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## Transatlantic Musical Flows in the Lusophone World



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# the world of music (new series)

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Congado performance group in the procession of the festival of Our Lady of Help, Socorro (Barão de Cocais, Minas Gerais, Brazil), 15 August 2010. (Photo: B. Alge)

**the world of music (new series)**

**vol. 2 (2013) 2**

**Transatlantic Musical Flows  
in the Lusophone World**

**Birgit Abels**  
Editor

**Barbara Alge**  
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## Transatlantic Musical Flows in the Lusophone World

### Articles

- |                                                    |                                                                                                     |     |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Barbara Alge                                       | Transatlantic Musical Flows in the Lusophone World: An Introduction . . . . .                       | 7   |
| Suzel Ana Reily                                    | Reconceptualizing “Musical <i>Mulatismo</i> ” in the Mining Regions of Portuguese America . . . . . | 25  |
| Martha Tupinambá de Ulhôa and Luiz Costa-Lima Neto | Memory, History and Cultural Encounters in the Atlantic: The case of <i>Lundu</i> . . . . .         | 47  |
| Christine Dettmann                                 | History in the Making: An Ethnography into the Roots of <i>Capoeira Angola</i> . . . . .            | 73  |
| Katherine Brucher                                  | Crossing the Longest Bridge: Portuguese Bands in the Diaspora . . . . .                             | 99  |
| Jorge de La Barre and Bart Vanspauwen              | A Musical <i>Lusofonia</i> ? Music Scenes and the Imagination of Lisbon . . . . .                   | 119 |

---

### Book Reviews (Dan Bendrups, ed.)

- |                  |                                                                                                                                                               |     |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Jonathan Glasser | Richard C. Jankowsky, Stambeli: <i>Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia</i> . . . . .                                                                       | 147 |
| Dale A. Olsen    | Matthias Stöckli and Arnd Adje Both (eds.), <i>Flower World: Music Archaeology of the Americas/Mundo Florido: Arqueomusicología de las Américas</i> . . . . . | 149 |

Kent Windress	<i>Bode Omojola, Yoruba Music in the Twentieth Century: Identity, agency and performance practice</i>	152
Chunghee Sarah Soh	<i>Joshua D. Pilzer, Hearts of Pine: Songs in the Lives of Three Korean Survivors of the Japanese "Comfort Women" . . . . .</i>	154
Dan Bendrups	<i>David Kaminsky, Swedish Folk Music in the Twenty-First Century: On the Nature of Tradition in a Folkless Nation . . . . .</i>	156

---

**Recording Reviews (Robert Fry, ed.)**

Elizabeth A. Clendinning	<i>From Kuno to Kebyar: Balinese Gamelan Angklung, produced by Ruby Ornstein . . . . .</i>	159
Ryan McCormack	<i>Seven Stamps, produced by Dimitar Bodurov . . . . .</i>	161
Shari Lindblom	<i>Cute Boy, Charming Girl: Children's Songs of the Modern Hebrew Nation (1882–1948), produced by Edwin Seroussi, the Jewish Music Research Centre, and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem . . . . .</i>	162
Plamena Kourtova	<i>Kelmti Horra (My Word is Free), produced by Emel Mathlouthi . . . . .</i>	164

---

**Website Reviews (Frances Wilkins, ed.)**

Hannah Marsden	<i>Folk Punjab . . . . .</i>	167
Keith Howard	<i>Tinotenda: Shona Mbira . . . . .</i>	168
Kristin Borgehed	<i>Ukrainian Folklore Audio Project . . . . .</i>	169
Kirk King	<i>Sant Sucha Singh Archives of Music . . . . .</i>	170
Máire Ni Bhaoill	<i>Inishowen Song Project . . . . .</i>	172
Noel Lobley	<i>The Official Woody Guthrie Website . . . . .</i>	173

Joseph Jordania      *Sounding the Depths* ..... 174

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**About the  
Contributors** ..... 177

*the world of music*  
*(new series)* ..... 179

*This issue is dedicated  
to the ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Travassos Lins,  
who passed away in Rio de Janeiro on 28 October 2013.*



## **History in the Making: An Ethnography into the Roots of *Capoeira Angola***

**Christine Dettmann**

*Abstract*

*By focusing on the history-making of the Afro-Brazilian martial art capoeira, challenges for research into the African Diaspora become apparent. By outlining the research history to date of Capoeira Angola within the academic realm of African American Studies, the contentious territory between Afrocentric and creolizationist ideas comes to the fore. Here, the agents of capoeira history-making extend far across national borders and continents, stretching beyond the boundaries of the lusophone world. This is particularly noticeable when tracing the historic trail of the Angolan combat game engolo, rumoured to be an African ancestor of Capoeira Angola and as such, since the 1970s, a powerful signifier for capoeira practitioners. My concluding remarks allude to the increasing intersection between scholars and practitioners involved in this global history-making process. It is therefore necessary to develop an ethnography sensitized to the identity politics of history-making in order to better ground and position future transatlantic research in ethnomusicology.*

For the past three years, I have been part of an interdisciplinary project dedicated to exploring transatlantic links between the Afro-Brazilian martial art *capoeira*, more specifically *Capoeira Angola*, and particular Angolan traditions.<sup>1</sup> The historian Matthias Röhrig Assunção (University of Essex, UK) hired me as an ethnomusicologist because it has often been the case that scholars in the discipline of ethnomusicology have provided decisive pieces of the puzzle to corroborate presumed links between musical practices from the African continent and the New World. For instance, in terms of *capoeira*'s musical history, the transatlantic research by the Austrian ethnomusicologist Gerhard Kubik (1979) has become a central point of reference. However, ethnomusicology is not an auxiliary discipline; moreover, ethnomusicologists have positioned themselves in diverse ways within these African American studies (for an overview, see Butler 2010).

