succeeded in getting uniforms donated. Still, some people don’t appreciate the clothing. Their kids show up without their uniforms. When I ask them where they are, they say that they’re dirty, because their mom didn’t wash them.”

“Are the parents’ attitudes towards capoeira changing?” I asked.

“They *are* changing. Some parents forbid their child to come, but more and more parents are sending their kids to the roda. They’re starting to see that capoeira is not like in the old days and it won’t do their children any harm. On the contrary, capoeira is good. They see that my doors are open. I try to instill rules, just as I would in an academy. Sometimes, kids come to the roda high and I have to talk to them. I don’t use the word ‘drugs’ directly. I say, ‘It’s better not to come to the roda like that, because it causes problems and fights, and we’re amongst friends.’ The only thing I don’t want is fighting.”

“Capoeira truly is a school of life, isn’t it?” I mused.

Mestre Olavo nodded. “Capoeira *is* a way of life. It educates people, helps them develop themselves and teaches them how to interact with others. Capoeira brings people closer. If strangers pass each other on the street, they don’t speak, but in capoeira one might say, ‘Hey, Lang! How’s it going? Capoeira this or that...’ I’m not afraid to talk to *anyone*, even though I’ve had no formal education. I’m not ashamed to admit that I didn’t finish primary school. Educated people might say twelve words to my every word, because they know more, but I listen and learn. Thanks to capoeira, I’ve travelled to many countries and learned many skills. Capoeira teaches you how to defend yourself and how to be shrewd. You learn how to fight, but you also learn how to soften people up. Sometimes, a guy wants to fight me. I’ll give him a bit of money, chat with him and turn him into a friend. Capoeira teaches you all of this.”

“People fight about which capoeira is the correct one,” I remarked.

“That’s foolishness,” Mestre Olavo said, intently. “When Mestre Bimba created Regional, the name ‘Angola’ came into usage, but before that, it was simply ‘capoeira’ – neither Angola nor Regional. Some people say, ‘I don’t play in Regional rodas, or in Angola rodas.’ That’s stupidity. It’s all *capoeira* and we all play the best we can. Some people go in a roda with the intention of beating someone up. That’s pure insanity. Capoeira is about *union* – about one person helping another. Some people lack humility and always want to be on top. I don’t interact with that kind of person. I don’t want to have anything to do with them.”

“What do you think of the rules one finds in Capoeira Angola?” I continued.

“They were created because Capoeira Angola is the ‘primitive’ capoeira – the *mother capoeira* – and these days, people are mixing things with capoeira, using techniques from other martial arts like jiu jitsu. Wrestling is *not* capoeira. You can grab someone quickly in the roda and let them go, but you cannot use strength. That’s street fighting.”

“What about *floreios* – the acrobatic movements?” I asked.

“They’re beautiful, but they should be done only in shows. The *objective* in capoeira is striking and defending – doing a *ginga* full of *mandinga*. It’s about knowing how to move well. Acrobatics have no real objective, but nowadays, we see a lot of this. Everyone thinks they’re beautiful, but if someone were to attack, they would be useless. When you jump, you make yourself vulnerable. Sure, they’re pretty, but they have no value in capoeira.”

“Would you say there’s a spiritual side to capoeira, Mestre?” I asked.

“Yes, there is,” he answered, pensively. “Capoeira inspires people to sing, to write music and to play *berimbau*. Your spirit must be well-prepared for this kind of thing. It’s a kind of *magic*. Of course, not everyone is good at singing or writing songs. Capoeira is a *deep* mystery. In the old days, ninety to a hundred percent of capoeiristas wore a *patuá* – an amulet – around their heart for protection. Now less than half do. People used to do incantations, too – now people *play* at these things. If I use a fake amulet though, I’m putting myself in danger. If you have to pay for an amulet, it’s worthless, because you don’t *buy* amulets. I know a woman in Cachoeira who makes really good amulets. She’s a really old African woman and her amulets cost 350 reals, but they’re worth it. They can help you marry the man you like, protect you from harm, help you come out on top or protect you in a capoeira *roda*. There are false amulets that you can buy as cheaply as 5 reals! Besouro, the ‘Black Beetle’, had a powerful amulet, but the day he forgot it at his lover’s house, they killed him. His amulet was like my Grandfather’s – a *Patuá da Índia*. These are made through a kind of ritual in which you absorb the amulet by making a cut somewhere on your body with a knife and “putting it” inside, so to speak, with a prayer. The *patuá* then protects your body and stays there. Even if you get cut somewhere, it never gets inflamed. There’s only one thing... There’s an herb that you have to apply before you die, otherwise you’ll suffer a long and painful death. You have to take the *patuá* out, you know? Besouro had an amulet that he never took off, except when he visited his lover. Do you know why? When you *namora* – when you’re intimate with someone – you have to remove the amulet, because *isso corta santo*: sex makes the *patuá* lose its protective power. The police sent a man to kill Besouro with a knife made of *ticum*. If Besouro had been wearing his amulet, he wouldn’t have been affected, but he’d left it at the woman’s house. I’m telling you these things, because I like you. Otherwise, I wouldn’t talk about them.” Mestre Olavo smiled. “My friends always get mad at me – they say that I give away too much, but I was born for the world and my knowledge is for the benefit of all.”

The crowd had grown to a clamouring throng by the time I followed Mestre Olavo outside. He handed me a *berimbau*, insisting that I take the place next to him and began the rapid São Bento Grande de Angola rhythm, so although my fingers ached, I strove to follow. Back in December when I had first arrived in Salvador, I had been too shy to participate in this *roda*, and here I was, at Mestre Olavo’s side!

The capoeiristas here were another breed entirely – a tough, energetic bunch of boys and men who could do incredible things with their bodies and who loved to show off. I managed to

push my way into the roda a couple of times, but the games were frustratingly short. Players were constantly jumping in, the more aggressive players dominating, and games never had a chance to develop. I knew Mestre Olavo did not like this disorder and that he was often at a loss as to how to contain this stream of energetic humanity. Mestre Nenel's insistence on following Mestre Bimba's ritual – players having to wait for the permission of the berimbau-player and always going in two-by-two – suddenly made a lot of sense. I felt for these boys who lived in a society where marginalized people had few opportunities. Their need to assert and express themselves and to gain recognition from their peers was understandable, but I had to agree with Mestre Olavo: these young people had to be taught some guiding principles.

Mestre Olavo switched to samba, signalling the end of the roda, and I was suddenly propelled into the centre of the circle. I repressed a grin as one of my partners – an eight year-old with the swagger of an adult and the steps of a professional – moved skillfully around me, shaking his tiny hips. Was this really me, dancing samba in Santa Mônica? The roda over, I was swarmed by eager, giggling children, and as I tried my best to answer their questions, I was filled with hope. Despite their poverty, there was something in the children's' eyes – a kind of irrepressible joy – that seemed to say that in the midst of desperation there is always light.

## 11. Mestre Zé do Lenço's Birthday



Birthday roda at Mestre Zé do Lenço's Academy, July 2005 (Photo: Lang Liu)

Mestre Zé do Lenço birthday roda took place on a hot and cloudless Sunday at the end of July. I realize, too late, that I had come to *the* roda of the year – I had not brought my capoeira clothes. So after waving to the familiar faces in the crowd, I resigned myself to sitting amongst the spectators. Mestre Zé do Lenço's senior student, André, was being promoted to the rank of *contra-mestre* – a level below mestre – and I knew enough about the youth's humble background to appreciate the importance of this day<sup>6</sup>. Although at first I was relieved to be watching this spectacularly intimidating gathering of people, shortly after the first game, I felt the unmistakable stirrings of longing. I had always found Mestre Zé do Lenço's rodas special, but there was something on this day that confirmed what I had always suspected: our host had the gift of drawing the magic out of everyone. His rodas transmitted a joy and vibrancy I rarely saw elsewhere – perhaps the playful, irreverent spirit of the capoeira of old. Music, I realized that day, was the great connector, helping us transcend our small, limited egos and tap into something larger than ourselves.

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<sup>6</sup> Two years later, in 2007, André and Mestre Zé do Lenço had a falling out, and André is no longer with the school.

“In capoeira,” Mestre Zé do Lenço had once reminded me, “the *axé* is sensitive to people’s energies. If a person enters my academy with the wrong spirit, or if he is arrogant, he can break the energy. Some masters have a radical stance. They don’t understand that a person must feel free to play the way they know best. Every time they stop the roda to say, ‘*This is wrong. This is not capoeira,*’ it’s not good for capoeira! I didn’t learn capoeira this way. I may offer a suggestion to a comrade after the roda, but to stop a roda... Capoeira is magic and it changes all the time. Sometimes, we are moved to do things that we didn’t even know ourselves capable of.”

As I made my way home, the energy of Mestre Zé do Lenço’s roda lending an extra bounce to my step, I thought of the fact that, in many ways, my training in Brazil had not been at all what I had expected. Mestre Augusto felt that I had learned a lot during my stay in Salvador – I had broken my knowledge down into its parts and rebuilt it – and I would now be stronger and more conscious in my game. How I wanted to believe those words of praise! After training Capoeira Angola with Mestre Curió and struggling to drop habits acquired over half a decade, however, I had to admit that I felt more confused than ever. The same thing was happening in Capoeira Regional. Would I *ever* come to play with the same ease as the Filhos de Bimba?

## ***12. Mestre Marinheiro***



Mestre Marinheiro at his home in Feira de Sant’ana, August 2005 (Photo: Lang Liu)

With four weeks to go, I had, grudgingly, begun to think of my return. A new roommate and heaps of university work awaited me in Toronto. With my brother in Thailand, my mother in Ottawa, and many of my closest friends far away, it seemed like a lonely future. And what would happen to my capoeira? Where would I train and with whom? Miguel had left for a capoeira event and would be returning mere days before my own departure, something I was trying hard not to think about, so I decided to make the best of my time and visit Mestre Marinheiro – one of the elderly mestres I had met in Mestre Augusto’s Encontros.

Mestre Marinheiro, his wife Amália and their numerous children lived in Feira de Sant’ana, a medium-sized city of the Recôncavo. The house, located at the end of a dirt road in a row of similar habitations, was humble, yet comfortable. When I arrived, Amália was away at a market with some of the children, but three daughters were hard at work. The family lived off the sale of the instruments they made, and the girls were expertly bending long, stiff reeds with their small hands to make *caxixís* – the shakers used with berimbaus. Mestre Marinheiro showed me a tiny garden where *cabaças* – the squashes that would eventually be made into gourds for berimbaus – were grown, before inviting me to sit in the kitchen. As we talked, every so often, he would stop to fill my cup with a delicious home-made liqueur, and in this way, the hours sped by, punctuated by a brief break for dinner. I felt very much the privileged guest as I settled in for a long interview. The short, stout, mustached man launched into his life story.

“My full name is *Gerson Pereira de Jesus*, but I’m known as Mestre Marinheiro from my marine days. I was born on July 6, 1941, in a city called Jainpas, known today as Feira de Sant’ana. My family was of humble origins, my father a *lavrador* – a farmhand – and my mother a *lavadeira* – a washerwoman. When I was only six months old, my family moved to the big city – to Salvador – and life was hard. I’ve tried to give my children the things I didn’t have. Unfortunately, I never got the opportunity to become *cultured*. Capoeira is rich in culture, of course, but I never got a more *refined* education, you know? I grew up in the Liberdade neighbourhood and went to a public school in Bola do Ouro, and later in São Martin – it used to be called *Linha do Bonde*, because of a streetcar that ran through it in the ‘50’s – where I saw a lot of capoeira rodas. These rodas took place at the Armazen de Jujú, named after the Spaniard

who ran it, and was I ever dazzled! I fell in love with capoeira. What child doesn't?" Mestre Marinheiro gave a good-natured laugh and continued. "When I was seven, my mother sent me to learn how to be a mason. I wanted to be a mechanic, but she thought masonry was a better profession. I didn't like it and years later, I left the profession. Eventually, we bought a farm and built a house near a factory that belonged to a great capoeira master. This man was one of the best berimbau players of the time and was very influential in my capoeira. I am *very* proud to have been his student. In fact, I'm his only living student, today. I'm talking about Mestre Olímpio – *José Olímpio*."

Mestre Marinheiro paused for effect and continued, "Mestre Olímpio was one of the founders of the famed *Centro Esportivo de Capoeira Angola* – the Capoeira Angola Sports Centre – which was the brainchild of Mestre Daniel Noronha. He came up with the idea – he was the intellectual of capoeira – and then Olímpio and Pastinha arrived on the scene. In fact, Mestre Olímpio was from Caboto, Mestre Augusto's home town! So we moved near Olímpio – he used to call me *Geu* – and one day, he told my mom, 'Lend me Geu. I want to teach him.' 'Be careful, Mestre!' she said. 'He already asked me permission to learn capoeira and I didn't let him!' 'Don't worry,' Olímpio answered. 'Leave him to me!' In that period, the recently deceased Antônio Cacarangongo – Mestre Antônio Cacarangongo – also lived nearby. His full name was *Antônio Heloi de Chaves*. He watched me take my first steps in capoeira and he'd say, 'When he's ready, I'll bring him to Pastinha, God willing!'"

"So, at thirteen, I started to train capoeira with Mestre Olímpio. It was September 26, 1954. Sorry for the details! A lot of people say I have a mind like a computer! Well, we did what was called *Capoeira Fundo de Quintal* back then, meaning we would train in a backyard or in a *terreiro*. My mestre gave good classes and I learned my first steps with him, what we call today the *movimentos básicos* – the basic movements. Of course, it wasn't like today, where people take you by the hand and show you, 'No, my son. It's not like that – it's like *this*.' Back then, things were more... You know, it was like, 'Come on, come on, come on...' When I'd been training for about six months, Mestre Olímpio said to me, 'It's not time to put you through the fire yet, but I want to see how you're doing,' and he started pushing me a little harder. He'd say, 'I don't want a wimp. I want a man!' Nowadays, people don't like it when you say these kinds of things. One day, Mestre Olímpio told me, 'Gerson, I never had a son, but you're like a son to me.' He said he wanted to bring me somewhere to continue my training, on one condition. Every Tuesday, I would come see him and do a revision of my capoeira. So he accompanied me to the Pelourinho and we walked up the Ladeira do Pelourinho – to the Capoeira Angola Sports Centre – Mestre Pastinha's space. It was July 15, 1955 at 3 p.m. We knocked on the door and Dona Alicia, Mestre Pastinha's wife, answered. Mestre João Pequeno, whom I call warmly, 'old colleague', was teaching. He was the highest ranked student there. Pastinha taught occasionally, but the classes were mostly taught by the *trenels*. Mestre Olímpio introduced me – I was really young and baby-faced back then, but I already had a good base in capoeira."

Mestre Marinheiro paused. "I kept training there and visiting Mestre Olímpio, and soon they began bringing me to the Carramanchão de Sete Molas. If you've read Frede Abreu's book, 'Mestre Waldemar's Barracão', that's what he's referring to, except that it wasn't called a *barracão*. It was called a *carramanchão* and that's where Mestre Waldemar used to do his rodas every Sunday. Now that roda was a beautiful piece of work! It was always packed. I don't know why history speaks so little of Mestre Waldemar. Maybe it's because he was from the suburbs. There had been rodas going on there for decades and I met a lot of mestres. I used to

see Mestre Traira. The guy would stop suddenly and say, ‘Just a sec. I’m going to the pharmacy to get some medication.’ He’d go to the *pipoca* – the bar – and drink some cachaça alcohol. Then he’d say, ‘Let’s go! *Vamos vadiar!* Let’s play!’ And he was good... There were other great mestres – I call them *mestres*, but they weren’t considered mestres back then. Nowadays, *everyone*’s a mestre, but back then, it was a *huge* responsibility and most people didn’t want to take it on. They’d say, ‘I’m just a capoeirista. I was also lucky to meet Mestre Onça Preta, whom I consider my godfather in capoeira. Today, he’s really old – almost a hundred – and lives in the interior of São Paulo State. He was perhaps the best of them. There was also Mestre Aberrê, one of the great mestres. Then there was Mestre Canjinquinha, who was in that movie with Nagé and was the greatest *cabeçeiro* – the greatest head-butter – in the history of capoeira. Around then, I also met Mestre Bom Cabelo and his twin brother, Cabelo Bom. There was Mestre Zacaria who was already a mestre back then and was Mestre Waldemar’s first student. I got to play with him, too. No one speaks about Rafael Boca Torta, but he was a great mestre. And I met Flor do Mar and Boca Rica – not the one people know now, but Boca Rica Deidão. I met Itaberaba who, other than being a great capoeirista, was a thief too. There were some malandros! I was lucky to have been a part of this period with Mestre Waldemar. I didn’t have enough money to buy a ticket to visit Mestre Espinha Remoso, although I would’ve liked to have met him. He was a great mestre. I don’t know why we only hear about Pastinha and Bimba. Yes, they were great mestres, but they weren’t the *best*. Did you know Bimba was the one who started the tradition of calling apprentices *alunos* – students? It was around the end of the 20’s, beginning of the 30’s. Many university students followed the command of now-deceased Cisnando and Cisnando would sometimes bring his colleagues to train capoeira with Mestre Bimba in their school clothes. Anyways, it’s unfortunate that so many mestres are forgotten.”

“Everyone always considers Pastinha to be the great thinker,” I suggested.

“Well, it was *Noronha* who actually had the idea of creating the Sports Centre for Capoeira Angola,” he retorted. “People don’t want to accept that, since Pastinha took over the direction of the space in Gingibirra, brought there by Aberrê, his great partner. Yes, Pastinha did do a lot of things, but Noronha was there, guiding him from the sidelines. I don’t think we should be so ungrateful. I always speak the truth in my talks. Pastinha’s students were ungrateful. Bimba’s students were ungrateful, as were Waldemar’s. Those mestres should not have died in poverty. When Mestre Pastinha and Dona Alice were dying of hunger, people would make a *detour* around the house! People criticize Curió, but he was the *only* one who helped Mestre Pastinha, other than Lua de Bobó. Yes, I met *many* capoeiristas! If I were to tell you all their names, we’d be here all night! I was lucky to watch rodas at the carramanchão of Mestre Espinho Remoso, the father of Mestre Virgílio, who raised Mestre Diôgo. Mestre Diôgo is the best Angoleiro Bahia ever had. I saw many other rodas, too – the roda of the carramanchão of the father of Mestre Olho de Ouro, Velho Churrão. One of the son’s names was also Churrão. I participated in many rodas with the old Churrão and his other son. I also played a lot with Mestre Flor do Mar, in the Lateral da Leste Brasileira near the Joazeiro train – a beautiful roda that started Friday nights at nine and went until morning. I participated in rodas in the *Mercado Popular* – the Popular Market, which is now called the *Mercado de Frutas do Mar* – the Seafood Market. I participated in rodas of the *Mercado de Ouro* – the Gold Market – as well as in the Trapiche de Cima and the Trapiche de Baixo in Preguiça. You may think I’m making all this up, but it’s the truth! A lot of people can vouch for me. The day of Mestre Jararaca’s Formatura, I was the only mestre to broach the topic of women in capoeira. I cited the names of great female capoeiristas from the twenties and up. A lot of people didn’t believe me,

but Mestre Martinho da Pemba, Mestre Curió's father, spoke up, and said, 'He's not lying! I knew three of these women he spoke about. I played capoeira with them.'"

"Mestre," I interjected, "Could you tell me a bit more about these female capoeiristas? We hear so little about them and people always cite the same two or three names."

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "there was *Maria Homem* – Maria Man. Then there was *Maria Doze Homem* – Maria Twelve Men. We had *Mariona* – Big Maria – who lived in the Treva da Fonte do Capim, below the Pelourinho. Back then, we called a *treva* the place where water would pass through from one side to the other, when it was opened. There around the *Ponte do Capim* – Capim Bridge – on one side you had the Dique da Ponte do Capim and on the other, you had the Dique da Ponte da Bola de Ouro and in that passage, on that road, right in the middle is where Mariona lived with her six kids. She was a tall woman, almost two metres tall and very strong. When she drank cachaça and some guy tried to pick a fight with her, she'd really let him have it! A lot of times, she sent the police running. She played capoeira, but of course, in those days, it wasn't acceptable for a woman to do that. Men were *machista*. The only way women could show their knowledge of capoeira was during fights. A lot of people talk and sing about Maria do Camboatá, but she wasn't a capoeirista. There was *Maria Para-o-Bonde* – Maria Stop-the-Tram. Was she ever *valente* – tough! On the days she drank cachaça she'd wait for the tram, get in, beat up the driver, then throw him out and drive the tram herself! She carried a knife everywhere – in those days, knives were called *sola*, *leque* and *colavel* in capoeira circles. Or sometimes she had a *peixeira*. Do you know what it is?"

I shook my head. Mestre Marinheiro gestured with his hands, "A *peixeira* is an enormous knife used to cut up ox or beef – a well-honed knife – that's what it was called in the capoeira jargon. It was also called *peixeira* or *lambeteira*, or *viana* in the capoeira jargon. Today we call a gun a *colo*, but back then a *colo* was that kind of knife. That tough Mariona would wear those big skirts and a *facão*, which was sometimes called a *rico* on the street, right on her leg with an elastic band. She was always armed. Sometimes she'd even hide a blade on the roof of her mouth."

"Wow!" I exclaimed.

Mestre Marinheiro laughed. "*Lu de Guerra* – Lu of War was also one of the great female capoeiristas. Then there was *Nega Beth* – Black Beth – Mestre Mica's mother. She was also a great capoeirista, a student of Mestre Waldemar. Nega Beth was really brave. In Avenida Peixe, in the Liberdade neighbourhood where Mestre Waldemar lived, someone shot her in the head three times. They brought her to Castelo Branco, where she died. If you ask Mestre Mica how Mestre Marinheiro met him, he'll tell you proudly, 'When I was in my mother's belly!' She was pregnant when I met her. In the Calçada area, there was a very dark and very short woman named *Zero Um* – Zero One. She used to hang around Mestre João do Mar. They called her Zero Um because she only saw out of one eye. In the same period, there was a woman named Tambura. There was also a lesbian couple – yes, even in that period. They were both filhas de santos of a great pai de santos who passed away, Gozinho da Gomeia. They were known by the name of the Candomblé temple, Quijinda Belas, and one was called Mozambi, while the other was Mutabe. And to speak of just one more woman – because if I keep going, we'll be here all day and we won't have lunch – there was Paula da Maraca, another dangerous woman. She was young and she was my student – I was a marine back then. Many years later, I learned that she'd been shot in Rio de Janeiro trying to rob the Banco do Brasil with her brother. She was a pretty woman – she bugged and bugged me until I agreed to teach her capoeira. Much later, in 1975, there was this girl in the Pelourinho whose mother was a prostitute in the Rua das Laranjeiras,

where Mestre Bimba's academy used to be. At fourteen she was one of Mestre Vermelho Sete's best students. I don't know why nobody ever talks about her. The other day, I asked Bamba if he knew her, but he didn't. Her name was Tânia and she was known as *Diabo Louro* – White Devil.”

“But returning to my own trajectory, when I was sixteen, I used to go to the Carramanchão de Sete Molas where Mestre Waldemar's rodas took place and there was also a place to train boxing. Back then, the teacher was Brazilian Champion Ivo Barzillo. One day, I was training when a certain José Carlos appeared wanting to get even with Ivo Barzillo. Ivo wasn't there, but the guy watched us training and liked what he saw, so he said, 'I'm going to take you two boys with me'. He was the South American champion. I trained with him and one of his brother-in-laws, known as Éudes, in the *Corpo dos Bombeiros* – the Fire Station. I then trained with now-deceased Paulo dos Anjos – boxing, that is, not capoeira – he was a good capoeirista and a good fighter. In 1963 – I was a marine by then – I went to São Paulo, sent there by Paulo dos Anjos to fight in the Brazilian Championship of Amateur Boxing. I trained there with a champion named Altário Lucas, but I got tired of the boxing scene and drifted away.”

“I was always *crazy* about capoeira, but I couldn't find it in São Paulo. Sometimes, I wonder where these capoeira magazines find capoeira *centenarians* in São Paulo. Coming from a city like Salvador with so much capoeira, it was odd for me to have to go to the suburbs in search of it. Capoeira was badly seen, so it was risky. One day, I met a guy who told me of a tenant in his house – a Bahian – who played 'that thing'. I got up at five in the morning to take the train to the guy's house, but when I arrived, I realized instantly that the guy was Pernambucan. 'Whose disciple are you?' he asked me. 'Olímpio and Pastinha's,' I answered. 'I know them both!' he said. He had been to Bahia, because his son lived in Lapa. We started training capoeira, but he told me, 'Son, this place is really far for you. I'm going to send you to learn somewhere closer. Look for someone named Osvaldo.'”

“I went to the address he had given me and knocked on the door, calling out 'Peace!' Someone answered, 'Who's coming in peace? Must be a *Nordestino* – someone from the North East!'” Mestre Marinheiro laughed. “He opened the door and asked, 'Can I help you, son?' 'I came here looking for a Mister Osvaldo,' I answered. 'What do you want with him?' he asked. 'Apangido sent me,' I told him. 'Apangido is my friend! You're a capoeirista, aren't you? Come in! Come in, my son!' It turns out that the man was from Alagoinhas and knew the woman who had been raised as my sister! We talked and talked. He brought out coffee and refreshments, and sent his boy to get four others. When they had arrived, he said, 'Now let's play a little.' He asked me who I'd trained with. When I told him it was with Olímpio and Pastinha, he exclaimed, 'Olímpio of the Gymnasium! I know him! Does he still drink a lot of cachaça? Very well son. Make yourself at home. Come, let's play.' And he called for a berimbau. Back then, we didn't use atabaques in capoeira. If you hear anyone saying that they saw a drum in a roda before 1973, you can tell them that they're lying and that Mestre Marinheiro says so! The atabaque only began to be used in capoeira in '73 – before that, no one wanted it. It was first used in Capoeira Angola. Mestre Bimba never accepted it in Capoeira Regional. Today, people say they're doing Regional, but they use atabaques, agôgôs and all those things. They should say that they're practising a Stylized Capoeira.”

“So someone brought a berimbau – only *one* berimbau – a *tambor* – a small drum – and a pandeiro. There were no agôgô cowbells and no reco-recos back then. The reco-reco's job was accomplished with an enamel plate that was tapped. The music was *gostosa* – really delicious!

He called me to the foot of the berimbau and when I had kneeled, he asked me, ‘*Dá um recado, meu filho.*’ Sing us a song. So, I sang...”

<i>Eu venho de muito longe,</i>	I come from far away,
<i>Eu venho de muito longe,</i>	I come from far away,
<i>O recado eu vim trazer,</i>	I came to give you a message,
<i>Mas não me pergunte, moço</i>	But don’t ask me, boy
<i>Que eu não sei se eu vou dizer.</i>	Because I don’t know if I’ll tell you.

“Afterwards, he said, ‘Yes, my son! I like it! Now, let’s play...’ When my partner wavered, I gave him a *cabeçada* – a head butt. ‘*Ta bonito!* Beautiful!’ he called out. So, *tum-tum-tum...* He moved here, I moved there. I threw a foot sweep. He stood up, in went a hammerkick... *Pa-pa-pa...* I got a *chapa de costa* – a back spinning-kick in. ‘*Ta muito danado!* You’re tough!’ my host yelled out. ‘Hey Kid, come here and take the berimbau so I can *vadiar* – so I can play a little.’ What a nice capoeira he had! What precision. What calm. So, I started training with this man and every Sunday, we’d play. I learned a lot from him. I don’t know if he’s still alive. Back then, I was twenty-three and he was already around forty-five to forty-eight. Now I’m in my mid-seventies.”

“In 1966, I kept looking for more capoeira – things were slowly opening up – and around that time, a Mestre Freitas from Alagoinhas came to São Paulo – *José Freitas*. I had met him in a roda of Mestre Waldemar, since he’d been a student of Mestre Waldemar and of Mestre Joel from São Paulo. Mestre Joel’s first mestre was also the mestre of my wife, Amália: Mestre Liberino! Mestre Freitas had an academy where he taught both capoeira and *luta livre*. Then, one day, leafing through the pages of the São Paulo newspaper – the *Folha de São Paulo* – I saw an article on a *Mestre Waldemar Escultor* – Waldemar Sculptor. It wasn’t Waldemar da Paixão from Bahia, but I went to check it out. I told the man that I was an ‘admirer’ of capoeira and that I’d heard about him and wanted to watch a roda. It turned out that roda days were on Thursdays, but he said that he could call some guys over and we could all play a little.

‘But I already told you I’m not a capoeirista,’ I protested.

‘You’re *not* a capoeirista?’ he pressed.

‘*Não, Senhor* – no, Sir,’ I repeated.

‘Don’t call me *Senhor* – you can say *você*,’ he corrected me. ‘Are you really from São Paulo?’ I told him that I lived in São Paulo, but was Bahian. ‘I knew it!’ he said. He’d been to Bahia and knew many of the same capoeiristas I did. Suddenly, he exclaimed, ‘You’re *Marinheiro!*’ It turned out that he’d played with me once in the Carramanchão de Sete Molas! We played, had a drink and became friends. Every roda, I was there. He wasn’t an Angoleiro, so he asked me to teach him some Angola. I felt very inexperienced, but he pleaded with me to show him a few moves. I went there for about two years, until the day I discovered he was involved with drugs – back then it was marijuana. When I found out, I disappeared.”

“The years passed and I moved to Rio. I was in Central Station one day in ‘71 when I saw a beautiful mixed roda – this huge guy was looking at me and calling my name. It turned out to be *Sputnik*, a man who’d been a boxing champion in Flamengo three years before. I got to know the Rio capoeira scene well, but in ‘74, I decided to return to Bahia. I’d been coming to Bahia every year over the holidays to visit Mestre Pastinha and Mestre Waldemar – Mestre Waldemar had moved from the Carramanchão to the Passeio de Aguinela – there was a restaurant and a supermarket on the third floor of a place called *Caido do Ceu*. There were also

rodas on festival days and the first roda was at the Festa da Conceição in Ribeira. Then there was the Festa de Santa Luzia on December 13. Wherever there was a roda, I was there! A mestre named Um-Por-Um, a student of Grande, who was the student of Nô, still says how much he liked to see me play! I used to have run-ins at the rodas with a thief called Mingão and people still comment on it. This was in the late 50's to early 60's, when I was still a marine in São Paulo. After a while, I stopped coming to Bahia. It got to be too far and things were changing in the capoeira scene. They'd begun playing the so-called 'Stylized Capoeira' – *Capoeira Estilizada*. When I returned for good in 1994, a converted Evangelist, I wasn't playing capoeira anymore. I had problems with my knees and with my finger – I can't play berimbau, as you've noticed. My knee problems started at the end of the 80's, so I was able to teach Mestre Joel in Cachoeira."

Mestre Marinheiro paused suddenly. "If Mestre Curió knew I was sharing all this information with you, he'd get mad at me!"

"Why, Mestre?" I asked, surprised. "If you don't share this information, it will be lost," I protested.

"Forgive me, Lang, but Curió's right. People sell this information, because it's worth a lot. We mestres have always been well disposed to share, but people come with hidden intentions. If universities give such importance to knowledge, why don't they give their students money to pay their informants, a little something for the mestres?"

"I understand your point of view, Mestre," I nodded, sympathetically, "but universities have to be careful about using money to gain information. I agree with you that it is unfair, though, that the benefits, financial or other, rarely trickle down to the impoverished communities they've tapped into."

"Let me tell your university something," Mestre Marinheiro said, severely. "We are doctors, too – doctors taught by the *university of life*. Capoeira is a philosophy where you learn to speak with the body. I'll be really happy if you succeed in your thesis and I was able to contribute something of value, but I hope I'm still around by the time you finish it. These things take time and I'm old!"

I laughed. "I hope so too, Mestre! I'll do my best!"

### ***13. Adeus, Adeus***

As I settled in for the night at Mestre Marinheiro's house, the ring of my cell phone broke the quiet. The woman's voice on the end of the line sent my heart racing. Somehow, someone in Miguel's family had gotten a hold of my lover's cell phone and seen the messages we had sent each other. *They know*. My lover was gone for another week and had no idea of the private hell I had been plunged into. Had he ever, in fact, truly had the intention of leaving his marriage? It seemed suddenly, devastatingly, improbable. I turned off my phone and spent a sleepless, tortuous night.

Although life returned to normal after the incident, I was deeply shaken, and my hope – that upon Miguel’s return our relationship might finally move forward – was soon dashed. It helped a little that during my last weeks in Bahia, I was too busy to dwell on this latest deception and there were enough magical moments to keep my spirits high. On Mestre Jararaca’s birthday, I went to her home in the suburbs, a small, neatly-kept house that she shared with her children and aging mother. The guests, a small group of family and capoeira students, chatted and nibbled on refreshments while Mestre Curio prepared a fish. As Pit and Zé Carlos filled our cups with pop, Mestre Jararaca ran to and from the kitchen. Whenever she passed through the room, she would break out into dance steps, gazing radiantly at the small gathering, and I could feel my heart swell with joy and sadness. My trip was nearing its end.

The evening of my last roda at the Escola de Capoeira Angola Irmãos Gêmeos, I was unusually relaxed. I had been looking forward to the roda all day, hoping for a game with one of the mestres to celebrate the eight months that we had spent together. Miguel had promised an appearance, as well, and I kept looking at the door in anticipation, but as the evening wore on, my lover did not appear, and I began to suspect that Mestre Curio and Mestre Jararaca had forgotten that this was to be my last roda. I was crestfallen.

My hope turned to shame and embarrassment. Even though I had come to feel a deep affection for the members of ECAIG, perhaps this ending was a sign of the *true* state of my relationship to the school. Why had I thought that my absence would make any difference to these people? What did I bring that a hundred other foreigners had not brought before? The lingering sadness threw me off and snowballed into an existential crisis, a questioning of all of my relationships in the capoeira world of Salvador. The next morning, I ducked out of the Filhos de Bimba roda – I told myself I was busy and that no one would probably notice anyway – I did

not think that I could handle indifference from my Regional classmates. Too late, I found out that people at the Fundação had, in fact, asked about me and that Miguel had been stuck at work, the night before. It was sobering to realize that after all these years, I still did not believe in myself.

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Mãe Helenice's Candomblé terreiro, *Ilé Ayé Odím J'Oba*, was tucked away on the outskirts of Salvador. It was a long taxi ride and night had long fallen when Maria and I arrived, but I was glad I had come. The eve of my departure seemed like the perfect opportunity to give thanks to the Spirits for the eight and a half challenging, but rich months I had spent in Bahia.

We found ourselves in an immense, beautifully decorated room where sumptuous bouquets had been hung from the rafters and guests had come in their finest for this celebration in honour of Obaluaê. Maria had been invited by a friend, the lead drummer – the head ogã – and I watched in wonder as his hands danced over the skin of his atabaque. I had expected something somber, but instead, people were smiling and singing. The women fell into trances, one by one, only to be helped out of the room. They returned, vested in the accoutrement of their specific Orixá, and began circling around a large post, their steps powerful and hypnotizing. There were many things I did not understand about the ceremony that night, but it did not seem to matter. The music and dance spoke to a deeper part of me, and I felt in that moment the certainty that whatever I had come to Bahia looking for, I had found.

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The Orixás accompanied me all the way to São Paulo. I arrived at Guarulhos International Airport with precious minutes to spare before my flight, only to learn that berimbaus could not be taken aboard Air Canada flights, since they were considered potential

“weapons”. The three neatly wrapped instruments given to me by Mestre Marinheiro, Mestre Olavo and Mestre Zé do Lenço had made the domestic flight without any problems, but now they were going to be thrown in the garbage, unless I came up with \$100 American dollars. I had no money and no time to wrap the berimbaus. A sudden vision of my three berimbaus crammed into a garbage can made my eyes blur with tears. There was no way around it. I would have to give my berimbaus away.

Half in shock, I began looking around me for a friendly face, someone who looked like they might appreciate such a gift, but I was in *São Paulo* – only primped, tense people in business suits rushed around me. Suddenly, Bahia seemed a long way away. I forced myself to walk until I spotted a young Rasta, but it was his friend, a young Spaniard, who turned to me with kind eyes. Fighting back tears, I explained my situation in a gush of words, and it was my turn to be stunned when the man responded, “Why don’t you leave me your address? I’ll send them to you.”

True to his word, two months later, a huge parcel with three berimbaus arrived at my Toronto doorstep. Although it must have cost him a fortune, my Spanish friend sent me – a perfect stranger – three berimbaus from Spain. The magic of Bahia is never far.

## ***Epilogue to Book One – Toronto 2005-06***

I did not know it at the time, but a full year and half would pass before I was to return to Bahia – a difficult year of confronting self-defeating patterns and mending a broken heart. My studies at OISE absorbed much of my time and energy, but I began, tentatively, to renew my links with the world of capoeira in Toronto. I was on my own for the first time and felt keenly the absence of my family. Doubts assailed me day and night, exacerbated by financial and practical stresses.

At first, I resisted the return to daily life, but soon I began to appreciate anew Toronto – my freedom to walk the streets more safely, the respect with which men treated me, and the incredible variety of cultures and lifestyles that surrounded me every day. Even as I felt the terror of forgetting Bahia – of turning it into a “parenthesis” in my life – I realized that I was *not* forgetting at all. I dreamt often of Salvador and of the Filhos de Bimba.

In love, my hope rose and fell like the tide, but I had to face the truth: my lover was not coming for me. I spiralled into a depression that was to last for months, held afloat by my mother’s love and by a few caring friends. I found solace in books. In a perfect mirror of my internal disarray, my body was also breaking down. My right shoulder was diagnosed with tendonitis and I had to give in to the evidence – at thirty-five, my body was as tense as a violin string. I began to devote myself to seeing a slew of experts, from sports therapists and acupuncturists to massage therapists, and threw myself into stretching, tai chi and yoga with the same focus and discipline that had served me in capoeira for years. I began to teach capoeira again – an hour a week at a local community centre. To my surprise, some of my former students reappeared and I soon added a second day. Within the year, we relocated to a martial

arts gym. I had also begun teaching capoeira at the Hart House gym in the University of Toronto and running capoeira workshops wherever I was invited to do so.

I was juggling two part-time jobs at the university, applying for grants, taking two courses at OISE, and trying to work on a required Proposal and Ethics Review. The thesis was proving to be a struggle. Added to the challenge of finding a way to fit capoeira into the academic discourse was the fact that so many memories were still associated with my former lover. I came across Gregory Downey's dissertation, an eloquent piece written through the lens of Phenomenology, in which Downey detailed his experience training Capoeira Angola in Salvador with Mestre Moraes, and could not help wondering: had it all been done before?

I wanted to do something different – I wanted to talk *about* capoeira, but also to talk *with* it. Capoeira was lived through the body (I imagined it as a lyrical, slightly mischievous being with a penchant for escaping closed quarters) so if it were to enter and thrive in the academic world, it would have to be on its own terms. I wanted to be both analytical *and* personal, not only grounding my theory in experience, but also expressing it in a sensual, expressive manner befitting of the art form. I wanted somehow to show the connection between capoeira and the larger issues plaguing our planet – the rupture between mind, body, and spirit in Western culture that had resulted in ecological and social devastation. Although issues like *patriarchy* and *Eurocentrism* were openly debated at OISE, I felt like many of the old paradigms were being reproduced. Ultimately, the underlying message was still that life could be dissected and analyzed in the comfort of a classroom, or in the pages of a thesis, the mind viewed as superior to the body.

I began looking outside academia for inspiration and came across several books that helped me to clarify my ideas. I devoured David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), a book

which challenged the Cartesian model of western civilization and affirmed the sacredness of the physical world. Years later, I would read Abram's *Becoming Animal* (2010). I fell in love with Jerry Mander's *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations* (1992), a damning critique of technology and an exploration of an alternative Indigenous vision. There was also Gabor Maté's *When the Body Says No: The Hidden Cost of Stress* (2004) exploring the link between individual disease and repressed emotion. These books all shared a fundamental idea: a critique of the Western world's rupture of body and mind – a separation of the various dimensions of a human being.

An Arts-Informed Research class with Professor Ardra Cole taught me that I could blend the Arts and academia. I was intrigued. Could I write about the capoeira masters I had met and about my own experience? In July of 2006, I formed my thesis committee, choosing three individuals whose work inspired me: Jean-Paul Restoule, a young and inspiring First-Nations professor, Anne Goodman, whose course "Transformative Learning and Peace" lovingly bridged the divide between the personal and the academic, and David Turner, my advisor during my masters in anthropology, a man who had studied and lived with Australian Aborigines. Roxana Ng would come on board later as my supervisor – I was drawn by her integration of Qi Gong theory and practice in her classes on Traditional Chinese Medicine.

I did a lot of crying on sleepless nights, but in the spring my brother was back and the summer months were happy ones as we explored Toronto together. Slowly, I began replenishing my heart and plotting a trip to Brazil. I needed to continue my research and to sound out future interviews with the mestres. There was talk of a trip with my capoeira students. Bahia, which had felt far away, was suddenly present. Contrary to my earlier fears, after a year and a half in Toronto, I was recreating my capoeira community, teaching as much as I could remember of the

Regional I had trained at the Filhos de Bimba. The more I practised the traditional songs and rhythms, the more I was *feeling* everything, and when I closed my eyes, I was back in the Fundação. As class attendance rose and fell, I was filled with doubts, but I hung on, and on December 4, 2006, leaving a student in charge of my capoeira classes I boarded the plane for Brazil. I was returning after a year and a half – a little less naive, a little less idealistic, but stronger than ever in my love for Bahia.

# Book Two

*Capoeira: A Tapestry of Brazil (December 2006 – April 2007)*

## *~ Part One: Salvador da Bahia*



Mestre Augusto, Lang and her students on Boa Viagem beach, December 2006 (Photo: Lang Liu)

### *1. Mestre Augusto and the Students*

A wave of memories – of familiar sights and sounds – flooded me the moment I stepped into Maria’s apartment. After an interminable trip, I was in Santo Antônio again, and the part of me that had been carefully buried for the past two years stood up, shook itself off, and gazed around with tangible relief. I had expected to be moved, yet the intensity surprised me. After my initial joy, a host of other emotions bubbled up – fear, anger and profound sadness. Every time I glanced at Maria, I felt the passage of time.

The next morning, I was not prepared for the shock of leaving the apartment. Santo Antônio fairly burst with activity as I struggled to keep up with Maria’s long-legged strides. Not so long ago, this had been home for me, but now my translucent winter skin fairly recoiled from

the heat. After a short ride, the bus coughed us up onto the hot pavement, and then we were walking again, descending a steep hill. Below us, the first glimmers of the sea had appeared between waving palm trees.

We were at the top of a tall white sand dune, blinking under an impossibly blue sky, when a feeling of joy exploded in my chest. After the sea had baptized me, tossing me like a rag doll and making me drink great gulps of salt water; I crawled out of the waves and stood dizzily for a moment, overcome with gratitude. I had made it back to my beloved Bahia.

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The thought of Salvador without my lover was devastating, yet excitement began to stir within me when thirteen of my students arrived in Salvador. We would be staying for two weeks at a bed and breakfast in Boa Viagem run by nuns of the Organização Fraternal São José, with several mestres from outside Bahia, all of us participating in Mestre Augusto's four-day Capoeira Angola Encontro. Although I trained Regional, I knew that Capoeira Angola would give the students insights into Bahian culture and I could not wait to share with them the warm relationships I had developed over the years with the Angola mestres. The first week, there would be a busy round of workshops, rodas and visits to academies – an exploration of the world of Capoeira Angola – followed by a side trip to the city of Aracajú, in the state of Sergipe.

It was good to see Mestre Augusto again and as we rode from the airport, I began peppering him with questions.

“Mestre, capoeira has changed so much nowadays. What do you think of these changes?”

Mestre Augusto paused before answering. “Capoeira is an *activity* without a specific root, so each person has his own vision. It's like a plant that can be looked at from various perspectives – each person will see something different. You can only see what you understand. Sometimes, people add their own ideas to capoeira and think it's the truth, but it's just a story – not *the* truth. Capoeira has *many* truths and that's capoeira's great richness. It's multifaceted.”

“So if everyone has a different vision, how can we come to a common understanding of capoeira?” I pondered.

“Well, although many discourses do exist, there’s only *one* body language in capoeira. That’s why people understand each other. With discourse, on the other hand – the metaphorical part of capoeira – everybody has his own vision. How many people have read the Bible and come up with different interpretations? Capoeira’s the same.”

“But this presupposes that people share a similar culture,” I objected.

“Yes,” he conceded, “depending on the individual’s culture, he’ll create a corresponding capoeira. The capoeira vision from someone in Santo Amaro is not going to be the same one as a guy in Ilheus. One guy grows sugar cane, while the other grows cacao and coffee. Their cultures are different, so their visions will be different, even though their body language will be similar.”

“So,” I said, trying to organize my thoughts, “How does the question of culture enter into capoeira and especially into Capoeira Angola with its close ties to Bahia, now that you have capoeira *outside* of Bahia?”

“It depends on the kind of capoeira people are bringing with them,” Mestre Augusto pointed out. “*Who* is bringing the capoeira abroad and *to whom* are they teaching it? Do they know enough about Bahia to teach it, or will they make adaptations, since the way people move abroad is so different than they do here? One of the strengths of capoeira is that it moulds itself to the culture. The interpretation of capoeira movements will be different there than here, because the same movements are being placed in different environments, climates, visions and *emotional* environments. When you learn capoeira here, in Salvador, your spiritual state is already affecting your understanding. ”

“Do you think capoeira has been endangered by the meeting of other cultures?” I asked.

“No, no, no!” Mestre Augusto shook his head, emphatically. “*Capoeira* has not changed. It’s *people* who are changing it. In Bahia, the vision of capoeira isn’t a commercial one, while in Europe, North America and other Brazilian states, it is. Here, the outside influences are minimal. People in Bahia give themselves in a way that they don’t out there, where all sorts of factors can affect the way capoeira develops.”

“What do you see as the difference between Bahian capoeira and other capoeiras?” I asked.

“The capoeira culture of Bahia is native to here. Its origins and its roots are here, so the *sentiment* is different. The way I play is different. My ginga, for example, is authentic and natural. It’s different from a ginga in another part of Brazil where people try to *imitate* what Bahians do naturally. It’s a good thing that people want to imitate us, but people get lost easily. They don’t know *why* they’re contorting themselves. If a guy wants to know why I move a certain way, he has to come and live with me for a while. *Then* his capoeira will mature and he’ll start to pick up the Bahian mannerisms. Of course, some things are personal – no matter how long the person is around, he won’t pick them up – but by coming here, it shows an interest in learning. A lot of people come for a month or two. They may be dedicated and able to compare what they’ve learned here with what they’ve learn back home, but to understand, they have to *live* in the culture for a certain amount of time, like you.”

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After a short ride on the Lacerda Elevator, the students and I were in the Pelourinho, their first glimpse of the historic area. I ushered them down the Rua Gregório de Matos and, suddenly,

we were standing in front of the familiar entrance of the Fundação Mestre Bimba. My stomach began to knot in earnest.

Anum caught sight of me as I descended the stairs. My professor took me tightly in his arms, his face radiant with joy. I had half-dreaded, half-anticipated returning to the Fundação, not knowing what awaited me, but even Mestre Nenel seemed happy to see me. “You’re a part of the family now!” he greeted me. It struck me that in a transient place like Salvador’s capoeira world, coming back meant a lot to those who stayed behind.

Before the roda, everyone was expected to warm up in pairs by going through the *Sequência* – the set of movements that Mestre Bimba had created to cover the ABCs of Capoeira Regional. I had warned my students that they would need to know this sequence inside out, but only now did they understand – I saw their panicked eyes as they stumbled nervously through the movements, aware of the gaze of curious onlookers. When everyone was done, we lined up in two rows that hugged the walls of the room.

I had been anxious at the thought of entering the roda, as I had not been playing well for months, but the students of the Fundação were relaxed and generous in their movements, and soon, I forgot my physical fatigue, reveling in the flow of the game. Gazing over at my students, I saw their excitement and fear. Plunged abruptly from the Canadian winter to the Bahian summer – from the quieter energy of Canada to the vivacity and loudness of Bahia – the sheer intensity of the roda with its shouting, sweaty bodies, was undoubtedly overwhelming. When we left the Fundação, I thought I read a new respect in their eyes. In a short time, something had shifted in their understanding of Capoeira Regional. In Toronto, I had striven to transmit my knowledge of capoeira to the best of my ability, but I was a Canadian attempting to teach a traditional form of Capoeira Regional, while the capoeira reference in Toronto, aside from a

couple of Capoeira Angola schools, was of contemporary styles. Here, they were in the belly of Capoeira Regional – its motherland – where they could *see* and *feel* it, surrounded by skilled practitioners who could render the fullness of the art. Capoeira was no longer an exotic or abstract *thing*, but a deeply-rooted art form intrinsically linked with a way of being and a culture. Seeing how vulnerable and disoriented my students were – unable to speak the language, lost geographically and culturally – also gave me a sense of the knowledge I had accumulated over the past decade. My students had always been supportive, but in a one-hour class sandwiched between yoga and closing time, they had had no context with which to understand what I was offering them. After two difficult years, I could finally share the bonds I had painstakingly and lovingly formed in 2005, during my eight and a half months in Bahia.

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Mestre Augusto had scheduled a variety of workshops for us and the mestres he invited loved to talk, challenging me to use every bit of my translation skills. My students were beginning to understand the dedication and passion required to live capoeira – the ways in which the art form was so intricately tied to peoples' lives. I could see that they were moved by the generosity of these mestres, who had so little materially and yet were bubbling over with joy.

Monday morning, my students and I had our first class at the Fundação Mestre Bimba. The school – the music, movements and atmosphere – they assured me, felt familiar to them and they loved the people. Could I have prepared them sufficiently well, after all? Many times in Toronto, far from Bahia, unsure about the teachings, I had felt demoralized. Although I had never claimed to represent the Filhos de Bimba or to be teaching the traditional Regional style (only to be *striving* to follow the teachings), I felt like an imposter. Comparing myself with the highly skilled Filhos de Bimba teachers, I was embarrassed to admit that I taught capoeira, so I

could not have been more surprised when, at the end of his class, Anum congratulated me on instilling the spirit of Regional in my students. Truly *nothing* was as I had expected in Bahia.

It was the next day, a sweltering morning, when I brought my students for a class with Mestre Jararaca, that I knew I would not return to Angola. I was excited to see my former mestre and I had not forgotten the movements, yet something had changed. Although I still felt connected to Capoeira Angola, I wanted to devote myself to Bimba's Regional. While it would be hard to turn away from my old friends, I knew then that I would no longer be training at the Escola de Capoeira Angola Dois Irmãos.

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Gerard Taylor (2005) wrote that the San gatherer-hunters, nomadic people who had lived on the open savannah between modern Somalia and central Angola at least seven to eight thousand years ago (p.340), had used a *berimbau de boca* – a mouth berimbau – and, according to Taylor, greatly influenced the musical traditions of the Bantu people who migrated into the area. It was the Bantu people, however, who made the change from the mouth as a resonator to the gourd – the structure of modern-day berimbaus in Brazil. Variations of the berimbau were found in other African countries. In Cuba, they were called *burumbumba*, played during funerals and attributed magical properties. In Brazil, they were a symbol of capoeira, their haunting melodies imbued with spiritual powers.

A true musician could coax an astonishing variety of sounds from a berimbau, but when I arrived with my students in 2007, I still felt like a beginner, despite having attempted to play the berimbau for almost *ten years*. I was glad, therefore, that one of the last events in Mestre Augusto's Encontro was a berimbau-making workshop with Mestre Zé do Lenço. Perhaps here I would learn something of the secrets of the berimbau.

