

Living as a Capoeirista: Social Inclusion in the Periphery of São Paulo, Brazil¹

Jaclyn Donelle McWhorter
(Oglethorpe University, U.S.A.)
jaclyndonelle@gmail.com

Urban anthropology allows us to obtain an in-depth view of the complexities and challenges that occur in the intricate spaces of cities. Ethnographies highlight the voices of marginalized populations to better comprehend local systems of knowledge. This research explores how individuals in the low-income periphery of São Paulo, Brazil, use the Afro-Brazilian martial art of *capoeira* as a tool for social inclusion in an area of high crime rates, violence and insecurity. Living as a *capoeirista* forms a philosophy of life for these practitioners and provides them with a sense of citizenship and resistance to the hegemonic societal norms. However, these unequal systems of power and oppression are recreated in the realm of *capoeira*, complicating the rhetoric reflected in the interviews. Ideally, *capoeira* in and of itself is a beautiful, holistic art, which aids in social inclusion, re-education, citizenship, resistance and even spirituality to those who open themselves up to the possibilities and experiences. However, the human element added to the concept of *capoeira* is what creates further conundrum and discontent as we add our unique experiences to everything we encounter.

Keywords: Social inclusion, development, habitus, citizenship, cultural capital.

Introduction

Movimento. (Movement/Motion). Life in a city is constant movement and motion. With larger populations, an influx of humans leads to various activities occurring at once, creating an energy or flow that my research participants describe as *movimento*. Urban anthropology is defined as: anthropology of the city, establishing the city as its unique social institution, or as anthropological research carried out in these urban areas (Prato and Pardo 2013). Although there are more people that reside in urban areas, cities have often been analysed as impersonal places of isolation due to occupational specialization. As a result, there is a lack of moral guidance, standards, or guidance for individuals to follow (see discussion in Prato and Pardo 2013).

Cities are more than just geographical spaces, but places of meaning and identity depending on what occurs in that space. Cities have the ability to give meaning to ‘who we are’. For some, this could depend on what resources are available, for others it is the opposite. A city’s lack of resources leads to a life of insecurity, in a form much different from a rural area. Citizenship, identity and belonging are constantly renegotiated in unique and creative ways (Prato and Pardo 2013). Although urban life is complex, ethnography has been proven efficient to understand the challenges associated with cities. By using ethnographic approaches, we are able to bring attention to intricate issues that arise out of the inequalities of urban life, such as marginalization, corruption, violence and conflict and movements of resistance (Pardo and Prato 2018).

Urban anthropology in Brazil tends to address three domains, which are interconnected. One area of research examines resistance, which has been reconceptualized as occurring when ‘subjects who are subjected to multiple discursive influences create modes of resistance to those

¹ I would like to thank Dr Peter Collings, the editorial board and the anonymous reviewers for *Urbanities* for their valuable comments.

discourses out of the elements of the very discourses that shape them' (Caldwell 2007:16). A second body addresses the formation of citizenship, or of what Holston (2008:4) describes as an 'insurgent citizenship', processes by which the working classes and urban peripheries have become new types of citizens based on their lived experiences and hardships of inequalities and its challenges. The third is best exemplified by approaches that attend to Freire's (1993) calls for social justice in research in urban environments. This type of research frequently employs participatory action research frameworks to encourage participants to think critically about the realities in which they live, rather than imposing research programs on those under study in a hegemonic manner. This research seeks to yield results that improve the lives of marginalized urban residents.

This article follows Freire and others to examine concepts of habitus and social inclusion for practitioners of *capoeira*, called *capoeiristas*, in the periphery of São Paulo, Brazil. The term *habitus* refers to the structures that organize the way individuals perceive the social world around them due to their own life experiences, and how they react to them (Bourdieu 1980). *Capoeira* is an Afro-Brazilian martial art with roots in anti-slavery and resistance to colonial domination. Research on *capoeira* demonstrates the origin of the art, the lessons students learn and the complications of the practice. This article addresses how *capoeira* affects the habitus of its practitioners. Through extensive participant observation in the community and a series of unstructured interviews, I demonstrate that 'living as a *capoeirista*' becomes a form of social inclusion for individuals in a marginalized community. This research employs methodologies that emphasize understanding structures of experience and consciousness, and how *capoeira* may or may not alter these phenomena.

The following section examines previous research on creating consciousness and generating agency for practitioners, formations of habitus and how it is altered with this lifestyle, and understanding the context of the practice through the lens of social inclusion. I then turn to a description of the community in São Paulo and the methods employed in the study before examining narratives that establish what it means to live as a *capoeirista*.

