



Responding to the Call of *Compromisso*: Reflections on Research Ethics from the Ground of Capoeira Angola

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Abstract

This essay explores how call-and-response exchanges in Capoeira Angola both embody and generate ethical ways of being in the world. By bringing ethnographic specificity to a discussion of ethics, I ground the often abstract nature of ethical thought in movement, sound, and lived experience. Drawing on my experiences of training with one capoeira group in Bahia, Brazil, I argue that when players enter capoeira's ring of play, they also enter ethical relations with one another, which extend beyond moments of play into their lives. They call these ongoing responsibilities *compromisso*. Considering my roles as a guest, part-time student, and ethnographer, I ask what ought to comprise my *compromisso* with the group, and I reflect on the ways in which learning Capoeira Angola continues to influence how I think about research ethics.

Keywords: Capoeira Angola, call-and-response, ethical responsibility, fieldwork ethics, ethnography

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The kick can come smooth and slow, or it can fly at my face, but if I feel in that split second that her heel will hit my head, then I must respond by getting out of the way. If I am already close to the ground, I lower further, sideways into *negativa*¹: Suspending my torso just millimeters above the ground, holding my weight in my hands and one foot, with deeply bent elbows and knee, my upper leg slightly extended and foot resting lightly on the ground. My temple grazes the concrete, safely out of reach of my opponent's attack. If the kick comes faster, I may only have time to throw my body to the side, knees bent and legs still in a wide stance, ducking under the kick as it whirs over my back, performing Capoeira Angola's movement of evasion and escape, *esquiva*.

But my responsibilities do not end there. Capoeira Angola is an Afro-Brazilian music-movement form that combines elements of fight, dance, and game, but also transcends them, with each game's purpose shifting depending on who is playing.² As I have learned from master practitioner Mestre Cláudio Costa, one primary aim is to "entertain the *roda*," the term for both the event and its circular space of play created by practitioners and onlookers sitting and standing in a ring. To entertain means to play a beautiful game (*um jogo bonito*), full of question and response (*pergunta e resposta*), expression, theatricality, trickery, humor, and much more.³ Fundamentally, achieving a *jogo bonito* requires multiple overlapping modes of call and response. Every defensive escape ideally contains the seeds of an attack or entrance, encroaching upon my partner's space. If dodging a kick I

1. Here and throughout, I provide the names and descriptions of movements and leave them untranslated, as is standard among capoeira practitioners, even non-Portuguese speakers. The meaning of each term corresponds to the movement, not necessarily a direct translation of the term. For example, *negativa* translates to "negative," but it refers to the defensive move described above. All other translations in this essay are my own.

2. My study focuses exclusively on Capoeira Angola, a style that emphasizes tradition, African roots, and moving closer to one's opponent and lower to the ground, in contrast to capoeira "Regional" or contemporary styles that emphasize more acrobatic moves like flying kicks and flips. See also Downey (2002) for a good discussion of how capoeira blurs and eludes genres.

3. Dance-capoeira scholar-practitioner Cristina Rosa describes the capoeira game in similar terms: "[A]cross their call-and-response dialogues, capoeira players propose metaphorical questions to 'test' the other in the hope that their opponent will eventually run out of answers" (Rosa, 2012, pp. 102–103).

turn to my left, I may pivot on my left foot, lowering my hands to the ground, bending deeply at the waist, dropping my torso, and step my right foot towards my partner. Now I've positioned my body to counterattack. Shifting my weight to my right leg, looking at my opponent (upside down), I lift my left leg into an arching *rabo de arraia* kick aimed at my partner's head—but he ducks out of its way. Each exchange takes place in a matter of milliseconds.







This is a sequence of stills taken from a video of the author (in colored headband) playing capoeira with a member of the Angoleiros do Sertão in February 2016. It shows the player on the right giving a kick (rabo de arraia) and the author, on the left, responding with another rabo de arraia kick. Original video by Ben Dicke.

The body-to-body conversation depends not only upon each player's ability to understand what is coming their way and respond appropriately, ensuring that each response contains a new call to keep the game going, but it also relies upon the encircling singers

and instrumentalists playing, singing, and responding with the right energy, or *axé*.⁴ Just as a player must perform a kick with conviction, as if they really mean to take you down, participants in a Capoeira Angola *roda* must sing response choruses at full voice. Indeed, as Mestre Cláudio insists to his students, they must grasp the expression (*expressão*) of the movements. Performing the “right” movement without expression is meaningless. Similarly, Mestre Cláudio demands that his students play the instruments with the right attitude (*atitude*). Singing the correct words is not enough. We must sing and play convincingly and with conviction—like we mean it. Whether playing percussion instruments, moving in the *roda*, or singing responses, in every moment participants must commit to giving their all, putting in the *axé*-energy.