A beaming mestre greeted us at the door of his Aquidabã academy. He had already assembled the materials we would need for the workshop – various types of wood with their barks still attached, entire gourds that needed to be cut and hollowed out, wires to make *arames* with which to string the berimbaus, and other odds and ends. For several hours we sawed, sanded, nailed, hollowed and worked on assembling the various parts of this instrument under the watchful eye of Mestre Zé do Lenço. He had to help us more than a few times, his nimble fingers doing in seconds what we had struggled with for long minutes and by the end of the afternoon, my students had a whole new respect for the quirky instrument.

As we worked, I saw Mestre Zé do Lenço surveying us with a deep and satisfied smile. Heads bowed, minds utterly absorbed in their tasks, my students worked meticulously. It occurred to me that for many of the mestres we had met during the Encontro, life was a struggle not only materially, but in other ways, as well. The wider Bahian society, by and large, still looked down on Afro-Bahian cultural manifestations and for someone like the mestre who had devoted his life to his art, my students' respect offered a rare moment of recognition. I knew that many foreigners, my students included, did not yet grasp the full extent of the discrimination capoeiristas faced in Brazil. In Canada, like in many other countries where it had been introduced, capoeira was perceived as a beautiful, rather exotic art form, and slavery was the stuff of legend – not a tangible reality. In Brazil, however, this sordid legacy was never far, reflected in a system of repression that favoured a tiny minority and meant grinding poverty for the rest. All of these experiences were slowly opening my students' eyes to the harsh reality for many people in Brazil and expanding their understanding of the larger world.

## 2. Mestre Adolfo – Aracajú



Mestre Adolfo, a.k.a. “Lobo Mau” in Aracajú, 2007 (Photo: Lang Liu)

The bus hummed along a winding road that would take us from Salvador to Aracajú, the capital of Sergipe where Mestre Adolfo, also known as *Lobo Mau* – the Bad Wolf – awaited us. The young mestre had timed his weekend Encontro for our passage. As the city slowly gave way to farmland, I thought of how the trip had been an overwhelming success so far. Coming to Bahia on my own, I had expected the worst, but not only had I been blessed with a group of adventurous and sensitive students who were feeling capoeira in an entirely new way, the reception from the capoeira community had been beyond anything I could have imagined. The only dark cloud on my horizon was Miguel – he had come to a few events and it was always a pure torture to see him. Despite my joy at being in Bahia, I could feel despair lingering on the edges of my awareness. As long as I kept busy, I was okay, but in quieter moments, those feelings returned, and I could feel my resolve beginning to crumble.

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I had met Mestre Adolfo, an attractive man of mixed African and European origins in his early forties, back in 2003. As the young mestre strode towards us, I caught sight of an impish

face and laughing eyes set over copper skin. His sincerity, coupled with a keen mind and a sense of humour, made him eminently likable. While we rode in the van, I plied the young mestre – *Adolfo das Costas* – with questions, and learned he had been born in 1968 to a large, poor family of eleven brothers and sisters.

“When I was a child, we used to fish to survive,” he remembered. “I wasn’t a *street kid* per se, but I spent a lot of time on the street. During my childhood, capoeira came into my life and although it did not lift me out of poverty, it did transform my life in so many ways. I used to be one of those kids that people commented on, ‘That kid’s a *valentão* – a real toughie. Don’t mess with him, because he’s good with his fists,’ but capoeira taught me that violence isn’t always the best way to resolve your problems.”

“When did you start learning capoeira, Adolfo?” I wanted to know.

“I learned capoeira in Aracajú. I already played in the streets – I’d learned from watching – but I didn’t really *know* capoeira and I definitely didn’t value it. I thought all capoeiristas were potheads! Things only changed when I learned about a capoeira class from a schoolmate. My brother offered to pay the membership, so I went and I fell in love with capoeira. My mom would never have allowed me to train. She was very religious and thought capoeira was something from Candomblé, even though I never saw Candomblé or *any* religion pushed on us in class. If anything, I saw that the Catholic religion had a strong influence in capoeira. When you enter the roda, you kneel and bless yourself, right? The occasional Candomblé influences were just expressions of a particular person’s beliefs. I was eleven when I started capoeira. I’d come home after class all battered and bruised, and tell my mother I’d fallen in soccer. I hid my uniform, so she wouldn’t know I was training. In those days, there was still a lot of discrimination against capoeira, so we were encouraged not to tell *anyone*! We couldn’t wear our uniform in the streets. It wasn’t *legally* prohibited anymore, but it might as well have been. We still suffer some discrimination today, because capoeira is linked to the fighting arts. One day, my mother discovered that I was training capoeira. Even after she’d shredded my capoeira pants and told me repeatedly that I couldn’t go, I decided that my father was the one in charge of our home. Until he forbade me to go, I’d keep training!”

“What were your classes like back then?” I asked the young mestre.

Mestre Adolfo smiled. “We were always well guided. My friends and I stopped fighting in the street, even though in class we played *hard*. I had two teachers: Zumbi, whose capoeira nickname was *Gato* – the cat – and who’s since stopped capoeira, and *Morcego* – the bat – who still teaches today. Mestre Morcego was my capoeira master and no one in this state has ever successfully challenged him in a roda. A lot of people say he’s ignorant and violent, but the truth is that he’ll play nicely unless you provoke him! Back then, Mestre Morcego used to teach us to play hard – to hit for real. I liked to fight in our rodas, but it was a *controlled* fight, unlike the street. Afterwards, we’d hug each other and there would be no leftover resentment. In capoeira, I learned to deal with *racism* and to deeply value my blackness – I became motivated to study. I thought that if I received a better schooling, society might look at me differently. I’d be respected as a capoeirista. I wasn’t a bum or a druggie. The more I studied in school, the more I began to analyze things. I got into university, wanting to learn to speak the ‘language of the intellectuals’, to be able to tell them about capoeira one day.”

“In the 70’s, a National Council of Sports was created and capoeira was recognized as a sport. In fact, the *Confederação Brasileira de Pugilismo* – the Brazilian Boxing Confederation – was given the power to direct the sporting side of capoeira. The competitions they ran favoured its fighting aspect, rather than its cultural aspects. I had the opportunity to compete in the 80’s, but by then, they had started using *one berimbau* and capoeiristas stood in a circle. The two competitors would wear different coloured belts and two referees awarded points for different strikes. In reality, no one followed the rhythm of the berimbau. People would ginga with their hands in fists, their bodies tight, in case they received a blow. We played hard, so it wasn’t a relaxed ginga with that *swing*, you know? When the Brazilian Capoeira Confederation – the CBC – was created, they tried to minimize the fighting aspect and to introduce ‘play’. Things started to change, but to this day, many referees don’t know the rules well. The CBC is trying to research capoeira, using the classical capoeira styles – Angola and Regional – as a reference. Competitors have to demonstrate their ability to use both fighting styles, in the context of the game, without hurting their opponent. That’s the goal, but during the last competition, we still had some serious accidents. The truth is that sportive capoeira is not that popular. Capoeira as a *cultural* activity – events and batizados – is much more popular. When I started competing at eighteen – that was the minimum age you could be – there were about fifty competitors. In my state of Sergipe, the Federation under the umbrella of the CBC only had one group, but now others have joined on. Back then, there were more spectators, because people liked to see fights. I still participate, but only as an organizer, referee, or director. Right now, I’m the technical director of the CBC.”

“Tell me mestre,” I interrupted. “What originally drew you to capoeira?”

“Back in my teenage years, friendships in the capoeira world motivated me to train,” Mestre Adolfo grinned. “I have a childhood friend that I met in capoeira with whom I’m still close to. We used to play a lot in the *roda* and we had a riot! I think my best capoeira phase was when I was fifteen to eighteen. At eighteen I started to compete, but I preferred *rodas*. Just two weeks ago, I got together with Mestre Beija-Flor and a few other mestres I knew in my childhood. Since we no longer had the same energy of our youth, we played around through songs and it was amazing! One of us would sing, the other would answer and the third would tease the others. Sometimes, my students didn’t understand what was going on! These are the kinds of pleasures I still enjoy and that hooked me on capoeira in the first place – the pleasure of play. We didn’t have graduations back then, but there were students who were ‘baptised’ after five years – maybe in imitation of Bimba’s *batizados* – by four professors and our mestre. They would play with us and the shit would hit the fan!” Mestre Adolfo laughed. “That’s just how it was. After that, we could teach.”

“And where did you get the nickname ‘Lobo Mau’?” I asked, curiously.

“*Lobo Mau* was the name given to me at my batizado. In those days, we received a name that reflected our behaviour in the *roda*. When my mestre told me that I had to find myself a nickname, I researched the origins of the name ‘Adolfo’. It turns out it means ‘wolf’ or ‘warrior’, and because of my intensity in the *roda*, I became known as the *Bad Wolf!*” Mestre Adolfo chuckled. “I used to love hard games. That’s how we trained in our group and when we visited other groups, we fought, too. I was a *cara de pau* – I had a lot of gall! But people change... I was baptised in my group when I was eighteen and when I was twenty, I founded the *Grupo Bantus*, which I still run today. Thank God, I learned to control my aggressive side. I realized that it was *easy* to act ignorant, to take someone down, or to hit them, so I chose not to fight even when someone was provoking me. Back in ‘85 my nickname fit, but after that, I changed to the

point that some of my colleagues joke I should be called the *Good Wolf*! Of course, things can happen on the spur of the moment... When I started to get paid for teaching capoeira at the university, my mother's attitude changed. Capoeira in Brazilian universities was a new thing. I had proposed a class and they'd accepted. Then, when I started *studying* capoeira in the Phys. Ed. Department, my mother was amazed. She'd say, 'Thank God you disobeyed me, Son. If you hadn't, you wouldn't be who you are today.' Of course, this was very gratifying."

"The changing point in my attitude towards violence came when I found myself in charge of *seventy* kids. They were so innocent... I began to change my behaviour. The kids were glowing and doing new things. They were looking up to me and the parents would even seek me out to talk about their kids or to tell me that their kids' behaviour had changed thanks to capoeira. You feel a sense of joy when you've helped in some way. I also started university around that time. I used to pass by the university doors and dream that one day I'd teach and study capoeira there. Thank God, all those dreams came true. That determination – the ability to know how to deal with life's challenges – was something I learned through capoeira. I owe a lot of the good things in my life to capoeira and to the knowledge I acquired through it. I'm not just referring to the *movements*, but to what I learned in *life*. Capoeira taught me to pay attention to my environment, to receive a slap in the face and to rise above it, to know that things always come back to you. I'm very motivated to enter the Masters programme now. I'd like to specialize in Physical Education with a focus on capoeira in schools. I'll probably do my Masters in Education at the Federal University of Sergipe. What I did for capoeira, capoeira did for me. When I started to teach capoeira at the university, my financial situation improved and I was able to buy a motorcycle. Then, when I started to teach capoeira in another university outside Aracajú, I was able to buy a car. Capoeira has allowed me to travel and to meet wonderful people – to become a type of *ambassador* of our culture. So clearly, capoeira has brought me a lot of benefits. The money was a consequence of things, but not the principal one. Capoeira also motivated me to get an education. I remember when I was teaching capoeira at the university and hadn't begun to study there yet, these kids *spat* on me. It was really humiliating, you know? I remember thinking that if I had my B.A. this kind of thing wouldn't happen. As a capoeirista, no one would listen, but as a *professor* in the Phys. Ed. department, they would. Education has given more weight to my words. To this day, some people are surprised when I talk about capoeira in the university. They say, 'If you're a capoeirista, what are you doing here?' Sometimes when I visit my capoeira colleagues, the opposite happens. The students tell each other to be careful with me, because I'm a professor, and I have to tell them, 'I'm a capoeirista, guys! Don't worry about me. Play like you usually do. Watch out for *yourselves*! You're playing with Lobo Mau!' I always make a point of saying that I may be a professor, but I'm first and foremost a *capoeirista*. In personal terms, capoeira has shaped how I see the world. It's my link to my family and my past. When I learn about the history of black people in Brazil, I see myself in their story. Black people left a huge cultural legacy behind and through capoeira I'm able to contact these ancestors. That's *my* vision of capoeira, irrespective of the style."

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Aracajú was a small, friendly city with a population of about 500,000. It sat on the Rio Sergipe and was separated from the ocean by a sandy barrier island called Ilha de Santa Luzia.

Although not a major tourist destination, it was a frequent stopover to other points in the North East, and the students and I became enchanted with the tranquil city and its welcoming people.

Mestre Adolfo's Encontro was being held in a sleek building in downtown Aracajú. A number of his students were there to greet us, and soon, they were chatting gaily with us, unconcerned by the lack of a common language. Glancing about the auditorium, I noticed mestres from several capoeira schools and my nervousness grew. What was I doing here, pretending to be a capoeira teacher amongst people who had grown up in the art and dedicated their lives to it? I had been asked to give a talk on "Capoeira in Canada", and I was suddenly petrified at the thought of having to stand in front of this crowd. The local television news station had also come to film the opening and wanted to interview me. I was taken aback – I had not expected the presence of our little group of foreign capoeiristas to be an event worthy of local attention – and it took all my courage to stutter some answers in Portuguese.

The next morning, we returned to the air conditioned building for a series of workshops. Mestre Adolfo had gone to great pains to invite a variety of speakers covering a wide range of topics, many of them university scholars. Although this was not surprising in itself – Mestre Adolfo taught at the University of Sergipe – as my students began nodding off, I realized that I was witnessing an interesting disconnection between the art of capoeira *itself* and the formal presentations being offered. The passion my students felt for capoeira was usually enough to keep them awake, despite their fatigue, so it occurred to me that their involuntary reaction was an accurate barometer of the absence of life in the presentations. I had witnessed the tension between capoeira as "popular knowledge" and capoeira as an academic subject in Brazil before. No matter how much popular culture was being elevated in the discourse, it seemed to me that capoeira was not being accepted on its *own* terms. Even in Brazil, it was being dissected – made

to fit into a Western paradigm – and the life squeezed out of it.

Throughout my travels to Brazil, I had often witnessed the mix of suspicion and fascination with which many capoeira mestres from the older generation – men who came from an oral and mostly illiterate background – viewed the academic world. Although they did not understand this world, they had been taught for decades that universities held a superior form of knowledge and they knew that there was *power* there, to which they were not privy. An immense gap existed between the social classes, a legacy of slavery that portrayed non-European forms of knowledge as inferior. Mestre Bimba had recognized the need of Afro-Bahians to win the respect of members of the upper echelons of society, and he had known that for capoeira to thrive and to survive – for his people to find a place in society – the art would have to present a veneer of respectability. For all its advances, however, I could not help wondering if capoeira had ever really been accepted. Many Brazilian practitioners like Mestre Adolfo – mestres who were also researchers of the art form – found themselves caught between two worlds. It seemed all the more ironic to me given that, in my experience, most foreigners, having grown up in cultures already soaked in the scientific paradigm, came to capoeira in search of *spirit* – the last thing they wanted was to be thrust back into a Western paradigm, via capoeira!

I sought Mestre Adolfo out at the break.

“You can still feel the discrimination towards capoeira,” the young mestre admitted. “Recently, I put together a proposal to get into the Masters programme at the Federal University of Sergipe and one of the professors counselled me *not* to work with capoeira. He said that the university doesn’t see capoeira as a form of knowledge. There’s a belief that popular knowledge isn’t *true* knowledge – only scholarly knowledge is – so sometimes, I’ve had arguments with my professors. They’ll be talking about Aristotle, Gramsci or other philosophers and I’ll mention *Pastinha*. ‘*Pastinha?*’ They’ll say. ‘Who’s he? *Pastinha’s a nobody!*’ And I’ll respond, ‘*Pastinha’s a capoeira philosopher.*’ They’ll laugh, ‘He doesn’t even know what philosophy *is!* Did he ever study in university?’ So, yes, there’s still a belief in university that popular knowledge isn’t true knowledge. That’s what motivated me to want to learn to speak ‘the language of the intellectuals’. I wanted to tell them about the language of *capoeira* – to show them that it is, in fact, a valid form of knowledge and a useful tool in education. It’s already an *informal* educational tool. Why not make it more effective and use it formally? We can do this,

as long as we maintain the roots of capoeira alive.”

Mestre Adolfo continued grimly, “Sometimes I do worry about what happened to Bimba. Although it was necessary for him to break away from certain aspects in capoeira, in order to introduce it into the upper echelons of society, there is a risk that it may become something only privileged people have access to. When Bimba made changes, there was an explosion in capoeira’s growth. It rose within society, because politicians and governors began to practise it. Capoeira had always been the domain of the underprivileged – of the poor, mostly black people of Brazil – due to its link to slavery, so although Bimba may not have done it consciously, from the moment money entered into the equation, capoeira changed. Were Bimba and Pastinha the only capoeira teachers? There were many capoeiristas who were as good, if not better Angoleiros than Pastinha. When you look at the people who surrounded both of them at the time, they were mostly from the upper classes. Nowadays, Mestre Camisa from Abad Capoeira has students who are deputies, so he has an easier access to opportunities than other capoeiristas. In the 30’s, the decade in which Bimba created Capoeira Regional, Brazil underwent a revolution under President Getlio Vargas. Vargas tried to implant a new system of government and focused on schools. Physical education was seen as instrumental to their transformation and sports became one of the main ways for shaping the Brazilian man into a strong citizen. Getlio Vargas wanted the same thing as Hitler did: nationalization. He wanted a *fighting technique*. Why not develop a Brazilian martial art? The issue, as I see it, is that for capoeira to be accepted on a world scale, cuts will have to be made. I’m not talking about transforming capoeira into a *commodity* for the market, but of transforming it into a sport that can be done on a mass scale. The problem is that this changes capoeira’s relationship with the disadvantaged segments of society and I worry about where we are going with it.”

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Mestre Bimba’s original *batizado* was the moment a student played to the sound of the berimbau for the first time. A novice was paired with an advanced student who would take great care so as not to injure the new capoeirista. The latter would then become the new capoeirista’s *padrinho* – his godfather. Weeks later, a party would be thrown, the school’s community invited to share in food and drink, and the recently baptised students given a nickname by their colleagues. Mestre Bimba had created such rituals as a way of forging bonds between capoeiristas – of building community – but batizados had come to acquire a different meaning in many contemporary schools. Many were now heavily commercialized events in which students paid large sums of money to receive belts, and mestres from other groups were paid to participate. All too often, they were opportunities for experienced players to show off their skill

at the expense of less experienced students, and injuries were frequent.

Knowing this all too well, I was nervous when we arrived at Mestre Adolfo's batizado. The giant cemented arena was packed with over two hundred children, teenagers and adults – Mestre Adolfo's students and teachers – as well as several mestres from the Brazilian Capoeira Confederation who had come to Aracajú for a meeting, including Mestre Marinheiro and Mestre Augusto. Although this was no commercial event – most of the students were from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and Mestre Adolfo had paid for their expenses out of his own pocket – I knew that I would be expected to help “baptize” Mestre Adolfo's students by playing with them. My own students were nervous, as well, never having participated in such an event.

Mestre Adolfo greeted me warmly: “Most Brazilians don't care about capoeira, but when they heard that you and your students were coming, people thought, ‘If *Canadians* are here, there *must* be something to capoeira!’”

I had been dreading this day, convinced that my capoeira would be found lacking. How could I compete with the tremendous speed, flexibility and power of these young men? It took every ounce of my courage to enter the roda, feeling a hundred curious eyes on me, but as game followed game, I began to relax. It was obvious that our hosts were thrilled to have us there and that the children loved playing with the *gringos*. The judgment had been ours all along. When it was all over, I breathed a sigh of relief. I was proud of my students – with only a few months of capoeira experience under their belts, they had played with open hearts – but there was one more surprise. The elderly Mestre Marinheiro from Bahia drew me aside.

“I *like* what I saw in your game today, Lang,” he whispered with conviction. “I like what I saw in your students' game. You are Regional. Look, I'm frank. When I don't like something, I say it, but today when I saw you singing and playing, I said to Augusto, ‘Look at her, Augusto.

She's taking flight! She's letting her hair down, Augusto, and singing right. I like it.' Every time you went in there, I followed your every move. *Pa-pa-pa!* This movement is Regional. Here comes the Angola... I told Augusto, 'She's growing well, even though she's alone in capoeira. Train her in Salvador, Augusto.' The only problem is that it will be hard for you to find your way, because you're training both Angola and Regional, and they're *different*. Do you understand?"

I nodded mutely as Mestre Marinheiro walked away. For the first time in my six long years of teaching capoeira, I felt like a true *professora*.

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When Mestre Adolfo returned from his meeting with the Brazilian Capoeira Confederation, he shared with me some of the issues facing the organization.

"In the CBC," he began, "part of our work is to talk to other mestres and to do research about the ways we can develop capoeira's sporting aspect. The sporting aspect is important to get more public support, but obviously, we try to minimize the impact on capoeira's cultural dimension. The problem is that sports require *massification* and they're strongly linked to capitalism. If a sport doesn't sell, no one will want to fund it."

"How do you feel about this alliance with money?" I asked him.

"It's complicated," Mestre Adolfo admitted, "but we're seeing a lot of capoeiristas leave the country to teach capoeira abroad without the proper qualifications. The advantage of a sportive capoeira is that whoever opts to join the Federation system is *obliged* to learn the fundamentals of the traditional styles, Angola and Regional. We're trying to address the uniformization of movements and the standardization of systems of graduation. It would be interesting, for example, for a capoeirista from Japan who came to Brazil to know more or less what his capoeira level was in relation to others, and whether his movements were the same or not. Every group has a different system, so it would be interesting to standardize things for those who come from abroad. They'd return with a clearer understanding of capoeira. Obviously, sports won't *save* capoeira, but it might help eliminate some of the confusion. I think the Confederation has an important role to play in this. Although it hasn't been accepted by a majority of capoeiristas yet, it's quite strong. Whether people want it to or not, capoeira is moving towards greater regulation. In Brazil, we have the Federal Council of Physical Education (CREF) that's demanding a greater stability in capoeira. It's trying to implement a control of capoeira teachers and has sparked a lot of debate. Many people are outraged that capoeiristas who suffered and made sacrifices to maintain the traditions inherited from their ancestors are being taken away the right to teach capoeira, while some guy who studied capoeira for four

months in a university will be allowed to teach. That *is* worrisome. We're trying to maintain a relationship with capoeira and with the history of the Brazilian people – to give it continuity.”

“How will the CBC get everyone to be on the same page?” I asked, quizzically.

He nodded, gravely. “In order for someone to be a part of the CBC, they have to accept the graduation system and that’s where we bump into questions of ego. The CBC doesn’t ask you to abandon your *own* style or even your way of seeing capoeira. You *can* be an Angoleiro and a traditionalist. You don’t have to like competitions or even to go to them. The CBC develops the sporting aspect, but this is just *one* of its facets. The only thing we are standardizing is the sporting aspect, using as its base the references of Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional. For example, Mestre Augusto is President of the Capoeira Angola wing of the CBC and he organized a Capoeira Angola Congress a short time ago. He invited mestres to share what they saw as the proper formation of an Angola roda. The mestres went up, one by one, to demonstrate their teachings. After a lot of discussion, they came to a conclusion. The most common elements in a Capoeira Angola roda were then adopted by the CBC: three berimbaus, two pandeiros, an agôgô, a reco-reco and one atabaque. It was agreed that this is a *traditional* Angola roda. Of course, if you look far back enough, some traditions didn’t exist! People got creative and things came to be seen as traditional. Still, nowadays, it’s in the interest of certain mestres to keep capoeira as it is – without any consensus or unity between the groups. They profit from this, especially the mega-groups that export capoeira everywhere.”

“What about diversity?” I asked Mestre Adolfo.

“Culture is dynamic, but some things must be preserved. I speak Portuguese, but my way of expressing myself is personal. In other words, the fact that we speak the same capoeira language doesn’t mean I have to abandon my capoeira *style* or my way of seeing capoeira. It’s only in competitions that Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional are used as the references. It’s a way of spreading the teachings of these two traditional styles. I’m not an Angoleiro, for example, but I know the Capoeira Angola movements and names. A lot of mestres will say, ‘I’m an Angoleiro, but I have nothing against Regional.’ Then when they go in the roda, they act differently. Often people don’t like another style, because they don’t know much about it. We’re proposing a way of speaking a *common language* – of learning another style.”

Mestre Adolfo paused. “You know, when I go to events in Bahia and hear the old mestres talk, I mostly listen – I’m a beginner next to them – but I think of my dad’s grand-father who was a slave and I remember stories about my dad’s cousin who was a capoeirista, or my own experiences with racism, and I think that capoeira is more than any *one* person. My interest in capoeira has to do with my identity as a black man who has suffered discrimination and with my *history* – the history of the Brazilian people. When I see people packaging capoeira to get rich, I worry that they’re tainting it. Some people confuse creativity with creating a new *style*. We don’t *create* capoeira. We try, at the very least, to leave its roots intact. Black people fought, first and foremost, for the freedom to express their beliefs and culture. For me, capoeira is a way of keeping alive the links with my ancestors. It’s a tool of liberation. Today, we may no longer need to free ourselves from the slave masters, but we have so many other forms of oppression that keep us prisoners: salaries, racial discrimination, and vices such as drugs. Capoeira can be a tool to free oneself, although we have to be careful, because it can become a weapon of oppression. Some people use their titles as masks. At the bottom of it, however, capoeira has *always* been a symbol of resistance.”

“What do you feel when you play capoeira, Mestre?” I prodded.

“When I’m in the roda, I forget everyone else – I’m totally *present* – but although I’m

totally in myself, I'm also *with everyone*. There's something mysterious in the experience that's hard to express in words. Something happens when you enter the roda – you're transformed. At work I'm reserved – I can be really shy – but a colleague of mine told me that in the roda I look relaxed and spontaneous. There's also something universal in capoeira. Regardless of your background, *playing* is something we all need as human beings, and in capoeira, there's no discrimination. Even if you sing off key, it's seen as a personal characteristic. The roda is an act of sharing and warmth. There's nothing else like it!"

## ~ *Part Two: Belém do Pará* ~

### *1. Belém*

Once my students left, I had another three months in Brazil – Dançarina, my student who had stayed behind, had four months – and another chapter was about to begin. We were going to Belém, a city I had not seen since my ex-husband and I had parted ways. In 1996, during my first trip to Brazil, I had travelled by bus alone up the north east coast into the Amazon area, then back through the interior. My friend Sônia had welcomed me in Belém, taken me into her home and brought me to the UFPA – the *Universidade Federal do Pará* – where she taught French. There, I had found capoeira classes, met Mestre Bezerra – my future mestre – and Renaldo, the man who would become my husband. I had been stunned to learn of the existence of a vibrant community – Japanese farmers who had founded a small community called *Tomeaçú*, several hours east of Belém – where my friend Sônia had spent her childhood. My main motive for going to Belém, other than visiting her, was to seek out Mestre Bezerra with whom I had become estranged since my separation. I wanted to remedy things. I wanted Mestre Bezerra to be a part of my thesis.

After twenty-six miserable hours in an air conditioned bus, Dançarina and I were in Belém, and a very pregnant Sônia was greeting us at the bus station. My friend had arranged for two of her university students – young men eager to practise their French – to take us around

Belém. Typical *Paraenses* with Indigenous features and thick black hair, our new friends seemed entirely unperturbed by the stifling heat. The four of us wandered for hours through old Belém with its colourful, crumbling buildings seeped in centuries of humidity, and gazed into the Amazon River's muddy waters, as deep and impenetrable as the forest itself. Although I had been here many times before, I could not stop marveling at the differences between Belém and Salvador. In Salvador, where eighty percent of the population had some degree of black blood coursing through its veins, I had always stood out. Here, with my Eurasian features, I could easily pass for a *Nisei* – a Japanese or mixed Japanese-Brazilian woman. After the exuberance of the inhabitants of Salvador, the quieter energy of the Paraense people also surprised me. This lush city, whose inhabitants' delicate features and copper skins spoke of the disappearance of untold peoples, was truly another world. For a long time, Salvador had been the exotic "other", but sometime over the past three years, it had become a second home.

It was an emotional week – unearthing memories of my ex-husband, while my romantic future remained uncertain – and now that the students had left, the real work of the thesis had begun. I was overwhelmed by the immensity of the task that lay before me and had no idea where to begin. Who was I to attempt a delicate and weighty task such as interviewing mestres about their life stories? With the university thousands of miles away, the label of "researcher" seemed woefully inadequate. It did not help that I was always tired, but at least I was holding up – poor Dançarina had spent the night throwing up. Trapped in the mugginess of my room with its mosquito netting, I had tossed and turned uneasily in my sleep.

## *Mestre Bezerra*



Mestre Bezerra and his family in Belém, 1996 (Photo: Lang Liu)

Mestre Ferro<sup>1</sup> picked me up in his car and less than an hour later, we were at the edges of the shantytown – the *invasões* – the invasions, as they are called in the north of Brazil. Unlike in cities, these houses were scattered amongst the vegetation, but the place was every bit as dangerous as urban shantytowns. After driving through a series of pothole-filled roads, we arrived. I recognized the gap-toothed smile, curly hair and slim build of Mestre Bezerra, and I was relieved to see that the mestre still moved like a man half his age. The house, too, was much as I remembered it – a ramshackle structure made up of assorted wooden beams and planks, where the mestre lived with his younger wife and their eight children, ranging in age from five to sixteen. Despite the humbleness of the surroundings, there was a quiet dignity to the family, a sweetness that seemed to hark from another era. I had not known Mestre Bezerra in the early years of his youth, before he had converted to his Mormon faith, so it was hard to imagine this man “living on the wrong side of the tracks”, drinking, fighting and womanizing. I knew that he

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<sup>1</sup> To see the interview with Mestre Ferro, please refer to the Annex 3.

had met his current wife – “the love of his life” – at the local church. She had been a young woman of eighteen at the time and was now in her mid thirties. I could also see why in this place *faith* might make all the difference between life and death.

Mestre Bezerra’s wife and children greeted me warmly and ushered me inside. During two trips to Canada, organized by my ex-husband and me in 2003, Mestre Bezerra had made enough money to install a functioning toilet – a vast improvement from the former outhouse – and to buy a few electronics, but I could see that the family still struggled. The children gathered around excitedly, thrilled with the gifts I had brought, yet displaying a maturity far beyond their age. Indeed, there was nothing sad on this day – it was the same place full of laughter and joy I remembered – and any initial awkwardness between the mestre and me quickly disappeared. To my immense relief, it was Mestre Bezerra himself who brought up the idea of participating in my research. He seemed eager to have the opportunity to tell his story and to share his knowledge of capoeira with the world.

I had always felt great affection for this man who had been my mestre for close to four years. Vivacious, outspoken and proud, he had a wisdom born of the fruit of decades of capoeira experience, and at sixty-two, his life had been almost entirely shaped by his art form. We had had our clashes in the past – our religious and cultural beliefs were sometimes at odds – but we cared a great deal about each other, and he quickly brought down the walls that had been erected over the years. I had had many teachers along the way, but Mestre Bezerra had been the first one to believe in me as a teacher and to offer a fatherly love. On my first trip to Brazil in 1996, I had trained with him every chance I got at the Federal University of Pará. Those hours spent in a muggy classroom overlooking the Amazon River were forever etched in my mind.

When Mestre Bezerra invited me to return the next day, I knew that we had passed a

milestone. Dançarina was still weak, but she did not want to miss another visit, so while I chatted with the mestre, she sat shyly in the living room, watching television, sandwiched between Mestre Bezerra's children. I remembered how overwhelmed I had been the first time I had visited the mestre's home – the striking material poverty of this sweet family a stark contrast to its dignity. I still struggled with the knowledge that I had been born in privilege, while my friends fought to put food on the table. Over the years, Mestre Bezerra and I had developed a warm friendship, and although the discrepancy between us did not disappear magically, I was able to give back in small ways. More importantly, I began to see that he had a lot to teach *me*.

“Mestre,” I encouraged, “tell me more about your capoeira trajectory. I know that you were born in Maranhão, the state beside Pará, and I've heard that it is rich in Afro-Brazilian culture. What kind of work were you doing? How did you start capoeira?”

Mestre Bezerra nodded. “I worked in the police and gave judo classes on the side. My first contact with capoeira was through a judo student from Rio – a capoeirista. I'd never heard of capoeira before, so I made disparaging comments about it, but when I reached over to grab his kimono, I got a swift martelo kick to the head!” Mestre Bezerra laughed. “I never forgot the incident, but it was only years later, in 1966, that capoeira reentered my life. Another judo student, a man named Roberval Cere – a diver at the port – turned out to be a capoeira master. He became my first teacher. Mestre Roberval never defined his capoeira – he played a style in between Angola and Regional – but I recently learned from a magazine that his own teacher was none other than the most famous name in the Rio de Janeiro capoeira scene: *Artur Emídio*. Unfortunately, Roberval died at thirty-two, killed by a shark as he worked the port waters. Soon after his death, a capoeirista from Bahia named Mestre Sapo arrived. He was an Angoleiro and he taught me the basics of Capoeira Angola. We began doing performances at theatres and clubs with a small group of students, and eventually, I decided that I needed to go to Salvador to *define* myself. I looked for Capoeira Angola and took a course there. When you start learning, it's natural to seek others out, but it has nothing to do with your capoeira genealogy. A lot of people don't understand this and say, ‘I went to Salvador and got my certificate, so I'm Pastinha's student.’ I *wasn't* Pastinha's student! I did a *course* in his academy. Roberval was my mestre.”

Shortly after he received his capoeira certificate, Mestre Bezerra left Maranhão and moved to Belém. “Capoeira didn't pay enough to feed me in Belém. I lived in the *Clube do Remo* – the Rowing Club – at first and taught capoeira. By a stroke of luck, I ended up on television the day after I arrived – that's how I got my first students – but unfortunately, no one was interested in Capoeira Angola in those days. People wanted to learn Regional, so that's what I taught for years, even though my heart was in Angola.”

Mestre Bezerra spoke proudly of being the first to teach capoeira in the state of Pará – the pioneer of Belém's capoeira scene. “Mestre Ramon, who arrived in the late sixties, contests this, but the community supports my claim”, Mestre Bezerra asserted. “I founded the first Capoeira Group in 1971 – *Grupo Zumbi de Capoeira* – with four senior students. By teaching capoeira to

firemen and to the military police, I was able to bring together quite a few students. In 1974, I held the first ever batizado ceremony in Belém.”

Mestre Bezerra spent six months in the neighbouring state of Macapá, where he taught capoeira and, shortly after, moved to French Guyana where he worked as a stone mason by day and taught judo by night. In 1980, Mestre Bezerra returned to Belém to resume his work with capoeira. “I brought together my old students Nazaré (Valdecir), Zumbi and Nonato. We went everywhere, trying to raise money to pay for a trip to Salvador so that they could be graduated as *mestres*. Three others joined us – six in total. We finally made it to Bahia and went to Mestre Pastinha’s academy where I’d done my course, years before. They did their exams and passed. They had to pay fifty cruzeiros to get their certificates, but they all chose to buy crafts with their money, all except for Nonato, who bought his certificate. Pastinha liked me, so he *gave* me my certificate as a gift!”

Mestre Bezerra proudly showed me the document, protected by plastic in an old faded photo album. “All Salvador was buzzing with news of these capoeiristas from Belém,” he recalled proudly. “We went to play in Vermelho’s academy, where Bamba now teaches. Zumbi gave Vermelho a hard hammer kick to the ribs, so Vermelho said he was going to beat up Zumbi. When they played the next day, Vermelho threw a martelo – his foot had barely left the ground when Zumbi gave him a foot sweep. Vermelho fell and the next thing I knew, the two were walking towards me, arm in arm. Vermelho wanted Zumbi to stay for a tournament that was coming up!” Mestre Bezerra shook his head, laughing. “Zumbi was a student, though, and had to get back to Belém for his classes. The day of their exam, I brought my students to that old building that’s now the Associação de Capoeira Angola (ABCA). I warned them all to behave, ‘This is Capoeira Angola. It’s not the silly game that you all like to play, threatening to kill each other. It’s art and culture.’ Well years later, in 1996, I found out that the hosts at the ABCA, having heard of Zumbi’s famous foot, had hidden large wooden sticks behind the door in case things got heated!”

Mestre Bezerra laughed, uproariously. “Curió told me about the hidden sticks. If any of my students had acted out of line, they would’ve gotten beaten up! On our return to Belém, our group grew quickly, so my students decided to go their separate ways. I created my own entity, Associação Arte Brasil. All of this happened in the spirit of peace and good will. I encouraged it, because God is the only master. *Mestres* teach, but students need to follow their own paths and to assume responsibility for their work. Some *mestres* think that a student can never be a *mestre*, but I think that’s wrong. Of course, there are a lot of groups outside of Brazil that expand at the expense of quality. I call these the ‘franchise’ capoeiras. Those *mestres* send students who are *bombários* – robot-like, big, strong guys who know nothing and are mostly interested in finding a foreign girlfriend. I created the Capoeira Federation of Pará and linked it to the Brazilian Confederation. Then I was invited to serve on the Superior Council of Masters – a council reserved for older, experienced *mestres*. Mestre Miguel, from the famous Cativeiro group in Manaus, came to Belém one day to do research on capoeira in the state of Pará and was told to seek me out. My victory at the Brazilian Championship in Brasília in 1996 speaks for itself. People were saying I was old and didn’t play anymore, but I won second place!”

It was true that Mestre Bezerra had a remarkable endurance – the limberness and speed of someone much younger – coupled with experience and skill. Seeing him in the *roda*, I *felt* moved by his joyful abandon and effortless spontaneity. The man had the soul of an artist.

“When I first came to Belém, I realized that I couldn’t live off of capoeira, so I branched off into other trades. Today I’m a carpenter, a mason, an electrician and an artisan. I’m learning

music and taking drumming classes. I'm going to do shows and workshops with my family and I'm also seriously considering applying to be a politician – a *Veriador* – here in Belém, if my wife will let me,” he added, smiling. “I don't want to exploit anyone, but I also cannot continue living in this situation of misery, as I have my whole life.”

“Mestre, why are you not teaching classes anymore?” I asked him softly.

“I teach workshops, when I'm invited,” he answered. “But I don't want to teach classes anymore. I don't want to go through what happened to that old Bahian Mestre, *João Pequeno*. I don't know if he's still in the same situation, but he used to give classes in this *tiny* little room. All the while, upstairs in that beautiful room, the classes were taught by...”

“Mestre Moraes,” I finished for him. “You're speaking of the Forte da Capoeira in Salvador – the former Santo Antônio Fort.”

“Yes, Moraes. Everyone would go up to his *roda*, while just below there were only two or three students with João Pequeno – a man with much more knowledge. I will *never* do that, even if I have to let capoeira go! People must value my work or I'm out!”

Mestre Bezerra told me of his plans to work more intensively with crafts. “People sell capoeira. They sell CDs and t-shirts that they don't even make, while I *make* my own things.” The room we were sitting in served as the family's workspace, and next to me, plastic containers lined a shelf, filled with seeds and natural materials from the Amazon forest.

I had been hastily jotting down notes as we talked and was so deeply involved in our conversation that I was surprised when the mestre suddenly reached over and clasped my hand. “Lang,” he said, softly, “Now I want to tell you something. Put your pen down.” The look in his eyes took me aback. I knew that there was still a lot unacknowledged between us. After all, the man had been like a second father to my ex-husband.

“Of course, Mestre,” I smiled nervously. “What's on your mind?”

“Lang,” he began, gently. “When you broke up with your husband, I said things to you that weren't right.” His eyes were moist and I was not sure whether to be more stunned by this or by his words. “You're like a daughter to me. I know that we may not always have agreed on everything, but that does not change the love a father has for his daughter. What happened between your ex-husband and you remains between you. It does not affect the love and friendship I feel for you.”

I was humbled. After my separation, I had assumed that I would cease to have importance in the eyes of all the mestres – these men who had always known me as “the wife” – but I had been wrong. Time and time again, the mestres had surprised me. I squeezed Mestre Bezerra's hand. With this simple act of humility, Mestre Bezerra was showing me the true meaning of the word *mestre*.

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We came for one last visit. It was a hot and muggy morning and, as usual, the mosquitoes were out biting our tender *gringa* skins. I scratched absentmindedly as I looked at the training

space – a room about the size of a large closet. Dançarina and I were soon sweating, trying to bend our limbs into tiny shapes, if only to avoid bumping into the furniture. At noon, we joined the family for lunch. They had gone out of their way, preparing a meal of rice and chicken, and afterwards, Mestre Bezerra took out his berimbau to share a song of his own composition. It spoke of the famous Quilombo dos Palmares – a community of runaway slaves that had existed for 46 years in the state of Alagoas, before being razed by the police in a violent confrontation:

*Iê, no Quilombo eu nasci,  
Na selva eu sofri.  
Gunga Zumba me ensinou,  
De atender para correr...*

Iê, I was born in the Quilombo,  
I suffered in the forest.  
Gunga Zumba taught me,  
To learn to run...

“Music”, Mestre Bezerra explained, balancing his berimbau on his lap, “is what inspires a capoeirista to enter the roda. Songs recount stories of victories, defeats and suffering, soothing the spirit and the emotions. Music fills the great emptiness in a human being.”

“What about spirituality?” Dançarina asked, suddenly. “Is there a spiritual aspect to capoeira, Mestre?”

“When people speak of spirituality, they’re referring to Candomblé,” Mestre Bezerra answered sternly. “Candomblé helped capoeiristas hide in the past, but the capoeira of today has become a symbol of social recuperation. It has a philosophy and brings harmony through its music and rhythm. The part of spiritualization that they believe in, in Candomblé – the *spirits* – is not for me. The Spirit I obey has nothing to do with this sport, but with the intimate, spiritual life of human beings. The symbols and magic some people use in capoeira are something else. A lot of great mestres work with that part, but not me. I work with the physical, the real, the sensitive part of capoeira – a knowledge that can be for all. God and religion can’t be mixed with sports or it will engender confusion. Capoeira is rich in practical knowledge – in culture and history – so there’s no *need* to enter into the mystical part. People still sing about church, Candomblé, saints, and so on, but they’re *historical* links. We’re in a period of technical and scientific growth. When you do a movement, for example, I can explain which parts of the body are activated, what type of exercise should be done, what one is doing wrong, and how to correct it. With the right technique, women can play as well as men. In fact, people often train too hard and put their bodies in danger. I’m proof that my gentler way works – I have excellent stamina at my age that few can match.”

As we waved good-bye to the mestre from the car, I thought of the desire of many

capoeira mestres to incorporate science into their teachings. Not only was this understandable, I did not dispute the fact that science had interesting insights into capoeira. I was not convinced, however, that many of the mestres who spoke of science had a good grasp of it. Furthermore, they might not realize that hidden in their assertions was often a subtle, yet definite undermining of popular knowledge. Ultimately, the wisdom of the body – an experiential and more holistic understanding – was still being considered inferior to the intellectual approach of science. Yet from my own experience with Mestre Bezerra, his teachings remained fundamentally intuitive and emotional. When he played, it was my *heart* that responded – my limbs that yearned to fly as freely as he did – and my mind that, maddeningly, kept me prisoner. So while I was hearing the word “science” more and more often in the discourse of capoeiristas, I was convinced that at a deeper level, the art form remained fundamentally *Afro-Brazilian*, both in its view of the world and its teachings. In fact, at times, the tenements of science could be in contradiction with the teachings of capoeira. Capoeira was not just about the *body*, the senses and the physical laws. Although it was deeply physical, it also touched on the spiritual world where logic failed. How many moments had I witnessed over the years that would be impossible in the eyes of science but that were completely accepted in capoeira?

The problematic marrying of an essentially Western view with capoeira occurred in many ways, big and small, and sometimes they made for funny bedfellows. I was reminded of my surprise when I had begun learning of the *estrelas* – the exams through which Mestre Nenel preserved his father’s movements. On the outside, these exams had appeared rigidly organized, but when I had looked at them more closely, they had turned out to be surprisingly *porous* in nature. They took into consideration many personal factors and were infinitely more “human” than any other tests I had taken in my life. The route to becoming a *formado* – a graduate student

– in the Filhos de Bimba School was even harder to define. It was not simply a question of “you do a) and b) and you will become a formado”. Once a student had passed the fifth star, Mestre Nenel had to *feel* she was ready, before inviting her to participate in a formatura ceremony. A variety of reasons would be considered, ranging from the student’s global understanding of capoeira to her dedication to the art, her technique and experience. According to Mestre Decânio, one of Mestre Bimba’s most trusted students, speaking in the documentary *Mestre Bimba: A Capoeira Iluminada* (2005), *trust* was a fundamental quality for Bimba, a quality Decânio linked to the influence of African cultures – a most unscientific criteria!

Mestre Bimba lived in a society where European values prevailed amongst the powerful elite – the mostly white population of Portuguese descent – and if capoeira was to survive, it had to be given a veneer of respectability. He adopted a university jargon and structure, and shaped capoeira in ways that would make it more palatable, but did he really change capoeira’s *essence*? I was becoming more and more convinced that while Bimba’s Regional worked, it did so thanks to its powerful vision – its philosophy and teachings inside and outside the roda – almost *in spite of* its outer accoutrements. The structure worked for Afro-Bahians whose culture was saturated with the teachings of capoeira, because they were immersed in it and they learned, much like their ancestors had, by observing and imitating. It did not, however, work quite as well for *non-Brazilians*, who had to do a lot of extra work to fill in the cultural gaps. Having grown up in societies built upon a Western model, the foreigners could spot the inconsistencies often much more clearly than the Brazilians did. Science had its gifts to share, but I was convinced that beneath capoeira’s “scientific” façade, a strong African heart still beat.

## *~ Part Three: Return to Salvador*



Cinturada Desprezada (Throws) in the Fundação Mestre Bimba – 2005 (Photo: Lang Liu)

### *1. Daily Life*

After wandering for weeks, I was eager to return to Salvador to tackle my capoeira training and research. Dançarina and I arrived late one night at Travessa José Bahia, the apartment I would be sharing with Maria and a roommate over the next two months. Although it was only a skip and a hop from my old apartment, my new room held little of the previous one's charm. An old, sheetless mattress had been thrown in the middle of the floor, next to a teetering armoire, and a curtainless window faced the street. Dançarina was going to stay with me until she could find her own apartment, which would be a little tight for comfort, but I hoped that once my friend had gotten her bearings, life in Salvador would fall into a more familiar rhythm.

The first week, I focused on settling back into Santo Antônio. It felt wonderful to move my body again and to reconnect with my professors, Anum and Chapinha, at the Fundação. As I loaded up on groceries at Toni's and stopped by Carmoweb Internet Café to chat with Alex, the friendly owner, Santo Antônio quickly began to feel like home again. With relief, I realized that the months I had spent building a life in Salvador, back in 2005, had not been in vain, and I was

now reaping the fruits of those challenging times. I was worried, however, about my research. There were interviews to think about – sounding out what the mestres thought about my thesis – while I was still unclear about my focus. I had, at least, made a big step in simplifying my life by deciding to train Regional exclusively. Although it took me a week to work up the courage to have the big talk with my former Angola mestres, when I finally announced my decision, Mestre Curió simply nodded. Of course, he had *known*.

Dançarina eventually found her own apartment, easing the growing tension between us, and things were going pretty well: I was training capoeira daily, hanging out with the mestres and attending the odd capoeira event. I could feel myself slipping deliciously into the sea of Bahian warmth that I had missed so much, but the one thing I could not seem to find peace around was my relationship with Miguel.

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The call came at six in the evening. Miguel's wife had wanted to watch Mestre Curió's roda at the Fort – a roda marking the end of the yearly Encontro – and the mere thought of a confrontation with my lover's wife left me shaking. I did not want to spend the evening cowering at home. Would I be tempting the fates if I attended?

The Capoeira Fort – the old Santo Antônio Fort – a crumbling and neglected structure for decades, had recently been restored to its former glory thanks to an outpouring of government money. While some of the rooms still had their former occupants – people like Mestre João Pequeno and Mestre Moraes – there were newcomers. The Filhos de Bimba had been given a small room, as had Mestre Curió. Despite disputes over the allocation of space and accusations that the administrators had pocketed large sums of money, the Fort had been reopened.

When I arrived, Angoleiros had already gathered in the middle of the courtyard. Mestre

Curió and Mestre Jararaca welcomed me with smiles, yet I was suddenly gripped with fear. Now that I was no longer a part of their school, would they still look out for me? What if they were angry and waiting for an opportunity to humiliate me? People always spoke of *malandragem* – was I being naive in trusting my former mestres? The courtyard began to feel like a giant trap as I joined the others on the floor, my heart racing.

My thoughts were interrupted by Miguel's arrival and I watched with trepidation as my lover circled the *roda's* perimetre, shaking hands with several participants. I dared not look around, convinced that his wife was standing behind me and certain that my distress was there for all to see. When it was my turn to play, I took a deep breath and knelt by the *berimbau*, throwing a quick glance around the crowd, but could see neither Miguel nor his wife.

Capoeira came to my rescue that night as it had so many times before. I played with a rare passion, and when it was all over, my fear had vanished. Miguel and his wife were also long gone. I had been spared, but I could no longer deny it – once again, I was in a relationship with a married man. I was too ashamed to share my grief with Maria. This time I would be walking into the shadows alone.

## ***2. Balões***

Anum had been trying to push me beyond my old barriers in Regional, but I could feel my body getting tighter, week after week. I could no longer do the front handspring and back walkover, moves I had once done easily, because of the tendonitis in my shoulders. A reinjury could put me out of commission for a long time. All of these physical ailments left me feeling tired and dispirited. It was no wonder I could not relax in my game. In addition to my weekly acupuncture treatments, I had begun to see a Danish physiotherapist named Annette, who lived one street over. Every week I made my way to her home – a beautiful colonial structure where

the sounds of the street mingled with the scent of lavender, orange and anis – and I could only pray that my body would hold up.

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With its heavy stones, the Fundação floor often developed cracks and fissures that could catch unwary toes and fingers. I had fallen on that floor more times than I cared to remember, so as Anum coaxed me to relax, I had visions of broken bones. My professor was about to throw me and I was terrified. *What was I doing?* I was no longer sixteen – bendy and easily healed of injuries – and this was definitely not Canada, where we would have learned on mats, at the very least. When Anum finally threw me, Chapinha standing next to him to spot me, there was a surreal moment when I saw the ceiling rushing towards me – I had *no* idea which was top or bottom, left or right, up or down – and I fell to the ground in a crumpled heap. I stood up, brushed the dust off my pants and realized that I was still in one piece.

I survived my first lesson in the *balão cinturado* – the intricate partner-assisted throws that Mestre Bimba had created as a way of teaching his students to fall on their feet. Although I had wanted to learn how to play to the *iúna* rhythm ever since that first *roda* when I had watched the teachers in the Fundação, I had not really believed that day would actually come, and here I was, learning four throws – a basic sequence that I would eventually have to demonstrate at the start of every *roda*.

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I had begun to dread Regional class. The mere thought of the throws was enough to make me break into a cold sweat, and some days, I could think of little else. Most of the time, I managed to fall on my feet, and at that moment I felt as if my life had just been extended – until the next class when the whole nerve-wracking experience would have to be repeated all over

again. The muscular pain of these new exercises added to a general fatigue, and the price was a fever and a sore throat. I spent the day in bed, trying to centre myself. Dançarina and I would soon be parting ways, both of us heading north along the coast, she to join her Toronto drumming group in Recife, while Maria and I met up with a friend in Olinda for Carnival. Partying was the *last* thing I felt like doing in my weakened condition, but the plans had already been made.

During my last pre-Carnival class at the Fundação, a small tragedy struck – a giant puppy dog-of-a-man with no control pinned my ankles and brought me crashing down, *knees-first*, into the hard stone floor. I limped home, my knees swelling like balloons, but there was no time to ice them. We had to run to catch our bus to Olinda.

