

DIASPORA WITHOUT DISPLACEMENT

THE COLONIALITY & PROMISE *of* CAPOEIRA IN SENEGAL



Celina de Sá

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The Coloniality and Promise of Capoeira in Senegal

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*To Dona Celina, our past,
and Selah and Yael, our future*

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As culture becomes less a synonym for performance than its field of work, and as performance complicates our understanding of cultural practice so that we recognize the rehearsed and produced and creative nature of everyday life, perhaps we may be excused for wondering who the artists are, who the ethnographer, the dupe, the closet colonist. Who, ultimately, pulls the theatrical strings? Who is positioned where in this most uncanny, post-modern drama of cultural encounters?

—DIANA TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire*

All of us are suffering coloniality, it's just that the significant presence of white bodies in South Africa and the United States make it easier to visualize.

—PANASHE CHIGUMADZI, "Why I'm No Longer Talking to Nigerians About Race"

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PREFACE

Capoeira—a combat game developed by enslaved West Central Africans first documented in the late eighteenth century in Brazil—is now an Afro-Brazilian symbol of national pride. It is a multifaceted practice that involves instrumentation, song, community interaction, and a distinctive aesthetic often misunderstood as “dance-fighting.”¹ Scholarship about capoeira notes Senegal as the first place where the Afro-Brazilian combat game, developed mostly in the diaspora, actually returned to Africa (Varela 2017), referring to the legendary occasion when Mestre Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha) performed with a small crew of students at the First World Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN) in Dakar in 1966. That is where the story of capoeira in Senegal ended. This book picks up where that story left off, when another visionary, Moctar Ndiaye, saw a little Senegalese boy (who had been adopted by a French woman) throwing his legs in the air on the historic Gorée Island beach. The boy and his mother were on their own personal origins journey, reconnecting him to his roots since he had left Senegal to live with her in France. He had struggled as a racialized child in French society, and his mother was advised by the adoption agency to ground him in his place of origins. He became Moctar’s first teacher, and Moctar spent the next two decades of his life spreading the gospel of capoeira, which is widely understood by practitioners to be the quintessential practice of Black liberation.

Moments of diasporic return are imbued with the weight of what they do or do not accomplish. While some have investigated the rupture of the Middle Passage, others have looked to the Atlantic gap less as of a rupture than as a channel that links regions by oceans rather than divides them (Ferreira 2012; Gilroy 1993; Hartman 2006; Wright 2015). Whether existentially rewarding or disappointing for returnees, the African side of return is equally complex and filled with expectation, disappointment, and aspiration that comes to bear on how returns play out. Diasporic

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connections with the Americas are rich with potential for West Africans without any actual return.

I unpack events such as capoeira roots tourism trips that are widely recognized as diasporic return when Brazilian capoeiristas (and others) visit the African continent. I also move beyond those moments to reveal how West Africans have already been carrying out the mundane work of return over several decades through a process that is nonlinear, fraught, and unpredictable. Almost thirty years after Mestre Pastinha and his students performed a demonstration of capoeira in Dakar, Moctar and the first cohort of Senegalese capoeiristas, who formed a group called Les Messagers du Vent (the Messengers of the Wind) that later became Africa Capoeira–Ilha de Gorée (which they nicknamed Afreecapoeira), visited Brazil early in their passion to learn. Moctar would spend the next two decades building up Senegal as a symbolic home of capoeira open to everyone. He also had to defend it in the face of Brazilian and European neglect, empty promises of support, and even attempts to claim capoeira in Senegal without having invested anything in it. The leaders and active membership also presented unexpected twists, going from predominantly Senegalese participation to almost no Senegalese and an influx of West African non-nationals and white Europeans. The copresence of coloniality and promise at the heart of this community is the subject of the stories in this book.

In a way, this book is also the story of my own return. My father, Mestre Beizola (Ronaldo de Sá) was among the cohort of the first Brazilians to bring capoeira to California in the late 1980s. In fact, my parents met through capoeira, when my mother was training in Berkeley and my father taught a workshop at her academy. My siblings and I were raised in a capoeira household, and as kids we took samba and Afro-Brazilian dance classes, paraded in the San Francisco *Carnaval* every year, and learned to play a range of instruments, all with my father as our teacher.

But I was a reluctant student. Capoeira's spinning moves often made me dizzy. I dreaded the intimidating moment of approaching the *bateria* (orchestra for capoeira) to play in the *roda* in front of so many staring eyes and to face the unpredictability of my opponent's attacks. I also struggled with my connection to the idea of Brazil, a place that was integrated into my daily reality but that I visited only every other year. I was also a heritage speaker of Brazilian Portuguese, which often shook my confidence of my transnational belonging. Growing up with a capoeira legend also meant having other (mostly Black) Brazilian *mestres* around, along with countless (mostly white) Americans who were dance, music, and capoeira

students passionate about “Brazilian culture.” I vehemently rejected capoeira training for many years, aspiring to be a normative American teenager who played volleyball.² Still, my background had always made me curious about racial identity and the possibilities and limitations of performance.

I grew up always wanting to visit “Africa,” knowing that my grandmother, Dona Celina (to whom I owe my name), knew her grandmother, Christina, who we believe had been captured from her home in Angola and enslaved in Brazil. When I first encountered Afreecapoeira during a semester abroad in Senegal, I felt a flood of familiarity, of knowing how to greet people and how to move in the space. I joined them in singing the same songs I had sung at capoeira *rodas* all my life. Moctar and I came to the conclusion that we might have been in Rio de Janeiro at the same time back in 1998, when he and a few of his early students took a trip there funded by the Brazilian Embassy of Senegal. He even visited the house of my father’s capoeira *mestre*, Mestre Touro, which we also likely visited when my family moved briefly to Brazil when I was nine years old. Training with the people from Africa Capoeira made me fall in love with capoeira for the first time, an ocean away from the world that introduced me to it. When the prospect of my earning a belt came up, the association leaders told me I would have to decide whether I would stay in the tradition of my father’s school (where I had received my last belt at twelve) or leave my lineage to join them. I was honored to be welcomed, and I earned two belts from Afreecapoeira over my time studying with the group. I still proudly claim my training from Dakar but, of course, acknowledge the deep foundation of my training from my father.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, my father visited me in Dakar, and he was greeted at the airport by a boisterous group of my friends in Afreecapoeira who played pandeiro (a Brazilian tambourine) and sang his welcome to the continent for the first time (figure P.1). They were eager to have him teach a workshop over the course of his stay. Conversations about the history and goals of Afreecapoeira culminated in a kind of informal meeting at one of the top student’s house, about how best to build a collaboration between my father’s US- and Brazil-based networks, on one hand, and Afreecapoeira, on the other. After a long discussion, my father came to his own conclusion, which he formulated as advice: “Don’t wait for anyone else or ask permission. Protect what you have and just keep doing what you’re doing.” Ibrahim (*apelido* Propheta), the student at whose house they met, later told me he was grateful for this perspective and that it inspired him to preserve Afreecapoeira’s autonomy. My father now tells the



P.1 Propheta (*left*) posing with Mestre Beçola (Ronaldo de Sá, the author's father) in the Afreecapoeira training space in Dakar in 2016 during Mestre Beçola's first trip to the African continent. Photograph by the author.

stories of his time in Senegal proudly, sharing how much he learned from connecting with Afreecapoeira's motivated capoeiristas.

Today, West African capoeiristas in Senegal are forging new connections with the Black Atlantic. They enact (or reenact) historical ties through an imaginary of Black kinship, even as so many historical links among West Africa (Senegal), West Central Africa (Angola), and South America (Brazil) remain difficult to trace in the Black boxes of Atlantic history. Those Atlantic gaps make up the space that embodies coloniality's investment in erasure. That inaccessible past is also a space of imagination and potential.

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MOVING ORIGINS

A group of twenty-something martial artists arrived at the Port Autonome de Dakar to take the ferry to Gorée Island, as they had done dozens of times before. This morning was special. We awaited the *batizado* (baptism) graduation ceremony, where we would each earn a new, higher-level belt in the Afro-Brazilian martial art capoeira. Two members of our group, Africa Capoeira–Ilha de Gorée (Afrecapoeira), which is based in Dakar, called to say they were on their way, hoping to catch the same noontime boat ride. Kassoum, whose capoeira *apelido* (nickname) is Gavião (Hawk), a Senegalese-Ivorian capoeirista who grew up playing capoeira between Dakar and New York, shared an update about Elena, *apelido* Lagoa (Lake), a Burkinabé woman who had moved to Dakar to complete medical school. Her phone had stopped working after she dropped it in the ocean during our women’s acrobatics training, a group we playfully called “Les Amazones.” The capoeiristas who had arrived early gathered at the dock, sipping from Dixie cups of Nescafé and launching roasted peanuts at one another. In anticipation that we would need our white uniforms to be clean for the ceremony, I showed up that morning in a T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers. The rest of the group chose to look more polished. The men sported Dutch wax print button-ups, while Ashael, *apelido* Encantador (Enchanter) went a step farther, rocking fitted jeans stylishly torn at the knees and patched with brightly colored fabric. Bigue was fully dolled up: Her teal eyeshadow matched her tank top and headscarf, and her orange sandals echoed her equally bejeweled orange handbag. Her peers affectionately referred to her as “Iemanjá” (the Brazilian goddess of the sea) for the regal way she carried herself. While we were waiting, she became the target of a flying peanut, which broke her serious demeanor and caused her to burst into laughter.

Aboard the ferry that day, members of Afrecapoeira took the opportunity to once again disregard the sign that read, “Tam Tam Interdit” (Drums Forbidden). We slapped and rattled pandeiros (tambourines);

strummed the bowl-like berimbau; clapped in unison; and sang boisterously, to the delight of locals and tourists who filmed our spontaneous jam session with their smartphones. Upon landing at Gorée Island, we made our way through the cobblestone alleyways softened with bougainvillea-flower-covered walls to arrive at a school courtyard. We slowly took over the space, pulling instruments out of our backpacks, taking off our shoes, and piling up our bags. After a family-style meal of yassa poulet (grilled chicken in onion sauce) and chilled bissap (hibiscus juice), some stretched out on mats to rest while others tapped a 6/8 beat on the pandeiro to accompany the Afropop blaring from a cell phone. We stretched our wrists, shook out our calves, and practiced handstands, warming up for the intense workout to come.

