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Capoeira Angola Diversifying the University: sowing an *Ecology* of *Knowledges* in the Performing Arts

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ABSTRACT – Capoeira Angola Diversifying the University: sowing an *Ecology of Knowledges* in the Performing Arts – Using testimonies from students after one semester practicing the art of capoeira, we underscore the potentiality of Capoeira Angola for actor training, as well as for promoting the self-knowledge of human beings and their social action. It is the playfulness and complexity of Capoeira Angola's martial game, congregating space-body skills, music and poetry, in addition to a history of resistance and resilience as African heritage, constructing an *Ecology of Knowledges* that contributes to performing arts training and also to the embracing of Afro-diasporic popular culture by Brazilian universities.

Keywords: **Capoeira. Actor Training. University. Folk Knowledge.**

RÉSUMÉ – La Capoeira Angola Diversifie l'Université: semer l'Écologie des Savoirs dans les Arts du Spectacle – Depuis les témoignages d'un groupe d'étudiants, consultés après le bref contact d'un semestre avec cet art, on a essayé de signaler le potentiel de la Capoeira Angola pour la formation d'artiste du Spectacle, bien comme pour la connaissance de soi d'un être humain en formation et son action sociale. La complexité et ludicité de la Capoeira Angola unissent compétences corporelles, de la musique et de la poésie. En plus, cet art apporte en soi une histoire de résistance et résilience lié à l'ascendance africaine. Toutes ces caractéristiques peuvent contribuer à la composition intégrale d'une *Écologie des Savoirs* qui contribue à la formation aux arts de la scène et aussi à l'accueil de la culture populaire afro-brésilienne à l'université.

Mots-clés: **Capoeira. Formation d'Acteur. Université. Sagesse Populaire.**

RESUMO – A Capoeira Angola Diversificando a Universidade: semeando *ecologia de saberes* nas Artes da Cena – A partir de depoimentos de alunos, coletados após breve contato de um semestre com esta arte, procura-se reforçar a potencialidade da Capoeira Angola para o treinamento do artista da cena, e também para promover o autoconhecimento do ser humano e sua atuação social. É a ludicidade e a complexidade do jogo marcial da Capoeira Angola que congrega habilidade espaço-corporal, musical e poética, além de sua história de resistência e resiliência da ancestralidade africana, compondo uma *ecologia de saberes* que contribui à formação em Artes da Cena e também ao acolhimento da cultura popular de matriz africana na universidade brasileira.

Palavras-chave: **Capoeira. Treinamento do Ator. Universidade. Conhecimento Popular.**

Iê¹ – Foi agora que eu cheguei (it's now that I've arrived)

The article underscores the potential of Capoeira Angola — a non-violent combat game, which values the trickery and beauty of movements, music and poetry — in student training in higher education in Brazil, emphasizing its influence on the careers of the so-called Performing Arts, mainly dance and theater. Capoeira Angola is an art of African origins whose history mixes with the formation of Brazil and its culture, and therefore enables ways of (self) recognition of the role of the Afro-descendant population in Brazilian society, as well as awareness of the institutionalized violence against Afro-descendants in Brazil. In this sense, Capoeira Angola can impact students from all areas as a gateway to anti-racist awareness and struggle. To exemplify its influence on the performing arts, excerpts from testimonies will be presented here, collected from students at the end of a semester of weekly sessions of this Afro-Brazilian art. We wish to reinforce the idea that the presence of Capoeira Angola in higher education is an important element — if not fundamental, in the case of Brazil — in providing the epistemological diversity that is urgently needed in academia; Capoeira Angola can and must cooperate to the construction of an *ecology of knowledges* within the spaces of university education, as will be discussed below.

Before describing the activities that were carried out, a brief explanation is in order about the background of Capoeira at the institution where the experience took place: the Department of Corporal Arts of the Institute of Arts (IA) of the University of Campinas (Unicamp). At Unicamp, the Performing Arts course includes Capoeira in the syllabus of the disciplines Body Techniques: Fight I and Body Techniques: Fight II². Although the course excels in offering capoeira in its program, albeit within these elective disciplines, the department currently does not have a specialist professor on the faculty team, which hinders and even often prevents the continued offering of these disciplines. The only specialist professor was Mestre Antônio³, at a time when professionals could still be hired without a PhD or even a higher education degree. Mestre Antônio taught from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. In the 1990s, Mestre Tulé⁴ also taught, in an extracurricular way, bringing together students from various courses at the University, including the IA. At the IA there is also a Dance department whose program

does not include capoeira as a training element per se, but where it was present in the form of extension courses from 2006 to 2009, offered by the then professors Lara Rodrigues Machado and Eusébio Lobo. From the beginning of the 2010s until his retirement as an employee in 2012, Mestre Jahça⁵, a disciple of Mestre Antônio, also collaborated in the Performing Arts department, offering capoeira classes in addition to being responsible for technical activities of the department's daily operation. Since Mestre Jahça's retirement, the IA has not had another specialist of capoeira, which has been taught discontinuously, with occasional collaborators.