Research into *capoeira*'s history-making illuminates a need for caution when tracing a path back to its presumed origins. I will therefore excavate prominent dis-

courses and narratives from scholars and practitioners alike which have come to shape the current (hi-)stories of *capoeira*'s origin. I argue that the case of *capoeira* is but one example of how research into the African Diaspora has been imbued by legacies of political agendas and interpretative ideologies. To demonstrate the efficacy of this highly contentious research field, I set the stage with a scene from our fieldwork in Southwestern Africa, the location of which, although it may be considered a more conventional academic environment (the National Archive of Namibia), nonetheless exemplifies the degree of emotional investment involved in the research with regards to the African Diaspora.

### Setting the stage

For several hours, we have been in the National Archive of Namibia in Windhoek where the friendly director had earlier instructed us how to access archival material and bibliographical references. We have just returned from a four-week fieldtrip in Southwestern Angola, visiting new places as well as some locales known to us from the previous year. The team is headed by the historian Matthias Röhrig Assunção and the renowned teacher of *capoeira*, Mestre Cobra Mansa (Cinezio Feliciano Pecanha). They originally visited Angola in 2006, searching for evidence of the Angolan combat game *engolo*. Since the 1960s, *engolo* has been rumored to constitute an ancestral root of the popular Afro-Brazilian combat game *capoeira*. For a long time, it remained unclear whether *engolo* still existed, and if so, precisely how it was executed. Would it involve similar kicks and sweeping leg movements to those used in *capoeira*? Would music be played by spectators while two opponents engaged in this graceful form of combat? Was it taught using a similar method that bestowed on true masters of this art the title of “mestre”?

The decisive clue for *engolo* had come from the Portuguese ethnographer and painter Albano Neves e Sousa who, following his travels in Angola in the 1950s, was struck by the similarity between the *engolo* he witnessed in Angola and the *capoeira* style *Capoeira Angola* in Salvador, Brazil (Neves e Sousa 1972, and Cascudo 1967:180–8, see also Assunção 2005:47–8). Almost four decades of colonial and civil war impeded attempts to conduct further in-depth research and fieldwork in Angola, and prevented Brazilian *capoeira* practitioners from making contact with Angolan *engolo* players. The lack of further evidence even contributed to a general disbelief in the existence of *engolo*, among both Brazilians and Angolans. However, Assunção and Cobra Mansa had succeeded in finding some senior *engolo* players in the Cunene region of Angola in 2006. Delighted by their findings, they decided to deliver the exciting news to the (*capoeira*) world in more substantial form. Through a UK-funded project, both myself, an ethnomusicologist, and the Namibian filmmaker Richard Pakleppa joined this team.<sup>2</sup> During the same year, 2011, we were also fortunate to be accompanied by an excellent interpreter.

Now, following our extensive travels, and having watched exciting performances and conducted in-depth interviews with fascinating people, we had a few days left before flying back to our various destinations. Our minds and cameras were filled with images of *engolo*, together with scenes of other powerful masculine combat games as well as nights of dancing and singing for the *mofiko*, the name given to a girl in her coming of age ceremony, the *efiko*. However, literature on these subjects is scarce. We were thus hoping to discover more hints or references in the Namibian archive.

Suddenly, the atmosphere in the archive changed almost imperceptibly. Another dedicated researcher had entered the reading room, recognizing Assunção and Mestre Cobra Mansa. My historian colleague explained to me that he was also conducting research into African combat games. I was now aware of a subliminal tension within the dialogue, springing from a reticence about revealing too much of where one had been and what had been seen. I had been instructed not to show film footage at public lectures or to disclose too many details of the places we had visited. This was a means of protecting the exclusivity of the film material until the official launch of the documentary. Undoubtedly, our film material traverses significant frontiers, yet to witness its wider social impact, evident in such moments, was still surprising to me.

To examine the causality of the feeling illustrated here it will be helpful to bring the dynamic research history of *capoeira* into sharper relief. I believe that an awareness of these history-making processes is not only important for positioning my own ethnomusicological research but also illustrates the contested nature of transatlantic histories up to the present day. Here I follow Philip V. Bohlman's conviction that "ethnomusicology cannot distance itself from the politics of history" (2008:96). By focusing on prominent authors and stakeholders, I wish to draw attention to the extent that politics have come to shape these processes and thus cannot be ignored in the interdisciplinary research of ethnomusicology.