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In this essay, I consider how the synergetic musical-bodily call-and-response exchanges of Capoeira Angola both embody and generate ethical ways of being in the world. My aim is to bring ethnographic specificity to the ways in which call and response not only structures the sociality of musical and danced performance—as Black music’s “musical trope of tropes” (Floyd, 1995, p. 95), among the most prominent of Africanist “mechanics of delivery” (Maultsby, 2005, p. 192)—but also how call and response “‘recuperates’ the humanity of black people” (Nelson, 2013, p. 62), contributing to their thriving in “vibrant communication” and communality (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014, p. 11). Drawing on my experiences of training with Mestre Cláudio, in his school the Angoleiros do Sertão (Capoeira Angola Players of the Backlands), on multiple trips to Brazil since 2013, I bring my embodied knowledge of one African diasporic sound-movement

4. *Axé* is a concept, from the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, meaning energy, (life) force, or the power to make things happen, but *axé* has also taken on a broader range of meanings in capoeira and the Brazilian popular imaginary. As I explore elsewhere, the sounds and movements of capoeira may transmit *axé*, which can therefore be understood as a force players cultivate in order to make the call and response of the game happen (Kurtz, 2024).

practice into dialogue with theorizations of response-ability in performance contexts and beyond (Madison, 2018, pp. 31–33; Schneider & Ruprecht, 2017).

When players enter capoeira’s “aural-kinesthetics”—simultaneously listening, moving, sounding, calling, and responding “within the all-encompassing aurality” of the *roda* (Johnson, 2012)—I argue that we also enter into ethical relations with one another. In the moments of play, this means assuming responsibilities to answer when called, to respond with energy, to do one’s part to ensure that the questions and responses continue. Yet, this is only the start. As I will show, a player assumes broader responsibilities upon entering the universe of Capoeira Angola. These may not be immediately apparent to students in their first months or even years of training, but as they become more involved in capoeira practice and its community, they learn that they have taken on ongoing obligations. Mestre Cláudio often refers to these commitments as *compromisso*. Capoeira’s calls thus transcend the *roda*’s space-time, summoning capoeira group members to assume responsibilities within the group and beyond in their lives. By anchoring a discussion of ethics to the embodied context of the *roda*, I seek to ground the often abstract nature of ethical thought in concrete lived, moved, and sounded experience. As the song lyric goes, “*Capoeira de Angola se joga no chão*,” meaning that the Angola style—in contrast to more widespread, acrobatic styles—privileges playing low and close to the ground. Thus, I consider what the ground of the *roda* can offer, both metaphorically and literally.

Below, after briefly positioning myself within ethnography’s perennial problems and introducing the Angoleiros do Sertão, I explore the multifaceted meanings of *compromisso* and how it calls to members of the group. This establishes the ground for considering how my involvement with the Angoleiros do Sertão, as both researcher and student, has also called on me to assume a *compromisso* with capoeira and the group, though determining what this entails is anything but straightforward. Indeed, thinking seriously about *compromisso* opens up a seemingly limitless realm of recurring responsibilities—

obligations without end, and existential problems without solutions—which I allow to carry me away in the section that follows. This finally brings me back to considering how *compromisso's* ongoing nature offers an alternative posture, a different way of being, with which to approach ethical relations and responsibilities, one that grounds me in the unfolding processes of call and response.

Rethinking Ethnography Again (and Again)

Anthropology has been grappling with the field's coloniality, imperialism, and politics for at least four decades, since anthropologists turned their gaze self-wards, leaving structuralism behind and embracing critical theory (Conquergood, [1991] 2006).⁵ Indeed, both the most pointed critiques and promising alternatives have emerged from critical ethnographers and anthropologists. While some non-ethnographic scholars still take issue with anthropology—and by extension ethnography—as a field/method aimed at “knowing strangers” (producing knowledge *about* others) (Ahmed, 2000, pp. 55–74), many others continue to recognize ethnography's potential as a site for bodily “co-performance” that entails “being and doing *with*” other people “in a more intersubjective and interpersonal engagement” (Madison, 2006, p. 349). Critical ethnography offers tools for undoing some of anthropology's most harmful ways of othering—but there are still limits and risks.

As a white North American scholar writing about an Afro-Brazilian music-movement form and its community of Black, white, and multiracial practitioners in Brazil, I embody the trope of white westerner traveling far abroad to study racialized others. As a first-year graduate student, new to academia and unfamiliar with these critiques, I naively imagined my good intentions would shield me from doing harm. But I eventually realized that I could not escape reproducing colonialist modes of extraction. There is no way around inhabiting relations of power; there

5. For several of the seminal critiques of anthropology from within the field see (Fabian, [1983] 2014; Clifford and Marcus, [1986] 2023; Harrison, 1991).

is only living in them, thinking and moving through them. One way ethnography can aid in these processes is by providing “a technique of attending to life as it is in this moment, one that has the potential to attune us to world-making everywhere that it is happening” (Shange, 2022, p. 188). I take this to include analyzing how my interlocutors and I are implicated variously in the same oppressive systems.