In this context, the subject was taught by the author as a guest professor during the second semester of 2017 and in the first and second semesters of 2018. In each semester, there were 15 weekly sessions of two hours each (Fridays from 2 pm to 4 pm), dedicated to the practice of Capoeira Angola movements and music, within the tradition of Mestre João Pequeno de Pastinha⁶, under the guidance of Mestre Jogo de Dentro⁷ and the group Semente do Jogo de Angola, of which the author has been a member since 1997, acting as *contramestre* (a kind of assistant master) since 2018. The activities of each session followed a specific sequence so as to always include warm-up, stretching, strength and balance activities, in movements exercised individually and later in pairs, in addition to the practice of musical instruments (*berimbau*, tambourine, *reco-reco*, *agogô* and *atabaque*), of singing and playing in the *roda* (the fighting circle), usually performed at the end of each session. Starting with a general warm-up and focusing on supports, we developed the movements to incorporate the *ginga* (swing steps), in attack and defense sequences repeated in groups and in pairs. With the increasing skills, we also increased the sequence of movements to be trained, interspersing them with stretching and balance challenges. Within the flexible spirit of Capoeira Angola, the specifics of each activity were developed in order to suit the particularities of each student and of the group as a whole in that specific session, adapting the content to physical limitations, pain, or even the lunch menu, sometimes taken a few minutes before class. For a more detailed view about the used movements and training practices, and also about the pedagogical evolution of training within the tradition of Capoeira Angola, we suggest the work by Goulart (2018).

In addition to movements training and experiencing the game itself, as well as the capoeira music inside the *roda*, some of the instruments were also built during the classes, such as the *berimbau*, *caxixi* and *reco-reco*. The 2017 class was also able to experience the final stages (stringing and tuning) of the assembly of an *atabaque* (hand drum) with Mestre Toshio⁸. With these practices, we sought to give all students the basic notions of these crafts so common to capoeira and that go hand in hand with body training.

In two of the semesters we received a visit from Mestre Jogo de Dentro and, in one semester, a visit from Mestre Bigo⁹ (also known as Francisco 45 de Pastinha), to teach and talk to the class, moments that were always of great importance for the students, as we will see in the reports. There were no purely theoretical classes, but some texts and audiovisual sources were indicated to supplement the knowledge about facts and historical figures of capoeira, information that also appeared, naturally, through music and informal conversation during the sessions.

As there was no formal assessment for the class, it was proposed that each student should write freely about a topic related to capoeira, or about the impact of this experience, even if briefly, on their individual training. This second option was the most chosen, probably due to the fact that most students had never worked with capoeira before. Without any guidance from the teacher regarding the chosen themes, the students wrote short testimonies which were shared with the class.

Initially, there was no intention of using such testimonies in a research, or even in an article like the one presented here. We just wanted to get feedback from the students on the qualities exercised in the brief contact with Capoeira Angola. However, many testimonies coincided on points considered important by the students themselves, related to both professional training and sociocultural (self) knowledge. Therefore, we decided to collect some excerpts among the most expressive that exemplified the power of Capoeira Angola within the university context. Our analysis is contextualized and supported by the works briefly described below.

***Jogo bonito, esse jogo é de Angola* (beautiful game, this game is from Angola) – Capoeira sowing knowledge**

There is no room here for an extensive description of the development of capoeira, whether of what is called today Capoeira Angola or of other styles such as Capoeira Regional or Capoeira Contemporânea (contemporary). For that we recommend reading the excellent reviews by Assunção (2004; 2019), which includes the controversial narratives about the African roots of this fight-dance in colonial Brazil; its urban development and social insertion and the strong institutional repression suffered in the 19th century; the consolidation/creation in Bahia of the current Capoeira styles (Angola, Regional and Contemporânea) in the first half of the 20th century; and the expansion of those styles to other regions of Brazil and the world. For a deeper analysis of its internationalization process, its discourse paradoxes and idiosyncrasies and its current market role, we suggest the work by Brito (2015). And for a broad and artistic view of capoeira codification, institutionalization and invention processes in which the different styles and groups (as well as their teaching methods) are distinguished, we suggest the work by Höfling (2019) which, in addition to the tradition/modernity dichotomy, shows us the creation/recreation interactions between capoeira masters and the artistic collectives that first exhibited this Brazilian cultural expression on stages abroad, including and transforming the game/fight into impressive performances, which are still part of Brazil's iconography abroad. As Höfling shows, the intersections between capoeira and performing arts date back to the 1960s and 1970s, and its use as complementary training for actors and dancers is hardly new but not yet recognized in the Performing Arts curricula at Brazilian universities.

The researcher and *contramestra* of Capoeira Angola Renata de Lima Silva (2012, p. 1) argues that we can have it “[...] not only as a potential element for the training of the actor and the dancer, but as a place/moment in which the body's artistic power can be observed.” On the artistic training side, this author presents both the training and the game itself as challenging spaces that, in addition to the physical practice, deal with risks and require a constant state of alertness, of preparedness, provided by this expansion of body perception in space (Silva, 2012). Silva, recalling the moment when she first witnessed a *roda* at the Santo Antônio Fort (Salvador/Brazil),



well reflects the enchantment that many feel when discovering Capoeira Angola: “[...] the movement had just revealed itself to me as a thought by the body thought. And the body, in turn, as something made up of a tangle of culture threads” (Silva; Falcão, 2021, p. 52); and also something that, when considering the historical-cultural process involved, is, “from an aesthetic point of view, [...] brilliant, because it was a dance that was the result of a consciousness that was not only corporeal, but also cultural” (Silva; Falcão, 2021, p. 54).