The agents of *capoeira* history-telling are not confined to the lusophone world. They cross various frontiers, both virtual and actual, whether that be in the realm of imagination, in their written correspondence or by physically exploring other countries. I am therefore confronted with the task of representing complex threads of encounters and discourses. For the sake of clarity, I start with the arguments of academic scholarship, such as those represented by the historian Assunção. I then examine the Angolan combat game *engolo* and its meaning for *capoeira* in Brazil, which leads me to the other team member present in the archive, the Afro-Brazilian Mestre Cobra Mansa.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, dividing the topic in this way is artificial because one of the prevalent characteristics of *capoeira*'s history-making is the intersection between scholarly discourse and the practitioners' world. My concluding remarks will therefore highlight the challenges faced by future ethnomusicological research and ethnographic writing on the African Diaspora.

### Debate on the Angolan roots of *capoeira*

The academic debate on the history writing of *capoeira*'s origin is currently dominated by two opposing arguments. In short, one group advocates an Afrocentrist view while another supports the creolization model. I will briefly outline the two strands of argument advanced by the most prominent representatives of each tradition, and then proceed to work my way backwards in history through these contested rationales.

One of the most influential works on African martial arts and their history was published by the African-American M. Thomas J. Desch Obi (2008). In unraveling the transatlantic history of *capoeira*, he relies on the concept of a central core that would have allowed African traditions to thrive and endure in the Americas as a "living tradition" (Desch Obi 2008:205–6). As he outlined elsewhere, this central core is detectable in bodily expressions, which are ultimately markers of so-called "Central African religious practices" (Desch Obi 2002:354). In the context of this spiritual cosmology, Desch Obi traces Brazilian *capoeira* back to a single African fighting system, which he declares to be the Angolan combat game *engolo* (*ngolo*):

The martial art *capoeiragem* (or *capoeira Angola* as it was called in Bahia) was essentially the same combat form as the *ngolo*, using headbutts and footstrikes from an inverted position while defending with acrobatic evasions. (Desch Obi 2002:361)

In his 2008 monograph, Desch Obi distances himself slightly from such a homogeneous claim. He clarifies his notion of tradition by explaining that, while it can adapt to new circumstances, it will nonetheless remain in harmony with the "fundamental principles" (Desch Obi 2008:204). The Southwestern Angolan martial art of *engolo* thus "crystallized" in Brazil into the game of *capoeira* (*ibid.*:209). Although he acknowledges an influence on the art form from the new continent, Desch Obi forcefully resists other interpretations in which these changes represent a central focus. For instance, in a recent article, Desch Obi not only resumes the celebration of a particular cultural African legacy, but also openly criticizes those who define *capoeira* as a creole martial art, accusing them of complicity in recreating racial power dynamics (2012:212). I will return to these accusations later.

One of these "creole" representatives, and frequently quoted by Desch Obi, is the historian Matthias Röhrig Assunção. His book *Capoeira: The History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art* (2005) has become a key reading for *capoeira* history. Although Assunção does not neglect the influence of African martial arts (2005:56), he avers a countervailing view encapsulated in the following statement:

[...] in the case of *capoeira*, creolization did not mean a loss of "African-ness." On the contrary, it provided enslaved Africans with a practice that was no longer restricted to any specific ethnic group, but open to all of them, and allowed them to incorporate some of their own specific traditions into a Neo-African form. (Assunção 2010:186)

Assunção's notion of creolization does not rigorously preclude research on the African continent but he is wary of tracing an art form back to one specific African source (see also Assunção 2005:27). Assunção's work on *capoeira* is rooted in a

very factual tradition in which new data will always help to refine existing theoretical models. For him, this is in contrast to the assertions of Afrocentric theorists who interpret data according to their presumed claims on African continuities in the New World. He has thus been highly critical of Desch Obi's work, challenging the way in which the American author weaves historical data into the narrative (*ibid.*:50–3). However, Desch Obi's work is also grounded in the fieldwork he undertook in Angola in the 1990s. This seems to have consolidated his belief in the notion that *engolo* stems from an “ancient Bantu cosmological system” (Desch Obi 2008:40). The inability to impugn this ethnographic data has undoubtedly underpinned Assunção's motivation for pursuing the work in Angola with his friend Mestre Cobra Mansa further.

I will return to these *capoeira* scholars after briefly outlining the cause of academic contention within African American Studies. From the debates it becomes clear that the keenness of contrast has always been underscored by the greater political intentions of the authors.

### **Backstage: African American Studies**

The antagonistic discussion between Desch Obi and Assunção on the history of *capoeira* reflects an ongoing debate, one might say schism, in the field of African American Studies, presided over by anthropologists, linguists, historians and other scholars during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will therefore briefly highlight the main arguments that have come to shape the present controversy in US-American scholarship but also hint at the political coloring of scholarly work.

During the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the abolition of slavery, intellectuals grappled with the so-called “Negro Question.” On the basis of racial prejudice, arguments ensued as to what extent Africans and African Americans could become fully recognized members of American society. This question was increasingly fuelled by the deteriorating situation of African-Americans in urban settings by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the early social scientists, the African-American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), provided an extensive survey on this matter in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899/1967). The analysis of the current situation was also in need of a historical perspective. In this regard, Du Bois presents a distinctive rationale, which is why I consider him an important starting point for examining the debate between the respective key figures of anthropology and social science, Melville J. Herskovits (1895–1963) and E. Franklin Frazier (1894–1962). In Du Bois' study of African American families, the possibility of African survival in America was not totally precluded but it was observed that, due to the dearth of material, more thorough research would be required (1908:9–10). Yet, he was also convinced that slavery had been very effective in almost completely “crushing [out of] the African clan and life” (*ibid.*:21, also quoted in Frazier 2001 [1939]:12).