## ~ *Part Four: Carnival* ~

### *1. Olinda's Mestre Sapo*

There was something about Olinda, a warmth and creativity to its old shops, artist ateliers, restaurants and bakeries that I instantly loved. The ethnic composition of Olinda and Recife, I soon realized, was different from Salvador's. Recife was the capital city of the state of Pernambuco, a major port with over three million inhabitants and its share of high rises and markets. Olinda, six kilometres from Recife, sat above its sister city overlooking the ocean. According to my Lonely Planet Brazil guide (2005), the area had been conquered and occupied by the Dutch between 1629 and 1654, until the latter had been pushed out by wealthy landowners (p.496). You could see traces of this past in the inhabitants, some of them fair-haired and blue-eyed, and others of darker European stock, mixed with Indigenous features. Like everywhere along the coast of Brazil, where the Indigenous people had been decimated by the Portuguese, African slaves had been brought in to work the plantations, but although Afro-Pernambucans represented a sizeable portion of the population, they were a minority, in contrast to Salvador.

One evening, I made my way to Mestre Sapo's Capoeira Angola academy. Dusk was falling as I entered the master's house. The first floor was an enormous space filled with plants, capoeira instruments, art objects, paintings and photographs. His students, dressed in yellow t-shirts and black pants, were already sitting in the roda. I made my way to the other spectators and took a seat on a wooden bench. There was no mistaking the mestre when he strode in: an athletic Rasta around fifty with a wandering eye and a proud bearing. *He has that Angoleiro way*, I thought. Mestre Sapo definitely had malícia, combined with the incredible stamina of certain Angoleiros, and there was axé – energy – in this roda, yet despite the beauty of the games, I felt

tense.

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“Capoeira Angola is not from Bahia. It’s *African*,” Mestre Sapo was saying firmly<sup>2</sup>. We were sitting in the academy’s kitchen after the roda. I had shyly presented myself to the mestre, and upon hearing that I was researching capoeira, he had launched into a historical commentary. “Capoeira was found in *three* cities: Recife, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador.”

I was not about to engage the mestre in a debate, especially since I was a guest in his academy, but I was burning to point out that the early capoeiras of Recife and Rio de Janeiro had largely disappeared by the early twentieth century. The Capoeira Angola tradition Mestre Sapo practised and preserved so assiduously – the specific music, uniforms, songs and rituals – had come from Salvador and been deeply influenced by the teachings of Mestre Pastinha. In light of Mestre Sapo’s strong Africanist position, I found it surprising that a painting of Mestre Pastinha hung on a wall of the academy. Mestre Sapo seemed to acknowledge Pastinha as an important ancestor in his capoeira lineage, even though the Bahian mestre – born of a Spanish mother and a father of mixed African and European descent – had experimented heavily with Capoeira Angola before settling on a way now considered “traditional”. How could capoeira thus be considered “African”? Pastinha – the father of modern Capoeira Angola to many – had even used *castagnettes* and *guitars* in his rodas for a time!

“I’ve been doing Capoeira Angola for twenty-four years,” Mestre Sapo was telling me proudly, “I did Capoeira Regional for twelve years before that.” The mestre had named his group *Angola Mãe* – Mother Angola – and I saw that like many Africanists, he had painted the walls of his academy with zebras, in reference to the *N’Golo* – the Dance of the Zebras – the Angolan puberty dance believed by its proponents to be the ancestor of capoeira. I understood, suddenly,

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<sup>2</sup> I did not record my chat with Mestre Sapo, and therefore, this is a reconstitution of our talk.

why none of the group's songs mentioned Bahia and why they were filled, instead, with references to Angola the *country*. What would the traditionalists in Salvador make of this?

Africanists seem to ignore the fact that capoeira songs are mostly sung in Portuguese, but coming from a family of translators, I have learned that language is not simply *cosmetic*. It reflects the world around it and profoundly shapes the way people see their environment. Capoeira songs are filled with comments about day-to-day life in Salvador. And what of the other non-African influences like the *pandeiro* – the Moorish tambourine brought to Brazil by the Portuguese for use in their religious processions – or the existence of *chamadas* – call-answer sequences that arose in Bahian capoeira?

My personal opinion, when it comes to the origins of capoeira, is close to the answer given by Mestre Nenel in his Toronto interview at Bavia Arts in May of 2009. I have translated his answer below:

Much research has been done on the question of capoeira's origins. Some studies speak of the influence of the Indigenous people of Brazil. Other studies speak of the role of the Portuguese. Some mestres speak of the Dance of the Zebra. My own father (Mestre Bimba) used to say that capoeira was born in the senzalas – the slave plantations. The truth is that we don't have any documents about this period. When slavery 'ended', in quotation marks, many documents about the history of black people and of the Brazilian people were burnt. My own feeling with respect to the origins of capoeira is that, most probably, capoeira was the result of various factors, peoples and tribes and that it arose in response to the necessity of survival – I say 'survival' in all senses of the word: physical, spiritual and cultural. These people united themselves and capoeira was born of this union – of these various cultural expressions. Capoeira is linked to the creation of Brazil. When it comes to capoeira, certain things, including its origin, will always remain mysterious. I think that this, too, is an important part of capoeira. There will always be a mystery.

As I discuss extensively in my thesis for the Master's in Anthropology (2000),<sup>3</sup> although

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<sup>3</sup> *The Fundamentals of Capoeira: A Philosophical and Historical Perspective.*

many versions of the original “primitive” capoeira *could* have survived, the fact is that the *Bahian* style of capoeira flourished during the twentieth century before spreading to other Brazilian cities, where it later underwent further transformations. In many European colonies where Africans were forced into slavery, other fighting arts still exist today – arts which drew heavily from African roots – yet despite their commonalities, none of them are *capoeira*. It makes sense that the particular environmental and social conditions in Brazil (and more specifically in Bahia), coupled with the particular combination of ethnic groups, were necessary to create capoeira.

The Africanist vision espoused by certain Capoeira Angola groups in which capoeira is seen as purely “African” arises out of an understandable desire on the part of Afro-Brazilians to feel proud of their heritage. A similar desire has led many *non-Bahian* Afro-Brazilians to claim capoeira as theirs, as well. Even light-skinned Brazilians try to portray capoeira as theirs by calling it “Brazilian” rather than *Afro-Brazilian*. (In their case, however, racial oppression is not the driving force.) The common factor in all of these situations is a search for *identity*. Afro-Bahians face serious racial discrimination in Brazil, often coupled with extreme poverty, so it is understandable that questions of identity would be paramount and would surface so often in discussions of capoeira. Despite my sympathy with this struggle, however, and the fact that defining capoeira as “African” may be a positive and necessary first step towards self-empowerment amongst socially marginalized people, ultimately, I believe that adopting such a position is dangerous. Teaching a romanticized and simplified vision of history robs it of its full potential. The truth is never quite as clean or as convenient as we would like it to be! The slave trade, for example, would not have been successful without the participation of *many* Africans who profited from the sale of rival groups (Taylor, 2005). A complex vision requires much more work and a greater degree of self-reflection, but by embracing complexity, we are prevented from

falling into an “us versus them” mentality, an unavoidable part of ready-made identities. Ultimately, we need to go beyond “black and white” versions of history (literally and figuratively). Instead of resorting to sloppy interpretations of the past, we need to dive into the *messier* discussions surrounding slavery, racism and poverty. I believe that if we are courageous enough to face the truth, it will free us all. We certainly need to recognize the deep-seated and widespread existence of racism in Brazil today, but answers to the dilemmas of poverty and inequality will not be found in polarizing issues of race or by simplifying complex questions of history. Doing so would be to lose precious opportunities for true growth and dialogue, crucial elements for the future well-being of our world.

Capoeira went through many incarnations at different points in its history, developing differently in each region. At the beginning of Brazil’s colonization, African slaves seem to have been the main practitioners of the “primitive” capoeiras. (We can only speculate as to what these fighting forms might have looked like, since they have since disappeared and there are few records before the eighteenth century). When urban centers expanded in the nineteenth century, however, many slaves and former slaves flooded cities like Rio de Janeiro and Recife, joined by waves of immigrants. A more violent and ethnically diverse capoeira emerged in this period, and distinctive Carioca and Pernambucan styles of capoeira appeared (as did other styles in urban centres like Maranhão and Sergipe). Unfortunately, since the capoeira of the nineteenth century was associated with the world of criminals, it was intensely persecuted, which led to it being driven underground and disappearing from most cities.

The capoeira of Salvador da Bahia and the surrounding areas was more resistant to the attempts to eradicate it, due perhaps to the particular economic and social conditions of that region. In her book, *On Mundo de Pernas Para o Ar*, De Souza Reis (1997, p.101) speaks of a

political system in Bahia based on paternalism and oligarchy, which she believes resulted in a less centralized and repressive government, one allowing for a greater cultural expression amongst slaves. J. Lowell-Lewis (1992) focuses on the importance of Salvador's geographical position – its location on the Bay of All Saints – which he suggests made it accessible to travellers from other parts of Brazil and of the Recôncavo Region. Bahian capoeira, however, was also threatened with extinction, as it was a pastime of the mostly poor black population. Its illegal status in the penal code reflects its rejection by society. Thus, Mestre Bimba was a crucial figure in the survival of capoeira, instrumental in changing the rapport of capoeira to the larger society. By developing Capoeira Regional – his *Luta Regional Baiana* – in the 1930's, Bimba brought capoeira out of its marginalized status, causing the art to grow astronomically both inside and outside Brazil. Subsequently, Mestre Pastinha and the practitioners of the “primitive” capoeira were able to take advantage of this resurgence to save and reorganize the old capoeira, which was renamed *Capoeira Angola*. By the mid to late twentieth century, Bahian capoeira had spread throughout Brazil and had begun to undergo transformations. Although the modern Pernambucan capoeira may have developed its own style, this is therefore a relatively recent phenomenon.

Ultimately, I believe that *all forms of capoeira in existence today* trace their roots back to the Bahian capoeira of the early to mid-twentieth century, no matter whether they are in Sergipe, Pernambuco or Japan. Although just about everyone seems to wish to claim capoeira as their own, we need to acknowledge the ancestors of modern capoeira: the Bahian people.

Furthermore, the need of many capoeiristas to feel a sense of pride and ownership in their heritage need not be dependent on which “state” capoeira emerged from. Afro-Brazilian descendants' quite justly feel pride and hope in the accomplishments of their ancestors and *all of*

us can celebrate the incredible resiliency of the human spirit – the fact that Africans and their descendents were able to survive with dignity in the midst of a dehumanizing system like slavery.

## ***2. Contra-Mestre Betão<sup>4</sup>***

The first week passed in a pleasant whirlwind of music and people. In the evening, my friends and I would head down to Recife by bus to catch a show. We would cross the bridge of the Beberibe River to wander the old city where stages had been erected. It was on one of the last days of Carnival that Maria, Julie and I heard the sounds of *côco* and *cavalo marino* – traditional Pernambucan music – coming from an old square. We rounded the corner and Maria gave a cry – in front of us stood *Contra-Mestre Betão* from Chapéu de Coro.

Chapéu de Coro was the Recife-based capoeira school from which the Ottawa teacher, Professor Fabinho<sup>5</sup>, had come – the same school where I had met Maria and Julie back in 1999, the year I had lived with my mother while I wrote my Master's thesis. Maria and Julie had gone to Brazil that year and spent several weeks in Recife with the members of Chapéu de Coro. They had fallen in love with the school, returning to Ottawa full of stories about the remarkable Mestre Curisco – a vegan who did yoga and studied Eastern philosophy – and Contra-Mestre Betão, the jovial man who now stood before us. Six years had passed in the interim, but Betão enveloped them in a powerful bear hug.

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When Betão invited Maria, Julie and me to stay at his house in the suburbs of Recife – the home where he lived with his mother – we decided to extend our stay in Pernambuco a little longer. Capoeira classes would be beginning again in a few days and Maria and Julie had yet to

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<sup>4</sup> He has since been promoted to the rank of *Mestre*.

<sup>5</sup> That year, Professor Fabinho left Chapéu de Coro and began his own school, Dendê do Recife.

see any of their Chapéu de Coro friends. I was also curious to meet Mestre Curisco, the man whose feline grace was so apparent in his students' games.

Betão was a generous and jovial host, shepherding us around Recife in his weather-beaten car. I was impressed by the apparently boundless energy of this man, and by the evening, we were exhausted, sprawled out on comfortable living room sofas, the warm air and the quiet sounds of the middle class neighbourhood, Varzia, where Betão had grown up pouring in through the windows.

“Did your siblings grow up here, too, Betão?” I asked my new friend.

“My older brothers and sisters,” he answered, “were born in Arco Verde, the town where my parents – Bahians who lived in the state of Paraíba – met. I was born in Recife, on August 13, 1971.”

“When did you start capoeira?” Maria inquired.

“In 1984,” he smiled. “It’s been *twenty-three years* since I joined the Chapéu de Coro group! I’ve never changed groups or trained with another mestre – only with Curisco. We met in this very neighbourhood. I knew his mother and brothers, and I spent a lot of time at their house. We were all linked through theatre and culture – their mother was a theatre professor – and we used to hang out in a children’s group called Mamulengo. Later, I discovered capoeira through his younger brother – I’m also the youngest in my family – and I started training capoeira with Curisco. It was that kind of neighbourhood – small and intimate – and a strong cultural movement was happening in the arts. When I first discovered capoeira, I was about thirteen. I had a forty to fifty minute bus ride to get to the training – our class was at ten p.m. – and I had to study in the morning. People used to pick on me, because I was small, you know?” Betão laughed heartily. “All those big capoeira guys... I used to admire them! I was a shiny-eyed kid. It was tough, but I kept going. Eventually, I opened a capoeira school in Varzia, but twenty-three years ago when I started capoeira, there were only *three* capoeira academies in all of Recife. There was capoeira in downtown Boa Viagem and Candeias. There was capoeira in Olinda and in Morro da Conceição, but little to nothing in the suburbs. There was some *old* capoeira, as well – the traditional stuff – here and there. Nowadays, there are three groups in Varzia alone!”

“And when did Mestre Curisco enter the picture?” I inquired.

“Curisco played an important role in the transformation of the Pernambuco capoeira scene,” Betão replied. “Back then, there were few capoeiristas. Zumbi from Bahia had just arrived and Mulatinho from Rio de Janeiro, too. Mulatinho had trained in Rio with Grupo Senzala under Mestre Mosquito, one of the founders of the group. He had then gone to Brasília to study at the university and trained for a while with Mestre Adito, before being transferred here with his family. Capoeira was growing and starting to get organized – things really exploded in Pernambuco. Before that, capoeira had only been played in the streets. It was marginalized, not something everyone did. It was more for black people – like Maracatú and Candomblé. They’re linked to capoeira, too, you know? So when I started capoeira, it was still discriminated against and my parents were against it. My mom only allowed it because my brothers trained and they

were already adults. The cultural movement had begun, so there was a musical renaissance in Pernambuco. I began capoeira and started to notice Maracatú. I partied at Carnival. It was all part of a cultural movement.”

“Anyway, I knew Curisco, but we weren’t very close. I was closer to his brothers, but once I started training capoeira I started to see him all the time. My brother trained tae kwon do, but he was also Curisco’s student. I was really impressed by capoeira! My brother would do this trick where he’d spin on his head – I was little and thought that was *amazing!*” Betão chuckled. “I fell in love with the acrobatics, the energy, the songs... Of course, after the first class, I could hardly get out of bed, I was in such pain! Our training was really tough. There were two groups – Curisco had one and Berilo had the other. They weren’t mestres yet. They had just gotten their red belts. Only one other fellow who started with us, Nego, still plays capoeira – he lives in Cologne, Germany now – but back then, there were a bunch of us from the neighbourhood who trained and hung out. I got my first belt after a year and a half, but the second one only came seven years later. I was still young when I got the first belt – about fourteen or fifteen – and I was a teenager, so everything amazed me. Our teacher was more than a master to me – he was my idol! Man, I wanted to be just like him... I wanted to wear the same watch as he did – the same shoes and pants! I even wanted to have my hair like his. Curisco founded Chapéu de Coro with two other guys – Berilo and Sambuca – all three of whom were students of Mulatinho, shortly after I met him. Mulatinho had to leave to do his Masters in Brasília, so the group was left without a teacher. The three students got together and founded Chapéu de Coro. Back in those days, the capoeira in Recife was very violent. To be respected, you had to play in the street and *fight*, and to be respected as a mestre, you had to be really tough. It was a capoeira of *valentões* – tough guys – and few survived. As a kid back then, I didn’t mind!” Betão laughed.

“Tell me more about Curisco,” I urged.

“I used to see how Curisco behaved in capoeira,” Betão replied. “I saw his dedication, honesty and courage. He was very smart, right? Curisco *always* acted like a mestre. I think it’s just inside him. When you see the kinds of things that happen in the capoeira world, you know he’s a great mestre, despite his youth – he’s about 41. He’s really wise and knowledgeable and has a strong philosophical understanding. You see it in the way he teaches his classes. In our group, we know every single student’s mother and father. They’re strong relationships. Sometimes a student will come over and cut my hair and others will help in some other way. It’s a neighbourhood thing, like going to ask for sugar or salt at the neighbour’s house. Of course, I had a lot of energy back then and did other things as well. I did dance. There was a lot of prejudice towards men who danced, of course, so people picked fights with me! It was ten times worst than the prejudice towards capoeira. Pernambuco’s a very macho place! The idea of the *Coroneis* – the Colonels – is still strong. Now things have changed, because there’s been a revolution in the Pernambucan music and cultural scene. Maracatú, capoeira, coco and ciranda are all a part of the marketing of Pernambuco now – of its cultural diversity. These days, capoeira and maracatú are even a part of daily life for university students. Some degree of prejudice still exists, but it’s much lighter. Cultural diversity and resistance are huge in Pernambuco. We resisted the lure of money and prestige, because we come from a land of Colonels, very *conservative* people. The resistance in Pernambuco also lies in the plurality of its cultures – the Europeans and indigenous people were very musical and dance-focused. It’s a big, bubbling pot where cultures simmered,” Betão smiled with pride. “I was doing all this cultural stuff, so it was only when I got to my second belt – the brown belt – that I started taking capoeira more seriously. I was in the flowering of my youth and wanted to become a man!” Betão

chuckled. “I wanted to prove myself – it was natural. I took part in it all: even the violence, you know? From morning to night, I lived and breathed capoeira! I wanted to drink, to get a girl and fight in the street. In Brazil you need to prove that you’re better than everyone else. You have to survive and life is hard, but things have gotten better. The shift in cultural vision and in tourism helped. Capoeira has become more sportive and it’s been exported abroad. No one wants to get hurt anymore – to get beaten up. When Curisco succeeded in bringing capoeira into the Catholic University, it contributed to the development of a more cultural capoeira in Recife, and moved away from the street, little by little. Nowadays our classes are quite different from the ones I used to train in. I changed, too. I *had* to, right? Hanging around middle and upper-class folks influenced me. I made friendships and got many opportunities through capoeira. Capoeira evolved and helped me evolve. Now, it’s leaning towards an ‘Olympic world’, however, moving away from the ‘cultural world’ as it becomes more media-based. The presence of muscular, acrobatic men is new, too. Capoeira doesn’t just bring us what we believe in, right?”

“What do you think of this trend, Betão?” I prodded.

“I talk about this subject a lot with Curisco and the other members of the group. Chapéu de Coro has a very strong spiritual aspect, but we can’t ignore the other side, can we? Even if my tendency – my spirit of resistance – tends towards a more philosophical and cultural capoeira, I also have students who are strong and acrobatic. I try to transmit a sense of *joy* to my students – of relaxation – but I don’t refuse athletes, either. If a guy comes to me who wants to dispute a *vale tudo* fight, I’ll accept him. It’s a part of capoeira, too. I just try to teach my students that nothing is worthwhile without pleasure. In spite of our difficulties, we have to find joy in life, right? Then we can survive anything. That’s what Carnival is all about.” Betão broke out in song, “*Com dinheiro ou sem dinheiro... ê... eu brinco. Com pandeiro ou sem pandeiro... ê... eu brinco.*” With or without money, I play. With or without a tambourine, I play. The party goes on! That’s a really old song.”

“How did teaching change things for you?” I inquired.

“I’ve been teaching for twelve years and I became a more responsible person – more serious in my work with the group. It wasn’t easy, but it had to be that way. When you first start out, it’s normal to need guidance. Back then, I was afraid of my teachers, but nowadays, I learn with my students. These days, the trend is *not* to have a mestre or a professor – to be alone. The effects of modernization are so big that even if you have a mestre, you don’t have a real relationship with him anymore. In our group, relationships remain important to this day. The relationship with the mestre reinforces the basic education. These days, anyone who’s strong and agile can be a teacher, but you need ability and leadership. Some people want power, but it’s not about that at all.”

“What do you think are a teacher or mestre’s responsibilities, Betão?” I interjected.

“Boy... It’s a mountain and then some!” Betão chuckled. “The responsibility of a good professor is to orient and to participate in the life of each student. Your relationship with the students doesn’t end after class. You try to develop friendships and to instill a sense of joy and love. A lot of people are missing that. There’s a real lack of respect – a lack of spirit – in many people. I also try to teach my students self-esteem and honesty, to know when to listen and to try to control their emotions. A group isn’t homogenous – there are kids, adults, elderly people and a variety of economic levels. We learn how to conquer our dreams together and not to be so alone, you know? I can’t be doing great in life, while someone else struggles. Together, we have a lot of *padrinhos* – a lot of godfathers – to help us on our path. As teachers, we open doors and shine a light for students. We teach them that hardships and challenges help us grow.”

“Have you ever been disappointed by a student?” I asked, gently.

“Of course! Look at my white hairs!” We both laughed. “I’ve suffered many deceptions and I’m sure I’ll have many more. Not everything can go the way we want it to. I’ve had students who’ve changed paths, despite all the patience in the world. They abandoned all the principles we tried to develop in them. Others were assassinated, joined assassin groups, or became thieves. I’ve had students who lost their minds and others who started teaching on their own. *Man!* Any professor in Brazil who works within a community has gone through these things. There are romantic relationships, betrayals and fights – that’s life. In spite of this, we have to throw ourselves into our work. I may fall on my face, but they know I’m being true.”

“What about the students who don’t have money to pay for classes?” I asked.

“I teach them for free and buy their clothes. I don’t charge them for their batizado ceremonies or their belts. We do what we can, right? But I have a lot of parallel activities. Even spiritually, I like to diversify. Capoeira *is* rich, but it also helps you to access and explore other areas. I studied in university and got a diploma. I worked with supplies for a long time, sold houses, worked in commerce and sugar cane production... Now I work with the production of instruments, manage the occasional show and receive people in my home. It’s a battle!” Betão chuckled. “My whole life I’ve gone after things.”

“How do you avoid making capoeira and culture into something commercial, as so many people have done?” I wondered.

“Without losing the human side?” Betão finished, “Well, if you just focus on money, you’ll lose the cultural and spiritual side of capoeira, and become a salesperson instead of a cultural agent. We have to have some principles, right? I’m no different than others, but thanks to my experience and to the guidance I received with Curisco, I’m better able to resist the seductions out there. It’s always hard, of course, because I have to survive, but when I see how I’ve helped other people change, even if only in a small way, this makes me very happy.”

“What do you think of the modern capoeira scene, Betão?” I continued.

“There’s a huge market for capoeira in Europe and North America now and now there are more mestres than students! Capoeira doesn’t die in Brazil, because it’s in our culture – in the roots – although some things are disappearing. The capoeira of today is more of a show than a spiritual roda. It’s more about acrobatics and violence than it is an art form. People are obsessed with beauty – the ‘Olympic’ evolution of capoeira – and I think it confuses people outside of Brazil a *lot*. They look at capoeira from a purely aesthetic point of view. What is the real – the original – capoeira? We don’t really know, but we keep searching for it. You know, things come and go. *Everything is a circle* – from the movements of capoeira to those of the Universe. I think a time will come when values will be demanded and those of us who are on that boat will be remembered. Capoeira left Brazil, but when it returns, it will be different, philosophically. Capoeira is in a state of transformation, following its own path, and it’s still relatively new. The first documents we have about it are about four hundred years old, so capoeira is young, compared to certain Asian martial arts.”

“Betão, what would you say capoeira has brought to your life?” I smiled.

“That’s tough to explain,” he said, thoughtfully. “Capoeira helped me build a vision of life – values and relationships. It helped me build my personality and my way of being, but of course, capoeira is not everything. I have a *self* too! Capoeira will give you the tools to build, but every person must create their own life differently.”

## ~ *Part Five: Return to Salvador* ~

### *1. The Rains of March*

With only three weeks left in Brazil, I could not help but wonder uneasily what I had accomplished. I had spent so much time on the road that I was feeling more of a guest than a true resident in Salvador. Even my inability to be a part of Miguel's life seemed to confirm that I was a shadow passing in the night. We had begun meeting again at an old motel near the Pelourinho, a sad and down-trodden place where the smell of humidity impregnated the walls. I could see the sadness of my imminent departure reflected in my lover's eyes, but the realization that little had changed between us plunged me into a state of despondency that threatened to unsettle the precarious peace I had built over Carnival. I was pursued with the feeling that I had failed at capoeira, as well, both as a student and a researcher. It was all I could do to make it to class every week. The constant threat of injury made training – once a joy – tense and painful. Only when I heard the berimbau did I remember something of the passion that had brought me to Salvador in the first place.

One evening, Maria and I made our way to the *Biblioteca Central* – the Central Library – where a documentary based on Ruth Landes book, *City of Women*, was being shown. Thanks to a Bahian boyfriend – the renown Afro-Bahian Ethnologist Edison Carneiro – Landes, a Jewish-American scholar visiting Salvador in the early 1930's, had succeeded in penetrating into the heart of Afro-Bahian society, and to her great surprise, discovered that women had powerful roles in Salvador through its religion. Candomblé women – mães de santos and their ceremonial “daughters” – lived in *terreiros* or religious houses, enjoying an unusual amount of independence, taking lovers and often running small businesses on the side to supplement their income. The

Afro-Bahian women on the black and white screen were beautiful, reminding me why I had fallen in love with Bahia, back in 2003. With their voluptuous frames, white dresses and proud bearings, they seemed to embody something of the magic and earthiness of Bahia, and of a culture imbued with the powers of nature.

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After Carnival, the weather turned cool and wet. I was instantly plunged back to a quieter Salvador – the one I had known back in 2005 – and it struck me that my rhythm had finally synchronized itself to the city's, just as my trip neared its end. Maria and I were spending more time at home cooking and chatting, the familiar motions helping to lessen our agitation. My initial passion for Salvador had been replaced by a deeper and sweeter affection. I planned to be back before a year had elapsed to conduct my interviews, but there was a lot to do before my departure: I had begun organizing an event in Toronto that would take place in June as part of my Graduate Assistanceship work with Professor Jean-Paul Restoule, an “Elders in Dialogue” Symposium that would bring together four Masters/Elders from four holistic traditions. I had settled on Mestre Augusto as an ideal candidate, since he straddled the capoeira and the academic world, and would have to fundraise with my students for his ticket.

Maria had been cooking all afternoon when the Filhos de Bimba gang arrived. I was thrilled to see the faces of so many dear capoeiristas filling our home. As the beer flowed, one of the students began an engaging melody, his fingers flying comfortably over the chords of his guitar. Others joined in, grabbing impromptu instruments from our kitchen. The sound grew to a deafening crescendo, a sea of voices and bodies that swept me up along with it. Thinking of my students in Toronto – how they would have loved this moment – I was suddenly deeply grateful to the joyful spirit of Bahia. Two years before, I had slinked away shyly without saying good-

bye, but things were different now. My heart had opened wider for the Filhos de Bimba, my other relationships shifting in consequence, and despite having been plagued by doubts and worries during my entire stay in Brazil, as I gazed around me at the life I had created in this city of the African gods, I knew I had done all right.

## ***Epilogue to Book Two – Toronto 2006-2007***

The moment I stepped into Toronto's Pearson International Airport, I wondered if I had made a mistake in coming back. Torontonians looked grim, bundled tightly against the cold in drab greys and blacks, and I was shocked by the way people walked – quickly and stiffly – looking neither right nor left. It was a particularly tough spring, a hard shift from the incessant sunshine of Salvador. I missed the cheerful expansiveness of Bahians, finding my fellow Torontonians stingy in their demonstrations of affection, yet slowly, I surrendered to life in Toronto. I had a myriad projects to tackle – Mestre Augusto would be arriving in four months, and in order to raise the money required to bring him to Canada, I would have to organize yet *another* fundraiser. Without my ex-husband, I wondered at the support I would find in the capoeira community, but I threw myself into the work with zest, juggling a dozen projects.

It was a textbook case of taking on too much, my days long and made up of impossible to-do lists. There were the requirements of the Graduate Assistanceship with Professor Jean-Paul, applications for scholarships and grants to fill out. By the fifth year of my Ph.D., I would no longer receive funding. In order to supplement my income I accepted any capoeira teaching opportunities that came my way. I tried hard to ignore the fact that my capoeira classes had dwindled in size – whatever energy the students had brought back from Brazil had long since petered out.

By mid-summer my body was in pain and no matter what I did – yoga, stretch classes, or acupuncture – I could barely function. It was hard not to panic at the loss of my range of motion. It was taking a tremendous amount of time and money to address the healing of my broken body, but I knew I *needed* to do this for myself. I had been on fast-forward most of my life, bullying myself into being the kind of person I felt I had to be – a good athlete, a strong academic and a

giving community builder – and it was wreaking havoc on me. In addition, it was demoralizing to see that for all the hours I poured into capoeira, I was getting paid a pittance in return. A feeling grew that people did not truly understand the work this represented. Not only my students, but the wider society, saw artistic and social practices as a *luxury*, rather than the necessity it was. For years I had convinced myself that since I loved my work, recognition – financial or verbal – did not matter, but I was worn down. After a decade of community work, it was humiliating to be reduced to a state of financial uncertainty and to depend on my mother. The crisis was mirroring my growing need for self-respect – I was not blind to the parallels between learning to speak up professionally and romantically – but whenever I considered giving up, I would hear of the ways, big and small, that capoeira had transformed my students' lives. If it were not for something much greater pushing me on, I would not have lasted the year.

I was also losing some of my oldest students. Many of them frequently and unintentionally wounded me as they searched for answers. It had taken me *years* to find my path, so I could not begrudge them their time. Many nights as I rode home, my heart in my throat after yet another small class, I would ponder the possibility of joining the Filhos de Bimba School. I had been on my own for *two years* and I knew that having the support of a school would help in many ways. Of course, with Mestre Bezerra I had enjoyed a tremendous amount of freedom. What if the rules and regulations of the Filhos de Bimba turned out to be too complicated and cumbersome? Yet when I thought of the way the berimbau had sung in Mestre Nenel's hands and remembered the warmth of the rodas in the Fundação, I knew that despite the importance of the years of freedom I had enjoyed exploring capoeira in its many dimensions, now I wanted the kind of depth only found in relationship.

The miracle of spring caught me by surprise – a soft green had started covering the trees,

lighting up the land for miles around – and things were magically falling into place as I tackled the Wisdom of the Elders Symposium. The fundraiser was successful and Mestre Augusto arrived within days. I had programmed three weeks packed to the rim with events, three weeks of pure magic where we were able to set our busy lives aside. The mestre's visit shifted something in my students, helping them understand a dimension beyond the physical, bringing us all closer.

The summer of 2007 I met an osteopath named Richard. I had seen a host of specialists over the years – people who took cursory glances at my problems and inevitably treated the symptoms (a sore neck and back muscles), but not the root of my pain. Although I had spent *years* patiently and single-mindedly working on my flexibility, my mobility was getting worst. I learned that I had the early onset of *osteo-arthritis* in both hips (especially in the right hip) and *femuro-acetabular impingement* – a condition in which the femur and hip bones are pinched. It went a long way to explaining the physical problems I had experienced over the past decades caused by my body's attempts to adjust to the limited range of movement. My cartilage was being worn down and in ten to fifteen years, I was told, I would have to get a hip replacement. I was in shock – I had always held the hope that I would get *better*. How could I give up capoeira?

Fall arrived and with it an opportunity to leave the gym where I taught capoeira for a more suitable locale. At our new dance studio, the manager seemed friendly, but he warned me that he would take away one of my evenings if I did not get more students. Not wanting to turn down such a beautiful space, I threw myself into the challenge. My health and school work soon suffered. I was a juggler balancing a dozen teacups – I had blamed my ex-husband for the burdens he had placed on me before, but I had to recognize that while he might have been taking advantage of my workaholic tendency, I had accepted the pace and it was killing me.

Mestre Augusto would be returning in November, invited to participate in an Arts Festival, and I raced to hand in the first draft of my thesis proposal. The deeper I dove into capoeira, however, the less connection I felt to the university. As I tried to find a way to fit capoeira into a thesis, I worried incessantly that my thesis would be rejected. Professor Jean-Paul, who was familiar with cultural tensions, thanks to his work with First Nations people, suggested that I might be adding to the field of *Indigenous knowledge*. The idea was appealing, but there was one problem: capoeira came from a culture of the Diaspora – not one native to Brazil – and its original creators, harking from the immense African continent with its dazzling array of cultures, had also been influenced by various Brazilian Indigenous peoples and by the Portuguese colonizers. On another level, however, the idea made sense. There were definite parallels between my research in the Afro-Bahian community and other scholars' research in First Nations' communities: relationship and trust were paramount to both Afro-Bahians and Indigenous people, both were oral cultures with non-linear perceptions of time and space, both held a holistic view of human beings which included the body, the spirit, the emotions and the mind, both saw people as integrated within nature, and both used the symbol of the circle, to name just a few similarities.

I found myself thinking often about the differences between the academic world and the Bahian world. The academic world, originally based on a positivist model, often viewed knowledge as separable from its context and elevated the intellect above the body. The native Bahian view, on the other hand, shared by many traditional Indigenous people, saw humans as imbedded within and dependent on the natural world – a world where animals, plants, rocks and spirits were conversant with each other and with the whole. In Bahia, the mystery of life was celebrated and knowledge found in art forms like capoeira. I struggled to find a way to honour

the teachings of my capoeira friends and still fulfill the requirements of the university. Living in Bahia had changed me profoundly, both in my relationship to my body and in my understanding of the deep-seated values of the society I lived in. I felt that universities still essentially paid lip service to the idea of embodied knowledge. What might a teaching that fully incorporated our hearts, minds, spirits and bodies look like?

Days before Mestre Augusto arrived I hit a wall – I could not spend one more semester in the dance studio – and I found a new space where we could train without the same pressure. The Angola mestre's trip proved to be as powerful as the first one, but once he left I realized that now I had to focus all my energy on the thesis. December had arrived and Professor Roxana, who had agreed to become my supervisor, told me that my time had run out. The university was telling me to complete my proposal and comprehensive papers by January, or to drop out of the programme. The holidays were a blur – I moved less in a month than I typically did in a *day*, watching snowflakes fall outside my window as I typed – and I got the requirements done, just barely.

When I left for Salvador in early January, I knew that in many ways, it was going to be a defining trip. Not only would I be completing my research, but I would be choosing my capoeira school and defining my relationship with Miguel for good.

# Book Three

*Salvador da Bahia (January – May 2008)*

## *~ Part One: The Bachelor*



Lang and Cabral in front of his store where Lang lived, Santo Antônio, April 2008 (Photo: Lang Liu)

### *1. Cabral Discoveries*

It was always a shock to arrive in Salvador's airport after a Toronto winter. There was the smell of frying *acarajé*, the sound of animated voices and bursts of colour. I barely had time to take a few breaths before a dark and smiling woman jumped out of a car. I stared at Maria in shock – the dreads, the tank top that came just above the navel, the tiny jean-skirt that showed the toned legs of a dancer – and I could *feel* the time that had passed since we had parted. It was ten months ago, exactly. For a moment I was confused. On my last trip to Bahia, I had come with my students by my side – a piece of Canada to ease me into Salvador – but this time, there was to be no such transition, and things had changed. Maria was no longer single. *Unlike me, she's*

*gone on*, I thought miserably. Miguel had not come and a vast emptiness stretched suddenly before me, making me want to turn on my heels and go.

Maria still lived at Travessa José Bahia, but this time, I would only be staying a few days. I had rented a bachelor apartment located above an antique store, a quirky building I had often passed on my way to capoeira called *Descoberta Cabral* – Cabral Discoveries – in allusion both to the owner, João Cabral, and to the sixteenth century Portuguese adventurer, Pedro Cabral, who had “discovered” Brazil centuries before.

Walking through the familiar streets, I felt uneasy. I could not stop obsessing about the differences that had accumulated in the year I had been gone. Maria told me of deep cuts in government funding and of the reduction in Pelourinho shows – a reflection of the generalized drop in tourism throughout Brazil – adding that the Filhos de Bimba School had been hard hit. I was almost afraid of what I would find. On top of this, I would not be seeing much of my friend, who was beginning a month of intensive dance workshops. Utterly depleted and sporting a tell-tale cold sore on my upper lip, I prayed that Salvador’s sunshine would be exactly what I needed. I could not help wondering if three months would be enough time to reconnect with this place I had once loved so much.

It was only the next day, when Maria and I made the familiar journey from Santo Antônio to the Fundação Mestre Bimba for the Saturday morning roda, then joined the others at the Beco da Coruja – the school’s traditional post-roda bar tucked away in an alley of the Pelourinho – that I began to relax. As the cheap beer was being poured, I found myself nestled between my old teachers, Anum and Chapinha. It felt good to chat in idle conversation and to see that changes were already happening – my skin was losing its chalky colour, my lip was healing, and even my frenetic Toronto pace was slowing down.

That day, I moved into my new apartment. João Cabral, the owner of Cabral Descobertas, a charismatic man in his late forties with impish eyes, greeted me warmly. Gazing about me in fascination, I could see that every inch of the shop was covered with odds and ends, objects ranging from the bizarre to the practical. I instantly liked Viví, the hard-working staff member who struggled to keep a semblance of order amidst the chaos. She disappeared into a small kitchen and emerged balancing tiny coffee cups in her hands. When we had finished, she handed me two large keys.

The narrow staircase to the second floor was filled with old paintings. I slipped my key into the keyhole and found myself in a narrow room decorated with antique furniture. On my left a veranda sheltered several potted plants and on my right a hallway led to a bathroom and kitchen. It felt good to put away my belongings and to shower in the tiny bathroom, buffeted by a gentle breeze. Sitting on my bed afterwards, combing my freshly-washed hair, I looked dreamily out onto the red-shingled roofs and quiet road that wound down to the Cidade Baixa. Already, I knew that this would be my oasis away from the turbulence of Salvador.

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Several days after my arrival, Miguel appeared at my door with the tortured eyes of a refugee. As we sat on my bed, holding each other with shaky relief, I knew there would be no denying our need. All the words, all the carefully constructed arguments had flown away at the sight of him in the early morning light. Being together was more a necessity than an act of desire – an attempt to bridge the gap that had grown between us over the months – and afterwards, I felt no regret, only a bitter-sweetness that lingered like the smell of his skin on my own. I had spent three years waiting for my lover and was now awakening as if from a deep sleep, only to realize that I had *nothing* to show for it. I had never felt so alone and disconnected in Salvador. What

did research and training matter when my personal life was a wreck?

My little apartment, however, was an oasis where I could be completely myself and this knowledge filled me with joy. Sitting on the floor, propped up against the bed, I could eat and read for hours, listening to pop tunes on the radio I had brought with me. Maria had lent me the book *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert (2006), the story of Gilbert's battle with depression and divorce, followed by her voyage of self-discovery during her travels to three countries: Italy, India and Indonesia. In each place, she had explored a different dimension of life – pleasure, devotion and balance – and found joy. As I read, I could feel the darkness receding, and become aware of a presence – a loving presence that seemed to suggest it was *not* too late. Yes, I had made mistakes, but they had all been a part of the journey – I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Maria and I met frequently for lunch, and despite my original apprehension, we had slipped back easily into our friendship. I was also glad to have my old teacher, Anum, back, and thrilled to be with Chapinha, as well – a woman someone whose body moved like mine. Anum taught Mondays and Wednesdays at the Fundação Mestre Bimba, and Chapinha did on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Although it was challenging to be the only student often, I found myself looking forward to the classes, to learning new techniques and correcting old ones. Even Chapinha had remarked that I seemed to be “getting” Regional better. After the physical difficulties of the last trip, it was a relief to notice that my joints felt looser in the warm weather.

Two of my Toronto students were going to be getting married in Salvador at the Organização Fraternal São José (OFSJ) – the Nuns' bed and breakfast – and not only would I be organizing their wedding, but a small number of my students would be flying to Brazil to celebrate with the couple. Friday afternoons, I would head to the OFSJ in the Boa Viagem

neighbourhood to plan my students' wedding with Irmã Valdinez – the head nun – and Cleidson, the receptionist whom I had befriended on my previous trip. They seemed as excited as I was with the ceremony, which would be taking place on the lookout, framed by a stunning view of the Bay of All Saints.

My sense of peace, however, was short-lived. I had always felt a secret thrill at being in Salvador, but this time something was different. While my lover had made it clear that he was not ready to leave his marriage, I could not seem to let go. The thought of him consumed me and many nights, I awoke to blackness outside my window that seemed to mirror my inner state. What was there to do but sit with my pain, with the tears, night after night – to force one foot in front of the other when things had long since lost their meaning?

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When I arrived at the Fundação for the Saturday morning roda, I could hardly look my fellow capoeiristas in the eyes. After a difficult night, the bitterness was still thick on my tongue. I had wrestled with my fears for hours, alone in my room, and come out of a sheer instinct for survival. Yet, once I entered the roda, the hum of the berimbau and the smiles of my companions began coaxing me out of my gloom.

That day, I did not care about “winning” or “losing”. I did not care about being taken down or looking foolish. As I surrendered to my game with Professor Berimbau, for once I was entirely unafraid. We flowed together, our bodies merging and separating, in a timeless ecstasy. I understood then the true impact of my tension. I had been living under the tyranny of my fears for years – only *playing* at life, while keeping the most vulnerable and vital parts of me hidden. I was still a prisoner to my deeply entrenched patterns, and my fears were reflected in the tightness of my body with its myriad injuries. *Intellectually* I might believe in a spiritual dimension, but I

had never truly relinquished control. My habits had brought me to a dead end. After all these years, capoeira was still teaching me – mirroring my internal life more accurately than I had realized. *Learn to fall*, it was urging me. *Falling is not a failure and need not be painful*. If I could only roll with the attacks, rather than resisting them, it would allow for a continuation of the dialogue. Falling could then become an interesting change in direction. It was my fear of falling that was creating tension and pain, both in my life and in capoeira. A beautiful game, just like a beautiful life, demanded surrender – a fundamental sense of trust and joy – and that was the crux of the matter. I was still terribly afraid.

## ***2. Roberta<sup>6</sup> and the Women of Capoeira***

One sunny Saturday afternoon, Maria and I headed to the home of an American friend for her *despedida de solteira* – a bachelorette party. As the *Pitanga* sugar-cane alcohol bottle was cracked open, we busied ourselves chopping vegetables to much raucous laughter, and I realized that being surrounded by ten strong, joyful women was the perfect antidote to my heartache.

The doorbell rang and we were joined by an expansive Baiana in a long skirt and bangles. I was thrilled to learn that Roberta trained with Grupo Nzinga, a Capoeira Angola school run by Mestre<sup>7</sup> Janja. A female mestre was a rarity in Capoeira Angola, so I had heard of Janja. Over the next few hours Roberta told me bitterly about her experiences in the Capoeira Angola world and of her frustration with its sexualization of women. As I listened, it dawned on me that she was the first capoeirista I had met in Salvador to draw links between capoeira and the larger sexual discrimination in Bahian society.

“The problem,” Roberta was explaining, “is that Bahian society is still overwhelmingly

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<sup>6</sup> This was not her real name.

<sup>7</sup> The names *mestranda* and *mestra* are sometimes also used to refer to female mestres.

mysogynist. Capoeira Angola simply mirrors that social reality – it’s traditional, so it’s ruled by patriarchal values. We started the Nzinga group to address this problem of disrespect women encounter in many rodas. In the beginning, it wasn’t so much a ‘feminist’ endeavour as a practical need. It can be really tough in the roda! Sometimes the men won’t let you play or take a berimbau, or when you finally do play, they try to humiliate you. They think it funny when a guy flirts with you in the roda, picks you up, throws you on the ground and then lies on top of you. They sing, ‘That girl’s so pretty! She’s so beautiful!’ Who says she wants to hear that?”

I nodded. “It’s a way of making it clear that you’re a woman – a sexual object first and foremost.”

“Exactly,” Roberta nodded. “These are the kinds of disrespectful *macho* behaviours we need to question. We wanted to do things differently at Nzinga – to organize rodas where women and men could play together in the true spirit of capoeira. Our intention is not to humiliate men, either. There are still so many negative stereotypes about women that it’s necessary to adopt the stance we have. I know of a case where a mestre got involved with a student and when she wanted to end the relationship, he hit her so hard in the roda that she ended up in hospital. She won’t be back any time soon, you know! It was a totally aggressive act – he *wanted* to expel her from his social circle – and this happens to a lot of female students. Another thing is that when foreign women come to Salvador, the men fight amongst each other to see who will sleep with them first. Sometimes, these girls don’t realize what’s going on. They’re flattered, thinking that all these guys are truly interested in them, but when they leave, the guys brag about how they ‘got’ the Italian, German or French girl. I’m not saying foreign girls shouldn’t go out with Bahian guys, just that they should be aware of these games. Many foreign women come with an attitude – instead of sharing and exchanging ideas, of learning about the way things are here, they adopt a confrontational stance towards us.”

“Roberta,” I interrupted, “I understand what you’re trying to say, but you must know that I’ve heard the same story from the opposite side. Many of my foreign female capoeirista friends complain about the unfriendliness and wariness of Brazilian women. They want female Bahian friends, but end up giving up and make friends with the men instead.”

Roberta nodded, “It’s complicated. It’s a struggle – a tremendous struggle for women here, you know? You have to understand how strong misogyny and *machismo* are in Salvador. We live in a sexist society, so women become sexist towards each other. It must be tough for you foreign women, without the language and knowledge of the place. Women need to come together to share ideas. Of course, if you talk about feminist ideas, people automatically assume that you’re a lesbian!”

I could understand Roberta’s frustration. I had met plenty of foreign women whose relationship with local men was a subtle form of prostitution – in exchange for access to cash, outings and gifts, the Bahianos lived out the foreign women’s fantasies of “virile” black men. It was part of the complicated legacy of colonialism. I found it sad, however, that Roberta, like many other Bahian women, would choose to focus the brunt of her frustration on other *women*. Most of my foreign friends in Bahia, having grown up with feminist values, found the rigid sexual roles in Bahia – the insistent attention of the men – *stifling*. My blond colleagues, in particular, were relentlessly pursued in the street. This form of sexual harassment was often brushed aside as a “compliment”. Patriarchy was setting women up against each other, ensuring that they did not challenge the status quo and until women came together to understand the commonality of their experiences – until they put their *men* to the wall, demanding respect – there would be no real change.

“You know,” I mused, “I’ve always thought that the effects of colonization run more deeply than people realize. There’s a lot of talk of ‘slavery’ and ‘liberation’ – these terms get brandied about so often – but *domination* still seems to be an obsession for a lot of men in capoeira. When they have the possibility of lording it over others and humiliating them, they sure take it! There’s a lot of unacknowledged *stuff* around hierarchy in capoeira.”

“Definitely,” Roberta agreed. “Women in capoeira are rarely given any power, either. I see lots of cases where women who’ve been training for a long time don’t get the opportunity to teach, so there’s a lot of work ahead. People see us as a threat in Capoeira Angola.”

“I can’t imagine the kind of reaction you must get here,” I shook my head. “Even in Canada, where there’s talk of feminist ideas and an attempt at equality at least, a group like yours that is explicitly feminist would get a lot of flack, perhaps even some violent reactions.”

“It’s tough,” Roberta acknowledged. “Sometimes we invite women from other groups to participate in our educational meetings, but they refuse to come. They accuse us of not using the same language. We’re struggling with how to involve people with less education. Language can be a barrier to the creation of relationships amongst women. There are so many factors...”

“Right,” I agreed, “because you’re not just talking about capoeira. If you start to question things, you’re going to touch on issues relating to a woman’s home life. Are there men in your group?”

“Of course, but they’re unconventional men. They have to be, to accept a female mestre and the ideas of Nzinga. Our men also suffer discrimination!” Roberta laughed, dryly. “They get called *homens flores* – flower men – even if they aren’t gay, because they have a woman above them.”

I nodded. “Speaking of men and women, Roberta, there are obvious physical differences between them. What do you see as the ramifications for capoeira?”

Roberta was quiet for a while and said finally, “I don’t quite know how to answer that. I think women are strong, too, and can do the same movements as men – hand stands and foot sweeps. They can play as equals. I don’t see much of a difference.”

“At the last roda,” I countered, “my friend and I observed that while there are excellent female capoeiristas in our school, there’s no denying men and women play *differently*. I’m not saying that one way is inherently superior, but our bodies move differently. The men are faster, have more upper body strength and a different centre of gravity. Capoeira was developed by men for men’s physiques. That’s bound to have an impact on the way the game is played.”

“Do you mean that men have more stamina?” Roberta asked. “They may have a greater ease in building muscle, but they also train more than women. They put the time in.”

“That may be,” I continued, “but our bodies are different. We were made to bear children, so we have more body fat. Even a woman who trains intensively does not have the build of a man. The ones who train like crazy often stop menstruating, a sign they’re losing their body’s equilibrium. There *are* differences between us and I see it in my students. Certain moves are tougher for women – especially the ones that demand a lot of upper body strength.”

“But capoeira is also of the mind,” Roberta objected, “about *strategy*. If you play intelligently, you can become an excellent capoeirista.”

“That’s true,” I nodded. “Emotions are part of it, too, aren’t they? Capoeira is poetry and not just gymnastics. Mestre Augusto often comments that, nowadays, people focus on the movements and ignore the other dimensions of capoeira.”

“Exactly!” Roberta exclaimed. “When you watch the old guys play, no one can compare. When you see Mestre Boca Rica in the roda, it’s a beautiful thing! He does the movements, but

with *mandinga* – playfully, smiling the whole time. You see that it’s not simply muscular. Look at Mestre Janja! She’s around forty or forty-five, so her body is not as young as it once was, but her movements are sharp and precise. She can get people easily. Capoeira is more about creativity and attention, than about strength. You have to meet Mestre Janja!”

I had wanted to visit Grupo Nzinga for weeks, but had been feeling overwhelmed. I was not thirty-three anymore – energetic and willing to run around – and had been feeling the need to *deepen* my relationships in capoeira. I had to admit it – I was perfectly content to train and hang out at the Filhos de Bimba School. My whole life, I had been a *doer*, but something was changing.

### **3. Bahia**

I had come, at Mestre Curió and Mestre Jararaca’s insistence, for the yearly *caruru* feast and the room was packed. In this mostly Afro-Bahian crowd of strangers, I felt suddenly shy. Helpers walked by, balancing enormous trays that groaned under the food. Every year, the preparation was a major undertaking. When I had last visited the academy, I had spied enormous cooking pots piled onto a table, next to mountains of ingredients – onions, okras, palm oil, toasted nuts, shrimp and large bags of white rice. I spotted Mestre Jararaca weaving around the room, smiling as she did a happy step to *Viola de Doze* – the latest samba group sensation – and was relieved when she hugged me, before quickly being swallowed up by the crowd. All the seats had been taken, so it was standing room only. People were dancing in small circles or chatting with friends, waiting for the food to be served. I was relieved when Mestre Jararaca’s eldest son, Zé Carlos, pulled me in to samba. With a pinch of nostalgia, I remembered Mestre Curió’s *rodas* – Zé Carlos had been one of my favourite dance partners. After a while, he was off to help with the food and I was, once again, alone.

I stood around awkwardly. Not only was I now an outsider, but my mind insisted that I

was an impostor. I also risked running into Miguel and his wife – this was *her* world and the mere thought of a confrontation made me sweat. Although no one stared, I clearly stood out in this crowd of dark Bahians. Suddenly, I was plunged back to the countryside of my childhood, a time when my brother and I had been the only half-Asians in the school, and shouts of “Chink!” had been thrown our way. This was not the Ottawa Valley in the 80’s, but I wanted to leave.