It is in this exercise of facing challenges, in enhancing physical aptitude, in a state of alertness disguised as indifference, with mischief and improvisation, and also in reviving and valuing the history and culture of African origin that Capoeira Angola brings tools to contribute to an *ecology of knowledges* that enriches artistic training beyond the aesthetic and performative enjoyment of each one. In the words of the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *ecology of knowledges* means “[...] recognizing the co-presence of different types of knowledge and the need to study the affinities, divergences, complementarities and contradictions that exist between them” (Santos, 2019a, p. 26). Santos confronts us with the urgency of an *ecology of knowledges* that encompasses epistemologies other than the Eurocentric/Western ones that have commonly been present in areas of academic knowledge, in order to also cultivate the so-called popular knowledge: those *artisanal* kinds of knowledge such as of native populations, of popular organizations, often described as being *peripheral*. The central knowledge usually cultivated in academia, coming from the *North* — not just in the geographic sense, but also resulting from dominance and colonization — urgently needs to relearn with the epistemologies from the *South*, the peripheral and artisanal knowledge, defined also by Santos as *non-scientific* — the practical, empirical, vernacular kinds of knowledge; which, despite many differences between them, have one thing in common: they are produced together with social practices, never detached from them (Santos, 2019a, p. 173).

The incorporation of this knowledge produced in the ‘daily life of the *people*, in their celebrations, their rites and habits, in their social relationship cycles and with nature, has the power to invigorate higher education, especially in order to keep the university public, free and comprehensive in its mission to include and serve the whole of society (Santos, 2019b). Often

these knowledges from the *South* are, like Capoeira, forms of *embodied* knowledge, knowledge of the bodies of agents of transformation, of agents of social resistance, of concrete, living bodies; the body that suffers oppression and resists (Santos, 2019a, p. 33). This is the knowledge of the “body that spans time,” it is the body of the ancestors, it is even a “temporal extension of the body”; it is that “body that has the marks of the abyssal lines” — the sinuous, imprecise and painful lines that divide center/periphery, colonist/colonized; it is “[...] the body as episteme: it is the body that knows, that transmits knowledge. It is the body that tells the body what body it is!” (Santos, B.S., 2020). The body of the *capoeira*, of the master who instructs the disciple, it is this body that spans time: the body that was enslaved in the colony, which sought freedom, today is the body of the oppressed — socially, economically and culturally — who seeks to be free, facing the contemporary abysses of daily life: famine, institutionalized racism and social prejudice. Capoeira is this art, of living bodies that connect times — a multifaceted art that perpetuates itself through the bodies of the *capoeiras* — in the *vadiação*¹⁰, in the *roda*, where the game/fight takes place and where multiple languages are mobilized, from the most verbal to the most indirect, implied and mysterious: the strikes, defenses and dodges; the facial expressions and mimes, the music and the choir (Moro, 2016, p. 74).

These multiple languages, the bodily resourcefulness, the interaction with the other participants in the surroundings, in short, the various skills involved in the game make capoeira a complex art, an art for lifelong learning, but which can also mobilize many powers during a short time of practice. Despite its expansion across all continents, in Brazil, paradoxically, capoeira is not yet properly inserted in education. Despite its clear transdisciplinary importance, it is still relatively poorly addressed in research or teaching, including at universities.

The corporal, musical and poetic exercise of the capoeira game inside the *roda* provides union, congregating everyone at that moment and, often, also for life, or a large part of it. The intense exchanges during the capoeira’s *roda* and also during the weekly training sessions create a community often united around a master. Having memory, orality and rituality as its fundamental pillars, as suggested by the educator and *capoeirista* Pedro Abib (2004, p. 60), Capoeira Angola is perpetuated in the collective memory by

the figure of the master (Abib, 2004, p. 64), whose role is key to the preservation and transmission of knowledge to new generations, predominantly done orally (Abib, 2004, p. 66). It is through the figure of the master that the art is perpetuated and amplified; it is he/she who propagates, maintains and also updates the ritual. It is the ritual that “allows this transposition of the here and now to immemorial times, to sacred places, from where everything originated”. It is the ritual that allows the “[...] connection with the sacred, [...] as an origin, as a source that continually evokes meanings” (Abib, 2004, p. 69).

The master acts in the present and is also the bridge to the past and to the future of this art, which fundamentally happens in the *roda* — the space to which all actions converge. The researcher and master of Capoeira Angola Rosângela C. Araújo sees the *roda* as a “[...] space where the sacred dynamics of knowledge construction is ritualistically consecrated. [...] Thus, more than simply evaluating the performance of each individual, the *roda* assesses the behavior of those who instruct, those who guide this or that *capoeirista*” (Araújo, 2004, p. 25). The *roda* connects the present and the past, making explicit individuals and groups, students and teachers. Capoeira, with its orality, history and ancestry, (re)connects individuals to their collectives; it is an art that has the potential to contribute in several areas, not only the Performing Arts as will be detailed here, but also human development in general. As emphasized by Araújo, bringing Capoeira Angola to the educational environment aims at a truly holistic world — in the sense of totality — through a pedagogy that considers the integrality of the being and its multiple temporalities, and that has the body itself as the basis of “its own historical-experiential context to point out the educational practice” and its consequences (Araújo, 2004, p. 40). Abib goes further, stating that Capoeira Angola, as a popular culture manifestation, is a source of humanity — where one learns about solidarity, cooperation, respect for differences, humility and partnership (Abib, 2004, p. 161). One seeks to experience the collective and individual perceptions, simultaneously, within one’s own memory and body skills, and also in the history of the capoeira game and its practitioners, mastering and exercising diverse body skills such as strength, balance, elasticity, control; as well as skills of the *soul* such as musicality, rhythm, poetry; and of the spirit such as (re)connection with

ancestry, socioeconomic solidarity and cultural acceptance. And this can reverberate in other areas of the lives of developing youngsters, in their professional, cultural and social activities.

