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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Call, Response, and *Compromisso:* Ethical Practice in Capoeira of Backland Bahia, Brazil

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Abstract

In the Afro-Brazilian music-movement form capoeira, call and response saturates all interactions in live performance events (*rodas*). In addition to call-and-response song structures, music calls bodies into movement, bodies call to one another, and movements invoke responses from instrumentalists. Yet call and response does more than organize the roda. Demonstrating how antiphony organizes group sociality, the article argues that the music and movement also summon members to assume a range of responsibilities within the group and their lives. These include showing up for trainings and rodas, maintaining instruments, preparing for annual events, and teaching capoeira to younger generations in Bahia's underserved communities. Practitioners frame their ethical commitments to capoeira as compromisso, a concept that implies broad, long-term dedication. Grounding the study in my ethnographic research conducted in Brazil, I bridge Black music scholarship with ethical Africana philosophy to argue that capoeira practitioners use knowledge generated in their music-movement practice to conceive an ethics of compromisso. While the literature on Black musics across the Americas widely acknowledges call and response as a foundational musical mechanism, few ethnographic studies have delved more deeply into the social, ethical, and political potentials of antiphony. The article thus contributes to understandings of how Black music-dance practices generate ethical knowledge and practice through their sounds and movements. As capoeira's antiphony transcends the roda's space-time, it calls practitioners to assume an unending compromisso, making commitments that span generations to continually leverage capoeira's lessons to improve lives in Black communities of backland Bahia.

Every Saturday morning, on a wide median strip of a main avenue of Feira de Santana, Bahia, Brazil, the Angoleiros do Sertão (Capoeira Angola Players of the Backlands) play capoeira, a fight-game played to live music, which they follow with their rural style of samba.[1] Forming a *roda* (circular space of play and the performance event) with their bodies, group members take turns playing percussion instruments and playing capoeira two at a time. Mestre Cláudio Costa, the group's founder and teacher, holds the lead *berra-boi berimbau,* the bowed single string instrument, suspending its weight on his left pinky finger, clutching the seed rattle *caxixi* and wooden stick *baqueta,* with which he strikes the berimbau string, sounding signals to direct the capoeira play in the ring. After singing the solemn opening *ladainha,* he sings, "Iê! Viva Bahia!" and the group responds in full-voiced chorus, "Iê! Viva Bahia, camará!" Soon a capoeira game will start. (See Figures 1 and 2).

When the capoeira ends, the samba begins, and residents of Feira de Santana and the surrounding region eagerly join in the samba's rapid shaking steps and high-energy clapping and singing. Like

[1]This article addresses capoeira Angola, as practiced by the Angoleiros do Sertão, which is one of several general styles of capoeira, often claimed by practitioners (*angoleiros*) to be the more "traditional" style. I will refer to it as both "capoeira" and "capoeira Angola" throughout the article. The group's *samba rural* is a regional style of *samba de roda,* a singing, dancing, and drumming form.

Figure 1. Mestre Cláudio, left, and *Treinel* (advanced teacher) Hulluca, right, crouch at the feet of the three berimbau (stringed bow resonator gourd instruments) players, before beginning a game in Feira de Santana, January 2023. Photo by the author.

Mestre Cláudio, most community members are of African descent.[2] They are workers catching the roda before or after shifts at construction sites, call centers, and as security guards. They are shoppers on a busy market day in a city named for its markets (*feira* means market), carrying produce and other products in tightly tied plastic bags, which they leave at the edge of the roda when they enter to samba. The capoeira group members are slightly more racially diverse, counting more white members of European descent, especially when including visitors from more southern states in Brazil and abroad.

[2]Much scholarly ado has been made of the complexity and supposed ambiguity of racial classification in Brazil, but among the Angoleiros do Sertão, members tended to self-identify either as Black (using *negro/a* and/or *preto/a* interchangeably, in contrast to previous generations) or white, reflecting group members' political-racial consciousness. This also reveals a broader change whereby younger Brazilians with a range of non-white skin tones are increasingly self-identifying as Black (*negro/a, preto/a*) and claiming African descent. While a census category for "Brown" (*pardo/a*) exists, I never heard a group member self-identify with this term. Throughout the article I use Black to signify African descent for members who self-identified this way to me. See Gladys L. Mitchell-Walthour, *The Politics of Blackness: Racial Identity and Political Behavior in Contemporary Brazil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Tianna S. Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Figure 2. Treinel Hulluca, left, and Mestre Cláudio, right, playing capoeira at the Saturday roda in Feira de Santana, January 2023. Photo by the author.

Figure 3. Samba dancer in the roda. Hulluca plays triangle (obscured) at far left. Contramestre Orikerê claps and sings to Hulluca's left. Feira de Santana, January 2023. Photo by the author.

They wear the group's uniform of brown pants and white shirt with group logo, many with their hair tucked into rasta tams. Everyone understands that by participating in the capoeira and samba, they are supporting Mestre Cláudio's commitment to Bahia's Black *cultura popular* (popular culture) as practiced by the rural communities in Bahia's interior, the arid *sertão* (backlands) (see Figure 3).[3]

[3]In Brazil as throughout Latin America, "cultura popular" refers to "traditional" cultural practices of the people (*o povo*), sometimes including folklore, but not mass-mediated pop(ular) culture as the term signifies in North America.

Many months earlier, Mestre Cláudio had harvested the *cabaça* gourd that forms the berimbau's resonator from a patch of his land. Months prior to harvest, he had planted the seeds and tended their growth. Months from now, the group will again hold its annual January event; but before the first guests arrive at the Mestre's plot of land on the rural outskirts of Feira de Santana, roughly a hundred kilometers northwest of Bahia's coastal capital Salvador, he and Rita, a long-time capoeira Angola practitioner, group member, and the mestre's wife, will have prepared for the event. They will have coordinated his students, delegated tasks, working more intensely in the weeks leading up to the event, clearing land, repairing structures, making instruments, organizing logistics, and securing the attendance of renowned mestres and artists of cultura popular. When Rita or the mestre call for group members to help, they are expected to respond by rising to the task at hand.

Years ago, one capoeira player in the ring was a young boy growing up in a periphery (*periferia*) of Feira.[4] Today he claims that capoeira has shielded him from the violence that encroached on his life, from police or drug traffickers, and he has started to teach his own capoeira classes. Years from now, another young player, today still getting her footing, moving with awkward sudden motions in the roda, will also start teaching a group of her own, in another periphery, passing on the knowledge ways of capoeira Angola to a younger generation.

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Capoeira players often talk about the roda as a microcosm of society: The smaller capoeira game transmits skills and wisdom applicable to the larger "game of life."[5] This article considers the ways in which one specific musical-embodied aspect of capoeira play extends into practitioners' lives before and after the roda. I focus on call and response—the mechanisms by which sounds and movements summon responses of sound or movement—and show that capoeira Angola practitioners experience call and response not only as a musical trope but also a summons to assume ethical responsibilities beyond moments of musical interplay. Closely considering the ways that call and response organizes sociality, I argue that the music and movement of capoeira call practitioners to respond by entering ethical relationships with one another and the broader Black community of backland Bahia.

This article takes as a given that musical practices can reveal, influence, and reinforce a group's ethics and sense of community.[6] This case study contributes by revealing how Black music-dance practices across the Americas generate ethical knowledge through their sounds, performance practices, and movements—that is, how they transmit ethics in nonverbal, sonic, and corporeal forms. Although call and response is a prominent feature of African diasporic music-dance forms, exceedingly familiar to (ethno)musicologists and practitioners alike, I offer a close reconsideration of antiphony's ethical potentials, which the literature consistently acknowledges but rarely explores in depth. I further argue that scholars and philosophers of ethics would do well to consider more seriously the ethical knowledges generated within African diasporic music-movement practices. However, following Kofi Agawu, I recognize the difficulty of defining abstract ethical norms.[7] I focus, therefore, on the "specific, local situations" that arise among the Angoleiros do Sertão, a capoeira group based in the backlands of Bahia, in the first decades of the twenty-first century.[8] In this way, the article brings ethnographic specificity to the social, ethical, and political possibilities of call and response.

