

There goes the *Berimbau*: An Africa-Brazil-Germany Musician-Body Trajectory

Simone Grundner

Translation by Brena O'Dwyer

After the second half of the 1980s, *capoeira* began to occupy theater stages, cultural centers, streets, and gyms, consolidating itself in countless countries around the world. *Mestre China* affirms that Germany was, in fact, one of the most receptive environments for the consolidation of this Afro-diasporic tradition. Having accompanied part of the international capoeira movement as both a participant and researcher, I experienced firsthand the impactful role of music in this process and pursued studies in musicology to verify the relevance of music in the internationalization of capoeira.

Without the active participation of listeners with applause and responses to the chorus, going to the *rodas*¹ held in the streets, the involvement of those interested would not be as enthusiastic as their participation would be passive. However, to the sound of the percussive instruments and especially the *berimbau* (see Figure 1), the relationship between body movement and the characteristic sound transmits a contagious vitality, attracting people to the *roda*, to the game, and to the *ginga* (capoeira's basic movement) way of life, gathering in a circle which proposes its own transforming language.

To trace the role of music in the internationalization of capoeira, I examine documents produced in German by students, practitioners, and observers of capoeira associated with the Capoeira Hannover Center (CHC) and the *Escola de Capoeira Angola Nzinga*² in Hamburg (with locations also in Hanover and Kiel). On the widely used platform *Yumpu*, where users can self-publish articles, magazines, and various other texts, I found writings prepared by these capoeira groups. Some of these published documents are revealing of how German *capoeiristas*³ understand, learn, and transmit the knowledge of capoeira. Originally taught through orality and body practices, the Afro-German capoeira teacher Tobias Gross from the city of Hanover, began to use bulletins and informative texts to help children and adult students understand capoeira by learning songs which were translated into German. Even though the songs are still sung in Portuguese in the *roda*, their translations reveal more about the culture and daily life of capoeira and its history to its German-speaking practitioners. Examining details of how the lyrics are translated, I note that the author maintains the meter and rhythm of the verses which, together with the explanations found in the texts, demonstrate a link between music and body movement which is crucial for understanding and learning capoeira.

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In addition, the internationalization of capoeira as an Afrodiasporic movement potentially addresses democracy more broadly by bringing questions related to social and racial differences into its daily practice. In one example from a bulletin on Yumpu, the lyrics of a popular song translated into German reads: “Oh my God, how can I live in this world? If I'm dirty, I'm filthy, if I'm clean, I'm a bum...”⁴ In their exposure to the lyrics of these songs and by observing societal behaviors towards immigrants and people of color in Germany, capoeira practitioners become increasingly aware of differences in access to resources and social privileges.

In her 2003 article “Performances da Oralitura: corpo, lugar da memória,” Leda Martins theorizes that a performance expresses, in addition to what is communicated to the public, ancestral memories transmitted through the language of singing, gesture, and movement. “Oralitura,” as she calls it, expresses not only the words and sayings of the performance itself, but a whole legacy and repertoire originating in African roots. Through this lens, I understand that a full performance of capoeira conveys these origins through its associated sounds, movements, and rituals. I examined the material about capoeira on Yumpu, as published by these German schools in Hanover and Hamburg, and took note of what may be expressed beyond the roda. Such language, which becomes part of the gestures and movements of capoeira practitioners, provides a sensorial link between their bodies and the culture originating in the Congo region, where Angola is located today, and directly or indirectly acts in transformations for freedom.

There are several freedoms to be understood in this process. I would start with the freedom to let the body move to the sound of the drum. This gesture in itself can be seen as a form of confrontation to morality, the rules of the Christian religions, and other forces which seek to premeditate and control the movement of others. The drum “shakes” (or, in Portuguese, *rebola*) this off when it offers the unexpected, intuitive, and seductive connection with oneself and infinite other non-static possibilities. Freedom offered through the practice of capoeira permeates one’s views of and relationship to the world. The German practitioner develops a new way of relating to their body and, through witnessing a more sociable and less individualist lifestyle, becomes familiar with the communities around capoeira in Brazil and with a lifestyle centered around music and capoeira movements. Another freedom offered through capoeira – though certainly not the last – is an openness to the practice of critiquing democracies of the so-called “First World.”