The inclusion of capoeira in the performing arts curricula of Brazilian universities, specifically Capoeira Angola, would mean the recognition and appreciation of Afro-Brazilian, artisanal and embodied knowledge — knowledge from the *South* — that would complement and dialogue with the hegemonic knowledge of the *North*, already commonly included in the curricula and generally originated in Europe or the USA. Capoeira, taught in all its aspects, would incorporate its episteme into the university environment: it is necessary to *vadiar*^x, to sing and to play; it is necessary to build/tune its instruments, compose its music, build its social spaces. It is necessary to listen to the masters and bring them to teach, without interfering with their personal way of teaching. What is expected is to seek “[...] an identity that is not the one imposed by Europeans, even if their influences remain” in our bodies and minds (Simão; Sampaio, 2018, p. 674).

Although it is not the only martial art performed to the sound of music, in Capoeira Angola the music includes rhythm, singing and poetry and plays a fundamental role in leading the *anima*, the soul of the activity in the *roda*: the body dialogue is modulated by the *berimbau*, the master’s singing and the choir’s response, along with the cadence of the *bateria* — the set of musical instruments — with its various elements (Stotz, 2010; Abib, 2004). In a dialogue of attack and defense, the attention to one’s own body, to the body of the other, and also to the body of the collective, which responds to the singing and sways the game, it is exercised in the circle shared by all.

This collection of knowledge, added to the inherent strength of capoeira social resistance, has been a research subject in several areas of knowledge¹¹. Curiously, the first master’s dissertation about capoeira was written in the area of Dance and in English, by Eusébio Lobo da Silva (Mestre Pavão), under the guidance of the innovative Katherine Dunham, at her professional training center in the USA (Ferraz, 2017; Silva, 1980). Twenty-five years later, he defended his habilitation thesis on the same subject, explaining the aesthetic body in/of capoeira and discussing its broad possibilities:



In the past, the place of capoeira was only the open space: the street, the backyard, the street party. These spaces [...] will continue to feed, to provide great *mestres*, because the moment they cease to exist, capoeira will probably be different. [...] We have reached a point in capoeira when we have more practitioners in academies than in the original spaces of its practice. A new space full of new styles, interpretations or reinventions. Within this new reality, capoeira is now disguised as sport, education, therapy and even theoretical material, as in this case. Even so, it continues to fulfill its primordial role of bringing humans closer to their essence (Silva, 2008, p. 20).

According to Mestre Pavão, capoeira produces *ginga*¹² (swinging), dodges, sways, disguises itself and enters new environments, permeates new cultures, but remains linked to its origins. The *ginga*-knowledge, the popular wisdom, resists and asserts itself in bodies that also penetrate through cracks the spaces of the so-called literate wisdom, just as Mestre Pastinha did almost a century ago, when he acted as one of its great propagators within artists and intellectuals¹³.

Transdisciplinary in essence, capoeira brings the fight in a multifaceted social choreography of corporal and political resistance. *Capoeiristas* are players who make their own music and dance, who make their own instruments, teach and publicize their art; who fight, on stage and in life. With its *ginga*, capoeira enters spaces and allows *North* and *South* to dialogue, to intermix, enabling human beings to be truly more human, coming closer and embracing their differences. Capoeira make us able to fight in the *roda*, in bodily dialogue with a *camarada* (comrade), the other player, and in doing so it qualifies us for life: an attempt to bring the human being closer to himself, as stated above by Mestre Pavão.

Capoeira's influence in various aspects of life is part of the story of any *capoeirista*, any player, and it has been increasingly studied also in relation to raising awareness and fighting racism and misogyny, in the feminist movement, in the reception and socialization of refugees and populations at risk, in special education, just to name a few fields of study. It is not intended here to address all of these themes, but it is worth mentioning one: the trend towards (self) awareness of blackness and white privilege. Mestre Jogo de Dentro says that it was Capoeira Angola that started this process in his life: "It was not the need of fighting" that led him to capoeira, but "[...] the desire to revive historical values, as a black man and afro-descendant", a de-



sire to understand the “suffering and the neglect of the culture of blacks” (Santos, JE, 2020, p. 17).

Araújo (Mestra Janja) also reports that, being a black woman in a white family, she discovered racism early, experiencing a sense of no-place until she came across Capoeira Angola in her last year as an undergraduate student in Physical Education, which led her to abandon the course and take the entrance exam for History. She reports that Capoeira Angola was the space of her greatest intellectual development, which awakened her to the history of Africa and Africans in Brazil; which brought a “[...] rebirth to a new world in which it was possible to conciliate bodily activities, a different body now, a body with history, with ancestry, with spirituality and not an enemy of all those things” (Nogueira, 2013, p. 164).

