

‘Pra homem, menino e mulher’?: Problematizing the gender inclusivity discourse in capoeira

Craig Owen

St Mary's University, UK

Nicola De Martini Ugolotti

Bournemouth University, UK

Abstract

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian bodily discipline that has now become a global phenomenon. In 2014 the cultural significance of capoeira was recognized on the world stage when it was awarded the special protected status of an ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’ by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. In the application to this organisation, and in wider advertising material and practitioner literature, capoeira is celebrated as a practice that promotes social cohesion, inclusivity, integration, racial equality and resistance to all forms of oppression. This paper seeks to problematize this inclusive discourse, exploring the extent to which it is both supported and contradicted in the gendered discourses and practices of specific capoeira groups in Europe. Drawing upon ethnographic data, produced through two sets of ethnographic research and the researchers’ 24 years of combined experience as capoeira players, this paper documents the complex and contradictory contexts in which discourses and practices of gender inclusivity are at once promoted and undermined.

Keywords

capoeira, ethnography, gender, inclusivity, masculinity

The emergence and transnational diffusion of capoeira

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian art form commonly referred to by both practitioners and researchers as the ‘dance-fight game’. Capoeira is played within a circle of people who sing Brazilian Portuguese capoeira songs, clap their hands to a rhythm and play a range of instruments. The most experienced player typically leads the song and the rest of the group follow in a call and response sequence. In the centre of the circle two players move their bodies in dialogue, attacking and defending, ‘playing’ capoeira.

In some basic form, capoeira was brought to Brazil by African slaves. A common narrative professed by capoeiristas is that the slaves needed to practice martial arts under the watchful eye of their owners, and hence introduced dancing elements in order to disguise the fighting elements of their training (Capoeira, 2002). After the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888, capoeira became illegal, and was associated with criminality and street gangs in urban Brazil (Capoeira, 2002). After capoeira was legalized in 1937, it was increasingly structured as a gym-oriented activity, and different styles emerged including capoeira *Regional*, *Angola* and, more recently, *Contemporanea*, with different, though related visions of the game and philosophy. In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of Brazilian capoeira *mestres* (masters) started to

emigrate from Brazil to set up new capoeira schools in major cities in North America and Europe (Assuncao, 2005; Taylor, 2007). Now, in the 21st century, capoeira is established as a global symbol of Afro-Brazilian culture and a physical practice that has spread to urban centres around the world (Fuggle, 2008).

In 2014 the cultural significance of capoeira was recognized on the world stage when it was awarded the status of ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’ by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The documentation supporting capoeira’s application claimed the UNESCO status would help recognize capoeira’s significance as a unique Afro-Brazilian cultural practice that is becoming increasingly popular on a transnational scale. Notably, much of capoeira’s success was linked to its inclusive discourses and practices which were said to promote the ‘respectful and harmonious coexistence between different ethnic groups, ages and genders’, with the capoeira *roda* providing ‘a maximum expression of union against oppression’ (UNESCO, 2014: 5–6).

Responding to capoeira’s increasing popularity and transnational diffusion outside of Brazil, a growing academic literature has sought to locate the spread of capoeira within wider processes of globalization and transnational migration (Almeida et al., 2013; Joseph, 2008b; Robitaille, 2010, 2014). A number of these authors have addressed the ‘sportization’ and marketization of capoeira in different contexts in Europe, North America and Brazil. Their analyses have highlighted how capoeira has increasingly become embedded in a process of commodification, and how the diffusion of the discipline has been intertwined with its adaptation to local marketplaces, trends, desires and identifications.

Building on the emerging study of capoeira in transnational contexts, this article attends to another fundamental development that has emerged with the worldwide diffusion of capoeira, namely, the unfolding of ambivalent and taken-for-granted discourses of gender inclusivity in capoeira following the radical increase in female participation in recent decades, and their implications in terms of gendered power relations within the discipline. Capoeira in Brazil has traditionally been viewed as a male activity (Capoeira, 2002; Lewis, 2000), first practised by African-Brazilian male slaves, then, with the demise of slavery, by black male under-classes in cities of the North East, and when legalized, codified and taught in formal classes, white middle-class Brazilian men were also incorporated (De Campos Rosario et al., 2010). More recently, as part of the diffusion of capoeira in Europe, North America and Austral-Asia, women have become important and active participants.¹ At present, this issue has been briefly explored in the work of Stephens and Delamont (2009, 2013) where they describe how the capoeira classes they observed were sex-integrated with a typical male to female ratio of 60–40. Delamont (2005: 308), however, goes further to argue that:

There is a stress on the equality of women, from the teachers and the students themselves. Some of the best students are female, and I have never felt that being a woman was any problem in class.

Writing this current article from the position of capoeiristas and ethnographers,² we can both identify a range of texts, personal experiences and fieldwork data that support Delamont’s (2005) claim about inclusive gender relations in capoeira classes. Indeed, one of the most renowned statements attributed to *Mestre Pastinha*³ – ‘*Capoeira è pra homem, menino e mulher*’, which translates to ‘Capoeira is for man, child, and woman’ (Almeida, 1986: 41) – clearly supports this inclusive discourse. Practitioners and academics also frequently celebrate the capoeira *roda* as ‘a symbol of equality and

unity' (MacLennan, 2011: 154), and promote capoeira movements as 'neither a man nor a woman thing. They are simply a Capoeira thing; they know no gender' (Merrell, 2007: 36). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising to hear capoeira teachers and experienced practitioners make proud claims that 'capoeira is for everyone... It is an amazing, unifying tool for folks of all types and backgrounds' (Essien, 2008: 48–49). Within this multi-stranded call to inclusivity, equality and acceptance, gender inclusivity in European capoeira is widely taken for granted.