[4]The term *periferia* refers to marginalized communities, often but not always geographically distant from wealthier city centers, that the state has targeted for neglect, often lacking basic infrastructure and resources.

[5]John Lowell Lewis, *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 191–93; Pedro Rodolpho Jungers Abib, *Capoeira Angola: Cultura Popular e o Jogo dos Saberes na Roda* (Salvador: EDUFBA; Campinas: CMU Publicações, 2004), 175–217; Nestor Capoeira, *The Little Capoeira Book* (Berkeley: Blue Snake Books, 2007), 32; Zoë Marriage, *Cultural Resistance and Security from Below: Power and Escape through Capoeira* (London: Routledge, 2019), 43–59.

[6]Kathleen Higgins, "Ethics and Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics and Art*, ed. James Harold (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 407–23.

[7]Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 202–05.

[8]Agawu, *Representing African Music*, 205.

Capoeira Angola is an Afro-Brazilian music-movement form played in a ring of practitioners' bodies, with eight instrumentalists playing percussion who are periodically replaced by the other players who complete the circle.[9] Ability allowing, everyone takes turns playing the instruments and the capoeira games (two players at a time, inside the circle) with more advanced practitioners playing the berimbaus, choosing songs, and leading the event. Call and response is fundamental to capoeira practice, not only in the song structures (a leader sings the call and the chorus responds) but also in the ways that the music and sounds call practitioners to move. In our interview, Rita, who identifies as white, described how the music even calls to people on the street, pulling their bodies towards the roda:

> "It's a call [*chama*]! It practically drags you there! It pulls you! … It calls my attention! … I need to be there!'"
>
> Seeking to confirm that the sounds had a physical effect, I prompted, "And you'll *feel* it, too—"
>
> "You will get *involved*," she corrected me. "You'll feel the energy, the involvement of this movement … It's the energy, it's the *comprometimento* [commitment] with the work. The *ogans* [drummers of Candomblé] are extremely committed to the *terreiro* [house] of Candomblé [the Afro-Brazilian religion]. Just as we have to be very committed to capoeira, to take care of the instruments, not to leave them without someone watching them. It is this same responsibility."
>
> Still focused on the corporeal, I asked, "And it's also bodily? The drums, the berimbaus, the music—"
>
> "—are what *involve* you!"
>
> Later in the interview, Rita summarized, "[This] is how everything fits together. How the game of question and response [*pergunta e resposta*] exists."
>
> "And," I added, "this thing of everything being *so* connected. You can't separate the samba from the capoeira—"
>
> "You can't be more committed to samba than to capoeira. The responsibility is the same."[10]

Throughout our interview, as I asked about bodily perception of sound and connections between practices, Rita gently but firmly insisted that the calling on bodies to join the movement led to deeper commitments. Rita patiently redirected my attention to the ways in which the sounds of the capoeira and samba rodas "involve" people by calling on them to assume responsibilities in their lives. The sonic calls of the berimbau or the samba drums pull bodies into the roda and into motion, but Rita wanted me to understand that what begins as sound calling bodies to enter the roda and move, sing, play, or samba becomes a summons to deeper involvement. Being called into the roda involves practitioners in the social movement of the Angoleiros do Sertão, summoning them to take on commitments that extend far beyond the roda. In this way, Rita insisted that capoeira's game of question and response resonates beyond the roda.

Mestre Cláudio often refers to this deep, broad sense of commitment as *compromisso* (commitment, obligation, and/or promise). Spending time with him over the years (since 2013), I've learned that Mestre Cláudio prefers to teach by example rather than verbal explanation, but on one occasion he discussed compromisso explicitly. In 2016, he was giving a masterclass for a new satellite group in

[9]For a description of capoeira as a "blurred genre," escaping easy categorization and combining elements of "dance, folklore, martial art, sport, ritual," and fighting, see Greg Downey, "Listening to Capoeira: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and the Materiality of Music," *Ethnomusicology* 46, no. 3 (2002): 490–91.

[10]Rita Eloá Gonçalves Lantier, interview with the author, Salvador, Brazil, August 25, 2015.

Northeastern Brazil that he had recently welcomed into the Angoleiros do Sertão. After an intensive training, we sat on the floor in a loose circle and listened to his impromptu lecture. He began by telling us that when a Candomblé adept suffers a negative situation in their life, often their spiritual leader (*mãe-* or *pai-de-santo*) will recommend that they fulfill an obligation (*obrigação*) to appease their *orixá* (divine being/energy). Mestre Cláudio said that in his experience capoeira was similar. He explained that he has often heard practitioners complain that capoeira wasn't delivering the benefits they had expected, such as earning a steady income from a dedicated group of students. Yet, he asked, before complaining about what capoeira hadn't given them, had they asked themselves what they had given to capoeira? This, he told us, was compromisso: understanding that to practice capoeira is to assume obligations to capoeira itself. He said, "*Capoeira dá, mas ela cobra*." (Capoeira gives, but it also demands payment.) Responding to capoeira's call means making a long-term commitment to capoeira, assuming ongoing responsibilities, and continually asking oneself, "Am I giving enough to capoeira?" It seemed he was telling us, his students, not to expect to gain from capoeira if we haven't committed ourselves to capoeira. Yet he left it up to us to figure out what exactly this looked like in practice.

In what follows, I consider the ways that capoeira calls its practitioners into compromisso and how they respond by assuming certain responsibilities in their lives. Visiting and leaving Mestre Cláudio's roça numerous times since 2013 to conduct ethnographic research, I have thought about compromisso both as a concept significant for group members and in terms of what demands it might make on me personally, given my relatively unique position (within the group) as a white North American researcher and only part-time student. Indeed, my interest in compromisso is also driven by my broader concerns with ethnographic ethics and the issues that arise when white researchers study African diasporic practices.[11] Here I propose that the concept of compromisso, as embodied in capoeira Angola practice, has much to contribute to discussions of ethical philosophy.[12]

I proceed by making a case for understanding call and response as not only a musical mechanism but also an ethics. Capoeira players commonly speak of the music/sound as a "call" (*chama*) that summons bodies into motion. Yet as Rita stressed, responding musically and physically also involves practitioners more deeply in the practice, leading them to assume responsibilities and commitments. Remarkably, given the prominence of call and response in African diasporic music-dance practices and the wide scholarly recognition that call and response also structures sociality within those practices, very little of the literature examines the ethical implications of call and response in depth. In contrast, numerous philosophical essays consider ethics in terms of call and response when drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy, which theorizes the encounter with an other as issuing a call that summons ethical responsibility. However, the literature on Levinasian ethics in turn overlooks both the knowledge generated in Black music-movement practices and African(a) philosophical literature.[13] As a corrective, I consider how the ethics of compromisso in capoeira resonates with Africana philosophy, especially with theorizations of responsibility to community as expressed through the concept of *ubuntu*. Returning to the capoeira roda, I describe how sound summons responses in the moments of the game. Then I expand beyond the roda, in space and time, to explore how the smaller frequencies of the roda spiral outward, as calls and responses repeat (but always with variation or

[11]In my forthcoming book I address how white participation impacts capoeira's antiracist politics, Esther Viola Kurtz, *A Beautiful Fight: The Racial Politics of Capoeira in Backland Bahia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2025), https://press.umich.edu/Books/A/A-Beautiful-Fight3.

[12]Elsewhere, I reflect on the ethics of fieldwork, my researcher positionality, and my personal and professional obligations to capoeira and the group, Esther Viola Kurtz, "Responding to the Call of *Compromisso*: Reflections on Research Ethics from the Ground of Capoeira Angola," *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* 43 (2024): 110–36.