Habitus and Social Inclusion

Capoeira is a unique martial arts practice, and it has generated a great deal of research interest. This research includes examinations of its historical roots in resistance (Lewis 1992), studies of the movement and play practice (Downey 2005), and perspectives of a life philosophy (Almeida 1986). Taken together, this body of research tends to fit in several different frameworks. One frame understands *capoeira* as a form of the creation of conscious beings, who have agency and are able to act with agency and have a voice in their society, allowing for social inclusion. Another form understands *capoeira* in the context of bodily forms, and how it recreates the habitus of practitioners, which includes gender. In this section, I discuss the importance of these different contexts to the research.

Any discussion of consciousness and agency must begin with Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, who approached these issues as a component of what he called development, or *desenvolvimento*. Freire measures development as 'whether or not the society

is a *being for itself* (Freire 1993:163) rather than through statistical measures of per capita income or gross national product. I chose this definition for social development, as Freire grew up in the northeast of Brazil and migrated to São Paulo, as did the majority of families of my research participants. For Freire, quantitative evaluations more accurately exemplify modernization, not actual development. He argues that development is attained through cultural action in order to achieve unity within a social structure. His critique of development projects argues that developers often further marginalize the communities in which they seek to support, because projects both distract communities from addressing issues occurring in reality and reinforce hierarchies that exacerbate the inferiority of community members. Freire also analyses the role of *conscientização*, or how to learn to recognize social, political and economic contradictions and take a stand against oppression in society by becoming consciously aware of the myths that are instilled by the oppressors. He highlights the necessity of the creation of ‘conscious beings’ through education in acts of cognition, not mere transfers of information passed from one person to the next (Freire 1993:75). Freire’s approach is phenomenological because the act of creating consciousness and transforming realities relies on active lived experiences. People participate in the transformation of their world by engaging critically with their reality and taking action against its oppressive elements. Freire highlights the importance of praxis, of reflection and action, which is fundamental in transformation. Active participation is essential for conscious awareness. These processes play out through *capoeira*, as *capoeira* emerges from ‘below’, from people themselves rather than being a state-driven or organized process. *Capoeira* is different from other forms of generating consciousness due to the history of its origins and how it has evolved, discussed in the following section.

Although *capoeira* is a martial art that generates social consciousness and awareness, *capoeira* also forms part of the *habitus* for practitioners. *Capoeira* provides a structure that organizes the ways they perceive the social world around them due to their own life experiences, and how they react to them. *Capoeira* shapes the way they interact with the world in particular ways and develops an inner cognitive embodiment of how one engages with the world and opens possibilities for looking at and shaping the world. It is not only the physical elements of how they train their body, but also shaping the mind for play, trickery and deception, equipping them to be able to get along in Brazilian society and adapt quickly to social situations. Bourdieu (1980) explains how these social spaces characterize bodily experience and practice through our everyday behaviours. Therefore, it is the *capoeira* academy that becomes the setting of this lived experience of the art of *capoeira*, which is then transformed into various metaphors that embody and naturalize social structures into everyday practice. The conditionings associated with the practice of *capoeira* produce habitus, further generating behaviour and practices without a conscious predisposition of the practitioner. Therefore, this habitus created by *capoeira* affects the way these individuals act in the world. There also exists a class habitus that runs parallel to the *capoeira* habitus common to these particular individuals.

The habitus enables the experience of *capoeira* to become a social system of cognitive and motivating structures, which define the interests and actions of the agents in that space, as well as other spaces, as different individuals in the group reproduce these structures. The

objective structure of *capoeira*, together with their economic class and geographic location defines the particular modes of the production of habitus, due to the conditions in which this particular habitus operates. Their actions both inside and outside the *capoeira* academy are reinforced, creating homogeneity within the group, which are often so normalized that they are taken for granted. Another interesting facet is that these individuals neither calculate nor consciously create these norms that harmonize within the group. This allows some individuals to monopolize this form of cultural capital by establishing hierarchy within the group based on years of practice, and often resorts to elementary forms of domination by normalizing hegemonic systems within the group. These very systems of habitus created within *capoeira* define how these individuals manoeuvre and operate in Brazilian society as they consistently seek a form of social inclusion, as they struggle to survive on the margins of society (Bourdieu 1977).

The Art of *Capoeira*

The research employs Freire's critical marxist and phenomenological approach to dissect the underlying implications of *capoeira*. Due to its historical significance in Brazilian culture, *capoeira* is a strong symbol of resilience and resistance for marginalized populations in Brazil, and, more recently, abroad. *Capoeira* was first developed in the 1600s by enslaved Africans in Brazil to rebel against their owners and seek freedom (Lewis 1992). After liberation, it developed further as a means to defend their communities from outsiders. *Capoeira's* unique style incorporates kicks, defence mechanisms and acrobatics as a means for unarmed men to defend themselves against armed attackers. *Capoeira* was practiced for hundreds of years as a fighting strategy for marginalized populations to protect themselves and their communities, and was illegal up until the 1930s. Since then, it has further evolved to become an art form and philosophy of life in contemporary society, as it represents a more generalized struggle against oppression and offers a message of hope.