In his opulent work *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), Frazier echoed Du Bois by focusing exclusively on the life of Africans and their descendants in the New World. By viewing the arrivals as coming from a “relatively simple preliterate culture,” Frazier praised their social “development,” i. e. their ability to assimilate into the supposedly more sophisticated culture of white Americans, often the culture of the masters in the context of the plantation (2001:3–22, 81 and 479). By assuming an evolutionary approach to racial progress, Frazier took pains to portray a people who, during the course of their forced settlement and consequent adaptation, had become equal members of American society, and deserved to be treated as such. According to this widespread “uplift ideology” (Gaines 1996:20), a so-called racial progress of African-Americans had only started from the point at which their ancestors arrived in the New World.

For Herskovits, Frazier’s stance, which implied the inferiority of African people, was unacceptable (Herskovits 1967 [1941]:1–4). Influenced by his visionary teacher Franz Boas (see also Yelvington 2006b:41–3), Herskovits comprehensively outlines his idea of the “survival of African culture” in the Americas in his seminal work *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941; Herskovits 1967 [1941]:185). For him, the resulting “Africanisms” on the new continent varied in their intensity, according to the circumstances of the different locales (*ibid.*:17). Nevertheless, Herskovits was convinced that “African culture, instead of being weak under contact, is strong but resilient, with a resilience that itself has sanction in aboriginal tradition” (*ibid.*:18–9).

As suggested above, Herskovits did not deny syncretism as the result of cultural contact (*ibid.*:16–7). However, his emphasis on the survival of African traits represented a strong response to the racial prejudices of the time that were prevalent in the United States, as he had established good contacts with Harlem’s Black community. His Jewish background might also have contributed to his awareness of diasporic issues, even more so in view of the increasing anti-Semitism of his time (see also Yelvington 2006b:43). Herskovits was determined to “lessen[ing of] interracial tensions” through his work (1967 [1941]:32) and sought to establish an image of African-Americans who had descended from people with an equally valuable history. He thereby distanced himself from the notion of an a-historic, primitive people as presented in the uplift ideology of Frazier and Du Bois, among others (for Du Bois see Du Bois 1898/1980:78, 81 and 111; see also Gaines 1996:152–78). Instead, Herskovits proclaimed: “To give the Negro an appreciation of his past is to endow him with the confidence in his own position in this country and in the world” (1967 [1941]:32).

Clearly, Frazier and Herskovits emphasized different aspects in their models of the history of African-American people, but each regarded their study as making an active contribution to changes in the political world. In a sense, this applied approach unites their work. Thus, it may not seem surprising that African-American studies have remained embedded in pressing political concerns, although there have been changes in their theoretical emphasis. Here, I limit myself only to milestones

that helped to shape the North American side of opposing positions in the *capoeira* debate.<sup>4</sup>

In their 1976 publication, *An anthropological approach to the Afro-American past*, the anthropologists Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price do not deny Herskovits' claims of African survival (1992:55). However, they suggest that these social and cultural forms of survival had to accommodate the forging of enslavement by a process of "creating" and "remodeling" (*ibid.*:82–3). Within the Anthropology of the African Diaspora, Mintz and Price became referential figures for a dynamic creolization model, which foregrounded these creative processes in the New World (Yelvington 2006a:14). Their perspective was erroneously assumed to be similar to Frazier's and consequently it has also come under severe attack. Some scholars criticized the fact that both anthropologists had overlooked certain continuities between the African continent and the New World, continuities which undoubtedly survived the hardships of enslavement (Thornton 1998 [1992]:152–3 and 206–34).

The Africanist scholar John K. Thornton thus proposes a spectrum ranging from relatively stable to very changeable elements, whereby the "principles of underlying ideologies" would undergo the least change (*ibid.*:207). Whether or not his subsequent examples of handcrafted artifacts and music are convincingly argued, shall not be the focus of my attention. Rather, it is noteworthy that his work has been marked by Afrocentric ideas, as instanced most notably by the charismatic art historian Robert Farris Thompson (*ibid.*:221). In his influential book *The Flash of the Spirit* (1983), Thompson wedded African and African-American examples of visual art with greater cultural and religious concepts from ancient African civilizations that he refers to as "Yoruba," "Kongo" and "Mande," etc. (Thompson 1984 [1983]). Echoing Pan-Africanist ideas, his account is intriguing in the way that it weaves the cultural heritage of both continents together. Yet, it is the paucity of reliable and confidential primary sources on these ancient symbol and belief systems that places his claims beyond close scrutiny (critique of his Yoruba discourse in Taiwo 1995:41–2; Matory 2006:171–83). The American anthropologist Sally Price further criticizes Thompson's work by characterizing many of his assertions as "silent misrepresentations" of sources which, because they have gone undetected, have made his work a major reference of incontestable truth (2006b:95–100). Incidentally, his claims also underpin the research of ethnomusicologists working on transatlantic tie-ins (for Brazil and *capoeira* see Kubik 1991; Fryer 1996:158).