Whilst heeding the positive possibilities the prevailing gender inclusive discourse offers, we are still apprehensive that simply because more women are now entering capoeira classes and sharing the same training space with men, this 'does not... guarantee that it represents a great step forward for sex equality' (Channon, 2014: 591). This concern has already been taken up by Guizardi and Ypeij (2016), who shine a light on how more complex and ambiguous gender power relations underpin the promotion of female inclusion in capoeira. Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted primarily in Spain and The Netherlands, Guizardi and Ypeij note that capoeira has 'a deep notion of bodily, social and cultural liberation' (p. 189), as evidenced in their research by the important role women played in the organization of group activities. At the same time, they argue men continue to dominate the symbolic and ritual space of the capoeira ring. This is succinctly illustrated with the lead author both experiencing and seeing other women being carried out of the *roda* by male players. When confronted by highly skilled female capoeiristas, the authors propose that these male players are resorting to physical domination and demeaning practices in an attempt to affirm their domination of the *roda* space, and of women's bodies. Crucially, Guizardi and Ypeij propose that this is not a standalone incident but part of wider embodiment of gender inequality in capoeira.

Building on these concerns and considerations, we propose that the issue of gender power relations in capoeira in Europe is a complex phenomenon that, with few exceptions, is fundamentally unaddressed in the academic literature, practitioner texts and in many capoeira groups. Drawing on our 24 years of joint experience as capoeiristas, in addition to material from our respective ethnographic research on capoeira, this paper offers an empirical and theoretical contribution to emerging discussions about gender inclusivity in capoeira (and other physical cultures).

We address the complexity of gendered power relations, discourses and practices in capoeira from a situated and partial ethnographic standpoint as European, white, educated, hetero-sexual, male capoeiristas and scholars. Conscious that there is no single text 'saying everything to everyone' from a single theoretical and methodological perspective (Richardson, 1994: 518), we acknowledge that our research positioning enables us to focus on some relevant issues, whilst leaving others unexplored (issues that we call on other researchers to address and develop). In this vein, we acknowledge that the workings of gender (in)equality and inclusion intersect with and are influenced by constructions of femininity *and* masculinity (alongside other intersecting identity categories). Yet, for the purposes of the current article, we explore these complex issues through a more tailored, but in-depth, focus on masculinity and its impact on gender inclusion, and thus we analyse the chequered inclusion of women in capoeira through this analytical lens. Adopting this approach, we seek to further problematize inclusive gendered discourses and practices¹ in capoeira within several ethnographic settings in Europe, exploring how they are at once promoted, undermined and negotiated through various male and female teacher and student discourses and practices.

Masculinities in capoeira

Within the existing literature on capoeira, several authors have identified how male European and North American students undergo a process of embodied enculturation, where desirable abilities, performances and dispositions associated with ‘Brazilian’ styles of masculinity are learned and acquired (De Campos et al., 2010; Delamont et al., 2017; Stephens and Delamont, 2013). This includes the cultivation of a *cintura solta* (smooth or flexible waist) for the performance of sinuous dance movements in the *samba de roda*; increased flexibility for the performance of exotic, acrobatic and crowd pleasing *floreios* (flourishes); and the development of fighting prowess to unleash dangerous kicks and take-downs (De Campos et al., 2010; Delamont et al., 2017; Downey, 2005; Stephens and Delamont, 2013). As Delamont (2006: 167–168) observes, ‘In capoeira ...the most successfully masculine men are those who can fight and dance simultaneously, play with sinuous grace, attack and defend aggressively, and display comfort with both aspects of their bodies’. In capoeira communities, the bodies and masculine performances of male capoeira teachers play an important role here, at least for male students, as an object of emulation (Delamont et al., 2017). Joseph (2008b), for example, notes how:

Mestres and *graduados* [masters and instructors] remove their shirts [...] expose their bodily capital in the form of defined muscles and dark skin, and display physical mastery through their powerful acrobatic manoeuvres, fierce kicks, outstanding flexibility, and effective takedowns. (p. 505)

Several capoeira authors (Delamont, 2006; Downey, 2005; Stephens and Delamont, 2013) have commented on how the embodied performance of such ‘exotic’ masculinity starkly challenges traditional forms masculinity in Europe and North America, where flexibility, dance and sensuality are viewed as ‘entirely oppositional to sporting prowess’ (Delamont, 2006: 167). These authors address how students view these forms of masculinity in capoeira as authoritative, idealized and transgressive, and thus enable a form of corporeal liberation for practitioners, regardless of gender (Delamont et al., 2017; Downey, 2005; Joseph, 2008a, 2008b). However, much less attention has been dedicated to critically unpacking how these masculinities are (re)produced through capoeira discourses and practices and what the implications of these processes might be, in terms of gendered power relations and the increasing number of female practitioners in Europe and across the world.

The work of Guizardi and Ypeij (2016) has started to unpack these issues by focusing on the experiences of female capoeiristas. We contribute to this emerging critical analysis, turning our attention to how the (re)production, emulation and transmission of masculine narratives, performances and practices impact on gender relations within the European contexts we have practiced and observed.

A Foucauldian approach to discourse, power and sporting masculinities

Building on these propositions, we contend that a Foucauldian approach to discourse and power relations can offer a fresh perspective to help unpack the impact of masculinities in the complex, shifting and ambiguous gendered power relations in European capoeira. As such, Foucauldian theory has been widely used in the analysis of contemporary masculinities (Berggren, 2014; Garlick, 2002; Martino, 1999), and has been harnessed to great effect in the sociological study of sporting masculinities

(Crocket, 2012; Pringle, 2005; Pringle and Hickey, 2010; Pringle and Markula, 2005).