Based on Paul Gilroy’s (2012) assertion that Afro-diasporic movements contribute new critical looks at democracy, I find that capoeira – like many practices which involve music and movement – alert society to the idea that democratic values such as freedom and equality do not reach racialized people to

the same degree. In understanding racialized people as those whose difficulties and suffering are a result of slavery and racism, it is necessary to have a critical and empathetic look at the experiences described. Throughout Germany and Europe, actions promoting equal rights, anti-racism, and the visibility of the cultures of peripheral and racialized societies, are often spearheaded by civil society organizations.

Capoeira in the German socio-cultural context

Capoeira arrived in Germany to a receptive environment. Young and curious citizens from other non-European cultures, aware of the difficulties immigrants face, often supported traveling artists who wanted to remain in Europe. When I attended a capoeira workshop in Hamburg, I remember how capoeira students helped in the dissemination of the art, mainly in the production of flyers and texts, as teachers and mestres rarely mastered the German language. I had the opportunity to see the curiosity that locals had when seeing capoeira movements, the Brazilian culture, the language, and the music. I witnessed social relationships develop over time, forming families and new generations of Brazilians born in Germany.

Music made me stay in Germany for many years, participating in bands, orchestras, and musicals as a singer and backup singer. I believe that it is from the effect of music and movement offer to the self that a group of mestres and capoeiristas found their safe haven and were able to spread the art of capoeira and other forms of Brazilian music, while simultaneously making a living and be considered *mestres de capoeira*.⁵ The social spaces frequented by Brazilians were common to various cultural agents. Capoeiristas often played percussion and sang accompanying other bands, expanding their social and musical area of activity.

When researching how music enabled the consolidation of capoeira in Germany, I began by looking for examples which demonstrated the ways in which German practitioners understood the art. Mestre Paulo Siqueira of the *Escola de Capoeira Angola Nzinga* in Hamburg informed me of the CHC, which was the most active on social media. From the 1980s to the present, Tobias Gross, a Professor of Physical Education and student of mestre Paulo Siqueira, remains the mestre of the CHC.

When I first arrived in Germany in the 1980s, I attended capoeira meetings, as well as performances by African, Jamaican, Brazilian, and American bands and dance groups, sometimes as an audience member, but also as the lead singer of my reggae or MPB⁶ band. Around that time, the public representation of international cultures outside of Europe and North America were less prevalent

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in Brazil. On the other hand, in Germany of the 1980s, music and other festivals often promoted local and international bands.

As spring and summer arrive, when people are finally able to spend more time outdoors, fairs and events take place across Germany. The spas and parks are crowded with people in varying degrees of nudity, thirsty to enjoy days that dawn at five in the morning and only lose sunlight around ten. At the Englischer Garten, located by the river Iza in Munich – also where one of the most world-renowned German breweries is located – multicultural performances often take place. I remember feeling immensely happy and curious one afternoon in this park when, in the distance, I suddenly heard the sound of the berimbau and spotted a crowd coming together to see and hear a roda.



Figure 1: The berimbau is an instrument made up of a *Biribá* tree wood pole, a single steel wire, and a gourd. It is played with a stick, stone, and *caxixi*.⁷

The Yumpu website is a publishing platform which hosts magazines, catalogs, flyers, presentations, and articles. There, I found texts about capoeira written by German practitioners. There are nine texts posted by Christian Hess, a member of the Hanover group led by Professor Tobias Gross. Gross and sometimes other members of the school – who attended any combination of classes or summer meetings at CHC – contributed texts on a range of themes and central questions, such as “What is capoeira?” and on the philosophy of capoeira.

Importantly, they would translate verses from songs following the original meter of the chants, revealing the collective's concern with transmitting the significance and deeper social and historical meaning of capoeira to adult students and children in Germany. These translations function to simultaneously convey the meaning behind the lyrics in Portuguese and to maintain the corporeality of capoeira. Martins' notion of African ancestral roots being maintained through music and movement, transmitting a corporeality that remains alive beyond what happens in the performance, is noticeable here.