Capoeira becomes a form of liberation, as practitioners become so focused and exhausted, creating an escape from the harsh reality of their daily anxiety and social responsibilities in a positive manner by reflecting on its history of resilience, based on claims by research participants. *Capoeira* has evolved to provide a different form of communication between individuals, on a deeper level that has nothing to do with skin colour, personal income, social prestige, status, occupation, kinship, or previous history. It is liberation from slavery, class domination, the poverty of ordinary life and the constraints of the individual mind and body. *Capoeira* is about the here and now, the contextual intricacies that are occurring with these people in this place at this time, because if one is altered all of the energy changes. It is here that *capoeira* reveals its deep cultural patterns through ritual and play and can serve as a framework for contextualizing social encounters.

Although *capoeira* has its origins in resistance as a martial art, *capoeira* is conceptualized as *play*. *Capoeira* a game between two players, who seek to outmanoeuvre their opponents (Downey 2005). *Capoeiristas* channel their aggression and fighting instincts into play, without having to harm others. The fight of *capoeira* is only metaphorical; the real fundamental aim is

liberation, liberation from slavery, poverty, oppression and the constraints of the body. Play is a more liberating term as it expresses this freedom and creativity, as it breaks daily patterns in its improvisation, which is reflective of breaking patterns of sociocultural order. Reflecting on social encounters, the idea is to control oneself strategically, but sporadically a playful game often ends up in an actual fight and respected individuals intervene. Interestingly enough, this intervention does not always occur for various reasons that are founded in the human ego. This is due to the personal insecurity that is inherent due to the contexts in which they are subjected to in the periphery of São Paulo. However, this phenomenon is not isolated to this area alone. Many people around the world inhabit this insecurity and feel the need to prove themselves within the *capoeira* hierarchy and in Brazilian society as a whole, as they have not always been treated as citizens. This is reflected in the work of Trimbur (2013), as members of an urban boxing gym are also seeking recognition, status, dignity, and sociality because they have been excluded from the restrictive labour market. However, as members seek to escape racial, class and gender hierarchies, they continue to operate in the structures of both boxing and *capoeira*, reflecting their lived experience.

Capoeira players often unmask the hypocrisy of the social system by the consistent lessons *capoeira* provides, even outside of class time, as *capoeira* can be applied to daily life. For example, a key aspect of *capoeira* is *malícia* or trickery and cunning. This *malícia* was also a form of slave resistance through dissimulation, which has a common pattern among subordinate groups worldwide. Upon meeting a new student, a *mestre* may reach out for a handshake and then use his *malícia* to kick the student, while teaching the lesson to always be aware and never trust too much. The brutality of the lesson reflects the brutality of the wider system; behind each blessing there is potential danger so be cautious (Lewis 1992). The practice of *malícia* is the art of deceiving your opponent to attempt to trick them into a compromising position. This is the goal of the game so it is not only approved but also praised. This is welcomed, as it is said to teach *capoeiristas* how to combat real enemies in society and to be aware when others try and trick you. This notion of extending principles of *capoeira* to life outside the *roda*, or the circle in which the game is played, is the underlying theme of this work. As *Mestre* Vicente Ferreira Pastinha said, '*Capoeira é tudo que a boca come*' (*capoeira* is whatever the mouth eats), meaning it is all the things that come in life (Almeida 1986:1).

Although the discourse of *capoeira* has been researched previously, it has not been approached through the lens of a social development perspective. Today *capoeira* has evolved and is often employed in low-income communities as a tool for social development to overcome oppression and offers youth an alternative path to drug trafficking and violence. *Capoeira* is a diversion from daily life in the periphery in São Paulo. In addition, it expands beyond the *capoeira* academy to teach lessons that are useful in daily life on the streets. This research demonstrates alternatives to the development discourse by observing ways that community-based approaches apply culture as a tool for resilience and resistance in the modern struggle for citizenship and agency by providing a voice for individuals in a marginalized low-income community in the periphery of São Paulo to tell their story.

Among the *capoeiristas* in my research community, it is the feeling of having agency that defines citizenship, embodying the idea of a universal human citizenship that transcends local and national confines. This type of citizenship is the capacity of the individual to have the freedom to make choices and act upon them and to be treated by other members of society as equals. Social inclusion is a product of this form of citizenship, as members of society seek to be treated by others with respect and feel as though they are part of a community. Freire viewed development as the ability of a society to transform the structure of oppression by allowing marginalized individuals to become ‘beings for themselves’ as opposed to being integrated into the current system as ‘beings for others’, which is how development is defined for this research (Freire, 1993:163).