Central to Foucault's scholarship (1972, 1978) is the concept of discourse. Foucault attended to discourse in two ways: in the general sense, of how discourse constructs a topic through socially constructed meaning-making processes that allow people to make sense of some aspect of reality. And in the plural sense, through the examination of specific discourses that take the form of groups of statements. These statements provide a language for talking about and a way of representing knowledge about particular topics, in this instance capoeira, masculinities and gender relations. For Foucault (1972), discourses are forms of practice and social action, and are thus manifested and reproduced through individuals' active engagement with multi-media texts, bodies, stories or any other cultural resource people draw on to make sense of an issue or practice such as capoeira and/or gender. Discourses establish the conditions of possibility within a subject's field of action, that is, they work in both inhibiting and productive ways. Within capoeira communities, as in a society at large, there are dynamic fields of multiple, interweaving and shifting discourses, which offer knowledge and justifications to support or contest specific actions, understandings and social arrangements as being natural, normal and the way things are (Hook, 2001). To understand the ongoing struggles between different discourses, Foucault tied his analyses to the local workings of power.

In outlining his conception of power, Foucault (1978, 1980, 1984b) was, in part, reacting against Neo-Marxist understandings which predominated at the time. Foucault challenged the view that a binary division existed between rulers and the ruled, a hierarchical structure of power, and that power relations worked primarily in a top-down and repressive manner. Instead, he attended to how social actors are caught up in a web of diffused, dispersed and unstable discourses, but 'avoided fingering a set group as responsible for producing or controlling these discourses' (Pringle, 2005: 261). He also asserted that power is both constraining *and* productive, so whilst authorities, institutions and discourses can regulate, constrain and discipline individuals in contemporary societies, power also functions as 'a productive network which runs through the whole social body', giving actors the capacity to act, and enabling forms of pleasure, knowledge and self-stylization (Foucault, 1984b: 61).

Sociologists such as Crocket (2012) and Pringle and Hickey (2010) have employed Foucault's concepts of discourse and power to great effect in the study of sporting masculinities. Crocket (2012) conducted a year-long ethnographic study of elite male Ultimate Frisbee players in New Zealand. Conceptualizing masculinities as discursive performances, he explored how through engaging with 'complex, layered discourses... fragmented masculine identities are formed' (p. 321). Crocket employed the notion of *hypermasculinity* to describe men's more problematic performances (including the use of sexist and homophobic language, and the imposition of hierarchical divisions between players), and the notion of *moderated masculinities* to describe less problematic masculinities (where men were supportive, cooperative and collaborative, and avoided forceful or violent domination of others). Drawing on Foucault's (1978: 100) argument that the 'tactical function [of discourse] is neither uniform nor stable', Crocket was able to explore the interactive boundaries between moderated and hyper-masculinities and how each member of the Ultimate Frisbee team performed an inconsistent range of practices that 'defied reduction into a single, stable masculine identity' (p. 329).

In turn, Pringle and Hickey (2010) interviewed a series of sportsmen who were known to be sympathetic to feminism and who held senior positions within sports teams and organizations. Using a Foucauldian lens, Pringle and Hickey analysed how

these men problematized the hypermasculine sport cultures they were located in, critiquing the sexualization of females, public drunkenness and excessive training demands. Pringle and Hickey showed how, within contexts of competing discourses relating to masculinity and femininity, ethical dilemmas and identity tensions arose. Crucially, they proposed these tensions work not only to 'entrench social problems and inequitable relations of power but can also provide opportunities for social change' (p. 117). In this instance, a form of personal change was enabled through critical self-reflection, wherein the sportsmen gained an understanding of how they were enmeshed within power relations, whilst also imbued with a certain amount of freedom.

Engaging with this exemplary work is useful for illustrating how discourse and power relations both enable and constrain performances of masculinity and gender relations, often at the same time. In relation to the current study, this means that it is unlikely local gender practices and performances in capoeira contexts will be either 'unambiguously equality orientated or oppressive towards women' (Christensen and Jensen, 2014: 71). As a result, as (gender) researchers, we need to remain flexible to multiple possible interpretations, engage in an 'open empirical analysis of contextualized power relations' (Christensen and Jensen, 2014: 72), and attend to how subjects take-up, negotiate and resist multiple, often contradictory, discourses of gender. As illustrated in the work of Crocket (2012) and Pringle and Hickey (2010), an awareness of the complexity of the relationships between discourses will also be particularly relevant in the study of capoeira as it is renowned for being an ambivalent and contradictory practice, with movements, songs and practice underpinned by 'conflicted and malleable meanings' (Robitaille, 2010: 2). With the diffusion of capoeira being bound-up in local and transnational processes of hybridization, contextualized analyses of the take-up, negotiation and resistance to dominant discourses⁵ and the promotion of marginalized discourses, are essential for making sense of the multiple possible meanings associated with capoeira practices in diverse localities. Ultimately, then, by engaging in contextual analyses of the workings of power and the deployment and negotiation of discourse, a Foucauldian framework enables us to interrogate the discursive practices⁶ through which gender inclusivity is framed and negotiated in specific capoeira settings in Europe.

Problematization – A Foucauldian analysis

Building on Foucault's understandings of discourse and power, our analytical approach has been informed by Foucault's (1984a) method of problematization. This has meant focusing on 'practises...that raise an issue, pose a question, or introduce a hitherto unacknowledged element in the field of thought' (Deacon, 2000: 137). The method of problematization can work in two distinct ways: either by focusing on problematic practices or by actively questioning taken-for-granted practices. In this article we take the later route, interrogating a phenomenon – gender inclusivity in capoeira in Europe – that is widely taken for granted and seen as self-evident.