From the materials available on the Yumpu platform produced in collaboration between the CHC and the *Escola de Capoeira Angola Nzinga*, I selected those that are most relevant to this work and translated the main passages from German into Portuguese and now into English. Often, explaining the meaning of what is written requires the use of words that do not exactly correspond to those used by the author. The translation of a word from a sentence in German into Portuguese can generate an entirely different meaning. I understand that, in certain circumstances, for a better understanding of the text, providing a non-literal translation can make the meaning of what was written clearer. In other words, conveying the meaning of the texts analyzed is given more importance more than necessarily reaching the optimal translation. It is in this way that I was able to reach an understanding of the dynamics of teaching-learning capoeira in Germany and the role of music in this process. I examine explanatory texts produced in German, including lyrics translated from capoeira songs and details on capoeira culture, which are of paramount importance for a broader understanding of the internationalization of capoeira. These are geared towards capoeira practitioners and potential future teachers and reveal how instruction has been adapted in a new context.

The section below includes translated portions of a German bulletin titled "Fazination Capoeira" (2004), which was produced by Tobias Gross, published by Christian Hess, and features contributions from capoeira practitioners on the anthropological, philosophical, historical, and musical aspects of capoeira. Questions they approach include, but are not limited to: how to explain the style of movement (*ginga* or *gingado*) to a German practitioner, the meaning of the songs in the roda, the leadership and command of the berimbau in the game, what is capoeira and its philosophy, the meaning of the lyrics sung, the timing of the singing, and many others. Though the study of such documents alone is not a comprehensive way of learning capoeira, they appear to be of paramount importance for its two-way understanding in the German context.

One of these documents is a bulletin entitled "What is Capoeira?" ("Was ist Capoeira?") (Gross 2004). This eighteen-page text written by Gross is of fundamental importance for this study's analysis on how German practitioners understand capoeira. A brief introduction in the bulletin defines capoeira as "a

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Brazilian fight-dance-sport that expresses a lifestyle and unites opposing concepts,” (2004, 3) such as combat, poetry, creativity, and spontaneity. Gross adds that if one were to ask five mestres what capoeira is, each one would have a different explanation of its meaning and what it represents. He mentions mestre Pastinha's statement: “Capoeira is all the mouth eats” and mestre Bimba, who describes capoeira as the “science of malice” (2004, 3). Gross also acknowledges that for Black people in Brazil, capoeira is not just a sport, but a philosophy of life that manifests itself through movement, music, and rhythm. He concludes this introduction with mestre João Pequeno's phrase: “Capoeira is everything” (2004, 3).

Gross also contributes a poem of his own authorship to the bulletin (2004, 4). In *Favela*, he conveys his understanding that the *favela* (“shantytown”) is part of the culture of a people who do not have blue eyes, have curly hair, and find part of their historical roots in slavery. Tobias Gross is Afro-German and thus, compared to other German practitioners, has a greater identification with issues related to the origins of capoeira and the status of Black people in social contexts. Gross translates a capoeira song that mourns the death of mestre Bimba. The Portuguese version does not appear in this text, but other documents show the original lyrics. A concern with the metric and rhythm of capoeira is evident in these translations, as they follow the *ginga* of the original in Portuguese and transmit the cadence of capoeira.

Following an introduction on the origin of capoeira and brief biographies of mestres Bimba and Pastinha, Gross moves on to introduce the berimbau, its Central African origin, how to play it (stressing the degree of difficulty), and comments that it is an instrument which nowadays is considered typically Brazilian. In fact, the monochord instrument of central African origin is called *urucungo*⁸ and was brought to Brazil through the memories of the enslaved. With the internationalization of capoeira, it eventually established itself in Germany and most other countries as a traditional Brazilian instrument.

In his book *O Urucungo de Cassange: um ensaio sobre o marco musical no espaço atlântico* (2019), author Josivaldo Pires de Oliveira follows the path of the musical instrument through the story of a cowboy in Piauí, Brazil, who gained prominence in the Recife newspapers in 1878. Ataliba, the cowboy, had as an ally in his herding work, the *preto velho*⁹ Cassange who was always accompanied by his instrument, the urucungo. It was named as such because it originated from that region of Angola, from the Lunda empire and the Imbangala people whose main activity was herding cows, an activity in which this musical bow was used. In capoeira Angola rodas,¹⁰ such as those of Mestre Angolinha in Rio de Janeiro, three berimbaus are used: the *gunga* or *berra-boi* (with the lowest timbre), the *médio* (“medium”), and the *viola* (the highest timbre and often a soloist). In rodas I observed abroad, sometimes only one berimbau was used (Mestre Bimba also

used just one). This depends on the number of mestres and players available at the time of the roda.