[13]An exception is Bharath Ganesh, "The Politics of the Cipher: Hip-Hop, Antiphony, and Multiculturalism" (PhD thesis, University College London, 2016); which theorizes antiphony as an ethics that helps cipher participants negotiate difference. Schneider also notes the philosophical literature's general lack of engagement with Black thought, suggesting that future studies might do well to "hear … resurgent lifeways of the colonized/capitalized," Rebecca Schneider, "That the Past May Yet Have Another Future: Gesture in the Times of Hands Up," *Theatre Journal* 70, no. 3 (September 2018): 118.

difference) over weeks, years, and generations.[14] By bringing together ethical Africana philosophy with scholarship and ethnography on call and response in Black music-movement practices, I argue that capoeira's call and response does more than structure musical and bodily exchanges; it also regulates the capoeira community's ethics, calling upon members to respond in myriad ways.

Call and Response as Ethics

Scholars of African diasporic music and dance forms widely recognize call and response, or antiphony, as a prominent structure—one of the most foundational "mechanics of delivery"—in Black music and dance.[15] Mellonee Burnim has shown that the inclusive imperative of call and response opens up space for "everyone to participate" and, through repetition, creatively modify lyrics, melodies, rhythms, and textures.[16] Declaring its significance for the musics and people of the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy found antiphony to be the "principal formal feature of [Black Atlantic] musical traditions," a practice that is at once "democratic, communitarian" and that "symbolizes and anticipates (but does not guarantee) new, non-dominating social relationships."[17] Tracing call and response as an Africanist aesthetic across numerous African diasporic music-dance practices, hip hop dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson notes that a significant function of call and response is "keeping up the spirit" (or putting in the *axé*, as I discuss below), which reveals "call and response as an approach that deepens an individual's relationship to the collective through the body."[18] Taken together, these passages suggest that call and response generates inclusive, ethical modes of embodied participation and belonging in community.

Brazilian scholars also frequently acknowledge the centrality of call and response to Afro-Brazilian music-dance practices, though practitioners more often speak of *pergunta e resposta* (question and answer), as Rita did above. Scholars additionally refer to *solo-refrão* (solo-refrain), *verso e refrão* (verse and refrain), or simply *solo e coro/grupo* (solo and chorus/group).[19] Still it is clear that all these terms

[14]See Henriques' diagram of a "Frequency Spectogram," which illustrates how frequencies of sound lengthen and spiral outward into seconds, minutes, and eventually generations, Julian Henriques, "The Vibrations of Affect and Their Propagation on a Night Out on Kingston's Dancehall Scene," *Body & Society* 16, no. 1 (March 2010): 73. On "repetition with difference" see Floyd's discussion of Gates's Signifyin(g), Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95. The theorization of repetition and difference in African and diasporic musics has produced a rich literature. See for example John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 111–23; Ingrid Monson, "Riffs, Repetition, and Theories of Globalization," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 1 (January 1999): 31–65; Juan Diego Díaz, "Between Repetition and Variation: A Musical Performance of Malícia in Capoeira," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 46–68; Fumi Okiji, "Storytelling in Jazz Work as Retrospective Collaboration," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 11, no. 1 (February 2017): 70–92.

[15]Portia Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Culture," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 192; Gena Caponi-Tabery, "Introduction: The Case for an African-American Aesthetic," in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin' & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 10; Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 138; Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, eds., *African American Music: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014); Jacqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

[16]Mellonee V. Burnim, "Spirituals," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, 2nd ed, ed. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby (New York: Routledge, 2014), 55.

[17]Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 78–79.

[18]Imani Kai Johnson, *Dark Matter in Breaking Cyphers: The Life of Africanist Aesthetics in Global Hip Hop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 34.

[19]To give just two examples, Tinhorão briefly discusses the call and response structure of Black work songs in the late nineteenth century, using the terms of solo and (response) chorus, as a means for workers to communicate across distances, José Ramos Tinhorão, *Os sons dos negros no Brasil: cantos, danças, folguedos: origens* (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2008), 128. Throughout their text describing and documenting the *samba de roda* of Bahia's Recôncavo region, Sandroni and Sant'Anna refer to the solo (call) and group (response), Carlos Sandroni and Márcia G. de Sant'Anna, eds., *Samba de Roda Do Recôncavo Baiano* (Brasília: Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, 2006). In these examples and countless others, call and response is acknowledged as fundamental to Black Brazilian music and dance forms, but call and response itself is not the focus of the inquiry. Texts in Portuguese tend to use *chamada e resposta*, the direct translation of call and response, only when referencing English language literature.

refer to the same phenomenon, as when Brazilian capoeira scholar Cristina Rosa writes (in English) that "across their call-and-response dialogues, capoeira players propose metaphorical questions to 'test' the other in the hope that their opponent will eventually run out of answers or will be unable to improvise them in a timely fashion."[20] However, as in much of the North American literature, in Brazilian literature call and response seems largely to be taken for granted: few scholars have explored in depth how the musical mechanism reverberates in social or ethical thought and behavior.

Samuel Floyd has offered one of the most extensive explorations of call-and-response musical devices through his concept of Call-Response, "the master trope, the musical trope of tropes," which he leveraged to define a "culture-specific approach" to analyzing Black music so as to reveal its deeper meanings and complexities.[21] Black popular culture scholar Angela Nelson applied Floyd's concept to find that, in a profound sense, call and response "encourages and maintains spiritual harmony, a sense of group solidarity, and validates aesthetic and cultural values."[22] Ingrid Monson also noted that as a "fundamentally social, conversational, and dialogic way to organize musical performance," call and response structures the sociality of communities of practice.[23] I extend these insights further to explore how call and response organizes community members' ethical ways of being beyond performance contexts.

Doing so, I am also inspired by Shana Redmond's expansive approach to antiphony in her theoretically rich rumination on Paul Robeson's life, work, politics, and art. With Robeson's life as model, Redmond invokes "Black antiphonal life" as "a method of engagement with and challenge to the brutalities of the 'afterlife of slavery,'" citing Saidiya Hartman's generative framing of the ways that the logics and legacies of slavery sustain conditions in which "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago."[24] "Black antiphonal life," Redmond explains, "arrives as a vibrational practice shared openly and freely, across space and time."[25] As I interpret Redmond's theorization, the vibrations of call and response, resonating beyond the space-times of musical events and individual lifespans, can summon people again and again to address and redress the persisting racial harms of systemic white supremacy. Calls must repeat over time and responses must transform into future calls as long as racialized violence endures. This is what determines the ongoing, "non-linear and open-ended" nature of Black antiphonal life.[26]

Listening to the sounds and movements of the Angoleiros do Sertão in the roda and in their lives, I ask how call-and-response vibrations resonate throughout their community, calling upon members to live Black antiphonal lives. Considering the ethical dimensions of antiphony, I explore how intensive embodied participation in the calls and responses of capoeira Angola summons broader ethical responses from practitioners. As capoeira practice orients players to call and respond in specific ways with sound and movement, this further reorients their ways of thinking and being, summoning them to assume responsibilities and make commitments not only to capoeira practice and their group, but also to the wider Black community.

Levinas's Ethical Philosophy and Ubuntu

The work of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has had a profound influence on theorists and philosophers of ethical responsibility. Levinas argued that ethical responsibility arises in the

[20]Cristina F. Rosa, *Brazilian Bodies and Their Choreographies of Identification: Swing Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 102–3.

[21]Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 95, 254–55.

[22]Angela M. Nelson, "'Put Your Hands Together': The Theological Meaning of Call-Response and Collective Participation in Rap Music," in *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality*, ed. Andre E. Johnson (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 62.

[23]Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 89.

[24]Shana L. Redmond, *Everything Man: The Form and Function of Paul Robeson* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 140; citing Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 6.

[25]Redmond, *Everything Man*, 140.