I was turning to go when I spotted him – a tall Scot who trained capoeira with me at the Fundação. I had forgotten that I had invited him on an impulse, and although my friend was even more incongruous than me, he seemed not the least bothered by it. As we were handed paper plates sagging with food, I laughed. The spell had been broken.

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The time was fast approaching for me to put an end to the torturous situation with Miguel, but the knowledge of the certain emptiness that would follow kept me from taking the plunge. In losing my lover, I feared that I would be losing a piece of Bahia. When I roamed the city streets, I saw Miguel in the sun-soaked skin and wiry hair of the inhabitants – in the graceful curve of a muscular arm, or a dazzling smile.

My romantic heartaches only added to the love/hate relationship I was developing with Bahia. The Pelourinho with its blatant inequalities – its old colonial relationships beneath its modern façade – tired me. Every time I walked to class, I waded through a sea of white tourists with expensive clothes and cameras, surrounded by desperate vendors. It seemed like the ugliest aspects of humanity gathered in one place – racism, poverty, violence and injustice – next to some of the most beautiful artistic expressions. What was I doing thousands of miles from home? I wanted to believe that I was a part of Salvador, but was I not a tourist, perhaps a more sensitive one, but in the end, still a tourist? My foreign money allowed me to live more

comfortably than the majority of the population. I might be attempting to engage with Bahians and their culture, but it was a fine line. I lived in the tourist ghetto where many of my friends were foreigners and unlike my Bahian friends, I could always leave if things got tough. Although I loved many aspects of Salvador, there were things I would never come to accept – the deeply-rooted racism towards Afro-descendants, the social injustice and entrenched patriarchy. Ironically, the more I was coming to feel comfortable in Salvador and seeing beyond its postcard image, the more distance I felt from it.

When I had arrived in 2004, I had been afraid that I would never be allowed “inside” Bahia, yet people had opened their hearts and their homes to me. What had *I* given in return? Although I planned to interview capoeira mestres and professors for my thesis – to collect stories about their lives – I could not be sure that this would help anyone. Who was I to speak for them anyway, caught in my own conflicting feelings for Bahia? I had come to train and to do research, but I had also come for *love*, and now that the romance was coming to an end, the all-too-fragile human being I was, with all my inadequacies and contradictions, was more confused than ever. Soon, my ethics review would be approved and I would start running around with my digital recorder, but it had all begun to seem meaningless.

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After capoeira class, I always swung home for a quick shower and a home-made meal, but on this day, I had escaped my apartment. After weeks of swatting at creatures as big as my thumb, I had had enough – I had sprayed my room for cockroaches. It was not my style to kill anything, but something about waking up in the middle of the night as a cockroach landed on my arm finally did it. The area where I lived, the old city of Santo Antônio, was infested with the creatures and since this was an exceptionally hot summer, they were particularly in abundance.

I crossed the street to *O Hispano*, an *ao kilo* – self serve – restaurant and after helping myself to a heaping plate, looked for a place to sit. It was then that I spied Leonardo, the friendly Swedish journalist who lived down the street. I had instantly liked this man who was involved with a host of social issues and political groups like the MST – the *Movimento de Sem Terras* or Landless Movement. Tall and fair-skinned, Leonardo seemed strangely at ease in Bahia, and it occurred to me as I listened to his stories, that I had finally met a foreigner who was deeply integrated within Bahian society and who gave back as much as he took. Perhaps, one day, I would find my way, too.

#### 4. *Dona Nalvinha*



Dona Nalvinha teaches samba de roda to Lang and her students, December 2006 (Photo: Lang Liu)

Nalvinha – Mestre Bimba’s daughter and the receptionist at our school – had a no-nonsense manner softened by a warm laugh. With her slow, deliberate movements, she had always seemed to me the quintessential Baiana. For a long time, I had wanted to ask her what it had been like growing up with Mestre Bimba and for once the Fundação was quiet. I took a seat on the bench next to her.

“Capoeira has been a part of my life since I was a little girl,” Nalvinha laughed in response to my queries. “I was Bimba’s daughter, so it was impossible *not* to be involved! We were brought up inside capoeira. When we weren’t in school, we were in capoeira with my father. Our father would be in the academy and we’d stay with him until it was time to leave for the night. We’d help him to make drums and to cut, paint and varnish berimbau. Then, when it was time for class, we trained.”

“What was it like being a woman in capoeira back then?” I asked, curiously.

“Women didn’t do capoeira back then,” Nalvinha responded evenly. “I trained capoeira, but stopped just before I would’ve graduated. My father tried several times to teach groups of women, but he never succeeded in seeing them through to their graduation. Their boyfriends, husbands and fathers weren’t very understanding. A lot of women would start, but then someone in their family would raise a fuss. There were so few of us... I started capoeira when I was nine and there were only men in the academy. The only other children were my two brothers, Nene and Dermeval, so when there weren’t any other women, my father would separate me from the adults. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to put me with the men. My *padrinho*<sup>8</sup> in capoeira was a man, in fact, and the first time I played capoeira to the sound of the berimbau was with a man, but his dream was to create a *women’s group* and he didn’t succeed because of the prejudice.”

Nalvinha paused. “My whole life has been linked to capoeira. Like they said in the film on Mestre Bimba<sup>9</sup>, he wasn’t just a capoeira master – he was both a mestre and a father. In the old days, a mestre had an important role with many other responsibilities aside from teaching. Nowadays, if you have a lot of money, you can pay for a diploma!” She gave a short laugh. “I still live for capoeira. I don’t train or teach capoeira anymore, but I give samba classes and my whole work at the Fundação is linked to capoeira... and I love it. I don’t like to sit still and I can’t imagine not coming to the Fundação.”

“As you know, the batizados we have in our school are different than what others call batizados. The Festas de Batizado and Formaturas used to be done in the Nordeste neighbourhood, right by our house, and my father’s women – those who lived with him – all had a role to play. They’d go to the academy with him and keep an eye on things, making sure no one stole anything. My mother and godmother – all of them – would come and take care of the kids. Sometimes they’d be someone’s *madrinha* at a Formatura. His women were always involved in one way or another. When I was born, my crib was placed right in the academy next to the *charanga* – the orchestra! That’s how it was with me, and that’s how it was with Nene. It’s the same now with Nene’s son, Abayneh. He eats and sleeps here, in the Fundação, and his first *meia lua* kick will be given here, you know?”

“Some people suggest that you were both very young when your father died and couldn’t have learned very much,” I commented.

“How could we *not* know these things?” Nalvinha responded, angrily. “We were with our father all the time! My father used to do *emboscadas* – ambushes in the forest – and we’d be there with him. He did cultural shows and we took part in them. Whenever he went for shows, we went with him. *All* his kids went through this process, even the ones before Nene. Bimba was a father – a *real* father. We were always with him, even the kids from different mothers. There’s no way after fifteen years not to have learnt *everything* that was being done.”

“What about samba,” I smiled. “When did you learn to samba, Nalvinha?”

<sup>8</sup> A *padrinho* is a godfather. Mestre Bimba created a tradition in which a female student who graduated (a formada) chose a godfather and a male student (a formado) chose a godmother.

<sup>9</sup> *Mestre Bimba: An Enlightened Capoeira*, 2007.

“Samba de roda has always been a part of capoeira,” Nalvinha explained. “We had samba rodas during the Formaturas and my father would choose a *madrinha* – a godmother. We still do the cultural shows as a continuation of Bimba’s legacy. My father wanted to prevent the loss of Bahian culture. Nowadays, when you hear that so-and-so is giving samba classes and you check it out, it’s not *samba*. People are forgetting things in Salvador.”

“What do you consider the characteristics of a samba de roda, Nalvinha?” I prodded.

“Samba de roda is the traditional samba – the *samba no pé* with the old songs. There are some types of samba, like the *samba chula*, that aren’t played with a tambourine, but are played with a guitar, instead. If you watch someone my age or older samba, it looks different from the way they do it today. Nowadays, there’s a lot of *pagode*. I like pagode, too, but the old samba is being forgotten. These days, I give samba classes to the girls in our school. My father saw the loss happening – if it hadn’t been for him, these girls wouldn’t know samba. In the old days, we used to have festivals called *Festas de Largo* in places like Conceição, Boa Viagem, Ribeira and Rio Vermelho. People around my age – I’m in my late forties – saw *many* types of samba de rodas thirty years ago. There used to be a lot of samba de roda in the street and in *barracas* – bars. You’d be there and pretty soon someone would start playing *batuque*. Someone else would appear with a tambourine and a third person, hearing all the commotion, would come running. Soon, you had a samba roda!”

“That must’ve been great,” I sighed.

“To see samba these days, other than during at the Conceição Festival, you have to go to Santo Amaro or São Felix,” Nalvinha reflected sadly.

“Did men dance in the traditional samba de roda?” I wanted to know.

Nalvinha paused. “In the past, it wasn’t common for men to samba. It was more common for them to play instruments. Once in a while, someone with a tambourine might go in the middle of the roda and dance around the woman for a bit. Sometimes there were informal sambas and the guy danced a few steps, but it wasn’t common.”

“And did women play instruments?” I continued.

“Just plates,” Nalvinha answered. “Women tapped out rhythms on plates with a fork. They didn’t play the guitar, the atabaque or the pandeiros – the woman’s role was to clap, to samba and to keep the rhythm on plates.”

“Speaking of gender roles, Nalvinha, why did your father want women to play capoeira if it broke with tradition?” I ventured.

“Because he wanted to show people that capoeira is for *everyone*,” she said, firmly. “Capoeira is about technique. It *can* be done by women, children and the elderly. Bimba had an ample vision and he may have been a womanizer, but he wasn’t *machista*. He had a lot of affection for women and respected them. He knew they were capable of playing capoeira and that the fact women didn’t play capoeira was not about *tradition* – it was a form of prejudice! People used to think black people couldn’t be lawyers or drive buses and look now! Mestre Bimba never got to see women capoeira professors, however. It was quite a while after he died that I started to see more women in capoeira. I can’t tell you for sure that there were no women in his time – I don’t know – but it was rare in Salvador. There weren’t a lot of capoeira groups to begin with. Only after ‘64 did women become more accepted in capoeira. My father was a pioneer. Things have improved a lot – there are a lot of women in capoeira nowadays, especially outside of Brazil. Unfortunately, you don’t see the same amount of participation from women in Salvador.”

“What’s it like for you, working with capoeira nowadays?” I inquired.

“It’s hard to live off of capoeira in Salvador,” she responded. “I spend the whole day working at the Fundação and when I’m done, I have to go help my husband at our bar. Sometimes, after that it’s late, but I still have to wash dishes and all of that. Making a living with it is still hard today. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the majority of people who pay for classes are not *from* here. People here still don’t value capoeira. Students only show up when there’s a *roda* or something fun, but they don’t train very often, so it’s *hard*. Our father left Bahia for Goiás because of this. We’ve known this hardship all our lives. It was only when we returned to Salvador and Nenel began training with me, my son Bira, his wife and a nephew that we started capoeira again. It wasn’t like it is now, either, with Bimba’s old students around. Sometimes we went hungry. We started holding classes in an academy that belonged to Beto, a student of my father’s – it was in a humble neighbourhood called Xadrinhas – and it helped open doors for us. After that, we went to a space in Amaralina. We returned to Xadrinhas and only *then* did we come to the Pelourinho. The Fundação is small for the kind of work we do, though, and a lot of people can’t find it. Still, we ask foreigners to pay the same as locals, because we think it’s better to make less money now, but to create something of high quality. It’s important to us that people are satisfied and happy. We can do good work without distorting capoeira or exploiting anyone. It will make our work stand apart. People have begun seeking us out and there will come a day when *everyone* will come here.”

## 5. Visiting Frede

Sitting in the Instituto Mauá with Frederico Abreu, I could hear the sounds of the Pelourinho drifting up from the open windows. It was good to see the cheeky historian again. He had begun working with a contemporary capoeira group, after decades of working with mestres of more traditional capoeira styles, so I was curious to hear his thoughts on the globalization of capoeira.

“Look,” Frede said, forcefully, “Many people have adopted the discourse that expansion has negatively affected capoeira, but the truth is that *all* the mestres have had to expand. Expansion prevents a manifestation from remaining underground. You could say it creates the possibility of *citizenship*. Take Nenel. We both see him as a representative of the Capoeira Regional tradition, right? Well, globalization allowed him to do what you might call the *traditional work* of his father. If it wasn’t for globalization, he’d still be in Amaralina today, so whether you like it or not, it has been favourable to capoeira. Mestre Moraes, Mestre Curió, Cobrinha – all those mestres who consider themselves the defenders of tradition – have also participated in this process and *benefited* from the opportunities. They travel and do their work – they keep the traditions alive. Of course, when something goes out into the world, it takes on all sorts of configurations and is often commercialized. I don’t believe, however, that commercialization is a problem. This discussion about capoeira and money has existed for ages! There may be extremes, but making a living through capoeira is old.

“What about the perils of capoeira losing its essence?” I protested.

Frede looked at me intently. “To be honest, I don’t see capoeira as having an ‘essence’. It’s *historical* – some things survive, while others fall away. The only thing that can be said about capoeira is that it is constantly *changing* – its essence is liquid.”

This was the crux of the matter. While it was true that capoeira – like all culture – was fluid, not all change was good. I was not interested in saving *all* of capoeira. I was concerned about certain aspects of the old Bahian capoeira that had been preserved thanks to people like Bimba and I believed that this capoeira had an essence. I had been attracted to Regional precisely because of these cultural elements – elements that were being lost in many other capoeiras – so while it might be easy for Frede to see through the eyes of a historian, capoeira was not simply an interesting intellectual exercise to me.

“I don’t think you can say, ‘I prefer *this* period or *that* period’,” Frede was saying. “In fact, given a choice, I’d certainly not return to the past! *Slavery* existed! Whatever you think of these modern capoeiras, they laid the ground for capoeira and created opportunities for people like Nenel and Moraes. If I were to interpret things rigidly, I’d never go to modern events, but I go, and those mestres do, as well, because it allows us all to do our work and to make a living.”

“But, Frede,” I protested. “Why does it have to be all or nothing? Of course things were not all positive in the past, but there are things that are worth preserving.” To me, this kind of thinking was leading us down the path to ecological devastation. There were aspects of the old Bahian capoeira – values, knowledge and a relationship to the world – worth preserving from the rapacious appetites of commercialization, and certain discussions needed to happen more often.

“All those debates about capoeira’s evolution,” Frede was saying, “you can’t use *this* colour, you have to do *this* ritual or *that* ritual – those were not my preoccupations when I began studying capoeira. I didn’t know anything about capoeira, so it wasn’t up to me to enter the debate. What interested me was its *diversity*. My experience with popular culture and Brazilian diversity helped me a lot in this regard. I wasn’t interested in differentiating between academic culture and popular culture. Capoeira could co-exist with popular culture as much as in so-called ‘elitist cultures’: classical culture, academia and so on. I felt that academia could be a part of the capoeira world, as long as it respected and accepted the ways of capoeira – as long as there was no longer a hierarchy of knowledge.”

“Don’t you think that there are big contradictions between the world of academia and the world of popular knowledge?” I interjected.

“Sure, but there are contradictions within popular knowledge itself,” Frede countered, laughing. “The more contradictions, the better!”

“Hold on!” I paused, irritated. “A lot of basic premises in academia are problematic. The idea of objectivity...”

“That’s the university’s goal,” Frede interrupted me. “It tries to capture something of the *object*. Look, the way I see it, you have a choice as to whether or not to do such work. You don’t have to enter into that world at all.”

I wanted to suggest that the world of academia could benefit a lot from some of the teachings of capoeira and of Indigenous knowledge in general, but I held my tongue. Frede continued, “What I’m trying to say is that when someone like you comes here to learn about popular culture, I don’t say, ‘Be careful of that academic!’. The important thing in research is to be able to interact within the *capoeirista*’s domain – to enter into *his* world. I have always valued the old mestres and their knowledge of capoeira. The capoeira world – the traditional world of popular knowledge and mestres – was fundamental to me. The old guys were, in turn, usually very open. They *liked* to give interviews. They *liked* researchers. They didn’t *have* any

resistance. Even today, there are plenty of people who don't have any resistance to talking. Resistance usually arises for political reasons. When someone arrives, tape recorder in hand, and tells them that they want to study them, most mestres like it! It's a prestigious thing to be sought after by foreign researchers! They're in the midst of a creative process and they're seeking out new paths. If you look at capoeira's history, it's always been *expansive*. Capoeira isn't 'reductionist' – practitioners don't believe that it's only for *them*. Yes, capoeiristas have their own places and ways, and if you don't like their ideas, you have to bow down to them and respect them, whether in the street or in the academy, but as long as you respect them, you'll be welcome. The old mestres understood this – Bimba created this kind of atmosphere in his academy. He chose people who could talk for him, because he realized that he needed help. He wanted people from other social classes and from the upper echelons of society – journalists and such – to come to him. Pastinha spoke for himself, because he was a literate man and had gained a certain experience in that world, so he built a more intellectual vision of capoeira."

"Frede, when I talk of 'essence', I'm not referring to the capoeira of the 1600's," I cautioned. I'm speaking of the Bahian capoeira of the 1900's that laid the ground for the styles that emerged today – a capoeira of berimbau, an orchestra, a circle, rituals and songs..."

"OK," he nodded. "So let's say that we use Bimba and Pastinha as our references. Nenel is doing the work of reviving his father's Regional, a project that is intellectual as much as existential. He returns to the use of one berimbau and two pandeiros. You have to play *iúna*, and you play *this* way to this rhythm, *that* way to that rhythm... Fine, but how do you know that someone who *doesn't* follow that structure doesn't have more *quality* in his capoeira than someone who does? Structures change, under certain circumstances. When I worked with Nenel, we'd always say, 'Bimba is the future of capoeira,' because Bimba had a powerful ability to communicate. He was a lot more *modern* than the so-called Capoeira Regional groups of today. His work was much richer than what those guys are doing today – so much so that he became a reference."

"Why do you say that Bimba's capoeira was richer than the modern versions of Regional?" I prodded.

"For several reasons," Frede explained. "First of all, what Bimba offered was far richer in terms of rhythms – berimbau rhythms and variations in the game – than what we find today in the so-called Regional schools. Today, people do the sequences, the moves and that's it. Things often end in a fight. They started to mix Regional and Angola, and they lost things that Nenel rescued, like the *iúna* rhythm. The only problem with Nenel's work is that he froze things too early – he should have let things continue developing to another stage. The range of experiences was greater before. He's having problems now, because the process of renovation in his academy is being compromised."

"I remember that Mestre Nenel told me that he initially experimented with various ways of running a *roda*, but kept returning to one berimbau and two pandeiros, and to other rituals that Bimba had laid out, since they worked best," I objected.

"The hardest thing to do was to get him to stop using belts," Frede remembered. "'Drop the belts!' I kept telling him." Frede chuckled. "Nenel always takes into consideration what Bimba's former students think. I think he needs to incorporate more of his own influence. He's done that to some degree. Some elements in Bimba's Regional were external to capoeira. They came about because of the influence of some of Bimba's students and I think that they threw Regional off-track."

"What kind of influences?" I wanted to know.

“The *sports* idea, for example,” Frede snorted. “That was Decânio’s influence – the idea of developing capoeira as a model for the martial arts. Bimba was fascinated by judo. It’s one thing to respect Decânio’s opinion – Bimba trusted Decânio – but it’s important not to repeat what *Bimba* did in Regional. Use Bimba as a reference, but walk on your own two legs. Angola is encountering the same problem: it’s frozen. It’s going to change – it will have to. Nowadays, when you go to an Angola roda, you see violence. When you freeze things, you take away the spontaneity and you create conflict. Before the conflict was between Angola and Regional – that was fine – but today they’re having internal problems.”

There was a lot to mull over. “Frede,” I ventured, “I was thinking about this big debate – about the differences between Angola and Regional. I still haven’t found a satisfactory answer for what differentiates them. It’s not just the *movements* or the *rituals*. What’s the difference?”

“Well, you trained in both. What do you think?” He asked, pointedly.

I did not hesitate. “They are different, but I can’t quite explain how.”

“You don’t need to *explain* it,” he suggested. “You can *feel* it when you play. Of course, an Angoleiro and a Regional guy can play together. There are areas of intersection. The problem arises when the guy from Regional, let’s say, goes to an Angola roda and tries to play their game. There are Angola references and if you try to follow them, you’ll get lost.”

“I’ve seen Angoleiros play nastily with people from other styles, almost as if they felt that the contemporary guy should not be playing in their roda,” I remembered.

“The thing about capoeira is that you should be able to go to any roda and do your *own* game – your own capoeira,” Frede responded. “Capoeira is *generous*. I’ll play with you, even if you’re less advanced than me. I’ll still allow a game to happen.”

“But Frede, how would *you* describe the differences between Angola and Regional?” I persisted.

“There *is* a basic difference,” he explained. “For Bimba, capoeira was a *luta* – a fight. If I don’t hit you in the roda, it’s because I don’t want to. For the Angoleiro, however, even when he’s fighting, he specializes in *o desfarço* – avoidance. In literature, we have something called Minimalism – the economy of words. We also have the Baroque style, which is the opposite. *This is the difference between the two capoeira styles!* Angola is Baroque and Regional is Minimalist. You may not have the words to convey what you’re feeling, but you know there’s a difference in the games when you see them. Angola is imbued with this element of *mandinga* – of trickery. It’s not to say, however, that Regional doesn’t have trickery, as well. You can see that Nenel’s rodas are a lot more relaxed, say, than Curió’s rodas nowadays.”

“I do feel, however, that Angola has a theatricality Regional lacks and I’ve wondered if it’s somehow more linked to the Afro-Bahian culture,” I suggested.

“But Regional is *also* theatrical,” Frede countered. “What Bimba did was to shape a body – a foreign body like yours – more quickly into his way of playing. In capoeira, it’s not necessary to move the way Angoleiros have adopted. For example, if I give you a half-moon kick and you respond by going down and giving me a head butt, you’re using a sequence of movements of *recent* origin – from this century. In the old capoeira, you attacked, hit and got out! *Bam-bam-bam!* You didn’t try to prepare a trap. There were even games where one guy threw a move – say a *benção* kick – and instead of avoiding it, the opponent grabbed his foot. That kind of fighting is not from Bimba! It’s a lot older. It’s just that over time, people started to eliminate it. Have you seen the film of Pastinha playing and doing a *balão* – a throw?”

I shook my head. Frede nodded excitedly, “Yes! Imagine Pastinha doing a throw! Jiu jitsu also has throws, but they’re different. In Regional, there’s an aspect that involves fighting

directly, but tricks are more important. In jiu jitsu, you confront each other's strengths – the guy grabs you and throws you to the ground – while in capoeira, even the throws are used to escape. When the guy grabs you, you jump and do the *cintura* to land on your feet.”

“But Frede,” I insisted, “in Angola rodas, I often have the feeling that I don't really know what's going on, half the time. The movements seem to have so many layers – the looks, the interactions. I feel a bit of that at Nenel's rodas, but they're so much clearer to me.”

“Of course,” Frede responded. “Angola hides more, doesn't it? But even so, I don't see things that way... Let's say that you go to various types of Candomblés and in each one, the language is different. In *one* Candomblé, you don't speak to the Orixás. The Orixá arrives, everyone shows their respect, goes away and that's it. He came from a supernatural world. You saw it and experienced it. But in another Candomblé, it's different! The *Caboco* comes and drinks spirits, comes over to you, dances with you, hugs you, flirts with you – all of that stuff, right? The two languages are different. *There isn't just one Afro-Bahian language!* There are *many* languages. So, for me, I can honestly tell you that I've never succeeded in seeing Capoeira Regional as a 'foreign' thing. If you go to Rio and visit various academies, you'll see differences, but if you compare them to Bahia, you'll see commonalities in the Rio capoeira.”

I let Frede's words sink in. These were powerful ideas running contrary to a lot of the popular sentiment I had heard in capoeira circles. In Bahia, Capoeira Angola enjoyed a definite sense of cultural superiority. “What about the fact that the students who came with me from Canada felt at home at Nenel's,” I asked, pensively, “much more than they did in the Angola rodas? True, they trained Regional with me, but I think it was also the atmosphere.”

Frede nodded. “Regional was *made* for expansion, not just in society, but as a project working with a differentiated body. When the black man went to work, he worked with his *body*. Nenel says something interesting: ‘The training changes the body.’ You train the *sequência* with Nenel. It's different from an Angola guy's training. If you train three times a week in karate or in Angola, don't you think the training will affect your game? Of course it will! You have to deal with a different rhythm and different responses. If you play with an Angoleiro, he has a lot of alternative ways to do a *chamada*<sup>10</sup> and you don't. You don't even know when to do a *chamada*, or you're doing it at the wrong time. Look at João Grande's classes in New York. They're different from classes here, because he teaches Angola to foreigners. He's always around people who don't *know* capoeira. Obviously, when you go somewhere where you have to learn everything – movements, how to enter a *roda*, how to cartwheel and sing a *ladainha* – the amount of information is much greater than in a minimalist practice! It's more fascinating, too.”

“It's funny, Frede,” I mused, “but I've seen a lot of Angola rodas and you know what? Few are as happy and joyful as the rodas at the Filhos de Bimba. I rarely feel like playing in Angola rodas, to be honest. Why is that?”

“Because today there's a dominant discourse in Capoeira Angola,” Frede answered, emphatically. “*You must do the politically correct rites. If the music doesn't sound right, stop the roda. Don't go in the roda with your shirt hanging out. Don't go in barefoot. Everyone has to be sitting down.* It creates a very serious atmosphere and a lot of rodas end up feeling like a Convent!” I laughed in recognition. “A lot of people in Angola rodas don't feel like playing. You're not the only one! So, you see, much to the contrary, this is *not* a Bahian thing! It's a lack of spontaneity. That doesn't mean that rules or precepts aren't needed in capoeira. They must exist, but in a relaxed atmosphere. The Capoeira Angola of today is *nothing* like the old capoeira. Let me tell you something in all sincerity. When I look at a street *roda* today, I see that

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<sup>10</sup> A *chamada* is a call-answer sequence, a break in the game, in the Angola style.

it has a lot more to do with the old Bahian culture than the Angola played in many academies – a capoeira which has been transformed into something sacred. By its very nature capoeira is *profane* and profane things are much more open. In a street roda, there's noise and people passing by. Why *can't* you enter a roda without shoes? Pastinha used to play *castanets*! He just chose not to keep them. If you take the spontaneity away in capoeira, you lose something."

"Speaking of religiousness, Frede," I ventured, "You say capoeira is profane, but in the past, was it not linked with the sacred, by the very fact that its practitioners were practitioners of Candomblé? In Canada, fewer people belong to an organized religion, but we do feel the need to experience a *spiritual* dimension in life – a sense of the sacred – and to belong to a community."

"Community?" Frede asked. I have yet to see the same degree of community and solidarity in capoeira that you find in Candomblé. The links in Candomblé are *very* strong – they are to the terreiro. People *live* there. The mother-of-saint who reads a person's shells has an obligation to accompany him for life and to take care of him. Her words have a weight that go beyond a common person's words. Capoeira doesn't have this kind of power over people. Whether you like it or not, sacred and profane *are* different things. You don't behave the same way before something sacred as you do before something profane. I don't act the same way in Nenel's academy as I do in Dona Alice's terreiro. An academy does not have a sacred constitution, even though it has a lot of things, even mysteries, and the sacred is present. I can protect myself by making the sign of the cross, for example, just as I do at a soccer game, at a school exam, or when I leave my home and go into the street. People confuse the two at times, but capoeira is *not* sacred or religious! An Italian guy once said to me, 'Capoeira is my religion.' Look, great for him that capoeira is his religion, but it *wasn't* a religion for Nagé! It wasn't a religion for Besouro Magangá, Pastinha, or Bimba! For those guys, capoeira was something *unique*. Capoeira was capoeira. During its evolution, capoeira has always been much more profane than sacred."

I pondered for a moment whether a part of the problem was the *terms* that we were using. I had always thought dualistic thinking a characteristic of the west, so reactions in Brazil to my questions about spirituality surprised me. They were almost always interpreted as questions about *religion* – institutionalized religion. A majority of Brazilians practised at least one religion, while many people I knew in Canada did not belong to a formal religion. For them, as for me, their experience of the sacred came mostly through music, dance and other more "profane" moments. It was ironic that westerners, schooled in a more dualistic thinking, seemed more sensitive to the sacred dimension in capoeira than Bahians themselves. At the same time, I understood Frede's frustration. I, too, had seen many practitioners invest capoeira with a religious dimension that gave it a somber feel.

"This changes capoeira," Frede insisted. "João Pequeno is an Evangelist, for example, but he doesn't bring his religion into capoeira! Of course, there's a powerful atmosphere at rodas and to a foreigner, the impact will be greater than two guys playing capoeira on the street, but Street Capoeira is no less authentic! Someone may call himself a 'traditionalist', but if you went far back enough, you'd find someone to challenge him about the way he interprets the traditions."

"What does 'tradition' mean, anyway?" I smiled at Frede.

"It means *ancestrality*," he responded. "Look, I'm sixty and I've seen so many things change in my lifetime – things that are traditional today were once new. *Tropicalismo* was once a challenge to the old ways. Is it not considered a reference for Brazilian culture today? The 'popular' has become the classical! I understand why you have problems with some of the more modern manifestations of capoeira. Imagine what it's like for someone like me, who thinks

capoeira should have stopped with old guys like João Grande and João Pequeno! The problem is that we have a tendency to value the past, but the past was not all rosy. I, too, have problems with modern capoeira, but I have to recognize that guys like Camisa and Barrão did a lot for the art! They may not be Nenel or Moraes, but they've made their contributions. I think it's great that you take this 'alternative' role, Lang, and that you bring another vision to capoeira, to counterbalance what you think is lacking, but I also think it's better for you to demonstrate these ideas by living them in your work, rather than through discourse. I get annoyed when I hear the usual critiques against modern capoeira. Barrão invites me to his events and treats me well. He pays people well and shows by his actions that he values his culture. I don't believe in going to someone's 'house' and lecturing them about how they should or shouldn't do things! I have my criticisms, but these guys have done a lot for capoeira. Angola grew a lot thanks to the growth of contemporary Regional. Capoeira has never had a 'pure' path. It's been the story of the guy who dated a foreign girl and immigrated with her. *That's* the capoeira we find in the world – not Bimba's, Pastinha's, or Pequeno's."

I had been restraining myself, but now the words burst forth, "I think you're right, Frede, but even if globalization is a reality, we need to develop critical minds. We need to have the ability to *analyze* things and not just to accept everything blindly!"

Frede nodded, "I accept your analysis, but what I'm trying to say is that I don't accept the *moralizing* that goes on with respect to these contemporary guys. Look, I don't know if my vision is 'right' or 'wrong'. I change opinions easily and am not ashamed to say it! I don't have any intellectual *rigidity*. I do, however, have my *own* vision. I spend a lot of time with the older guys from my generation, but I also value the experience of vagabonds and street toughs. Today's capoeira has a moralistic edge, but the world of capoeira continues to be an imperfect one, just as it was in the past, and *that's* what's interesting about it! Unfortunately, what keeps capoeira alive is foreigners' money. The mestres are *all* struggling, so it's good when someone like you arrives – someone who learned capoeira with a sense of respect. It's not the typical behaviour of foreigners."

"Really? Is it that rare?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes," he nodded sadly. "A lot of people are teaching capoeira now. In Europe, it used to be common for them to bring mestres from Brazil for their events. Now they bring their closest friends instead. You teach in Toronto, but you also train *here*. You have a reference and don't call yourself an authority. You're doing a great contribution to capoeira as an intermediary. You can be sure there are only a handful of Langs, while there are many, many of the other type!" Frede gave a hearty laugh. "If you asked me to choose between Nenel and Suassuna, I'd choose Nenel! But if capoeira was only Nenel, it wouldn't exist anymore!"

As I made my way home, I thought about the problem of concentrating power and the media in the hands of a few, of the effects this was having on local knowledges. Large, commercially successful capoeiras that could be easily implanted anywhere around the world and that appealed to the mass market were now *the* capoeira reference for most people, and certainly in no danger of extinction, while traditional schools that taught a less shiny capoeira, like the

Filhos de Bimba, struggled to keep afloat. Despite Frede's optimism, I could not help but worry about the future of capoeira and other locally-based knowledges.

### ***6. The Vulnerable Researcher***

For days, I could not stop thinking about the young capoeira researcher from Germany I had met at a friend's house. He had spoken with such a knowledgeable air about Bahian culture that I had been surprised to learn this was the young man's *first* trip to Bahia. His Portuguese was rudimentary and he had very little capoeira training. Where did he get his confidence?

After three visits to Bahia, twelve years of training in and six years of teaching capoeira, ten years of contact with Brazilian culture and a marriage to a Brazilian man, I *still* felt like a child in the capoeira world. I remembered then how Dian Marino (1997), the York University professor who had explored the politics of art before her untimely death from cancer, had written in passing about the gender differences in her students' approaches to research. She felt that her female students worried more about questions of representation in their research than did their male counterparts. Might this be related to questions of socially assigned gender *values*, to the belief that knowledge and life are essentially objectifiable – an idea espoused in the scientific paradigm – while emotions are seen as unimportant and perhaps even inherently *dangerous* to research? While gender roles had changed a great deal over the past decades, Marino's observations confirmed my own impression that gender-based values were still deeply entrenched in society and academia.

In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar quoted George Devereux, an ethnopsychiatrist who had suggested, a half century earlier, that the subjectivity of the observer “influences the course of the observed event as radically as ‘inspection’ influences (‘disturbs’) the behaviour of an electron... Yet because there is no clear and easy route by which to confront the self who

observes, most professional observers develop defenses, namely ‘methods,’ that ‘reduce anxiety and enable us to function efficiently’” (Behar, 1996, p.6). Even though Ruth Behar’s ideas were now accepted by many in the academic world, the fundamental dualism in western thinking – body vs. mind – seemed to me so deep-seated that it resisted the best of intentions. I still felt that academic work still struggled, for the most part, to reconcile the emotions and the intellect.

Capoeira might be a highly emotional art form, but researchers were going out of their way to portray it as emotionlessly as possible. There were exceptions, of course, researchers like Greg Downey – an American scholar who had written about capoeira in 1998 through the lens of Phenomenology, and explored the field of sensations, emotions and experiences – and Muniz Sodré who had written eloquently about his former master, Mestre Bimba, in 2002, in his book *Mestre Bimba: Corpo de Mandinga*, but by and large, expressions of emotion in academia still seemed taboo, even in Brazil. The books and theses I read almost unanimously adopted an impartial, “objective” tone. Even Mestre K.K. Bonates, whose ideas I found enriching, had accused Pedro Abib of being “too emotional” in *Cultura Popular e Jogos de Saberes na Roda*, a book I had found rather dry! Speaking from one’s experience “in the field”, of the messy and intensely personal nature of research, was still a rare act, and in many ways, a deeply *political* one that challenged the dominant paradigms in university.

Anthropologist Ruth Behar said it best in *The Vulnerable Observer*: “But just how far do you let that other culture enmesh you? Our intellectual mission is deeply paradoxical: get the ‘native point of view’, *pero per favor* without actually ‘going native.’ Our methodology, defined by the oxymoron ‘participant observation,’ is split at the root: act as a participant, but don’t forget to keep your eyes open... when the grant money runs out, or the summer vacation is over, please stand up, dust yourself off, go to your desk, and write down what you saw and heard. Relate it to

something you've read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci, or Geertz and you're on your way to doing anthropology" (1996, p.5).

Former York Professor Dian Marino (1997) and writer Jerry Mander (1991), amongst others, understood that decisions about who possesses "authentic knowledge" ultimately reflect who has access to power, and lie at the core of the rift between Indigenous ways and Western ways of looking at the world. They speak, ultimately, to opposite views of ourselves as *separate from* or *intertwined with* the natural world, a difference that is far more than theoretical. It is no exaggeration to say that whether we engage the world essentially through the intellect, or embrace a vision that includes feelings, spirits and bodies, will ultimately determine the future of our planet.

## ***7. Carnival in Diôgo***

Maria, her boyfriend, Roots, and I had chosen to escape the madness of Carnival by camping on the coast north of Salvador. With the ocean's mysterious presence only meters from where we had hitched our tents, the city and its excesses soon became a distant memory. The hard sand seemed to aggravate aches and pains that had accumulated over weeks of hard training, yet by the third day, I noticed that my body had found a way to fit itself into the contours of the ground and I was sleeping throughout the night. I had, it seemed, finally surrendered to the soothing energy of nature.

I thought a lot about capoeira during those days, musing about the irony that it had both healed and damaged my body. The creators of capoeira – Bahian men who had worked their bodies all day long – had come from impoverished backgrounds and spent their days in the ports and city streets, doing all manner of physical labour. Theirs had been short, unpredictable lives – hard lives – and they had been an entirely different breed than us modern, sedentary Canadians

who often came to capoeira late in life. The capoeiristas of old had begun playing in their youth, as most modern Bahians still did, and to them, capoeira had been a leisure activity – a way of *relaxing* weary muscles after a hard day’s work. Most Canadians, on the other hand, spent their days in chairs, stooping over computers, hips tightening and shoulders rounding. It was an altogether *different* struggle to learn capoeira in such conditions.

I had spoken many times with Mestre Nene about the challenges of doing capoeira outside Brazil and of the need for complementary forms of body work. He was sympathetic and respected my opinion, but he stressed his belief that Capoeira Regional was *complete* and required no additional exercise. I was not interested in conventional Western calisthenics either – repetitive exercises like push-ups, sit-ups and simple stretches that demonstrated a very limited understanding of the body – but I was drawn to millenary traditions like yoga, tai chi and qi gong. Capoeira’s twists and turns, its complex movements performed in every direction, might create a far more balanced and agile body than Western calisthenics did, but for foreign bodies that needed to *acquire* suppleness, dynamic movements were not enough. I had learned, through my own injuries and those of my students, that without flexibility, we were putting ourselves at a great risk in capoeira. Short of changing our lifestyles, we needed to look to traditions like yoga to help our rigid, Western bodies gain suppleness. What we simply wanted, after all, was to be able to *participate* in capoeira! Sometimes, the “just do it” technique favoured in Brazil – a great contrast to the hand-holding we were used to in Canada – helped me go beyond my limits, but at other times, the barriers I faced were real and needed to be addressed differently.

The presence of foreigners in the Filhos de Bimba School was a relatively recent phenomenon, and even though the teachers and mestres cared deeply about the physical and emotional well-being of the students, bridging the cultural gulf that separated us would be an

enormous challenge. If I wanted to continue playing capoeira into a ripe old age, I would have to be far more attentive to my body's wishes. It would mean more bodywork and more patience than ever before. The alternative – stopping capoeira completely – was something I wanted to avoid at all cost.

### ***8. Santo Amaro's Mestre Evan***

The van jostled over the empty roads of the Recôncavo region as I stared into a sky filled with cottony clouds – a dance of alternating sunshine and shade. I had almost stayed in Salvador, hit by a wave of such grief the night before, but here I was, a dozen cheerful university students by my side and the Pelourinho a world away. It had taken all my courage to do it, but I had ended things with Miguel, and although I had been filled with grief, I knew it was time. My lover had smiled sadly. I had tried to believe that the ache would one day disappear.

A few days later, I had gone to Mestre Cafuné's house. Mestre Cafuné, a small, bearded man with pale skin and a gentle smile, was one of Mestre Bimba's former students – a fixture at rodas – and was hosting a lunch for a dozen students in the undergraduate capoeira course at the UFBA. The course was being co-taught by Professor Cecília and Lilú, a capoeira teacher who trained at the Fundação Mestre Bimba and who ran a capoeira group in the suburbs with her husband, Contra-Mestre Luciano. I had expected to feel out of place amongst the youth, but they were so friendly and engaging that when they invited me to accompany them on a capoeira road trip to Santo Amaro – a historic city of the Recôncavo area – I said yes.

We turned onto a dirt road and suddenly we were at the *barracão* – a large structure made of bamboo and palm fronds. In the early decades of the twentieth century, rodas had often taken place inside such structures. The barracão had been built only months before with the help of the capoeira community, but in the six months since Lilú had visited, the fronds had rotted, leaving

an empty shell. The inside was filled with rainwater, transforming the ground into treacherous mud. As we gazed silently around us, a slim Rasta in his fifties – Mestre Evan – emerged with two young children, the three of them dressed in rain boots, tattered shorts and t-shirts. I felt a stab of shame at their striking poverty, and from the students’ muted expressions they felt it, too, but our host seemed thrilled to see us.

We piled into the van with Mestre Evan. It was noon when we arrived at São Francisco do Paraguai, a sleepy town nestled on the banks of the Paraguai River. Its small square framed by an ancient, sprawling tree, and its backdrop of tiny, multicoloured houses seemed straight out of a fairytale. After a meal of well-seasoned fish, rice, beans and salad, served in the home of a local woman, Professor Cecília turned to Mestre Evan.

“Mestre,” she explained, “We’re doing a project at the UFBA in our capoeira class, in which the students go out into the capoeira community to visit schools and to develop initiatives. Lilú told us about your work and said that you knew a lot about the Recôncavo region – you had a lot of stories to tell – so we were eager to get to know you. Could you start by telling us a little about your own mestre?”

“My Mestre’s name was Ferreirinha,” Mestre Evan answered without hesitation. “He came to Santo Amaro when he was ten and started learning capoeira with *Antônio Asa Branca* – White Winged Antonio – a capoeira master from Santo Amaro. They say that Mestre Antônio Asa Branca played capoeira best when he was drunk, but Mestre Ferreirinha didn’t like to drink! I used to drink like crazy, but now I only have a beer once in a while. If I have *two*, I get drunk and it’s no good. I was ten, like my mestre, when I started capoeira in 1976. I was at a birthday party and we were really poor, so I didn’t have money to pay for capoeira classes. Ferreirinha said, ‘Look, if you give me the cake money, you can train capoeira. Don’t worry! You’ll pay, eventually!’ He didn’t beat me up, but was he ever tough! When it was time to pay, he’d bring me into the forest to help him cut *beriba* wood. I was too short to do it properly, but I did what I could. I spent ten years with him.”

“Where did you train?” Cecília interjected.

“I started training at Ferreirinha’s house. The place was about this big,” Mestre Evan gestured with his hands. “It must have been three by three metres, but he had a ton of students, and the class and *roda* took place in there! It was a different period. It used to be a community of *manguezal*.<sup>11</sup>”

“Why did you want to learn capoeira?” Cecília inquired.

Mestre Evan grinned. “A lot of people will tell you that they learned capoeira to be tough and to learn to defend themselves, but I learned it so I could have a swagger! My dad, despite the fact that he was a *pai de santos* in Candomblé, thought capoeira was for bums. ‘Why do you

<sup>11</sup> A *manguezal* is a type of vegetation. *Mangues* are low trees with airborne roots that are found in swampy areas.

want to learn capoeira?’ He’d ask. ‘So you can beat others up? I’ll put you in karate!’ ‘Karate? No way! I want capoeira.’”

“Was capoeira prohibited in Santo Amaro?” Cecília interrupted.

“Not in my time, but in my mestre’s it was,” Mestre Evan nodded.

“And were there lots of Candomblé terreiros?”

“*Lots*. There still are today, but back then, the stuff really worked. Mestre Ferreirinha was Catholic, though. He had an altar dedicated to Santo Antônio. Back then, there’d be a prayer at his house – he’d make offerings, light candles and start the capoeira class. One day the roda got heated up. Two of his students were playing and one guy gave the other a *benção* kick. The guy fell on the altar, knocked it over and it caught fire!” Mestre Evan laughed uproariously. “Mestre Ferreirinha kicked everyone out and there was no capoeira for a *month!*”

“Did Mestre Ferreirinha have any other trades?” Lilú asked.

“He only gave capoeira classes,” Mestre Evan responded. “He came from a family of carpenters, so he knew how to make *atabaque* drums, but they weren’t for sale. Dona Gilda, a historian in Santo Amaro, knows a lot more stories than I do about him. She lost her job as the director of a school in Santo Amaro because she defended Ferreirinha,” Mestre Evan added.

“Really?” Cecília exclaimed. “What happened?”

“Ferreirinha needed a larger space to teach capoeira, because he had a lot of students, so he spoke to Dona Gilda, who was his friend and asked her, ‘Ma’am, can you please find a room for me to teach in the school?’ ‘Of course,’ she said, and she found a space for him. The Mayor or the Secretary of Education went to her and said, ‘Dona Gilda, are you bringing a *negro* into our school to do capoeira? If you keep this up, you’re going to lose your job.’ She felt like she *had* to quit after that. Mestre Ferreirinha kept teaching in his home. A couple of years later, he spent a year with the infantry in Santo Amaro and was able to teach capoeira there. I didn’t go because of my bad eye. One of my eyes is pretty much blind, but the other has good vision.”

I could see that one of Mestre Evan’s eyes gazed off in the distance. “Does your vision interfere with your capoeira?” a student asked.

“No, thank God! I tried to do an exam at the optometrist’s once, but when I got there, he told me it was 90 reais!<sup>12</sup> I only had 10 on me, so I went home and never went back. In my line of work, this eye gives me a certain charm, anyway!” There was general laughter. Mestre Evan continued, “A lot of people in Santo Amaro don’t want to play capoeira with me, because when they kneel at the foot of the berimbau, they aren’t sure where to look! Sometimes, when I talk to someone, they look worried and I have to assure them, ‘I’m *talking* to you, man!’”

The room erupted once again and Lilú interjected, “It’s good that you have a sense of humour.”

“You can’t be sad,” Mestre Evan nodded.

“So what were your classes like? What was training like?” Lilú wanted to know.

“Ferreirinha’s training was *tough* and I haven’t changed a thing. Now, I have a student who leads the training. I mostly lead the rodas.”

“Do you have a lot of students?” Lilú continued.

“No. Occasionally, a person comes by to watch a class, but when they see that there aren’t any jumps, they say, ‘No jumps? It’s worthless!’ My capoeira is the capoeira of zebras<sup>13!</sup>” Mestre Evan smiled.

<sup>12</sup> Ninety reais was about 50 Canadian dollars.

<sup>13</sup> He is making an allusion to the N’Golo, the Dance of the Zebras from Angola that many Angoleiros claim is the ancestor of capoeira.

“When did Mestre Ferreirinha start teaching, more or less?” One of the students inquired.

“He died at seventy-two... I’d have to look at his documents. He came to Santo Amaro at ten looking for work, because he’d run away from home – his godfather used to beat him up – and he never went back.”

“Did he ever go to Salvador?” Cecília asked.

“Often,” Mestre Evan nodded. “He knew João Pequeno and Pastinha. He spent a lot of time with Pastinha, in fact. They were from the same period.”

“Did he sing and play berimbau?” Cecília continued.

“Yes. *Nobody* could play berimbau like him. Dona Gilda once said that he didn’t know how to play berimbau. Just imagine! If that’s true, I’m never playing berimbau for Dona Gilda!” We laughed heartily.

“Did Mestre Ferreirinha tell a lot of capoeira stories?” Cecília inquired.

“Yes, he told stories about his own mestre. He used to say that when Mestre Asa Branca played, you could do what you wanted with him, but when he was drunk the shit would hit the fan! He once beat up a policeman – sent him flying on top of a wall, seven palms high! Mestre Asa Branca was in a street roda that day, when a policeman told them they couldn’t play capoeira. Since he was drunk, he said, ‘Yes, we can.’ ‘No, you can’t.’ When the policeman pulled out his weapon, Mestre Asa Branca gave the guy a hammer kick that sent him flying.”

“Were there a lot of street rodas in those days?” Lilú inquired.

“In those days, yes, but in my days, Mestre Ferreirinha only organized a street roda if there was a festival. Sometimes on my birthday, he’d do a roda and people could come and watch me get beaten up! Mestre Ferreirinha told Dona Gilda a lot more stories than he ever told us, though. To this day, I don’t play berimbau very well, because my mestre never taught me. I only started to understand why he was like that – why he was so closed – much later. I’d ask him questions and he’d just answer, ‘You’re too young to know these things.’ He died without passing on a lot of his knowledge. Nowadays, people teach their students *everything*, but then the student leaves the group for another one. A lot of my students have done that. People ask me, ‘Are you really an Angoleiro?’ And I always say, ‘I am. I walk like an Angoleiro, have the game of an Angoleiro and play berimbau like an Angoleiro.’ People say, ‘Aren’t those capoeira styles all the same?’ No. *Regional*<sup>14</sup> guys like to show that they’re capoeiristas, you know? They show off in the street. ‘I’m gonna do a flying leap!’” Mestre Evan laughed. “They give away the fact that they’re capoeiristas. I think there’s a certain charm when someone is a capoeirista and nobody knows it. As Angoleiros, we protect ourselves. There was a man I knew whose car I used to fix. ‘Hey, Dinho!’ he’d call me. ‘You know why I like you? Because you don’t play capoeira!’” The room roared with laughter. “‘Those capoeira guys are *bums!* I like you, because you work hard!’ Then one day, we were in a square playing capoeira, when he came by. ‘Dinho! You rascal! You play well, Man! I’m gonna put my grand-kids in your class!’ I told him there’s a time for everything, you know? A time for work and a time for play. For me, capoeira is play.”

“Are there any other students of Ferreirinha in Santo Amaro?” Cecília asked.

“Are any of his former students teaching? No,” Mestre Evan shook his head. “Before he died, Ferreirinha said to me, ‘Listen, Brother. Open up a shack and teach. You know, a shack – a little tavern, a place where you can train.’ But then another student took the old school over and when Mestre Ferreirinha died in 1998, he didn’t keep it up.”

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<sup>14</sup> Mestre Evan is using the term “Regional” in its popular sense, referring to practitioners of contemporary styles of capoeira and not to the Bimba Regional style.

“Is Ferreirinha’s house still used for training?” Cecília questioned.

Mestre Evan shook his head. “No. His son lives there now, but he doesn’t want anything to do with capoeira. When his dad was alive, he used to play, but now he only plays ‘copoeira’.<sup>15</sup> I used to drink a lot, too, but every time I drank, I’d get into a fight. I said to myself, ‘you’re becoming exactly what dad was afraid you’d become’.”

“Did you ever want to abandon capoeira?” Lilú inquired.

“Never,” Mestre Evan answered, quickly. “I’ve missed a week or two, but that’s not giving up capoeira. Although I haven’t graduated anybody, I have a student who is close to it and I told him, ‘You’re going to be a *trenel*. You’re going to teach when I travel. Sometimes I tell him, ‘It’s like this or like that,’ but he already teaches. It’s his responsibility to go to the students’ homes to pick them up or to drop them off. He’s been with me for about eighteen years – he came to me young and picked things up quickly. Sometimes he even tries to get me!” Mestre Evan laughed good-naturedly. “Chico<sup>16</sup> is going to be even worse when he gets to that age! He’s already a good capoeirista.”

“Mestre,” Cecília interjected, “do you talk to the parents about capoeira?”

“When a child comes to my class and says, ‘I want to learn capoeira!’ I tell him, ‘You have to ask your parents.’ But when the parents see that they’ll have to drop off and pick up their kid, they drag their feet. If a kid doesn’t have clothing for capoeira, he can play with his regular clothes. I’ve even got a bunch of uniforms donated to me by the people from the Capoeira Fort in Salvador. Even though capoeira is free, the parents don’t want to bring their kid, so it’s hard. I have about twelve teenagers and adults, who don’t come that often, but I have twenty-seven or twenty-eight kids. That’s a lot for Capoeira Angola!” Mestre Evan chuckled.

“People don’t realize the value of capoeira, do they?” I sighed.