Capoeira is still largely a male activity, and traditionally was exclusively practiced only by males, although this is currently changing. However, this change in gender restriction is correlated with income level. A pattern has been observed that when *capoeira* is played in the middle class and gains a higher social status, there is increased participation by women, even if on an occasional basis. For these women, they participate simply because they feel more enabled due to their enculturation. However, when *capoeira* is a lower-class activity, it remains dominated by males (Lewis 1992). Although some women do participate in the academies where research was conducted, it is highly dominated by males, which based on this pattern could be due to its location in a lower income community in the periphery of São Paulo. As a white, American woman in this space, my positionality creates complexities in the research, while allowing me to have a different view of the practice and the various pressures that men feel and face as they relate to inclusion.

As *Mestre Acordeon* explains, *capoeira* is not just a sport; it is a ‘way of life’ (Almeida 1981:17). This is why *capoeira* is characterized as being a philosophy of life, as it teaches us so much more about the world around us. Therefore, *capoeira* encompasses an art form in a game as a philosophy of life that is applicable elsewhere. The game of *capoeira* teaches lessons of historical resilience in the music lyrics and cunning, which was an important lesson in slavery and is still highly applicable in modern society today, especially in the corrupt system of Brazil. It also teaches lessons on life and social situations of not letting your guard down and trusting other individuals during physical play (Lewis 1992), of challenging yourself and your body and overcoming difficulties building strength and character. Another lesson in building cultural citizenship is being accountable to the consequences of your actions and to be conscious of your behaviour because how you treat people in the game is how you will in turn be treated. *Capoeiristas* are also taught specific techniques in the game that are applied to life, such as to catch yourself when you fall and to always be alert to your surroundings to avoid danger. When someone is attacking you in *capoeira*, it is best to evade the attack and strategize a counterattack. Not everyone you come across is an adversary and experiences should be used to improve yourself because often we are our own adversaries (Essien 2008).

The research within *capoeira* demonstrates that it can insert itself in the various discourses surrounding the frames of consciousness, habitus and social inclusion. *Capoeira* enables the practitioners the ability to begin to become conscious-thinkers and more aware of

their situation in order to advocate for changes. This creates a space in their habitus that opens up different ways of moving about in society, creating a form of social inclusion. All of these observations lead naturally to the question: What does it mean to ‘live as a *capoeirista*’?

Urban Area and Methodology

This research is geographically situated in the periphery of the city of São Paulo, Brazil. São Paulo is Brazil’s largest city, with a population of over 12 million in the city limits and 21 million in the larger metropolitan area (IBGE 2017). It is estimated that 20-30 percent of the city’s population resides in urban slums often referred to as *favelas*, accounting for approximately 3 million people in the city limits. São Paulo contains the largest slum population in South America, as more than 70% of its housing is sub-standard and one-third of the city’s population is below the poverty line (UN-HABITAT 2010). São Paulo experiences a high crime rate, with offenses ranging from theft to homicide. Street crimes are an immense problem, most prevalent being armed robberies and rape. During part of my research, there were a total of 962 documented homicide victims in the city of São Paulo between July 2016-June 2017, with peripheral areas bearing the majority (SSP 2017). Due to the economic situation in Brazil, violence becomes more prevalent and exacerbated in urban areas. Insecurity then becomes normalized; it is the way of life. Insecurity is enculturated into the youth and creates a vicious cycle, as children become adolescents and later adults who then become examples for their own children, as presented in research data.

In the research community, there is a large *capoeira* group on one of the main avenues of the neighbourhood. This community sits on the outskirts of São Paulo, in the periphery as they call it, with the majority of the activity occurring on *Avenida I*, or 1st Avenue, with the hustle and bustle of traffic both on foot and with buses, cars, motorbikes and bicycles alike. The majority of the residents are lower-working class, either as unskilled factory labour or part of the informal sector, working as seamstresses or in food production offering cakes or dishes for sale from the home. Others are involved in illicit activities for sustenance income. The perceptions mentioned from an outsider residing in a different area of the city is that it is a dangerous place, ‘where the maids live’, with a social stigma attached to being from this area. For local residents, *capoeira* is often viewed as a way out of this social stigma. One of the students that graduated from this academy claims that *capoeira* has the ability to re-educate youth and offer social inclusion to create ethical citizens. He says that *capoeira* teaches people to see the world in a different form and creates new opportunities. The research critically unravels this claim in order to understand more about the discourse of development and context of *capoeira* in this community. Is *capoeira* a form of social inclusion? Could *capoeira* be a form of insurgent citizenship, cultural capital, or *conscientização*, as noted above? What other factors play into the *habitus* of the individuals of this *capoeira* community?