To give an example, while conducting fieldwork I sought out interlocutors who were outspoken on capoeira’s racial politics, even if they did not actively practice capoeira. *laiá* is a prominent Black movement militant (*militante do movimento negro*) in Feira de Santana, Bahia, who generously shared her thinking with me and eventually became a dear friend. On numerous occasions, *laiá* confronted me about my position as white foreign ethnographer, who was always arriving in Bahia and “sucking” in (*sugando*) everything I could get of their cultural practices and traditional knowledges, solely for the benefit of my own career. What, she asked, did I intend to give them in return? As I address further below, my wrestling with this fundamental problem has leveraged little in the way of concrete solutions. Instead, I came to think of this as the work: staying committed to grappling with the questions. Ultimately, my conversations with *laiá* and other activists empowered me to center racial politics and critiques of whiteness in my book. Rather than seeking to escape, avoid, or excuse my position, I have sought to leverage it to understand diverse group members’ lived experiences, complicity with, and situated critiques of white supremacist coloniality.

Still, I realize that claiming there is no way to fix ethnography’s coloniality is at best unsatisfactory; at worst, it may seem as if I am abdicating my responsibilities. This is where I have found the concept of *compromisso* helpful. Contemplating how *compromisso* serves as a guiding principle for group members, I have wondered what *compromisso* means—and ought to mean—for me, as a guest, part-time student, and researcher of the group. When I enter “the field,” as when I enter the *roda*, what kinds of commitments and obligations do I assume, even unknowingly (at first), simply by virtue of entering? What is the nature of these commitments and for how long am I bound by them?

Here I seek to share some of what I am continuously learning, always in process, from my involvement with Capoeira Angola. What kinds of ethics does Capoeira Angola teach, suggest, imply, produce, or theorize? I am not providing a model of what to do or how to do it, but rather considering how the concept of *compromisso* offers a way to think and move through seemingly intractable problems. In the spirit of a beautiful game—*um jogo bonito*—I offer more questions than answers, with the hope that other researchers will feel called to continue the conversation.

Training with the Angoleiros do Sertão in Backland Bahia

The Angoleiros do Sertão are a group founded and run by master teacher Mestre Cláudio Costa, based in Feira de Santana, Bahia, with satellite groups throughout Brazil, Europe, and now one in the US. As in many Capoeira Angola groups, Mestre Cláudio and his students understand Capoeira Angola as an antiracist, anticolonial practice that valorizes Black lives and centers Black Brazilian ways of knowing. Yet, in contrast to other activist contexts, such as Brazil's Black movement, the group de-emphasizes discourse and privileges the sounded, embodied *doing* of capoeira as their greatest form of activism. They consider their capoeira *roda*, followed by samba, held every Saturday morning in the bustling downtown, to be their most significant contribution to Feira's Black community.

I have been visiting Mestre Cláudio in Feira de Santana since 2013, conducting the bulk of my research in 2015–2017, on trips ranging from two to four months. I have always come and gone, never living in Brazil permanently.⁶ Yet, rather than claiming *bona fides* based on time spent in Brazil, I offer the perspective of a researcher/capoeira student

6. I have spent a total of just over 11 months conducting fieldwork in Brazil, several intensive months of online ethnography over Zoom during the pandemic, and have spent time with Mestre Cláudio while he was in the US. I have conducted over 40 one-on-one interviews with group members (two with Mestre Cláudio), most of which lasted one to two hours. I began training capoeira in 2006, and prior to beginning my graduate studies in 2012, I had spent a total of seven months in Brazil. I am conversationally fluent in Portuguese.

who arrives, leaves, and returns; who has built ties with group members over time but also lives a life far from the group. My experience is similar, in some ways, to members who live abroad, though I do not run a satellite school, as many of them do. When I am in Brazil, I participate fully in the group's activities, training Capoeira Angola, playing in *rodas*, and attending events in Feira and throughout Brazil.