In the following decade, Thompson's own reading of *capoeira* sources brought him even further into the realm of the studies in question (1987 and 1992). Thus, it may not be surprising to find the *capoeira* scholars I introduced earlier engaging with his work and ideas, albeit in very different ways. By following their engagement with Thompson's ideas, I intend to highlight the different approaches to data and history-making in order to develop my own position in this debate. Concomitantly, I seize upon a suggestion raised by Richard Price. In his much acclaimed article "The Miracle of Creolization" the anthropologist laments the rivalry between different strands of scholarship in these transatlantic studies (2006a:124). Rather

than taking the proposed frameworks too literally, he advocates that these debates should move beyond their ideological battlegrounds (*ibid.*:132–3). Given that the past events in question, such as the emergence of *capoeira* in Brazil in this case, might elude direct observation, Price suggests that the competing narratives should be confronted and weighed against each other in order to “develop reasons for giving greater credibility to one or the other” (*ibid.*:141).

### **The credibility of approaches**

During the 1970s and 1980s, the encounter with Robert Farris Thompson’s work excited many contemporary scholars. As a white intellectual, he mirrored ideas originally voiced by progressive black critics in the U. S., opposing Eurocentric biases in all disciplines (Hooks 1995:112). Thompson’s elaboration of ancient African belief systems has also influenced Desch Obi’s framework. For instance, Thompson refers to “kalunga,” the ancestral part of an alleged Kongo cosmogram (1984 [1983]:109). Accordingly, Desch Obi suggests that the Angolan combat game *engolo* derived from an ancient and all-encompassing cosmological understanding of this kind (Desch Obi 2008:37). By rigorously proceeding from this conceptual basis, no additional data will be deployed to challenge this assumption. Even ethnographic data taken from contemporary *engolo*, as observed in fieldwork, only serves as an illustrative but mostly redundant example. Admittedly, he thereby avoids mistaking contemporary rural fieldwork sites as accurate reflections of a “traditional” past (Vail 1989:4). Yet, by insisting on an ancient, and hence unverifiable *engolo* practice, Desch Obi equally refrains from critically challenging his hypotheses.

The authoritative character of Desch Obi’s presentation is further showcased by the way in which he disguises some of his sources. For instance, he cites ritual ceremonies as one way of gaining access to the history of *engolo*. He claims secretive knowledge, obtained by communicating with ancestors through an initiated medium (Desch Obi 2008:2–3). In Western scholarship, this represents an unusual method for gathering data. At the same time, bewilderingly, Desch Obi succeeded in introducing another frame of reference; one that may be alien to Eurocentric thinking. As one of the leading Afrocentric scholars purports, approaches to Afrocentric knowledge and knowing imply “more circular systems of thought” (Asante 1987:171).

Returning to the field of African-American studies, Assunção represents the creolizationist stance. He clearly expresses his indebtedness to Mintz and Price, while simultaneously not denying a “loss of African-ness” (Assunção 2010:184–5). He not only criticizes Desch Obi’s but also Thompson’s work on *capoeira*, particularly their treatment of sources (Assunção and Vieira 1999; Assunção 2005:24–7). Assunção’s scholarly affiliation stems from a generation of historians who were the first to reject and overturn the historical indoctrinations previously enforced by the military dictatorship (1964–1985) in Brazil (Assunção in conversation with Dettmann on 19 July 2012). This biographical note may further explain his deep suspicion of any form of



ideology or authoritative knowledge that he recognizes in other works, such as those by Desch Obi.

Although Assunção is interested in aspects of the African contribution to *capoeira*—as is evident in the aforementioned UK-based project—he is cautious of unquestioningly accepting the underlying principle of greater African cosmological systems in the way that Desch Obi suggests. In order to historically contextualize the chosen fieldwork sites, Assunção relies on another team member, the historian Mariana P. Candido. Her meticulous work focuses on the importance of the Angolan port city Benguela and its hinterland during the time of the transatlantic slave trade (Candido 2013).

A comparison of the approaches by Desch Obi and Assunção reveals the clash of Afrocentrist and African-Americanist ideas; apparent in their different ways of applying historical data to advance their theories. Desch Obi uses data to defend ambitiously the supposition that *capoeira* is rooted in *engolo*. In contrast, Assunção attempts to continuously refine theory according to the available data, ultimately aiming to enhance the representation of past events (Assunção in conversation with Dettmann on 20 February 2013; see also Price 2006a:135). In sum, the approaches of both scholars are embedded in fundamentally different ideas of knowledge and history-making. Any inquiry into the credibility of their approaches, as suggested by Price, would therefore be unlikely to lead to a counterbalanced view, but rather result in an either/or decision between them.

Due to my own continuing search for reliable and certifiable inquiry, I will show a proclivity toward an ideal of presumed objectivity as I see it in Assunção's approach. Yet, although I distance my position from essentialist claims, I also wonder how wise it is to settle instead on the creolizationist stance. In regard to the current history-making of *capoeira*, I understand creolization as a placeholder for "what is yet to be known," in that the search for more data and insight into transatlantic processes continuously contributes to refining models of the past and past events. Nonetheless, this distinctly methodological approach to "creolization" deflects from the variegated use of the term.