“Not Capoeira Angola. Capoeira Regional is *full* – there’s a ton of Regional groups in Santo Amaro. My training is really hard – really strict. There are kids who come to class and don’t last two days. Some people want me to blend Angola and Regional, but I won’t. Or you’re salt, or you’re pepper. They say, ‘You’re really rigid, man! Just like your mestre!’ What am I gonna do? That’s how it is.”

“Do you compose music, Mestre?” Lilú asked, suddenly.

“Mestre Ferreirinha always used to say, ‘A capoeirista has to sing, be an actor and a composer.’ Sometimes I get inspired. I think of a song and at times I write it down, but there are so many others that I make up and when I get home, I’ve forgotten them.”

“Did you go to school, Mestre?” Lilú continued.

“I only studied for six months. What I know, I learned on the street. That’s why I’m a bit of a wolf! When you live in the street, you have to learn how to get by. My mom didn’t have the money to raise us, so we had to go out to the streets to help her. Capoeira was my schooling... and TV!” Mestre Evan laughed. “Capoeira makes you sharp. You learn how to make the best of things and it teaches you *malandragem*.”

“Can you give us an example of how capoeira helped you in a certain situation?” I prodded.

Mestre Evan paused. “It prepared me for a lot of things,” he said, finally. “I had three children with my first wife. After thirteen years together, she found someone else and left me.

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<sup>15</sup> *Copoeira* is a play on the words “capoeira” and “copo” or glass – Mestre Evan is insinuating that Mestre Ferreirinha’s son is a heavy drinker.

<sup>16</sup> “Chico” is Bochecha, the young boy who lives with Mestre Evan. He has an illness that prevents him from growing.

The other guy took the three kids, but I didn't go after him. If I hadn't been a capoeirista, I might have tried to kill him, right? I would have died. Physically, capoeira also helped me. I received two bullets, one here and one there," Mestre Evan pointed to two small scars on his torso. "Since I was fit and my muscles were strong, I survived."

"That's crazy, Mestre!" Lilú exclaimed.

"What happened, did you have a fight?" Cecília wanted to know.

"No, I didn't fight," Mestre Evan shook his head. "When my wife and I separated, I found a new woman right away!" he grinned. "My ex-wife went crazy. She started yelling at me. I'd bought a radio and she took it. I'd bought a television and she took it. I'd bought a fridge and she took it. 'Take it all! You just won't take *me!*' Then, one day, my daughter came to visit me. She spent the day with me and when my ex-wife came to pick her up, I got pissed off at her and pushed her. That was it. Her boyfriend waited for me and said, 'So you like to push women, huh? Well, you're gonna die now.' And he shot me. I walked to the hospital – it was about two kilometres – and lost some blood, but not much. When I got to the hospital, I fell down. They thought I was a liar. 'You came by mule!' they insisted. The doctor asked me, 'What did you eat today?' I told him, 'I drank a coke and had a piece of cake.' 'That's it?' 'That's it,' I said. So if it wasn't for capoeira..."

"Capoeira taught you not to seek revenge," I suggested.

"Not to seek revenge," Mestre Evan echoed. "Some days when you go to a *roda*, you get beaten up... You have to learn how to deal with that."

"The guy who did it disappeared?" Lilú asked.

"He disappeared. The other day, I saw him hiding behind a tree. I said, 'You're worried, aren't you?'" Mestre Evan roared with laughter. "Well, I'm just fine now."

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That evening, we arrived to a room filled with children and teenagers. Mestre Evan's senior student was leading the class in a series of grueling exercises, and I stared in amazement at the youngsters – they were utterly beautiful with their ebony skin, large, luminous eyes and graceful bodies. As we gathered for the *roda*, it struck me that there was something uncannily similar between this *roda* and the ones I had experienced with Mestre Curió. The movements, the music, and even the atmosphere were incredibly alike. And then it struck me. Mestre Ferreirinha – Mestre Evan's teacher – had had a close relationship with the revered Mestre Pastinha, Mestre Curió's teacher. I had the sensation of being given a glimpse into a remote past, an older Bahia, and although the whole scene made me intensely aware of the enormous cultural gulf between me and the people of Santo Amaro, I could feel how my training with Mestre Curió helped me bridge that distance.

I had been nervous to play in front of my UFBA friends. Despite having spent over a decade in the world of capoeira, I was convinced that Brazilians – and particularly Bahians – automatically “got” capoeira far better than me, by virtue of their cultural roots. I worried that when they saw me – a capoeira teacher from Canada – playing in the roda, they would find my capoeira lacking, so I was startled to realize that the UFBA students had had very little capoeira training. Only Lilú, with decades of capoeira under her belt, could come close to matching the young teacher. Seeing the good-natured spirit with which my university friends played the children of Santo Amaro, I was suddenly ashamed of myself. I had missed the point *again*. By focusing on the technical side of capoeira, I had forgotten the *soul* of the game: its celebratory aspect. It was maddening, the paradox of it all, but I knew that that night I was catching a glimpse of capoeira’s intangible spirit.

When it was my turn, I was paired with a young teenager – a beginner – and within minutes, the instructor took the boy’s place. I looked hesitantly at my new adversary, all sinewy muscle and grace. Even before we had begun, I knew I could not hope to match him – I was far too stiff and slow next to my feline adversary. He *was* capoeira, while I was a foreigner merely *trying* to learn the art form. My mind would be of absolutely no use to me in this situation, so the only thing to do was to relax and give my body free rein.

The playing took an intense focus, but I found myself enjoying our game as I did my best to sidestep my partner’s explosive attacks. When the young instructor came in for a foot sweep, I instinctively countered it with my own – a sequence of movements that I had been training at the Filhos de Bimba. As my partner met the solidity of my foot behind his, I saw, from his surprised expression, that he had not been expecting it. He fell on his buttocks – *hard*.

My young adversary had probably opened himself up more than he would have with a

more experienced Angoleiro, but this was an exciting realization in itself: capoeira is often defined as the “weapon of the weak” – the art of deceptive appearances – said to have been developed by slaves who could not confront their oppressors directly. Angoleiros often feign weakness or fear, in this spirit. Clearly, I had not had the upper hand, but in accepting this and using what defenses I did have, an opportunity had arisen. My vulnerability had lured my opponent into a moment of carelessness. The experience left me with an entirely new respect for my body’s *knowing*.

When I rode the bus back to Salvador the next day, I knew that Santa Amaro and its surrounding towns had shifted something in me. I had caught a glimpse of my own reflection in the eyes of these gentle folks – an answering pulse that bridged the cultural divide.

## ***9. Berimbau Lessons***

In December of 2003, when I was travelling to Salvador with my ex-husband and our students, a ribbon – a *fita* – had been tied to my wrist in the Bahian tradition while I made a silent prayer. I had asked for a direction in capoeira – a direction in *life* – and four years later, I had my answer: *I am a Filha de Bimba and Regional is my way*. My heart had long known, but I had needed time to sort through the layers of fear and doubt. It seemed particularly auspicious that the *fita* had fallen in the middle of Chapinha’s class at the Fundação – my first female capoeira teacher’s class – only days after I had decided to do my *estrela* exam and to formally join the school. My ethics review had been approved and I was on a race to complete as many interviews as possible. I would be making a quick trip to the north of Brazil to capture the interviews I had set up with several mestres, and then return to Salvador.

I had started berimbau classes with Anum again and every time our lesson drew near, I felt a sense of dread. It seemed ridiculous, since I always emerged from these classes filled with joy, as if the secrets of the universe had been revealed to me. Anum was a talented musician and a good teacher. During his classes at the Fundação, I rode the sound of his berimbau like a boat on the waves, forgetting my fatigue.

My resistance to playing berimbau came from an old, irrational fear. Growing up, music had always seemed like magic to me – a fantastic world created out of thin air – especially since I did not come from a family of musicians and had not grown up in a culture like Bahia. Practice seemed important, but musicians had that little extra *something* – their skill seemed to access a different dimension – so after ten years, although I could scratch sounds out on the berimbau, I knew that I was not *good*. I had always avoided practicing the berimbau, but teaching in Toronto had forced me to play, and slowly, imperceptibly, I was getting better in spite of myself.

It was the morning Lilú, Chapinha and I were training together in the Fundação, that I had a flash of insight into the nature of capoeira. When it came time to play games, two-by-two, Chapinha handed me the berimbau. As there was no one else to do it, I took a seat on the bench, swallowed deeply, and began. My teacher had just played the berimbau, so I could follow the shimmering path of her notes, allowing my body to guide what my mind could not yet grasp. To my great surprise, what flew from my hands was São Bento Grande – not a pale imitation, but the *real thing*. Even Chapinha looked up from her game with an expression of pleasure. How many times over the years had I felt lost and frustrated – how many frigid nights riding my bicycle to class, wondering if I should give it all up? I knew then with a new certainty that capoeira was like any other skill, a series of small steps and minor victories leading to eventual mastery.

With the pressure of research hanging over my head, every moment seemed imbued with urgency. I worried endlessly about whether I should be gathering more books, theses and articles, seeking out more capoeira mestres to chat with, and participating in more capoeira events, and yet, I could not seem to find the energy to act. Training with the Filhos de Bimba four days a week, going to their rodas and attending the odd capoeira event took courage when all I wanted to do was to hide and grieve the loss of my lover. In some ways, it was fitting – I had always known that I would eventually have to choose a path, so despite the fact that focusing on the Filhos de Bimba School meant letting other activities fall by the wayside, I was coming to know Regional more intimately than ever before.

I missed my lover terribly in this city where sensuality saturated the very air. It was obvious to me that a strong wind would blow me over, so the evening Miguel dropped by my apartment, I knew before he had said a word that my carefully built defenses would crumble.

## *~ Part Two: Wedding Bells*

### *1. My Students in Bahia*

My students had arrived: the couple to wed, the bride's twin sister, the sister's husband, and three other students – seven of them in total – and it was wonderful to have the gang with me. While they sat down to dinner, I went in search of the Angola mestres that Mestre Augusto had invited for the welcome roda, but they were nowhere to be found. When the driver motioned me over, I knew from his expression that something was terribly wrong. As he nodded in the direction of the garden, a little shiver went through me. Miguel was there – *with his wife*. He had come for the roda and somehow she had gotten wind of the event. I started heading back to the building, my heart pounding, but it was too late. She had seen me, and when she called out with steely determination, there was nothing to do but approach the two seated figures, feeling a blend of fear and relief. The moment of truth had finally arrived.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” Miguel’s wife said softly, but distinctly, as if echoing my thoughts. “I’ve been carrying this weight around in my heart like a stone.”

I was surprised to find that I liked this woman – her biting sarcasm was understandable, given the circumstances, and she struck me as dignified. Miguel sat, his shoulders hunched, staring at the ground with an inscrutable expression, but a strange feeling of calm had descended upon me. I knew that I had made mistakes, but I was totally present now and willing to face the truth. Perhaps my bearing and the truly respectful feelings I had for this woman saved me from a worst fate. As her anger hovered close to the surface, I was grateful to have been spared the eyes of the students. I listened – really listened – trembling only once, when his wife revealed how close she had come to attacking me the year before. How had I let it come to this? How had I

gotten involved in something so ugly – something that did not resemble me at all?

When Miguel's wife heard that I was going to be at the Nuns', she had come, dismissing the *mestres* who had shown up for the *roda*. She did not want to lose her husband, she explained, but if Miguel decided to end their marriage, she would accept it. For long minutes, the voice alternated between calmness and fury, and I opened myself up to it, accepting it all. Had I not chosen to walk this path, ignoring the pain I knew it was causing another being? Miguel had a large part of the responsibility, but I had danced with the darkness as well. The more I listened, the more I understood the true depths that separated my lover and me – how different we were culturally and generationally. Miguel and his wife had been raised to have other expectations of marriage. He was to be a father and a husband to her, fulfilling her needs through his work as a provider and as the public head of the family. In turn, she was to be a wife to him, providing for his needs – food, sex and a stable home. The practical considerations of life were, in many ways, more important than true communication and shared interests, dimensions I had grown up expecting in a marriage. Raising children, putting a meal on the table every day for her husband, doing his laundry and taking care of him in a myriad other ways *was* love. In many ways, theirs was a bond forged on the backbone of their community, one built of the many laces that tied them through family and friends. How blind I had been to think that I could find a place here – that my love for Miguel could possibly compare with this. My lover was caught between two generations and the changes sweeping through them – drawn to exploring an intimate relationship based on a different kind of connection, yet also bound to the past in a thousand ways. Who was I to ask him to leave, to turn his back on his family and his entire community, on *everything* that was familiar and dear to him?

When she was finished, Miguel's wife asked him abruptly. "So, what's it going to be

then?” For a moment, I thought that my lover would take the long-awaited step to be with me – that he would stand up for our love – but when he spoke, there was not the slightest hint of hesitation in his voice. He had known the answer all along.

“Eu vou com você.” *I’m going with you.* Miguel said softly, but distinctly. I could hear the words, but my mind would not fully register them. Surely, I had misunderstood. I stared at my lover, dumbfounded, as a voice inside my head screamed. *You idiot, Lang! What did you think?* This man whom I had loved with all my heart for three years would not even look at me. I had tried to end it so many times before, but now I knew it was truly over.

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My students had travelled thousands of kilometers and were depending on me, so despite a burning in my chest that made it hard to breathe, I forced a smile and mumbled an excuse about an emergency in Mestre Augusto’s family. No one read my distress. The night air was warm, the sky lit by starlight, and the students’ excitement, as we took our first walk on the beach that evening, made me smile. When I was finally alone in my room, however, I only had time to collapse on the bed before sobs began wracking my body. The grief was a tidal wave slamming into me again and again. At times, the pain was so intense that I had to physically massage my chest, and in this fashion, I cried for hours, dimly aware of the passage of night into day, until I finally succumbed to an exhausted sleep.

I wondered how I was going to face the next day and all the ones after that, and I was sure that sorrow was written all over my face – that everyone could see my cloud of shame and despair – but capoeira came to my rescue, as it had so many times before. Once in the Fundação, the joy in that tiny room lifted me momentarily out of my grief. The roda was only marred by a small incident – a black eye one of my students received in the roda. In a short time, Música’s

eye had swollen shut, and as we rushed around, trying to find ice, I realized that for better or for worst, the Encontro had begun.

## 2. *Mestre Santa Rosa in Cachoeira*



Lang and Mestre Santa Rosa, March 2008 (Photo: Mark J. Francisco)

The next morning, the students and I set off to Cachoeira with Mestre Santa Rosa in a rented van. I was relieved to be leaving Salvador and felt years younger. While Mestre Santa Rosa pointed out places of interest, I asked him about his past – I knew little about this man except that he had strong links to the old capoeira, and I had always respected his deeply non-commercial and spiritual approach to the art.

“They named me *José Walter Santa Rosa*,” he explained, “but I haven’t been able to discover where this name comes from. In the past, slaves didn’t have last names – last names were assigned to them. I was born in 1953 in the neighbourhood of Rio Vermelho<sup>17</sup>, and from there I moved to the Retiro, where I lived for about seven years. After that, I moved to Rita Morães de Santa Grande do Retiro, where I still live today. I discovered capoeira while working in a metallurgy shop that was located in the *interior* – in the countryside. We had to take baths in a spring that was freezing, you know? So we used to do this ‘esquenta banho’ kind of thing – warming our bodies up before bathing – and that’s where I learned sports like wrestling. The son of the boss did karate and two of our colleagues did capoeira in Bom Jua<sup>18</sup> with Mestre Limão.

<sup>17</sup> Rio Vermelho is a neighbourhood in Salvador.

<sup>18</sup> Bom Jua is a suburb of Salvador.

On Sundays, before our soccer game started, we'd train capoeira. Sometimes, the shit would hit the fan!" Mestre Santa Rosa laughed. "I was about twenty-four at the time. The first nickname I was ever given was 'Mosquito', but it had to do with my work, not capoeira. At my workplace, there were lots of fights, so I'd walk with my head low. If someone was staring at me, there would be trouble."

"You were a violent person?" one of the students asked in surprise.

Mestre Santa Rosa simply laughed. "I had a second nickname – *Índio* – but in the end, I reverted back to my family name. My classmates called me by my last name, like they do in the military and I liked it better. There was a guy in Santo Antônio by the name of Zé, who used to invite me to train at his house at night. I'd go once or twice a week and he called me *Mosquitinho de Angola* – Little Mosquito from Angola!"

We chuckled and Mestre Santa Rosa continued, "I haven't seen the guy in *fifteen* years. We were about the same age and he lived in Formiga, but trained in Santo Antônio. We played a nice game together. He'd go to Virgílio's roda on Sundays, the academy where I trained, but we didn't have access to *his* academy. His mestre didn't accept visitors and it drove my friend almost to tears not to be able to invite us. He'd tell us, 'If you go to my academy, my mestre will beat me up and you, too!' I trained with Mestre Limão for about seven or eight months, but then, around 1978, Mestre Limão decided to stop teaching. He brought four of us – the guys he respected and liked best – to Mestre Virgílio's academy. I'm the only one of the four who's still active in capoeira today. I spent eleven years with Mestre Virgílio and then, at the end of the 80's, capoeira underwent a transformation. The laws began to relax and capoeira's image changed. Around that time, many students had a falling out with their mestres. They went their own ways and it was the same for me. Since I had always been a bit of a *rebel*," Mestre Santa Rosa smiled, "I took things until I couldn't stand them anymore. I told Mestre Virgílio that I'd never set foot in his academy again and I never did."

"What was the motive for your decision?" I wondered.

Mestre Santa Rosa answered grimly, "There were a lot of reasons. Mestre Virgílio showed me and the guys from Bom Jua a lack of respect. There were politics, as well, so I left in 1990. I was training with João de Barro back then, too. I needed a certificate to teach in a small town in Bonfim, because they had a soccer team in the town and were looking for someone to train the guys. The director of the College knew me, back from our days in the political movement, and was trying to get me the job. I was training with Barro and about to graduate. Barro agreed to let me bring the guys from capoeira to train there. After four or five months, Mestre Virgílio found out and he wasn't happy. All the time he was doing events – capoeira baptisms and graduations – and he *never* called on me. I would have remained a student forever, so I left. I was with Virgílio from '89 to 2000 and was one of the founders of that group. I started with him in the street. We'd go down every Tuesday and Thursday to train at the Catinga with Beca and Mestre Trazinho. On Saturdays, we had berimbau class at his house and on Sundays, we had a roda. I trained four days a week with him and by myself every day. Anyway, I got a *professor* diploma from João de Barro and opened my own group around '93. I still have a group to this day. Mestre Bom Cabrito needed someone to teach classes and invited me, so I went to work with him for two years. He gave me the certificate of *Contra-Mestre*. We worked at the Hotel Pelourinho together, but he died in '95 or '96. A lot of mestres started calling on me then, but I didn't like them and kept to myself. Mestre Pastinha was another person with whom I worked. I liked Pastinha. He'd come to my group and I'd visit his. That's when he gave me the diploma of *Mestre*."

“Mestre Pastinha gave you a diploma of Mestre?” I said, surprised.

“Yes,” Mestre Santa Rosa nodded. “A lot of mestres went to visit my group in Fazenda Grande in the 70’s. Augusto went. Jaime de Mar Grande, Moraes and Cobrinha went there, too. In the 80’s I started a metallurgic business in Lauro de Freitas. One of Moraes’ students came every day after work to do his politics. Moraes sent him, because he hoped like crazy that I would visit his academy!”

“Mestre Santa Rosa, when you received a diploma and opened your school, were you already known as a mestre?” I asked.

“Yes, already,” he nodded. “In Capoeira Angola, the diploma is not important. These things are symbolic and they’re relatively new, dating from the ‘80s or so. Ask Augusto about it. This modern idea that people have to play capoeira in shoes and so on, it makes no sense. When people first started playing capoeira, they’d wear *tamancos*, *xagrins* and *pecatas*! They’d even play barefoot. Society has changed. In the old days, I’d wear sandals. Later, I started using tennis shoes. I think certain values *are* positive, but we have to cut the things that aren’t necessary out. If someone comes to a roda without any capoeira clothes and he’s wearing sandals, he should be able to play.”

I remembered a conversation that I had had with Mestre Augusto. We had been sitting in the Cruz do Pascoal Square sharing beers and a *pirão de aipim* – a delicious purée. “Mores have changed,” Mestre Augusto had said. “Historical values have changed. I don’t like this pressure to wear a certain type of clothing. I’ll wear it if I have to, but in my group, we’ve never used uniforms. I used to go to rodas after work and didn’t want to have to carry capoeira clothes with me.”

“Why do you think Capoeira Angola has changed?” I had asked.

“Ideas were introduced as a way of maintaining quality in capoeira,” Mestre Augusto had responded. “In the past, capoeira was played on the street, sometimes in the mud or in the house where slaves lived – wherever there was space for it – but when capoeira changed geographically, the conditions also changed. If you played in the street, under the hot summer sun, you couldn’t play barefoot – you would’ve shredded the skin of your feet. Guys played the way they were dressed in the street. White clothes – a symbol of capoeira – are a new thing. That came about as a way of paying homage to the capoeira of the past. Now, however, it’s expected and has become a kind of ritual, but these values arose in the modern era.”

“Weren’t black and yellow the colours of Mestre Pastinha’s favourite soccer team?” I had interjected.

“All the mestres in Bahian Capoeira Angola have their own preference,” Mestre Augusto had said, by way of an answer.

“But you were saying that *white* was a way of paying homage to the capoeiristas of the past?” I had repeated.

“In the past,” Mestre Augusto had answered, “clothing used to be made from a cheap European cloth – it was colourless. Coloured cloth was expensive, so few could afford it.”

“Was white linked to Candomblé?”

“No,” Mestre Augusto had shaken his head, “Who were the people linked to the African religion back then? Black people! And what clothing did they wear? Clothing made from *bags*. The clothing of the Orixás became more sophisticated, in order for it to be accepted more easily into society – now people wear jewellery, too – but the authentic Candomblé didn’t have fancy clothing. People didn’t have enough money to *feed* themselves. How could they afford jewellery? People don’t know the history of how rituals came about.”

“So they invent reasons for their existence,” I had suggested.

“That’s the thing!” Mestre Augusto had exclaimed. “In the old days, even *suits* were white. It was only in the ‘60s that coloured clothing made its appearance and even then, it was the rare person who could afford it. Anyway, I don’t wear a uniform. If I go to a *roda*, I play as I come. I can do this because I have earned respect. I’ll respect you in your house, but don’t try to impose this type of thing on me! Nowadays, the only guys who break the rules are Santa Rosa and me. That’s my fight with the Associação<sup>19</sup>. I tell them that they have to accept this from me, because I’ve been doing this work for a *long* time. I do things with awareness and I won’t do something just because everybody else is doing it. At Mestre Zé do Lenço’s event, the question of *Mestre* and *Tio*<sup>20</sup> came up. I told people that if they wanted to Africanize capoeira they shouldn’t apply things that aren’t pertinent to Africa. Everyone uses European titles like ‘mestre’, but mestre isn’t an African concept. It’s a European word! It came from the cavalry: the ‘Mestre Auxílio’ or the Captain of the Marine, the Urban Cavalry and the ‘Mestres de Ofício’. When I try to raise these points, no one listens.”

I told Mestre Santa Rosa about my conversation with Mestre Augusto. “Augusto and I have a long-standing fight in the capoeira community over this topic,” he nodded. “People are like parrots. They just follow the system. It started in the ‘70s and I tried to address it back then, but I got no response, so I got out. That’s when capoeira exploded.”

“Speaking of changes,” I wondered, “Can you say something about the way capoeira values have changed, Mestre?”

Mestre Santa Rosa thought for a moment. “Values change depending on peoples’ experience and vision. Capoeira has completely changed its trajectory since ‘95. *Everything* changed then. A lot of people who played capoeira back then no longer do so. These days, we’re pressured to embrace the internet. That’s all people care about now. Not long ago, Mestre Pelé’s son, who’s in Germany, was talking to me about some project and I pretended not to understand. I said, ‘Hey Boy, can you speak Portuguese? What are you talking about?’ His ideas had *nothing* to do with capoeira, but it’s his reality in Germany now. If we don’t hang on to the old values, we’ll be increasingly drawn into the market game. As values disappear, the old ways of playing and of *being* in capoeira disappear. Nowadays, you have to wear that light, stretchy cloth to play. Some mestres say, ‘If I don’t enforce this, I won’t be able to sell t-shirts and pants, and I won’t make any money!’ That has nothing to do with capoeira and that’s the biggest difference I see with the past. *In the past, things were done with love*. As Augusto likes to say, capoeira’s in the blood and soul, but a lot has been lost through its commercialization. The kids may be doing capoeira, but it’s not authentic. At some *rodas*, people don’t even kneel at the foot of the *berimbau* anymore,” Mestre Santa Rosa sighed.

“That seems like a sad vision of the future,” I commented.

“In the old days we had *Festas de Largo*,” Mestre Santa Rosa continued, “where we used to play capoeira in the street. Now, who plays in street *rodas*?”

“It’s true,” I nodded. “I can’t say that I feel very inspired by the few street *rodas* I’ve seen at festivals or otherwise. Street *rodas* have changed, haven’t they?”

“In every way!” Mestre Santa Rosa nodded, emphatically. “You can see it in the way people play *berimbau* and sing! The new capoeira lacks spirit. When old guys like Pelé, Paulo Rato, Curió and Virgílio used to play instruments, it gave you chills. To hear Paulo dos Anjos sing gave you such a deep yearning to go into the *roda*! You can’t find that anymore, not even

<sup>19</sup> The Capoeira Angola Association or the ACA.

<sup>20</sup> *Tio* is uncle in Portuguese.

when mestres play – *mestres*. I watch them. I see them playing their instruments. Now the music just makes me uncomfortable.”

### 3. *Return to Santo Antônio*



Jet Li, Lang and Música in the Pelourinho, April 2008 (Photo: Lang Liu)

The night before the wedding, my students and I were invited to a unique version of the Stag/Staguetta party by our Angoleiro friends at the Santo Antônio Fort – a *Despedida de Solteiro* or “Farewell to the Single Life” party. When we arrived, the mid-sized room shared between Mestre Pelé and Mestre Bola Sete was already vibrating with energy. It was a powerful evening for us all, wrapped in the collective warmth of our friendships. Not only had the students and I travelled thousands of miles to celebrate the wedding – a momentous event in the lives of our two friends – but by choosing to do so in Salvador, it struck me that we were welcoming the mestres into our Canadian community as well, deepening the rich, cross-cultural friendships that I had begun so many years ago.

After the wedding, the Toronto group was reduced to four – my students Jet Li, Marionete, Música, and me. We moved to Santo Antônio where they could be housed, a two-minute walk from my apartment. I was relieved to be “home” with Cabral and Viví, and my

students were thrilled to be downtown, where they could feel the pulse of Salvador.

We were meeting up at the Fundação daily for capoeira class and I was spending as much time as I could with them, but feeling a growing sense of urgency about my studies. My body had not been pleased with the excesses of the past ten days, and it was letting me know it in no uncertain terms. On top of a general sense of fatigue, new aches and pains had appeared which I suspected had something to do with the emotional storm I had just weathered. Miguel and I had begun meeting again, surreptitiously, and I could only pray that I would make it through the last few weeks. In my heart, I knew it was over, and perhaps with a continent between us, I would finally be able to let my lover go.

As I watched Música, Marionete and Jet Li jump from one Angola class to the next, I began to worry. By allowing my students the freedom to explore capoeira, had I inadvertently dug my own grave? Throughout the Encontro, I had exposed them to the Angola world, wanting to give them a taste of the diversity of capoeira and to share the warmth of the Angola community, but perhaps I had gone too far. Students need guidance – they do not yet understand the full ramifications of their choices – and while in theory, I wanted them to follow their hearts, experience had shown me that a teacher shapes her students and that *experience* ultimately creates the connection, the physical and emotional memory that makes the capoeirista. I had taken a big risk by letting them run free. Maria tried to soothe me, suggesting that their experiences would make the students appreciate the Filhos de Bimba even more, but the anxiety helped me make up my mind. I had already decided to officially join the school and I had been waiting for the right opportunity.

At the next class, I found myself nervously sitting across from Mestre Nenel. After listening to me for a long time, the mestre nodded and explained gently, “You have a complicated

situation, Lang. Your students are young in capoeira, but they've already been exposed to many things. *You* may be ready, but *they* may not be ready to join the Filhos de Bimba. Let me tell you what such a choice would entail before you make a decision.”

By joining the school, I would be accepting certain limitations. As an independent capoeirista, I had been welcome, while retaining the freedom to train with whomever else I wanted. Filhos de Bimba students, however, despite being free to play in other rodas if accompanied by a formado, were agreeing to train exclusively with the Filhos de Bimba – to follow the teachings, methodology and philosophy laid out by Mestre Bimba. In other words, once I became a Filha de Bimba, it would mark the end of my wandering ways.

“When Mestre Bimba created Capoeira Regional,” Mestre Nenel smiled, “he made it *complete*. I know it's hard to understand, but Regional has everything a person needs – slow games, fast games, music, dancing, drumming, philosophy, even acrobatics through the balões. We have no need to look outside of ourselves.”

I thought I understood what Mestre Nenel was trying to tell me. My own experience had confirmed to me the importance of focusing on one style. It was not simply a question of the inherent complications of learning different *moves*, but it was also that every style had its own internal logic – its own principles, methodology and philosophy – that often conflicted with the teachings of other styles. I had always known that, ultimately, if I wanted to deepen my relationship to capoeira, I would have to choose. In addition, in a game where microseconds could lead to serious injury, automatic reactions were crucial. We were *shaping* our bodies and minds – literally and figuratively – through our practice, and if I ever hoped to acquire a degree of mastery in the art, I would have to give myself completely to one capoeira. Training multiple styles might have been enriching for me, allowing me to explore ways of moving and being, but

my students lacked a *confidence* that I could see in the beginners in the Fundação, people who had only ever trained Bimba's Regional. *My* choice was clear. I was a Filha de Bimba, but would my students follow me?

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I had developed a dry cough that made breathing difficult and was feeling depleted, so when the downpour began in earnest I was relieved to be home, curled up under blankets in the silence of my room. I had been doing too much again, wanting to accompany my students in all of their activities. They had changed a great deal on the trip, and it seemed that in giving them the freedom to explore the Capoeira Angola world unimpeded, my trust had been well placed. Despite dabbling in other schools, they were feeling closer than ever to the Filhos de Bimba. Although I felt like a proud mother watching her chicks learn to fly, I was overcome with waves of sadness and fear. The excitement and fervour I saw in my students' eyes reminded me that it was becoming harder for me to train. Although I tried my best to hide my fatigue, my body was struggling.

By Monday morning, I found myself sidelined in Anum's class. The pain in my shoulder had gotten so bad that I could think of little else, and while it was clear my body wanted rest, with only two weeks left in Salvador, it seemed pointedly unfair. Instead of perfecting my throws, suddenly I could not do them at all. After a strong beginning, I was going out with a whimper instead of a bang. And there was so much to wrap up before I left. I wanted to say good-bye to the mestres and professors who had graced my life in Salvador and to finish my last interviews. Maria, who was returning to Canada after three years in Salvador, would need me. I tried hard not to think that for the first time in years, I did not know when I would be back.

## ~ Part Three: *Filha de Bimba*



Filhos de Bimba caxixi and dobrão (Photo: Walter Lai)

*In Regional, there is no such thing as a ‘style’ of game. Each person has a style. Nowadays, you see a lot of schools where people ginga almost identically – they look like robots that have been programmed! In Capoeira Regional, this is not the case [...] when it’s time to play, you must play to the rhythm of the berimbau, but your style is yours alone. I’ve been to places where people have these ‘workshops’ and mestres are correcting people, ‘No, the ginga has to be like this...’ This is not capoeira! Capoeira is a process of liberation. Just as each person walks differently and no two people are alike, each person has a personal ginga [...] We teach students the base of the ginga – we show what it looks like to people who have never done capoeira before – but the rest is up to the person.*

Mestre Nenel in an interview at Bavia Arts, Toronto, May 2009<sup>21</sup>

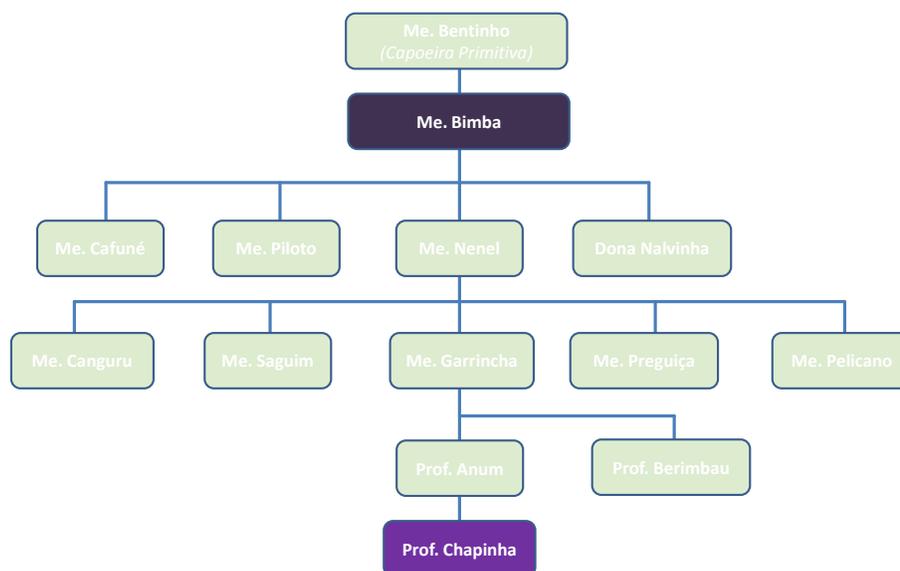
*Capoeira Regional is the best demonstration of the hybridization of African traditions with Brazilian customs.*

Mestre Decênio (2005: 118)

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<sup>21</sup> Translated from the Portuguese by Lang Liu.

## 1. Mestre Nenel



**Capoeira Regional Geneological Tree (Figure 3)**

Mestre Nenel smiled at me, a gentle figure in a beret and dreads. He was a large man like his father – tall and powerful – with the same piercing blue eyes, but I was not surprised to learn that he had been painfully shy before capoeira helped him find his way. He was looking at me expectantly now, while I searched for the right words.

“Mestre,” I said finally. “I’m ready to join the Filhos de Bimba. Will you have me?”

As Mestre Nenel paused, I could feel my pulse quickening. “For you, there’s no problem, Lang,” he answered, finally. “We’ll see how your students react.”

My students were used to a lot of freedom. When I began asking people to define

themselves, there would be some resistance, but I was willing to try. Mestre Nenel handed me several sheets, general guidelines – the traditions, rituals and philosophy of Capoeira Regional – and I read the first page:

*The Principles*

1. Ginga constantly while playing.
2. Always dodge and evade an opponent's attack – do not resist it.
3. Always play as closely as possible to your partner.
4. All movements must have a purpose (attack or defense).
5. Always keep at least one base on the ground at all times – i.e. At least one hand or foot (jumps make one vulnerable).
6. Always follow the rhythm of the berimbau.
7. Always be respectful of a player who can no longer defend him or herself from an attack.
8. Always protect a partner's physical and moral integrity – stronger players have a responsibility to care for weaker players.

I thanked Mestre Nenel and tucked the pages carefully away. A period of transition was inevitable, but change was not necessarily a bad thing. It would be a relief to have guidelines to follow and to know that I could count on the support of Mestre Nenel.

Once alone in my room, however, my doubts began surfacing. What had I done? Had I unwittingly shut the door on friendships I had nurtured for years in the Capoeira Angola world? I knew that Mestre Augusto and Mestre Santa Rosa would be disappointed – Mestre Augusto had suggested I continue as a “free agent” while following the Regional teachings, and I had seriously considered the possibility. It was a testament to the fact that the mestre believed in me, but like all Bahians, he had grown up cradled in the motherland of capoeira, surrounded by his community, and I knew that he could never truly understand the pain of a solitary capoeira path. My mind was made up – it was time to move on.

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When I returned to the Fundação for the long-awaited interview with Mestre Nenel, I found him polishing a berimbau on the back steps and chatting with an Italian capoeirista named

Eva<sup>22</sup>. The two of them made room on the steps for me.

“Can you tell us a bit about your capoeira past, Mestre?” I suggested. “How has capoeira shaped your life?”

“Let me see if I remember,” he joked. “My name is *Manoel Nascimento Machado*, but from the day I was born, in 1960, my father always called me *Nenel*. Maybe it was just his way, or maybe it was an old tradition. All his sons had different names on the registry than the one by which he called them. Well, at four or five, I was already helping my father give workshops. I started officially playing capoeira when I was six and when I was seven, I did my *Formatura*, complete with scarf and medal. I also began participating in my father’s cultural shows then. Sometimes, my brother and I did the *casadiório* – the final closing number. I hope to write a book about my father – about life in our home and the neighbourhood he frequented.”

“The most important thing capoeira did for me was to transform me and to help me mature quickly. It was tough, losing my father at thirteen. He died in 1974, at that stage where I was becoming a man, so it was a really rough period. We often went hungry. I went to live in the home of my *mãe de criação* – the woman who raised me as her son – in Brasília. In 1977, I fell into a world of alcohol and cigarettes, but I was lucky – there were no drugs. I lived for about five years without being involved in capoeira and tried several professions, but in 1984, I came back to capoeira. I opened my first school in 1986. Capoeira challenged me on a daily basis – I was a *very* timid person, I hardly spoke and I avoided people. Perhaps it was just my nature or perhaps it was the way my father educated us – he was heavy-handed in some ways. He never hit me, but I was very sensitive, and sometimes, when he was upset with me, I would lock myself in my room and cry. I was a very introverted youth, so capoeira helped me free things that were imprisoned within me. I remember the first time someone interviewed me – there was no tape recorder, just someone taking notes, but my stomach and my head hurt. The first time I had to go on TV... *My God!* The night before, I dreamt that they were burying me alive in a cemetery!” Mestre Nenel chuckled. “Nowadays, I can go anywhere and I know that the true value of a human being isn’t in his wallet – it’s in his mind and character. These are the good things that capoeira brought me. When I stopped capoeira, I began smoking, drinking and sleeping around *a lot*. Some people might think of that last part as a good thing – shades of Bimba!” he grinned. “But it was capoeira that helped me free myself from my vices. On September 6, 1984, when I came back to capoeira, I decided to dedicate myself to it. Capoeira *forced* me to do this – there may have been something spiritual to it. Bimba’s disciples had all chosen different paths, as had my brothers. I was the only one left without a profession. I tried several, in fact, but none worked out. So maybe it was destiny and maybe there was also a part of me that couldn’t accept working beneath someone. My bosses were people I couldn’t respect. In capoeira, we’re independent beings. People started to question me, ‘So, you’re Bimba’s son, huh?’ I didn’t pay attention, but I read a few articles and saw a few television reports that caught my eye. I started thinking that my father had *died* for capoeira. His whole life had been built upon capoeira and he had made a deep impact. You just have to look around you and wherever you speak of capoeira – wherever there’s a berimbau – the name *Bimba* is remembered. He brought together different professions and ways of living under capoeira, and yet, after all that, for all practical purposes, Capoeira Regional went into the grave with him. That was what *most* motivated me to begin working again. I disputed several capoeira championships – I wouldn’t do that anymore, but back then, it was good for me – and everywhere I went, I observed the almost

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<sup>22</sup> Eva is not her real name.

complete absence of my father's work. His name was being remembered, but the little that lived on of his work was not great. There were many aberrations that continue to be attributed to Bimba to this day. I, on the other hand, had *lived* his capoeira, and these things started to bother me. I'd see people killing themselves in the roda and the next day the paper would call it 'Regional'! Capoeira was losing its spirit of *resistance*. That and the gymnastics... all of it finally made me decide to come back to capoeira. Not long afterwards, my youngest brother died and I began to live capoeira twenty-four hours a day. So, capoeira helped me mature as a man, a citizen and an educator. Every day, capoeira teaches me about being a human being. Although I have a lot of students, I know *each one* personally. I know their behaviours, strengths and weaknesses, thanks to capoeira."

"You have students who came from the Capoeirê Project, right, Mestre?" I asked.

"Yes," Mestre Nenel nodded, "We had a nucleus of the Filhos de Bimba in the Polytechnic School of Engineering at the UFBA and back then, Saguim was the teacher – now he lives in Italy. There were lots of *pivetes*<sup>23</sup> there, you know? The kids were giving us problems, getting into fights, interfering with our capoeira classes and so on, so Saguim decided to open a class just for them. There were ten kids at the start – that's how the Capoeirê Project began! The original project at the university had been based on showcasing the work of capoeira mestres in Bahia. It fell through because of a lack of government support, but we sprang into action. I worked on the Capoeirê Project with Frede's help<sup>24</sup> and Saguim began to teach the kids. Thank God, it was successful. The kids started to change! They were seven to thirteen years of age, and soon, we had almost *eighty* of them! As the project grew and gained visibility in the community, the parents started pleading with us, 'For the love of God, don't stop!' Their kids were starting to concentrate better in school and to have a growing desire to become responsible people. Of course, not all of them improved, but most did and I'm very proud of who they've become. We then decided to start a project in the Pelourinho. We would have had *twenty-three* Capoeirê nuclei today – we had to get teachers from other capoeira schools to fill all the need, because there weren't enough teachers in our own school – but unfortunately, the government didn't come through financially. We kept a few projects going, despite the lack of support. I no longer go without today, thanks to capoeira, so I feel an *obligation* to help others in the same situation. It's my expression of resistance – what keeps me going. Of course, I run into all sorts of barriers. Some people speak well of the project and some speak ill, but I just continue to do my father's work."

"Just one thing, Mestre," Eva interrupted, "People speak of the importance your father placed on work and studies. How does this relate to the educational project?"

Mestre Nenel nodded, "There are people whose work involves the study and dissemination of my father's work – they're preoccupied with the details of what my father did or did not do – and they like to give it a negative spin. For example, this question of the *carteira de trabalho*<sup>25</sup> arises, although no one seems to know if it even existed in the early nineteen hundreds. It probably didn't, but this faulty information is written about and spoken of with the intention of criticizing Bimba. My father asked that his students work or study. This shows me that he wanted them to be *good people* – good citizens – if they were going to be involved in capoeira. If you were neither a worker nor a student, however, it didn't mean you *couldn't* do capoeira with him, because if you were introduced by someone, you could join. He did this as a

<sup>23</sup> *Pivetes* can be street kids or simply kids who spend a lot of time on the street and steal, get into petty crimes, etc.

<sup>24</sup> Frederico de Abreu, the capoeira historian.

<sup>25</sup> A *carteira de trabalho* was a form of identification that workers of certain professions carried on themselves.

way to *inspire* people to be citizens and not bums! It was important for him to see capoeira being accessed by all segments of society. Some people try to insinuate that my father *judged* people, when it was the opposite! My father was always trying to awaken people. That's why he worked in the Pelourinho and in Nordeste, where a lot of people didn't have jobs – they didn't have *anything*. You can be sure that the people who say, 'Bimba discriminated against those who had no carteira', have no bums and criminals in *their* schools! It's easy to criticize others – these ill-intentioned professors make money. They also like to say that my father created Regional to gain access to the world of white people. This is also untrue. My father was a *formigão* – a poor worker. Thanks to him, many poor people became good people, in part because of his insistence that people study. Nowadays, there are many people in high society who are there thanks to my father. They were students – kids of fourteen or fifteen years of age – and now they're powerful men. My father had a role to play in this, so it's the opposite: *My father didn't whiten capoeira – he darkened society with his capoeira!* He brought the entire society *inside* his own vision, so as to preserve the culture and not let it die."

"Mestre," I ventured. "I'm interested in the subject of popular education – in the use of capoeira as an educational tool. I'm not talking about formal education, like school, but about the holistic form of knowledge you are passing on, where you don't just use the mind – you use your whole body."

Mestre Nenel nodded eagerly. "Let me tell you something. I once worked in an Art School where I developed a capoeira project for children and everything had to be written down. Now I would know better how to speak of such things, but back then it was hard for me to explain to the directors that capoeira is not like that. You can't predict what will happen to the people you're working with. *This* is going to give *that* result. What's going to come out of it? No one can tell! Capoeira is *different*... It's not like math, history or even phys. ed., because it involves the body and the spirit – it's *energetic*. There's something in popular culture that comes from the *inside* and doesn't have an exact shape."

"And what do you think capoeira brings people, Mestre?" I prodded. "Personally, I feel there's something lacking in formal education and it seems to me that capoeira attracts a lot of people precisely because it has that *extra* something. What is it that is so unique to capoeira?"

Mestre Nenel nodded. "Let me address one of these points. In my experience working with capoeira, it *strengthens* kids and gives them hope. Capoeira succeeds in seducing people, irrespective of social class, race and religion, independently of the way people define themselves. It has a power, which is hard to explain. We take advantage of capoeira's attractiveness to educate kids and to provide them with discipline. We show them that something exists beyond the criminality that surrounds them on a daily basis and we start demanding more of them. They learn different habits – a different way of seeing the world and of *being* – and meet people from other social classes who have other experiences. They start to realize that they can become anything they want to. So you can see how difficult this is to explain to the director of a school! Capoeira's power lies in its daily interactions, where things are *experienced*."

"Do people who run the schools want capoeira for their kids?" Eva inquired.

"Unfortunately," Mestre Nenel answered, "sometimes it seems as if those who run our country don't *want* the people to learn or to have a more enlightened mind. It's easier to manipulate and to control things that way. The poor start to destroy one another, not realizing that this plays into the hands of those above. In capoeira, we try to treat people differently and to show them that they're living a form of oppression which is a legacy of the past – of slavery and such."

“Capoeira is a form of resistance,” I suggested.

“Resistance, defiance – it’s a way of disturbing the order!” Mestre Nenel laughed. “Capoeira may never be fully recognized by society, but in a way, it’s *obliging* people to recognize it. Capoeira is much more than a dance, a martial art or a game. Bimba and other practitioners fought to develop this spirit of resistance within it. Of course, there are many people who are mainly interested in making money and it is often commercialized nowadays, but this spirit of resistance persists.”

“Mestre, don’t you think that there’s a danger in seeking the support of the state for capoeira?” I said, doubtfully, “Won’t the state then seize more control of popular culture and direct it towards something commercial, changing it into something less powerful?”

“I don’t think this will happen, but the danger does exist,” Mestre Nenel acquiesced, “I went to a reunion for mestres on the topic of ‘Capoeira in the Olympics’ and you should have seen the expression on the mestres’ faces! They thought the idea was *fantastic*. Recently the CREF – the Conselho Regional de Educação Física – and the CONFEF – the Conselho Nacional de Educação Física – came up with a ploy that a lot of capoeira mestres fell for. They amended the law so that anything that has to do with physical movement would have to be regulated by these two organisms. They wanted to administer courses, to introduce a system of IDs and monthly taxes for capoeira. These institutions are modern *Capitães do Mato* – the Forest Captains<sup>26</sup>. The majority of those who liked the idea were, of course, people with some type of higher education. They would get more power. They didn’t think for a moment that capoeira is for all of humanity. So, as you said, there’s an attempt at control and manipulation, but I believe capoeira to be greater than this. There are forces that seek to lead capoeira in a better direction and there will always be an element of resistance.”

“Mestre,” I said, thoughtfully, “Speaking of the essence of capoeira, what is the difference between Capoeira Regional and contemporary styles of capoeira? It seems to me that the difference lies in more than the movements.”

“It’s easy for me to talk about the *differences*,” Mestre Nenel answered, “but it would be better if we had mestres from the other schools present to speak about their own styles. As far as Capoeira Regional goes, it’s simple. It was created by one person, so it’s easy to see whether something is Regional or not. My father left things defined and complete, and when I say ‘complete’, I don’t mean ‘closed’. Bimba created what I believe to be the methodology of the future 50, 60, 70, 80 years ago. Despite the fact that he came from the old capoeira – the ‘primitive’ capoeira – he preserved everything that he valued and developed it. Some people claim that Mestre Bimba denatured capoeira, but I believe the opposite. He *systematized* it and chose the name ‘Regional’ precisely because capoeira was becoming folklorized – it was in a process of extinction, just like batuque, a Bahian art form that is now extinct. Bimba held on to many elements in capoeira and batuque through his work. This is the spirit of resistance that I spoke of and what may be missing in other capoeiras: the rituals, the music and so on. A good example of this is the batizado. I won’t cite any names, but there are places where I’ve seen people taking students down – students who know very little about capoeira. In my father’s Regional, batizados had the opposite intent. After a student had had three or four classes and knew some of the movements of the *sequência* – the first and last parts – my father would call on a formado to play with him to the sound of the berimbau for the first time. It was his way of making sure that the new student didn’t get hurt. The idea of making someone fall runs counter

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<sup>26</sup> Mestre Nenel is referring to men who were once hired to capture runaway slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

to Regional. The batizado was not a *graduation*. The berimbau was the new student's entrance into the capoeira roda. From that moment on, the formado also became the *padrinho* of the student. It was about safe access and about creating emotional bonds – a paternal feeling. A lot of capoeiras today use graduations, belts and so on to make money, but Regional is different. In Regional, everything we do is linked to a particular vision of things. In the specialization course, you learn how to fight and to defend yourself, but you also learn how you to behave in a bar, or how to walk in the street. This is a form of resistance, as well. Many of these things have been lost with the so-called 'evolution' of capoeira. The teachings passed on during the *formatura* were part of an educational process. You can see when the *Turma de Bimba* – Bimba's former students – gets together that they're like a group of brothers! It's such a pleasure to sit in the roda and to play capoeira with them. We hug each other, afterwards, and go out for drinks. That's also a part of the Regional tradition that's been lost. Nowadays, you see guys punching each other at rodas. That's not Capoeira Regional and I do think that *that* kind of capoeira is more easily manipulated by the public powers than a truly cultural capoeira – a capoeira that is art and life philosophy."

"Mestre, do you feel that this philosophy has to do with black people and with slavery?" Eva suggested.

"It does, *directly*, and in every way," he nodded. "It's in the way one walks, dresses, sings, thinks, or makes instruments. This instrument here – the berimbau – for example, is made the way it used to be made in Africa. That's another form of resistance. My father used to tell me not to use green wood, even if you can make a lot of money with it. There are people who make a living selling lower quality berimbaus and that's okay. We need those guys, just like we need other capoeiras, but Regional is something different. Someone has to keep the spirit of resistance alive. If we were to come back in three hundred years, we would hope to see a *guarda-baixa* or a *cocorinha* – defensive movements that aren't valued anymore. Otherwise, one falls further and further into the system, and there comes a time when there's nothing left – just *materialism* without philosophy. *These values are a form of resistance!*"

Mestre," I said tentatively, "Many capoeira styles incorporate acrobatics, but it seems to me that they're different from Regional in other ways, too. Are the values perhaps different?"

"They *are* different," Mestre Nenel confirmed. "Let's take the example of belts – I tried to use belts in my capoeira, but they didn't work. Why? Because whether you want it or not, the first thing you see when you meet someone with a belt is their belt! 'I'm *this* belt. You're *that* belt.' This creates a lack of harmony and issues of power. This does not go with Capoeira Regional, so the first thing I did was to get rid of the belts. I think people should also pay more attention to capoeira's *form*. In some places, there's a lot of emphasis on gymnastics, which demonstrate a lack of understanding of the historical dimensions of Capoeira Regional. Instead of using a capoeira technique, they prefer to use *tricks*. This probably started with capoeira shows. People thought, '*Gringos* like it when we do this.' My father, however, succeeded in pleasing spectators with his *balões*, and they were *not* created for tourists. The throws were created for self-defense purposes, but also had an aesthetic aspect. They were lost over time as things 'evolved' into gymnastics. When someone tells me, 'I do *this* type of capoeira', I say, 'Good!', but when they say, 'This is the 'evolution' of Capoeira Regional,' I find it strange. How can you *evolve* something that no longer exists for them? Where did this new movement come from? For me, an evolution in Regional would mean creating new *quadras* and *corridos*<sup>27</sup>, new rhythms on the berimbau, new entrances and exits for the movements that my father created.