Next, it was time to get changed. In just a few minutes, we were all in white—loose elastic pants for maximum flexibility and matching white T-shirts emblazoned with the school's logo, made especially for the event. Those who had received belts the year before fastened the braided yarn around their waists for the last time. Bags of newly braided belts in combinations of yellow, white, and blue rested patiently on the staircase as Gabrielle the tough love “mama of the group,” sorted the colors by level. Gorée Island—the site of a historical slave port and centuries of trade networks—is now the headquarters for West African martial artists continuing a legacy of play, combat, and musical expression created by Africans taken in Angola and brought to plantations across Brazil.

Moctar Ndiaye is a native Goréan who has taught capoeira on Gorée for almost thirty years to the children of the island and a diverse group of young adults living in Dakar. His students call him by his capoeira nickname, “Lion,” which refers to his Wolof last name, Ndiaye (of the lion clan). Lions are also a symbol of the Senegalese nation-state, and a performative practice of the false lion (the Simb) is danced across ethnic groups in the country. At the castle on the peak of the island and in the plaza on the island's dock, capoeira gatherings have long burst forth in the open air, free-flowing movements now saturating the historical site of containment. The Mariama Bâ girls' boarding school that occupies an old army barracks is where Moctar teaches the local children the diasporic art of combat and liberation. The Boubacar Joseph Ndiaye Cultural Center—dedicated to one of the country's most renowned historical preservation activists, who renovated the island's main “attraction,” the Maison des Esclaves (House of Slaves) in 1962 and created its accompanying museum—is where Afreecapoeira inducts generations of new recruits into the tradition through annual *batizados*.

The pink wash of the Maison des Esclaves holding chamber, at once both swollen and hollow, has become the ritual site where hundreds of African martial artists have “played” capoeira to pay homage to those who once awaited a tragic voyage to plantations in the Americas.¹ “Parana ué,” as capoeira is colloquially known in West Africa after a popular Brazilian song, is a phrase with which many Goréans are familiar, as this Afro-Brazilian martial art has seeped into the social landscape of the historical island. Along with an anthropologist and fellow capoeiristas who went to greet her own potential ancestors, West African capoeiristas made a pilgrimage to the island as proof of a new trajectory of this improvisational art of liberation. They gathered in a circle while our teacher, Moctar Ndiaye, began to sing:

Gorée
me chamou pra jogar
Capoeira na roda
Mas um dia eu chego lá
Eu chego lá
Se Deus quiser
Eu chego lá camará
Eu tenho fé

Gorée
 called me to play
 capoeira in the roda
 but one day I’ll arrive there
 I’ll arrive there
 God willing
 I’ll arrive there, comrade
 I have faith

In capoeira, singing provides a narrating voice to comment on the events occurring inside the *roda*—the circle of peers in which two capoeiristas “play” one another—and to provide thematic context related to capoeira. In this adapted capoeira song, the Senegalese capoeira vanguard from Gorée Island—who replaced “the sea” (read, Africa in general) with “Gorée” specifically—performed a yearning for return to homeland, despite that homeland being the place he had lived all his life. What the song calls our attention to, then, is not the longing itself—a classic trope in the affective repertoire of diasporic subjectivity—but the adaptation of “the sea” as

a referent for Africa to Gorée Island in particular. This performative musical utterance pins the origins of Afro-Brazilian capoeira's trope of exile to a longing for the singer's own West African home(land). The performance is made successful by his embodying a diasporic exile who is crying out for Senegal.

It is well known that Africa often represents a heritage for Black people in the diaspora. Blackness, however, is also a heritage for Africans. This book is organized by a set of misrecognitions at the heart of the tension among race, origins, and diaspora. Xavier Livermon (2020, 32) argues that "(mis)recognition as diaspora inhabits the space of 'friction' that may exist between Black people in Afro-diasporic spaces while also insisting that such friction can be productive spaces of affinity." Analyzing misrecognition illuminates the insidious nature of diaspora as an unlikely source of coloniality. While ordinary young people train to become martial artists, the cultivation of these new selves as "capoeiristas" reveals at once the limitations and the possibilities of subjectivity in postcolonial, urban West Africa—a space of former French colonial rule and intervention by American and European nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and militaries; an exoticized cosmopolitanism; a Western tourist playground; and a romanticized diasporic Motherland.

Brazil holds a strong presence in the imaginary of many West Africans, as it does for most of the world, for its well-known soccer legends, eroticized images of women on pristine beaches, and being the land of samba and Carnaval, one of the most famous festivities in the world. But Brazil also captures the attention of many practicing capoeiristas in West Africa because of its successful portrayal of itself as a racial paradise (Smith 2016a), a place that overcame slavery and transitioned to a society where all racial groups have long mixed freely. Indeed, this portrayal is the basis of Brazil's claim to racial democracy, a claim that has been debunked as mythology (Hanchard 1999b; Smith 2016a). While some West Africans romanticize Brazil's racial democracy, Afro-Brazilians and Europeans similarly romanticize Africa as a site of historical richness and Black symbolism, the site of origins for much of what Brazil prides itself on as a national culture influenced by Africa, but, ultimately, a unique, creolized national culture. At times, these urban postcolonial artistic communities draw on diasporic histories and perform diasporic bodily forms of liberation *at the expense* of contending with their own historical contexts and at the expense of confronting social hierarchies specific to West Africa, some of which are racial hierarchies from transnational circulations and from local histories of colonial categorization.

Senegal is not a place of capoeira's historical origins, which can be traced predominantly to Angola. Senegal is, however, the origin point of capoeira's "return" to the African continent. Capoeira was one of the iterations of Black performance that contributed to the ways Senegal was imagined and constituted not only as a new nation-state but also as a Pan-African "homeland" for the diaspora. In 1966, Senegal's first president, Leopold Sedar Senghor—one of the founders of the Négritude movement—held the First World Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN) as the country was emerging from decades of French colonial rule. During the colonial period, Dakar was the administrative headquarters for French West Africa. Performers in the festival hailed from all over the world, and among the array of acts was a small troupe of Brazilians who performed capoeira to inaugurate Senegalese sovereignty. State-sponsored celebrations of regionalism and Blackness also mask regional and intranational hierarchies. State-sponsored Pan-African events in West Africa such as FESMAN, held in Dakar in 1966, and the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1977, have had the effect that "ethnic difference and class formation were subsumed by the inclusive horizons of blackness" (Apter 2005, 9).

West Africa holds particular appeal for the consumption of performance, creating a circulation through "African dance" classes transnationally that route interested dance students from abroad to the region (Sawyer 2006). Performance was key to the French approach to colonial rule. The federation of French West Africa involved colonial administrators who were also ethnographers, theater programs, and colonial schools in Senegal attended by a range of West Africans. These multifaceted ethnographic, educational, and performative strategies of rule left a legacy of using the stage and other cultural spheres as a mechanism of politics, ethnic-cultural discourse, and experimentation with political formations (Izzo 2019; Kringelbach 2013; Valente-Quinn 2021). In other parts of West Africa, performance becomes a way of "mimic[ing] the trappings of power as exhibited by the privileged power class and, paradoxically, also inhabits the space of the marginalized to push for more power," such as the case of Pentacostal expressive practices in contemporary Nigeria theorized by Abimbola Adedokun (Adedokun 2021, 20). Performance has been and continues to be a vital battleground of social and political power in West Africa from the colonial state to the postcolonial state, and from elites seeking control to grassroots movements vying for sovereignty.

With capoeira, we see another example in which Black performance becomes a space of exoticization and consumption of the African body in motion and in music and of how industries develop to supply visitors with dance experience and experiences in African settings. Dakar in particular is a regional hub of cosmopolitanism and a symbol of the legacy of the French West Africa's colonial headquarters. Wolof society in the peanut basin of Senegal became relatively privileged under French colonial rule (Barry 1997; Diouf 1998; Wilder 2005). Senegal's "special" standing as a postcolonial nation-state is rooted in its colonial position as a model for proto-citizens under a rubric of French civil and cultural standards. This reputation of intimacy with France obscures the history of Senegalese religious and political leaders who resisted complete domination by the French, such as Lat Dior, the ruler of the Cayor empire, and the Sufi saint Cheikh Amadou Bamba. They became icons of Black African liberation and sovereignty (Morales-Libove 2005).² In the era of independence, and again at the start of the twenty-first century, Senegal sits in ambivalence as a vanguard of cultural expression of Black liberation and as a kind friend of empire that chose a path of negotiation of political relationships with the metropole rather than a full break.³

The first time the combat game is known to have been performed in Africa, when capoeira was performed at FESMAN, is a story unique to Senegal. Yet there and across West Africa, almost all who become capoeiristas cite the film *Only the Strong* (1993) as their first contact with the art. This TV film, which became a cult classic, depicts a white soldier who learns capoeira while he is stationed in Bahia and then returns to civilian life in the United States as an inner-city high school teacher. He uses capoeira to show the rowdy and wayward young men (including greasy-haired skateboarders) how to have discipline and stay off the streets. The film's popularity spread among what Donal Cruise O'Brien (1996) calls the "lost generation" of disenfranchised youth in West Africa—and in Senegal, in particular—who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s. Moctar Ndiaye, a native of Gorée Island, founded Afreecapoeira, Senegal's first capoeira school, where he has been teaching children and adults for more than twenty years. Despite the small scale of this initiative within Senegal's expressive cultural landscape, Afreecapoeira has had a wide impact. Moctar has instructed students in rural communities outside Dakar, as well as children of the upper echelon of the country, such as those of the world-renowned artist Youssou N'Dour and of former president Macky Sall. I once went to pay an overdue electricity bill and the cashier was a former student of Moctar's.