Following Freire’s examples, this research employs methodologies that emphasize understanding structures of experience and consciousness, and how *capoeira* may or may not alter these phenomena. To avoid imposing the expectations of western social science on local understandings, I began my field research by analysing daily human behaviour and how

individuals understand the world, before asking questions. This analysis also involved discourse on the themes that were presented by the research participants.

As a fellow practitioner, I have been practicing *capoeira* for nine years, after having lived in Brazil with family on and off since 2004 and am a fluent speaker of Portuguese. I have had a *capoeira* academy in the United States for five years with a partner, teaching classes to all ages beginning at age 5. With our group, we travel frequently in the US, as well as to Brazil and Mexico. My first visit to this community in São Paulo was in 2014, so I got to know all of my research participants very well over seven visits, each consisting of approximately one month each. I interviewed 15 individuals that represent different economic backgrounds, ages between 18-45, and varying years training *capoeira*, with the most being twenty-five and the least being five years at the level of *mestre*, *contra-mestre*, *professor* and *instrutor*. In addition to immense participant observation, or rather observant participation, I also lived in the neighbourhood with the family of the *Mestre* of the group as my host. I conducted informal unstructured interviews to collect personal biographies in the form of conversations with informants to listen to their point of view on *capoeira* as social development through the context of their individual life experiences. Each interview was approximately one hour in length and all information used was recorded with their verbal consent with IRB# IRB201700289. I will use pseudonyms in the following discussion to protect their identities.

Living as a *Capoeirista*

To uncover the common themes that underlie what it means for each of these participants to live as a *capoeirista*, the research employs a case study approach. All individuals interviewed spoke of ‘living as a *capoeirista*’, forming a philosophy of life for these practitioners.

The *mestre* of this group, José, is 42 years old and began *capoeira* at the age of 18. Since he began *capoeira*, he noticed a multitude of positive discourses within *capoeira* and he believed they should be shared in society. He says,

‘In *capoeira* you have access to an uncommon happiness that only *capoeira* has, that sensation of freedom from everything.’ Most practitioners of the art did not have access to liberty due to life conditions. José, goes on to say, ‘Everyone has problems and difficulties, but *capoeira* liberates them from unpleasant situations because it helps them forget the problems, stress and tiredness and they want to share this with their community.’ He tries to show this world to everyone around him because: ‘If everyone shares this philosophy with those close to them, we can transform the world for the better.’

José explains that *capoeira* liberates us from the hidden slavery that society obligates us to live and teaches us to respect others. Everyone endures problems and difficulties, but *capoeira* liberates them from unpleasant situations because it helps them forget the problems, stress and tiredness and therefore, they want to share this with their community. Therefore, these ideologies exemplify the work of this *mestre*. José explains how living as a *capoeirista* provides numerous advantages:

‘*Capoeira* is the game of life... it is the adjective of ability for any other activity that you choose [...] If you direct your experience in *capoeira*, in any other situation you will have a card up your sleeve that *capoeira* gave you [...] Through the “*jogo de cintura*” [ability to escape difficulties] that *capoeira* gave you, your trickery in a good sense; you will get along well in dialogue with others [...] *Capoeira* leaves you alert, prepared for diverse situations, a surprise. *Capoeira* has so many surprises [...] so many situations that you don’t predict, that you will be prepared for any surprise that life gives you.’

For José, living as a *capoeirista* represents the struggle for freedom and equality. He explains that *capoeira* provides the sensation of freedom, as it offers the vision of equality and happiness. He takes the lessons he learns inside *capoeira* to other situation in his daily life to adapt to different types of people, as he has to adapt while playing *capoeira* in the *roda*. The philosophy of *capoeira* presents advantages in his life because he remains aware and alert in all situations. It also opens the ability to believe in yourself and overcome challenges that are presented in life. This sense of freedom relates to the concepts of development and social inclusion as confidence enables opportunities.

Others spoke of the security that *capoeira* can offer, and discuss how they have experienced extreme violence and trauma in their neighbourhoods. *Capoeira* allows practitioners to share positive experiences with each other and live in a different reality. *Capoeira* offers an outlet for youth in urban peripheries. *Capoeira* provides a different perspective of life and opens their mind to different realities and possibilities. It also changes their life because it changes their expectations and teaches that violence is not the way to solve problems. As a result, these youth have a better outlook on life, with many good examples to follow. Here are in-depth statements from different research participants that demonstrate the harsh reality of living in the periphery of São Paulo, and how *capoeira* creates social inclusion and forms citizenship.

Carlos, with the graduation level of *contra-mestre*, began *capoeira* at 19 and is currently 34. He has an even different perspective of this concept.

‘I lived in a very poor place in a favela and we didn't have many resources, and the things that were shown to you daily were negative things. People using drugs or death, thieves and from there it goes on [...] I want to share [the happiness of *capoeira*] with others because I came from a place like this, and through *capoeira* I found another reality [...] In *capoeira*, I learned how to differentiate what was right and wrong, many people dying in front of me and everything, but *beleza* (it’s all good). And through this that I experienced, I had to find *capoeira*.’