A similar potential for awareness emerges within the non-Afro-descendant population — in the awareness of their relative privilege in today’s society (Nogueira, 2007). Simone G. Nogueira (2007), psychologist and *capoeirista*, did her master’s research in the university environment, which she considers hostile and averse to Afro-Brazilian culture, and concluded that although it is not yet recognized as an equally important part in the education of citizens and professionals, Capoeira Angola operates as an anti-racist pedagogy, providing collective support to students (Nogueira, 2007). Also Ansel J. Courant (2018), in his master’s degree, studied the effects of participation in capoeira on white people’s positioning in relation to racial identity, racism, anti-racism and privileges. He concludes that capoeira, by promoting “coexistence between people from different places of speech and life experiences,” influenced the switch in awareness of all interviewees, and that in some cases it was the main factor in mobilizing “awareness of privileges and the process of understanding oneself as a racialized being” (Courant, 2018, p. 217).

The awareness of ‘white privilege’ and the need to act within the institutions for the recognition of Afro-Brazilian culture’s contributions are boosted within the communities involved in these manifestations, as Mestre Plínio¹⁴ puts it: “White people need to recognize privilege and to give voice to the communities: who contributes? [It is] the *terreiro* (backyard) of African origin: the true place of culture and popular emancipation” (Santos, P.C.F., 2020).

Such awareness of the racial issue, which leads to the recognition of the contribution of Afro-Brazilian popular culture to social organization and the anti-racist struggle, is now demanded by the students themselves, who call for recognition of Afro-Brazilian culture in their training in Performing Arts. Such awareness leads us to questions that can be summarized in the points already made by Reis and Rodrigues (2019): “[...] how many university professors will go through academic life and work with students without having this awakening to the ethnic-racial issue? And how many students [...] will go through training without having contact with the subject?” It is in this gap that Capoeira Angola can make a great contribution, because “[...] in its complex, human, contradictory entangle, Capoeira presents itself as a power of transformation, of inclusive, questioning, liberating education that values diversity” (Machado, 2012, p. 230).

Vem jogar mais eu (Come and play with me) – Capoeira Angola and the Performing Arts

The skills developed while practicing Capoeira Angola can be widely used for training and creation activities in performing arts. As will be seen in the statements in the next section, stage presence, the ability to play, to be alert and to improvise with fluidity are the main points noticed by most students. First, let us see some examples of what has already been developed by other researchers.

The *capoeirista*, actress and researcher Evani T. Lima, in her actor training work, argues that Capoeira Angola is a tool that enables self-expression and the development of essential elements such as “[...] balance, strength, flexibility, attention, vitality, rhythm, movement control, in addition to affording spaces for subjective interactions, spontaneity, and improvisations” (Lima, 2002, p. 31). Lima shows the powerful use of Capoeira Angola in actor training by exploring its elements to strengthen important aspects of performance. She analyzes the relationships between the elements of Capoeira Angola, identified in the lines above, and elements of the great schools of western theater. For her comparison between the potential of Capoeira Angola and a western epistemology of performing arts, Lima uses the theater anthropology of Eugenio Barba and highlights its elements compared to those typical of capoeira, some of which we highlight below. The ambiva-

lence of actor training, in which the incoherence of the non-everyday body circulates along with organicity, called by Barba *Incoherent Coherence*, is an ever-present tool in capoeira: at the same time codified and improvised, its game makes it possible to lead “the body to extraordinary positions” in “absolutely organic conformations” (Lima, 2002, p. 102). Another determining element for stage presence, and always active in the *capoeira’s* body, is *balance*, or rather the imminent threat of losing it, the change of supports in a permanent rearrangement of the body’s tensions: “[...] a precarious situation, [which] makes us think that there is no balance or gravity at all” (Lima, 2002, p. 106), i.e., that the body masters its movements, despite the apparent unsteadiness. There is also what Lima calls “opposition”: the “denial of gesture as a premise, whether to amplify, highlight or hide it” (Lima, 2002, p. 111); such denial can be observed in Capoeira Angola in the *negativa* movement, the fundamental defense, and in the *capoeira’s* ability to *negacear*, to confuse his opponent in the game with bluffs and tricks.

Daves Otani, another *capoeirista*, actor and researcher who also used Capoeira as a basis for his theatrical creation and training, recommends it as a tool that enables “reflection on possible processes that limit the understanding of the character” and that expands “understanding of the meaning of play [...] in theater making” (Otani, 2005, p. 5). Such understanding of play, of the tension in improvised relationships, is perhaps the greatest tool for actor training, as we will see in the statements below.

These works of training and artistic creation, such as those described by Lima (2002) and Otani (2005), resulted from personal experiences, developed beyond the possibilities provided by academia. It is the artist who, individually, having a previous close relationship with Capoeira, uses it later as a basis for his creation and training. How much more intense would the use of capoeira in the Performing Arts be if it were part of the academic curriculum in Brazil? How rich would the knowledge exchange be if capoeira were a mandatory subject in theater and dance curricula?

Capoeira, however, is rarely used institutionally in student training in higher education in Brazil. It is hardly found as a teaching component in course programs, on a par with other disciplines, such as classical ballet, European/Western theater or even Asian martial arts. As Bruno A. Andrade explains, when specifically studying the cases of primary and secondary

schools, public and private, the exclusion of Afro-referenced practices evidences the persisting structural racism, a “cold violence [...] that manifests itself in the absence or subordination of capoeira masters and teachers in these spaces” (Andrade, 2016, p. 238). This same absence or subordination of Afro-referenced practices is also evident in universities in Brazil. When it is present, capoeira is most often part of extracurricular programs, as an exotic and occasional activity, always with the “[...] prevalence of a relationship of subordination [...] marked by the hegemony of sport and folklore trends” (Andrade, 2016, p. ix).