I show how West Africa historically has been—and, perhaps more important, continues to be—a site that is key to understanding race, embodiment, cultural innovation, the legacy of the slave trade, and what young people find politically salient in the twenty-first century. Victoria Collis-Buthelezi makes the case for a contemporaneity that South Africa once maintained with the imperial world that gave way to a West African-oriented freezing of “Africa” as relevant only in terms of Black ancestry (and not Black modernities). In the nineteenth century, the South African Cape was a site of global Black modernity and Black radical aspiration with West African, Black American, and other Black immigration circulations. This collapsed with the creation of the Union of South Africa under the British Crown in the early twentieth century:

The loss of the Cape/Cape Town precipitated the calcification of Africa as a site of origin for those in the diaspora. Under this schema West Africa—from which transatlantic slaves came—became the key point of reference for New World blacks. . . . Whereas diasporic Africans could look to West Africa as a source of origins, the Cape was almost only ever conceived of as a place of coeval black modernity. Its loss precipitated the loss of a kind of coeval, global black modernity. From the diaspora, Africa became *only* the ancestral home. (Collis-Buthelezi 2021, 128)

West Africa, then, carries a legacy of representing ancestry and origins for the Black world at large, which is both a sacred position of grounding and a burden of being cemented. With a specific focus on Dakar, Senegal, I show how postcolonial urban sites in West Africa must be understood within the broader dynamics of regionalism and global transnationalism. West African regionalism emerges as the antidote to diaspora’s failed promises. West African capoeiristas reimagine their own kinds of homelands in Dakar, Banjul, Cotonou, and Abidjan, alongside diasporic sites such as Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. They take new and old African spaces and symbols as homelands to be discovered.

Coloniality and the Promise of West African Capoeira

Although capoeira now exists across the African continent, it is most established in West Africa, in the Francophone coastal cities that are also key sites of the transatlantic slave trade. Without a strong presence of

Brazilians, West African capoeira practitioners collaborate with one another through local, regional, and international networks by regularly communicating on social media, hosting workshops, and attending annual events. These efforts were initiated by a few visionaries, mostly young men in the 1990s who, in their respective contexts, discovered capoeira and saw it as their calling. Collectively, they created an artistic network among the schools founded and developed by West Africans, including Afreecapoeira in Dakar; the Capoeira Association of the Gambia in Banjul; Ogun Eru in Cotonou, Benin; and Nukunu in Lomé, Togo.⁴ Their efforts to advance these artistic social projects through training sessions, performances, and institution building pose key questions about the place of diaspora, its starting point, and the implications of the people and ideas that circulate within it. The boundaries of these capoeiristas' transnational communities are constructed through online interactions (i.e., learning Brazilian cultural habits from YouTube videos or emailing masters in Brazil, France, and the United States), and in quotidian actions of self-improvement (i.e., gaining mastery over one's internal world through physical training to advance skills for inclusion in global capoeira standards).

For many of the founders of this network, their historical and geographic positionality living in sites significant to the transatlantic slave trade is central to their mission to disseminate capoeira as a practice of Black liberation. Through their research online and from books acquired from passing visitors, some West Africans discovered the art form's history, along with the African cultural traditions that are embedded within that history. As a result, many have made claims to the capoeira tradition as decidedly African, alongside Brazil's material claim to the art's origin. They connect certain instruments or movements to specific ethnic groups, concluding that capoeira is, by definition, quintessentially an African and a Black form of combat. The reconstruction of African social categories in Brazil, the Atlantic dialogues, and the different ways racial hierarchies took shape in various African and Brazilian contexts are such that sometimes Blackness is seen as a continuity from Africanness through a process of racial formation, while *African* and *Black* are sometimes evoked as synonyms. This book attends to what those two concepts mean from the vantage point of urban life and performance in West Africa. It is an investigation of a Black diasporic perspective from African contexts outward that is also colored by internal migratory diasporas and their cultural manifestations. The concept of African origins is remade by West Africans themselves through their own diasporic imaginaries,

opening up new possibilities for origins to be understood as flexible and mobile.

The artistic social network of capoeira schools in West Africa brings awareness to innovative acts of racial self-making in African contexts. Race is not only relevant in interactions between Africans and non-Africans (Europeans and Brazilians), but it also plays a role in the formation of social categories within West African regionalism, albeit in different ways. There, Blackness and whiteness are complexly tied to transnational circulations and global structures of race and entangled with other markers of difference in various scales (e.g., caste, class, religion, ethnicity, urbanity, and nationality). As the capital of the colonial region, “Dakar was a place designed by the French to meet the needs of European governance and life” (Keller 2018, 12). The colonial legacy is one of absorbing complexity, and constructed colonial categories, “such as *French, African, citizen, subject*,” “remained fragile” as Lebanese, Syrian, Vietnamese, Moroccan, and many other people circulated in Dakar, producing global connections and political solidarities that were criminalized by interwar French colonial authorities who treated these new residents with suspicion (Keller 2018, 5–6). The examples I explore in this book provide insight into how this capoeira community helps us reimagine what it means to be African for a diverse group of West Africans living in twenty-first-century Dakar, not as a category confined to ethnicity or its entrenchment in autochthony but, rather, as a political positionality that gathers multiple places, sometimes even playing with imaginative time travel. Through these reimaginings, West Africans challenge categories of diaspora, nationality, and ethnicity in part by foregrounding Blackness—rooted in both diaspora and home—as a central aspect of their identity.

Coloniality and promise are in tension at the heart of Black performance. Promise signals an entitlement to global Black heritage and an expectation of what embodied liberatory joy—of play fighting with friends and joining a global movement community—could do. Coloniality also shapes the heart of what draws people to that community of Black expressive joy. In holding both realities through each chapter, I argue that diverse groups of young people in urban West Africa are mobilizing performance, history, and symbolism to write themselves back into the diaspora, not just as the embodiment of origins, but as equal participants in diasporic exploration of heritage and innovation. In doing so, they also renew a practice of West African regionalism that always was, and continues to be, in dialogue not only with the colonial logics that tie them together but also with regional

solidarities that insulate against colonial legacies. Urban African contexts are built from layers of regional migration that produce local concepts of intra-Black mixture and difference.⁵ In pursuit of understanding how performance and artistic communities emerge from and simultaneously conceptualize race, class, and regional circulation, Livermon (2020, 69) advises that we should “think equally about the relations between differently classed Black people as much as (or perhaps more so) than the presence of whites and Black in the same space.” By virtue of my focus on West African performance communities that draw on Afro-Brazilian cultural practices, this book speaks within the fields of African studies, South Atlantic studies, and Black Atlantic studies and the anthropology of diaspora, race, expressive culture, urban youth social movements, and migration to reexamine where and how we locate the practices and conditions of diaspora.⁶

The capoeira network I discuss in these pages raises issues related not only to West African processes of state formation and nationalisms but also to broader relationships among race, diaspora, and citizenship. Racial discourses of self-identification with Blackness are complexly hidden and silenced in contemporary urban West Africa, leading to a prevailing myth that race is irrelevant to the African public consciousness, particularly in countries understood as all Black or Black by default (Araujo 2010; Hartman 2006; Holsey 2008; Ochonu 2019; Pierre 2012; Wright 2016). What are the political and artistic dynamics for West Africans who identify with a transnational Black community? Because racial discourses of self-identification with Blackness are complexly hidden in contemporary urban West Africa, this type of artistic coalition building and the recognition of a shared history with African descendants in Brazil is significant. The diversity of capoeiristas in Dakar from across West Africa take on a Black sense of self as core to why they play, identifying as racial subjects practicing a fundamentally Black martial art created out of the conditions of enslavement.

Diaspora without displacement figures into how the construction of an Afro-Brazilian capoeira-based community brings out hypermasculine norms from global capoeira visual culture, as well as gendered expectations that confront young West African women in Dakar. Female capoeiristas in Dakar often have a difficult time moving away from the margins of the *roda* and into positions of capoeira leadership. Many describe the mastery of instruments and physically challenging acrobatic movements as a barrier that keeps women from advancing at the same rate as men.⁷ While some women take the masculine energy of the capoeira space as an exciting challenge to

prove equal capability, others find it to be an excuse men use to act in excessive and distasteful ways. White female capoeiristas also pose a challenge that, like racial dynamics more generally in Senegal, is not always explicit. During a routine *roda*, several white female visitors showed up to play. One of the few Senegalese women left in Afreecapoeira stepped up to play them, even though she normally would wait for others to play first. She burst into the game with explosive speed and energy, throwing relentless *queixada* kicks, forcing her opponent into a defensive stance until the orchestra broke into the song “Devagar! Devagar!” which is used to slow down heated games. Afreecapoeira does not adopt the common capoeira practice of being tough on visiting capoeiristas during the *roda*, which occurs regularly at other capoeira schools. Her frustration spoke to discomfort with a shift in energy from the space when the European guests arrived that could not be expressed out loud. Interactions inside the *roda* can therefore be a way of resolving tensions or making a larger statement about the dynamics of different social positions through the one-on-one confrontation space.

Roda interactions are not, however, the only ways that West African capoeiristas, and women in particular, approach sociopolitical issues. Many draw on diasporic symbols of feminine power to make social interventions in support of their local communities. Although they are not represented as often in the high ranks of capoeira groups, West African female capoeiristas enact diaspora without displacement by seeking out a Black “elsewhere” through cultural practice and finding female African role models in the process. I learned this when I returned to Dakar in 2022 and found a new cohort of motivated Afreecapoeira members. I met a new capoeirista, Oulimata, and was eager to hear her thoughts as a Senegalese woman in the group. Oulimata wears a hijab, is pursuing an ambitious career path, and trained as the only Black person in a capoeira group while living in South Africa, which gave her an interesting comparative perspective. Coming back to Afreecapoeira and seeing other Senegalese women excel deepened her pride as a capoeirista. She said:

Gender is a big deal. Especially in capoeira, right? Because you want to be represented as women. And there are few women who come to train regularly. Almost all of them were part of this friend group, and I naturally felt drawn to them, and they were my people for a while. [They were] Italian, French, Burkinabé. There were a lot more Senegalese men than women. There was only one Senegalese woman, Bigue. When I see her, I’m just, like. “Ah!” How she moves is so amazing. And one more

with a beautiful voice [Paullele]. I didn't think that would mean so much to see other people that looked like me.

Oulimata explained that the gendered representation spoke more to her experience than racial lines. Yet seeing Senegalese women in particular master music, movement, and confidence seemed to touch her most profoundly. The racial geographies in her circulations among African urban sites such as Johannesburg and Dakar exemplify how race and other social categories—as well as differing legacies of racial and colonial history and contemporary migration—affect young West Africans' sense of self and belonging. As a Senegalese foreigner in Johannesburg in the predominantly white leisure space of the capoeira school, Oulimata's Blackness came to matter more. When she returned home to Dakar, the overwhelmingly male-dominated capoeira school there inspired her to embrace the diverse clique of women. She also gained appreciation for the few Senegalese women making room for themselves and those they inspire.