Carlos said that once he found *capoeira* and met so many different types of people in *capoeira* that it began to open his mind. ‘This helped me in question of what? Experience of life.’ In *capoeira*, he says he evolved as a person and changed his mentality. He thinks differently about society and the world because it has opened up his mind.

Another participant, Paulo, began *capoeira* at the age of 9, but stopped in his early 20s and is now married with children. He said *capoeira* changed his life, because without it he thinks he would be doing bad things in the streets. For Paulo, the *capoeira* professors always guided him to stay away from drinking, drugs, trafficking and thievery. He always had lots of people in *capoeira* to look up to and show him the right path to follow. Paulo stated that living as a *capoeirista* is believing in yourself and in your dreams. It gave him the incentive to be a better person and do the right things, because he had good examples in *capoeira*. *Capoeira* taught him to have manners and gave him an education that he would not have received otherwise:

‘If I did not choose the path of *capoeira*, I would have chosen another path that is not good [...] drugs, alcohol, parties [...] things that throw you far from a healthy life, a life with quality. Of my 7 or 8 friends that started [*capoeira*] with me, today 3 are dead, 2 are in jail and 3 are good working and studying [...] *Capoeira* also was an incentive to be a better person, because we come from a difficult place, where society throws you down and tells you that you will not be anything, and you believe in this and follow the wrong path, the path of drugs, robbery, all the perverse paths. *Capoeira* for me was the biggest incentive [...] during that time if I did not have good examples I would be in the streets learning bad things and never have contact with *capoeira* because if you start in this life here in São Paulo we say if you don’t have a good head it is a path of no return [...] Without the influence of *capoeira*, I could be in jail, I could be doing the wrong things, I could be dead, I don’t know — I could be dead.’

Others have different stories of how *capoeira* shapes their life. Gabriel began *capoeira* at 14, and is currently 23 at the level of professor. He explained how *capoeira* was very important for him.

‘If it wasn’t for *capoeira*, I wouldn’t know what I would be; I wouldn’t have an outlook on life. In *capoeira*, I found my heroes. The people that are references for me, I found a lot of “dads²” in *capoeira*, when I didn’t have one.’

For Gabriel, living as a *capoeirista* is having it be a part of your life all day, everyday. He uses *capoeira* tactics to pay attention while he is out in the streets, and he teaches this to others. *Capoeira* changed his life because it changed his life expectations and taught him that violence is not the way to solve problems. *Capoeira* gave him a better outlook on life, with many good examples to follow.

‘Because in my house my dad has a lot of problems with my mom, I already have grown tired of my dad wanting to kill my mom, and my dad lives using a lot of drugs and all of those things, and this was a big influence on me. I had to listen to everyone in the streets saying, “you are going to be the same as your dad, *filho de peixe peixinho é* (the son of a fish is a little fish), you will be this, you will be that”. So, all of this messed with my head, until I discovered *capoeira*. Since I started *capoeira*, everything changed, and I no longer thought that I would be the same as

my dad. I had a different perspective of life, because before I didn't even have a perspective of life, like, I didn't even know what I would be.'

Although research participants demonstrate the *capoeira* is an alternative to drug trafficking and violence, many individuals choose the latter path in order to have rapid access to greater amounts of cash, as opposed to other forms of employment. In addition, it is difficult for someone to be both a drug-trafficker and a *capoeirista*, as the drug factions do not allow their members to be a part of outside communities to reduce risk of exposure.

Reflections

Capoeira was created in deceit, deception, disguise and trickery as a means of resistance among enslaved Africans; it was developed as a tool to fight for their freedom. Therefore, we must look deeper than the surface to unravel particular truths about this philosophy of life. Although interviews created a discourse around such topics as education and friendship, I would still propose that there exists much disguise in the reality, due to the human aspect in the martial art. It is questionable to trust other *capoeiristas*, perhaps reflective of humans in our daily lives. *Capoeiristas* often use *malandragem*, this cunning or trickery previously mentioned, to appease others and tell them what they want to hear, rather than disclosing the actual truth. Then they secretly praise their own actions in doing so and explain the matter by stating: 'It's *capoeira*'. You must have *malícia*, or cunning, to make it in *capoeira* as in life. This is already a methodological problem with interviewing, so perhaps even more so in this case.