Starting from the linguistic study of creole languages in the Caribbean, the model of creolization has gained momentum in different disciplines since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the field of Cultural Studies, the Caribbean experience was even adopted as a "promising root metaphor" (Hannerz 1987:551), stressing empowerment, agency and forms of creativity in a dynamic and globalized world (see also Cohen and Toninato 2010). I share the disquiet of various authors that such a broad application hinders a beneficial use of the term on the grounds that it would not only mask increasing inequalities worldwide but also risks failing to acknowledge historical circumstances (Palmié 2007; Trouillot 1998).

Furthermore, the term "creole" is intimately connected to core experiences of colonization and cultural encounters between Europeans and Africans, for example in the Caribbean and Latin America (Palmié 2006:438–9; Dunn 2007:854; Cohen and Toninato 2010:3). Desch Obi is not alone in blaming advocates of creoliza-

tion for their part in keeping racial assumptions alive. As observed above, the same accusation has been leveled at the Mintz/Price-model. By confounding this model with earlier interpretations, such as that expressed by Frazier, it is seen to implicitly endorse racial ideologies. The historical weight the term creolization carries is thus another reason for misunderstandings and conflict between rationales, which in turn makes me question whether the use of the term creolization is sufficiently advantageous within the present discussion.

As the cultural anthropologist Aisha Khan asserts, the Caribbean should not be taken as an encapsulation of the world, at least not until this experience is more fully understood (2001:272). With this in mind, I would again like to call to account the “politics of history” (Bohlman 2008:96). In the Caribbean and Latin America, dominant interpretations of cultural contact, despite being imbued with racial ideologies, have been co-authored (Rodrigues 2003), reproduced but also challenged by different sectors of the population up to the present day. For instance, in the Brazilian context, Afrocentric ideas represented one of the main challenges to ideologies perpetuated by the state. Thus my argument-driven process of deciding between the two approaches toward *capoeira* history runs the risk of overlooking the explicitly political mission with which Afrocentric ideas have typically been entrusted (Early 1998:708; Austin 2006:137–8, 170; Adeleke 2009:138). I would therefore like to draw attention to the situation in Brazil and the relevance of *engolo* for the narration of *Capoeira Angola*’s history. The focus on the team member Mestre Cobra Mansa will thereby further illuminate the personal meaning of *engolo* for *capoeira* practitioners.

### **Naming *Capoeira Angola***

For someone unfamiliar with the *capoeira* style *Capoeira Angola*, its origin would appear to be obvious since the name itself points to a geographical area. However, the explanation is not that simple because the attribution “Angola” has not been clearly documented. Marginalized in Brazilian society, the voices of practitioners are omitted from early sources. Thus, knowledge about *Capoeira Angola*’s specific history relies on the accounts of Brazilian historians and folklorists who wrote in the vein of their own era. For instance, in 1915 the historian Braz do Amaral characterized Africans and their descendants in Brazil, remarking that the “Angolas” would also be known as “capoeiras” (1988 [1915]:55). Indeed, at the time of the slave trade, the connotation “Angola” was one of many ethnonyms in Brazil ascribed to people according to their ports of deportation (Karasch 1987:19). Yet, due to local politics on both continents, this type of designation was far from accurate. Not only was it prone to simplification by the ruling authorities but it could also be subject to the interchanging identities claimed by people in threatening circumstances (Candido 2011:45–6; Dias 2002). Therefore, the meaning of “Angola” needs to take these shifts in historical connotations into account.

Closer to contemporary notions of *Capoeira Angola* is the description of *Capoeira de Angola* as observed in Salvador by the Brazilian ethnographer Edison Carneiro in 1937 (Carneiro 1937). The account also provides an example of how the Brazilian intelligentsia increasingly came into direct contact with the artists and practitioners of their research (see also Segala 2012). Carneiro concedes that *Capoeira Angola* was the purest form, while simultaneously asserting its continuous decline (*ibid.*:149, 159–60). The latter observation can be interpreted as part of Carneiro’s enthusiastic attempts to actualize preservation strategies for Afro-Bahian folklore (Romo 2010:66–77). In addition, his writing also reiterates binary assumptions of strength and weaknesses assigned to cultural expressions from different parts of the African continent (Carneiro 1937:32–3). Brazilian scholarship has long privileged West African origins over Bantu traditions, by virtue of their alleged cultural value for the mixed-race culture in Brazil (see also Vilhena 1997). Only in the 1970s did a counter-discourse that highlighted the value of Bantu-heritage gain ground. In *Capoeira Angola*, the reference to a special locale in present-day Angola, namely the combat game *engolo*, played an important role for these claims.