The Origins Debate and Its Afterlife in Capoeira Scholarship

Present-day Angola is the site from which the vast majority of African captives who landed in Brazil were taken at the height of the transatlantic slave trade; Angola remains one of the strongest cultural influences in capoeira's making. So when I describe my investigation into capoeira's uptake in Francophone West Africa, people often ask: "Why not study Angola?" At the crux of my argument is showing how postcolonial African orientations toward diasporic inspiration on one end also approach Africanness, origins, and heritage expansively and with great imaginative reach. The historical backdrop also supports a more complex and interwoven story that disrupts neat linear confines of Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone worlds as they are often understood today.

Since the mid-eighteenth century there have been many migrations of free and manumitted "repatriated" people from Brazil to Africa, to both Anglophone and Francophone sites, including Nigeria, Togo, Benin, and Ghana (Castillo 2016; Essien 2016; Matory 1999, 2005; Zeleza 2005). From the mid-eighteenth century through the late nineteenth century, waves of Afro-Brazilians (mostly formerly enslaved people) migrated to modern-day Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. These migrations and the alternative moder-

nities they inscribed are a testament to how communities in the African diaspora have always creatively reconstructed place and the past (Matory 2005; Scott 1991). These innovations are often attributed to New World Black communities while we primarily look at continental African subjects to either confirm or deny their legitimacy.

As for capoeira in particular, the question of its origins has inspired fierce debates. T. J. Desch-Obi, for instance, laid out more than three pages in a single endnote on the debate over capoeira's origins, calling Matthias Assunção's analysis a "Eurocentric version of this denial" of the form's African origins (2008, 289). The two main sides of the debate concern whether capoeira is "African," with a progenitor in Angola (making Brazilian capoeira a kind of African continuity) or "Creole" and "Brazilian"—a nationalist argument that suggests capoeira would only exist through a hybridization of Afro-Brazilian, European Brazilian, and Indigenous Brazilian cultural influence. Capoeiristas were predominantly West Central Africans enslaved in Brazil (various Bantu from Angola) until the 1840s and 1850s, when Brazilian-born *crioulos* (creoles), *pardos* (mixed-race people), and freemen started becoming capoeiristas in increasing numbers (Talmon-Chvaicer 2008). Once capoeira is no longer disparaged as a scourge on society and instead valued as folklore, the question of whether or not it is African or Brazilian emerges, with most arguing that it is Brazilian (*crioulo*) rather than a purely African (*negro*) import. In other words, the concern over whether capoeira is African or Creole arises only in the context of Brazilian modernization as an explicit state project. The ambiguity of capoeira's origins is a lesson in how binaristic debates can perpetuate coloniality: when Black performance is not limited to Black performing bodies, diverse participation becomes a justification for erasing both Black epistemologies of movement and the credit African innovators are due. Racial binary making itself is therefore more telling of anxiety about Black performance than any resolution empirical evidence might bring.

If, as I suggest here, we move away from the assumption that capoeira is a singular, discrete object, we gain a deeper understanding of how African cultural innovation unfolds and intersects, proliferating in a diverse range of spaces, borrowing from and innovating on itself and its changing context. The dynamism of this innovation is evident with a clear origin, as in the case of Ifá, a Yoruba spiritual system that is foundational to African-based religions such as Cuban Santería and Haitian Vodou (Apter 2017; Castor 2017), or without fixed origins, as with Garifuna self-identification and religious practices (Johnson 2007). Rather than approach Africa as a

black box holding the mysteries of origins to be uncovered, I instead pursue the question of what is at stake with knowing or not knowing capoeira's origins.

What is unique about capoeira's diasporic return is the fact that the object that we imagine to be capoeira today likely never existed anywhere in Africa. Although it is imagined as, and widely agreed on by practitioners to be, a returned art form that is growing in contemporary Africa, capoeira is arriving there for the first time.⁸ Recentering African origins and contemporary African contexts does not necessarily re-essentialize the idea of Africa.⁹ In fact, it can lead to a deeper understanding of the complexity of African embodied "traditions" that in fact reveals the essentialism inherent in European notions of the word (Apter 2017; Matory 2005). Underlying the debate over capoeira's origins is an *epistemological* and *methodological* concern: Can the structure of contemporary expressive practices (and comparing them across geographies) tell us about what these forms were like in the past and therefore show where they originated? Performance and dance studies scholars would say not only that they can but that we *must* turn to embodied knowledge for marginalized groups that did not have access to self-representation and self-historicization and to the written word that constitutes the (colonial) archive (Covington-Ward 2015; Daniel 2005; Taylor 2003). But the origins debate is also an *ontological* one: Is there something we can separate as "capoeira" prior to (and even during) its existence in Brazil?

Origins are historiographically contingent.¹⁰ Capoeira's history was created somewhat retroactively. West Africans and Brazilians both participate in discursive formations of its origins in the present to connect its somewhat ambiguous and diverse traditions to specific locations and traditions on the African continent today. While Brazilians have speculated about the specific origins of capoeira's African elements, and built accompanying mythologies, West Africans today also participate in discursive formations of its origins to situate the art form's diverse traditions in specific locations on the continent. One of the major consequences of these debates is that Africa as a concept came to be synonymous with the idea of origins.

West African capoeira ethnography demonstrates how both origins and diaspora are being simultaneously constructed "here" and "there."¹¹ Dominant popular and scholarly narratives of the African diaspora are often structured in a way that not only imbues the space of diaspora with complex histories and social processes but also simultaneously marginalizes and homogenizes Africa in the present. In this way, African subjects

come to signify and embody the past, preventing continental Africans and diasporic Black people from being considered contemporaries. However, ethnographic treatments of contemporary urban West African social and cultural phenomena often contribute to the idea of African contexts as linked to parallel global processes, but they rarely engage the centrality of racial subjectivity as an element foundational to West African's conceptions of global connectivity (Pierre 2012; Thomas and Clarke 2013). Based on Livermon's (2020, 31) idea that Africa is a diasporic space, with "diaspora as processual, circulatory, and polyphonic," this book turns our attention to how, despite the erasure of their contemporaneity, West African artistic projects serve equally as a mechanism of defining African people and their sense of belonging as they are projects of contemporaneity with diaspora and with "the global."¹² African young people are reimagining their social worlds to be transnational in ways that challenge the limitations of postcolonial nationalism and neoliberal marginalization. Precisely by taking African perspectives as a starting point, we see new possibilities for diaspora as an intellectual and lived framework.

New Life of the Origins Debate in Global Capoeira Scholarship

In scholarship on what I call global capoeira, the origins debate reemerges in ways that reproduce unproductive binaries. Research on capoeira outside Brazil focuses on the "authenticity" of capoeira practiced outside Brazil and how it is called into question (de Campos Rosario et al. 2010). It looks at the "capoeira diaspora" or "diasporic capoeira," centering the question of capoeira's "Brazilian-ness" in relation to the new sites of practice (Delamont et al. 2017).¹³ Brazil (often homogenized) is the site of origins while other nation-states are the battleground of authenticity debates. The binary that reemerges becomes one of Brazilian versus foreigner, obscuring the distinct but intersecting racial landscapes that are at play in these kinds of performance spaces, even as they engage the historical reality of race for capoeira in Brazil. Furthermore, scholars nominally bring up whiteness as a factor in capoeira in places such as Russia and the United Kingdom, or the scholars' own whiteness, while arguing for diverse (white, non-Brazilian) participation in capoeira serves as a sign of capoeira's success as a cultural form (de Campos Rosario et al. 2010; Downey et al. 2015; Lipiäinen 2015; Wesolowski 2020).

The revived creolization paradigm has a new face as an inclusivity framework.¹⁴ Practices rooted in pursuits among enslaved people of bodily, psychological, and epistemological liberation come up for grabs as a decontextualized object that, as Assunção put it, is “no longer linked to a specific class or group but rather to the feeling of encompassing resistance against oppression” (Assunção 2005, 191). Capoeira becomes detached from its trajectory as a Black form that Blackness survives with—and, perhaps, in spite of—diverse participation, which Tatjana Lipiäinen and others misread as essentialism. In this defense of freedom, playfulness, and openness, capoeira also becomes a way to borrow a loose notion of “freedom” that bypasses the contemporary racial contexts in which it operates, demonstrating a common example of the process of the colonality of Black performance. This free-floating idea of freedom emerges from the link between “openness” and distance from African origins. Without the racially charged implications of capoeira’s Black/African origins (even in Brazil with “Bahia”), scholars become free to ignore the racially charged implications of the practice today. The colonality of Black performance here manifests as a triumphalist Creole paradigm in which participation by white people means that African cultural forms and knowledge have succeeded. In pursuit of defending inclusivity, these scholars critique the internal power structure of capoeira, unpacking hierarchy and authority from teacher to student while naming race within that structure but not directly seeing the racial dynamics as their own structured relation of power (e.g., Downey et al. 2015; Lipiäinen 2015). The stance by scholars and capoeiristas that slavery and Black resistance is at the base of capoeira, but that contemporary racial inequality is irrelevant in the practice, is often justified by perpetuating capoeira’s reputation as “nonhegemonic,” as an inclusive art form that, for scholars and capoeiristas, seems to transcend social barriers such as race, gender, and nationality.

While one vein of global capoeira studies celebrates capoeira’s potential for inclusivity but rarely deals with its global power structures of race, another starts from an analysis of race, nation, and social hierarchies. These studies—which might be read as continuing from earlier generations of “Afrocentric militants”—investigate racial subjectivity as it interacts with the practice of capoeira as a globalized Afro-Brazilian combat game (Gibson 2014; Humphrey 2020; Joseph 2012). In some contexts, capoeira becomes a tool to address racial politics of the nation-state and the social landscapes of power in different contexts (Gibson 2014; Joseph 2012). The bifurcation of the literature into these two groups demonstrates how ca-

poeira continues to elicit panic about cultural purity and origins as it circulates, even as the diasporic horizon keeps advancing to new sites (Aula 2017; Johnson 2007).

African and other Black capoeiristas' experiences illustrate that marginalizing Blackness and centering whiteness occurs regularly in global capoeira (Humphrey 2020). What's more, those engaged in critical race studies of capoeira mostly look at the binary of Westerners (implied white) and Brazilians (implied racialized), but do not touch the underinvestigated subject of Brazilian whiteness, especially in the role of the expert master and disseminator of capoeira around the world. Recent work looks at capoeiristas in contexts that rely on a foundational assumption of material historical connections. For example, Angolans are drawn to and claim capoeira because of the art form's significant Angolan roots (Wesolowski 2020), while Cubans look to capoeira to revive and value existing Black practices suppressed in a society that does not always value Afro-Cuban contributions (Gibson 2014).