This research demonstrates that *capoeira* can be viewed as a form of social inclusion. As the research participants have mentioned, *capoeira* gave them a space in society that was not previously available to them. *Capoeira* issues them the opportunity of being included and having value as a citizen of a community and larger world in which we live in. Due to the complex world system, hegemonic domination often leads to the oppression of particular groups based on income, race, gender and place. *Capoeira* allows individuals from the periphery of São Paulo to resist that domination and create a form of insurgent citizenship for themselves. *Capoeira* provides belonging and social inclusion on the micro level as well. Participants attend classes regularly and become part of the social group, as they often get together during the day, before and/or after classes to create friendship and camaraderie. Members often travel to other *capoeira* events together and create a social bond with other members of the group.

However, another topic to be unravelled is the system of structure and power. In the periphery of São Paulo, many of my research participants talk often of oppression and 'the system' and how the system is constantly brainwashing and manipulating humans to have less power and therefore take away their agency as individuals. The system causes them to live in a constant state of insecurity with economic instability, due to lack of quality education and lack of resources, leading to increased violence. This diminishes their citizenship and causes them to feel anger inside. Therefore, many of these individuals are the products of generations of insecurity, carrying the trauma that occurs as a result of being excluded from society and trying to survive with their circumstances.

Consequently, within *capoeira* they recreate these same systems of power they wish to defeat. They have created a boys' club with a gang-like, mafia mentality, which has the possibility of shaping the ways of thinking of group members, starting at the top and dispersing through different levels throughout, depending on hierarchy and gender.

It is very problematic when individuals do not question hierarchy or authority, especially when abuse is present, such as emotional abuse during training or sexual abuse during events. Some only have *capoeira* and need *capoeira* to escape from their harsh realities in peripheral urban areas. In addition, humans often react to trauma, rather than heal themselves from it, due to cultural norms and lack of resources. It is this constant reaction that is part of the human condition, as is the ability of awareness to be better. However, there exists a separation between those that realize when these instances of abuse occur and others that do not, and therefore abuse often becomes normalized as a means to obtain a false sense of power.

Antonio bluntly states:

'Unfortunately, not all, but some are like this, and are good *capoeiristas* and are like this: "I am good at *capoeira*, I am going to go out of the country, I am going to make lots of money, and I will fuck lots of women." This is what kills *capoeira*; the ego of the *capoeirista*.'

He explains that a lot of *capoeiristas* lack professionalism because they travel often, but do not have any ethics and do not know how to administer or lead a group.

'I think that a *capoeirista* is egotistical and thinks everything is his, "é meu é meu é meu, quero pra mim" (It's mine, it's mine, it's mine, I want it for me).'

He continues:

[*Capoeira*] 'is an expression of freedom, to get out of slavery, and unfortunately today many times a student ends up living in slavery. He ends up living in discrimination, because there are *mestres* that discriminate students [...] *capoeiristas* are very jealous. They are afraid to lose their space, they are afraid to suddenly lose the shine they have [...] this is bullshit.'

Maria gives another example:

'It's very pretty to say today there are so many women in *capoeira* and all of that. Yes, there is. There are a lot for the men to fuck, this is the reality. There are a lot of women in *capoeira* that the guys are using and abusing, destroying lots of things because of all this, all of the things that us women are chasing after the guys end up fucking up. This is how it works.'

Can *capoeira* in fact be used as a tool for social inclusion and to re-educate youth, and hence create citizenship in conscious thinkers? *Capoeira*, after all, pulls youth out of the streets and provides a community where there did not previously exist a healthy environment or support network. Some of my participants went through very tumultuous and violent situations, and *capoeira* provided an escape from these harsh conditions. But a pertinent question to ask is, what exactly is social development and who defines it? While some of my participants

created profound friendships in *capoeira* and a support system, others have stated and they have witnessed a harsh treatment to those who go against this very system that has been created in *capoeira*. *Capoeira* provides one set of values and skills for getting along in society, but it also replicates society, which is problematic. The malice and trickery characteristic of *capoeira* means that alliances and friendships are inherently unstable, often to gain more power either through prestige in the group or wealth. Prestige can be exemplified in the form of betraying one to get approval of another, and wealth by simply exchanging friendship for money, as the higher cords are often paid to attend events. One of my participants recently stated that he has more loyal friends in drug trafficking, that these types of things would never occur on the streets because they do not betray one another because it is immoral and repercussions are more serious and can lead to death. However, this is not to say that the trafficking community has higher morals and cares more about the way they treat others — just there has to exist more trust and loyalty while engaging in illegal activity as the consequences for betrayal are more dire and could lead to imprisonment or again death. So, what can lead to loyalty and morality? And is social development just that, achieving a higher connection with other human beings so that we must all live on this earth and survive?

Social development is not always defined in this way. It is too often viewed as economic development: having money. Society often values money over personal relationships and individuals seek to have increasing wealth to therefore have increasing power. However, in this research project, I look to the definition offered by the native Brazilian Paulo Freire who defines social development as ‘whether or not the society is a *being for itself*’. He argues that development can be attained through cultural action in order to achieve unity in the social structure. So, what does unity in the social structure look like? Unity is derived from these very feelings of connectedness, which is often a result of cultural similarities. If the goal were to achieve unity in the social structure, there would be little conflict, high degree of concern for the welfare of others in that society and for the society as a whole (Miller 2010). In terms of this definition, I am not sure if *capoeira* does provide for that cultural action to achieve social unity.