<sup>27</sup> *Quadras* are the opening songs in a traditional Regional roda, while *corridos* are the regular songs that follow.

You can build on top of what was left behind without denaturing Regional, but most people don't succeed in doing this, so forgive me, because although I find many things people do beautiful, *it isn't pertinent to Regional.*"

"Mestre," Eva piped up, "Have hierarchies always existed in capoeira?"

"Look," he answered, "if a hierarchy existed, it was so subtle as to have little practical effect. In Regional, when a person starts, he's considered a *novato* – a novice. Afterwards, he becomes a *formado* – a graduate student – and after that a *formado especializado* – a specialized graduate student. If he continues, over time he'll be considered a *mestre*. When people graduate, they receive a medal and a scarf, but they only display it on the day of the ceremony. Hierarchy is a question of respect. Nowadays, people try to use belts as a way of forcing others to respect them, but respect has to do with *life*. Even amongst my teachers, some of them command more respect than others. *It's not the symbol* that will win you respect. It's you, so in Regional hierarchies and graduations have no meaning."

Eva asked suddenly, "Mestre, do you think that slavery has ended?"

"I don't think so," he replied, without hesitation. "Slavery remains very much alive in our school system, in speech, in politics and in the police. It persists in so many ways. The form may be different, but you see that people in Brazil are expected to survive on a monthly salary of 300 reais<sup>28</sup>. Slavery may be different now, but when people have no rights, it's pretty bad."

"What about richer countries?" Eva persisted. "Do you see slavery there?"

"Not like here," Mestre Nenel shook his head, "but some nations are rich financially, while they've forgotten the arts, the moon and the stars. Life has become materialistic. I do think that people in richer nations have become slaves to this. They created the system themselves, but they're slaves, too. They're prisoners of their work or their houses, to the point that they feel *empty* and fall into depressions. I know a lot of people in other countries and we talk a lot about this subject. Capoeira helps these people a lot."

"Mestre," I said, hesitantly, "How does Regional deal with the question of religion? I know that Mestre Bimba was a Candomblé practitioner and that a lot of old capoeira guys were also practitioners. Capoeira was never a *religion*, but people's beliefs sometimes bled into their capoeira. Did Mestre Bimba deliberately leave these aspects out of Regional?"

"Listen," Mestre Nenel said, earnestly, "A link between capoeira and Candomblé exists because of the *places* where capoeira developed. There were a lot of Candomblé terreiros and the majority of old capoeiristas belonged to one – some were even *ogãs* like my father – but it doesn't mean that it had anything to do directly with capoeira. My father made a point of showing us that capoeira is capoeira, samba is samba, maculêlê is maculêlê, and Candomblé is Candomblé. You can do your obligations for yourself, but not as a capoeirista in a capoeira school doing your 'work' with your students. My father always made a point of showing us that capoeira was for everybody, independent of colour, religion and so on."

"Do you go to the *terreiro*, Mestre?" Eva inquired. "So you believe in Candomblé and such things?"

Mestre Nenel smiled. "I like all religions! I don't go to Candomblé because of a lack of time and sometimes because of the strict ways of the *terreiro*. There are few of them downtown, but once in a while, when someone invites me and I have the time, I do go. I grew up in a Candomblé terreiro. My godmother was a *vieradora* of the Orixás. I never made a pact, but I always sang and played the instruments. I played in all four Nations, so I understand Candomblé, more or less. Every year, I organize a mass for my father in a Catholic church, so I don't know

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<sup>28</sup> About 150 American dollars

what to call myself. I am *everything*. For me religions are there to fill a void human beings feel and I fill this void with capoeira. When someone tells me, ‘You *have to* fulfill certain obligations to save yourself’, I tell them that my path is the *Capoeirê*. It’s the people who come to me with a need and whom I help. I think that *this* is my mission with God and my path to God. I don’t feel a need to pray in a church or to go to the Candomblé to cleanse myself. I may not have a lot, materially, but I’m happy with God and with what I do have. I used to do a lot of bad things when I was younger, but now I only have good energy. I like religions and think they’re an important path to peace and happiness for human beings, lessening suffering, but I find this in capoeira, too.”

“I can’t speak for Brazil, but I see that many foreign capoeiristas, when they’re in the roda, feel a very strong energy,” I suggested. “For them, capoeira becomes something ‘spiritual’, for lack of a better word – something more than physical. Perhaps that’s why some people confuse capoeira with *religion*.”

“Everything has a spiritual side,” Mestre Nenel agreed, “otherwise, there would be no life. In capoeira, this is particularly *strong* because of the music. People respond to music – they open themselves up to it. Before they know it, they’re sweating, moving, and feeling a desire to play. It makes them euphoric! That’s normal, but it’s also independent of faith and religion. The music in capoeira touches the Candomblézeiro, the Atheist and the Evangelist equally. In a roda, everyone feels the energy.”

“In Canada, things are quite separate,” I mused. “You go to church, you go to school, you go to work and there is no link between these things, so people are hungry for that energy. In Bahia, spiritual life feels linked to daily life. Many people in Canada don’t have this. They feel a kind of emptiness and I think they’re attracted to capoeira because of it.”

“How nice...” Mestre Nenel smiled. “You’re interviewing me, but you’re teaching me a bunch of things!” I laughed, but Mestre Nenel insisted, “I’m serious! When we started working in England, we had lots of problems, because of the culture. Back then, we couldn’t even touch people in class! Over time, however, we saw a transformation – the students started accepting things and eventually, they began to comment on it, ‘It’s funny! Capoeira is uniting us. After class, we don’t simply go home. We go to a bar or a square to talk.’ I had only been thinking of the *conversational* aspects of capoeira – the playing, singing and clapping – how it made the British students more attached to each other and opened their minds. I hadn’t thought of the ‘trance’ or spiritual aspect of capoeira.”

“Speaking of transformation, could you speak more about the role of music in capoeira, Mestre?” I asked. “It’s obviously so crucial.”

“It’s hard to speak *directly* about music in capoeira,” Mestre Nenel answered, “In the past the slaves sang while they worked. Travelling salesmen would sell their wares in the street to music and there was even music for fishing. When people row, walk or ginga at the same time it’s easier. Music helps open the heart and mind, removes stress, and brings you closer to other people. The power of music is older than capoeira – it’s always been strong in black people and in Africa – and perhaps it arose to alleviate pain and suffering. Music has always been a way of feeding the spirit and strengthening resistance. It has this role in capoeira, samba de roda, puxada de rede and maculêlê.”

“The power of music and the way slaves sang when they worked are not only African,” Eva countered. “This exists in many people of the world.”

“That’s true. Music alleviates suffering at the core of it, doesn’t it?” Mestre Nenel nodded.

“Mestre,” I ventured, “One of the things I find fascinating, but paradoxical in capoeira is that it has the potential both for violence and for peace. It’s a martial art, but it also connects people. How do you balance these opposites?”

“I don’t know if I can explain this,” Mestre Nenel answered. “I don’t think our mind can understand it. In capoeira, the person who teaches has to be on the right path – a spiritual path of joy and balance, a path of peace – then it’s easier to pass things on. Otherwise, if the teacher has a lot of technique but little spiritual evolution, it’s going to be tougher. Capoeira will remain materialistic. Capoeira is a *luta* – a fighting art – but one that can be controlled. It doesn’t have to become a *fight*. You can learn to defend yourself or to avoid a fight, and that’s more or less what my father used to say: the best thing is *not* to fight, but to *run*. Violence is not from capoeira. In our school, we rarely have any kind of violence – I don’t accept it from my students. The first open roda I ran, back in ‘90-91, ended in a fight. It was a good experience, because it awakened me to Regional. I was doing extensive work with another mestre and we did a mixed roda. There was a large orchestra with berimbau, atabaques, agôgôs, and so on. There was no control in that roda – it was not *Regional* – and things got heavy! It was good for me to see that I couldn’t work this way. It might be fine for other capoeiras, but I couldn’t work with rituals that weren’t from Capoeira Regional. I began to follow my father’s guidelines and once I went back to the Regional rituals, there were no more fights. In our school, we do strikes and take-downs, but then we stand up and laugh it off, because *that’s* capoeira! That’s how it was done in the old days – it was an occasion for joy, celebration and play! Fighting belongs to a different world.”

“So changing the orchestra changed the energy in your rodas?” I repeated.

Mestre Nenel nodded, “It changed *everything*. In Capoeira Regional, you can’t buy a game. That was the first lesson I learned: when people ‘buy’ games in the roda, there’s no time to *feel* the berimbau or to develop a game, so there’s no energy. I experimented with many things, but until today, *none of the things that were not a part of my father’s legacy* have worked! It began to feel to me like destiny itself was forcing me to do things the way I do them today – my father’s way. Now everyone wants to know what I do, but it’s not my role to try to *change* people or to convince them to do Regional. I just want people to recognize what Regional is and is not.”

“Mestre,” Eva commented, “I see a lot of conformity in the way many contemporary students play.”

Mestre Nenel nodded. “Sometimes you see a *thousand* people playing exactly the same way – everyone has the same ginga. In Angola and Regional, however, everyone has their own way – they ginga and play differently. Some like to play low, some like to play high. People think that in Angola you *have* to play low to the ground and in Regional you have to jump to the sky. That’s totally untrue. I met many good Angoleiros who always played upright and there are times in Regional when we play to the slower *banguela* rhythm. It’s the music’s cadence – its rhythm – that draws you to the ground. An upright banguela would look ugly.”

“Mestre, can you explain to me what a banguela game is?” Eva asked.

“No, I can’t,” he laughed, “because there’s no such thing as ‘playing a banguela game’. You play to the *rhythm* of banguela. There may be a more *suave* way of playing capoeira or a lower way of playing capoeira. If you play to a slow rhythm like banguela, it’s impossible to play upright and super fast. There is no such thing, however, as playing an *Angola*, a *Regional*, or a *Banguela* game. When you leave the foot of the berimbau, you play in whatever way you can! The only exception is *iúna*, for which my father insisted formados do the throws.”

“So you feel that all capoeiras are equally valid, even if they’re different?” I reiterated.

“Exactly,” Mestre Nenel answered. “I just want people to know what Regional is – I’m tired of going to events where someone who knows *nothing* about Regional claims to be playing a more ‘evolved’ Regional. A lot of mestres have difficulty understanding that *Capoeira Regional is not simply the act of playing!* I’ve heard people say so often, ‘Let’s play Regional now.’ Well, I don’t know how to ‘play Regional’. I *am* a Regional. I play *capoeira*. My philosophy, my methodology, my tradition and my principles are *all* Regional. One day at an event, I asked the participants: Yesterday I was playing in the roda with Mestre Cobrinha Mansa, who is an Angoleiro. What were we playing? Nobody knew how to answer, because Regional is not a *way* of playing. It isn’t resumed by the game. *Regional is a way of life.*”



Mestre Nenel in Toronto – May 2009 (Photo: Mark J, Francisco)

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“You may have a herniated disk.” Annette told me the depressing news as she gently examined me on her massage table. It would explain why my right arm muscle had become so weak that it would not hold my weight up anymore. “Better not train for the next few weeks,” she added.

I had an *estrela* exam scheduled for the following Thursday, I told Annette in a panicked voice, and had waited a long time for this moment. “If I don’t do it now, I don’t know when I’ll be back in Salvador,” I finished tearfully.

“Well,” Annette murmured soothingly, “let’s see how you heal over the next few days, but no class and no roda for you this week.”

It was hard not to panic, but at least the treatment had given me my first real pain relief in weeks. Once Annette had taped my shoulder to support the weak muscles, I felt almost normal. I spent the rest of the afternoon on the floor of my apartment, as she had counselled me to do, listening to my breathing and pondering how things had gotten to this point.

## ***2. Mestre Diôgo of the Retiro***<sup>29</sup>

Mestre Augusto and Mestre Santa Rosa swung by to pick me up, and the three of us headed for the Retiro, a *bairro popular* – a working-class neighbourhood – where the elderly Mestre Diôgo lived. The streets were teeming with life and although my companions warned me that this was a dangerous place at night, I felt completely safe with my two friends at my side. Mestre Augusto explained that some of the best capoeiristas over the past forty years had come from the Retiro.

“Mestre Diôgo,” he said emphatically, “is perhaps *the* best capoeirista of his generation. You had to see him play... He was fast and agile. That man had mandinga!” He lowered his voice in a conspiratorial tone, “Mestre Diôgo is also one of those old timers who appears and disappears at will. He doesn’t let people find him if he doesn’t want to!”

Luckily, it seemed that the mestre wanted to be found today. We intercepted the handsome elderly man leaving a busy supermarket and I smothered a laugh as Mestre Augusto and Mestre Santa Rosa hid behind a tree, jumping out before a mildly surprised Mestre Diôgo. Despite his seventy-five years, the mestre was erect and trim, with piercing, yet gentle blue eyes.

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<sup>29</sup> As I did not do a formal interview with Mestre Diôgo, this is a reconstitution of our meeting. Sadly, Mestre Diôgo passed away in July of 2011.

After the introductions had been made, we sat on a bench, drinking pop from plastic cups.

Mestre Augusto gently prodded me, explaining to Mestre Diôgo that I was doing research on capoeira, so I summoned the courage to ask about his experiences. The elderly man seemed more than happy to answer my questions, yet his soft voice was carried away by the wind. I would have been content simply to sit in the company of these mestres who, collectively, had a long capoeira history between them, but I managed to gather that Mestre Diôgo had played capoeira at a time when it was a “man’s game”, a rough game marked by respect, where hidden weapons were manipulated in the hands of *mandingueiros* – cunning men who used magic.

“In Mestre Diôgo’s time,” Mestre Augusto added, “the capoeira was tough, but playful, and there was a sense of camaraderie. Mestre Diôgo doesn’t go to rodas anymore, because he finds the modern capoeira scene too commercial – too superficial – and he’s become disenchanted by it. A lot of young people don’t even know who he is.”

I asked whether spirituality had been a part of the old capoeira. Mestre Augusto had to repeat the answer for me. “Mestre Diôgo said that the incorporation of religious rituals in the roda is a modern thing. Spirituality was a *private* act. People would protect their bodies and spirits – *fechar o corpo* – that sort of thing, but rituals were private. He used to drink cachaça before the roda to relax and to loosen up. Then *o pau caia* – all hell would break loose!”

We laughed heartily at the image. As I listened to the old mestre, I wondered about the other ways in which capoeira had changed over the years. When these elderly men died, who would be left to remind us of where we had come from in capoeira – of what had been lost?

As we were leaving, Mestre Augusto whispered in surprise. “These old guys don’t usually talk this much. Sometimes they’re completely *calado* – totally silent – and you can’t get a word out of them!”

I was grateful for our afternoon and for Mestre Diôgo's hospitality. There were things one simply could not get from a book – feelings, impressions, a physical understanding of a place and a people – and I knew that if I had not visited the Retiro, I would have missed an important piece of capoeira's history. What else was I missing – what information that might help to shape my understanding of capoeira in an entirely different direction? True, the capoeira of the Filhos de Bimba resembled me much more than the capoeira of these “toughies”, but Mestre Diôgo and the long gone men he spoke of were also my *roots*. There were aspects of the old capoeira in Bimba's way – I could see hints at times, tantalizing, yet elusive. There were so many unanswered questions in my head, so many pieces of the puzzle to fit in. I felt like a child in capoeira.

### ***3. Mestre Cafuné and Mestre Piloto***

Thursday afternoon, I headed for the Fundação. The *Turma de Bimba roda* – a roda frequented by former students of Mestre Bimba with Mestre Nene in attendance – was going to take place that evening, following their training, and I had scheduled an interview with Mestre Cafuné. The two of us had just found a quiet spot on the back steps when Mestre Piloto, another elderly mestre, joined us.

“I'm Bahian,” Mestre Cafuné began. “I was born in Salvador on July 29, 1938 – I'm going to be seventy – and my full name is *Sérgio Facchinette Doria*, although I'm known as Mestre Cafuné in capoeira circles. My mother and father were Italian, but I was born here and I've lived in the heart of popular Bahian culture my whole life. I first saw capoeira as a little boy. My mother always brought me to the *Festas de Largo* – the popular festivals – where I would listen intently for the sound of the berimbau. I would always watch the rodas. They were Angoleiros, so they played in the streets. It was my favourite part of those celebrations. Maybe it was the music – I don't know – but all my life, I've wanted to be close to all forms of capoeira. Other kids played soccer and did other martial arts, but those things never interested me. Maybe it was because I was always shy and easily intimidated. One day – I was already twenty-eight by then – I read an interview about Mestre Bimba in a newspaper in which he spoke of his work with kids. He was describing how he treated them and how he gave them a focus in life. That article really grabbed me and made me curious to see this *thing* up close, so a few days later I went to visit Mestre Bimba's Academy.”

“Was it here in the Pelourinho?” I asked.

Mestre Cafuné nodded. “In the Rua das Laranjeiras where Bamba is today. I walked up the steps, feeling a bit nervous and scared...”

“Was it a dangerous area back then?” I inquired.

“Not that street,” Mestre Cafuné shook his head. “Just past the building though, it was pretty dangerous. I knocked on the door, a student answered and I said, ‘I’d like to speak to Mestre Bimba’. He brought me to the mestre, who was preparing the berimbau, and introduced me. I asked him, ‘Mestre, may I watch your class?’ He looked away and told the student who had let me in, ‘Show him out and shut the door.’”

“Really?” I laughed.

“That was my first lesson with Mestre Bimba,” Mestre Cafuné confirmed. “The student walked me out and shut the door. I stood outside, feeling confused, right? I was trying to figure out what had happened when I looked at the door, when I saw a sign I hadn’t noticed before. It read: ‘Spectators 2000, Monthly Fee 2000’ – the currency was *cruzeiros* back then. I thought, ‘Man, I’m not gonna pay two thousand cruzeiros just to watch, when it costs the same to train for a month! I’m going to sign up for a month of classes.’”

We laughed again and Mestre Cafuné resumed, “Wasn’t that interesting? That’s how my lessons began and how Mestre Bimba attracted students. When he kicked me out, he was trying to teach me that you have to *look* first. Observe things – don’t just jump in right away. He also told the student who had let me in to escort me out. It was his way of telling the student, ‘When someone new arrives, find out who it is first.’ My first contact with Mestre Bimba made a deep impression on me.”

“Would you say that Mestre Bimba changed the course of your life?” I asked.

“Definitely,” he agreed. “At that time, I used to work for the Petrobrás administration and years later, capoeira played an important role in encouraging me to find another way to make a living. The teachings of capoeira showed me a new way of looking at the world – of relating to it. I had always walked with my head down, but I became prouder and braver. I started to assert myself and to interact more openly and easily with people, while at the same time, more *carefully*, because capoeira also teaches you awareness. Capoeira gave me the courage and determination to leave Petrobrás after six years – to abandon the safety of my work and to start a new life. It was a very important moment for me. I started to work with wood and have worked with it all my life ever since. When Mestre Bimba left for Goiás, we found ourselves without a father – without our mestre – and the majority of us stopped capoeira. Many times afterwards, I’d pass a capoeira roda in the street and my eyes would tear up. It could be an ugly capoeira, but I would still feel that *yearning* to participate. When Mestre Bimba moved away, I drifted away from capoeira and spent almost twenty years away. It wasn’t until the nephew of my adopted child’s father came home one day and said he was training capoeira that I went back. I live in Lauro de Freitas, a suburb of Salvador, and I started to go – to play capoeira. Around that time, there was another coincidence. I read in the paper that Mestre Nene was bringing back the mortal remains of Mestre Bimba to Salvador – that they would be transported to the convent above the Church of Carmo early one Saturday morning – and I thought to myself, ‘This is an opportunity to meet up again with my old capoeira friends.’ Life had caused us to drift apart. We weren’t training anymore and rarely ran into each other in the street. On that day in ‘94, I met up again with Mestre Nene. I’d last seen him as a little boy of seven and now he was a man! He had returned to capoeira and had opened a school. From then on, I went back to capoeira and never looked back. It’s been fourteen years.”

“In the movie *Mestre Bimba: an Enlightened Capoeira*, you speak about how you were very shy,” I prodded, “and how receiving your capoeira nickname was a decisive moment.”

Mestre Cafuné smiled. “Exactly! In Brazil, the word *cafuné* describes an affectionate gesture, like petting a child on the head. That was another strong moment for me, engineered by Mestre Bimba. I wanted to be baptised so that I could receive a nickname – usually given by our colleagues – but on the day of the batizado, Mestre Bimba announced, ‘This one already has a name. I’ve chosen it.’ So I played and when the time came, he announced, ‘His name is Cafuné. He doesn’t play capoeira, he gives caresses.’ I was furious! A *cafuné* is a feminine thing, you know? I’d wanted to be called ‘puma’ or ‘lion’. I was so angry – I thought about it afterwards and decided, ‘He wants to play a game, huh? Well, he’ll see. Things are going to heat up! I’m gonna beat the *hell* out of everybody.’ From that moment on, I woke up. ‘What am I doing?’ I realized, ‘Capoeira is a *fighting* art.’ I hadn’t really been giving myself, and once again, Mestre Bimba showed me what I was doing. Long after his death, I still feel connected to him and I try to continue doing what he guided us to do.”

“You said that capoeira gave you a focus in life,” I reminded him.

“It definitely did!” Mestre Cafuné enthused. “In a game, especially during the *roda*, you need to have peripheral vision – three hundred and sixty degrees – to pay attention not only to the movements, but also to the colleague who is there with you. It makes you more attentive and quick-witted in life. You can be in the middle of the street, but still be aware of everything around you. Capoeira taught me this.”

“What about the communal aspects of capoeira?” I ventured.

“The friendships that we developed in capoeira, especially in Mestre Bimba’s academy, were very strong,” Mestre Cafuné said, softly. “A deep bond still exists amongst Mestre Bimba’s old students. We still receive visitors warmly at our Saturday *rodas* so that they feel the positive energy of the space. All of this is cultivated intentionally and it’s quite powerful.”

“How did Mestre Bimba succeed in balancing the combative and the communal aspects of capoeira?” I wanted to know.

“It wasn’t difficult,” Mestre Cafuné insisted. “With a few words, mostly a look, Mestre Bimba made us understand what he wanted. If he had to, Bimba would tell someone to shape up or leave. He was never one for much talk! If he was teaching, for example, and people were talking, he’d just give that look. While he was *hard* in his manner, at the same time he was also very *affectionate*. When we asked him questions, he was gentle, and he had a *way* of receiving people. He opened up when he spoke or taught his classes. It’s hard to explain – it’s not something concrete that I can describe. There was a kind of fluidity in his way – a friendship and camaraderie. We had a tradition called *esquenta banho*<sup>30</sup>, a moment when we could play hard, but it was always done with great respect. No one ever dreamt of doing something that would endanger another person, because even though Mestre Bimba didn’t participate, he was always there, watching. Of course, there were accidents – it happens – but immediately afterwards, things went back to normal.”

“Were there fewer egos in this capoeira?” I wondered.

“Yes,” Mestre Piloto chimed in. “There wasn’t crime or fighting like you see now.”

“You know, Lang,” Mestre Cafuné added, “Mestre Bimba didn’t give people a lot of leeway. We knew who we were. I didn’t think I was better than Piloto or try to put him down. I

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<sup>30</sup> *Esquenta Banho* means literally to “warm up the bath”. There was only one shower in Mestre Bimba’s school, and as the water was cold, Mestre Bimba began the tradition of hard games, in order to keep the body warm while waiting one’s turn.

knew my limits, so I didn't get upset or feel diminished. I'd improve with my friend's help."

"That's right," Mestre Piloto agreed. "As Mestre Bimba used to say, 'you can get beaten up in the roda, but not in the street'! We played in the academy. The street was different – it was our adversary."

"It seems there was a range of social classes amongst the people who trained together, so how did you all deal with that?" I asked the two mestres.

"There were no distinctions made between people," Mestre Piloto volunteered.

"Everyone was Bimba's student there," Mestre Cafuné added. "Even now, we have colleagues who are governors and doctors, but when they come to the Fundação, it's like before."

"Mestre Piloto," I inquired, "in the movie, you say that some people didn't have money to pay Mestre Bimba for classes and that this happened to you at one point."

"Yes, when I lost my job and went back to school I couldn't pay for classes," Mestre Piloto explained. "At the students' suggestion, I told him, 'Mestre, I lost my job. I won't be able to continue training.' He said, 'Keep training. If you can, pay, but if you can't, don't pay.' Later, I found a job. I continued capoeira until Mestre Bimba left Bahia. If he'd stayed, I wouldn't have stopped for anything. When there were folkloric shows, the guys would come looking for me to play berimbau and pandeiro, or to lead the maculêlê and play the atabaque. Mestre Bimba would send for me. When it ended it left a real hole in my life. When Mestre Bimba moved away, I got married. He'd left two of his students in charge – Vermelho and Ezequiel – but they started to mess with things and the quality of the classes fell. Mestre Bimba had a way in the academy. You had to be introduced by one of his students to be able to train. When a stranger appeared, he would call on one of his disciples to test the guy, to see if he was capable of training in our school. He'd always ask the guy what he did, but even if the guy didn't study or work, he'd often let him stay."

"What happened when Mestre Bimba left Bahia?" I continued.

"Then Vermelho left the academy in Ezequiel's hands," Mestre Piloto responded.

"What do you think of the changes in capoeira, Mestre," I asked, "the acrobatics?"

Mestre Piloto shook his head. "They have nothing to do with Regional! Acrobatics weren't a part of the original capoeira. The only handsprings were done with our hands on the ground. Bimba didn't like jumps, or that capoeira *ventiladora* – that fan-like capoeira – where you spin, spin, spin, and people play more than two metres away from each other! We always trained a *grounded* capoeira."

"Mestre, what's your full name?" I turned to Mestre Piloto.

"My name is *Raimundo Oton Figueiredo*", the small, mustached black man with the sweet demeanour answered. "My nickname, *Piloto* – Pilot – didn't come from capoeira. I was called Piloto as a kid, because I'm cross-eyed, but Mestre Bimba used to call me *Pneu* – Tire.

I was really strong back then and there was another student before me who was also strong and was called Pneu. Since I had a few friends who already trained capoeira – Acordeon and Cabelo Preto – and they always called me Piloto, the old name stuck."

Mestre Piloto also saw his first capoeira rodas in the Festas de largo. "They were Angola rodas. I wanted to learn, but people said that capoeira was for malandros. One day, when I was in Itapoã, I saw a totally different roda. I asked someone, 'Why do these guys play so differently?' And he said, 'That's Capoeira Regional, the capoeira of Mestre Bimba.' I thought, '*This* is different!' It interested me even more, but there was no one on my street who played Regional or who could introduce me to Bimba. Time passed and I met Acordeon through a mutual friend, Cabelo Preto. I started training in Acordeon's academy – it was in his home, back

then. He was a formado of Bimba. In those days, no one made money teaching capoeira. Academies opened and closed frequently. Acordeon had to close his space and he suggested I go to Bimba's, so I started to train there. In March of '64, I did my formatura. When I lost my job, I just did capoeira for two years! I learned everything about the folkloric forms. I taught capoeira for a while and opened an academy with another guy, but it didn't work out. Then, in '74, when Mestre Bimba left Bahia, I stopped capoeira completely. Acordeon reopened an academy in Barra with Xareu's help, and I'd go there once in a while, but it wasn't the same. Eventually, I stopped. Vermelho was a big deception. He'd taken over Mestre Bimba's space, but there was *cachaça* and fights... Mestre Bimba's students stopped going and Acordeon left for the States."

"Some of them started doing shows," Mestre Cafuné interjected. "Camisa Roxa, Acordeon, Mexa, Sassi... Itapoã<sup>31</sup> went to Rio Vermelho."

"So when did you return to capoeira?" I asked Mestre Piloto.

"When I got married, I drifted away. Mestre Bimba had left and capoeira in Salvador was becoming violent. Years later, in '97, I ran into Mestre Nenel in the Pelourinho. He was training in Amaralina and had a roda on Saturdays, but I never went. I didn't have the time, since I worked. Then one day, I met up again with Nenel in the Pelourinho and he told me that there was going to be a celebration. When I arrived and saw all the old guys, I started to cry!" Mestre Piloto laughed. "I saw all the work – the maculêlê, samba de roda, berimbau – that pure capoeira... Nenel had been doing his father's work and I got emotional."

"I think it's incredible how Mestre Nenel succeeded in continuing his father's work, even though he's a very different person from his dad," I observed, "You both seem to feel that he succeeded in capturing something of Bimba's capoeira."

"I think that *that's* Nenel's biggest challenge," Mestre Cafuné mused, "It really drives him, doesn't it? Thank God, he's succeeding."

"It's amazing how much influence Mestre Bimba had and continues to have, isn't it?" I reflected.

"I personally know *three hundred* students that Bimba taught," Mestre Cafuné stressed. "I have contacted almost four hundred and fifty former students and every single one said the same thing. 'Bimba changed our lives.' Every single one of them who comes to the Fundação, cries. I haven't met one who didn't. No matter how old they are, after a while, the tears come."

"There's a song about Mestre Bimba that goes like this," Mestre Piloto hummed, "*Ô saudade que Bimba fez, ô saudade que Bimba faz...*" Oh, how we've missed Bimba. Oh, how we miss him... Every time we sang that song, I'd have to leave! I couldn't stand it."

"I know the song," I said, softly. "It gives a whole new meaning to it... Mestres, why are these rodas of the Turma de Bimba so important?" I asked.

"Nenel started these rodas in '94 or '95, shortly after I came back to capoeira. It was his dream to reunite this group. Actually, a lot of us dreamt of this!" Mestre Cafuné laughed. "Nenel succeeded in bringing back more and more of Bimba's students. For us, it was also a way to reignite the friendships that had been dormant, an opportunity to get together and to talk about the old days over a beer – to joke, to laugh and to learn what was going on in each other's lives. That was important to us."

"I've noticed that there aren't many elderly people in the contemporary styles of capoeira," I remarked. "What have been your experiences in the way your capoeira has changed as you've aged?"

Mestre Piloto thought for a moment before responding, "I'm seventy-four and I started

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<sup>31</sup> *Itapoã* was also the name of one of Mestre Bimba's students.

capoeira at nineteen, so I don't have the same ability, you know? I left capoeira for a long time and lost many reflexes. I have scoliosis, too, but when I stop training, it gets worst! That's why I went back to training. Once in a while, my spine bothers me, but I still play."

"The way I play today is quite different from the way I did in my youth," Mestre Cafuné added, "for all the reasons that Piloto spoke of – reflex, speed and so on. We have physical limitations, right? But I see that I have more experience now than in my youth. Nowadays, not only do I save my energy, but I'm able to find better opportunities to attack. I do more take downs with fewer movements."

Mestre Piloto chuckled, "We can't try to dispute games the way we used to! We have to use other ways, you know?"

"I don't know if you'll agree with this," I mused, "but my own feeling is that many contemporary styles are overly focused on the perfection of movement. The essence of capoeira – that something that is hidden – is often forgotten."

"Exactly," Mestre Cafuné nodded vigorously. "I see this as the influence of Physical Education, in opposition to the traditional ways of capoeira. I know a lot of professors and people in Phys. Ed., and I try to suggest, 'See if you can't invert things. Try putting *capoeira* inside Phys. Ed. It will do a lot of good.' In Bimba's time, I don't remember ever having seen a student of his bust a knee."

"Never?" I said, surprised. "In spite of the esquentas games?"

"Never," Mestre Cafuné confirmed. "In the capoeira of today, a lot of emphasis is placed on physical exercise – an influence from countries like Sweden."

"The ludic side of capoeira is important, isn't it?" I mused.

Mestre Cafuné smiled, "Emotion, music, energy... To me, *that's* what's most important in capoeira. In our rodas, when the music is good, the capoeira flows. It becomes more ludic and beautiful. When the music is bad, it leads to harder and more intense games – to violence."

"So do you think that there's a 'spiritual' side to capoeira," I said, searching for words.

"I've had certain experiences..." Mestre Cafuné said, softly. "It doesn't happen all the time, but I've had moments in the roda when I'm not the person I am right now. I touch another level of consciousness and become a different person. I do things then that I didn't think myself capable of. It's something 'other'. I don't know how to explain it."

Mestre Piloto added, "There are days when I feel it and days when I try but nothing will come out. Sometimes it's better to play once and to get out."

"It reminds me of *axé*," I suggested. "Why does the word *axé* get used so much in capoeira?"

"*Axé* is a term from Candomblé that, if I'm not wrong, is linked to *energy* – a kind of positive energy," Mestre Cafuné explained.

"In the sense of 'peace'," Mestre Piloto added.

"I know capoeira is profane," I continued, "but at the same time, I can see that in Bahia spirituality isn't just Candomblé. It's something that touches the whole of life, isn't it?"

"Bahia is very *mystical*," Mestre Cafuné confirmed, "thanks to the strength of the Candomblé religion. A lot of people practise it and there's a lot of folklore surrounding it. There may be a greater religiosity here than in other places. With respect to capoeira, however, have you heard of a book by Ruth Landes?"

"City of Women!" I exclaimed, excitedly.

"City of Women," Mestre Cafuné nodded, "In this book, she has two passages that are very clear in which she says that the *mães de santos* did not like the capoeiristas, even though

these men often frequented the terreiros, because they were trouble-makers<sup>32</sup>, so there was no link between them. A lot of capoeiristas were in Candomblé, but that was a good reason to separate the two, back then.”

“What about things people did like ‘closing the body’ and so on?” I asked. “Wasn’t it a way of protecting themselves in the roda?”

“Oh, that,” Mestre Cafuné laughed, “that’s something you do in Bahia when you go for lunch! You close your body to everything, because Bahia is very mystical. Religion is present in everything.”

“I think that that confuses foreigners,” I commented. “People from abroad don’t know Candomblé or the ways of Bahia. They just *feel* that there’s something powerful in capoeira.”

“I’ve studied and read many things,” Mestre Cafuné said, quietly, “and I believe a lot in energy. I know, for example, that everything that goes on in the roda – the circle, the people and the music – creates an energy that is concentrated in the middle. *That’s* what makes capoeira so powerful. This energy goes up and down, propelled from the sky to the earth, and it’s something that I think even foreigners experience.”

When it was time for the roda, I thanked the mestres profusely and took a seat on the bench. As I listened to the notes falling like liquid magic from Mestre Nenel’s fingers, I thought about how privileged I was to have been welcomed into this warm community, to be a part of a long and rich history that had begun with Mestre Bimba and that lead into an unknown future.



**Me. Bimba and his students (including Me. Piloto, top left)**

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<sup>32</sup> Landes, 1994, p. 91, 92, 100.

#### ***4. Estrela***

I had bruised my foot on the cobblestones of the school the night before and as I hobbled to the bathroom, I mused that this latest injury might have something to do with my fear of the *estrela* exam. It had been years since I had been tested in a physical discipline and although the exam would be no more than twenty minutes, I had not been practising the combinations for long. Maria had laughed uproariously, the night before, when I had confessed to her my irrational fear that I might not know the basics such as *negativa*, after all. My nerves were starting to get to me, but injured or not, I was going for it.

Of course, I had been putting a tremendous amount of pressure on myself, and with Chapinha as my partner, things went flawlessly. When it was time for the *sequência* – something I had practised with my professora hundreds of times – my body took over with competence, an unexpected state of grace that earned me a perfect mark. For years, I had carried the fear that I was a *fake* in capoeira, but now, with the support of Mestre Nenel, I was about to embark on a new chapter in my capoeira story.

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A few days before my departure, Miguel came to visit me. The sadness that had been gnawing at me for weeks was gone as we lay, cradled in each other's arms. I had loved this man to the best of my ability and now it was time to let him go, trusting where life would lead me. I knew that it would take me many months, perhaps even years, to come to appreciate how much Miguel had coloured and shaped my experiences in Bahia and in capoeira. As a capoeira mestre with many connections, he had shared his world with me openly and generously, and in loving him I had come to understand – to love – capoeira and Bahia more profoundly. The suffering I had endured in the affair had often seemed cruel and pointless, but I knew the deeper truth – it

was all a part of healing wounds that had been there for a long time. Although our connection was about to change, Miguel would forever be a part of me, embedded in my every cell, and in the blood and flesh of memory.

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Mestre Augusto also dropped by, one last time, a diploma tucked under his arms which he gave me without pomp or ceremony. My name was neatly typed above the title *Contra-Mestre de Capoeira Angola*, and it was signed, *Mestre Augusto*. I sucked in my breath, speechless for a moment. At that moment, I saw the two distinct paths – the two roads I could have taken – shimmering before me. Although I knew that my choice to join the Filhos de Bimba was the right one, I was profoundly moved by the gesture.

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On our last night, Maria and I were invited to play at the Turma de Bimba's roda as the honorary guests. My friend's feverish eyes betrayed her anguish at our imminent departure. I was sad, as well, but when Mestre Nenel played the anthem, wishing us blessings on our journey, I felt joy flood me. In the three years since my feet had touched upon Bahian soil, I had found my capoeira family, my second home, and more importantly, I had begun to reclaim my life.

## *Epilogue to Book Three*

*No one was more surprised than me when I found myself on a stage in Salvador on August of 2010 receiving a blue scarf – the symbol of my official graduation as a teacher in the Filhos de Bimba Capoeira School.*



Lang, her mother and her partner, Lobo, at the Formatura, August 2010 (Photo: Meredith Kenny)

A year and a half was to elapse before this moment, however. In 2008, I spent the month of July at my mother's house in the Ottawa countryside transcribing my interviews. Over the next months, I also transcribed all three of my thick Brazil trip journals. During that fall, I thought I had finally found a permanent home for my capoeira school – the Filhos de Bimba Toronto – when I was invited to join *Bavia Arts*, a centre run by a lovely couple with ties to Brazilian culture. It seemed that things were looking up and I thought I knew how my thesis would end – the story was already written in my head – but life had other plans.

In May of 2009, with the help of several students, I succeeded in bringing Mestre Nenel to Toronto. He was there for nine rich days, and when he left, Mestre Nenel, in his quiet, inimitable way, told me that he wanted me to do my Formatura – the ceremony in which I would

formally be recognized as a teacher of the Filhos de Bimba. It took me months to accept that I had worked for over a decade and deserved this honour. A year after we had moved to Bavia, however, class attendance fell. I had to face the truth: I was keeping our group financially afloat at a great practical and emotional cost to myself. In year six of my studies at OISE, without a bursary, my finances crumbled. At thirty-eight, it was demoralizing to see that despite having served my community for years, I could not afford the roof over my head. The shock opened my eyes to an imbalance I had actively created over a decade of work in capoeira – teaching and community-building. We had the space until the New Year, but were going to be homeless after that.

I escaped to my mother's home that winter in order to focus on my thesis. While I typed away, I tried desperately to find a new space for our capoeira school. After having struggled on our own for five years, we had finally joined the Filhos de Bimba, so it seemed ironic that we might fold at the very moment when things were looking up. As the weeks passed, I swung between hope and despair, anger and sadness. There were frequent phone calls to my student Marionete. We were both stunned that more help was not forthcoming from our community, and our moods plummeted. As fate would have it, we were losing our space during the coldest months of winter, so when a friend offered the use of a warehouse, I agreed. Although this was a temporary solution, it was disheartening to leave Bavia's expansive rooms for the dirty, dusty cold of a warehouse. When I returned to Toronto in February, joining the few students who were still training, I did not know whether I would find the strength to go on. Ten years of capoeira work and service had led to *this*. I had always had doubts, but this time, it seemed I had truly reached the end of the road.

I decided to try one last time and found *Hub 14* – a small dance studio located on a quiet

side street in the heart of downtown Toronto, where we moved in April. The space was small, but had a roughness that reminded me comfortingly of our mother school in Salvador. With the upcoming Brazil Trip and the arrival of spring, classes began filling up. Eighteen students would be joining me on a two-week trip to Salvador in August for *Iê Capoeira* – the first ever Filhos de Bimba International Encontro in Salvador – and would see me receive my blue scarf. I had half-expected to go alone, but when I left for Brazil in June of 2010 to do my training for the Formatura, the Toronto school seemed to have been saved, at least temporarily.

Through all of these trials and tribulations, Marionete struggled by my side to keep the school going and helped me question the way I had always done things. Our conversations on those many frigid bike rides in the late winter nights of 2009 saved both of us from falling apart in so many ways and gave us the courage to take new steps in our professional and personal lives. I raised my fees and began restructuring the school, knowing that I would lose students who had been used to the old ways, but believing that if I acted with integrity, those that understood would come to stay. Despite my doctor's urgings, I was not about to stop capoeira. Instead, I began yoga more intensively, as I had dreamt of doing in Bahia – it might not *cure* the problem, but I was sleeping better, gaining energy, and feeling more limber than I had in years. Something in my life was shifting, after what had felt like a very long time. I still thought occasionally of Miguel – I had met no one for whom I felt remotely the way I had felt for him – but I had taken my distances. In my late thirties, for the first time in my life, I had to face the possibility that I might *never* meet someone with whom to build a life. All I could do was pray for the strength and courage to go forward.

In June of 2010, I returned to Salvador da Bahia. As I navigated the complex emotions that assailed me – reconnecting with my former lover and with this culture I both loved and

struggled with – I tried to focus on the Formatura. I did not know if it was *possible* to do all the requirements in two months. There was the regular pain of tendonitis in my right shoulder, my fragile neck that would frequently spasm, my dysfunctional hip, and then there was the little matter of having to do *two* estrela exams – my fourth and fifth stars (the latter made up of a dozen throws) – before I even got to the Formatura.

The mere thought of the Formatura ceremony, which would be performed on a stage before an audience of hundreds, sent me in a panic, so I tried to focus on the steps. I would have to demonstrate the following skills: 1) Bimba's Sêquencia, 2) a slow game to the banguela rhythm (the one thing I felt confident in, thanks to my Angola years), 3) the cintura desprezada (the series of throws done as a warm-up before all rodas) and 4) a fast game with a variety of throws – the balões – done to the rhythm of São Bento Grande. As far as the simple cintura went, I figured that I might be okay. The balões done to the fast rhythm, however, were another matter. Yes, it would take a small miracle to get that blue scarf.

When I arrived at the Fundação, I had neither a Formatura partner, nor a *padrinho* – the symbolic “godfather” who would tie the scarf around my neck, nor the formal attire required for a Formatura, but these details were the least of my problems. People were pouring into the Fundação every day, Bahian teachers who had come from Europe with their students, and excited visitors and *formandos* – those in training for the Formatura like me – most of them from Salvador and the state of São Paulo. Eighteen of us would be doing the ceremony and there were rehearsals. I had no idea what a “rehearsal” entailed, but the thought was terrifying, as I was finding regular classes hard enough. The school was abuzz with excitement and I was confused, trying to feel confident in my new role as a soon-to-be-graduate, but aware that I had not trained with a teacher in two years. I had two new *professoras*, Professora Preguiça and Mestre

Canguru. Mestre Nenel was so busy with the preparations for the Formatura that I barely spoke to him. It was all chaos and adrenaline at the Fundação.

Throughout it all, I was staying at Nalva's – a *casa familiar* – an immense house with dozens of rooms, a common kitchen and living area. The best part was the stupendous view from the roof – a view of the Bay of All Saints where I did my yoga every day, rain or shine – and the wonderful women who ran the home. Marionete was staying there, too, so we had plenty of time to chat about the days' events. My student had grown by leaps and bounds, both in capoeira and in Portuguese, but was, not surprisingly, often overwhelmed by the intensity of Bahia. A month into my stay, Marionete received several blows to the shin that got infected in the humid weather. As we trooped from clinic to clinic, trying to get answers, she struggled to keep her sagging spirits up.

I was struggling, as well, with the feeling that I did not belong at this Formatura. When I shared my fears with Mestre Cafuné, he reassured me that Mestre Nenel would not have invited me to participate if he had not felt that I was ready. "I have never known him to be wrong," he comforted me. "He *always* seems to know when the student is ready, just like his father did." I tried to cling to these words of assurance, but every time I stumbled in class, I felt the sting of humiliation. The pressure was making me ridiculously nervous, and one evening over drinks with Marionete, I broke down. Through my tears, I raged at Mestre Nenel for having brought me all this way, only to leave me to my fate, without any guidance. What was I supposed to do to prepare for the Formatura? With whom, when and how was I going to learn the rest of the throws? Most of the students in the Fundação were much larger men than me, which did not bode well for me with my tendonitis-ridden shoulders, and while every other formando had had *years* in which to practice the throws I had *two months*. It all seemed pointedly unfair.

Marionete shook her head, “No, Lang. I can’t believe that you’re going to be alone in this. You’re going to find the *perfect partner*, only you don’t know who it is, yet. Remember, this is Bahia and there’s magic here.” Mestre Nenel *knew* me and had Bahia not proven itself to me, time and time again? Moments later, Professor Garrincha walked in and joined us at our table. I had no way of knowing then that he would become my padrinho and be made a mestre at the Formatura, or that after sharing my despair with him, he would pair me up with my ideal partner: *Lobo*.

Lobo was light, agile and graceful. He was confident in his technique and, most important of all, he was kind and patient. Incredibly, with him, I found that I could *do* the throws – I rarely fell when Lobo threw me and I could throw him well, too. I passed the fifth and fourth stars with flying colours and when the time came to practice our *isquete* for the Formatura – our choreographed throws to the sound of São Bento Grande – things came together easily. Lobo had his own struggles and I helped him when I could. It was as if Bahia had known all along exactly what we both needed.

Professor Preguiça, who had been tough and watchful when I arrived, helped me prepare for the Formatura with maternal love. I stopped worrying about what others thought. Dona Ilza, the elderly mother at my house, sewed my capoeira pants for the ceremony and would not take a penny. Small miracles continued to happen, bringing the big day closer to fruition. A week before the Formatura, my students arrived from Toronto, full of energy and enthusiasm. Marionete and I moved with them to the Nuns’ bed and breakfast in Boa Viagem, so that we could all be together. The two of us were exhausted, but it did not seem to matter – my students were falling in love with Bahia, just like the others had on previous trips. Then my mother arrived, eager to explore the country her daughter had loved for so many years. It was one of the

most powerful moments of my life when I stood up on the podium next to her, wearing my blue scarf.

The ceremony could have been a disaster. Days before the Formatura, a back injury brought on by an overzealous visitor reduced me to tears, convinced that it was all over, but with mindfully done yoga and Annette's magic massages, Lobo and I completed the ceremony flawlessly. The night before, Annette had soothed my fears. "You know, Lang, in these momentous times of our lives, it's not the events themselves that are important. It's what they *represent*: the months and years of hard work, the fears we've overcome. Having the courage to stand up in front of your community, that is the *true* test."

My body came through for me and I became an official teacher of Filhos de Bimba Escola de Capoeira.

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As I write, Filhos de Bimba Toronto is still in a period of profound transformation. In many ways, the hardest part of the journey has been accomplished: finding our "home" – our own capoeira school. For the first time, we are attempting to build a firm foundation and we have the principles to guide us. No school is perfect and as I got to know the inner workings of the Filhos de Bimba, I ran into some of the tensions and contradictions that had not been apparent at first glance. In spite of this, however, I feel that we are part of a large and loving family spread throughout the world, and we have a mestre whom I believe in – Mestre Nenel – whose wisdom imbues our capoeira.

After a difficult winter, I had misgivings about teaching in Toronto. From experience, I knew that the students' enthusiasm would peter out as they encountered the practical challenges of daily life. While my suspicions proved correct, I began to see that the spirit of Regional was

alive and strong inside of me and a number of my students. Most importantly, I understood that I could hold lightly to it all – the spirit of capoeira might change over the years, taking different forms in my life, but I would never *lose* it. I was being challenged to let go of the control I had clung to for so long and to trust in something greater.

Having celebrated my forty-first birthday I can no longer deny that my life is entering a new phase. My body is changing and asking me to respect its rhythms. “Burning out” turned out to be a blessing in disguise – a sign that is showing me the way to a more satisfying life. Now, as I continue to search for more holistic ways of learning and teaching capoeira, there are promising leads. I am fitter now than I was throughout my thirties, thanks to a combination of yoga and mindfully done capoeira. There are exciting projects and trips on the horizon. After so many years, it is wonderful to see my relationships in the Bahian capoeira community deepening. How impatient and fearful I was when I first arrived in Salvador, wanting so much to belong and to do well! Even the pain of Miguel has softened as we settle into a gentler friendship. Time, as always, is the best of teachers.

My thesis has slowly taken shape and I have come to feel that it is part of a larger clamouring of voices, voices demanding respect for art forms and cultures grounded in a body/spirit tradition, voices suggesting alternatives to the colonial values and way of life. I can see that the healing I sought in my own life is, in fact, part of a *collective healing* that is needed all over the Earth and is reflected in struggles all around me. I had expected that the end of my thesis would be accompanied by clarity in my professional and romantic life, but many questions still loom on the horizon. It is humbling to acknowledge that the journey is long, yet I am proud of how far I have come on my path of transformation. One thing I know is that capoeira will always be a part of me, urging me on to greater wholeness.

## ***Conclusion: Teachings from Capoeira***

Playing several roles in Bahia – teacher, student and researcher – while being an outsider, albeit one fairly well integrated into the capoeira community, was key to my entire research process. My own personal transformation as I searched for a path in capoeira and in life was crucial, for without it, my knowledge of the art form would have remained superficial. I went to Bahia as a young woman of mixed Asian and European heritage who had suffered racism growing up in rural Ontario, Canada, and who still struggled with the aftermath of a difficult family history that had left deep scars. While this made the challenge all the more intense, it also provided an incredible opportunity for growth. Years later, I am still amazed and constantly surprised to discover new layers to my experiences – to see richness and beauty emerging even from the painful episodes. It has made me a little wiser and much humbler about what true learning and transformation entail. Deep change is often slow and must happen on every level simultaneously, demanding a vulnerability that few of us are willing to concede. Thankfully, we are not always aware at the outset of just how difficult the journey will be when we first set out!

My ambivalence as a researcher in the world of capoeira may seem extreme to some, but I believe that it was central to my ability to enter the more elusive aspects of capoeira and to serve as an intermediary. Both the capoeira world and the academic world have a lot to learn from each other, but the scales have long been tipped in favour of the latter. Being humbled in Salvador – amongst people who had suffered and continue to suffer so deeply from the effects of colonization – was a prerequisite, an essential attitude for one wishing to be accepted and taken in to the Bahian art form. When I set out to train Capoeira Regional, I never dreamed that I would one day come to be included as a representative of the art – a *formada* – and I often think that that is precisely why Mestre Nenel chose to place his trust in me. Mestre Augusto once told me that

we do not choose capoeira – *capoeira* chooses who will serve it. So perhaps it is fitting that those who most doubt themselves are its candidates of choice. The road is long and hard, often fraught with heartache, and only those who walk with a faith greater than themselves have a chance of surviving the journey.

### ***Women in Capoeira***

As many scholars have pointed out (O’Sullivan, Miles, Milani, 2003), the hierarchical system in which we live today is a legacy of patriarchy and imperialism, a system that has marginalized women, the oppressed classes, and Indigenous people alike, and that sells the Earth and its inhabitants for a profit. Anything that stands in the way of this objective is considered expendable. There is, undoubtedly, a great need to speak about the experiences of women in Capoeira, yet as O’Sullivan writes, this need is “part of the larger project of reconstituting and revitalizing all our relationships (2012:171).” Rather than delving into issues of gender, class and race, I chose to focus on the transformational aspects of learning capoeira, including my own personal journey, on “radical vision, action and new ways of being (2012:171).” I wanted to explore how we can use the arts to touch lives and stir others to action, exploring the ties between personal and planetary transformation.