West African capoeiristas both acknowledge that capoeira is new to West Africa and lay claim to capoeira as their heritage by virtue of its having been created by Africans and Afro-Brazilians. Given capoeira's overwhelmingly Central African influence, they sometimes make connections to a specific ethnic heritage while also taking on histories that are not empirically their own. The questions of which histories, which practices, when they occurred, and who can claim them are decidedly unwieldy and imaginative in a way that reinforces the idea of African Blackness as a constant becoming, as well as an ongoing construction of origins/roots/heritage and the imagining of a decolonial, racially empowered future. This intersection of imagined origins, racial self-making, and global Blackness reveals that the complexity of West African capoeira goes beyond a presumed "Afrocentric bias" that is rooted in origins essentialism. West Africans, in many ways, live in one of the most marginal regions in the capoeira world; they are further making a statement about unequal access to this African-based New World practice due to the privileged position of other global capoeiristas who have access to Brazilian economic migrants and their ability to make pilgrimages to Brazil (Griffith 2016; Joseph 2008).

Although it is the site where capoeira was first imagined to have "returned to Africa" when Vicente Ferreira Pastinha (known in the capoeira world as Mestre Pastinha) visited Dakar in 1966, West Africa has been marginalized in the hierarchy of the global capoeira network. In the hierarchy of this world, rather than being embraced for their own innovations,

African capoeiristas' value today is bound up in their ability to perform and embody origins. They are also expected to embrace an expansive definition of who can embody diaspora, including white European and white Brazilian capoeiristas who visit Africa, often as experts with status linked to the legitimating structures of Brazilian capoeira schools. Because they often choose to operate autonomously, West African capoeira schools often are not recognized for their own work and expertise.¹⁵ The baggage of Africa as origin makes it hard to see the real story of continual, and multisited, African innovation.

Moving Through Origins: West Africans Reshaping Diasporic Return

The space of a capoeira *roda* is ephemeral and improvisational. The *roda* is also a repeated and predictably structured event whose actors participate in the symbolic reenactment of a pastime of enslaved people. Capoeira temporality both speaks to *the time of enslavement* through formerly criminalized movements and sounds and acts as a metadiscursive performance *reflecting on enslavement* through lyrics, new contexts, and resignification. As Diana Taylor (2003, 143) has argued, "Performance makes visible (for an instant, live, now) that which is always already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life." West African capoeiristas play a dual role within this collective life: They are at once the imagined origins bearers and contemporary diasporic subjects navigating the tropes of narrated enslavement and exile. For almost thirty years, they have trained and performed this act of bringing about a sense of closure at Gorée Island's slave fort, but a closure that is regularly enacted. At a *roda*, one witnesses joy, friendly competition, and displays of physical determination. West African performances of capoeira on Gorée Island are thus also reenacting the scenario of captivity to bring about a kind of resolution that is often repeated. Diaspora without displacement shows how Africans perform the resolution of diasporic return as a regular practice rather than as an event. West African capoeiristas' practice therefore holds brutality and levity simultaneously in a way that both hails and enacts diaspora.

Diasporic return is relevant to continental Africans, whether they migrate away from the continent or circulate within it, as a process of claiming Africanness as capacious against the limited subjectivities available from postcolonial nation-states entangled in coloniality (Coly 2019;

Ekotto 2020). Following Livermon, Tina Campt, Brent Hayes Edwards, and others, I see diaspora as an embodied and contested process, a modality through which Africans and Afro-descendants come to see themselves as both subjugated and empowered by racialization, as well as by gender and sexuality, while they negotiate shared and different histories. In the context of postcolonial urban sites in Africa I draw on the work of scholars such as Jordanna Matlon (2022) and Jemima Pierre (2012) and, specifically, Livermon's concept of "Afrodiasporic Space" (2020). These works are particularly crucial in foregrounding the long, rich history and dynamic processes of Africans borrowing, rejecting, and remastering Black performance and performativity. I work from the space of continental Africans' experiences of return through performance, both as a concept and as an act that attends to what it means to be African within the context of incomplete postcoloniality.¹⁶

French Atlantic and Lusophone Atlantic circulations during and after empire offer complex contributions to the discussions of racial categories and how they influence and are influenced by performance (Ekotto 2011; Ferreira 2012; Izzo 2019). West African capoeira provides an iteration of some of the grassroots—rather than state-driven—initiatives by actors that define themselves through a *racial* history, in part because their involvement in the practice leads to physical and intellectual knowledge about the slave trade as a corrective to public silence about race (Araujo 2010; Hartman 2006; Holsey 2008; Pierre 2012). Their engagement with diasporic art forms is indicative of a search for answers about their own experiences as racialized subjects who face a lack of open dialogue about historical processes. It also demonstrates how they attempt to work through their own experiences as migrated populations in urban African centers, where they are sometimes marginalized politically, economically, and socially. Urban West African martial artists are not just trying to write themselves into modern Blackness from the margins; they are also actively contributing to the construction of it (Pierre 2012). Their cultural "work" speaks to the aspirations of young people to enact Black Atlantic performances, serving to discredit the myth of race as irrelevant to the African public consciousness (Ochonu 2019).

Can diaspora be embodied as a condition of longing for, of seeking origins of, a desire to reunite a scattering and build community—all *without* the foundational event of displacement? Capoeira in West Africa does not fit neatly into other, more common formulations of "return." In contrast to what is common in relation to Ifá and Africana religions in the Americas, for example, West Africans rarely claim to be authorities in relation to

their knowledge of the capoeira form. This is evident in the way many capoeiristas hesitate when they are asked about their knowledge of capoeira and its history, and suggest they are separated by a few degrees from the “facts” by saying, “I was told . . .” or “I heard . . .” The issue of origins within the context of capoeira is not a specific claim to the past but, instead, a question of inclusion in the present and future of the form based on a generalized African foundation.

Afro-descendant Brazilians, Black Americans, and other Black capoeiristas from the historical diaspora have also worked to link their practice symbolically and materially with contemporary Africa. Many of them have built strong ties and lasting relationships that center and support West African capoeira institutions. Profesora Amazonas, for instance, is a Black woman whose capoeira school is based in New Jersey. She has made visiting Senegal and the Gambia to teach workshops and interact with Afrecapoeira a regular part of her life. However, the majority of non-African capoeiristas who engage with Francophone West African capoeira groups are white Europeans, predominantly French. Rather than focusing on the intra-Black diasporic exchange, which merits its own investigation, I shed light throughout this book on the more mundane reality of capoeira in West Africa. Not only does capoeira “return” to an origin that is other than the site of its historical roots, but the motors of this return are equally unexpected: initiatives by West Africans themselves, who are left to their own devices to develop the form with little contact with diasporic “experts,” and frequent trips by white European capoeiristas who make up the majority of non-Africans with capoeira expertise and high status who visit, interact, and exchange knowledge with West African capoeira schools. Many of those white foreigners also have expertise and close links to the capoeira structures rooted in Brazil; they therefore arrive in West Africa with a privileged position derived from the valued cultural knowledge they have at their disposal. This reality has much more to do with the complexities of West African regionalism and the global effects of whiteness than a narrow view of origins and diaspora would make visible.

Diasporic Chauvinism

One of the effects of positioning Africa as origin is the creation of forms of what I call diasporic chauvinism. This is a formulation of Black cultural production in which incorporating “African cultural elements” in a diasporic

tradition simultaneously requires a framework of Africa as both source of origin and pastness. This, then, translates to a complex relationship with contemporary artists on the African continent who continue to learn and innovate the same cultural form. Diasporic chauvinism is a monopoly on expertise by Black *and* non-Black experts founded on coloniality in interactions with African cultural producers. As a result, contemporary African artists seeking collaboration with the diaspora are often remarginalized.

For instance, Steven Feld and Robin D. G. Kelley's mutual interlocutor, Ghanaba—a famous Ghanaian jazz musician—called out “American jazz musicians” as perpetuating “racism” for the way they interact with Africans (Feld 2012; Kelley 2012). Referring predominantly to African Americans, Ghanaba characterizes “racism” as an iteration of what I call diasporic chauvinism. He describes how his Africanness did not fit neatly into a framework designed for the legibility of Black diasporic cultural production in the United States; he felt he was viewed as “too African” and, at the same time, “not African enough” because his musical sensibilities drew from a multitude of national and ethnic contexts in West Africa. His lack of discrete, recognizable, singular ethnic purity (the example he cites is Yoruba) made his contribution to jazz music in a diasporic context ill-fitting. Ghanaba's frustration comes from the kind of renewed regionalism—the eclectic resources of West Africa put in artistic dialogue with diasporic expressive forms—that is emerging but illegible under our current frameworks of Africa and diaspora.

What I call *diasporic chauvinism* is an intentionally paradoxical term that illuminates a consequence of triumphant moments of return in which nationalistic assertions of expertise foreclose collaboration with African artists. This assertion of expertise pertains to the knowledge inherent in the capoeira form itself, as well as to the narrative authority over its historical significance. I employ the term *chauvinism* to signal a kind of superiority that is not linked to structural inequality characteristic of white supremacist racism in ways that are more easily identifiable (Ebron 1999; Weitzberg 2017).¹⁷ This is partly because these are social networks developed on the premises of a shared passion for Black cultural production. The gatekeeping practices of this form of cultural chauvinism are enacted by Brazilians, even those of African descent, who exercise ownership over cultural practices in ways that exclude Africans or marginalize their innovations. *Chauvinism* also speaks to the dynamics of masculine expertise. African female capoeiristas specifically bear the brunt of this structure of diasporic hierarchy (de Sá 2024). Ultimately, the national identity of the

practice as belonging to an imaginary of a Brazilian nation has the contradictory effect of marginalizing diverse African participation and thus separating origins from contemporary claims to the practice itself.