Conducting the analysis, we initially engaged in face-to-face dialogue about our own personal experiences and in-class observations of the promotion and undermining of gender inclusivity in European capoeira. We then returned to our respective ethnographic data sets and field notes, with the explicit goal of identifying critical moments that either: (a) illustrated the (re)production of gender inclusive discourse; (b) exposed the gaps, shortcomings and resistance to the discourse; or (c) offered an ambiguous engagement with the discourse. Ultimately, following Foucault's (1984a) call to de-familiarize common sense and make conventional understandings

uncomfortable and problematic, we sought to interrogate claims for gender inclusivity in capoeira by ‘demonstrating its contradictions and discontinuities... exposing these points of vulnerability’ (Hook, 2001: 536) and highlighting sites and strategies for resistance and change.

Methodology

This article draws on a corpus of ethnographic qualitative data produced through two sets of ethnographic research and the researchers’ 24 years of combined experience as capoeira players. The lead author undertook ethnographic research for his PhD to explore how masculinities were constructed in capoeira classes. He conducted fieldwork from 2007 to 2011 with two capoeira groups in South West England. Both groups were led by young Brazilian male instructors and included a mix of students from local universities and people working locally in the cities. The groups had a ratio of approximately 50–50 male-to-female. The students were typically aged 16–35. Classes were usually taught in mixed ability groupings. The ethnic make-up of classes was approximately 50% White British and 50% a range of other nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. One group typically had between 5–15 people attend class whilst the other had 15–35.

Starting the research as a capoeira ‘beginner’, the author’s ethnographic methodology functioned as a socio-cultural apprenticeship (Downey et al., 2015). He engaged in embodied fieldwork, participating as a student in classes once a week, as well as attending numerous annual festivals, social activities and public performances in nightclubs and other venues. He also wrote field notes after the events; collected multi-media artefacts including flyers, posters, DVDs, capoeira clothing and musical instruments; conducted interviews with 15 *capoeiristas* (11 male, four female) of various abilities; and photographed *capoeiristas* in action in class and at festivals, and shared the photographs with each capoeira group via Facebook. After the completion of his PhD fieldwork, he continued to play capoeira with a new group in South West England and then a group in London.

The second author’s main focus of research relates to disenfranchised youth engagement with transnational physical practices (e.g. capoeira and parkour) in contexts of urban marginality (De Martini Ugolotti, 2015; De Martini Ugolotti and Moyer, 2016). However, for this paper he drew on 17 years of experience learning and teaching capoeira in diverse European countries. More specifically, since 2011, he has engaged in an ongoing ethnographic endeavour to explore his own and fellow capoeiristas’ experiences, meanings and engagements with the discipline across different contexts. During this period, he led and participated in weekly training sessions and workshops in the UK and participated in more than 20 events in several European countries. After returning home from the events and training sessions, he regularly compiled field notes. These focused on his own (auto)ethnographic reflections concerning his political, gendered, sexed and classed positioning and engagement with the practice, as well other male and female practitioners’ accounts gleaned from informal conversations. In this way, he sought to recognize the partiality of his own voice and experience in capoeira, and to use it as an analytical tool to dialogue with fellow practitioners and researchers about the nexus of pedagogy, power, culture, embodiment and practice in the discipline.

Capoeira is a multi-dimensional art form, and the ethnographic methodologies of the two respective research projects tried to embrace a number of these relational, visual, embodied, performative, textual and discursive elements. Acknowledging this multi-

layered challenge, debates about gender (in)equality and inclusivity in capoeira, and physical cultures more widely, need to engage with these multiple levels. Within the confines of a single journal article, this is a challenging task however. Indeed, in Guizardi and Ypeij's (2016) exploration of the ambiguities of gender inclusivity in capoeira, they prioritized their analysis on the embodied interactions and organizational structures of capoeira *rodas* and classes. In this paper, we broaden the focus of analysis to explore how the promotion and undermining of gender inclusivity play out through textual, narrative and other forms of ethnographic data. Engaging with multiple capoeira texts, including interviews with practitioners, local and national advertising, practitioner literature, UNESCO publications, and our own field notes and personal reflections, we critically analyse a series of critical moments that illustrate the complex and contradictory contexts in which inclusive gender relations are at once promoted, undermined and negotiated. All capoeiristas, whose voices are presented in this text, either chose or were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Every single girl could kick my ass

In the application to UNESCO (2014: 5), capoeira is said to provide the 'possibility of respectful and harmonious coexistence between different ethnic groups, ages and genders'. It is not surprising, then, that during our two research projects and our wider experiences as capoeiristas, we have both seen and heard a range of examples of teacher and student practice that exemplified and re-produced this discourse. One such example emerged in an interview conducted with 'Thomas' – a white British 26-year-old male who had been practising capoeira for 10 months at the time of interview. When asked 'have you ever come across the idea that dance is associated as more of a woman's activity?', Thomas responded:

For me that's why capoeira is so special is because there is not an emphasis on sex, in that formal sense. And like, girls can be much better at capoeira than guys, even if they're half the weight and the size and build. So I think the playing fields are quite level in capoeira, which is really special.... So yeah I think it's like a real interesting like box you're opening here. It's something that I've not given too much conscious thought to it, but I've felt it. Like this is awesome, like this is really equal. It's nice. It's refreshing. It's not even conceited either. It's not like 'let's make sure the girls get a go too' [silly voice]. It's not like that, it's totally natural... Every single girl that goes to capoeira on Thursday Tuesday evening and Saturday could KICK MY ASS [loud voice], which is awesome.

In this extract, Thomas clearly (re)produces a discourse of gender inclusivity by proposing that 'the playing fields are quite level' in capoeira. Thomas also pre-empts and rebukes the potential counter-argument that women could be included in capoeira classes on a practical level, yet in a manner where their apparent inclusion is undermined by notions of male superiority and patronization. To support this rebuke, Thomas asserts that 'girls can be much better at capoeira than guys, even if they're half the weight and the size and build'. This proposition can be explained, in part, by attending to one of the common principles or discourses of capoeira, namely, that the abuse or 'simple physical domination of one's opponent risks bringing the game to a halt and losing the respect of one's fellow capoeirista' (Fuggle, 2008: 213). Rather, as Lewis (1992: 91) explains, 'the ideal seems to be not to use force, but timing and knowledge: to apply a gentle pressure at the right time to unbalance the opponent and cause [them] to fall'. In this sense, capoeira can be viewed as a 'contact' martial art, yet not brutal contact. With the focus more on trickery, cunning and timing, what

capoeiristas refer to as *malicia*, this enables smaller, lighter and shorter players (that might include women and children) to outwit players who are bigger, heavier and supposedly 'stronger'.