Of course, as a woman living in the highly misogynistic society of Bahia and frequenting the male-dominated world of capoeira, I was keenly aware of my gender. (I also constantly questioned and agonized over my privileged position as an educated, middle-class Westerner.) Like all of my foreign female friends, and many of my Bahian female friends, I had difficulty with the treatment of women, so I was grateful for the tools that Critical Resistance Education had given me. It allowed me to take a step back from what I was living and understand it better. I was fortunate, in many ways, because my experiences in both capoeira schools, the Escola de

Capoeira Angola Irmãos Gêmeos and the Filhos de Bimba Escola de Capoeira, were both overwhelmingly positive. I felt that my mestres and professors took me *and* my training seriously. They gave me lots of positive feedback and, in fact, seemed to believe in me more than I believed in myself! Some of my friends were not as lucky, particularly if they were blond and blue-eyed. My darker skin and hair stood out less in Afro-Bahian circles, and most of the male attention I got was from Bahian friends who had gotten to know me personally. Of course, I was deeply caught up in the misogynistic system of Bahia, due to my relationship with a married man. Infidelity, although common to men *and* women, was particularly prevalent amongst Bahian men, and even encouraged as a sign of virility, at least in the world of capoeira. Bahian women appeared resigned to this fact, though they evidently suffered from it. I often wondered if my involvement with a well-known and respected capoeira mestre gave me some immunity from come-ons, but being “taken” did not necessarily deter other men.

I relate these facts because they were important parts of my day-to-day, and gender relations, although rarely discussed, were heavily intertwined with the lives of capoeira schools. Romantic interests definitely impacted these schools, at times creating severe problems amongst the members. Mestres were often guilty of dating or “sleeping around”, creating explosive situations. (These situations are sometimes mirrored in Canadian capoeira academies.) As I explain in my thesis, being implicated in a complicated romantic web was devastating and destabilizing. Infidelity might be part and parcel of the world of capoeira, but it was not something I was familiar with, and it fell far outside my moral compass. I was shocked by how differently I found myself acting in Bahia. In retrospect, this mirrored the delicate juggling act I was constantly engaged in, simultaneously joining in the life of the capoeira community, while attempting to retain some of my own individuality. It was an important process of discovery, this

realization that I needed to learn to embrace Bahian culture, and yet be *different* in important ways. In, other words, it meant learning to set the limits of my own boundaries.

While at times I felt quite angry with the treatment of women in capoeira, many times during my travels throughout Brazil, I was surprised to experience a deep respect on the part of the male mestres, a respect I had not experienced in Canada. Their admiration for my work – running a school and teaching capoeira – was sincere. I had come to Brazil expecting to be mocked and disdained, since I was frequently looked down on in Canada by the male mestres and instructors for not playing an acrobatic form of capoeira. Even in the “liberated” climate of Canada, the majority of my students were female and I occasionally experienced power conflicts with some of my male students.

I came to understand that in Bahia, where the roots of capoeira are strong and elderly mestres still hold sway, I was being *seen* with different eyes. The mestres I met came from a capoeira less concerned with aesthetics, one in which *spirit* was felt and acknowledged. They saw to a core that is always present, but which, in our Western disconnection between body and spirit, we are often unaware of. So while Bahia could be far more misogynistic than Canada, it also allowed for other types of possibilities. Many of the older practitioners, however, like Mestre Augusto and Mestre Santa Rosa, felt that this old vision of capoeira is fast disappearing.

Capoeira began as an activity by and for men. It is still dominated by men, although women are increasingly taking their place in the roda. In *City of Women*, Ruth Landes writes about a conversation she has with the respected Bahian ethnologist, Edison Carneiro. Carneiro tells her that the head women in Candomblé – the female-dominated Afro-Brazilian religion that Landes is studying – do *not* like the men of capoeira! In fact, they consider them to be trouble-makers. This comment intrigued me, because it seemed to suggest the existence of conflicting

threads within the African cultures that gave birth to Bahian culture – the presence of both matriarchal and patriarchal influences. Mestre Bimba, himself, had many wives (in the tradition of the African kings, it is said), yet he encouraged women to practice capoeira and believed they could become skilled practitioners. These tensions, therefore, had long existed within Bahian culture.

In my thesis, I suggest that the strong presence of black male heroes in legends, in contrast to the almost total absence of black female heroes, reflects the low social position of women in Bahian society, but also points to the strong social humiliation experienced by black male slaves and their descendants (who drew much of their sense of identity from their social position), their need to see themselves as heroes, warriors and resisters. I also discuss the ambiguous concept of *malícia* – malice and cunning – and suggest that it, too, is challenged by the presence of women in capoeira, and the differing values they bring. These are two possible points of exploration for further study that, I believe, would challenge many of the current ideas in capoeira and would be very interesting indeed!

Capoeira is deeply imbedded within the culture and society that gave birth to it. It cannot but reflect and embody the contradictions, ambiguities, strengths and weaknesses of that society, so while the status of women in Bahia and in the capoeira world is slowly evolving, there is a long way to go before the art form truly becomes inclusive. At the same time, these tensions are rich, suggesting that women can bring a different kind of dialogue and new directions for capoeira. While this does not take away the potential of capoeira as a transformational tool, it reminds us of the importance of addressing and being sensitive to gender and other power issues when working with capoeira. In this, a Western perspective can greatly enrich the art form by contributing to the discussion around equality and diversity.

## *The “Essence” of Capoeira*

When I returned to Canada, I began to digest my myriad capoeira experiences, trying to put them into a coherent form. At times, the teachings did not match my expectations or ideas of capoeira. Sometimes, mestres espoused opposite ideas (I will discuss some of these below) and at other times, a particular mestre would express what appeared to be contradictory views. Capoeira might very well be an educational tool that taught its practitioners to respond to conflict with maturity, but this did not preclude boasting of one’s more violent past, or insisting on capoeira’s essentially *malandro* nature. How was I to make sense of this complexity? Was there really a common *essence* to capoeira – teachings that could be applied across the board? Frede the historian seemed not to think so, and my own mestre – Mestre Nenel – had described capoeira as, “whatever you want or need it to be”. Capoeira was obviously multi-faceted, and certainly, there were strains of capoeira that did not attract me at all, or with which I was in strong disagreement. Was I grasping for an illusion?

Despite my uncertainty that a capoeira “essence” existed, I found certain themes returning again and again in my interviews and journals. True, I was focusing on capoeira styles that were considered “traditional” for the most part, since most of my close relationships were with practitioners of Angola or Bimba’s Regional in Bahia – the centre from which modern capoeira styles had radiated – but even when I spoke to the Street Capoeirista, Mestre Mica, or to young Mestre Adolfo in Aracajú, Sergipe, there were echoes of these same themes. I had chosen people in the capoeira community who reflected various dimensions of the art and with whom I had a deeper personal connection. It had felt natural to devote a greater section to the mestres and professors of the Filhos de Bimba School in the latter part of my thesis, since this mirrored my journey in capoeira. I did not doubt that, as many mestres alleged, a sizeable population of ill-

equipped teachers existed in the capoeira world, but they were not the focus of my dissertation.

My focus was the *roots* of capoeira, something I had described as a “tribal essence” in the beginning of my research, and there were recurrences in the speech of the mestres and teachers I spoke to, words such as *transformative, resistance, healing, energy, emotion, axé, identity, ritual, magic, malícia, community, relationship, education, citizenship, culture, freedom, dignity, poetry, cosmovision, opportunity, orality, values, inclusion, trust, generosity, ancestors and balance.*

If there was an essence in capoeira, it had to have something to do with these recurring concepts.

### ***The “Dark Side” of Capoeira***

Capoeira was a reflection of a society and its individuals, so less desirable traits found in human beings – racism, misogyny, violence and self-aggrandizement – were inevitably present within the art form, too, only recognized by practitioners to the degree that they had developed their consciousness. I came to see these traits, however, as windows to the positive aspects of capoeira. While difficult to deal with at times, they provided opportunities for dialogue and a deeper understanding of the challenges capoeiristas frequently encountered.

It was evident from the first, but rarely acknowledged publicly, that many people in the capoeira community were locked in power struggles. Political tensions, questions of hierarchy, and abuses were rampant in many schools and events. A great deal of “moralizing” went on, particularly in Capoeira Angola circles, as Frede the historian pointed out. I witnessed the intensity and rigidity with which many mestres defended their version of the “truth”, and came to feel that many debates, including those around the origins of capoeira, were questions of identity and power, closely linked to the issue of racism. I quickly realized that the general discourse in Brazilian society was still, by and large, a racist and discriminatory one, particularly towards

black and disenfranchised people. The radical political stances espoused by capoeiristas attempting to resist this discrimination, however, often created other types of tension and barriers.

It was also obvious to me that the indignities and humiliations of slavery, and the many other injustices inherited from colonization, were far from behind Brazilians, especially Bahians. They regularly reappeared in the dynamics of capoeira schools and in the larger capoeira community, creeping into concepts like *malícia* and *malandragem* – the falsity within capoeira that should have been a celebration of the ingenuity of human beings in conditions of poverty and injustice, but were used to justify all sorts of abuses. When I spoke to mestres about the topic of violence, confusion and contradiction abounded. Most mestres denounced the presence of violence in capoeira, affirming the importance of an “educational” and more lyrical art form, yet simultaneously boasting of their participation in a virile and violent past.

It was interesting, as well, to see how the presence of women challenged many of these contradictory practices in capoeira. Most men were eager to declare themselves supportive of women, but in their actions, they often reproduced the very structures and behaviours that oppressed women. Female capoeiristas related tales of widespread sexual discrimination and harassment. A few, like Nzinga student Roberta, spoke of the deep-seated misogyny embedded within Bahian society. I witnessed and experienced many such incidents myself, not only in capoeira, but in Bahia in general, as a result of living there.

These darker sides of capoeira, however, as exasperating, bewildering, frightening, and unhealthy as they were, created many interesting opportunities for dialogue, change and transformation and are worthy of further exploration and study. Living in Bahia made me aware of how the wounds and traumas of the past are passed down through the generations, something I saw mirrored in the stories of First Nations people and in my own father’s story.

## *Culture*

*The oral self... was the first formation of the human subject as a speaking being, as a creature of culture... this primordial form of the cultured human animal was not an abstract or intellectual self, but an embodied, viscerally felt identity informed by, and entangled with, the perceptual surroundings. Communal, deeply animistic, yet keenly awake to the elemental practicalities of water and food and shelter, our ancestral and somewhat collective sense of self remained inseparable from both the body and the terrain... It was... a tangible yet shifting identity that expressed itself in narrative and song, in spontaneous, rhythmic chants... and in whispered prayers offered on the breath to capricious powers in the enfolding field.*

(David Abram, 2010, p.274-275)

As I tried to tease out themes, I came to see that despite the universality of capoeira, its cultural roots were particularly central. This became apparent as I travelled throughout Brazil and compared what I saw being done elsewhere with my experiences in Bahia. (I was also able to include several mestres from small towns of the Recôncavo region outside Salvador, where cultural influences were particularly pronounced.) While certain characteristics were found in capoeira throughout Brazil, others were imbued with a definite local flavour.

I was drawn to the traditional Bahian form of capoeira, because Bahia was the *Mecca* – the source of all modern capoeira forms and the area with the greatest concentration of Afro-Brazilians in Brazil. Samba, especially, was closely linked to capoeira, as were maculêlê and puxada de rede. Mestre Bimba's trusted student, Mestre Decênio, writes "Cisnando always emphasized, with the Mestre's approval, **the importance of practicing samba in order to obtain lightness in the movement of one's feet**, which is an indispensable component of the ginga! This led us to insist on the *introduction of samba* in the preparation of our capoeiristas (2005:38)."

While cultural manifestations clearly lived on in folkloric expressions, I began to see that culture went deeper than I had imagined. The older mestres spoke to me of a *way of life* that was being eroded, relating tales of rodas and festivals in which they had participated as young men

and women, and decrying the modern, impoverished versions. Their sadness stemmed from profound changes that were taking place in Bahian society. Many of the values that had guided and shaped cultural practices were changing, and this was being reflected in folkloric forms. The emphasis on aesthetics in modern capoeira, for example, contrasted with the more *ludic* art form described by older mestres. A way of life was disappearing, but glimpses persisted in certain capoeiras.

The very concept of culture became quite *practical* while I was living in Bahia. Capoeira, I began to realize, was a natural extension of the Bahian people, flowing from their day-to-day interactions, imbuing people's speech, attitudes and beliefs. Culture was literally animating and shaping bodies. Bahians were such a physically expressive people that living amongst them was awakening me to my own unsuspected potential – not only that of my physical body, but also of my emotions, thoughts and spirit – making me aware of the many physical inhibitions that I had absorbed in the West. In addition, in the Bahian tradition, knowledge was not strictly intellectual. It was deeply holistic, and although people did not express things in such terms, I found myself thinking often of the Medicine Wheel – the circle – found in many First Nations' teachings, a symbol that embraces the mental (or intellectual), physical, emotional *and* spiritual dimensions of life.

Learning happened on many levels in capoeira. While the art form could be festive, it also ruthlessly held a mirror to my imbalances, providing an amazingly accurate metaphor about the state of my life. The illnesses, injuries, victories and joys that I describe in my narrative showed me clearly that my old patterns were not working. After years of having bent my body to my will – my mind's desires – I was becoming more atuned to another way. It was often my body that urged me to develop in new directions such as yoga, meditation and more mindful

movements, while simultaneously putting up barriers to the military-like training I had engaged in most of my life. The realization dawned on me that this was also *the way in which I had lived my life up until that point*. Life was pushing me to change and I was resisting. Every time I ignored these warning signals, however, I got sick or injured myself. Upon my return to Toronto, I continued the long process of attempting to integrate these new teachings into my daily life.

Capoeira also seemed to intuitively hone in on my greatest emotional weaknesses, forcing me to confront them. Falling in love with a married man – a capoeira mestre who provided me with many connections in the capoeira community – brought me face to face with my deepest fears and wounds, many of which stemmed from unresolved childhood traumas. Training capoeira in Salvador revealed to me the depth of my insecurities and feelings of inadequacy. Faced almost daily with judgements about my capoeira skills, I was shocked to see how often I confused *ability* with *self worth*. My childhood desire to belong to a community also reared its head, as I attempted to live in this land so different than mine, this place where I stood out both physically and culturally.

In those brief moments when I could let go and be present, however, I touched upon a spiritual dimension, and I began to understand that transformation is, in fact, about becoming *yourself* – about letting go of fears and restrictions imposed from the outside world – and simply *relaxing*. This was clear to me when I played capoeira, for a tense game, in contrast with a flowing one, was always rooted in *fear*. Of course, Bahians sometimes lived their own contradictions or treated their bodies harshly, but they seemed to excel at the art of letting go and living in the moment, both inside and outside the roda, experiencing a great deal of pleasure in the sensual dimensions of life. Not only did they trust their bodies, but they seemed to trust in something *larger* than themselves. I saw this in the dramatic way that Mestre Mica was healing

himself from two strokes, and in the joy of living my Bahian friends expressed in their day regular lives. I saw it in the magic and beauty of a capoeira roda.

I began to understand why capoeira would have been a *folgado* – a joyful expression for the slaves – and an affirmation of their dignity as human beings. I began to suspect that this humble art form, in its simple act of reclaiming the body, was a powerful act of *resistance*. What could be simpler, yet more radical, in this age of technology and broken communities, than two human beings facing each other in a circle of bodies? With its practice grounded on hands and feet, its hand-crafted instruments and joyful voices, capoeira was a rhythmic pulse, a return to the primordial heartbeat. Its rituals were reminders that we are of this Earth – of flesh – and that in denying our common ancestry with the creatures, plants and elements of this planet, we are killing off parts of ourselves that we did not yet understand.

### *Spirit*

*When we speak of the human animal's spontaneous interchange with the animate landscape, we acknowledge a felt relation to the mysterious that was active long before any formal or priestly religion. The instinctive rapport with an enigmatic cosmos at once both nourishing and dangerous lies at the ancient heart of all that we have come to call 'the sacred.' Temporarily forgotten, paved over yet never eradicated, this old reciprocity with the breathing earth was here long before all our formal religions...*

(David Abram, 2010, p.276-277)

To the mestres and professors I interviewed, capoeira was their philosophy and way of life. When they spoke of their art form, they chose words like “energy”, “emotion”, and “axé”, struggling to describe the powerful altered states they experienced in the roda. For Mestre Nenel, capoeira was something that “comes from the inside”, a characteristic of popular culture. Mestre Cafuné and Mestre Augusto both spoke of the “mystical” qualities of the circular roda, and some practitioners evoked the ancestors as a powerful connection to the past, a source of strength and community. Music, many agreed, was the string binding it all together, helping to create

harmony in the roda, elevate the soul, and allow for joyful expression. This spiritual dimension of capoeira was often contrasted with more youth-focused, modern and acrobatic capoeiras with their emphasis on “form” and “aesthetics”.

Mestre Decênio, ever attentive to the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of capoeira, writes:

Bimba, faithful to African customs, always insisted on the *audience's participation in the chorus*. He emphasized *accompanying the orchestra with the beat of clapping hands*. As a young man from a Catholic culture, unaccustomed to socio-tribal refinements, I did not notice the African subtlety! Today, the broader conception of the universe... reveals the old ones' depth of perception! **By the chorus of clapping, the Mestre made the audience into a gigantic amplifier of the capoeira roda's vibrations, thus generating an immense energy field that surrounded us.** *It was an atmosphere of unison, building in all the peoples' hearts a great community through the integration in one spirit.*

(Decênio, 2005: 95)

All practitioners seemed to agree that capoeira had the power to *transform*, but when it came to describing this power, the mestres differed greatly. They recognized that capoeira was *not* a religion, despite the fact that many practitioners of the early twentieth century Bahian capoeira had been Candomblé practitioners, but they disagreed as to the relevance of the religion. Mormons like Mestre Bezerra were keen to distance themselves from the past, while others, like Mestre Pelé, argued for an enduring link between the two. Mestre Nenel valued Candomblé, but saw it as distinct from capoeira, although he acknowledged the existence of a strong *personal* spiritual dimension. I was drawn to Mestre KK Bonates' description of capoeira as an art form embedded within an *Afro-Brazilian cosmology* – a polytheistic vision common to Indigenous people, in which spirit imbues everything. In order to truly understand capoeira and concepts like axé, Mestre KK felt that a person needed to have some knowledge about Candomblé, since

capoeira was a “carrier of ethnicity”, historically, sociologically and anthropologically. I felt that he had touched upon a crucial point: for someone enmeshed within the Bahian culture, there were many aspects of capoeira that required no explanation, but for a foreigner coming from a completely different world view, it helped immeasurably to learn something of the religious traditions of Bahia.

Mestre Decênio writes the following, confirming my own observation of the close ties between capoeira and Candomblé:

**During years on end, I researched the origins of capoeira, analyzing the data at my reach... I reached the following conclusions!** After studying the rhythms of Candomblé, I perceived that the basic rhythm of Logunedé on Luiz da Muriçoca’s disc corresponds to the pandeiro beats in capoeira: or in other words, **candomblé is the mystical source from which the magic of capoeira springs!** This coincides with the observation of Mané Rozendo... **of the ginga’s similarity to the movements of candomblé’s ritual dances... In candomblé, the rhythm of the atabaques and the nexus between the Orixás and the Vodunce<sup>33</sup>, and in capoeira the style of the game,** accompanies the musicality of the rhythm! Some mestres who are technically weak but musically well developed manage to form students of excellent quality by the subtle teaching from the berimbau rhythms! From this we conclude that, in accordance with the legend of capoeira, **the monotone toque of Exú is what creates the capoeirista** (2005: 21-22)!

I began, slowly, to build my own understanding of capoeira. I felt that the capoeira of early twentieth century Bahia had had strong links to its African past, and thus, although the culture in Bahia might be something *other* now – a hybrid of many influences – many of its ancient African teachings remained embedded within the art form. In Candomblé, the spiritual entities known as the Orixás are tied to the forces of nature: thunder, lightning, water, fire and

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<sup>33</sup> Sons of Saints

forest, to name a few. While capoeira was not a religion, it had come from a people soaked in these animist beliefs. The extensive knowledge of the original African ways might have been lost over the years – unsurprising after the devastation of slavery – yet I could see that hints of the old knowledge still persisted, kept alive in stories of magic and in festivals like the cleaning of the steps of the Church of Bonfim.

I saw that many Brazilians, having grown up immersed in an Afro-Brazilian cosmology, could not see how much they had been shaped by it, nor appreciate how different other frameworks can be. They could not “step outside of themselves”, so to speak, and of the reality they had always known. (The same, of course, is true of all cultures, including our own, but traditional societies like Bahia’s are particularly insular. This is where an outsider’s perspective can be enriching, insofar as it comes from a place of respect and knowledge.) It was quite possible, therefore, to imagine that capoeira practitioners could argue about whether Candomblé was “relevant” or not to capoeira, all the while living in an environment seeped in its values, behaviours and beliefs. My day-to-day experiences showed me that people’s perceptions and discourses were frequently at odds with the ways in which they engaged with the world. On top of this, I witnessed again and again the deeply entrenched prejudice towards Afro-Brazilian ways both in Brazilian society and in religions of Western origin. Was it surprising then that so many would deny the importance of Candomblé?

In Brazil, I soon realized that a strong division existed in people’s minds between the sacred and the profane. Even though Bahians (and other Brazilians) often unconsciously transgressed this distinction in their own lives, the subject of spirituality often caused a great deal of confusion. For many Brazilian practitioners, “spirituality” automatically referred to “organized religion”, whereas I was coming from the perspective that a person could be deeply

*spiritual* without necessarily adhering to a particular religion. (I, myself, identified with some of the earth-based teachings of Candomblé – particularly its reverence for nature and its perception of human beings as deeply embedded in the web of life – without claiming to be an adept.) Capoeira was multi-faceted and I felt that it allowed for the expression of mental, physical, emotional and *spiritual* aspects without needing to be a *religion*.

To an outsider, the frequent merging of the sacred and profane in Bahia was striking, so if this holistic approach was linked to an African cosmovision, why were Brazilians so resistant to seeing the sacred in capoeira, while Westerners had no problem accepting this? The answer lies in the fact that the way one *lives* life and the way one *conceives of* one's life are two very different things. The reality might very well be that spirituality infused every aspect of Bahian life, as many of the mestres I interviewed and authors like Ruth Landes (1994) suggested, but *in people's minds* religion and day-to-day activities were distinct. In contrast, many people in the West were increasingly questioning religious institutions and essentially coming to experience the spiritual through the arts and nature.

### ***Capoeira as an Act of Resistance***

*...diversity does not imply differentness, complete distinction. Diversity is really about being different facets of the same organic whole... humanity.*

(Wade Davis<sup>34</sup> in a CBC interview on "Ideas" with Paul Kennedy, May 29, 2000)

Capoeira was opening my horizons and enriching my life, and thus I found it particularly sad that many practitioners seemed to feel an acute sense of shame about their lack of a *formal* education, and to echo the general prejudice about capoeira and all things Afro-Bahian. While a few mestres did suggest that capoeira could enrich academia and other sectors of society, many mestres spoke proudly of the art form while simultaneously undermining it in their attempts to fit

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<sup>34</sup> Wade Davis is a world-renowned anthropologist and ethnobotanist who has lived and studied with various people of the Amazon. He has also studied the *voodoo* religion in Haiti.

capoeira into a more academic or scientific framework. Universities might be recognizing capoeira as a form of popular education deserving of respect – one with its own paradigm and forms of knowledge – but all too often they analyzed it through an essentially positivist model. Clearly, a hierarchy of knowledge still existed.

From practitioners' stories and my own experiences, I knew that a strong prejudice still existed towards capoeira throughout Brazil, but I was surprised to find this theme still being echoed by the teachers. These young men related tales of fighting for their parents' permission to train, or of going against parent's wishes and risking beatings and other forms of punishment. In all social classes, capoeira was still being associated with vagrancy and criminality. Once practitioners began to experience new work and social opportunities, however, families often became supportive.

The intensity and persistence of this prejudice towards Afro-Bahian forms of expression throughout Brazil continually shocked me. It showed up in a myriad ways – in people's attitudes towards Candomblé, in efforts to make capoeira more “acceptable” in higher society, and in attempts to “tame” capoeira within universities by reducing it to a mere intellectual debate. Ironically, I found that foreigners often demonstrated far less prejudice towards capoeira and other Afro-Bahian forms of knowledge than Brazilians did. I came to believe that this reality reflected a deep internalization of Colonial values on the part of Brazilians. Popular culture might be gaining acceptability and prominence, but the values of the conquerors – the Portuguese – still predominated in the upper classes and in spaces like the university. Definitely at the Federal University of Bahia and in the minds of many mestres, European ways were still seen as more “civilized”, and thus, more desirable.

To varying degrees, many of the mestres and teachers seemed aware of the issue of

cultural validity and power. The Black Power movement in the United States, mirrored in Brazil, was reflected in songs by popular groups like Olodum and Ilé Ayê. Black consciousness and pride was evident in Bahia – in people’s speech and dress, or in the pride with which young black men and women braided their hair and wore African-style clothing – and capoeira was part of that movement, part of an ongoing conversation between practitioners. Highly politicized mestres like Mestre Moraes and Mestre Curió, many of them Angoleiros, put forth strong discourses emphasizing the African origins of Capoeira Angola and criticizing the many social inequities suffered by Afro-Brazilians. Unfortunately, my experience in Bahia showed me that on a deeper level many black Bahians still nursed deep feelings of inferiority towards Western traditions and people. Although a deeper discussion of racism and its implications clearly lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, it definitely impacted capoeira in many ways, large and small.

Certain mestres and teachers did, however, demonstrate a deeper understanding of the underlying issues. Mestre Nenel, Mestre Augusto, Mestre Santa Rosa and Contra-Mestre Betão, amongst others, all spoke in their own ways of capoeira as an *act of resistance*. For them, community, health and dignity were all central teachings of capoeira, and they saw the art form as a powerful tool in the fight against racism, poverty and exploitation. They clearly understood that capoeira’s values and its emphasis on relationships and quality of life did not adapt well to the pressures of capitalism and to a globalization focused on market growth, profit at all costs and consumerism. Hence, they demonstrated a strong resistance to the commercialization of capoeira. Such mestres were more likely to sacrifice financial remuneration for the preservation of a traditional form of capoeira.

I came to see that my own mestre, Mestre Nenel, expressed essentially the same ideas that

I was developing in my thesis. While I used words like “globalization” and “environmental devastation”, and he spoke of “resistance” and “keeping the cultural roots alive”, we both sought to challenge a world in which individuals were pawns in the market, the natural world a mere resource for human consumption. In fact, I came to believe that this explained much of the fascination with capoeira around the world. Without necessarily being able to articulate *why*, people were responding to a primal urge for balance and harmony in their lives.

Several practitioners attested to the role of the mestre as guide and protector. Contra-Mestre Betão in Recife spoke with passion about the web of relationships in his capoeira school, Chapeú de Coro, detailing the powerful bond between teacher and student. In a society with enormous differences between the *haves* and *have nots*, he suggested that mestres often filled in the gaps of knowledge, acting as father figures, while educating and “politicizing” their students around issues like racism and poverty. Many of the older mestres were, in fact, highly critical of the trend in modern capoeira in which young men with little life experience were being given the title of “mestre”, despite being mostly fueled by a desire for prestige and financial gain.

Mestre Bimba was a pioneer in the development of capoeira as an educational tool. He was driven by the desire to help people develop into full citizens at a time when Afro-Bahians did not have a place in society. Such a need still exists in Brazil and throughout the world, and in fact, many modern capoeira schools now use capoeira to solve a host of social issues. Capoeira opens horizons, as many of my thesis participants attested. In Western industrialized countries where people live in relative material comfort, however, the urgency is of a different kind. As Mestre Nenel suggests a lack of *spirit* and *connection*, rather than a material need, has led to a wide range of psychological illnesses, and to environmental and social abuses. This ignorance about the fundamental interconnectedness of life has created a world that is ultimately

unsustainable. Sadly, more and more countries are rushing to join our industrialized way of life. Even in Brazil where “earth-based teachings” were once a part of the African way, much has been lost. Things can, however, be rekindled, as Mestre Farol from Porto Alegre reminded me. In the simple act of making a berimbau, one may learn the art of living, but this takes some consciousness and a concerted effort.

The allure of capitalism, once out of reach for many, was strong in Brazil when I was there. Many practitioners seemed unaware of the threat that globalization posed to their local cultures and ways of life, and they focused solely on the positive aspects of new possibilities. At the same time, many mestres were highly critical of the effects of globalization and viewed capitalism as a system defined by individuality and materialism. These individuals perceived capitalism to be contrary to the communal teachings of capoeira and mourned the loss of the old capoeira. Modern styles of capoeira were, for example, “mechanical” (Mestre Augusto’s term) and overly “aesthetic” (Contra-Mestre Betão’s term). So while it is true that mestres have benefitted immensely from globalization, many were keenly aware of the ramifications of their choices and expressed feelings of sadness and anxiety about the future of capoeira, both inside and outside of Brazil. For some, their worries centered on the appropriation of capoeira from poor, black Brazilians by wealthier, lighter-skinned practitioners (Mestre Adolfo), while others felt disdain for the “muscular”, “robotic” brand of practitioners taking over capoeira (Mestre Bezerra, Mestre Betão). Most elderly mestres felt that capoeira had been denatured by the addition of gymnastics, break dancing and martial arts techniques like jiu jitsu.

While it is undoubtedly true that capoeira would have disappeared, as many other old Bahian cultural forms did, had it not opened itself to the world, and that many positive interactions have resulted from the cross-cultural meetings that have taken place as a result of

globalization (my own story being one of them), I am not alone in feeling that there needs to be more discussion within the community about the pros and cons of adopting certain practices. The spirit of resistance that Mestre Nenel evoked needs to be nurtured if we are to preserve earth-based, local teachings. Without a concerted effort, the danger of materialist concerns overshadowing human ones becomes greater.

In an interview with the CBC – the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation – anthropologist and ethnobotanist Wade Davis spoke of how we, in the industrialized West, have tended to view Indigenous societies as “quaint and marginal to the overall thrust of history” (ie. to the technological and modern world), yet a central revelation of anthropology has been the realization that the world we live in does not exist in some absolute sense. Our society has chosen *one* model of reality and *one* set of choices. Having insulated ourselves from the natural world, we have lost any real connection to it and thus endangered ourselves. Thus, in terms of the quality of life, Davis suggests, we have a lot to learn from Indigenous people. Furthermore, he warns, the destruction of the natural world goes hand in hand with the destruction of cultural diversity, so as we lose the old cultures, we lose a facet of life that existed in potential (CBC interview, May 29, 2000).

### ***Embodied Teachings***

*...bringing marginalized knowledges into academia is part of a collective movement by subordinated peoples who occupy an 'outsider/in' position – a position in which marginalized people can challenge the dominant knowledge production.*

(Patricia Hill-Collins, 1991, p.52)

In his interview, Mestre Marinheiro describes capoeira as “a philosophy where you learn to speak with the body”. Although it is obvious for anyone who has seen capoeira that there is a great physicality – a sensual pleasure – in the practice, what has been less clear until fairly

recently is that capoeira is also a rich form of knowledge. In this, capoeira has much to offer the academic world. This brings me to the field of Embodied Learning, or EL. Although a deeper discussion about EL is beyond the scope of this thesis, there are important points of intersection.

Professor Roxana Ng (2009) critiques modes of teaching that “do not treat the learner as an embodied subject” and suggests that the field of Embodied Learning offers “a more holistic pedagogical endeavour that explicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of our mind, body, emotion and spirit in the construction and pursuit of knowledge (p.1)”. It does so through various means, including the incorporation of other epistemological and philosophical traditions.

According to Ng, Chinese Traditional Medicine theory treats the mind, spirit/soul, and body as inter-related. Change in one sphere inevitably affects the other spheres. Thus, Ng believes that by practicing Qi Gong in her classroom, as well as implementing other teaching techniques such as journal writing and discussion of articles assigned at each class, students engage in a more holistic and complete form of learning. Although Ng was describing the use of Traditional Chinese Medicine as a teaching tool and presenting it as an alternate paradigm, a similar case could be made for capoeira, which arose out of an Afro-Bahian cosmology and which, similarly, embraces a more holistic view of the human being.

Ng’s discussion around “decolonizing the self” was particularly of interest to me in that this process challenges “the way we live as individuals within a collectivity that reproduces and sustains systems of oppression (2009, p.19)”. It resonated with my own lived experience in Bahia, and the ways in which its culture challenged many of my *ways of being in and perceiving* the world. In Bahia, sensuality is prominent and celebrated in spite of the humiliations of slavery and its after-effects. I would go so far as to say that the celebration of the human body and all its pleasures (including capoeira) offers a challenge to the degradation experienced in slavery and

post-slavery conditions, as well as to the imposition of purist Catholic values on Afro-Bahians by their European colonizers. In fact, I came to believe that Cartesian values are deeply embodied, not only in colonized people, but in all people living in the West.

Janet Sheila Batacharya (2010) writes in her Ph.D. thesis, *Life in a Body: Counter Hegemonic Understandings of Violence, Oppression, Healing and Embodiment Among Young South Asian Women* that René Descartes, the seventeenth century thinker and father of modern Western philosophy, viewed the body as inferior to the mind, a vision that was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment scientific quest for absolute truth and rational knowledge (p.7).

Western philosophy and social studies do, however, have a tradition of challenging the Cartesian view of the world. Western philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote, in 1945, that the ability to perceive – “sentience” – can only be experienced through the body (Batacharya, 2010, p.7). Critical sociology further explored how bodies are “constructed, disciplined and managed through inequitable social relations of power (p.8)”. In spite of these advances, however, lived experience continues to be in Batacharya’s words “suspicious in academia (p.12)”, perceived as subjective and thus infinite in perception. In many ways, she felt that embodiment scholars were reproducing a dichotomous thinking, one that thought about the body differently, but still focused on cognition and discourse (p.15).

Like Ng, Batacharya sought to reclaim the body, both in practice and in theory, integrating her research in yoga. Transformative Learning advocates were doing similar work, yet Batacharya felt that despite advocating attention to the mind, body and spirit, they failed to address how “social location shapes the experience of embodiment (p.17)”. In fact, Batacharya faults the New Age movement (and the Transformative Learning scholars to a lesser degree) for expressing a form of liberal individualism. I disagree with this critique of Transformative

Learning, as I feel that scholars in this field are conscious and critical of social inequity and other forms of oppression – their focus is simply different.

Living in Bahia, I came to realize that I, too, had grown up in a culture that fundamentally rejected the body in many ways. My very schooling – the place where I came to learn – was in itself a place that taught me to disconnect from my body. By being enclosed behind four walls and being forced into a physically passive approach to learning, removed from the outside world, I was being shown over and over throughout the years that my body was, at best, unimportant in the learning process and, at worst, a nuisance requiring occasional tending. In the world where I grew up, natural spaces were disappearing and humans' ability to navigate the wilderness with it. I struggled unknowingly against a Cartesian view of the world, not having the words or concepts to express my deep, underlying discomfort. My body, however, knew before my mind did that there were spaces – places or moments, such as when I danced – in which I felt whole and complete. Thus, although the impact of society's oppression upon the body is tremendous and should not be minimized, I came to see that *the body has its own innate intelligence* – an intelligence that lies at times beyond the capacity of the mind to follow – and that, although affected by social factors, is able to rise above them. How else to explain the extraordinary vitality of a people reduced to a state of slavery, but nevertheless able to create vibrant songs, dances and rituals? Sometimes, it is this very capacity of the body for joy – or the body/spirit if you will, since the two are intertwined – that can help a human being reclaim the parts that have been oppressed and trampled upon.

The Transformative Learning field recognizes the latent power of the cultural-spiritual dimension and resonates with my own experiences in capoeira. Although I agree with Batacharya that globalization, “a form of Western cultural imperialism and exploitation (p.90)”,

continues to have powerful ramifications in peoples' lives, I also believe that resisting the impact of globalization has as much to do with *celebration* as it does with critique. The Afro-Bahian way of dealing with adversity is to celebrate – to dance, play and laugh at danger – and it has taught me to view myself and my life as much more resilient and creative than I previously believed. Thus, I agree with Batacharya when she says that the “colonizing other” cannot completely appropriate you from your own body, and I see this as a strategy of resistance (p.107). Furthermore, I believe that this was Mestre Nenel’s point when he spoke of capoeira as a form of resistance, or of samba de roda, maculêlê and puxada de rede – all cultural manifestations of Bahia – as forms of resistance.

Such ideas are more than interesting intellectual debates. They point to a way of seeing the world, paradigms which ultimately guide our societies and cultures – including our universities – and have important ramifications for the future of the planet. Integrating Indigenous knowledge in the university means questioning who gets to decide what constitutes true knowledge.

### ***Capoeira and Transformative Learning***

*Today there is a pressing need to show how the practices of qualitative research can help change the world in positive ways.*

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. xi)

So where does this leave us? Once we have shared the stories, how do we know that they will help us to create the more “positive” world that Denzin and Lincoln speak of? If, as a species, we now have an incredible amount of knowledge at our fingertips and yet continue to desecrate the earth, what hope is there for us? The answer, I believe, lies at the heart of the disconnection between our minds and bodies. It does not have to be this way. Despite its limitations and dangers, the written word has brought us many blessings, opening our eyes to

other realities and ways of looking at the world, as well as allowing communication over great distances. It is only when this knowledge remains purely *intellectual* – divorced from experience and emotion – that it loses its inherent power.

In an article entitled “Sustainable Minds”, published in August of 2010 in the on-line magazine *Alternatives: Environmental Ideas and Actions*, author Kate Davies writes: “A radical transformation of education would develop an ecologically literate society – one that understands the principles of ecological systems and uses them to design human systems.”

I instantly liked the idea of an *ecologically literate society*, for if, as a species, we are facing climate change, depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, and increasing pollution and toxic wastes, then there is something fundamentally wrong with the teachings we are passing on from generation to generation. Previous advances may have brought gains, but they have also led to an “ecological crisis of unprecedented proportions that threatens our very well-being and perhaps our survival” (Davies, 2010). This crisis stems from our Western culture’s addiction to economic growth and consumerism, she continues (something which, I might add, has been successfully copied by other nations like China). Thus, fundamental reforms are needed in the education system, because today’s schools, universities and colleges serve the needs of the industrial society by producing students who become cogs in the enormous, dysfunctional economic machine. Modern education, Davies continues, does this by fostering competition, consumerism and individualism, and by emphasizing theories over ethics, detachment over relationships, and immediate answers over thoughtful inquiry. Such a worldview asserts the superiority of our species over others and feels no remorse at using others for its own perceived gains.

Scholars at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the University of Toronto are developing the concept of Transformative Learning in interesting directions. (The field of Transformative Learning is a large one beyond the scope of this thesis, and I have chosen to focus on the approach developed at OISE.) Political, social justice and ecological issues are seen as fundamentally intertwined.

Anne Goodman (2003) writes in an article entitled “Transformative Learning and Cultures of Peace” that *violence* is a fundamental aspect of our modern industrial Western civilization (p.186), something that now encompasses the whole world. By violence, she is not only referring to direct harm, or even to structural, indirect harm, but also to cultural violence – our very *assumptions* about the world (2003, p.187). She sees, however, an “unofficial culture of peace” growing, one that is hard to define as it falls outside modern concepts of knowledge, but which is nonetheless powerful. This is the culture of artists and mystics – the culture of everyday living – and a celebration of humanness. It offers hope in dark times, just as capoeira once offered hope to slaves living through the horrors of slavery. Despite what we may think, this culture of peace is, Goodman believes, our *natural way of being and living*.

Eimear O’Neill and Edmund O’Sullivan (2003) write in “Ecology, War, Patriarchy, and the Institution of Violence” that the growing pride in distinct cultural identities is linked to the ecological crisis, a signal that the assumptions of the underlying culture are no longer sustainable (p.178). This helps, I believe, to explain in part the tremendous appeal of capoeira all around the world.

As cultural historian and ecologist Thomas Berry proposes in his book *The Great Work* (1999), there is a great need in the world for a new “Story”, one which places humanity within the great wheel – the great *roda* – of the Universe. Thus, a challenge to a market-driven

education would be “a more integral transformative vision” and “a broad cosmological framework (O’Sullivan, 2002, p.xvi)”. As Thomas Berry postulates, we are in a critical moment on Earth and a break-down of the whole system is eminent. Our present society with its techno-industrial values, based in a Western Eurocentric culture, is failing us – it is pathological – but this crisis is also challenging us to change, giving us an opportunity to use our creativity to bring into being something more harmonious (Talk given at OISE, 1993). To do so, we need to reassess our most basic values.

O’Sullivan suggests that three dimensions must be transformed through what he calls “resistance education” (2002, p.5). The first dimension is *thought*: the modern techno-scientific industrial worldview views nature as mechanical and has caused a disenchantment of the natural world. *Consciousness* is the second dimension, a reference to the fact that knowledge in itself is not enough to make us conscious, and in fact, an oversaturation of information has left us disconnected, with no sense of ourselves as a part of a greater whole. And last, but not least, there is the issue of *hierarchical power*. We are ensconced in a system whose roots are patriarchal and imperial, a legacy of our past.

In “The Signature of the Whole: Radical Interconnectedness and its Implications for Global and Environmental Education”, David Selby (2003) proposes that dualism is more deeply entrenched in Western society and Western thought than we realize (p.79). Male-female, mind-body, reason-emotion, and object-subject are examples of division, and are reflected in our education system – in the separation of the disciplines, “grade apartheid”, individual learning, teacher-student delineation, and of school and community. Transformative education, he goes on to say, would offer a web model in which *flows and patterns* are more important than fixed objects. In fact, dance, Selby suggests, offers a powerful metaphor that can teach us:

This need to experience the relational self and the dancing self speaks, for example, to *working with relational modes of knowing* [italics mine] that would help us recognize our inner connectivities (the embedded nature of body, mind, emotions, and spirit) and our deep connectivities with each other and with nature. It would also mean introducing new modalities, enabling students to explore their inner ecology, to cultivate their attunement to their senses and body rhythms, and thus to develop an embodied relationship to nature (2003, p.87).

His focus on relationship and flow is reminiscent of both Indigenous modes of knowing and capoeira. Lisa Lipsett (2003) writes in a similar vein in “On Speaking Terms Again: Transformation of the Human-Earth Relationship through Spontaneous Painting” that art forms can help us to create the kind of world we want:

The creative life force [...] speaks in images, in music, in dance, in dreams, in trance and in mystical experiences [...] Animating, unblocking, and releasing our wild creative capacities allows us to open to a sense of Earth connection, animate new visions, and remain fueled and energized for the difficult tasks ahead. Once experienced, this transformed sense of connection can be put in the service of the planet in the form of creative right feeling, thought, and action (p.218-219).

Thomas Berry (1999) proposes that a new “Story” would need to show us a new way of seeing and *being* in the world, reminding us that our primordial spirit is one of *joy*. This appeal to the creative spirit of human beings is echoed in many artistic traditions and can offer interesting leads. Capoeira has much to teach in this regard. As an Indigenous form of knowing that is embodied and holistic, it can be a powerful expression of resistance that is also deeply transformational. It is a form of resistance in that its teachings are communal, non-materialistic and sensuous, in direct opposition to an individualistic, capitalistic, techno-scientific dominant model that is being adopted in an increasing number of societies. It is deeply transformational in that it allows for the fullest expression of the self – physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual dimensions – integrated within a web of complex relations. Capoeira’s power lies in its

multidimensional modes of knowing and in its link to the deeper mysteries of life. Reason is not enough. Transformation must involve the *whole* human being.

The merging of two very different traditions is promising: the intuitive, embodied ways of knowing found amongst Indigenous people and people of the Diaspora, and the analytical skills of the West. Both are important aspects of the Medicine Wheel and crucial to the well-being of the Earth. Although I am critical of many aspects of Western culture, I recognize the immense potential and value of the analytical faculties, and I know that the marrying of the body's wisdom with the mind's vision is essential if we are to survive on this planet. It does not matter whether we choose to delve into capoeira or our local neighbourhood. What matters is that we engage the world with our entire being, giving of ourselves as generously as we can. Only then transformation is possible.

Although I set out to find out if there was an "essence" to the old capoeira of Bahia, one which perhaps lived on in at least two of the styles, Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional, over time my thesis became more about the transformative potential of capoeira. Capoeira helped me to see that modern life is making us increasingly disembodied, disconnected from nature and from ourselves in a technologically-dominated, human-made world. An art form like capoeira can be a radical form of resistance and affirmation – a celebration of the sacred. Despite their differences, the mestres all speak of the essential mystery and sacredness of life, and of the many dimensions involved in learning. Seeing the effects of capoeira in my own life and in the lives of my students, I now know that beneath its playful and festive airs, capoeira transforms lives.

## ***Closing the Circle: Bringing it all Together***

In choosing a very personal and creative approach, I knew that I was taking an enormous risk, not only because my work might be met with resistance by my committee and the rest of the academic community, but also because I would not be walking a well-beaten path. In addition, it was quite possible that I would flatly *fail* at capturing anything of the spirit of capoeira and its people, and that my work might be of mediocre quality. Despite my many fears, however, I knew I had to try. My inspiration for the Ph.D. came from a very personal and passionate place, and I wanted to give it my all. I had come to the university, lured by the possibility of sharing my love for this art form and its people, and wrestling with questions of planetary proportion. This was my chance to read, write, discuss, listen and create. I knew it was a very privileged position that few people get in their lifetime. The challenges were many, but I would have to learn patience!

The true test of my work, in the final analysis, would be the readers. Would they be moved and challenged by my writing, as I so fervently hoped? As my thesis goes out into the world, I dream that it will inspire others to walk their own path, and to dare to live and create from a place of wholeness. If this process has taught me anything, it is that we *all* have wisdom deep inside ourselves, a knowing that is far richer than we can imagine. Throughout our lives, we go from institution to institution, mostly learning to distrust our own voices and to conform to the needs and ways of the outside world. The field of Transformative Learning and the vast knowledge of Indigenous people brought me back to myself, reminding me that all the answers I seek are within. We do occasionally find answers in the outside world, of course, but these feel like a coming home.

All the textbooks and guidelines in the world could not have prepared me for the work I was about to do. In the end, it was my mother's advice that helped me the most: *trust yourself*. Coming from a place of heart in everything I did helped me make decisions throughout my research that honoured the three principles of Indigenous Methodology as outlined by Shawn Wilson (2008) in his book *Research as Ceremony*: respect, reciprocity and responsibility. These principles, Wilson writes, are the foundation of relationship and thus of Indigenous knowledge and research.

Whenever I was in doubt (which was often) I sought the advice of people I trusted – Elders in the Bahian community, committee members, friends and family – but then I always came back to my own inner voice. Did these ideas resonate with me? Did they make me feel alive and vibrant? Was I peaceful and calm? If not, I kept searching, knowing that I would recognize the truth when I saw it. This worked for me in capoeira – in my choice of a capoeira school – and in my personal life. I believe now that it worked for my thesis and research, as well.

There is no recipe for research. We have to do it the hard way, challenging and questioning the whole time, while trusting in something deeper. We fumble around, feeling foolish – nothing like the researcher we imagined at the outset – yet this *is* research. This is creation in any form, whether inside or outside the university. Indigenous people taught me that this *knowing*, deeper than the self-doubts of my thinking mind, *was* spirit, and that as long as I was connected to it, I would not be alone.

This may not be reassuring for researchers looking for practical guidelines or simple steps, yet to me it was the best kind of news! It was a relief not to have to figure out all the right answers and to trust that we are being guided all the time. As Shawn Wilson wrote, the answers

belong to the Cosmos, of which we are a part. Our job is to become as clear as we can so that we can *hear* the answers when they come.

Whether we are engaged in research that focuses on gender, race, class, sexual orientation or environmental concerns, the process is the same. We cannot speak of others and of broader socio-political issues without deeply implicating ourselves. I hope I have made the case throughout my thesis that the deeply *personal* nature of research is our greatest strength. It takes courage to show ourselves for who we are, “the vulnerable observers” that Ruth Behar (1996) wrote about, but it is the only way to a truthful kind of knowledge. It does not matter whether the subject is home schooling, hip hop or community arts – the process is the same: a merging of the life of the artist/scholar with the life of the community. Like alchemy, this process is mysterious, but the result is always more than the sum of its parts.

Would I change anything in my research now, knowing what I know? Yes and no. I am no longer the same person I was when I arrived in Bahia in 2004, so I *could* not reproduce the same work or research even if I tried. Part of the beauty of this dissertation was the process of growth that *I* underwent, as I completed the Ph.D. and grappled with the idea of capoeira as a path of transformation. Just as a dancer never dances the same way twice and a painter’s style evolves over time, I will never approach my work in the same way again. In a sense, it is “perfect” just as it is, with all its flaws and imperfections! I liked the organic way I approached each interview, the improvisation of much of the process, and even the mysterious way in which the thesis was written in the end. In the beginning, I wrote of capoeira as a mischievous spirit – a *duende* – who resists fitting into any constraints, and in the Indigenous way, art and knowledge are one. So how does the artist produce her work? Only the Creator knows.

My research led me to the conclusion that capoeira is transformative, as it engages the many dimensions of a human being. This approach grew out of a fundamentally Indigenous African world view, one in which lack of *balance* is believed to cause disease. The world in which we live, dominated as it is by a Western positivist view which separates the body, the emotions, the spirit and the mind, has brought us to a precipice. By delving into an art form like capoeira, we can open ourselves to a way that acknowledges all of our dimensions and thus begin a much-needed healing process.

Capoeira is part of a global movement that recognizes the limitations of our current way of life – one based on a capitalist industrial techno-scientific model – and which celebrates local cultures and ancient wisdoms. As an art form that arose out of great suffering, in which slaves were able to create beauty through the few means available to them – music, dance and ritual – it is a rich part of our human legacy and points to possible solutions. Although we may not be slaves in the former sense of the word, the industrialized world has bound us in a system that oppresses its citizens and strips them of their basic humanity. This materialist vision of life, where profits come first and other life forms are there for human exploitation, results in a fundamental sense of alienation. It also exacts a devastating toll on our planet.

Our collective suffering manifests in myriad ways, from the continuing abuses experienced by the descendants of slaves and First Nations people, to the psychological scars evidenced in people like my father and survivors of socially oppressive regimes, to depression, high drug rates and high suicide rates. Capoeira offers the possibility of change through transformation on an individual and community level by engaging us in all our dimensions.

As other scholars have pointed out, we are deeply immersed in a post-colonial world and rarely appreciate the true extent of its influence upon us, failing to see how it shapes everything

from our relationships to our institutions. These taken-for-granted assumptions are most dangerous, because they are invisible. Indigenous scholars have long made the case that the language we use and the concepts that guide research in universities – our places of higher learning – are examples of the unacknowledged paradigms that still permeate these halls. The idea of “validity”, for example, is in itself at odds with an Indigenous approach to knowledge, one rooted in *relationship*. Similarly, in Indigenous conceptions of knowledge, art and research are one and the same, hence the importance of storytelling as a teaching tool and of *healing* as the ultimate goal. For Indigenous people, integrating emotions, physical experience and spirituality is a fundamental *requirement* in the pursuit of knowledge, rather than an option.

These examples illustrate the enormous rifts that still exist between Indigenous approaches to knowledge and traditional academic approaches, underlying the fact that issues of power ultimately affect *who* gets to define Knowledge. My hope is that in celebrating capoeira and daring to bring it into the academy on its own terms I have contributed to a greater diversity of voices being heard in the university. Ultimately, our only hope for survival on this beautiful planet Earth lies in our capacity to unite all of our strengths and to face the coming storm together.

## **APPENDIX 1: Mestre Nenel – Bavia Arts Studio – May 10, 2010**

Mestre Nenel: I especially wanted to welcome the people who are not from our school. Please do feel at home, because deep down, capoeira is one big family. In the first part of my talk, I want to focus on the technical aspects of capoeira. Since there are many beginners here, there are two points in particular that I think are important to know. One has to do with the origin of capoeira and the other is perhaps the most frequently asked question in the world of capoeira: ‘What is capoeira?’