The question that diasporic chauvinism raises in part is that of what counts as diaspora. Who embodies it, and who is therefore viewed as “returning” or taking diasporic performance “back” to Africa? The capoeira world—today a by-product of Brazil’s campaign to mythologize racial harmony through a narrative of intermixture and cultural unity—epitomizes the space between Black performance and those designated as having cultural expertise in Black forms. Being a capoeirista and being Black diasporic kin become conflated, most evidently in the context of collaboration with African capoeiristas when non-Black Brazilians, and even white non-Brazilians, position themselves through capoeira roots tourism to Africa as diasporic returnees. What I call the *coloniality of Black performance* is the broader context within which dynamics such as diasporic chauvinism occur. It offers a lens through the contradictory ways that Black performance can rarely escape its own racial baggage of demands on Black performativity. Those who admire Black performance can also perpetuate coloniality through that admiration in two ways. The first is through consumption, and even taking ownership, of Black positionality through diasporic performance (by non-Black subjects, whether they are Brazilian, European, or others) that manifests as diasporic chauvinism.¹⁸ The second is through racialization: Black performance always carries the possibility of racialization, which manifests in addition to and alongside other schemas of social difference in African contexts.

Diasporic chauvinism is not simply a claim of cultural authority and expertise. It signals a phenomenon intimately connected to white privilege. The phenomenon is an iteration of the incomplete process of the postcolony and an expression of a complex global commodification and “universalization” of Black cultural forms—the privilege and coloniality of tourism combined with the reality of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century migrations. Diasporic chauvinism involves a certain structured narrative of the imagined geographies of the diaspora and how these imagined geographies are embodied, emphasized, or invisibilized. Brazilians are no exception to this phenomenon, which can be found in capoeira schools in Western countries in which Brazilians are both the authorities and subject to being exoticized, fetishized, and objectified (Robitaille 2014). Afro-Brazilians who practice capoeira are thus in a position not only to continue the legacy of the tradition but also, as racialized subjects, to

harvest greater significance from a return to the African continent from which they are descended. Still, the racial makeup of Brazilian *mestres* (capoeira masters) is not always so easy to define. White Brazilian capoeira experts sit at the nexus between diasporic chauvinism and the colonality of Black performance.

***Mbokk* Capoeira: Innovating Through Origins and Renewing West African Regionalism**

Capoeira also becomes expansively African in the present through West African discovery and innovation. African continental capoeiristas in the present, from Gabon to Senegal, lay claim both to the *origins* of capoeira's instrumentation (Alexandre 1974), movements, and symbolism and to *innovation*—namely, the freedom to invent new ways of doing and using the form. But innovation is just that—new and unexpected—so it doesn't unfold in predictable ways. Unlike ways that young artists are revising and inventing new approaches to other movement traditions, such as dance in Guinea-Conakry, innovation in capoeira in Senegal does not mean that the movements themselves look any different from how they would look elsewhere (Cohen 2021). The capoeira itself is not more or less “African.” In fact, it's disappointingly recognizable as capoeira from anywhere for those looking to exoticize Africans' reclaiming of an Afro-diasporic form. Afreecapoeira is committed to a faithful training of Afro-Brazilian capoeira styles and to learning all genres.

Innovation emerges from sincere efforts to reproduce the original, but from the context of urban West Africa, and from the ambiguous positionality of West African capoeiristas' embodying both origins and diaspora. Attachment to both origins and innovation is rooted in contemporary West African practitioners' belief that they possess a significant and special relationship to the diasporic practice. Innovation, then, does not emerge from the sanctioned culture bearers shifting ritual through modifications over time, as is the case with Yoruba ritual (Apter 2017; Drewal 1992). It also does not progress in a linear trajectory of vernacularizing capoeira until, for example, it takes on the personality of “Senegalese” capoeira. In certain moments, the original songs that emerge from the group and directly comment on capoeira in Senegal are prominent in *rodas*. Then new capoeira songs emerging in Brazil and elsewhere become more popular for the group. Performance that is ritualized through repetition is not static but always

building on what came before it, and is “by its very nature intertextual by virtue of the embodied practices of the performers” (Drewal 1992, 3).

Improvisation is not a tool of just the highly skilled and extensively trained to express virtuosic achievement. Neither is it strictly for the performers. Next to play, improvisation is the mode of learning when onlookers are inspired to take what they see into their own bodies. Improvisation is also the mode of recall, when a former active member draws on the energy of the moment and their past training. For instance, members of Afreecapoeira and the Capoeira Association of the Gambia met during an *encontro*, a gathering of various capoeira groups, on Gorée Island, where we all wore blue event T-shirts. As the *roda*, capoeira circle, progressed, a Senegalese woman in her thirties wearing loose black pants and a light-pink T-shirt and dreadlocks down to her waist joined us. She had been a member of Afreecapoeira years earlier and came to reconnect with her capoeira community for an afternoon. She tried to keep her dreadlocks wrapped up in a long scarf, but as she spun in a *queixada-armada* kick sequence, leaped to the side in a joyous *ginga*, and dipped down to kick Souvenir in a *chapa* from the ground, her hair and scarf were set loose to swing with her flow. The men outnumbered us that day, and the woman made sure to cut in to “buy” the game with each of the women present throughout the *roda*. By the time she played a third, more instructive game with Seinabou, a beginner-level Gambian capoeirista, two little Senegalese girls who had been watching and clapping with us during the event started their own *roda* next to ours. They peeked over every few seconds to copy what they saw, and kicked, escaped, and cartwheeled with impressive accuracy. The taller girl added her own twist: a diagonal disco finger dance celebration between each step of her brand new *ginga*. Her tiny opponent whipped her beaded braids around, turning and dodging. We then brought the two girls in to show off their new embodied skill, only thirty minutes old at this point, and join us at the center of our gathering.

My interest in destabilizing origins and problematizing returns emerges from attending to the relationships that African capoeiristas had with those concepts through their personal intimacy with capoeira. The *berimbau*, for example, is considered one of the central distinguishing characteristics of capoeira and likely originates in West Central Africa. It is found among Bantu and Fang groups and is related to a bowlike instrument among the Fang called the mvét.¹⁹ I first learned about the mvét from a Gabonese capoeirista living in Dakar, who told me that his training had inspired him to do research on the Fang people from back home. “I’m not sure, but I think

the berimbau comes from Gabon,” he shared with me in a spirit of collaborative discovery and openness (rather than a reclamation of origins). While capoeira scholarship continues to debate the “Brazilianness” or distinct region or ethnic group of capoeira’s “Africanness”—in this case, from which region of West Central Africa the berimbau comes—African capoeiristas are undergoing an invisible but incredible phenomenon of discovery, recovery, and conjecture. Often from their displaced site of migration in Dakar, they ask: Could *this* be connected to *that* back home?

African capoeiristas imagine, connect, and speculate about their cultural histories’ links to those developed across the Atlantic not as specialists steeped in the tradition but as curious minds open to the journey of discovery. Nasser, an Afreecapoeira member I interviewed in 2010, saw aesthetic similarities between capoeira and other cultural practices from his home country of the Comoros Islands off the coast of Madagascar. The founder of the first capoeira school in Benin, Contra Mestre Fassassi, teaches not only capoeira and Afro-Brazilian folkloric dances, such as maculelê (in which pairs of people dance with wooden sticks); he also teaches morengue as a creative exercise for people to think about other African movement traditions. As he tells it, “Morengue is a folkloric dance like capoeira that is practiced in all of the Indian Ocean, most especially in the Island of Reunion.” Fassassi is from Agoue, what he called “one of the most historic cities in Benin,” and through becoming a capoeirista he has built a repertoire of African diasporic folklore rooted in the slave trade that imaginatively stretches from Brazil to the Indian Ocean.

Enock, a capoeirista from Benin who came to Dakar for higher education, learned about his family’s connection to Afro-Brazilian repatriates to West Africa in the nineteenth century as a result of going down the path to becoming a capoeirista. After diving deeply into capoeira training, he showed his mother YouTube videos to give her a sense of his new hobby. To his surprise, she responded, “That is our ceremony.” He discovered in that moment that his heritage included the members of Benin’s Aguda community of Afro-Brazilian returnee descendants. So while he started practicing capoeira for the aesthetics and friendship, and because it was a window into the fascinating world of Brazil, his own Afro-Brazilian heritage was revealed to him in the process.

Only a year into Enock’s training, a sense of duty to the future of capoeira in Africa set in. For the twentieth-anniversary event, most spent the week sleeping in shared quarters on Gorée Island for a full bonding and immersive experience (and to avoid having to pay the expensive daily

fees to take the ferry back and forth from Dakar). When he discovered that Kassoum (from Senegal, Ivory Coast, and the United States), Dieudonné (from Senegal and Guinea-Bissau), Bigue (from Senegal), and I (from the United States and Brazil) would not be joining the others for the overnight stays on the island, he pled with us to stay with the rest of the capoeiristas on Gorée during the event. “We [the newest recruits] thought the event would be a good time to learn about how the group was before, and learn from you guys,” he said. “We were hoping to benefit from your experience and spending time with you, and most of you are staying over with us on the island.” His appeal to our regional West African and African diasporic group demonstrated that the legacy is something that belongs to all of us who shared the experience of keeping Afreecapoeira alive.

Liberation is not just about the transatlantic slave trade. It serves as a modality through which to navigate life in contemporary Dakar. Despite how central African enslavement and Black pride is for many West African capoeiristas, most do not hold history at the forefront of their minds in the day to day of training. The healing of community building and embodied expression in the present is what keeps so many dedicated to capoeira in Dakar. Coumba, a Senegalese member of Afreecapoeira, told me about capoeira’s healing potency for her, saying, “When I play capoeira, I feel good. When I’m a little upset and I come and sing, I feel better. I forget my worries. It’s not to become pro, but to be well. It’s kind of spiritual. When I play I don’t think of roots, I just think of playing. It’s a freedom. You forget everything else. The movements make you forget everything else. You only think of succeeding in the movements.”

West African regionalism is most evident in capoeira through the community’s playfulness in and outside of the *roda*. Play is a quality of improvisation that opens up space for commentary, parody, and critique. In short, “Improvisation is rhetorical play” (Drewal 1992, 5). No one exemplified this playful wit better than Adama Badji, founder of the Capoeira Association of the Gambia, when he marched up the hill to the peak of Gorée Island, a former European military fort called “the Castle,” where cannon remain to this day. A motley crew of West African capoeiristas from the Gambia, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Conakry, Senegal, and elsewhere were waiting there to begin a workshop for Afreecapoeira’s 2016 *encontro*. I started filming Adama on my iPhone and held down the repeated chorus with Cantador, a Gambian capoeirista who came up with a rhythm on the berimbau to hold a beat for Adama’s riff on a Jamaican chanting style. Adama had me

chant “Mbokk Capoeira” (Wolof for “Capoeira Family”) or after each of his improvised lines. He sang:

Rastaman a tell dem!