This conclusion confirms Araújo’s (2004) arguments that it is necessary to reject this exotic role and demonstrate the pedagogical and educational roles of Capoeira Angola, also with regard to higher education. It is necessary to consider this Afro-Brazilian martial art as epistemology, in the bodies that make it, and have these bodies as agents of knowledge also within the university. Often, the acceptance of this embodied popular knowledge in university also takes place via a certain appropriation disguised as inclusion; within a neocolonial vision, the idealized culture carrier is treated as a static *collection*, incapable of innovation or creation—qualities reserved only for artists and academic scholars (Höfling, 2016). It is a clear mark of a colonialism that, continuing its historical antecedent, is still present in the university curricula of the Performing Arts; these have Western European culture as the norm, as the basis for innovation and virtuosity, while other cultures, when present, are considered exceptions, only as “static repositories of tradition” (O’Shea, 2018, p. 756). Even today, Performing Arts schools in Brazil “do not delve deeply into expressions understood as popular cultures” (Silva; Falcão, 2021, p. 161); when not totally ignored, there is only one discipline to address the subject in a specific manner. That is, “[...] there is a systematic difficulty for the official educational programs, at their different levels, to dialogue with such performances, which can be understood as a form of epistemological racism” (Silva; Falcão, 2021, p. 161).

To exemplify the cultural potential embodied in the practice of Capoeira Angola—as strong as or stronger than the canons traditionally studied and practiced in academia—and to help break with such epistemological racism, we present below some testimonies.

***Quem nunca viu, venha ver* (Who never did, come to see) – testimonies**

Testimony excerpts from the three groups that attended Capoeira Angola classes at IA/Unicamp from 2017 to 2018 are presented below, protecting the students' real names but indicating their course of origin and the academic semester at the time of the classes¹⁵. We tried to condense some testimonies and also present some significant excerpts that show how Capoeira Angola acted individually and also in the group, even after a brief contact with this complex art.

The perception of the proximity between Capoeira and Performing Arts is one of the first findings raised by most students, who distinguish the evident exercises of improvisation, of dialogue between pairs and with the surroundings, of readiness and also of fluidity, as summarized by theater student Ana¹⁶: "Everything happens in relationships [...] It is necessary to feel the other and look them in the eye; it is not always necessary to impose. The fun of the game is its fluidity. [...] And as in any relationship between two people, when one imposes himself too much on the other, the balance is lost and with it, the fluidity" (Ana, 4th semester, Performing Arts).

This readiness that flows, an *eye-to-eye* game without the need for imposition, which enables a frank body dialogue: this is a hallmark of the Capoeira Angola game. By attacking in a way that allows a defense by the comrade, who soon comes in counterattack, *capoeiristas* allow the game to continue, to flow, so that both can exhibit their repertoire, their technique and dexterity, but always in response to what comes from the other. Capoeira creates an honest contact in which body language vices, the so-called "bad acting habits" which most of the time don't work, are replaced by presence, by the focus on the present moment and on the readiness of the relationship.

A similar view was also presented by other students, emphasizing the importance of the true relationship with the partner in the game, necessary to enliven the scene; to make it believable, one must *flirt with chaos*, with the unexpected. The theater students Alberto and Valter described this issue as follows: "The game makes it evident that in order to flow it is necessary to flirt with chaos, to hold hands with it and go loitering: strategist-artist-warrior are the

same, they support and intermediate each other, they cannot function separately within the *roda*¹⁷ (Albert, 8th semester, Performing Arts).

As the classes progressed, more and more people allowed themselves to pull the rug out from under their partner, forcing them to respond quickly and genuinely. This increased the dynamics of the fight, creating a space of readiness and playfulness. The same can be said of theater, in which when a collective creates a pact of mediocrity, no one puts themselves at risk and the scene does not evolve (Valter, 8th semester, Performing Arts).

In Capoeira's *rodas*, the unpredictability of the mixture between dance and fight leads to immanent readiness. Such vivacity in the *roda* makes it possible to work with the unforeseen, with the apparent absurdity, with the disconcerting, and it is something highly valued by students — the game of Capoeira as a living mirror of the world, where chaos and order intermingle, truths and appearances are confused, always in a way that privileges aesthetics and also the “mystery,” that of deceiving with elegance — as brought by the words of Ana and Amanda: “Capoeira gestures play with the notion of truth. A good *capoeira* is one who manages to deceive with elegance,” so illusory that no one doubts their combativeness and their mysteries: “Playing capoeira means disguising the body's intentions. In capoeira, there is a set of senses/meanings that establish spaces for rites: rituals of celebration, worship, respect for traditions and mysteries, etc.” (Ana and Amanda, 8th semester, Performing Arts).

The question of the rites, traditions and signs present in the game are aspects that were important for many of the students, and that on several occasions were also related to music and to singing — the *asking for protection*, paying attention to rituals of respect and zeal, of maintaining the combat environment with strength and vigor, but also with the necessary calm and patience. As translated by Juliana, the rhythm and the singing would provide “[...] a kind of ritual where *capoeiristas* will enter, creating a bond with the energy of the circle, the instruments and with themselves, when responding to the songs.” And, as “[...] the master commented: they must be prepared to enter a battle and must, therefore, ask for protection” (Juliana, 4th semester, Performing Arts).