The Call to *Compromisso*

Compromisso is one of a cluster of related terms I have heard group members use to discuss their senses of commitment, responsibility (*responsabilidade*), and dedication (*dedicação*) to Capoeira Angola.⁷ In an interview, Rita, Mestre Cláudio's wife and a longtime practitioner, compared group members' "*comprometimento*" with capoeira to that of Candomblé adepts with their *terreiro*, the house of Candomblé worship. *Compromisso* and *comprometimento* are both related to the verb *comprometer-se*, which has a range of meanings, including to oblige through commitment (*compromisso*); to make responsible; and to commit (oneself) or promise (*Dicionário Priberam*, n.d.). *Compromisso* and *comprometimento* are thus related to *obrigação* (obligation), another term from Candomblé, which refers both to performed religious rituals and, more broadly, to a specific "way of constructing and caring for ties [*vínculos*] over time" (Rabelo, 2020, p. 1)—with ties referring to connections or bonds among community members and divine entities (*orixás*). The concept of *compromisso* similarly involves building relationships among capoeira community members and strengthening their commitments to capoeira. Significantly, *compromisso* is not a debt that can be paid off or canceled. Unlike quotidian commitments, it is not a task that can be checked off a list. A *compromisso* with capoeira, as with Candomblé, is meant to endure. Specific actions may be undertaken and completed,

7. My choice to discuss *compromisso* may be somewhat arbitrary given the wealth of similar terms, but I feel that it succinctly captures how group members conceive of their obligations.

but the *compromisso* remains. It refers more to a way of being, or an ethical practice, than to any singular act.

Compromisso and *comprometer* also mean compromise and to compromise oneself: “expose to danger or harm” or risk your reputation (*comprometer-se* in *Dicionário Priberam*, n.d.). This sense of risk is also present in Candomblé’s *obrigação*, for a failure to fulfill one’s obligations may have negative consequences for a Candomblé initiate. In Capoeira Angola, a sense of this kind of risk may be less acute, and I believe that Mestre Cláudio usually means to invoke the meaning of commitment more than that of compromise, but the concept clearly includes a sense of putting skin in the game and “bodies on the line,” as when conducting ethnography as co-performative witnessing (Madison, 2007, p. 827). To commit to something (a community, a practice, an ethnographic project) means assuming both responsibility and risk.

Determining what comprises a student’s *compromisso* to capoeira is not a simple task. Mestre Cláudio regularly speaks about *compromisso* to his students. Yet, even though he demands that they, for instance, show up on time to *rodas*, help maintain the instruments, and save up money to attend events, *compromisso* always seems to imply more. Mestre Cláudio often insists that a student’s obligation is to Capoeira Angola, not to him or even the group, though clearly those categories overlap. As he puts it, “*Ela dá, mas ela cobra.*” Capoeira gives, but it demands payment (*cobrar*). Mestre Cláudio models his own profound *compromisso* with Capoeira Angola with his life story and trajectory. I have heard him describe how he taught himself to train alone when he had no one to train with. Rita told me that in every place Mestre Cláudio has lived he has cleared a space to train, whether this meant pushing aside furniture or tamping down the earth to create a smooth surface on the ground. He has described how he used to wake up in the middle of the night and, unable to sleep, he would train capoeira. Yet, this still raises the questions of what students owe in return for gaining capoeira knowledge, experiencing the *axé* of the *roda*, and what may be risked when we commit to capoeira and its communities of practice. How should students determine what they owe to Capoeira

Angola? And, what does capoeira demand of me? What and how can I pay back all I have received?

Clearly, part of *compromisso* is the physical dedication to training and incorporating capoeira movements. In Feira de Santana, Mestre Cláudio teaches classes three nights a week in addition to holding the weekly public *roda* on Saturday mornings. Students are expected to attend all three classes and the *roda* every week. Some members, when unable to rearrange their schedules, regularly duck out of work on Saturdays so as not to miss the *roda*. In that case, they are risking their jobs and very livelihoods for capoeira. Others who don't live in Feira travel hours by bus or car every Saturday to attend the *roda*. If Mestre Cláudio is traveling, as he often is, his more advanced students assume the responsibility of running the *roda*. Mestre Cláudio's *compromisso* with the street *roda* has ensured its weekly continuation, rain or shine, for over twenty years—a responsibility that he took over from previous generations of *mestres* in Feira (Ferreira & Tambascia, 2021).

Yet *compromisso* still encompasses more than training and participation in *rodas*, and necessarily, it means different things for different people. While many students emulate Mestre Cláudio's single-minded prioritization of capoeira in his life, this is not possible for everyone, yet they still have obligations to capoeira. A fundamental part of a group member's responsibility, therefore, is to figure out what *compromisso* entails for them. As I have gleaned over the years, this means taking responsibility for my own learning, which in turn includes assuming a particular posture or attitude toward acquiring knowledge—again, one much like that required of ethnography. Rather than expect answers to be pre-chewed and fed to me (Mestre Cláudio compared this to a mother bird masticating the food for her young), I keep my mouth closed and ears open while spending time with knowledge bearers. Community members in both capoeira and Candomblé often refer to this posture as (*con*)*vivência*, living and experiencing (with).⁸

8. See also Katya Wesolowski's (2023) ethnographic memoir on capoeira, throughout which she elaborates the concept of *convivência* as capoeira's special form of sociality.