With respect to capoeira’s origin, many studies, theses and research have been done on this question. Some studies speak of the participation of the indigenous people of Brazil in the creation of capoeira. Other studies speak of the role of the Portuguese in its creation. Some mestres speak of the Dance of the Zebra. My own father used to say that capoeira was born in the *senzalas* – the slave plantations. The truth is that we don’t have any documents about this period. When slavery “ended”, in quotation marks, many documents about the history of black people and the history of the Brazilian people were burnt. My own feeling with respect to the origins of capoeira is that, most probably, it was the result of various factors, various peoples, and various tribes in response to the necessity for survival. I say “survival” in all senses of the word, whether physical, spiritual or cultural. They united themselves and capoeira was born of this union of various expressions. That’s what I believe. I also believe that when it comes to capoeira, certain things, including its origin, will always remain mysterious. I think that this, too, is an important part of capoeira. There is *always* a mystery. One of the things that I also believe to be important in capoeira, with respect to its origins, is the way in which it has always been linked to the creation of the country – to the creation of Brazil. It is linked, in one way or another, to Brazil’s history.

Does someone want to ask a question about this first point, or can I move on to the second one? Tell them that they shouldn’t be shy, because I am a very, very, *very* shy person! I speak and do things out of pure necessity. I always tell people that I’ll never be a good public speaker, because of this shyness of mine, and I think that it’s far more pleasant to chat and to exchange ideas, so if someone wants to speak...

Question: When was capoeira legalized and when did it become more accepted by the larger society?

Mestre Nenel: Actually, there is no specific date. What happened is that the Prohibition Law against capoeira fell into disuse. Normally, in order to make something official, you need to have a collection of laws to substitute the old law. This did not happen. Capoeira was able to penetrate within society and it was legalized eventually – not capoeira in general, however, but certain segments of it. Many of these segments were part of Mestre Bimba's work, which he succeeded in legalizing in 1937 – he succeeded in legalizing his *own* work, but this did not apply to capoeira in general. That is why you will find various facts in various periods, and why, when you research this subject on the internet, some people will say, 'Capoeira was legalized in 1942!' Others will say, 'It was at such-and-such a date that it was legalized!' In fact, there were several events. People tend to concentrate on certain facts, saying, '*this* was the date that capoeira was legalized.' For example, Bimba opened his first capoeira school, his first space, and began developing his own methodology and pedagogy, in 1932. Therefore, on the internet you'll find, 'Well, it was in 1932 that capoeira was legalized!' Another famous historical event, much talked about in the papers throughout Brazil, was a capoeira presentation my father gave in 1953 for the politicians of the time – the governor and the president of the Republic. At the end of the presentation, the president exclaimed that capoeira was the only genuinely Brazilian national sport. Some people think, therefore, that 1953 was when capoeira was legalized.

The second topic that interests people a lot is the question of 'What is capoeira?' Various mestres have defined certain aspects of capoeira. For example, some people say, 'Capoeira is a sport, a fighting art and a dance.' Others will say, 'Capoeira is a game, a hobby and a sport.' One of the most respected masters in the world, Mestre Pastinha, once responded in an interview that, 'Capoeira is everything the mouth eats.' The truth of the matter is that capoeira is *all* of this and *much* more. I once worked in an institute of Salvador on a capoeira project, and the promoters of that institute wanted us to explain "how capoeira was going to educate the kids, what would be the results and how it would happen", but there is no such thing as a way or a *formula* to prove such a thing. What I believe, with respect to capoeira, is that it reveals different aspects of itself in accordance with the necessity and perception of *every* human being. In other words, if a person loves to fight – loves the fighting arts – then he will manifest capoeira as a fighting art. Someone who is linked with the world of sports will manifest capoeira as a sport. In

other words, the truth is that capoeira will express whatever purposes or intentions a person wants to focus on – whether this be for good or evil. Whenever people ask me, ‘What is capoeira for *you?*’ I respond, *for me*, capoeira is my life philosophy – it’s the way I live. In conclusion, of all the ways I’ve thought about and analyzed the question ‘what is capoeira’, I’ve come to the conclusion, finally, that capoeira is simply... *capoeira!*

*(Laughter)*

Mestre Nenel: That’s the most accurate response. Each one of us must learn to define what capoeira is for him or her self – *each one of us*. So, we started talking about the origin of capoeira and went on to speak about the perception of what capoeira is. Now, we come to the subject of the most important figure in capoeira, for the purposes of our own work – my father, Mestre Bimba. Due to the political persecution, not only of capoeira, but of all Afro-Brazilian artistic expressions, according to Mestre Bimba, in his time capoeira was already in a dying phase and practically extinct. He started training in 1912, and in 1918, he had already begun to develop a pedagogical process of teaching. In this period, capoeira merely possessed *nine* movements, plus the *ginga*. Therefore, he was the one who recuperated certain movements that were being lost, adding movements from an Afro-Bahian art form called *batuque*, a fighting art form that was the source of all unbalancing movements in Regional – *bandas* and *rasteiras* – *all* of these things came from *batuque*. He systematized his teaching at a time when capoeirista practitioners learned entirely by *sight*. In other words, people learned by watching *rodas* – they would come close and look, clap their hands and participate. Soon, they might start going in and playing a little. That’s how they learned and it took a long time to learn it well. Not everyone had the courage to enter, either. Mestre Bimba, therefore, created a sequence of basic attack and defense movements, and through this sequence, *anybody* can learn, is learning and will always learn capoeira with *a lot* more facility and speed. This sequence is so important that aside from the fact that you learn quickly and that you improve your physical conditioning, your agility, strength and reflexes, it will *always* be the base of any capoeira, anywhere in the world. It is not possible to play capoeira without drawing on elements of Bimba’s sequence. If you were to take away all the elements of Bimba’s sequence, not a single capoeira in the world would remain.

Unfortunately, due to the rapid evolution of capoeira around the world – capoeira spread quickly – many people have never received *any teachings* whatsoever from a master or a professor.

Because of this, in certain schools and in certain styles of capoeira, people will say, ‘The

sequence is something of the past! We don't see any value in it!' They don't understand that the sequence was not made *for* capoeiristas. It was made for those *who don't know* capoeira. If you already play capoeira, therefore, the sequence is merely meant as a warm-up. That's what they don't understand. From this sequence, Bimba began to develop *new* movements and to preserve, as well, certain projection movements such as the *balões* – the throws. Many people like to say that Mestre Bimba used other martial arts as his inspiration, but this is not true – there are many Black artistic expressions in many parts of Africa to this day in which *balões* exist. It had nothing to do with judo. In 1928, Bimba declared that his Regional– based on these movements that he had put together – was going to be called *Luta Regional Baiana* – Regional Bahian Fighting Art. He chose the name because in that period capoeira was still illegal under the Penal Code and it wasn't possible to refer directly to Capoeira Regional. That period, therefore – the twenties – was the time when Mestre Bimba worked at building his art form. Thus, when we get to the thirties, capoeira had already begun to *seduce* society and by the end of that decade, he already had a *new* need – to demonstrate the effectiveness of capoeira as a fighting form. In 1936, Bimba climbed in the ring and challenged anyone from *any* fighting modality to fight him. Lang: Why did he feel the need to do so? Did he want to prove that his capoeira was a martial art?

Nenel: No, not that it was a martial art, but that it was also a powerful fighting art<sup>35</sup>, as efficient as any other art. His first step was to challenge *all* capoeiristas of that period who doubted his work, and shortly thereafter, he challenged all fighters of *any* modality. He climbed into the ring and, thank God, he never lost to anybody!

*(Laughter)*

Mestre Nenel: Then came the forties, a phase when Bimba entered social clubs and began to teach the military – he was preparing men in the military to fight with his capoeira. This was in 1937-38. Decênio himself – everyone knows Decênio – was the one to bring capoeira inside the military in '38, and also in the ranks of the police. By the forties, the social barriers against capoeira were beginning to fall more and more, as Bimba started teaching capoeira in private homes, social courses, schools and colleges – this was at the end of the thirties and beginning of the forties. In the fifties, he entered yet *another* phase of capoeira – the “show” phase. This was

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<sup>35</sup> I believe that Mestre Nenel differentiates between a fighting art (*uma luta*) and a martial art (*um arte marcial*), in that the latter has links to the State, where it can be used as a tool of the State apparatus, while the former comes from the people and from a deep expression of resistance to oppression and injustice.

probably the period when he spread his capoeira most widely, developing its *ludic* form – its show aspect – and it was exactly in 1953 that President Vargas watched his capoeira demonstration. Thus, we arrive at my decade – the seventies. It was the best decade of all!

*(Laughter)*

Mestre Nenel: This is when Mestre Bimba is already quite mature – quite wise. He's already gone through various phases in having to prove capoeira, in all its dimensions. By the sixties, therefore, the *strongest* aspect of his work to date, *capoeira as path to the development of the person* – as an educational tool – appears. This, for me, is the best phase of all. Nowadays, if we were to do a survey of Bahian society, of doctors, engineers, dentists, politicians, businessmen, and so on – people from all social strata – we would find that *many* people once held Bimba as their second father, a true guide in their formation, their development into a *pessoa de bem* – a good human being. This is when we begin to see more clearly the ways in which capoeira can be used as a method for the good of society. This is when it becomes clearer to us, as disciples of Bimba, that capoeira has many facets. There are moments when capoeira is meant to be played – just *played*, as we did yesterday – and enjoyed. There are moments when capoeira can be used to fight. There are moments when capoeira can be used to educate people about general behaviours – in the home, on the street, in a bar. Capoeira can teach us all of this. There are moments when it is a socialization tool. This is why I say that it was the *best* phase of capoeira, not only because I participated in it. This was also the period in which women made their appearance in capoeira. Mestre Bimba's work was well defined by then. He had outlined everything from how a student must enter the academy, to when capoeira must be used – as a game, as a fight, as a means of personal defense, or for discipline and respect.

By the beginning of the '70s, after having done *all* of this work, Bimba had succeeded in opening peoples' minds in the 'higher' society. Capoeira became then the postcard for Bahia and Brazil. It began spreading all around the world and my father began to feel... How shall I say it? He didn't feel *appreciated* by our politicians and by Bahian society – especially by the politicians. He decided then to move to the state of Goiânia. He would say, 'Boy, they have all this money to support Carnival, but there's *nothing* for our culture.'

Lang, tell them that when it comes to the history of capoeira, I can stay here *all* night, telling stories, so if one of them wants to ask a question, they should lift their hand. We are *almost* at

the phase where you come in – remember what I said to you all yesterday – you’ll start to understand why Lang is carrying such a heavy responsibility!

Question: Mestre Nenel, can you tell us about your personal trajectory, how you began capoeira and when you began to feel that you had to continue your father’s work? When did it become something personal?

Mestre Nenel: We would need a whole other day of workshops for that!

*(Laughter)*

Mestre Nenel: I’ll try to summarize things. I started capoeira in my mother’s belly.

*(Laughter)*

It’s an automatic process in our family. *Officially*, however, I started capoeira when I was six – in 1966. By ’68, I was a part of our demonstration group. I was already a formado – I’d received my blue scarf. I already helped my father make instruments and I taught the Sequence to the new students. At thirteen, I started to help him teach the classes. When we moved to Goiânia – our family moved there in ’73 – and he started getting sick because of the complete disaster that the experience turned out to be (that would be another workshop in itself – Goiânia – a huge one), sometimes my brother, who had been my formatura partner, and I would teach his classes. Sometimes, my father didn’t even go to the academy in Goiânia, and my brother and I would be responsible for the classes. I was thirteen then, and my brother Demerval was fifteen. When Bimba died in ’74, I went to live in Brasília with my sister. I was fifteen when I opened my first school, officially – it was registered and all. I taught there until I was seventeen – until ’77 – but then, my sister returned to Salvador, and since I was a minor (I was only seventeen), I had to go with her back to Salvador, too. There, I joined several folkloric groups and did shows. I played a lot of Street Capoeira. I entered two Bahian championships in ’77 and ’78 and won second place. It was only in ’84, however, that I resumed my role – I won’t say as a *mestre* – as a professor, a *sharer of knowledge*. In ’86, I founded this school and that’s how I came to be here, with all of you. And this is where our *own* story begins, isn’t it?

In truth, the need for this work, the need to spread the teachings around the world, began on November 5, 1974, when Mestre Bimba died and Capoeira Regional began its slow decline and eventual extinction. This is where our own responsibility comes in. With Mestre Bimba gone and the velocity with which capoeira spread around the world, the essence of Capoeira Regional began to dissipate more and more. In other words, a great number of its movements, rhythms and

rituals disappeared. *Eighty percent* of Bimba's work was forgotten. Due to this lack of leadership, the world began to see capoeira in two ways. Capoeira Angola, which *reorganized* itself to show the world one form, was one way. In Bimba's time, Angola did not have a shape – various people practised it – but they organized themselves and it did a lot of good for Capoeira Angola. From then on, everyone who was not a part of this Capoeira Angola movement started to be known as “Capoeira Regional”. This was ironic – maybe it was a kind of *punishment* for Bimba – because when he originally developed his work and chose the name “Regional”, the other capoeiras were *all* known as “Capoeira Angola”. Then, when he died, the opposite happened!

*(Laughter)*

Many capoeira groups, in order to justify their work – a majority, but not all of them, since there are many good schools out there – began to say, “We teach *both* Angola and Regional. We teach everything.” They said this, because they defined Capoeira Angola as that really *slow* capoeira, where you stay low to the ground, and Capoeira Regional as that very *fast*, violent capoeira, full of jumps and acrobatics... The world began to perceive Capoeira Regional as fast and upright, and Capoeira Angola as a slow style, where old guys roll around, but this is wrong. It's actually disrespectful to *both* capoeiras – to both lineages of capoeira. In my father's time, Angoleiros played all sorts of ways. Some Angoleiros played slowly, while others played fast and really liked to duke it out. These kinds of differences are normal in human beings, as they were in capoeira. Capoeira Regional was the same! Some people liked to play *Banguela* or *Idalina* – to play slower – while others preferred to play to *São Bento Grande*, a faster rhythm. This is not what defines being an *Angoleiro* or a *Regional*. What defines Capoeira Regional is its teaching methodology and this is where I came in. I began to take capoeira more seriously. The erroneous perceptions of capoeira around the world, the belief that Capoeira Regional was fast and acrobatic, had some good repercussions, but mostly very, *very* bad ones, with respect to Bimba. When I realized the ways in which these perceptions were being associated with my father's work, I decided, “I have to find a way to work with this again, to share with people the true work of Mestre Bimba. His capoeira is neither better, nor worst than these other capoeiras, but it is *different*.” The most difficult part of our work is to manage to show people what Capoeira Regional is *without* disrespecting the other capoeira styles because there are dozens and *hundreds* of capoeira styles. We want to show the value of our own work.

Let me give you an example of something that happened in Salvador – I don't remember the date, but I was there and I *saw* this happen in a *roda*. Two masters got tangled up in the *roda* – they were fighting like a couple of roosters – and one of them ended up killing the other.

Automatically, everyone began to say, “This is the work of Capoeira Regional! This never happens in Angola.” A similar idea was often heard throughout Brasil – it was in all the papers. At another capoeira *roda*, a guy applied a *ponteira*. He kicked another guy in the ribs and killed him. “It's that Capoeira Regional!” people were saying. So it was things like that that finally made me decide to return to the work – to show the world that my father had nothing to do with this kind of thing.

What I am about to say next is not an attempt to compare who's *better* and who's *worst*. It's an example meant to give you a better understanding of the differences between the styles. In Mestre Bimba's work, there is no such thing as a *graduation*. He did have a ceremony that he called a *formatura*, which can be interpreted as a kind of basic course which you can pass. In other words, once you take the course, then you are a *formado* and you receive a scarf and a medal – a kind of recognition. You only wear them on the day that you receive them, however. After that, you put them away in your house and that's it. So, it's not really a “graduation”.

After that, if you are interested in learning about capoeira as a *luta* – for the purposes of personal defense – you can sign up for a specialization course, and at the end of that course, you receive a red scarf. After the second specialization, you enter another phase, at the end of which, you receive a yellow scarf. The last stage, the white scarf, is what my father used to call the *Mestre Charangueijo*. The truth is that my father never made anyone a professor, a *contra-mestre*, or a *mestre*, so if you ever hear anyone say that my father made them a *mestre*, don't tell them that he's a liar, but you'll know that it's not true!

*(Laughter)*

In summary, when you see graduations<sup>36</sup> being used in capoeira today, it's not that they're good or bad. They simply have nothing to do with Bimba's work. His way was *another* way of being a capoeirista. Another good example is one of the most talked about traditions in Capoeira Regional and in the world: the *batizado* or baptism. Everyone here has heard about the *batizado*, right? Can someone tell me what a *batizado* is?

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<sup>36</sup> Mestre Nenel is using the term “graduation” both in the sense of a physical object, such as a belt, and in the sense of a change in status or hierarchy.

*(Daniel speaks – his voice is too far to be heard well and captured in the recording.)*

Lang: Daniel is basically saying that in a batizado, you play with the mestres – that it's considered only a step in a long journey.

Mestre Nenel: OK. Roberta, you were in another group for a long time – what was the batizado there like?

Roberta: It was a day of ceremony and celebration between the professors and the mestres. There was a lot of music and each student had to play with a professor or a mestre, and then received a nickname.

Mestre Nenel: Right.

Roots: I just wanted to say that there are places I've been to where you receive a belt during the batizado, right? In the contemporary style that I used to train, the master would make you fall in the roda. He would bring you down to the ground, and then, you'd receive your belt.

Mestre Nenel: Exactly. Now, you'll soon understand why we have so much responsibility in our school, because these ways – not that they're good or bad – are simply not what Bimba created. It's a fact that now, everywhere in the world, people speak of 'the batizado' and they automatically link it to a tradition that my father created. These celebrations are called batizados and often, when I go to one, I'm told, 'There's going to be a batizado,' but when I get there, there's a lot going on, the least of which is a batizado.

The batizado created by Mestre Bimba was something very simple, but profound. It had a lot of meaning on the capoeirista's journey. A baptism is the first time a person joins a church, right? In Bahia, we also have the tradition of the batizado for people who have never been to the sea. On their first day there, we plunge them in the water! There's even a *choppe* batisado – a baptism of beer – when a young person drinks for the first time. 'Let's baptise him!' people say. That, too, is a batizado. In other words, the batizado is *the act of doing something for the first time*.

In Regional, the way it worked with Mestre Bimba was that after three or four classes, when the beginner had learned all the parts of the basic sequence – the basic movements – the mestre invited an advanced student who had good technique (whether it was a formado or not) to play and "baptise" the *novice* in capoeira. The new guy had never played in the roda before, and Bimba would say after the third or fourth class, "Next class, you're going under the wire!" Sometimes, people would get scared. "You'll go under the *berimbau* wire!" he would add. So

they played, *one* formado with the person being baptised, right? My father's main intention was to create a situation that would favor a spirit of fraternity – a family feeling – by initiating a relationship between an older student of the “house” and a beginner. In other words, that older student would take the beginner under his wing and care for him as his *afiliado* – his kin<sup>37</sup>. So can you see that how this idea of bringing a beginner down in the roda, of hurting him, has *nothing* to do with the philosophy of Bimba? On the contrary, my father always deliberately chose someone with good technique to play with a beginner, knowing that that beginner knew nothing! The advanced student had to take *a lot* of care in order not to hurt his ward. To give you an idea of the importance of this factor, in the Capoeira Regional regulation, you only start training foot sweeps – receiving and giving them – three months into your training. Why take a *batisando* – a beginner – and take him down roughly? I have personally *seen* many, many so-called batizados, in all sorts of places, where someone broke an arm, or hit their head on the ground. This has *nothing* to do with Capoeira Regional! It's a completely different capoeira philosophy.

So, after two or three months, my father would bring together the newly baptised students in the school itself – in the neighbourhood – to do a *feira de batizado*, a celebration and commemoration. He did not call on the oldest students or invite other mestres – the only mestre there was Bimba. The way it worked was that the recently baptised students played amongst themselves, two by two, and at the end of each game, my father would lift the arm of one student at a time and declare the student's *nome de guerra* – their war name or nickname. That was a batizado. So although many, many things have been attributed to the batizado and to Bimba, and people say, “This here is Capoeira Regional!” most of the time, it's untrue.

Our responsibility, therefore, is to show people *what* Capoeira Regional is without putting down and disrespecting other capoeira styles, and that's the hardest part. There are so many small details that are erroneously associated with Capoeira Regional. Sometimes we receive visitors in our school and we have to be really careful so as to find a way not to offend them. A good example of this is the way in which, in many rodas that call themselves Regional, people are used to going into the roda and “buying” the game. Sometimes, you see three, four, or five people all going in at the same time! This is not a part of Capoeira Regional, so when people come to the

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<sup>37</sup> An *afiliado* is a godson. Mestre Bimba deliberately used expressions like *afiliado* and *padrinho* to encourage relationships inside his academy and create community.

Fundação in the Filhos de Bimba School and try to go in like this, we have to tell them, “You have to go to the foot of the berimbau... and so on.”

Roots: I have a question about the rhythms we play on the berimbau in Capoeira Regional. Many people who train capoeira around here talk about *benguela* as if it were a capoeira *style* and I wanted to know how to respond to this – are *benguela* and São Bento Grande berimbau rhythms, or are they styles of capoeira games?

Mestre Nenel: (Laughs) Well, in relation to *benguela*, I have a little story to tell you.

Roots: Is it *benguela* or *banguela*?

Mestre Nenel: There is a site on the internet that is very popular, where people talk about capoeira in the world today. It has a lot of gossip, so I never liked it. I don’t like to write in it, because I don’t like to participate in this sort of thing, however, a certain *mestra* from São Paulo who used to represent an entity – a capoeira Confederation or a Federation, something like that – wrote that my father must have gotten confused, because the correct name of the rhythm was *benguela*, and Bimba called it *banguela*. She said that *banguela* is an *ascendente*, or whatever. When I saw this, I felt that I had to respond to this woman. First of all, she did not know Bimba, and secondly, she knew nothing about the history of Capoeira Regional. This showed a tremendous lack of respect towards Mestre Bimba and what he represented. What happened was that a capoeira master from one of the large capoeira groups began to spread the idea that it wasn’t *banguela* – it was *benguela* – and that *benguela* was meant to be played differently from other styles of game, etc. etc. However, through the irony of destiny – thank God – what this mestre was playing, calling it *benguela*, but thinking that he was playing *banguela*, was *not* the *banguela* rhythm. Thank God! I was able to take advantage of this small mistake of theirs, and wherever I go, when I teach berimbau, I explain the difference between *benguela* and *banguela*. I tell people, “No, people, *benguela* is a new rhythm that was developed in modern capoeira. It has nothing to do with Capoeira Regional.” I tell them why and I show them, technically, the difference, as I will be able to demonstrate for you, and show you later today on the blackboard, so that you can see the difference. What these people are playing, thinking it’s *banguela* but calling it *benguela*, is a small part of the *banguela dobrada* rhythm, mixed in with a small part of the Capoeira Angola rhythm! They are playing Capoeira Angola. So they do, “Din din dan din din. Din din dan din din.” It has nothing to do with Capoeira Regional! Thank God they are not really playing *banguela*!

In Regional, there is no such thing as a *style* of game. *Each person* is a style. This is something else that happens often. Nowadays, you see places where people are *ginga*-ing practically the same way and doing exactly the same movements. They look like robots that have been programmed. In Capoeira Regional, this is not the case. If you pay attention, as I said yesterday, when it comes time to play, you must play to the *rhythm* of the berimbau, but your *style* is yours alone. I've been to places where people were having these "workshops", and I saw mestres correct people, "No, the *ginga* has to be like this..."

*(Laughter)*

This is not capoeira. *Capoeira is a process of liberation!* Just as each person walks differently in the street – no two people are alike – each person has a personal *ginga*! If you ever watch a *roda* with Bimba's former students – they play every Thursday in the Fundação – and you watch the old guys playing, *every single one plays totally differently*. That's what *style* is about. This guy over here, Andrew, has his own particular *ginga*, right? It's great! I liked it a lot.

*(Laughter)*

Roots, here, has a totally different style, right? Well, I'll never say, "No, you're doing the *ginga* wrong! You have to *ginga* like this." No! We teach students the *base* of the *ginga* – we show what it looks like to people that have never done capoeira before. There is a *base*, but the rest is up to the person!

## APPENDIX 2

### Professor Berimbau

I asked Berimbau – *Edvaldo Azevedo de Jesus* – how he had started capoeira. “I was born in 1983,” he responded, “and my family moved to Salvador when I was four. “When I was little I loved martial arts movies – karate, Van Damme and all that stuff – and when I walked down the street, I’d see capoeira everywhere. I wanted to learn and I knew a kid named Luciano who did capoeira, so when I turned ten I started training in the street with him. When I was eleven, Luciano told me that I needed to find an academy to develop my capoeira. Capoeira was being taught at my sister’s school, so I started going there. That’s where I met Paulozinho, Pastor and Garrincha – my teachers.”

“Since I was young, I had to ask my mom’s permission to train. I knew that she would say no, so when I went to the class the first day, I didn’t bring my I.D. I acted like my mom was okay with it, and I told them that she worked and would come later.” Berimbau laughed.

“Professor Garrincha was skinny in those days and seemed so tall to me! I trained capoeira in shorts, because I didn’t have pants or a t-shirt. Eventually, I finally got hold of a pair of pants, but one day I was doing a cartwheel and they ripped. Everybody laughed! If the teacher had said something, I would have left, but since he didn’t, I kept going. I went home, sewed up the pants and the next day they ripped *again*. I sewed them up again! My first *real* pair of pants was lent to me by a cousin who trained capoeira in another school. I borrowed his pants, until the day he stopped training, and then went back to wearing shorts. After that, a classmate gave me a pair of black pants. I kept fixing them and everybody would comment, ‘Look at Berimbau, training with those ugly pants!’ I had to hide them from my mom, too. One day, she found them at home and she *ripped* them! I got another pair – tight ones – which she also ripped. It was only when I started making a bit of money that I finally bought myself a nice pair of white pants and asked my mom not to rip those. She never did it again!”

“So she knew you were training?” I asked Berimbau.

“Yeah, she knew it and she didn’t like it. Back in those days, she thought of capoeira as problematic. She used to tell me, ‘If you train capoeira, you’ll become a thief.’ It took her a while to start accepting capoeira, although it was partly my fault, because in the beginning I’d pick fights with my brother. I’d use the moves I’d learned on him, until my mom finally went to

the school to complain. It was the first time she'd ever gone there – I wasn't expecting her – and she talked to the teacher. He was surprised, 'But Berimbau is such a polite boy!' 'Polite?' she said. 'He hits his brother at home!' I promised I wouldn't do it anymore and from then on, I behaved."

"In a way, it was a good thing that my mom came to our school, because she heard people saying things about me like, 'That boy is growing up to be a good person. He won't become a thief,' and so on. Still, she didn't like capoeira and told me I couldn't train anymore. I got really upset. 'Mom, why do you want to take me out of capoeira? Just so I can hang around in the street like *those* kids?' I cried. I said I didn't want to stop – that I had a lot of friends in capoeira and we had fun together. We'd train and after class, we'd walk arm in arm, talking and horsing around – those were good friendships. I'd study in the afternoon, so that I could train capoeira in the morning. I thought about capoeira all the time. I told my mom I was angry with her and with my dad. 'You want me to stop capoeira, but I'm not like those kids who always hang out in the street smoking cigarettes, going to parties and coming home late. I'm not bothering anyone!' I told them that I was going back the next day. I was really upset, you know? I knew that I hadn't done anything wrong. Capoeira was my life. My mom became quiet and my dad told her, 'Let him go there if he wants to.'"

"So I went back and told Professor Garrincha everything that had happened. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'You're here now and in time, they'll come to appreciate what you're doing. One day, you'll be able to help them.' Garrincha kept an eye on me in capoeira. I'd bring my parents and my uncles to class, and I was behaving at home. Garrincha had one-on-one talks with us and also spoke to us at reunions. He'd say things like, 'You guys have to make sure that you dress well – that you're clean and not wearing dirty clothes, or going shirtless. Don't come in sandals – wear good shoes, etc.' He always guided us."

"After three years in capoeira, Garrincha called me over one day and said, 'I'm going to start giving a class in Rio Vermelho and I want you to help me. I'll pay you. Talk to your mom and come on such and such a day.' I was almost sixteen years old by then. I was *so* happy! *Wow, I'm gonna be able to buy myself a pair of capoeira pants!* I only had a ripped pair, you know? *First I'll buy some pants and then I'll give my mom the rest of the money!*" Berimbau laughed heartily.

“So I went to the address Garrincha had given me,” Berimbau continued. “The class was at six, but I got there at four! I waited and waited. I hadn’t had a snack or anything and finally, Garrincha arrived. We started the class and I was so hungry! He paid me on that first day. ‘Take this money,’ he said. ‘I’m going to put a part of it aside for your transportation. You’ll come twice a week. Here’s a bit of money for you to buy yourself some pop and ice cream.’ Back then, I liked this girl and Garrincha gave me some advice about how to approach her, you know? Then, he dropped me off at the bus stop. I calculated the amount of money I’d keep to buy a pair of pants and how much I’d give my mom, then I walked all the way home! It was really far, but I didn’t buy anything for myself, just some water and a snack. When I got home, I showed my mom the money I’d made. We happened to be out of gas and we were able to buy some. I only had 2 reais left over after that!” Berimbau chuckled. “It wasn’t enough for the girl or the pants, but I was so proud. Sometimes, the guys from capoeira would come over to my house and the girls, too. One day, a really cute girl who trained with me came looking for me. She asked for ‘Berimbau’, but no one at home knew me by that name. ‘There’s no Berimbau here,’ my dad said. ‘Edvaldo lives here,’ ‘That’s him!’ the girl said.” Berimbau started to laugh.

“In time my parents started to see that capoeira was teaching me a lot and I was making good friends, too. Four years into capoeira I started teaching. My mom would walk down the street and people would recognize her. I’d gotten the third star by then – I’d started to play berimbau pretty well – and I even sang, a little off-key. I went wherever Garrincha did. People would tease me about that, but I didn’t care. He was my teacher. I learned, memorized and repeated *everything* he said. People started commenting, ‘Berimbau is speaking so eloquently, now!’ Garrincha was a big part of my life, until I got my fifth star. At that point, I became an *estagiário* and started teaching in the Capoeirê. The kids there called me ‘Professor Berimbau’. My mom saw that people had a lot of respect and affection for me, you know? She started to *see*, to understand that all the negative things people said about capoeira were totally off and she became more supportive.”

“That’s wonderful, Berimbau,” I smiled. “Now *you* have kids in your classes who are the age you were when you started. Do you know what’s going on in their lives? What kind of a relationship do you have with them? Are you close?”

Berimbau nodded, “We’re close. I started getting more involved with my students after one of them got caught throwing a stone at a bus. He was little, so he didn’t break the window,

but they asked me to talk to him. I went with him to his house and talked to his mom. She asked me to keep an eye on him. ‘He doesn’t listen to me,’ she said. The boy was twelve. ‘You know what?’ I told him. ‘You’re gonna start helping me in class.’ ‘But I don’t know capoeira very well!’ he protested. ‘You’re gonna learn!’ I’d explain things to him and talk to him. He got better. His mom came to thank me, later.”

“Sometimes, a kid would be really shy, or would hang out with the bad boys – that kind of thing – and I’d have to resolve the problem. I didn’t want them to make the same mistakes I’d made at their age. Most kids were really well-behaved. One mother came to me and told me that her daughter didn’t listen to her at home, but that she was well-behaved in my class. I told the girl that if she didn’t behave at home, she couldn’t train capoeira, so she smartened up, because she liked capoeira. A lot of parents told me similar stories. Capoeira is a way of enforcing obedience.”

“That’s cool,” I smiled. “Have you ever had kids that have given you problems, Berimbau?”

“There was a student who was involved in drugs,” Berimbau responded, thoughtfully. “He was older – about twenty – and he worked. He liked capoeira, but I knew he took drugs. He’d been in the academy for a long time and he’d always talked to me, so one day, I asked him, ‘Hey man, are you involved with drugs?’ He’d started acting differently in class. ‘No, it’s nothing,’ he said. ‘I’m fine. I just have some things to resolve.’ Not long after that, though, I saw him in the street with some bad people. I suspected he was getting into some serious problems. I already knew that someone in his family was in the hospital – usually, the parents are required to come at least once a month to visit their kids in the Capoeirê, but his mom was sick. One day, he came to class stinking of pot and I had to talk to him. I said, ‘Hey man, you’ve always trained hard. You weren’t like this before. What’s going on? It’s the third day that you smell like this.’ He started to cry. I told him that everyone liked him, that I liked him and I knew what was happening at home, but that he was being disrespectful, coming to class like that. ‘You have to stop,’ I said. ‘I like you, but you can’t continue like this.’ ‘I know! I know!’ He promised not to do it again.”

“Well, he stopped doing drugs, but then those people started coming after him. They threatened to beat him up, because he’d stopped the drugs, so I decided to go with him and talk to them. I knew it was risky, but I went anyway, and when I got there, I told them, ‘Listen, this guy

needs to train. He does sports and he can't be using those substances. Not only are all of you behaving badly, but you're also putting *him* at risk. I don't have anything against any of you, personally, but if you cause problems for him, they become my problems, too.' They just listened and one guy asked me, 'Hey, can we train capoeira, too?' I said that they could."

"My student stopped taking drugs, but he started working in another neighbourhood that was really far away. That's when he fell back into drugs and had to be interned<sup>38</sup>. He'd gotten into the *heavy* stuff, not just pot, but things like cocaine and all of that. He was interned for six months. When he got out he asked me if he could come back to capoeira. He trained with me for a while and got interned again. He stayed there for two years, and now he's a Christian and working again."

"That's quite the story," I said, slowly. "Berimbau, do you think that for the students of Naranjiba, being a part of the larger Filhos de Bimba family helps them – that Mestre Nenel and the other teachers have an important role in their lives?"

Berimbau nodded. "When students respect a teacher, they're really excited to play with him in the roda. They admire Professor Bacteria a lot, for example, and they say things like, 'Man, is Bacteria ever good! No one plays like him! He's always smiling! Bacteria this and Bacteria that...'" When I told them that he was my *padrinho* – my godfather in capoeira – they thought I was so *lucky*. They always ask me when he's coming and when he comes, they stare at him. Sometimes Mestre Nenel comes, too, and the kids are in awe, 'Wow, Mestre Nenel is such a serious man.' They like playing with people from the outside, too. It helps them grow."

"I'm really glad to have met you, Berimbau, even though I admit that at first I was a bit worried. I thought you were so serious!" I smiled.

Berimbau laughed. "I'm grateful for it, too. I get to teach Anum's class and to meet a lot of good capoeiristas – a lot of foreigners, too. It's been a great experience – it's really opened my horizons."

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<sup>38</sup> I believe Berimbau was referring to a drug rehabilitation centre.

## APPENDIX 3

### Mestre Ferro

When I was in Belém, Mestre Ferro, the sturdy and mild-mannered man in his forties who had participated in Mestre Augusto's Encontro back in what seemed like an eternity, had generously offered to drive me to Mestre Bezerra's house. The neighbourhood was situated on the outskirts of Belém in a shantytown and not easily accessed. As we drove, I glanced at my host, a fair-skinned, educated man who often travelled to Salvador. I knew little else about him.

"My full name is Jorge Freitas," he told me, in response to my queries. "I'm the son of *caboclos* – of Native and European descendants from the Amazon area of the state of Pará – and I was born in a place called Vitória, a small island about four days' travel from Belém. I came to Belém to study when I was seven, because I was born in a Catholic family and my father placed me in a Catholic youth group. We had sports activities there and a young guy named Barbosa was responsible for them. He had books like 'Karate without a Mestre' and 'Capoeira without a Mestre' with which he used to develop these activities. When I was eleven or so, we began to meet once a week, to try to learn the capoeira movements in the book. We had no understanding of capoeira as a game or a combat. It was more of a diversion – a kind of exercise."

"After two or three years, my family moved and my father signed me up in another Catholic youth group. I already had my own copy of 'Capoeira without a Mestre' by then, so a bunch of us started up a group and got together to train. In a used book stand, we found a record of Mestre Bimba's and Mestre Pastinha's music. We found a record of Suassuna and Dirceu's music, too – Volumes One and Two – and we moved around to it, you know? We made our own berimbaus any which way. We'd take a piece of wood and cut it, or even use water tubes! The first *cabaça* we had was made from a can."

"Some time in 1977, there was a festival in our city where they closed off the street and there were activities, games and so on. I saw a capoeira roda there being led by Mestre Bezerra. The man whom I would choose as my mestre was there, too: Zumbi. Nonato, Álvaro and Rumildo were there, as well, but back then, they were Contra-Mestres. In 1978, Mestre Bezerra undertook a trip to Guyana and Zumbi took over most of his work. He founded the Grupo Rei Zumbi where I began to train. Back then, Zumbi and Rumildo taught us and from that point on I

began to develop the technical side of capoeira – to understand the essence of the game: the technique, strategy and movements.”

“The seventies were a *violent* period in capoeira. It was still seen as something you played with your enemies. It was common for blows to be exchanged in the street and to see violent combats, to the point of broken bones or people passing out. Sometimes, the police tried to catch people. I took part in this, too, perhaps because of my age. It’s human – a teenage phase – a period of self-affirmation where you want to show your power, strength and ability. I made a lot of friends, but I also made enemies. Then, one day, I was playing with one of my enemies when I successfully applied a technique that almost killed him. I was traumatized by this, especially since I practiced a religion that taught the opposite. I began to struggle with these contradictory values – religious, social and cultural – and I understood that I needed time to think. With my mestre’s permission, I stopped going to rodas and being a part of the street world. I restricted my capoeira practice to my yard and to the people who already trained with me. By then, I had received the rank of professor, so I had a few students.”

“This continued for three or four years. In that time, I got married and developed other values. When my son turned five, he began to interact with the students who came to my house. He threw the occasional cartwheel and wanted to train with the adults. In those days, there was no such thing as a capoeira class *specifically* for kids. My son’s appeals were so strong, though, that I started to teach him. Since he had a bunch of friends, before I knew it, the parents and their kids were participating, and I had a *hundred* kids under my care! We had to train in the street and people would come over. Adults began seeing it as an activity for their kids. After that, I couldn’t remain anonymous. I knew that I had to go back to training, but differently. Around 93 I went ‘back to the street’ with a new vision of capoeira. I had realized that there were other values than the combative ones in capoeira.”

“Around that time, a few of us started going to Salvador, wanting to get a better understanding of capoeira. I met many mestres and saw many types of capoeira there, and I began to see capoeira as a *transformational* activity. Capoeira has values that you didn’t even suspect were inside it. All the while, you thought that it was just a martial art, or a way of learning self-defense. Capoeira *is* all of this, but it can and must also be used as a complement to formal education. I speak of education in the widest sense of the term, from the religious to the

social, cultural and economic aspects. Capoeira gives people tools and information to teach their own students and contribute to their growth.”

“Nowadays, capoeira is all over the world and is no longer a prisoner of the ghetto. It’s become more *ludic*. I have classes for kids and people above sixty. Of course, there are mestres in their eighties, but they’ve played capoeira all their lives. It’s different when someone discovers capoeira in his thirties or forties, so I adjust my teaching accordingly. Capoeira cannot be a tool of *exclusion*. All social classes, genders, and so on, must be included without discrimination. One of its virtues is that capoeira helps promote social integration, respect and balance between the different social classes. That’s how I see capoeira and how I live it today. I try to pass this vision on to my students and disciples.”

“Of course, you can’t forget that capoeira has a ‘false’ side, as Mestre Pastinha and so many other mestres have said. Capoeira can be treacherous – never forget in the roda that a snake is playing with you. The capoeirista’s nature isn’t *bad*, but his *intent* may be. It’s like the story of the toad that helped the scorpion cross the river. When they made it to the other side, the scorpion stung the toad. ‘Scorpion!’ The toad cried out, ‘Why did you sting me, when I helped you cross the river? Is that how you reward a good deed?’ ‘I’m so sorry, Toad!’ The scorpion responded, ‘It’s just in my nature!’ It’s also the capoeirista’s nature. We must remember that capoeira came out of a very difficult period in Brazil and it went through the same struggles – economic, social and political. It underwent many transformations and will continue to do so. Nowadays, we approach it as a healthy activity that is pleasurable – you have to enjoy what you do. It helps you in your other activities, in your family and social relationships. In other words, capoeira brings a greater quality of life to you and to those around you.”

## APPENDIX 4

### Professora Lilú

I ran into Professora Lilú<sup>39</sup> – *Maria Luísa Bastos Pimenta Neves* – one afternoon at a family restaurant in the Pelourinho where Maria and I liked to go for lunch. The petite woman was seated at a table with her young daughter, and she waved me over. I had always felt slightly intimidated by Lilú’s toughness, yet underneath it I knew her to be kind – a hard worker who blazed trails for women in capoeira and tirelessly fought for those in need.

Lilú’s husband, Luciano, was a capoeira master from Minas Gerais and the two ran a school called *Capoeira Malta da Serra* in Lauro de Freitas, a suburb of Salvador. Although she was not formally part of the Filhos de Bimba School, Lilú trained at the Fundação, attended rodas and was well-liked and respected there. At eighteen, she told me, her family had moved from Rio to Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, where she had joined her first capoeira group and met her husband. Years later, in order to deepen her capoeira knowledge, she had moved to Salvador and been joined by Luciano. As a non-Bahian graduate student at the Federal University of Bahia, I knew Lilú would have interesting insights into capoeira and I could not wait to read her Master’s thesis: *Mosaico de uma Expansão: Malambas de Capoeira – A Mosaic of Expansion: Capoeira Talk* (2009).

Lilú told me that her husband had not only taught her to play capoeira, to sing and to play berimbau, but had also helped her become autonomous in capoeira. “I always knew that I was on my own in rodas,” Lilú remembered. “I understood that I had to find my own path and that no one would bring it to me. At the same time, Luciano respects women and taught me that if I trained, I could find my place in capoeira. On my thirtieth birthday, he brought me to Mestre Nenel’s academy – I’d already been in Bahia for a while and knew Mestre Cafuné, but I’d never been to the Fundação. It was an experience that changed me and my very conception of capoeira. From then on, I started going to the rodas whenever I could, and eventually, to train at the Fundação more regularly. Professora Cunchã, Mestre Nenel, Nalvinha and the professors of that period taught me and inspired me a lot. In the Fundação, I learned capoeira all over again and Mestre Nenel gave me the best present of my life by preparing me for my formatura. Although

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<sup>39</sup> This interview is actually extracted from an email exchange between Lilú and me in 2010.

I'm a formada now, I feel like an eternal student. The Fundação taught me to become more aware of the berimbau and the pandeiro. I stopped using the atabaque in the rodas with Luciano and I'm a lot more attentive to the rhythm when I play for my students. I'm not a *Regional*, because I still have my own group, which Mestre Nenel respects. He always said that I should be proud of my roots. My heart, however, beats strongly for Regional, and when I'm in the Fundação, I'm happy every single moment. For a long time, I was a *monitora* – an assistant to Luciano – and I started teaching capoeira in the ACC (*Ação Curricular em Comunidade* – Curricular Action in the Community)<sup>40</sup> course at the UFBA. It focuses on capoeira research and the teachings of the roda. We visit a diversity of capoeira communities and try to help them by organizing workshops and teaching university students about the educational potential of capoeira. Mestre Cafuné got involved with this project and the two of us began another project that was completely separate from the UFBA. We visited various capoeira groups in the Lauro de Freitas area, showing capoeira films and videos, talking to people and trying to understand how each group operates. The capoeira of the Pelourinho is a privileged one. Kids in the suburbs have nothing – they're isolated and poor – so they have *no idea* of the history of capoeira and no connection to the larger community. We hoped to do two things in Lauro de Freitas: To encourage collaborations between groups, with the aim of giving them a political clout in the cultural world, and to increase awareness of capoeira's potential in public and private schools, by educating teachers, coordinators and directors about capoeira's value." Lilú was teaching capoeira in three private schools around Salvador to make ends meet and had applied for funding to continue the social work. "Mestre Cafuné and I ran these projects from 1997 to this year," she said with regret, "but we had to stop them because of the tremendous energy and work they required, and the small return they gave."

When I asked Lilú what she thought of the situation of women in capoeira, she replied forcefully, "It's a struggle. A woman who is a real capoeirista struggles. She has to create a path alone – she can't depend on a man to lead the way – and she has to have patience and a sense of humour in those moments when she's discriminated against. She has to cry, too, because it's tough, but this has to be private – she can't afford to show it to just anyone. Women are becoming more and more present in capoeira, but I'm seeing lots of graduations, with little knowledge. Mestre Canjinquinha used to say, 'A man can train capoeira for a hundred years and

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<sup>40</sup> The ACC is on hold at the moment.

not learn capoeira.’ This is true both for men and women. It’s easy to fool yourself nowadays. The one thing that keeps me going and that gives me strength, other than the kids I teach and their parents who believe in me, is the look, the smile or comment – even a small one – of a good mestre after one of my games. Those moments are *mine*, and they happen with a certain frequency, thank God. I feel that my presence is important then – that it’s my rightful place – and no one can take from me this approval. A female capoeirista – a capoeirista in general – has to like swimming against the current, and I like it!”

“There is a prayer that I like to do in capoeira which goes like this:

*Que a capoeira me ilumine e ilumine meu caminho sempre!  
Peço aos mestres do passado, forças pra eu continuar!  
Peço aos meus antepassados forças pra continuar!*

May capoeira shine a light on me and light my path always!  
To the mestres of the past, I ask for the strength to continue!  
To my ancestors, I ask for the strength to continue!”

“I ask this with all my heart, because I believe that those anonymous warriors are of fundamental importance to the survival of capoeira up until today and we need to acknowledge them. They’re my ancestors in the capoeira lineage and I want to be a part of this family of social warriors – warriors in the roda of life! I want to express capoeira in every way – in the quick thinking of a university debate, in the captivation of a child who enchants herself with me (because we always become enchanted with the mestre), in the smooth running of my family, in the sensation of well-being that I may feel anywhere I go, and in my *rolê* escaping a foot sweep!”

## APPENDIX 5

### Information Letter – English Version

Lang Liu

Ph.D. Candidate, University of Toronto

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I, Lang Liu, am a researcher and Capoeira practitioner from the University of Toronto in Canada. As you know, I am doing research for a Doctoral thesis on Capoeira. I believe that Capoeira, although taught and lived through the body, is as valid a form of knowledge as academic knowledge and I want to learn about Capoeira through the stories of Masters and teachers. As a highly respected Master/Teacher of Capoeira, I would be honoured if you would participate in my research, sharing stories about your life and the impact of Capoeira in it, as well as your knowledge of the art form. There are ten to fifteen other Masters/Professors taking part in this study, most of them from Salvador. Your participation is entirely voluntary and would require between one or more interviews that would last a minimum of an hour each, and would be taped with your consent.

You are not obliged to respond to all questions, and may request that any particular part of the interview be omitted from the research at any point. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time during the research, up to the completion of the final draft of the thesis, without any adverse consequences. At that moment, all recordings and transcripts of your interview(s) would be handed over to you to do as you see fit. In addition, when the thesis is completed, if you wish to have the recordings and transcripts destroyed, or to have them donated to an organization of your choice, this will be respected. They will be kept in a locked cabinet at my place of residence. The data may be used for other projects, such as articles and presentations. There will be no financial remuneration, however, I will be glad to provide you with a copy of the chapter of the final thesis in which you appear, as well as any other records that you might be interested in - audio copies of your interview(s) and/or transcripts of your interview(s).

I will do my best to respect and do justice to the spirit of your teachings and life stories. If you have any questions or complaints, you can contact me by phone or email, you may speak to my Supervisor, Roxana Ng at the University of Toronto or you can contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University.

Roxana Ng 416-923-6641 ext.2283 or to the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto at 416-978-4984 / Lang Liu 416-536-3141 – langliu@oise.utoronto.ca

Do you understand all the information that I have just read to you?

Do you have any questions about this information?

Are willing to participate in this research?

Do you wish to have your name published in the thesis or do you wish to remain anonymous?

Would you agree to have your picture used in the thesis?

Would you like a copy of the chapter(s) where you appear and/or of the transcripts and/or of the audio tapes?

Would you like the transcripts destroyed after the thesis is finished or would you like them donated to the Brazilian Ministry of Culture?

Lang Liu

(Date of interview)

## APPENDIX 6

### Information Letter – Portuguese Version

Lang Liu

Candidata de Doutorado na Univerdade de Toronto

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (O.I.S.E.)

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Tel. 416-536-3141 / E-mail: langliu@oise.utoronto.ca

Eu, Lang Liu, sou pesquisadora e praticante de capoeira na Universidade de Toronto no Canadá. Como o Senhor/a Senhora/você já sabe, estou fazendo uma pesquisa sobre a capoeira pelo doutorado. Acredito que a capoeira, apesar de ser vivida e ensinada através do corpo, é tão válida enquanto forma de sabedoria do que o saber académico, e quero aprender mais sobre ela através das histórias dos mestres e professores. Visto que o Senhor/a Senhora/você é um mestre /professor(a) de capoeira respeitado(a), seria uma honra se o Senhor/a Senhora/você consentisse em participar na minha pesquisa, compartilhando histórias sobre a sua vida e o impacto da capoeira nela, e também falasse da sua sabedoria sobre a capoeira. Entre dez e quinze outros mestres/professores vão participar nessa pesquisa, a maioria em Salvador. A sua participação seria totalmente voluntária e necessitaria ao mínimo uma entrevista de uma hora que seria gravada com o seu consentimento.

O Senhor/a Senhora/Você não tem obrigação nenhuma de responder à todas as perguntas, e tem o direito de pedir que qualquer parte da entrevista seja omitida da pesquisa à qualquer ponto. O Senhor/a Senhora está livre de retirar-se da pesquisa à qualquer momento, até a conclusão do rascunho final da tese, sem consequências desfavoráveis. Naquele momento, todas as gravações e transcritos da(s) sua(s) entrevista(s) seria(m) entregadas ao Senhor/a Senhora/você. Além disso, quando a tese sera terminada, se o Senhor/a Senhora/você quiser destruir as gravações e os transcritos destruídos, ou doa-las a uma organização da sua escolha, isso será respeitado. As entrevistas serão guardadas, trancadas, na minha casa. A informação pode ser usada por mim para outros projectos, tal como artigos and apresentações.

Não terá renumeração pela sua participação, porém, estarei feliz de lhe fornecer uma cópia do capítulo final da tese onde você aparecerá, e outros registros que lhe interessem, tal como cópias audios da(s) sua(s) entrevista(s) e/ou transcritos da(s) entrevista(s).

Farei o meu possível para respeitar e representar o espírito do seus ensinamentos e da história da sua vida. Se o Senhor/a Senhora/você tiver qualquer pergunta ou queixa, pde me contactar por telefone ou email, e falar ao meu supervisor, Roxana Ng na University of Toronto ou me contactar no Departamento de Pesquisa Ética na Universidade.

Roxana Ng 416-923-6641 ext.2283 / o Departamento de Pesquisa Ética na Universidade de Toronto 416-978-4984/Lang Liu 416-536-3141 – langliu@oise.utoronto.ca

O Senhor/a Senhora/você entendeu toda a informação que foi lida?

O Senhor/a Senhora/você tem alguma pergunta sobre esta informação?

Está disposto(a) à participar nessa pesquisa?

O Senhor/a Senhora/você quer ter o seu nome publicado na tese ou prefere ficar anónimo(a)?

O Senhor/a Senhora/você consente em ter a sua foto na tese?

O Senhor/a Senhora/você gostaria de receber uma cópia do(s) capítulo(s) onde aparece nos transcritos e/ou uma gravação?

O Senhor/a Senhora/você gostaria que o transcritos sejam destruídos depois da tese ou queria doa-las (ao Ministério da Cultura por exemplo)?

Lang Liu

(Data da entrevista)

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