[26]Redmond, *Everything Man*, 8.

face-to-face encounter with "the other" because the face of the other issues forth a summons, demand, or call for ethical response.[27] As Levinas wrote, "the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me … and in so doing recalls my responsibility," for in "responding, I discover my responsibility to them."[28] Levinas's language thus eloquently echoes the musical terms of call and response, thereby lending them greater gravitas: Could musical and corporeal calls not also summon more fundamental ethical responsibilities? Notably, Levinas also understands responsibility as inexhaustible: "As responsible, I am never finished with emptying myself of myself. There is infinite increase in this exhausting of oneself."[29] The ethical responsibility summoned by one's encounter with another person is never ending. Likewise, one's compromisso with capoeira is unending. Levinas's ethical philosophy could therefore inform an understanding of capoeira's ethics, yet I propose that the reverse is also true. Ethical philosophers have much to gain by seriously considering capoeira and other African diasporic music-dance forms as constituting their own traditions of ethical thought.[30]

Moreover, despite these productive resonances, Levinas's thinking does not align seamlessly with compromisso as practiced by the Angoleiros do Sertão. Most difficult to reconcile, perhaps, is Levinas's insistence on the absolute alterity and abstraction of "the other." This reduces the other to its otherness; removes it from "the particular and worldly encounters in which beings are constituted in and through their relationship to one another"; and thus "conceal[s] the particularity of others."[31] Sara Ahmed proposes that attending to the "particular or finite circumstances" in which others encounter one another "may open up the possibility of an ethics that … resist[s] thematising others as 'the other.'"[32] Staying grounded in particularity "helps us to move beyond the [Levinasian] dialectic of self-other and towards a recognition of the differentiation between others."[33] Ahmed's critique of Levinas thus maintains the truism that everyone is other to everyone else—which surely was Levinas' point, that we are each unique beings who can only perceive the world through our own bodies-selves—while shifting the focus to recognizing differences among others (some of whom are invariably deemed more "other" than others). Moving beyond the self-other dialectic further allows questions of how members of communities conceive of their responsibilities to one another and to other communities.

Members of the Angoleiros do Sertão, when discussing responsibility, rarely speak in first-person Levinasian terms—"(my)self" facing "the other." Rather, they use "we" and "us" and talk in terms of collective ethical responsibilities to their communities, especially Brazil's Black peripheries that are "othered" by dominant society. Attending to the particularity of how group members experience their encounters with one another reveals that they differentiate among others above all when recognizing that white supremacist systems subjugate and marginalize Black people. How do those who are violently othered conceive of their responsibilities to others and to whom do they feel most committed? I found that group members' ethical thinking resonates powerfully with philosophical discussions of *ubuntu*—a term familiar to group members as it also circulates widely among Black movement activists and communities in Brazil.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously evoked the ubuntu concept in the mid-1990s when searching for language to express the common humanity of South African citizens, both victims and perpetrators

[27]Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985); Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989). Scholars who have engaged Levinas's thought on ethics as call and response include, e.g., Jeff R. Warren, *Music and Ethical Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); D. Soyini Madison, *Performed Ethnography and Communication: Improvisation and Embodied Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Schneider, "That the Past May Yet Have Another Future."

[28]Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 83; Bettina Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 2019), para. 2.3, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/levinas/.

[29]Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 182.

[30]Even when formulating African/Afro-Brazilian philosophy, authors may privilege Levinas, overlooking Afro-Brazilian music-dance also as an invaluable source of ethical philosophy. See, for example, Eduardo David de Oliveira, "Filosofia Da Ancestralidade Como Filosofia Africana: Educação E Cultura Afro-Brasileira," *Revista Sul-Americana de Filosofia e Educação (RESAFE)*, no. 18 (2012): 28–47.

[31]Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 143.

[32]Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 144.

[33]Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 144.

of apartheid violence, as the country attempted to heal in its post-apartheid era.[34] Commonly translated as "I am because we are" (or in Portuguese, "*Eu sou, porque nós somos*") ubuntu has since been debated and theorized by numerous (South) African and diasporic philosophers. Many philosophers and laypeople alike consider ubuntu the foundation of African(a) ethical thought.[35] As ubuntu has traversed oceans, contexts, time, and space, theorizers and philosophers have interpreted it variously and to diverse ends, and many diasporic Africans across the Americas have embraced ubuntu as an idealistic counter to the cult of Western individualism. In Brazil, ubuntu has received extensive philosophical, academic, and popular attention in recent years, circulating widely in literature, memes, forwarded WhatsApp videos, and dozens of articles on geledes.org, the popular online activist platform of the Geledés Institute of the Black Woman.[36] Brazilian scholars have used ubuntu to argue, for example, against competition and for "collaborative solidarity" in education; to call for tolerance to bolster a democracy in crisis; and as a basis for a decolonial Afro-Brazilian philosophy.[37]

In popular discourse, ubuntu is often leveraged simply to express that community matters, or to paraphrase, I would not exist without my community. As I describe below, capoeira practice embodies such an ubuntu ethic: Just as the roda needs a critical mass of players to complete and close the circle, an individual angoleiro cannot learn, train, and play capoeira without the group. They might say, "I am (and can be) an angoleiro only because we are angoleiros." In the abstract, ubuntu is an ideal that prioritizes friendliness, care, and compassion in service of community and social harmony.[38] However, the ease with which such values can be embraced masks the difficulty of putting them into practice. Recalling both Agawu's call for specifics and Ahmed's similar call for particularity, I briefly consider the South African context to inform my discussion of ubuntu.[39]

In *No Future Without Forgiveness,* Tutu arrived at ubuntu as an explanation for why South Africans had decided (collectively, after negotiations) neither to hold perpetrators accountable in court nor to grant them general amnesty, but rather to form the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which would enable victims to meet and forgive perpetrators.[40] This context reveals not only the radical potential of ubuntu, but also its complexity. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a South African scholar of violence and intergenerational trauma, reminds us that the now well-worn word "ubuntu" stands in for a longer proverb which in isiXhosa goes, "*Umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu*," which she says can be translated as, "'A person is a person through being witnessed by, and engaging in reciprocal witnessing of other persons,' or, 'A person becomes a human being through the multiplicity of relationships with others.'"[41] Gobodo-Madikizela identifies two meanings embedded in the proverb: "First, subjectivity depends on being witnessed; … Second, the phrase conveys the kind of

[34]James Ogude, ed., *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 1. See also Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 1st Image Books ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

[35]Augustine Shutte, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001); Fred Lee Hord, Mzee Lasana Okpara, and Jonathan Scott Lee, eds., *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Africana Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016); Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999).

[36]Founded by Black movement activist Sueli Carneiro, Geledés is one of Brazil's leading antiracist, Black feminist activist organizations and media sites.

[37]See, respectively, Wanderson Flor do Nascimento, *Entre Apostas e Heranças: Contornos Africanos e Afro-Brasileiros Na Educação e No Ensino de Filosofia No Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: NEFI Edições, 2020), 48; Antonio Oliveira Dju and Darcísio Natal Muraro, "Ubuntu como modo de vida: contribuição da filosofia africana para pensar a democracia," *Trans/Form/Ação* 45 (2022): 239–64; Marcelo José Derzi Moraes, "A Filosofia Ubuntu e o Quilombo: A Ancestralidade Como Questão Filosófica," *Revista África e Africanidades* XII, no. 32 (2019): 1–11; Francisco Antonio de Vasconcelos, "Filosofia Ubuntu," *Logeion: Filosofia da Informação* 3, no. 2 (2017): 100–12.

[38]Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 31.

[39]Gobodo-Madikizela also calls for particularity (and draws on Levinas): "While the precept that one should respect and care for human beings as human beings is true, it has had little sway in curtailing atrocities or waves of vengeance following atrocities. It is as though 'human being'—the face of the other—is too much of an abstraction … What is called for, it seems, is a movement from the abstract and the generalizable toward the particular and tangible," Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, "What Does It Mean to Be Human in the Aftermath of Mass Trauma and Violence?: Toward the Horizon of an Ethics of Care," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 36, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2016): 58.

[40]Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 15–32.

[41]Gobodo-Madikizela, "What Does It Mean to Be Human in the Aftermath of Mass Trauma and Violence?," 56.

reciprocity that calls on people to be ethical subjects."[42] In other words, I depend upon others to witness, recognize, and thereby summon forth my humanity, and this ushers a call for me to do the same with others. Their humanity also depends upon my witnessing. Or in Levinas's terms, just as the face of the other issues forth a call for my ethical response, my face summons a responsibility in the other.