Anthropologist Aimée Cox also recognized how ethical ethnographic postures seem to echo what she had already learned from Black women activist elders: “You entered spaces with humility and grace. You observed and listened before assessing and acting” (Cox, 2020, p. 119). This is *convivência*, too, knowing how to “enter communities with intentional care” and listen deeply to establish solidarity (119). One *contramestre* similarly urged a group of *angoleiros* to learn more about Candomblé, so that we could defend it against increasing attacks from evangelicals: “Go there [to the *terreiro*], sit down, listen, and observe what the person is saying. Go *vivenciar* [experience, live it] . . . Being and living with the people will bring you consciousness. . . . There’s no instruction manual. The manual is *vivência*.”

Assuming a posture of *convivência*, I have squatted low at the feet of Mestre Cláudio and Black women activists of Feira de Santana and listened to their stories, which are grounded in their lived experience, and their critiques of my subject position and all it represents.

An Ethnographer’s *Compromisso*

As I continue to ponder the nature of my *compromisso* to Capoeira Angola, a unique set of challenges and complications arises, especially due to my position as researcher. As outlined above, I have seen how Mestre Cláudio’s students organize their lives around capoeira and the group, and when I am in Feira de Santana I do the same. However, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and now that my book is nearing completion, I have rarely been there. (I returned most recently for three weeks in January 2023 to attend the annual event.) When I have spent more extended periods of time, some group members have generously called me an honorary group member. One kind member commented, after I played in a *roda* held by another group, that he recognized the characteristic movement style of the *Angoleiros do Sertão* in my playing. But the truth is that I am not officially a member

I use the term more narrowly, to signal a specific mode of knowledge transmission in Afro-Brazilian cultural contexts.

of the group, and even if I were, my distance from any of the Angoleiros do Sertão's satellite schools (the closest one is now in Los Angeles, and I live in St. Louis, MO) would make it difficult for me to participate regularly. My geographical location means that my *compromisso* to the group differs from that of other students.

Being a researcher also means that I gain in other ways from my participation. In addition to learning how to play Capoeira Angola, absorbing the group's euphoric *axé* (energy), and gleaning life lessons from my practice, among other benefits, I also draw on this experience and knowledge to produce publications that cumulatively will (I hope) raise my professional profile and secure my tenure. Even though my writings will not generate much if any revenue, as some community members imagine, a significant percentage of my salary could be seen as resulting from my research on Mestre Cláudio's group.⁹ Even though Mestre Cláudio often frames *compromisso* in terms of giving (back) to capoeira, he also speaks of great *mestres* of the past who have died in penury, implying that their students did not sufficiently fulfill their commitments to these *mestres* while they were alive.¹⁰ What, then, do I owe Mestre Cláudio and the Angoleiros do Sertão, financially and otherwise?

Like *laiá*, another community member asked me this question directly, during an online discussion held in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. I gave an informal presentation about my book project to the group members and then fielded their questions. One participant—an experienced player and friend of the group, but not a member—asked me pointedly if and how my research would benefit the community there. The way they phrased the question, I understood it to extend beyond the capoeira group to include the “periphery” (*periferia*, a term for marginalized Black communities in Brazil), where Mestre Cláudio lived. I answered truthfully that I didn't think my work would

9. My book, *A Beautiful Fight: The Racial Politics of Capoeira in Backland Bahia*, will be published Open Access, so I expect to earn even less in royalties than is usual for academic monographs.

10. Money and financial obligations are central to the concept of *compromisso*, and I devote a chapter to this subject in my forthcoming monograph.

benefit the people there very much, if at all. In my mind, I carried on a parallel conversation about the disconnect between contributing to academic discussions of racial politics and contributing to racial justice struggles on the ground in a specific community. Out loud, already knowing my answer fell short, I explained that I intended to deliver all photos and videos I had taken, suggesting that this might help build the group's archive. But peering at the questioner's grainy image on the computer screen, I could see they remained distinctly unimpressed. I knew that this community member and others had been exploited by previous visitors. Capoeira players from other parts of Brazil, and at least one European had arrived in the community before, taken videos and produced films, never to return. Mestre Cláudio told me bitterly about discovering one of the resulting DVDs only many years later, while he was traveling in Europe. At the very least, he said, the producer should have returned and given him copies of the DVD. Community members imagined these producers making money on the materials they had collected while in Bahia. In that case, they rightly reasoned, the filmmakers should have shared profits. It mattered little that my book would generate hardly any revenue, that I meant to bring them copies, and that I intended to give any royalties to Mestre Cláudio. In that moment, I had little to offer in return for all they had already given me.