The availability for the game, in an exercise of concentration, but with a certain mischievousness, appeared in some reports which observed the

growth of this capacity during the semester. As Márcio described it: “When I had fun playing with a partner, it was incredibly easier to keep my energy up” (Márcio, 4th semester, Performing Arts). The exercise of collective playing, of readiness, precision and speed of response — the *stage presence* — was singled out in several testimonies, in what we could call “expanding the state of presence.” Ana and Amanda, the pair mentioned above, also condensed this point well when saying that, in addition to muscle tone, capoeira “[...] provides artists with body awareness [...], in addition to constantly working with internal tensions and external stimuli that are caused by the game” (Ana and Amanda, 8th semester, Performing Arts). They present, in their joint analysis of the discipline, the following conclusion:

Capoeira, in addition to helping the actor develop stage presence, focus on what is happening, quick reasoning in action and reaction, dilation and precision of movements, saving, expending and generating energy [...], also develops flexibility, strength, lightness and balance of the human body. All this serves to make the performance cleaner and the movements more objective. In addition to developing freedom of interpretation (Ana and Amanda, 8th semester, Performing Arts).

As they well summarized, all the essential elements of actor training — from the corporal to the relational, from the collective to the individual, are potentiated by the practice of Capoeira Angola.

In addition to the aspects related to actor training, to valuing the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of Brazil, capoeira also creates new paths for the understanding and constitution of society. It is true that academia, with its extremely arrogant functional and conceptual structure, still has a limiting view of what is conventionally called *Brazilian culture*. However, the paradigm shift has started for some — or, at least, is approaching for others — breaking with the Eurocentric hegemony that is often still predominant in the teaching of the Performing Arts. Mainly for the students of the Dance course, the little contact with the so-called *Brazilian popular culture* is evident. As commented by Benedicta, a last semester student, the Dance course “[...] has sought to focus on Brazilians and their origins, but still emphasizes European knowledge a lot. It’s been very important to have an activity that moved my body in a very different way than in classes and in my past experiences” (Benedicta, 8th semester, Dance).

The body work provided by Capoeira Angola — working with transpositions and balances in a very different way from the techniques often taught in academic dance curricula — is identified as the greatest contribution in several testimonies of dance students.

The Dance curriculum, despite the many hours dedicated to body techniques, does not include any specific Brazilian dance technique. Also a last semester student, Cassandra brought comments about this lack as a central point in her testimony:

In my course I have a very intense workload in body technique that includes classical ballet classes, for example. But regarding *Brazilian techniques we don't have any*. [...] Like Brazilian culture, [capoeira] is rich in rhythm and meaning and that is why we cannot learn it without singing, dancing and knowing its myths and stories. Taught in this way, it requires very complex cognitive stimuli and is also faithful to its origins (Cassandra, 8th semester, Dance, emphasis added).

This richness and complexity — which involves several simultaneous skills and whose origins and ways of teaching are inseparable from the development of Brazilian culture — are passed on by the masters to their students, disciples who will be the future propagators of the art.

The experiences offered by the masters' visits, who brought their movements and also teachings, were remarkable for many. Beyond the training itself, they brought important messages with their life testimonies and stories, as described by Gustaf and Dalila: "The experience with Mestre Bigo was marked by his charisma and good humor: his wisdom. He looked like an old boy to me. I even had the honor of being invited to fall for one of his tricks: I came out of it all wet!" (Gustavo, 4th semester, Performing Arts).

The class with the master [Jogo de Dentro] was a very beautiful experience, the words and stories he told us broadened the perspective I had of Capoeira: 'if we are not in peace with ourselves, this will stand out in the capoeira game, because the body cannot lie' [...]. This helped me be more aware of the way I lived my life (Dalila, 4th semester, Performing Arts).

This impact on personal and social life, going beyond the dance/theatre/combat moment, is another important tool of Capoeira Angola. The ancestral aspect of Capoeira Angola was reinforced with the words of the masters, who brought a historical memory, a tradition of struggle, suffering and resistance. The memory transmitted by the bodies is indelible, it

will be always marked, and the students observed this mark in the masters, in their movements and speeches.

In the meeting to evaluate the discipline, the relationships between the skills worked in Capoeira Angola and the other disciplines of the Performing Arts course were discussed by the students, in a more independent way. One of these internal assessments summed up this discussion well:

The students are able to observe the discipline in dialogue with others, such as 'Body Techniques: Dance I and II,' 'Technical Elements of the Body I and II,' 'Circus Techniques,' 'Body and Brazilian Theater I' and 'Improvisation: The Game.' When learning the fighting movements, we deal with issues of motor coordination, resistance, readiness, persistence, rhythm, breathing coordination, to be able to sing while fighting, and to have body agility for reaction when playing with the other. The issue of the game was mentioned a lot, because, as in theater, in Capoeira we can only react if the other acts and does not premeditate the movements; eye-contact with the partner, being attentive and ready to act/react within the game, in addition to having an extra-daily muscle tonus to deal with the fight (4th semester, Performing Arts, group evaluation).