Notwithstanding, since its rise to popularity in the 1980s, *Capoeira Angola* has stirred up a degree of controversy. Generally, it is perceived as the more traditional style, which was formally established by Mestre Pastinha (Vicente Ferreira Pastinha, 1889–1981) in the 1940s, and revived by Mestre Moraes (Pedro Moraes Trindade) and Mestre Cobra Mansa through their founding of the GCAP (Grupo de Capoeira Angola Pelourinho) in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador. Furthermore, it is argued that Mestre Pastinha played *capoeira* rather than *Capoeira (de) Angola* (Mestre Moraes in *The Angolan Roots*, n. d.). The adjunct “Angola” supposedly represented a strategic attempt to set it apart from the modern *Capoeira Regional* style, successfully established by Mestre Bimba in 1932. By introducing additional formal elements, this modernized version of *capoeira* appealed to a wider audience and received governmental approval. In order to differentiate the more traditional Bahian form, the name *Capoeira de Angola* seemed only to have come into use during the 1930s (see also Assunção 2005:151).

This glimpse into the discussion about the application of the term “Angola” to *Capoeira Angola* reveals the historical complexity, intertwined with the strategic politics of *capoeira* stakeholders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the following sections, I further trace the entry of references to *engolo* in both Brazil and *Capoeira Angola*, highlighting its special meaning for *capoeira* practitioners at a particular time in Brazil. These descriptions add another layer of “backstage” knowledge to the fieldwork scene in the Namibian archive described previously.

### References to *engolo* in Brazil

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the painter and ethnographer Albano Neves e Sousa had become one of the most influential figures contributing to the Angola-based

discussion on the origins of *capoeira* in Brazil. After one of his exhibitions in 1966, he published *Da minha Africa e do Brasil que eu vi* (1972), which showed substantial parts of his drawings. In additional explanations, translated into four languages, Neves e Sousa suggested various links between cultural expressions of Brazil and their possible regions of origin in Portuguese-ruled African countries, which were still Portuguese colonies at the time (see also Assunção 2005:22–3; 47–50; Assunção and Mansa 2008:20). Among the various chapters, Neves e Sousa included illustrations of the Angolan combat game *N'golo*.<sup>5</sup> The attached pencil drawings show men wearing loincloths around the waist adopting different physical stances, either by themselves or toward an opponent. A hint of landscape or a horizontal line for spatial orientation has been omitted. Somehow this concentration on the essential facilitates the comparison with similar drawings of *capoeira* players in the publication.

In the accompanying paragraph, Neves e Sousa clearly links *N'golo* to *Capoeira Angola*, the latter he had witnessed and documented during his visit to the Northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia, in 1965. Noteworthy are the references to the puberty rites and the zebra kicks of the Angolan combat game, because this contextual information was soon to become a central signifier for practitioners of *Capoeira Angola*:

*N'golo*, the Zebra Dance, is possibly the origin of the Capoeira, the fighting dance of Brazil. It is danced at the time of the “Mufiko”, a puberty rite for the girls of the Mucope and Mulondo regions. The object of the dance is to hit your opponent’s face with your foot. A rhythm for the dance is beaten by clapping hands, and anyone who attempts a [b]low [sic] while outside the marked arena is disqualified. The “Angolan Capoeira” in Brazil also has its special rhythm, which is one more reason to believe that it originates from the *N'golo*. *N'Golo* means “zebra”, and to a certain extent the dance originates from the leaps and battles of the zebras; the blow with the feet while the hands are touching the ground is certainly reminiscent of the zebra’s kick. (Neves e Sousa 1972, before plate 57)

Indeed, the drawings have been used to direct attention to the similarity between *capoeira* and *engolo* (for example as copied by Newton Navarro in Cascudo 1967:183; Desch Obi 2008:219–24; Assunção 2005:48–9). Since the players in the drawings are transfixed in a still, the beholder will always have to augment the missing dynamic of the movements represented by the figures. It is the knowledge of *capoeira* techniques that can bring some of these pictures to life in an amazing way and make them visually convincing.

Curiously, the impact of Neves e Sousa initially relied less on his drawings. In Brazil, he had been in contact with two public figures who subsequently became important messengers of the *engolo*-theory by delivering it to a wider audience, i. e. to scholarly circles but also to the community of *capoeiristas* (*capoeira* practitioners). One is the Brazilian folklorist Luís da Câmara Cascudo; the other is the founding father of *Capoeira Angola*, Mestre Pastinha. Before focusing on the practitioner’s side, I turn my attention to the folklorist in order to portray the dominant Brazilian discourses on nation and race.

On the question of *capoeira*’s origin, Cascudo made use of his correspondence with Neves e Sousa in order to highlight the likely connection to the Angolan

*N'golo* (1967:180–8). He emphatically remarked: “The N’golo is the capoeira ...” (*ibid.*:185, my translation). Cascudo’s note on the specific Angolan origin of *capoeira* was immediately impugned by his contemporaries. One telling example can be found in the seminal book on *Capoeira Angola* by Waldeloir Rego who accuses Cascudo of defending a rather “strange thesis” (*estranha tese*, Rego 1968:31). For Rego, it is much more plausible to see the case of *Capoeira Angola* as an “invention of Africans in Brazil, developed by their Afro-Brazilian descendants” (*ibid.*:31, my translation). Rego—*pace* Amaral (1988 [1915]:55–6)—makes use of the supposedly highly imaginative character of Angola(n)s in Brazil who would only have begun to invent *capoeira* when they arrived in the New World.