From Reinventing Wheels to Controlling Cyclical Burns

As I mentioned above, anthropologists and ethnographers have been grappling with such issues of reciprocity, ethics, and anthropology's colonial legacy for decades. Yet, despite drafting ethics statements, proposing new interventions and "turns," and rewording critiques, anthropologists have collectively failed to "fix" the problems.¹¹ Despite all the brilliant thinking and writing on ethnographic ethics, why do I feel as if I'm still trying to reinvent the wheel? As Ryan Cecil Jobson

11. See the American Anthropological Association's ethics statements here: <https://americananthro.org/about/anthropological-ethics>.

suggests with his arguments against various “fixes” for anthropology’s “cyclical crises of legitimacy,” the issues cannot be resolved by “piecemeal revisions to a disciplinary canon or the diversification of the professoriate,” or other adjustments that leave liberal systems and ideologies intact (2020, p. 261). Indeed, Jobson’s argument for instead “letting anthropology burn” was essentially the same conclusion my undergraduate students reached after discussing ethnomusicology’s entanglements with coloniality: Rather than try to reform disciplines rooted in white supremacist (settler) coloniality, we had better start all over.¹² And it takes little imagination to extend these critiques to academia more generally.

Jobson and his interlocutors, in an interview about his article, acknowledge that what “letting burn” means or looks like is not obvious, nor does it mean the same thing as “burn it down” (Jobson & Clarke, 2020). Jobson drew the “let it burn” metaphor from an essay about California wildfires (Davis, 1999) in which the author also acknowledged that “cyclical wildfires . . . sustained local ecologies prior to European settlement” (Jobson, 2020, p. 261). In fact, the ecological necessity and benefits of (wild)fires are not only things of the precolonial past, but endure to this day, alongside the intensified threats of catastrophic weather events in the Anthropocene. Considering both these positive aspects of fires and their cyclical nature reveals other fruitful aspects to the metaphor. As in other parts of the United States, in the Midwest (which is starting to feel like my home), prairie restoration and management require controlled burns, mimicking the effects of wildfires and continuing or revitalizing “Indigenous cultural burning” (Adlam et al., 2022), to clear dried grasses, stems, and stalks of perennials and return nutrients to the soil. As the fire works above the ground’s surface, the soil shelters root systems, which ready themselves to plunge down toward aquifers when the earth warms and softens. The fire stratifies some seeds, preparing them to receive moisture, germinate, and sprout in the spring. At a recent prescribed

12. See also Danielle Brown’s call for ethnomusicology to be “dismantled or significantly restructured” (2020).

burn in my neighborhood, I spoke with the worker who was burning the prairie field, and he told me that burning is not necessary every year, but regular burning is ideal, at least once every few years, to maximize the prairie's health. My point is to propose thinking of burning not only as an anarchic "let it all burn," though there is power in this meaning, too, but also as a new practice. For even if we manage to let our "fields" burn now, they will still need burning again in the future. In this way, we can let go of trying to reinvent the wheel, and instead let it cyclically burn. As more radical critiques emerge, they render some of the ethical proposals of previous decades inadequate. Yet if these critiques can call forth controlled burns, these can also stratify seeds dropped by previous generations of radical thinkers and activists, enabling them to take root and grow.

Thus, a controlled burn is less about destroying everything and more about creating the conditions for sustaining life. This means that letting our disciplines burn would also include more actively nurturing the powerful interventions proposed by critical ethnographers and Black anthropologists over the years, creating methodologies and research practices such as activist, engaged, and collaborative anthropology and critical activist ethnomusicology, which center the needs of research participants and design projects collaboratively from the start. Activist research generally requires that researchers align their projects with activists on the ground (ideally those who are already seeking the involvement of academics) and then together establish the research aims and practices.¹³ These promising ethical interventions have existed for some time, and they have the potential to revolutionize entire fields. Indeed, Faye Harrison declared decades ago that it was the responsibility of anthropologists "to struggle not only for the enhancement of Third World intellectuals and the politicization of First World researchers but also for the empowerment of those most alienated from and dispossessed of their rights to democratized power and the

13. For examples, see the collaborative, engaged, and activist work of Araújo & Cambria (2013); Perry (2013); Williams (2013); Ndaliko (2014); Cox (2015); Smith (2016); McDonald (2021); Chatterjea et al. (2022); and Shao (2023).

material benefits of economic justice” (Harrison, 1991, p. 6). Yet activist approaches remain largely marginalized, “tolerated as appendages” receiving “tacit endorsement but [little] institutional support” (Jobson & Clarke, 2020).¹⁴ One result is that few graduate programs train PhD students in activist methods, thus reproducing their marginalization.¹⁵

In 2024, Harrison’s and other activist interventions unfortunately still resound as timely calls enumerating lofty goals that many academics of the Global North and South agree are worthy, but which still feel displaced to an ever-out-of-reach future. Global South (including South-in-the-North) scholars not only remain marginalized, but academics continue to write critically about politics and the political while our research output still feeds the professionalization of the university—perpetuating the same systems they/we critique. After all: “Does the critical academic not teach how to deny precisely what one produces with others . . . ?” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 39). By eloquently analyzing injustice and describing suffering (Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013, p. 13), progressive scholars continue to reinforce what Savannah Shange identifies as the “reconstructionist politic embedded within liberal logics—[which] aims to hold the state accountable to its promise of democracy and justice” (Shange, 2019, p. 4). To move beyond seeking such “fixes,” Shange argues for abolition.