The particularity of the South African context is significant when thinking about what ubuntu might mean in Brazil. In both places, Black subjects continue to wrestle with enduring dehumanization, trauma, and violence. If ubuntu "speaks of the very essence of being human," then it is deeply relevant in contexts where some are deemed less human than others.[43] Putting ubuntu into practice, therefore, can also be understood as belonging to a broader project of defining new ways of "being human as praxis."[44] Among the Angoleiros do Sertão, this means witnessing and summoning forth the humanity of Bahia's marginalized Black communities. By acknowledging the Black Bahian community as originators and guardians of cultura popular, which includes capoeira, samba, and other expressions, the Angoleiros do Sertão recognize that their beloved practices have been sustained only through the broader community's support, historically and through the present. This is why their compromisso to capoeira necessarily extends to the community and aligns with the ubuntu ethic of recognizing, witnessing, and confirming one another's humanity.[45]

Turning now to the sonic-corporeal calls in the roda, I consider how they summon players to assume a compromisso with capoeira, invoking responses that resonate antiphonally through practitioners' lives, and ultimately call on them to witness their own and one another's humanity.

Calling and Responding in the Roda

Group members' compromisso manifests both materially and energetically in and around the roda, and it can be expressed as a series of responsibilities players take on to sustain the roda's calls and responses. On a material level, the roda requires bodies and instruments. Time and again I heard Mestre Cláudio warn his students not to miss the Saturday roda. They should arrive at nine o'clock in the morning, even though the capoeira doesn't usually begin until eleven or noon. First they have to fetch the instruments from the storage space several blocks away. Then they must string up and tune the berimbaus, at least two of each size, adjust and tune the drums, and make any necessary minor repairs. The *bateria,* the roda's instrumental ensemble, requires at least eight competent players for the three berimbaus, two pandeiros, the atabaque, and the "instruments of effect" (as Rita called them) reco-reco and agogô; but more than eight players are needed to switch out and give everyone a chance to play capoeira, too. Students must take on these responsibilities to sustain the weekly roda.

The physical presence of bodies is also needed to generate the less visible but equally tangible energy of the roda, which group members often refer to as *axé*.[46] The roda needs bodies not simply to complete the circle, for aesthetic or spatial reasons, delineating the space of play. A roda with too many "holes," without enough bodies to close the circle, is also considered too "open." Too much space between bodies will prompt the mestre to cry, "*Fech' a roda!*" (Close the roda!). In rodas without enough participants to close the circle, it seems as if the axé escapes through the gaps between bodies. Such rodas tend to feel sluggish, as if running through mud, and exhausting, like pouring water into a leaking bucket. The sounds of the roda dissipate and the axé disperses. The closed ring of players keeps

[42]Gobodo-Madikizela, "What Does It Mean to Be Human in the Aftermath of Mass Trauma and Violence?," 56.

[43]Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 31. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337.

[44]Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[45]*Reparative Humanism: Exploring the Meaning of Ubuntu—Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inTgLvKUzvg.

[46]For an extensive theorization of *axé* among the Angoleiros do Sertão see Esther Viola Kurtz, "Community in Syntony: Theorizing *Axé* in Capoeira Angola and Rural Samba of Backland Bahia, Brazil," *Ethnomusicology* 68, no. 1 (Winter 2024): 118–49.

the energy circulating, amplifying, and reverberating among participants' bodies. At a bare minimum, therefore, a compromisso with capoeira Angola calls for players to be present and participate.

Producing axé-energy, however, requires more than just showing up and joining in the calls and responses. To create energy, everyone must play their instruments and games in the right way: Participants must play the instruments "with attitude," as Mestre Cláudio puts it, and the chorus must respond with full voice. Rita related how the Mestre instructs his students: "When you are on the instrument, [he says] give yourself! You must give yourself! … Give the best of yourself, play the best you can, because whoever is playing depends on your best!"[47] Practitioners also express this as giving (*dar*) axé or putting (*botar*) axé into the music. Binho, a Black group member and Candomblé practitioner in Feira, explained, "When we say, 'Let's put in axé!' it means we have to exert ourselves a bit more, put in more energy, make something happen—sing more, play more. You see how the samba sometimes falls [the energy dips]? When it rises up again, the axé is there!"[48] Afonso Mesquita, a white member from São Paulo state, underscored the essential role the responding chorus plays: "The chorus is very important! We don't talk much about it, but what gives the roda axé is the chorus! … A really great roda has thirty people, eight playing [instruments] and twenty-two responding. That's axé! This is why capoeira brings people together [*agrega*]. … The secret isn't in any one individual person, but in the thirty, the combination."[49] Playing music with axé is a generous, collective action that not only fuels the games but also calls the community into being.

Playing with axé and "attitude" in turn requires specific bodily commitments. Mestre Cláudio demonstrates playing instruments with "attitude" through bodily posture, centering his weight equally on both legs, head up, with serious, focused attention and an alert, proud stance. He critiques his students if they slouch or stand with their weight on one leg, a hip jutting out, while playing instruments in the roda. This committed bodily attitude directly impacts the bodily ability of the players in the ring, as Rita explained:

> If the game is governed by what's being played, and if you're playing with little energy, with bad music, naturally the game will be bad, with little energy. It will be difficult for things to flow well, for the game of question and response to occur. In this moment, the body needs the incentive of the music in order to react.[50]

Rita drew a direct connection: Players' bodies need the musicians to play with axé because this enables them to respond and call to one another. The singers and percussionists are responsible for players' ability to respond—their response-ability.[51]

Responding with movement—playing capoeira—to the axé-infused sounds of the roda also requires putting in energy. Contramestre Orikerê, a dedicated Black group member with many years of experience, described playing capoeira with axé in this way: "Axé is when you give your body, you sweat for it, you really throw yourself!"[52] This is where the distinction between calls and responses begins to blur, for calling with the appropriate energy summons an equally energetic response, which calls back to the callers who respond with more calls. These calls and responses happen among all participants—singers, instrumentalists, capoeira players, samba dancers—and the reciprocal cycle of energy exchange is what keeps the axé high and circulating.

Responding to capoeira's call thus means accepting multiple responsibilities within the micromoments of the roda, and these extend into students' lives (showing up early to the roda, repairing instruments) and to communities beyond the group. Binho asserted that playing in the roda is a great

[47]Rita Eloá Gonçalves Lantier, interview with the author, Salvador, Brazil, August 25, 2015.

[48]Binho, interview with the author, Feira de Santana, Brazil, April 3, 2016.

[49]Afonso Mesquita, interview with the author, Feira de Santana, Brazil, January 18, 2017.

[50]Rita Eloá Gonçalves Lantier, interview with the author, Salvador, Brazil, August 25, 2015.

[51]Madison draws on philosopher Kelly Oliver's interpretation of Levinas to underscore that one's response must also foster the "response(ability)" of others: "We have an obligation not only to respond but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility to respond by others," Madison, *Performed Ethnography and Communication*, 31; citing Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 18–19.

[52]Orikerê, interview with the author, São Félix, Brazil, March 10, 2016.

responsibility that extends to the Black community of Feira, whose cultural practices face increasing demonization from evangelical leaders.[53] In what could be seen as a continuation of historical practices of mutual protection between capoeira practitioners and Candomblé houses, the Saturday roda provides a space of refuge where Black community members can openly and safely participate in practices they cherish. In this context, Binho explained:

> You know you are doing good for yourself, and at the same time you are passing on some of the culture, which few people truly value. And you have the responsibility. You know there are people depending on you to show up and contribute to it. This Saturday roda, for us here in Feira, it's a total responsibility. We have to do that roda because the people are expecting it, waiting for it, every Saturday. It's a complete responsibility.[54]

Binho's and other group members' compromisso with community members in the ring reveals the tremendous sense of care with which they dedicate themselves to capoeira. Given the direct relationship between musicians giving their best and people playing or dancing their best in the ring, holding an instrument is akin to holding their bodies in one's hands. Indeed, the Portuguese verb for playing music, *tocar,* also means "to touch," and the term for rhythmic pattern, *toque,* also translates as the noun "touch."[55] Playing the instruments, directing the sounds, *tocando*, one is directing, moving, touching, and caring for bodies in the community.