Mestres who established capoeira in distant countries relied on the urucungo, one of the instruments that is most characteristic of a roda, to lend its tones and rhythms to capoeira, which can no longer live without it. In a German understanding of capoeira, the berimbau maintains its centrality. Yet in Gross's bulletin, the instrument's history was understood from a German point of view, which is a cultural position that did not experience a colonial process and does not have African representation in its ethnic-cultural formation, as is the case for Brazil. Gross claims that the berimbau is a kind of 'password' with which surprising musicality can be unlocked. In his analysis, the fact that the instrument has a monochord construction and no strict tuning, simultaneously lends musical simplicity and ample creative possibility for each roda. Indeed, there is no single, pre-established technique to play the berimbau. There are multiple ways to manipulate the instrument's sound, such as how one holds the coin or stone against this string or uses the *caxixi* (see Fig. 2), allowing each player to find their own path. It is also fundamental to mention the importance of orality to the practice of capoeira. A dynamic flow is established among musicians in the roda and additional opportunities for creation are possible throughout a performance.

In the Congo region, where the country of Angola is located today, African musicians created multiple ways of extracting, from a single string, an infinity of sounds with instruments like the berimbau. According to author Tobias Gross, each player develops their art of playing according to their understanding and expectation of sounds, finding in elements of their own culture the solutions for making music.



Figure 2: The caxixi is a percussion instrument filled with seeds, sounded by shaking, and played alongside the berimbau.

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According to Tobias Gross, the fact that the berimbau has multiple ways of being played and presents such diversity creates difficulties in learning. For example, the berimbau played in Bahia, Brazil, has a variety of sounds and nuances that differ for each player. That is why the sound possibilities of the instrument have so many effects in the field of popular music. The “belly” berimbau that we play in capoeira is hit with a stick, the way the stick is held, the stone, and the proximity of the gourd to the belly of the instrument are some of the factors not established in learning that affect the sonority. I could also add that the size of the gourd, the way the string is stretched, the type of binding, the paint that often colors the instrument, and the coin, doubloon, or stone are elements that equally influence the sound. And even with all these possibilities, they generate together the unmistakable sound that characterizes capoeira today. The work of the capoeira teacher is to structure the transmission of knowledge, using their oral ability and manual and didactic dexterity to elaborate a way of teaching. Based on Gross’s comments in his published bulletin, we can reflect on what the magic of teaching capoeira, its music, and instrument playing must have been like without mastering the language, just like other mestres who left for different countries taking capoeira with them.

Composed of a *Biribá* wood stick, a gourd, and a wire and played with a stick, stone, and caxixi, the berimbau, the ancient urucungo, today inhabits the list of typical sounds of Brazilian popular music. Gross goes on to explain that, for the capoeirista, the berimbau is a sacred instrument, which begins with its ritualized construction. The wood of a *Biribá* tree, which is native to tropical South America, must be taken on the night of a full moon. The pole of approximately one and a half meters is given the necessary stability and flexibility because of the unique quality of *Biribá* wood. A steel wire is then tied to each end of the pole and is adjustable, as it is replaced and stretched each time the instrument is played. The gourd of the berimbau, which acts as a resonator for the sound of the wire being struck, also does not remain attached. It is tied onto the *Biribá* pole with a stretched wire that goes through two previously made holes and is positioned with its cavity facing the belly of the player. By varying the distance of the gourd to the player’s belly, a variation in sonority is obtained, reverberating and amplifying the instrument’s sound. The rhythmic quality of the sound comes from the impact of a stick of approximately thirty centimeters against the stretched wire. The musician creates a wide range of sounds as they can simultaneously vary the amount of pressure applied against the wire with a coin or stone,¹¹ adjust the position of the gourd, and apply different striking patterns to the wire. In this section, Gross invokes the ancestral tradition of capoeira’s rituals to his students, though these are not necessarily reproduced or put into practice during his lessons.