Shange offers one definition of abolition by way of contrast: “[S]ocial justice’ means living happily ever after with the antiracist, distributive state. Abolition is a messy breakup with the state—rending, not reparation” (ibid.). In an essay conceptualizing five “interlocking ideology-praxes” of abolition as a set of gears that both complement and contradict one another, Shange quotes the “visionary movement worker and liberation theorist” Mariame Kaba: “For Kaba, abolition is ‘a long-term project and practice around creating the conditions that

14. Activist and collaborative approaches are established within the North American academy (Lassiter, 2005; Hale, 2008), but they remain far from the norm. In contrast, Latin American anthropology and ethnomusicology have shifted more broadly toward engaged and activist projects based locally rather than far across the globe (Perry & Rappaport, 2013; Lühning et al., 2016).

15. The Anthropology program at the University of Texas, Austin, is a notable exception.

would allow for the dismantling of prisons, policing and surveillance and the creation of new institutions that actually work to keep us safe and are not fundamentally oppressive' (2021, 72)" (Shange, 2022, p.190). In other words, "[a]bolition is not a metaphor" (p. 188), but it is "both a world-making and a world-destroying practice" (p. 190). Here I simply raise the question of how dance and music scholars can also undertake practices of abolition—and urge those who have not already done so to read Savannah Shange's essay. I also note that abolition's long term echoes the longevity of *compromisso*, and abolition's demands for radical imagination and nonmetaphorical destruction in service of creation resonate with the burn, which may also need to be long-smoldering.

At the very least, it is abundantly clear to me that if and when we let our disciplines burn, our responsibility must be to nurture the roots and seeds planted by Black feminist activists, anthropologists, and scholars. What might follow if a critical mass of scholars engaged broadly and deeply with Black women's thought (Smith et al., 2021)? What would our field(s), or even the humanities, look and feel like if the radical, liberationist, abolitionist thinking/doing of Black and critical ethnic studies formed the foundation, rather than remain options of "theory" that scholars can choose to engage with or not? How might such a shift lead to different ways of not just reading but also living in community, in *convivência*? What could the humanities be if more graduate students designed projects to shift the ground they shared with their communities? What if tenure committees valued public engagement or service to communities beyond the academy, not in addition to current requirements, but instead of them? Could these be moves toward a slow controlled burn?

Yes, this would mean abandoning certain ways of doing research and producing scholarship. It might render certain subjects less relevant, and some academics would feel that their academic freedom to study whatever they wanted and how they wanted to was being restricted. But to borrow from Kamari Clarke: "[I]f we are going to actually take solidarity seriously, one example of what that might involve . . . [would

be] to reconceive solidarity by interrogating what we're willing to give up in order for that solidarity to be real, to be transformative" (Jobson & Clarke, 2020). This question gestures toward the potential risk and sacrifice embedded in *compromisso's* meaning of "compromise." I am thinking specifically of well-meaning white Global North scholars who want to decolonize their fields and turn their institutions into antiracist spaces, but who not only retain our privileges and comfortable positions but also may even benefit from our diversity work. If we truly want to change our fields, what are we willing to compromise, to let go of, to burn?

Living Together in Compromisso

Ruminating on the ethics of ethnographic methods, I have leapt from dance and music studies to the racist-colonialist values still pervading academia and harming those who do not conform to its white patriarchal norms. From there it's only another jump to recall that these are systemic in our societies and threatening to destroy our world. (Indeed, destroying the world may require very little action on our parts beyond keeping on living as we are living now.) Like many of us, I feel overwhelmed by these existential threats, even as I know my body is likely among the least at risk. In face of the doom that keeps on impending, I long for methods to make my work more meaningful, to throw my body into the ring and put my mind-spirit muscles to better use.

As I warned, I have little in the way of answers, but I feel that the concepts of *compromisso* and *convivência* can help me keep my head in the game. Joining the Capoeira Angola *roda* means putting your body into an energy-field of *axé*. Whether or not a player has trained enough to know how to surrender to the pulling-pushing forces—to respond to the calls and to call in response—the sound-movement is already calling them. With time, players learn how to listen (with their bodies), to hear the calls and perform responses that become calls, thus perpetuating the exchange of energies and fostering the response-ability (the ability to respond) of others. Like the seeds

and soil of the prairie nurtured through fire and the new world made possible by the destruction of the old, each defensive response in capoeira ideally contains within it the potential for a new attack. Each answer ends in a new question.