Experiencing the Calls

Group members often described experiencing the sounds calling their bodies as being carried (away), cared for, or accompanied by someone. Solange, a Black group member from Feira, said, "For me, it's just me and the other person playing there, the music that's singing, and I try not to think about the movements. I don't think! I do the movements that come, I get excited/carried away! [*Eu me empolgo!*] It's as if another person enters into me at that moment."[56] Binho also noted that the music helped narrow his focus: "To be totally truthful, in that moment, when I'm playing, I only see my partner and the bateria. … I don't see anything else. … The *sintonia* [syntony, alignment of frequencies] carries your body. … The music does all of this." Both Solange and Binho experienced the calls of the roda—the songs, vibrations, and frequencies—as honing their attention and aiding or carrying their movements.

Flavinha, a Black practitioner of Candomblé, group member, and professional dancer of Afro-Brazilian styles compared the experience to "possession" because "it makes [her] feel like [she's] not alone." She clarified that she had never experienced possession in Candomblé, but she imagined that her sensations in the roda were "very close" to those experienced by Candomblé adepts. She explained:

> Because I feel in the capoeira roda, in the game, that it's not necessarily I, Flávia, who's talking with you and when she dances, thinking, "I'm going to do this movement, and, oooo how nice it feels!" No, it's not within my control. My movement is submitted to the movement of the other,

[53]For a recent study of religious racism in Brazil, see Danielle N. Boaz, *Banning Black Gods: Law and Religions of the African Disapora* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021).

[54]Binho, interview with the author, Feira de Santana, Brazil, April 3, 2016.

[55]Díaz Meneses cites an interlocutor, Sandra, an initiate of Candomblé, who describes feeling touched by the vibrations (*vibração*) (synonymous with axé) of the music, in a context outside of Candomblé, but where Candomblé instruments and toques are played in an ensemble with jazz instruments. Sandra says, "Each instrument vibrates, touches the mind of a person in different forms, and unleashes different feelings and emotions. The percussion, the drums, the atabaques touch specific parts of my mind and body," Juan Diego Díaz Meneses, "Listening with the Body: An Aesthetics of Spirit Possession Outside the Terreiro," *Ethnomusicology* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 104, 106. See also Katherine Johanna Hagedorn, "'Where the Transcendent Breaks into Time': Toward a Theology of Sound in Afro-Cuban Regla de Ochá," in *Theorizing Sound Writing*, ed. Deborah Kapchan (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 221.

[56]Solange, interview with the author, Feira de Santana, Brazil, July 28, 2015.

> and the tension of having everyone around, encircling [us], the rhythm—for me, the moment of the game borders a lot on this thing of non-total control between the mind and the body, because it's a corporeal conversation. You are not alone there. You can't do whatever you want.[57]

Capoeira players' altered states of consciousness are often referred to as a kind of trance,[58] and practitioners sometimes use this term, but here I emphasize not the terminology but the sensations of not being alone—of being accompanied. Responding to the calls, practitioners experienced an extraordinary sense of being aided, cared for, and carried by the presences in the roda, which in addition to the other players may include ancestors, entities, sounds, energies, vibrations, or all of the above.

Playing music in capoeira and samba thus means being responsible for the other bodies in the roda, carrying them (giving energy so they can play better) and caring for them, and this responsibility extends to everyone who shows up. When Binho spoke of a "total responsibility," therefore, he gestured beyond the capoeira group. When Rita insisted that the call of the music *involves you,* she emphasized that practitioners' compromisso also extends beyond the space-times of rodas, revealing that the roda's call and response directs more than the sounds and bodies in the roda. Indeed, call and response "has a ritualistic quality that 'restores,' 'reconciles,' 'regenerates,' and 'recuperates' the humanity of black people."[59] In this expansive sense, then, call and response orientations "*embody* the solutions to the problems of Africana people around the world."[60] They are "blueprints" for action.[61] Taking on their compromisso, Mestre Cláudio's students respond to capoeira's calls by assuming responsibilities to care for one another and the broader community beyond the group, including past and future generations of practitioners and aggrieved Black communities in Brazil.

Responding to the Call of Compromisso Beyond the Roda

Weekly and yearly frequencies

As with much cultura popular in Brazil and Black cultural manifestations across the diaspora, the capoeira group operates along regularly repeating temporal cycles. During the periods I visited the group, weekly trainings took place on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings, and members gathered on the street in Feira every Saturday morning to play capoeira and samba. Yet students also dedicated themselves to other activities throughout the week, such as practicing instruments and training capoeira alone or in small groups. A growing number of group members also teach satellite groups, throughout the city and its peripheries. These dedicated activities make up the weekly cycle, culminating in Saturday's roda, a ritual event that group members eagerly anticipate, some rearranging schedules and traveling long distances to attend.

Just as the Saturday roda punctuates the week, the group's annual event (*evento*) in January is the highlight of the year. Like a Candomblé house's annual public *festa,* the encounter (*encontro*, a more formal term) welcomes players from other groups and styles, and they arrive from all over Brazil and abroad, though members of the Angoleiros do Sertão still make up the majority. The event is held at Mestre Cláudio's *roça*,[62] his compound in the rural outskirts of Feira de Santana. Covering several acres, the Mestre's roça consists of two houses (one which has been under renovation for nearly a

[57]Flavinha, interview with the author, Feira de Santana, Brazil, January 16, 2017.

[58]Flávia Diniz, "Capoeira, Música e Transe," in *Capoeira Em Múltiplos Olhares: Estudos e Pesquisas Em Jogo*, ed. Antonio Liberac Cardoso Simões Pires, Paulo Magalhães, Franciane Figueiredo, and Sara Abreu (Cruz das Almas: Editora UFRB, 2016), 337–53; Angelo Augusto Decânio Filho, *Transe Capoeirano: Um Estudo Sobre Estrutura Do Ser Humano e Modificações de Estado de Consciência Durante a Prática Da Capoeira* (Salvador, BA: CEPAC–Coleção S. Salamão, 2002).

[59]Nelson, "'Put Your Hands Together': The Theological Meaning of Call-Response and Collective Participation in Rap Music," 62.

[60]Nelson, "'Put Your Hands Together': The Theological Meaning of Call-Response and Collective Participation in Rap Music," 62.

[61]Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 39; Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 64.

[62]The *roça* refers both to a parcel of rural or agricultural land and, more generally, the countryside.

decade), a small apartment, a workshop for building instruments, and two capoeira training sheds (one still with open sides). There is also a swimming pool with covered bar and barbecue area, with a built-in grilling oven (*churrasqueira*). The rest of the land is covered with various fruit trees (coconuts, mangos, cashews) and low brush. Attending capoeira practitioners bring their own tents and sleeping mats and camp out for the duration of the event. In recent years, by my estimates, the event has hosted over a hundred registered participants, perhaps exceeding two hundred in some years. Mestre Cláudio also opens his compound's gate to the local community for the event's Saturday night celebration. Soon after dark, community members arrive by motorcycle, horse, or car, dressed in their best fashion tees and dresses. The samba thunders all night long as the roda's centripetal force pulls bodies inward, and group and community members jostle one another in a joyous struggle to experience one fleeting moment in the center of the roda's vortex of axé.

An encounter of such scale requires months of preparation, with the intensity of the workload increasing exponentially as the event date approaches. Group members understand that if they arrive early to the event they will be expected to help. When I attended the event for my first time in January 2014, I also came a couple weeks early and observed that group members from near and far arrived gradually but steadily, setting up their tents in their preferred spots, whether favoring shade or a plot closer to or further from gathering areas. January in Brazil is summer, so many members had planned and budgeted so they could spend their vacation from work or school at the roça. The atmosphere was both relaxed and charged, with impromptu capoeira rodas, samba sessions, and pool lounging interspersed with manual labor. Yet since there were so many available hands, it never felt (to me) that any one person was working constantly—no one, that is, except for Rita, Mestre Cláudio's wife. Unable to take time off, she continued to work her full-time job in Salvador during the week and drove to the roça each weekend to coordinate the work being done there and unload supplies. These included spare tents, sleeping mats, trash bins, kitchen supplies, plastic coffee cups, plates, utensils, and nonperishable food. Rita's compromisso is profound.