We have noted that in several *rodas* and events across Europe, this inclusive discourse was reproduced by capoeira players of both sexes. This finding supports Delamont's (2005) earlier argument that one of the attractions of capoeira is that it is a form of combat men and women can do together. Indeed, Thomas's repeated remarks that playing with experienced and skilful female capoeiristas is 'special', 'awesome', 'nice' and 'refreshing', suggest that sex integrated capoeira classes can, and sometimes do, challenge traditional discourses of male physical superiority and female inferiority, and are being enjoyed, celebrated and promoted by capoeiristas of both sexes.

Troubling the gender inclusivity discourse in capoeira

Whilst we view the above account as a meaningful example of sex integrated and gender inclusive practice, the experiences and accounts of other capoeiristas also highlighted how 'the relatively even numbers of male and female capoeiristas do not necessarily reflect equality of power' (Joseph, 2012: 1089). Across both ethnographies and in our further engagements with capoeira, we observed and heard accounts where female capoeiristas experienced trivialization and open discriminations. These experiences and accounts enabled us to engage with Foucault's (1984a) method of problematization as a means to illuminate the cracks and fault lines of an ever-present and taken-for-granted discourse of gender inclusivity in capoeira.

One such example was recounted in an interview with 'Naomi' – a 23-year-old White British capoeirista with four years of experience. In this example, all students were instructed to perform a side push up, yet, the teacher told the male students to do this one-handed, whilst the female students were to do it two-handed. In the excerpt below, Naomi raises concerns about the sex differentiated strength training activity the teacher employed:

I don't know. I have trouble with, the fact that it's not always equal between women and men in capoeira. For example [N. chuckles], I guess my master won't hear about this, but when he says 'this is for girls and this is for boys', sometimes you know there are boys that aren't so strong as me doing the alternatives of the stronger boys and I'm like WELL [loud voice] you can't even do a press up properly, why should I do this double handed version, do you know what I mean?

Reflecting on her experience of being more proficient than some male capoeiristas in class, Naomi is clearly critical of the sex differentiated strength training activity which holds female capoeiristas to lower standards. Naomi's critique of assumed sex differences in capoeira resonates with our own observations and experiences. Specifically, the proficient performance of many capoeira movements depends on practitioners' *relative* strength to their own body, rather than their *absolute* strength. That is, a higher strength-to-weight ratio and a better capacity to use and control one's strength can make a capoeirista more effective. As a result, women's general strength differences to men are mitigated.

During a capoeira event in Italy in 2016, the issue of unequal gender relations in capoeira was also meaningfully addressed by a female Brazilian *contra-mestra* (assistant-master) – 'Lilù'. Speaking at the end of a *roda*, Lilù outlined what she saw as a generational shift in women's experiences of gender (in)equality in capoeira. Interestingly, she suggested that these challenges relate not only to assumptions about

women's perceived physical (in)abilities, but also exist at symbolic and organizational levels, for example, through the performance of music and the leading of activities in capoeira *rodas*:

I belong to what I would say are a second generation of capoeira women who started training in the 90s in Brazil. The first generation really fought and struggled hard to make their place in the *roda* if you know what I mean, just to be able to play, to be seen as a legitimate player as anyone else. Us, the second generation really fought hard not just to play, but to have a legitimate place in the *bateria* [orchestra], playing the *berimbau* [one-stringed lead instrument], leading the *roda* by singing... Male capoeiristas would not let us for so many reasons... so we fought to do it, and now in Brazil people started to accept it. Now there is a third generation of female capoeiristas, and this is possibly the first generation with a lot of non-Brazilian women... (*Contra-Mestra* 'Lilù', field notes, June 2016)

From our observations in capoeira classes and events, public talks by experienced female capoeiristas, raising concerns about the historical and contemporary struggles of female capoeiristas were rare. Indeed, Lilù's comments were a direct response to an observation from a female student who remarked how pleased she was to see a female *mestra*. From our experience, Lilù's speech represents an exception, in a context where primarily male *mestres*, *contra mestres* and capoeira teachers represent, re-tell and normalize the history, experience and meanings of capoeira from their own gendered perspectives. To further illuminate how gender inclusivity in capoeira is at once enabled, constrained and negotiated, it is to these storytelling practices that we now turn.

Re-telling the (male) history of capoeira

A Hook (2001) reminds us, Foucault's conceptualization of discourse requires historical contextualization. The modern re-telling of the history of capoeira has been undertaken, in part, by a handful of researchers who have drawn upon the limited range of archival texts available (Assuncao, 2005; Capoeira, 2002; Taylor, 2007). Alongside these published texts, and potentially playing a more powerful role, the history of capoeira is frequently re-told to students through the storytelling practices of *mestres*, *contra mestres* and capoeira teachers. As noted previously, in these contexts, the oral representation of the actions of famous capoeiristas (whether slaves, criminals, freedom fighters or masters) are both described and performed from the standpoints of male actors.⁷

Both authors have frequently witnessed the practice and performance of experienced male *mestres* orally sharing the history of capoeira. We will now share our joint recollection of a recent account in 2014 in which we were both present:

Sunday afternoon at the University of Barlington. At the end of the *roda* about twenty capoeiristas sit in a circle around a calm, authoritative figure. The person everyone's looking at is *Mestre* 'Sabio'. The master is sitting on a chair in a central position on the perimeter of the *roda*. Around him are other capoeira teachers. The rest of the capoeiristas are sitting on the floor. *Mestre* Sabio is about 60 years old. He is an internationally renowned and highly respected master. Even the other Brazilian *contra mestres*, with twenty or more years of experience, look at him with a mix of deference and anticipation.