In the same section focusing on the berimbau, Gross includes a German

translation of the chant called “Vamos tocar berimbau” (“Let’s play berimbau” or *Lass uns Berimbau spielen*), which emphasizes the importance of the berimbau’s sound to awaken the will and enthusiasm to play. From the body that plays capoeira to the toque of the berimbau, that sound exerts a specific command on those who play and even on those who aren’t playing, because it is from this sound that onlookers, observers, and practitioners approach and eventually become involved with the art of capoeira. The text comments that such simplicity does not minimize the value of what it produces with its sonority and its transforming power.

Regarding the role of the berimbau in capoeira, Gross states that it defines time, commands the game, establishes the beginning and end of the roda, unites and separates players, and characterizes capoeira as such that, without the berimbau, there is no capoeira. Every good capoeirista develops a relationship with the instrument that lends it its character, making them a capoeira. The one who carries it, who sets it up and makes music from it, has it as part of their selves. Such facts, together with the instrument's making ritual, suggest the importance of the berimbau for capoeira. In its simple structure, the berimbau offers a variety of rhythms that can be played in different ways and developed in the way of the player. The basic rhythm forms the character of the sounds that present variations that are developed by the soloist. The quality of the solo is linked to the degree of intimacy that the instrumentalist created. The author mentions Lourival Santos Araújo, according to him, one of the best berimbau players in Bahia.

On the *toques de berimbau* (the berimbau’s rhythms or patterns), Gross mentions that each has a specific meaning and determines the timing of encounters between capoeiristas in the roda. The definitions for the toques originated in the 1990s and evolved over time. Today, the N’Zinga School of Capoeira in Hanover has adopted the Angola style of capoeira, which is fundamentally different from the regional style and uses other nomenclatures for toques and movements different from those previously adopted. The definitions below, translated from German to English for this study, are found in a bulletin prepared in the 1990s by Gross, which was made available online in 2004:

Angola is the rhythm and way of playing that is very similar to the movement of a cat, the game is mischievous and low, demanding from the participants a greater elaboration of the movements. In Benguela, however, the movements are more spontaneous and faster, the ginga is looser and the game more surprising. At São Bento Grande de Regional, the game is higher, demanding more agility and strategy. Acrobatics are present, such a style of play was initiated in mestre Bimba's academy. São Bento Grande de Angola has a slower style than that of the Regional, this rhythm can be played in such a way that is more focused on dance and choreography, a game that values the beauty of the movements and playfulness, transmitting an environment of peace and showing with even more expression the effects of the corporeality of capoeira. *Iúna* is a sound that only advanced players can play and show off to the fullest, be it body expressions or acrobatics. A style that exposes its commitment to capoeira, which permeates fight,

ritual, and elegance where its players show everything they know. The cavalry sound, reminiscent of horses running, was used as a warning sign that the police would be arriving, players performed acrobatics to disguise the bellicose character of the roda (Gross 2004, 10,11).

The sounds are very distinct and show the diversity of ways to play capoeira. The author also mentions the caxixi, the ways of playing it, and its marriage to the sound of the berimbau. He explains what it is made of and its sound importance. The rattle with a handle, which contains stones or shells inside, is attached to the drumstick and adds to the sound of the bow.

I observed in the texts of this bulletin, a number of sounds – the ones listed and characterized here - that are probably present in the roda of that school or experienced in summer meetings where a larger number of mestres exhibit their aptitudes. Other sounds can be developed and found in other gyms and other schools. In a mainland country like Brazil, we will find numerous sounds that are probably not listed in this bulletin of Capoeira N'Zinga de Hannover. Furthermore, I perceive that the editor was and is familiar with and committed to capoeira and has his knowledge grounded in classes with his mestre and in research about the art. What I read in this bulletin leads me to think that the understanding of what capoeira is for the writer is not very far from what I saw happening in capoeira circles in Hamburg. What he captured about capoeira culture is a foundation that allows him to transmit and translate knowledge to his students.