One important and labor-intensive task every year is clearing the land of brush to make room for visitors' tents. In 2014, I observed the male students performing the heavy task of slicing away the brush with large scythes, machetes, or hoes. After the brush was removed, I joined others in clearing the ground of twigs, stones, mango pits, coconut shells, and trash—anything that could poke into a tent floor—and stamping down softer grasses to create a flat surface. One year, I also worked with other women washing, drying, and waxing the slate tiles of the capoeira space floor. Each year there is any number of small tasks, from bleaching white plastic chairs to handwashing kitchen rags (also in bleach) and hanging them to dry in the sun over the barbed wire fencing at the property's edge. Other tasks include organizing the logistics of event registration, transportation, cleaning training spaces and bathrooms, setting up the temporary outhouses and showers. In addition to delegating tasks, Rita hires the cooks and arranges rentals of plastic tables, chairs, and catering supplies. She makes sure that tents are cleaned, repaired, and if necessary, purchased, then set up for the visiting mestres, who are guests of honor. One year she asked me to go around to each mestre's tent and place a bar of soap and a chocolate on each pillow, just like you'd find at a hotel. The event t-shirt also must be commissioned, designed, and printed well in advance. Rita assumes an outsized responsibility and her ethic of care permeates the preparations, but the event could not happen without the collective effort of group members.

Meanwhile, before the event begins, Mestre Cláudio will have seen to one or more major construction projects, whether building a new training space (the concrete floor was finished one year, the roof another) or a water tower to ensure there will be enough water for the hundreds of thirsty and bathing attendees. Each year, he also prepares several baterias worth of instruments. He grows *cabaças*, the gourds for the berimbaus, on his property. After harvesting the cabaças, he lays them to dry and harden, eventually cutting a circular opening, scraping out their seeds, and drilling holes for a string to fasten the gourd. Then he begins the task of "marrying" the gourds to their *beribas,* the stiff wooden rods that provide the bow's tension. Just as the group must maintain capoeira and samba instruments throughout the year for the roda every Saturday, Mestre Cláudio and his more advanced students must make sure there are enough instruments to sustain the many rodas that take place during event. In the weeks leading up to the event, they can be heard testing the berimbaus, playing and tuning them as someone listens from a

short distance, switching out different cabaças, ensuring that there are enough berimbaus of each pitch range, from the large, lower *berra-boi,* the mid-range *gunga*, to the higher-pitched twangy *viola.*

Although the intensity of commitments ebbs and flows throughout the year, group members understand that their compromisso requires that they be ready to serve when needed. This commitment manifests most crucially in the weeks leading up to the annual event, but it also calls to members every week, as if each seven-day cycle were a microcosm of the annual cycle. As the years spiral outward, the call and response of compromisso likewise reverberates over time and space across generations.

Generational frequencies

During my first fieldwork trip to Mestre Cláudio's roça, in July 2013, he told me in one of our interviews about a project he had started roughly fourteen years earlier in Mantiba, his community in the rural outskirts of Feira de Santana. His intention was to create a center of capoeira education based in the periphery, where he had grown up, to give back to his community. Whereas many capoeira mestres leave their hometowns and migrate to wealthier cities in Brazil or the Global North, Mestre Cláudio always knew he wanted to live and teach capoeira in the roça where he grew up. Capoeira has enabled him to "envision new horizons" (*enxergar novos horizontes*), as he put it, and he wanted to bring this perception of expanded possibilities to the marginalized people—his people—of Feira's peripheries. He called the project "Oasis of the Sertão."[63]

The project took off. He gave capoeira classes every day of the week, mornings, afternoons, and evenings, with Sunday the day of the roda. Everyone came, children, adolescents, and adults. He had more than a hundred children taking his classes. It was a veritable *espaço cultural,* a space of cultura popular, where he taught samba de roda in addition to capoeira. The only problem was that he alone bore all the costs of the project. He had designed the project to serve his community, to offer them lessons in their own cultura popular free of charge. He also supplied the pants and shirts needed for training. Often he found himself putting down the work that sustained his livelihood, such as building percussion instruments for sale, to teach the classes because, he told me, if you start missing classes the students will become discouraged (*vai desanimando*). He realized at a certain point that it was no longer viable to continue the project in this way. He said, "As the saying goes, 'If you stretch a rope too much, it will eventually break.'" (*Corda que estique demais, uma hora ela quebra*). He ended the project.

I sensed both regret and resignation in his voice as he told the story. It sounded like a marvelous project—imagine a hundred children throwing themselves into circular back-kicks (*rabo de arraias*) and cartwheels (*aús*). The Oasis fully embodied Mestre Cláudio's compromisso with capoeira and his community. Truly selflessly, he had set out to create a wellspring of popular wisdom and knowledge in the arid backlands, his native sertão of Bahia. He had tried to pass on to his community what he had gained from practicing the Afro-Brazilian art form of capoeira.

However, it proved unsustainable. Mestre Cláudio shunned public support from the city or state, a common source of funding in Brazil, because it was always term limited and subject to be discontinued by a new administration. He also had to earn a living to support himself and family members. He transitioned to teaching paid classes in Feira's city center, mostly to college students and others who could afford the monthly tuition. He also continued to travel, as he still does today, visiting his satellite schools in Brazil, Europe, and the US and teaching guest workshops at other schools all over Brazil and the world.

As Mestre Cláudio's students in Feira have matured, many of them have begun to teach in other peripheral neighborhoods of the city. For instance, at some point in 2015 or 2016, two students, Pernalonga and Solange, began teaching in a neighborhood called Subaé, a southeast periphery of Feira. Since they have moved to another city, while Solange pursues a PhD, another student has taken over the classes. At the end of 2017, Hulluca, Mestre Cláudio's son, began teaching in the CASEB neighborhood, in the northeast of the city. Then in August 2023, I saw that Hulluca posted

[63]Mestre Cláudio Costa, interview with the author, Feira de Santana, Brazil, July 4, 2013.

on the group's WhatsApp chat that he had recently reinitiated the project in Mantiba, teaching residents of the community, "slowly giving continuity to the movement that has always existed" (*devagarinho dando continuidade ao movimento que sempre existiu*). He was referring to his father's Oasis of the Sertão, implying it had never really ended.

In October 2023, I called Hulluca for a phone interview to ask how the resurrection of the project in Mantiba was progressing. I began by explaining that I was writing an article about the compromisso group members have with capoeira, the Saturday roda, and the rural Black community of Feira. I asked,

"I'm wondering if you think this makes sense and if giving classes in Mantiba is also a kind of compromisso with the community?"

Hulluca responded, "I agree with what you're saying." But he made clear that for him the terminology—calling it "compromisso"—was less important. It was necessary with capoeira, he told me, as with any kind of work, to understand why they were doing it. "Capoeira brings within us [Black Brazilians] a sense of identity. There is no way to think about identity without thinking about responsibility."[64] For Hulluca the starting point was understanding how capoeira contributed to fostering Black Brazilian identity, and from that perspective it became obvious why he had to assume a compromisso. Regarding the newly resumed project in Mantiba, at the roça, Hulluca explained:

> It's a project that already existed, through my father, Mestre Cláudio, and now I'm bringing it back again after thirteen, sixteen years, without having anything here. So I understand where capoeira comes from and I understand that it needs to occupy other places, only I also understand that we can't let it cease to exist in the place where it came from.

A vibrant theme of discussion with Mestre Cláudio and other concerned group members is the issue of who has access to capoeira training. As a fight-game-art developed by enslaved Africans and their descendants ("where capoeira comes from"), capoeira is widely considered a product of Black resilience and a tool for fighting oppression (physically, psychologically, mentally, and/or spiritually) and even seizing freedom. Whether or not enslaved people used capoeira to physically liberate themselves in the past, capoeira remains a powerful instrument for marginalized Black Brazilians to learn about their history and affirm the value of their culture and lives.[65] Yet as capoeira has spread across the world (the "other places" capoeira now occupies), Black Brazilians are now far outnumbered by non-Black and non-Brazilian practitioners. When Hulluca said "we can't let [capoeira] cease to exist in the place where it came from," he underscored the importance of maintaining capoeira in Black Brazilian communities, where many of the descendants of capoeira's originators live today. Hulluca went on to explain the nature of the responsibility he has taken on:

> When I think about bringing this [project] back, it's necessary for me to have responsibility. Aside from entering a space that I already am part of, it's a space where there are people who need care.