Mr. President!

Mr. Vice President!

Donkey cries now! (*pointing to a donkey tied to a cart, causing me to burst into laughter*)

Martin Luther King!

Kunta Kinteh yo yo!

Inna Gorée Island!

Education Minister!

Defense Minister!

Foreign Minister!

Patrice Lumumba!

Afreecapoeira! (*sung when we reached the top of the hill and found a gathering of capoeiristas, all of us in our blue event shirts*)

Mama Africa! (*pointing to Senegalese women with puzzled expressions watching this strange mini-parade go by as they tried to sell us beaded jewelry*)

Likkle chil’reen! (*in his Jamaican patois-inspired phrasing*)

Yayah Jammeh!

Macky Sall!

Sharing capoeira was the rhetorical tool for social and political life, past and present, in West Africa and in the diaspora. The jewelry vendor began chatting with Adama when the song died down, and he deployed his few French words to share that he was Gambian and that “it’s capoeira here,” to which the woman replied, “You’re from Gambia? Oh, OK. So it’s capoeira here,” confirming that a diverse capoeira gathering at the Castle was a normal part of daily life on Gorée Island.

This is the first book on capoeira’s relatively recent emergence in African contexts. I am, therefore, also invested in expanding the conversation on the transnational dimensions of capoeira that works with the contemporary processes of globalization, consumerism, critical race studies, and embodiment (Aula 2017; de Campos Rosario et al. 2010; Delamont and Stephens 2010; Griffith 2016; Humphrey 2020; Robitaille 2007, 2014; Rosa 2015; Rosenthal 2009). While most scholars of capoeira have focused on the history of the practice in Brazil (Assunção 2005; Desch-Obi 2008; Lewis 1992;

Soares 2001; Talmon-Chvaicer 2008) and the networks extending from Brazilian capoeira structures into other countries (Delamont et al. 2017; Griffith 2016; Robitaille 2014; Taylor 2005; Varela 2017), only recently has any scholarly work been published on how the practice has circulated in Africa (see Wesolowski 2020). Centering my study on a youth organization, I also follow the body of scholarship that understands youth to be an imagined category of the postcolonial state (Diouf 1996; Ivaska 2011; O'Brien 1996).

The study of capoeira in West Africa is an inquiry about the ontology of Blackness in a postcolonial moment in process. Taylor's (2003, 15) formulation of performance is "as a theoretical term rather than as an object or a practice." Capoeira, therefore, is less the object of study than an angle from which to enter a historical process and a geographical palimpsest that is playing out partly in the concrete space of a Franco-Senegalese elementary school's yard (Smith 2016a). Capoeira also allows for exploration of the blurred line between Black performance and performativity because capoeira is always being staged, with or without a literal stage, both within capoeira and in literary, scholarly, and discursive constructions that have implications for how performance is always linked to racial formations (Acuña 2014; Höfling 2019; Rosa 2015).

Thinking Capoeira Transnationally

This project required a transnational approach to capture both the geographical range and imaginative reach of the people involved in these West African artistic networks. My strategy of multisite ethnography, conducted over twenty months between 2013 and 2022, was designed to chart a set of interactions and relationships in an inherently partial glimpse into how dominant narratives of diaspora, racial ideologies, and cultural resources circulate. Therefore, I followed this people-based network in a "mapping strategy" from one of its oldest and most stable nodes in Dakar to the larger nexus of capoeira communities in Abidjan, Ivory Coast; Cotonou, Benin; Banjul, the Gambia; and Lomé, Togo (Marcus 1995).

These cities are home to a network of practitioners connected by a goal to develop capoeira in their respective sites, as well as by a shared vision of one day creating a regional West African capoeira federation. By moving across these spaces, I established relationships with members of the network and their itinerant guests from around the world. I also tracked regional movement to follow the links of communities connected through

their practice. While mobility was limited for many of these young men and women, others gained access to various forms of travel (pilgrimage, migration, adventure) (Clifford 1997). My interlocutors were primarily professionals and university students, mostly in their early twenties to mid-thirties from across West and Central Africa.

As an ethnographer and fellow capoeirista I have a responsibility not only to document what “is” but also to meet the imaginative reach of my interlocutors. I conducted in-depth interviews, recorded informal music sessions, and engaged in participant-observation of training sessions, local performances, and international events.²⁰ The pedagogical nature of the classes and gatherings revealed the group’s ideologies in action while also illuminating key dimensions of contestation. By becoming an active member of this community and spending time with members in spaces of everyday life, I learned over time about their socialization techniques and requirements for inclusion, as well as the different barriers to and tools that expedite entrance. I spoke with members, founders, short-term participants, event guests, and other political figures and community members, asking questions about how they understood themselves, their political environment, their relationships, their interactions, their visions, and their practice.

My positionality as an Afro-Brazilian American who primarily identifies as a Black woman, and as the daughter of an Afro-Brazilian capoeira *mestre*, meant that I was considered by some to be an active member of their political and artistic projects before I was acknowledged as a researcher. The capoeiristas I worked with granted me two nicknames indicative of our relationship. One was “Google Translate” for my frequent role as translator among French, English, Portuguese, and, at times, Wolof; the second was “Espionne” (spy in French), signaling suspicion attached to my studying, observing, note taking, and recording, which seemed irrelevant to our shared goals as capoeiristas. At times, my semi-insider status meant taking for granted the ways that anthropological methods and categories have inherently colonial vestiges that demand active critical engagement at every step (Gordon 1997).

Chapter Overview

As the chapters that follow demonstrate, capoeira as an embodied performance shows how Africans were putting diasporic concepts to work long before—and, perhaps, more important, long after—diaspora itself

“arrived.” Each chapter probes how regionalism and migration within Africa affects the emergence of racialized concepts and the experiences of racialization in spaces such as Dakar.

Chapter 1 provides a history and overview of why capoeira in Senegal is significant for a theorization of diaspora without displacement. The chapter contextualizes and investigates the historical and contemporary social work that Senegal’s first capoeira school does for the nation’s position in the Black Atlantic and in the region. Furthermore, it lays out the transnational implications for how gendered performances through capoeira affect social implications differently in Brazil and in West Africa. Chapter 2 looks more specifically at the twentieth anniversary of Afreecapoeira to establish how celebrating the group’s beginnings reveals tensions around ownership of the meanings generated in the racial murkiness of embodied performance. In the chapter, pro-Blackness through the celebration of Black performance has anti-African consequences, enacted by Africans and non-Africans alike. I develop the concept of diasporic chauvinism, an assertion of ownership and expertise that, ironically, excludes African participation in Black performance that has diverse and somewhat ambiguous African origins.

On the question of direct Lusophone links, chapter 3 explores the subset of capoeiristas in Dakar who were born and raised in Senegal but have heritage from Portuguese-speaking African countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Cape Verde to provide one of the most direct examples of diaspora without displacement. It shows how they seek out capoeira as a form of diasporic performance and come to have more intimate knowledge of their own Lusophone African backgrounds as a result. In the chapter I also analyze the physical accessories essential to practicing capoeira as a way to think through the tangibility and intangibility of heritage.

Chapter 4 looks at the inverse process: how pro-Africanness and anti-Blackness coexist within a framework of modernity, masculinity, and Muslim respectability as they create friction with a call for Black liberation. I examine how Senegalese capoeiristas see the form as having both good and bad spiritual potential. Here we see diasporic tensions unfolding in the realm of spiritual concerns with capoeira in the Muslim and spirit-based landscape of Senegal, in which diasporic and local histories offer possibilities to elucidate each other. The chapter thus turns to the representations of diaspora that demonstrate racialized anxieties about the body as the site of the religious, the spiritual, and the liberatory. In chapter 5, I look at the phenomenon of capoeira pilgrimage trips to Africa, gatherings of capoei-

ristas from around the world who are guests or who organize summits in African cities. The chapter also explores how the regional ties ultimately reveal themselves to be the most solid group for preserving and maintaining the legacy of what West African capoeira schools created. The conclusion reflects on how the membership of Afreecapoeira is undergoing yet another unexpected shift, with implications for a new political moment in Senegal. The possibilities unfolding from the coloniality and promise of Black performance in Dakar continue to bear on West Africa as a space of both imaginatively embracing origins and refusing the burdens it produces.

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NOTES

Preface

- 1 The main mode of bodily communication in capoeira involves a variety of kicks, spinning and circular or straight and direct, as well as creative “escapes” and offensive or defensive responses. The goal is less to take down one’s opponent (although capoeira does involve takedowns and can sometimes be quite violent) than for opponents to engage in an improvisational “conversation” in which they communicate through creative one-upmanship, trickery, strength, technique, and even humor, all while the audience of a circle of clapping and singing peers (*roda*) await their turn.
- 2 Siaka, a Gambian capoeirista, once generously framed my early resistance to capoeira as “A fisherman’s child will lose a taste for fish.”

Introduction. Moving Origins

- 1 Because capoeira is understood to be a combat game, in which two opponents aim to interact both collaboratively and competitively to one-up each other in attacks and showmanship, the action verb used to describe capoeira is the Portuguese word *jogar* (to play), and a single match is called a *jogo* (game).
- 2 Cheikh Amadou Bamba was the founder of the Sufi brotherhood Muridiyya and the symbol of a successfully nonviolent anticolonial campaign against the French in Senegal. The French exiled him to Gabon in an attempt to disrupt his rising popularity, but this had the opposite effect. His exile is well known, and he is often depicted artistically for the miracle he performed by laying his prayer mat on the ocean. Known by few is that the vessel of his exile was the Brazilian ship *Pernambuc*.
- 3 Senegal is often referred to as a foil in relation to Guinea-Conakry for resisting a postindependence relationship with France.
- 4 Also featured in my analysis is the group Owlavé Capoeira in Abidjan; however, it falls outside the schema of African-founded schools. It was started by a Brazilian woman, Mestre Marcia Kablan. She is married to the Ivorian visual artist Cyprien Kablan, with whom she runs an artistic cultural and community center for Ivorian young people and diverse groups of Ivorian and international adults. Kablan’s capoeira school is integrated into the regional capoeira network through mutual collaboration and support for events. Several of the main groups listed also have members who broke

off to create their own groups, such as Berimbau Sagrado in Dakar, a *capoeira angola* group in Lomé, and, most recently, Capoeira Oriazambi Gambia in Banjul. This book, while it engages somewhat with these outgrowth groups, focuses on the original capoeira schools and associations in the region that have developed since the 1990s and early 2000s. One of these foundational associations, Ogun Eru in Cotonou, which is also the only African-run capoeira school in the region to have its own institutional space (a cultural center), has also recently expanded to open a branch in neighboring Togo. Similarly, Afreecapoeira in Dakar has several students from other African countries who have migrated elsewhere or returned home to teach as semiformal branches of the original Senegal-based school in Ecuador, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, and France.