Playing Capoeira Angola over the years has shifted how I see, think, and feel beyond the *roda*, as I know it has for many players. Perhaps it has heightened my sensitivity to these kinds of calling forces also outside of the capoeira context. This leads me to wonder how far the calls of *compromisso* can extend, across both space and time (Schneider, 2018). As promised, I offer some questions:

If the *compromisso* calls me to assume responsibilities in the capoeira community, can I extend this form of relation to other communities of which I am a part? How can an ethic of *compromisso* guide how I interact with other communities? In any space I enter, whether I belong, seek to belong, or not—whether as visitor, guest, member, or host—what are the forces at play and which responsibilities do I take on and to whom?

Assuming a posture of *convivência* means asking: Who am I in this space in relation to all with whom I share this space and breathe this air? What are my obligations, also, to people who are not here or who are no longer with us?

Another powerful aspect of *compromisso* and *convivência*, as I've emphasized here, is their ongoingness. *Compromisso* means committing oneself to lasting obligations while *convivência* acknowledges the unfinished nature of learning. Yet, rather than feel burdened by the never-ending story of "the cyclical crisis that erupts approximately every five years in the academy" (Cox, 2020, p. 119)—and the knowledge that I won't see the end of racial capitalism and white supremacist coloniality in my lifetime—I find hope in *compromisso*'s perpetual need for motion. Very much akin to the long-term commitments required to learn embodied practices, which change practitioners' body-spirit-minds, *compromisso* and *convivência* together shift the ground of knowledge

acquisition and production. Learning capoeira, like dancing and playing an instrument, can last a lifetime. As many say, it can be a way of living. And just as there is no end point to *compromisso*, *convivência* also values time. The mode of learning through *convivência*—in the living presence of tradition-bearers—eschews white settler valuation for definitive answers, mastery, the drive to grasp and know, and to establish and perform expertise. Rather, it means committing to listening over time, seeking “to care more than we can know” (Shange, 2019, p. 10). As I listen with my body and attend to the spaces I enter, I ask:

How might I intentionally shift my ways of being in the world?
 How can I allow what I learn to change how I continue to learn?
 From whom am I learning and what relations of *compromisso*
 does this establish? When shall I bow my head and listen, and
 when shall I speak? Who can benefit from the knowledge I am
 gaining? To whom do I hold the responsibility to teach what I
 am learning? Who needs to learn what I can teach?

Finally, *compromisso* involves thinking and acting at both an individual and community level. In this sense, it resonates with the South African concept of *Ubuntu*, which is often translated as, “I am because we are.” However, as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela explains, *Ubuntu* comes from a longer proverb that in isiXhosa says, “*Umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu*,” which she interprets to mean, “A person becomes a human being through the multiplicity of relationships with others” (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2016, p. 56). In other words, a person comes to exist as a human individual through their connections within their communities. In this way, *Ubuntu* can dissolve the distinction between selfishness and selflessness, preservation of self and other. In a community bound by *compromisso*, each member commits to contribute to sustaining the community for the benefit of all, including self. Yet, while this ethic may be easy to embrace, putting it into practice is anything but simple. For one, it is not always clear who or what “community” is, and communities can reinforce exclusions even while they symbolize belonging. This leads to several questions:

How broadly do I define (my) community/ies? Where does a given community begin and end? Does my community include everyone in my capoeira group, neighborhood, city, nation? With the evocation of the human embedded in *Ubuntu*, do my obligations to “community” extend to all humans or even beyond, to life on our planet? How do we each, individually but also collaboratively, determine the boundaries of our communities in nonviolent ways that heal rather than harm?

I live with these questions, and I invite you to modify and add to them as I continue to do. Regarding my commitments to the Angoleiros do Sertão and Mestre Cláudio, the most meaningful realization of *compromisso* I have found so far usually involves financial contributions. I strive to make myself available to respond when called. The long-term project of completing a monograph also means that group members are still waiting to see if I will return and show them the product of my years of research. Yet even if I continue to give money and one day bring the group copies of my book and have it translated into Portuguese, these are small, imperfect responses to more significant calls. None of these basic ethical practices can alter the ways in which our bodies (the bodies of research subjects and researchers) are subjected to vastly different degrees of risk.

This is why I am, perhaps paradoxically, heartened by the unendingness of *compromisso* and *convivência*. Both stretch on, whether time is conceived linearly, circularly, or otherwise. *Convivência* and *compromisso* both counter capitalist values, where time invested should produce quantifiable results, where projects have beginnings and ends, successes and failures. *Convivência* expresses the infinite curiosity of both scholar and *angoleiro* and the wisdom to know how little they know. Both *convivência* and *compromisso* require humility, patience, time. As calls reverberate across space and time, we are presented with opportunities to join battles already raging and add fuel to the fires. We are offered choices: How shall I respond to this call? How shall I ensure that I continue to respond and nurture the response-ability of others so that our responses become future calls?

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