He talked about his sensitivity to different forms of "abandonment" the people may have been subjected to, abandoned by family members out of necessity or abandoned by the state, the government, and how this creates the need for a certain kind of "accompaniment," following along with his students, regularly checking in with them. Hulluca seemed acutely attuned to the depth and breadth of the possible needs of his students and the resulting gravity of his commitment. He then explained why he took his compromisso so seriously:

> From the moment that you move [*movimentar*] the community with capoeira—because capoeira is a space of identity, it strengthens our identities, so it moves [touches, *mexe com*] the Black

[64]Hulluca, interview with the author by phone, October 5, 2023.

[65]For a close consideration of capoeira's origins and origin myths, see Matthias Röhrig Assunção, *Capoeira: The History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

> people of the peripheries, of the Bahian sertão—so when you give these people access to capoeira, you're messing [*mexendo*] with a piece of their identity. So you need to have responsibility with the [social] movement [of capoeira] as much as with the people that are part of the movement.

Hulluca understood that being involved with capoeira meant being involved with the local community, inviting them into spaces of cultura popular not only because this was already their culture but also because participating in Black cultural practices could strengthen senses of belonging, pride, and self-esteem among Black community members.

Like his father, Hulluca assumes all costs for the project. However, for now the scale is significantly smaller, and he has received some financial support from friends and other contacts. He teaches Mondays and Wednesdays, around six children in the morning and fifteen to twenty adults and young adults in the evening. This allows him to continue his paid work teaching capoeira in the CASEB neighborhood.

Hulluca also explained how he needs to operate differently in each space:

> For example, in the city [classes] the students pay monthly fees, they have to have [and provide their own] shoes, their clothes [school uniforms], they pay for transportation. They have a different financial condition. But here [in Mantiba] some people need to train without shoes. Like one of the youngsters, one day, I asked him, "Hey, where are your shoes?" And he said, "Oh, Hulluca, the only shoes I have are for school. If I use them [for capoeira] my mother will get angry with me!"

Most capoeira Angola schools have strict rules that prohibit training in bare feet. However, Hulluca recognized that teaching in Mantiba meant considering his students' life conditions and challenges, which led him to relax the rules around wearing shoes, for instance. This illustrates how Hulluca was thinking about his responsibility to care for his students and community members.

Hulluca also told me that his students are already worried that the project won't last, expecting or fearing that he will abandon them. Hearing of a trip he was planning to Germany to teach there for a short time in the following year, they demanded, "And now, [when you go] capoeira's going to stop?!" He told me this demonstrates their social need or lack (*carência social*) and how much they want the capoeira lessons to continue. In response, he talked with them about responsibility, telling them they had to assume the responsibility to keep the trainings going even in his absence. He would arrange for an advanced student to teach while he was away, but it was ultimately up to them to continue to show up, "with respect and with responsibility."

Eventually, Hulluca envisioned expanding the project to include other subject areas, for instance, studying for university entrance exams and learning English. These other services were also necessary because, as he put it, "The peripheral zone, the rural zone, is really abandoned by the state." The residents of the periphery, in Hulluca's view, need support to stimulate their personal growth so they can realize their capacities, and capoeira provides this kind of assistance: "Capoeira gives us the strength to pursue [*prosseguir, alcançar*] other objectives. In addition to strengthening our identity, we are able to see other [life] paths."

Capoeira's power to strengthen Black identities lies in the ways it directly counters white supremacist values. Young Black people in Brazil's peripheries grow up in conditions of abandonment, learning that the state does not value their lives, even though their family and community members do. In contrast, training capoeira teaches them that they descend from a long line of people who resisted racialized subjugation and dehumanization in part by weaving their experience into music, songs, movements, and ritual practices. The result—Black cultura popular—provides spaces where young people are cared for and where students learn about where they came from and where they can go. By continuing his father's work in Mantiba, Hulluca understands that his commitment ensures that younger generations will pass on capoeira's sonic-embodied knowledge that fundamentally affirms and values Black lives. Thus his responsibility far transcends simply teaching movements and songs. It encompasses an ethic of care. He must concern himself with his students' wellbeing, their sense of self, and their place in the world, as his father has also done for decades. Hulluca responds

to capoeira's calls by assuming certain responsibilities to a peripheral Black community of the Bahian sertão, yet this reveals how capoeira's call to compromisso can also reverberate across other generations and geographies.

Conclusion

Call and response may originate in the sounds and movements of the roda, but the energy exchanges resonate beyond the ring, expanding and repeating. The tong-tong of the berimbau wire resonating in its gourd summons people into Black Brazilian antiphonal spaces, communities, and lives. The pulse of the music and song calls participants back again and again to partake in the weekly, yearly, and generational frequencies of events, passing on the practice to future teachers. As their involvement increases, practitioners realize that capoeira makes demands on their lives and asks them to consider how they will put their compromisso into practice. The calls, responses, and responsibilities vibrate through space—throughout the city of Feira de Santana, across Brazil, and beyond—and over time, calling on practitioners to consider how to respond to the calls of generations past and future. Responding to a call in one moment means assuming the responsibility to issue future calls, thereby ensuring the response-ability of community members to come, so that they, too, can call and answer past and future calls.[66]

However, as the particular examples described here demonstrate—from Rita's deep involvement and Hulluca's resurrection of Mestre Cláudio's Oasis of the Sertão project to the myriad weekly and yearly tasks group members undertake—sustaining compromisso, like living by ubuntu, takes hard work, care, and time. One must be willing to recommit oneself over and over again. When Mestre Cláudio decided to give up his Oasis project, he did not give up his compromisso, but rather found new ways to sustain it. Because he has continued to teach capoeira in Feira de Santana, his son Hulluca could train intensively, eventually gaining the skills he needed to continue the project of teaching capoeira in Mantiba. In this way, Hulluca and other group members are readying themselves to assume the responsibility of sustaining Mestre Cláudio's capoeira Angola legacy when he is no longer there, and they are already training future generations who will assume the mantle after they are gone. Clearly the work is never finished. Moreover, just as there is no point at which a capoeira mestre would claim to have mastered every aspect of the art form, there is no end in sight to systemic racism and white supremacy. Understanding one's compromisso with capoeira as a commitment to the Black community means that the responsibility is infinite.

Interpreting Levinas, Ahmed explains, "To say that responsibility is infinite, is to imply that it is a debt that cannot be paid back, and hence that there is always a call, a demand, for a future response to an other *whom I may yet approach*."[67] Likewise, in the capoeira roda, finite responses are undesirable. Responding with a kick that, for instance, knocks an opponent out of the ring or renders them unconscious would end the game. Keeping the call and response going, ensuring that the games keep flowing, requires care and continually generates the axé-energy of the roda, ultimately, as I have shown, sustaining capoeira for future generations. Given the impossibility of ever fully responding to an infinite call, yet the necessity of responding anyway, Ahmed concludes, "How to respond to the particular at the same time as one takes responsibility for that which exceeds the particular would be the quest and the question of such an ethics."[68] She then asks, "How would such an ethics work?" I propose that the call, response, responsibility, and compromisso of the Angoleiros do Sertão provide an answer to this question and a model for this quest.

Seeing how call and response can orient the lives of capoeira practitioners reveals the value of asking what kinds of ethical and other philosophical knowledges are generated in Black music-dance practices across the Americas. I have drawn connections among philosophies originating on multiple continents,

[66]Schneider, "That the Past May Yet Have Another Future."
[67]Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 146.
[68]Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 147.

but focusing on the particularity of capoeira Angola in the Bahian sertão has shown how practitioners bring Black Brazilian musical-corporeal knowledge into ethical practice in their lives.

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