In addition to the physical and game skills, also highlighted was Capoeira Angola's capacity for synthesis in clarifying theoretical and practical points of the Performing Arts—addressed in other contexts or disciplines, but which had still been somewhat abstract, at least for some. In the practice of the game/fight, these points are exemplified directly within the experiences, in the free contact with the other player, opening up a new range of possibilities and reflection, learning and research. Luis, a first-year student, noticed that

[...] Capoeira gradually proved to be a synthesis of the 2nd semester of the first year of Performing Arts. During classes, I had a summary of what various other classes were trying to teach throughout the week. In fact, *there were questions in courses throughout the semester that I only understood because of the Capoeira class.* [...] A very clear example for me is [...] about performance. [...] Another example is [...] to integrate body-voice-movement and expand body-vocal expressive possibilities (Luis, 2nd semester, Performing Arts, emphasis added).

Luis explained that the questions he mentioned above, which at first were still in the abstract domain, were deciphered throughout the semester within Capoeira, which demonstrated the concepts in practice and in an integral way. Such integrality of performance is identified by the students without it being necessary to mention it; this happens naturally by the bo-

dies when they engage in a Capoeira game, which is martial and musical at the same time, and which demands all attention to the present moment and all possible body capacity. All this power, this richness brought by the reports above comes from the learning carried out in a totally practical process, on an oral and corporal basis: moving individually and in combat in pairs. Each individual faces their limits and embraces their conflicts, as well as those of others, expanding their capacities for action — on stage and in life. And, above all, in a free manner, valuing physical and spiritual integrity, their own and of those around them. For the (future) professional performer, Capoeira Angola can be a source of nourishment, helping in individual and also collective preparation, and which goes beyond the context of the game/fight and the activities involved. This practice, this *ginga*, this fight-dance, which is also history and cultural resistance, is our seed for an *ecology of knowledges* in Brazilian universities.

Conclusion

Based on original testimonies of students given after a brief contact with this game/fight, we aimed to reaffirm the importance of Capoeira Angola in the university context — especially within the Performing Arts courses — as a necessary contribution of Afro-Brazilian culture to university education, capable of mobilizing individual and relational skills, for interaction in pairs and groups. Capoeira offers an embodied, artisanal, living and ancestral wisdom that can complement other activities already included and valued in undergraduate curricula. In this way, possibilities are sown for an *ecology of knowledges*, opening paths that include the popular wisdom codified in Capoeira Angola. Beyond the Performing Arts, capoeira is also a tool for political action of reception, for inclusion, and also for facing inequalities and social injustices.

The students' testimonies show us how transformative capoeira can be as part of the university curriculum. The interest on the part of the students, added to the wide availability of capoeira masters in practically all university cities in Brazil, makes us question the reason for the absence of capoeira in the curricula of Brazilian universities. We conclude the article by inviting higher education institutions to rethink the Eurocentrism of their curricula, urging them to include, permanently and with equal value,



the practice of Capoeira Angola (with the presence of *contramestres*/masters of capoeira) within its undergraduate and graduate courses, contributing both to the teaching of arts and to the university environment in general.

*Iê!*¹⁸

Notes

- ¹ 'Iê' (Ye) is a greeting interjection, such as "long life," used to initiate and to finish the Capoeira Angola *rodas*: to initiate, it is pronounced long ("Iêeeeeee"); to finish, it is pronounced short ("Iê!").
- ² The description of these undergraduate courses can be found in the catalog of the Performing Arts course, IA/Unicamp, available online: AC143 – Body Techniques: Fight I. Introduction to the technical elements of a fight or martial art, emphasizing the playful aspects present in the combat game; AC243 – Body Techniques: Fight II. Use of combat game elements in dramatic conflict situations. Available at: <https://www.dac.unicamp.br/sistemas/catalogos/grad/catalogo2022/cursos/26g/currículo.html>. Accessed on: 08 Nov. 2021.
- ³ Antônio Ambrósio dos Santos.
- ⁴ José Antônio da Silva.
- ⁵ Jacinto Rodrigues da Silva.
- ⁶ João Pereira dos Santos.
- ⁷ Jorge Egídio dos Santos.
- ⁸ Valdomiro Waciro Katsue Emori.
- ⁹ Francisco Tomé dos Santos Filho.
- ¹⁰ The term *vadiar/vadiação* (loafing) is used as a synonym for playing, trickery, dancing freely, uncompromisingly, playfully and theatrically. The term is widely used by the practitioners (*capoeiras*), in the same sense as used in Samba performances and in other popular manifestations, where people loaf around, play, dance *samba*.
- ¹¹ An expanded review of the bibliography produced up to the last decade can be found in Stotz (2010).
- ¹² The word *ginga* refers to body balance, the basic movement of Capoeira, where you walk without moving: from the feet parallel, the base, one moves laterally,



taking a step backwards, with the arms alternating in relation to the legs; then return to the center, the base; and this same displacement is repeated to the other side. Varying considerably from one group/style to another, in Capoeira Angola it is the source of attack and defense/escape movements, a step with balance that tries to deceive and involve the comrade by the body swing, to better apply/defend a blow. It also refers to the way of walking: light, undulating, free, and to the feint, the swing that precedes a dribble in soccer play. For a further analysis of the term and its history, see the work by Cristina F. Rosa (Rosa, 2015), Silva and Falcão (2021) and Höfling (2019).

¹³ See Acuna (2017), Assunção (2004) and Höfling (2019).

¹⁴ Plínio César Ferreira dos Santos.

¹⁵ Full testimonials available (upon request) at: <https://doi.org/10.25824/redu/X7YGPW>.

¹⁶ Pseudonym, preserving the gender declared by the student.

¹⁷ Citation based on Gallep (2009).

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