Mestre Sabio talks about the tough environment in which he started practicing and becoming a leading capoeira figure in the late 1960s, during the Brazilian military dictatorship. He

recollects that unauthorised public gatherings, including street *rodas*, were forbidden and punishable with prison, and that *vadios* and *valentoes* (hustlers and thugs) would often enter capoeira street *rodas* with a knife in hand, ready for trouble. Indeed, on one such occasion, he was directly attacked and stabbed in a *roda*, yet managed to avoid deadly injuries by using his capoeira skills.

Responding to a subsequent question, *Mestre Sabio* re-tells another incident when he was arrested for ‘forbidden crowding’ during a *roda*, and put in jail for several weeks. He was young and not associated with any criminal network, yet thanks to his capoeira ability and street credibility, he proudly recalled not needing protection from older jail pimps, stating he ‘didn’t need to wear panties and a mini-skirt’ to make it through his incarceration.

The image of *Mestre Sabio* seated centrally, with every capoeirista sitting round in attendance, clearly illustrates how masters are practically and culturally positioned as authority figures and the revered source of knowledge about capoeira’s past and present. Indeed, capoeira is a practice that demonstrates a continuing loyalty to history and tradition (MacLennan, 2011), and the storytelling of experienced masters is a key practice in promoting these values and meanings to students.

As with all texts, capoeira stories, such as the above, are open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, they can be considered as meaningful counter-narratives (MacLennan, 2011; Tamboukou, 2013) depicting the historical struggles of subordinate, weak or muted social actors (i.e. slaves and their descendants, slum dwellers and the working classes), who used *malicia* and *malandragem* (wit and cunning) to negotiate or displace, if only temporarily, unequal, violent and exploitative social conditions (i.e. slavery, extreme poverty, social inequality, dictatorship and imprisonment). Notably though, as mentioned above, both the storytellers and main historical characters⁸ of these counter-narratives are invariably male, heterosexual figures. In addition, the morals of the stories typically draw on ‘orthodox’ qualities of masculinity such as rebellion, competitiveness, risk-taking, violence, engagement in public space and heteronormativity. Indeed, in the story above, *Mestre Sabio* constructs a narrative of capoeira’s violent and dangerous past in Brazil. Embedded within this are recollections of his proficient use of capoeira skills to dodge deadly injury and jailhouse sexual abuse. The *mestre’s* assertion he ‘didn’t need to wear panties and a mini-skirt’ to make it through his incarceration can also be interpreted as ‘transphobic’, and suggests an implicit hierarchy of gender and sexual norms and values passes through his capoeira narrative. Similar to other liberation movements that contained reactionary elements⁹ (King, 1988), we therefore have a complex and politically ambivalent context of gender contradictions within capoeira. That is, discourses of gender inclusivity are being promoted and overwritten on a history of sex-differentiated and sometimes sexist and hetero-normative discourse and practice, which continues to be re-produced, in part, through the re-telling of ‘orthodox’ masculine historical narratives.

Acknowledging that differently situated capoeiristas will take up and draw meaning from these stories in different ways, we now offer our own personal responses and reflections on *Mestre Sabio’s* story as a way to illustrate some of the challenges involved in negotiating the contradictory gender discourses and practices in capoeira. As practising male capoeiristas, we were both initially enthralled by the emotive, engaging and action-orientated narrative and performance of *Mestre Sabio’s* story. However, through the process of taking field notes and engaging in subsequent discussion after the event, we recognized that, in many ways, our masculine

subjectivities did not connect with the experiences or values the story evoked. Indeed, we have not suffered poverty or forcible government oppression. As white, middle-class, European men in our thirties, we grew up in Western societies where cultural norms against violence, prejudice and the establishment of gender and sexual equality were increasingly taken for granted. However, somewhat like Naomi, we too felt apprehensive about publicly challenging and critiquing *mestres* and teachers during capoeira events.

As Delamont (2006) notes, teacher authority in capoeira is typically less rigid and visible than many traditional Asian martial arts, yet capoeira masters are still in a position of considerable power. For Delamont (2006: 165), this power and authority is ‘performed, emblazoned [and] embodied’ through masters’ bodily superiority, their skills in the game, and their performance of authentic Brazilianness, and, as we documented above, through masters’ stories of cunning, hardship and survival. In such a community, where authority and respect is earned by capoeiristas’ expertise, authenticity and longevity, the value and practice of equality and resistance becomes somewhat limited and constrained when students’ and junior teachers’ critical perspectives are restrained or deferred to the voices of revered masters. Here then, we have an example of power, knowledge and discourse at work, with those identified as revered sources of knowledge shaping the conditions within which ‘being a capoeira’ is imagined and constructed.