If we shift the focus to Freire’s role of *conscientização*, this discourse becomes even more complex. *Conscientização* is how to learn to recognize social, political and economic contradictions and take a stand against oppression in society by becoming consciously aware of the myths that are instilled by the oppressors. Based on the data collected for this project, *capoeira* does stimulate some critical thinking about societal forces, but different participants repeated the majority of examples provided in my interviews. It appears the *mestre* thought critically about society and passed on his experiences to his students. They then repeat what he has taught them, but I am not sure if they think critically on their own because they are not allowed to be independent thinkers, as they are not allowed to go against the system that oppresses individual agents in *capoeira*. This is highly reflective of the society in which they live in. Here, the *mestre* has replaced the controlling elite, perhaps in the form of a dictator and whomever chooses to go against his ideology risks being ridiculed in the group and losing prestige or even being expelled from the group. So, a hierarchical power structure exists in both

realms. Even worse he could risk economic loss if he is a student who teaches or has chosen *capoeira* for his livelihood, and is thus exiled from *capoeira* by reputation.

Capoeira is a philosophy of life, although it is not applicable to all those who practice *capoeira*, just as all those who practice *capoeira* are not *capoeiristas* or embody *capoeira*. There are different degrees of absorption of the art into the consciousness of the human being, therefore leading to different results of the question at hand. Ideally, *capoeira* in and of itself is a beautiful, holistic art, which aids in social inclusion, re-education, citizenship, resistance and even spirituality to those who open themselves up to the possibilities and experiences. However, the human element added to the concept of *capoeira* is what creates further conundrum and discontent as we add our unique experiences to everything we encounter.

Due to its past deeply embedded in many forms of liberation, *capoeira* is often viewed in modern times as that which liberates the oppressed. Because oppression takes various forms, this can be liberation from society, the system, the routine, the body and even the mind. There are numerous dimensions to liberation, that which the final is most difficult in obtaining freedom. But *capoeira* has been providing a path for all forms of liberation for centuries, leaving space for humans to utilize its philosophy and story to overcome many of life's conundrums both inside and outside the realm of direct *capoeira* space within the academy. It is a knowledge base that practitioners can take with them to all aspects of their lives, reminding them of the fundamentals to the art. However, the practitioner must open themselves up to these possibilities for this to prove true. There are many practitioners of *capoeira* that are not capable of understanding and embodying the concepts of the art, which therefore complicate these notions. So, it is not to say that *capoeira* allows for freedom and liberation 100% of the time to 100% of those who choose to partake in the activity. Rather, *capoeira* provides the path and opens the possibility to another dimension of learning or being as an active agent in society.

References

- Almeida, B. 1981. *Capoeira, A Brazilian Art Form*. Palo Alto, CA: Sun Wave.
- Almeida, B. 1986. *Capoeira, A Brazilian Art Form: History, Philosophy, and Practice*. 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1980. Structures, Habitus, Practices. From *The Logic of Practice. Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*. Ed. McGee and Warms. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Caldwell, K. 2007. *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Downey, G. 2005. *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from and Afro-Brazilian Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Essien, A. 2008. *Capoeira Beyond Brazil: From a Slave Tradition to an International Way of Life*. Berkeley, CA: Blue Snake Books.
- Freire, P. 1993. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder New York.

- Holston, J. 2008. *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). 2014. Cidades: São Paulo. <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/sp/sao-paulo/panorama> Accessed 23 March 2015.
- Lewis, J. L. 1992. *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, W. 2010. Social Unity. *Interest Website for Social Theory*. <http://www.ifst.info/ifstessaysocialunity.html> Accessed 14 June 2018.
- Prato, G. B. and Pardo, I. 2013. 'Urban Anthropology'. *Urbanities*, 3(2): 80-110.
- Pardo, I. and Prato, G. B. 2018. Introduction: Urban Ethnography Matters-Analytical Strength, Theoretical Value and Significance to Society. In I. Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Urban Ethnography*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Secretaria da Segurança Pública de São Paulo (SSP). 2017. Transparência. *São Paulo: Governo do Estado São Paulo*. <http://www.ssp.sp.gov.br/transparenciassp/> Accessed 5 June 2018.
- Trimbur, L. 2013. *Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- UN-HABITAT and Fundação Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados (SEADE). 2010. São Paulo: A Tale of Two Cities. *Cities and Citizens Series: Bridging the Urban Divide*. Nairobi, Kenya: UN-HABITAT.