Next, Gross claims that music is the central nerve of capoeira, it is what allows the relationship between body and rhythm and portrays real events of everyday life. Without it, capoeira does not move. Be it praise or sports singing, poetic or imperative, music is the soul of capoeira. It takes it upon itself to lead the art to fight or dance, evoking spirituality in the body that plays, awakening their abilities, and ordering the roda. When capoeiristas play together, they inspire each other with rhythmically sung choir games and body communication, maintaining a unique excitement that leads bodies to the roda. With repetitive elements in variations that progress, a magical event takes place that inspires the art of capoeira.

Gross presents the other capoeira instruments without going into detail as he did with the berimbau, which leads me to think that the other percussive instruments present in the art, such as the *pandeiro* (see Fig. 3), the *reco-reco* (see Fig. 4), the *agogô* (see Fig. 5), and the *atabaque* (see Fig. 6), do not have the same meaning as the berimbau in terms of the importance of capoeira's musical identity.



Figure 3: The pandeiro.

Figure 4: The reco-reco.



Figure 5: The agogô.



Figure 6: The atabaque.

Finally, Gross addresses the significance of lyrics to the art of capoeira, which are rich in metaphors referencing the oppression of a people and remind practitioners and observers of the historical roots of the art. The poetics of capoeira songs convey stories not only of the discrimination and humiliation that the enslaved faced, but of their motivation and persistence in the struggle for freedom. The poetics of capoeira songs convey stories not only of the discrimination and humiliation that the enslaved faced, but of their motivation and persistence in the struggle for freedom.

In the final section of this paper, I analyze Gross's translation (2004, 13) of a *ladainha* ("litany") by mestre Pastinha named "I am already sick from living here on Earth" ("Eu estou já tão doente, de viver aqui na terra" or *Ich bin schon ganz krank* in German). Gross, when translating the verses into German, follows the meter of the litany in Portuguese so that, if it were to be sung in German, one could follow the rhythm of the berimbau, pandeiro, and atabaque. The slurred speech of the capoeira singer in the original song, following the slowed rhythm of the berimbau, is also preserved in the German translation. Gross was also careful to select words in German which still conveyed the humble speech of a capoeirista. This well-known *ladainha* goes: "I no longer want to live on this earth/ Oh mother, I'm going to the moon/ I spoke to my wife/ And she answered me/ "We'll go, if God wills it"/... tomorrow at seven o'clock/ we'll have coffee." These verses express the reality of the capoeirista as a Black man who feels he is unable to live with dignity and so intends to leave for the moon.

To better illustrate the rhythmic correlation between the Portuguese original and German translation, I provide a scansion¹² of some of the verses of the litany mentioned above with a focus on the meter, as it relates to the rhythm of capoeira. I use numbers to indicate the vowel sounds, which are positioned over the stressed syllables in both languages. The scansion of the verses in Figure 7 below illustrate an intentional similarity between the placement of the tonics, indicated by asterisks (*), and highlight Gross's understanding of capoeira's corporeality:

* * *	* * *
Ich bin schon ganz krank	Eu já tô doente
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
* * *	* * *
Von leben auf dieser Erde	De viver aqui na terra
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
* * *	* * *
Oh Mama, ich flieg auf den Mond	Minha mãe eu vou pra lua
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
* * *	* * *
Ich sprach mit meiner Frau	Falei com minha mulher
1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
* * *	* * *
und sie antwortet mir	Ela então me respondeu
1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
* * *	* * *
wir fliegen wenn Gott will.	Nós vamos se Deus quiser.
1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Figure 7: A scansion of the litany “Eu estou já tão doente, de viver aqui na terra” by mestre Pastinha.

Ich bin schon ganz krank	Eu já tô doente	I am already sick
Von leben auf dieser Erde	De viver aqui na terra	Of living here on this earth
Oh Mama, ich flieg auf den Mond	Minha mãe eu vou pra lua	Oh mother, I will go to the moon
Ich sprach mit einer Frau	Eu falei com minha mulher	I spoke to my wife
und sie antwortet mir	Ela então me respondeu	And she told me
wir fliegen wenn Gott will.	Nós vamos se Deus quiser.	We will fly when it is God’s will.