Singing and negotiating gender in the *roda*

Music and singing are also fundamental elements of capoeira and provide another important site through which traditional gender roles and discourses are at once reproduced and negotiated. In the capoeira *roda*, one member of the *bateria* will lead a song and the remaining capoeiristas will sing in response. Alongside the sonorous, emotive and communal qualities associated with the practice of singing, the capoeira songs also act as a ‘textbook’ (Barbosa, 2008). In other words, they allow the singer to convey messages about capoeira’s history, philosophy, etiquette and, most importantly for this paper, they reveal important information about gender roles and relations. A theme that emerges in the lyrics of numerous capoeira songs is the celebration of the masculine power and charm of Brazilian men and capoeira *mestres*. This celebration often takes the form of ‘tales of virility and sexual conquest’ and the promotion of capoeiristas as womanisers (Lewis, 2000: 546). These tales are frequently embodied and enacted by the archetypal figure of the *Malandro*, a sly, street-smart guy who uses his intelligence, seduction and charm to negotiate favourable dealings with others, including women:

Leva morena me leva,

me leva pro seu bangalo,

oi me leva morena,

me leva que sou capoeira já disse que sou

(Take me brunette [also meaning black/brown skinned woman],

take me to your bungalow,

so take me brunette,

take me, I am capoeira, I told you I am)

No dia que eu morrer,

pra evitar de ter pancada,

nao quero no meu velorio choro de mulher casada, camarà

(The day I die,

to avoid beatings,

I don't want married women crying at the vigil, comrade)

As observed by Barbosa (2008), there is an absence of women's perspectives in capoeira songs. When women are mentioned they are often represented in disparaging ways, positioned in the role of the lover of a great capoeirista, or as nagging or sneaky wives. These songs can accompany the games of female capoeiristas, and although sung with irony, engaging melodies and contagious smiles on capoeiristas' faces, they still represent the perspective of male actors, through which the female (capoeirista) is positioned as a casual sexual trophy or possession.

Acknowledging that the tactical function and effect of discourses is neither uniform nor stable (Foucault, 1978), the meaning, effect and reception of these songs vary depending upon the audience. On the one hand, many capoeiristas who have yet to learn the rudiments of Brazilian Portuguese sing along to these songs yet have little understanding of the content of the lyrics, let alone the multiple possible subtexts the lyrics engender. On the other hand, in numerous *rodas* and events we observed, where many capoeiristas were able to speak and/or understand Brazilian Portuguese, the performance of songs representing hetero-normative (and sometimes explicitly chauvinist) perspectives were not publicly identified or challenged as sites for the preservation of sexism and male domination. Rather, the performance of these songs often worked to legitimate the singer and leader of the *roda* through their deployment and preservation of traditional 'voices':

è samba no mulher (o mulher),

mulher bicho danado (o mulher),

danada para falar (o mulher),

assim como Deus nao mente (o mulher),

mulher nao fala a verdade (o mulher)

It's the woman's samba (oh woman)

woman, damned animal (oh woman)

damned to talk (oh woman)

as much as God does not lie (oh woman)

woman does not tell the truth (oh woman)

The lack of openly critical responses from both male and female capoeiristas (including ourselves) on the performance of these songs was even more profound and paradoxical when we regularly observed an array of female practitioners asserting their skills and abilities in everyday in-class practice, and negotiating central roles as organizers and teachers within capoeira communities. This element was again addressed by *contra-mestra* Lilù in her public talk referred to earlier in the article:

Here in Europe, playing or singing in a *roda* for a woman capoeirista is not uncommon, and you start to have also women's *rodas*, women's events, but I wonder, and that's why I talk about it if I am given chance, if students know how female capoeiristas in Brazil had to fight for being able to do it. Because we fought for it the hard way, including facing public humiliations sometimes and rebutting it, you know, defending our space and personally I feel like this space in the *roda* has still to be secured to be more comfortable for other women to live. (Field notes, June 2016)

Lilù's speech once again illustrates the ambivalent context of gender inclusivity in capoeira in Europe. On the one hand, she represents capoeira in Europe as a space where women are able to take central roles in the *bateria* and are able to organize and promote independent women-only *rodas* and events.¹⁰ That said, Lilù also raises concerns about the gendered histories that have been silenced or yet to be shared due to the discipline's uncritical approach to gender power relations, wherein historical gender struggles and emancipation *within* the discipline are rarely acknowledged. Here then, we have an example of how the effects of (dominant) discourses can be negotiated and resisted by previously silenced or marginalized voices (in this case, women who are recognized leaders in the discipline), who in turn promote marginalized discourses that

work to re-define what capoeira is, means and does for diverse populations.

Building on *contra-mestra* Lilù's comments, we are also concerned by the lack of knowledge and discussion about the struggles female capoeiristas endured in order to legitimate their role as players, singers and leaders in Brazil. This situation might in turn undermine the possibilities for female and non-heterosexual capoeiristas in Europe (and the rest of the world) to secure space, voice and leadership in the capoeira *roda*, beyond that granted by existing ambivalent discourses of gender inclusivity. Furthermore, we contend that *all* capoeiristas might benefit from being able to listen to, read, draw on and identify with stories depicting the negotiations, struggles and perspectives of female and non-hetero-normative actors within the discipline. We discuss the implications of these perspectives in the following discussion and concluding sections.

Discussion

The data presented in this paper enabled us to problematize taken-for-granted discourses of gender inclusivity and equality in capoeira, by illuminating some unspoken tensions between the discipline's fidelity to a (male-dominated and hetero-normative) history and tradition and the highly valued, but somehow contradictory, contemporary political ideology of social justice and gender equality. Foucauldian understandings of discourse and power were particularly useful in making sense of this contradictory context. As such, our analysis of capoeira oral narratives, song texts, student accounts and daily practice showed the unequal and, to some extent, unintentional *effects* of coexisting discourses in capoeira, simultaneously valuing hetero-normative traditions *and* the 'expression of union against oppression' (UNESCO, 2014: 6). We contend that these discourses, whilst envisioning capoeira as a site of 'respectful and harmonious coexistence between different ethnic groups, ages and genders' (UNESCO, 2014: 5), offer a filtered and uncritical set of values, meanings and priorities, wherein hetero-normative male norms, narratives and roles are taken for granted.