- 5 Regionalism based on geographical proximity and contemporary African migration within Africa contributes to other artistic worlds, such as Kwaito. Livermon (2020, 64, 69, 71) points to multiple forms of “black migration” in South Africa that contribute to diverse Black mixtures that coalesce in shared musical and aesthetic “affinities.”
- 6 For most of the book, I treat *Brazil* and *diaspora* as synonymous. In specific chapters that deal with capoeira events with Brazilian visitors (chapters 2 and 5), I approach the two distinctly to theorize separately the racial dynamics of diasporic return to West Africa and Brazilian social hierarchy.
- 7 There is little documented evidence of women’s participation in early capoeira in Brazil. However, criminal records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries show cases of women who were likely part of the capoeira street scene and were said to have “violently attacked men,” although the men’s names were often kept off the record to “protect the masculinity of the victims” (Oliveira and Leal 2009, 123).
- 8 That is not to say it is not an African invention. It simply is not likely to have existed as we know it today in West or West Central Africa.
- 9 Historians and social scientists have aimed to debunk the romanticization of “African resistance” that often accompanies historiography and contemporary ethnography of capoeira (Assunção 2005; Downey et al. 2015; Talmon-Chvaicer 2008). In so doing, they often position themselves against an “Afrocentric bias” linked to the works of another group of scholars writing about capoeira in the past and the present (see, e.g., Desch-Obi 2008; Kambon 2018). In the words of Assunção (2005, 206): “The idea of capoeira as an ancestral cult of ‘crossing the *kalunga*,’ is based on present-day knowledge of Central African religious traditions, and was re-invented by Afrocentric militants in the United States during the 1990s.” The charge of Afrocentric intellectual militancy is rooted in assumptions of poor empiricism, despite the reality that any and all scholars studying as ambiguous a form as capoeira must confront dubious colonial sources and a paucity of alternative forms of documentation. The label also creates suspicion around some projects that intentionally seek out African origins. With attention on the easy target of “Afrocentrism,” the creole hypotheses

flourish without being as readily challenged. Desch-Obi (2008) directly addressed what he called the “creolization paradigm” and what James Sweet (2011) calls “creole essentialism” that minimizes African influences through the charge of essentialism, while effectively producing a kind of Brazilian essentialism (see also Desch-Obi 2012; Wade 2004).

- 10 Brazil, for example, has shifted from an overwhelming focus on Nigerian/Yoruba influences (known as *Nagôcentrismo*) to recognizing the impact of an earlier and longer-standing migration of enslaved people from West Central Africa (Angola/Bantu).
- 11 Paul Zeleza defines diaspora as “simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings” (Zeleza 2005, 41). Working with scholarship that defines diaspora as a “process” and a “condition” defined as much by difference as by sharedness (Brown 2005; Camp 2002; Edwards 2003; Gilroy 1993; Zeleza 2005) shows that origins can be similarly processual, not as a final point in defining the self but, rather, as an active mechanism of political, social, and historical meaning making. The anthropologist J. Lorand Matory (2005, 3) troubled the narrative of a binary between African origins and diasporic constructions, offering, “The irony at the core of this story is that diasporas create their homelands.”
- 12 By introducing the possibility of contemporary continental West African capoeiristas as diasporic, I write in the vein of critically engaging racial, gendered, and affective formations that come to define emerging diasporic political projects (Thomas and Camp 2008; Thomas and Clarke 2006).
- 13 Annie Gibson (2014) distinguishes between diasporic capoeira, referring to initiatives linked to the structure of Brazilian schools, and transnational capoeira, in which media and capoeiristas merely passing through create a grassroots practice that often uses locally produced instruments. Cuba, like Senegal, is the latter case; Gibson (2014, 1) describes capoeira in Havana as “Brazilian in practice yet Cuban in essence.” There is an important distinction between diasporic capoeira and transnational capoeira; however, the bifurcation of the literature does not mirror this distinction. Tatjana Lipiäinen’s study, for example, looks at an example of transnational capoeira, but the analysis falls under the category of inclusive capoeira paradigms that usually accompanies diasporic capoeira studies.
- 14 The inclusivity framework is encapsulated in Lipiäinen’s origins argument based on a study of capoeira in Russia: “The very roots of capoeira are culturally mixed. Furthermore, capoeira’s underlying aim has been the pursuit of freedom from a variety of hegemonic constraints, by African slaves, Brazilian poor and now also by transnational young-old, females-males, poor-rich, black-Asian-white-etc. Therefore, to portray capoeira angola today as purely black, Afro-Brazilian, or Baian [*sic*], cultural practice does not appear to reflect empirical reality nor Lugones’ attitude of openness towards new constructions of self” (2015, 682).

- 15 Although African-founded schools such as Afreecapoeira fight to maintain their autonomy, they have social ties to major capoeira schools in Europe and the United States that are more directly rooted in Brazilian capoeira structures.
- 16 Interrogating postcolonial African subjectivity nonetheless requires interacting with Africa as a category, despite its constructedness. The concept continues to be salient both inside and outside of the continent (Ferguson 2006), and tracking the contested meanings of Africanness sheds light on a host of postcolonial social categories and lived experiences. It is out of this vein of reconstruction following the problematics (Apter 2017) or “problem-spaces” (Scott 2004) that this book emerges as a way to redefine how we see “Africa’s” role in the African diaspora and the making of the modern world. I follow the work of Deborah Thomas (2011) and Andrew Apter (2017), who see their respective research sites in Jamaica and Nigeria as places *from which* to theorize race, modernity, and the making of history rather than simply as places that require these perspectives to elucidate their singular historical experiences. In that light, I encourage thinking with and from Africa to shed light on how we have come to understand that world and the grammars, categories, and structures in place that shape our everyday interactions within it.
- 17 As Keren Weitzberg (2017) argues in her historical study of Somaliness, asserting chauvinistic superiority (internally over women and externally over other groups) can be a key strategy in positioning oneself in relation to colonial and postcolonial legacies of power where racial and ethnic hierarchical formations become normative. Somali chauvinism is not built on a clear material reality of who is or is not “Somali”; rather, it shifts with the changing power landscape from European colonial rule to postcolonial Gikuyu nationalist rule. Diasporic chauvinism is built on similar shifting and situational sands. Rooted in a claim of superiority based in performance skills by some Afro-descended Brazilians, diasporic chauvinism is a discourse of authority and authorship enacted by multiple actors positioning themselves as “diasporic,” whether they are descendants of European colonizers or Europeans themselves (de Sá 2024). Furthermore, as Weitzberg (2017, 118) notes, those defending Black African culture against Eurocentric ideas of African cultural inferiority have done so by enacting a kind of Black African nationalist politics, “but, in doing so, [they have] sometimes devalued the ‘culture’ of people deemed to be foreign to the nation.” Chauvinism, in other words, is not just a diasporic problem. It can, however, complexly and at times even paradoxically reproduce colonial logics of anti-African Blackness.
- 18 In this respect, diasporic chauvinism is one distinct manifestation of Thomas and Camp’s (2008) “diasporic hegemonies,” or the reproduction of inequalities in diasporic communities. The diasporic imaginary of Africa as a site of desire can not only obscure the complexity of African contexts. It can also privilege the diasporic experience in ways that ulti-

mately undermine the inclusion of contemporary African subjects. Further, as chauvinism is most often synonymous with an extreme expression of nationalism, I employ this term specifically to signal how the first term, *diasporic*, reveals an inherent multiplicity of different cultural traditions that are then consolidated into a national identity by a process represented by the second term, *chauvinism*. Diasporic chauvinism thus describes a type of interaction during a moment of diasporic collaboration or historical reckoning or repair that, in turn, creates a hierarchy of ownership and expertise that reinforces white privilege and white visibility in African contexts.

- 19 The berimbau, found throughout West Central Africa, is believed to have been introduced relatively recently in the trajectory of capoeira's history (Alexandre 1974; Diaz et al. 2021). So despite the specifics of its African origins, its origin in capoeira does not trace a continuous line from Africa to the Brazilian present. Berimbau-like instruments are also found in Guam and the Philippines. Further, the berimbau as we know it in capoeira today is likely derived from a sixteenth-century version of the mvvet of Bantu and Fang regions such as Gabon. As scholars of diaspora have argued, what is discursively and materially "African" is often better preserved in the diaspora out of necessity to maintain a connection to homeland (Scott 1991). Meanwhile, African continental cultural production moves on with innovation.
- 20 I recorded fifty-four in-depth conversations, the majority of which were with capoeiristas residing in Dakar. Some names are pseudonyms.

Chapter 1. Whose Diaspora?

- 1 The event used to be called La Nuit des Arts Martiaux (The Night of Martial Arts). Sensei Lô revamped the program in 2014 and gave the event its current name.
- 2 Five African heads of state are graduates of UCAD.
- 3 *Lenços* (silk scarves) were later replaced by the *cordas* (belts) common in capoeira schools today. Whereas the *lenços* often used colors associated with Bantu cosmologies, the *cordas* most often represented the colors of the Brazilian flag, showing a shift from Central West African cosmology to Brazilian nationalism.
- 4 The "semantic body" of prominent Afro-Brazilian capoeiristas is not limited to representing Brazilianness and Brazilian Blackness. These Brazilian figures are also working to perform their own centrality and "Afro"-authenticity that was shaped in large part by the success of reggae and Rastafarian music and aesthetics in Brazil in the 1970s and '80s (Crook 1993).
- 5 A jihadist movement was ramping up attacks in West Africa in 2016. The cover of *Jeune Afrique* featured a photo of the Monument de la Renaissance, with a corresponding article speculating that Dakar might be the next target. Since the attack on a popular hotel in Ouagadougou