Figure 8: The original lyrics of the above litany in Portuguese (center), along with the German (left) and English¹³ translations (right).

With the purpose of relating the sonority of the German language to the verses in Portuguese, I include the phonetic spelling of the translation (Figure 9):

ich bin schon ganz krank
 ɪç bɪnʃo:n ɡants kʁaŋk

von leben auf dieser erde
 fɔn le:bən aʊt di:zə e:ɐdə

oh mama ich flieg auf dem mond ich sprach mit
 o: mama ɪç fli:k aʊf de:m mo:nt ɪç ʃpʁa:x mit

einer frau und sie antwortet mir wir fliegen wenn gott will
 aɪnə fʁaʊ ʊnt zi: antvɔʁtət mi:ɐ vi:ɐ fli:gən vɛn ɡɔt vɪl

Figure 9: The phonetic spelling of the German translation of mestre Pastinha’s ladainha.

In this bulletin, Gross understands the importance of ritual and ancestry in capoeira and makes note of this in his remarks on the practice of praising predecessors. He identifies homages paid to mestres Bimba and Pastinha, forebearers of the practice in Brazil, in the ladainhas sung at the beginning of the rodas and connects parts of the verses sung with Afro-Brazilian religiosity.

In the introduction to the Portuguese version of his book *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy emphasizes the importance of Afro-diasporic movements for democratic advancements in Western societies. Themes inherent to the practice of capoeira and its religiosity – such as the historical hardships and current social differences caused by slavery, and capoeira as a form of resistance which gives life to the legacy of equality, freedom, and a fairer society – remain latent in each roda and class and intrinsic to capoeira’s cultural body and Afro-diasporic claims. Within the German context, questions related to these themes are thus reflected upon by local practitioners, offering opportunities for a greater understanding of the social differences which originate from slavery and extend to the present day through racism. Students may then reflect on the political system in which they live, Eurocentrism, social differences imposed by skin color, as well as democracy more broadly. Gilroy noted the importance of such Afro-diasporic movements in pointing out and denouncing social differences. Stories and anecdotes which relate the mistreatment of people of color are shared in the lyrics of ladainhas and circulate within communities formed around the practice of capoeira, giving greater visibility to the oppression of racialized individuals. In calling out the fragile and idealized democracies in Europe and beyond, capoeira is an Afro-diasporic movement which strengthens democratic and social claims in a sustainable way.

Capoeira is a transnational movement that maintains elements of culture in different contexts and countries. As an “oralitura” (Martins 2003) – which transmits ancestral knowledge through the language of music, body, and ritual – it maintains a unity around its African origin. Martins deepens the idea of

“oralitura,” explaining:

In the context of Afro-Brazilian rituals, the poetic word, sung and vocalized, resonates from the pulsating and mimetic language of the body, implicating the emitting subject, who carries it, and the receiver, whom it also circumscribes, in a circuit of expression, potency and power. Like the exhale, breath, diction, and performance, the uttered and sung word is engraved on the body, a portal of wisdom (67, 2003).

Capoeira is performed accompanied by the berimbau – an instrument that originated in the Congo region, where most enslaved people originated from – and words sung during a performance speak to concerns with social difference. Affirmations of supposed equity and democracy in the European context ring hollow in the presence of Black racialized bodies and, in capoeira circles in Germany, questions arise around the validity and extent of European democracy. The practice of capoeira, transmitted orally and through corporeality, opens paths for cultures which operate on the periphery and in resistance to colonialism.

With the consolidation of capoeira in Germany and the local population’s exposure to Afro-diasporic issues, Tobias Gross felt the need to develop additional tools for teaching the art in this context. The materials investigated in this paper were foundational, though methods of teaching capoeira continue to evolve. In fact, with the success of these capoeira schools and their programming, demands were made of the state to support the holding of lessons in appropriate spaces. The texts of capoeira practitioners and a whole series of didactic tools designed for the purpose of teaching and disseminating the art are still being published. Mestre Paulo Siqueira, based in Hamburg, affirmed that there is a locally published encyclopedia of these teachings, though contact between him and the author was interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impacts of an Afro-diasporic practice such as capoeira in Germany and other countries of the so-called “First World” – beyond introducing cultural elements which in themselves promote changes in body awareness and daily living – simultaneously inspire transformations in teaching practices and encourage a striving towards a more egalitarian society.