Applying Foucauldian understandings of discourse, and how it is constituted through power and knowledge, enabled us to illuminate how these gendered norms, narratives and roles are associated with and reproduced through the authority attributed to traditional, male and hetero-normative capoeira figures that have the power 'to construct the sport as they discuss, display and teach it' (Joseph, 2008b: 504). A Foucauldian perspective also reminded us that discourses are the product of negotiations around power and knowledge, and thus amenable to ongoing change and transformation. Whilst specifically focusing on the 'multiplicity of points of resistance' (Foucault, 1978: 95) to claims of gender inclusivity in capoeira in Europe was beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge, as previously noted in the text, that some female capoeiristas and masters¹¹ have posed critical questions and shared alternative histories and perspectives on capoeira. These voices and histories have sought to recover historical knowledge and produce new contemporary understandings about the struggles and achievements of female capoeiristas. Placed alongside existing male-centred histories, these discourses have the potential to contest and destabilize dominant narratives or, at the very least, offer challenging alternatives and additions.

That said, these alternative voices and histories are somewhat undermined by a discourse that celebrates and generalizes capoeira's 'inherent' (gender) inclusivity. In many capoeira groups in Europe, it seems this taken-for-granted discourse leaves little space for non-masculine and non-heterosexual voices. Nevertheless, by illuminating the operations of gendered discourse in the discipline, we can contribute to the process

of making the unspoken speakable and the nameless visible (see Foucault, 1978; Rich, 1983). In this light, we have highlighted ongoing gender imbalances in capoeira, and acknowledged how, although dominant, male and hetero-normative perspectives represent only *partial* perspectives through which to view and construct capoeira.

By considering how the central position of female participants in capoeira groups in Europe is not simply the consequence of capoeira's inherent inclusivity, but rather related to and inspired by the historical and ongoing negotiations of female capoeiristas, we can 'put into discourse' (Woodward, 2014: 242, citing Foucault, 1981) more diverse gendered and sexual perspectives in the discipline's practice, pedagogies and histories. The acknowledgment and recognition of these perspectives can thus 'make it possible to think about and give expression to something as possible which hitherto had been inconceivable' (Woodward, 2014: 243). Moreover, these perspectives are even more crucial to address now as researchers are documenting the relevance and ongoing (re)definition of the discipline in diasporic and transnational contexts (see Delamont et al., 2017; Joseph, 2012; De Martini Ugolotti, 2015).

Conclusions

In this article, we have sought to join with the already present, though still only occasionally heard, voices that present different gendered perspectives on capoeira's possibilities and contradictions in promoting egalitarian gender relationships. Harnessing a Foucauldian perspective, we have advanced critical discussions by problematizing the very concepts of 'gender equality' and 'gender inclusivity' in capoeira. Moreover, we contend the empirical and theoretical contributions offered in this article will be of interest to an audience beyond the confines of capoeira practitioners and scholars. As such, Foucault's (1984b) method of problematization, and our subsequent analysis of the workings of power and discourse in shaping gender relations in capoeira, can offer meaningful insights into the contradictions and ambiguities other (in)formal sports and leisure activities may face when addressing claims of gender (in)equality.

As such, we contend that the insights advanced in this paper can contribute to wider discussions about gender power relations in sex-integrated sports, martial arts (Channon et al., 2016) and popular forms of physical culture and lifestyle sports (Wheaton, 2004). Our contribution will be particularly useful, as these practices represent relevant and increasingly popular sites where gender and physical cultures are produced, consumed and played out. Finally, acknowledging that the game of capoeira works as a 'form of negotiation rather than a domination or negation' (Fuggle, 2008: 205), we call for further perspectives with which to dialogue and discuss the changes of a cultural phenomenon that has gained transnational relevance, and thus further unpack, and act on, issues of gender and power inside and outside the capoeira *roda*.

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Notes

1. Lewis (2000: 543), among others, notes that women in Brazil are also ‘increasingly active as participants, especially in the large southern cities’, yet more research is needed to explore this phenomenon.
2. The first author has seven years of experience playing capoeira and the second author is a capoeira instructor with 17 years of experience.
3. *Mestre Pastinha* and *Mestre Bimba* are unanimously recognized amongst practitioners as the founding figures of modern capoeira.
4. We acknowledge that there is no single, delineated definition for ‘gender inclusivity’ or ‘gender equality’, but a range of diverse, contested, overlapping and contingent ideas (Elliott, 2016; Verloo and Lombardo, 2007). We therefore refer to ‘gender inclusivity’ and ‘gender equality’ in this paper, aware of the potential ambivalences and contestations these terms convey.
5. We view dominant discourses as prevalent, accepted and/or taken-for-granted ways of speaking about or making sense of an issue or object within a given community or society. And we view marginalized discourses as less prevalent and alternative ways of speaking about or making sense of an issue or object, which may be perceived as extreme, dangerous or subversive. These should not be viewed as binary concepts, but rather in a plural sense, wherein subjects engage with numerous and contradictory discourses, rather than a single dominating discourse.
6. We view discursive practice as a diverse series of actions through which subjects actively engage with and (re)produce discourse.
7. Semi-legendary figures such as Dandara, Maria *Doze Homens* (Mary ‘twelve men’, the number of contestants she defeated in one bout) or Rosa Palmeirao are relevant feminine characters associated with capoeira, but are nevertheless eclipsed in widespread narratives by figures such as Zumbi, Besouro Mangangá or Nascimento Grande.
8. Such historical characters include: Zumbi, Nascimento Grande, Besouro Mangangá, *Mestre Bimba* and *Mestre Pastinha*.
9. For example, during the Black Nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the US, King (1988: 55) notes that ‘men quite effectively used the matriarchy issue to manipulate and coerce black women into maintaining exclusive commitments to racial interests and redefining and narrowing black women’s roles and images in ways to fit a more traditional Western view of women’.
10. ‘Women only’ *rodas* and events are sites which have received little or no academic attention and which we have yet to gain extensive data on.
11. We think of the work on gender and capoeira engaged by *Mestra Janja* in Brazil.

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