Final Considerations

In this article, I examined documents written by German capoeira practitioners, primarily authored by Hanover-based teacher Tobias Gross. Some of Gross’s teachings include: “Music is the vital nerve of capoeira,” “The berimbau is the cultural element that determines the rhythm of the roda,” “The songs of capoeira say more than its verses,” and finally, illustrating the central importance of music:

“It is with the rhythm that one manages to incorporate the movement [of capoeira]” (Gross 2004).

Furthermore, in the rhythmic comparison of the Portuguese and German languages and in the scansion of the verses of the translated *ladainhas*, I highlight not only the relationship between verse, rhythm, and body, but also the fundamental role of music in teaching capoeira abroad. The culture and practice of capoeira is consolidated in European bodies through rhythmic understanding, aided by translations that follow the meter and rhythm of the original Brazilian songs. Without compromising the rhythm of the original, capoeira’s corporeality is reproduced in German verses. Practitioners thus relate movement to the lyrics and rhythm in order to develop a practice. Even outside of the space of a capoeira lesson, on the streets of Hamburg, I witnessed how music is truly where it all begins, as it lures people to engage in the *roda* and let loose, to *gingar*.

In understanding the connection between corporeality, music, and bodily and diasporic movements, I expand my reflection to bodily communication, social relations, and anxieties for freedom as tools for change. With the contribution of Martins’s concept of “oralitura,” I conceive of capoeira as an ancestral expression sprawling with its own poetics, which embed *africanidades* (“Africanities”) in German society. Practitioners renew the way they view and relate to the world around them through corporeality yet, as a diasporic movement, capoeira also has the potential to inspire transformative views on democracy, as stated by Gilroy (2012), openings doors to liberation.

Details examined in the aforementioned bulletins and the scansions of the *ladainha* verses provided fundamental understanding on the internationalization of the art of capoeira in Germany. The assimilation of capoeira’s practice and music by local practitioners, including its cultural significance, is facilitated by and consolidated in such teaching materials. Without music, capoeira would not exist in the way we know it today.

Notes

¹ Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian cultural expression that mixes art, dance, music, sport, and martial arts. Capoeira is played or danced in a circle, in Portuguese “*roda*.”

² The official websites for each of these are: <https://capoeuropa.org/> and <https://www.capoeira-hannover.info/willkommen.html>

³ Capoeirista is the practitioner of capoeira.

⁴ The original in Portuguese reads: “Oh, meus Deus o que é que eu faço, pra viver nesse mundo? Se tô sujo sou imundo, se tô limpo, vagabundo.”

⁵ A literal translation of “mestres de capoeira” would be capoeira masters. I decide against translating this word into English due to its association with the word “master” and the idea of slavery. Capoeira was a form of resistance to slavery and is a cultural expression of Black people in Brazil. Though the word “master” is not necessarily linked to slavery in Portuguese, I preserve the words mestre and mestres (plural) in Portuguese to avoid this issue.

⁶ MPB stands for the genre of Brazilian music named Música Popular Brasileira (“Brazilian Popular Music”).

⁷ All photographs of instruments in this article were taken by the author (Figs. 1-6).

⁸ Other than urucungo, the berimbau has gone by many names, including *violam* and *rucumbo*.

⁹ *Pretos velhos*, literally translated to “old Black men,” are spirits in the Afro-Brazilian religion who represent knowledge and give advice as African ancestors.

¹⁰ Capoeira Angola is a style which emphasizes the form of capoeira as a game and its importance to ancestral memory. Mestre Pastinha was one of the most active proponents of this style.

¹¹ Though nowadays a flat stone is often used to play the berimbau, a coin called a *dobrão* (a Portuguese transliteration of the word “doubloon” and a remnant from the colonial era) was previously used to provide tension against the string of the instrument.

¹² A scansion is the method of counting and representing the metrical pattern of a line of verse.

¹³ The English translation does not follow the meter of the original in Portuguese (unlike the German version) and functions only as a translation of the meaning of the text.

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