During his own time, Rego’s stance reflected a well-established nationalist discourse that helped to shape the positive self-identity of many Brazilians. According to the “myth of the three races” (*fábula das três raças*, Da Matta 2000 [1987]:58–85), people with different racial backgrounds formed the type known as a “cordial Brazilian” (*brasileiro cordial*, Holanda 1956 [1936]:209). Contrary to European predictions that Brazil’s population, because of racial mixture, would “degrade” over time (see also Butler 2001:136), this explanatory model not only helped to unify the population but also firmly entrench the belief in the absence of racism in the country until the present day (Twine 1998:65–86; Sansone 2003:2). To start the cultural timeline only in Brazil might be understandable in light of the nationalist project, which ambitiously sought to create a common identity for the vast population. Yet it also bore the legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century racial notions whereby an acknowledgeable culture could only have started within Brazil rather than representing the continued heritage of a people who were considered inferior in this racial hierarchy.

Hence, the celebration of “racial democracy” was by no means an encompassing humanist enterprise. Although Brazil did not introduce segregationist laws as did the United States, racism with an underpinning “whitening ideology” persisted in Brazilian society (Skidmore 1974:64–5). Voices that attempted to document racial discrimination were still suppressed during the era of the military dictatorship until 1985 (Nascimento 1995:107; Telles 2004:46). During the 1960s and 1970s, the prevailing discourse, not only disseminated by the government but also widely believed by Brazilians, was therefore in contrast to the direct experience of some sectors of the population. People of African descent continued to be subject to discrimination and found themselves in a situation of disempowerment and poverty, effectively stratifying Brazilian society along color lines, despite the claims of the governing discourse.

In the 1970s, the Brazilian Black Movement, entitled “Movimento Negro” would thus resume the historical question of Afro-Brazilians’ place in society. By stressing African identities, the movement testified against the general nationalist belief (Neves 2005:87). In the wake of a global rise in Black consciousness, various cultural metropolises, such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Salvador, became sites where Pan-Africanist ideas were seized upon and expressed in new emerging cultural communities (Hanchard 1994; Dunn 2001:83–4; Telles 2004:47–8). Whereas

previously, even Afro-Brazilian activists had only highlighted Brazil's more recent past (Sansone 2003:73), claims of authenticity were now corroborated by forging direct links to the African continent and/or ancient African cultures.

The Latin American scholar Michael G. Hanchard argued that these political developments, mostly expressed in the cultural arena, achieved only negligible political change (1994:100). His analysis points to a more variegated outlook on the construction of racial identities in Brazil. For instance, since the 1930s, Brazilian leaders had deployed the rising mass media to promote their particular notion of Brazilianness, supporting popular music with a special esteem lent to Afro-Brazilian culture (McCann 2004:42–3; Davis 2009:89). Next to negative images of blackness, romanticized markers of Afro-Brazilian culture have long served as an integrationist part of national folklore, thus hindering effective racial mobilization (Selka 2007:128–40). However, Hanchard's observation detracts from a closer reading in which created links to an African homeland have proved to be a virtually life-sustaining argument for individuals, and subsequently also essential for maintaining their expressive culture. By focusing on the other team member, namely the Afro-Brazilian Mestre Cobra Mansa, the meaning of these links for both Afro-Brazilians' personal lives and *Capoeira Angola's* African identity, becomes salient.

### **The meaning of *engolo* for *Capoeira Angola***

Born in 1960, Mestre Cobra Mansa grew up in Rio de Janeiro, continuing his *capoeira* career in Salvador during the 1980s, which was by then a thriving centre of Afro-Brazilian movements. His teacher Mestre Moraes introduced him and other students to the theory that the Angolan combat game *engolo* was the definitive African origin of *Capoeira Angola*. Despite the absence of written documentation, there is evidence that the aforementioned ethnographer Neves e Sousa described *engolo* vividly when he visited Mestre Pastinha, who also taught Mestre Moraes, at his *capoeira* academy in Salvador. It is said that the old *capoeira* teacher will later tell his students about *engolo* (Mestre Moraes in *The Angolan Roots*, n. d.; see also Downey 1998:76).

In the following paragraph, Mestre Cobra Mansa reiterates the “*engolo*-myth,” as he sees it now. He thereby clarifies why this link to an Angolan “warrior-dance,” as it has been known in Brazil, had gained such a significant meaning for him when practicing *capoeira*:

I think when you are young, adolescent, these kinds of myths help you a lot, to build a certain image of you and what you can or could be. You even feel very proud to a certain point, because you are in a society where the black person is discriminated against, isn't worth anything, has no use. You go to school, [and] you learn that the black has only been a slave. So you also create an image for yourself that is very negative. But then, the *capoeira* mestre comes and tells you: no, because you are doing a dance of warriors where the guys competed, and that whoever wins would have the

right to choose the wife and so on. You know, that was just wonderful! I am the descendant of a warrior!<sup>6</sup> (Mestre Cobra Mansa on 11 March 2012, my translation)

In this statement, one can observe a similar thread to that found in Cascudo's account of the *engolo* theory (Cascudo 1967:180–8). Cascudo expanded the special link to the puberty rite in order to emphasize that on that occasion *N'golo* would serve as a competition for the young men. Apparently, the winner of these matches would have been rewarded with a free choice of the newly initiated girls, but without having to pay a customary dowry (*ibid.*:186). Curiously, Neves e Sousa's published entry was not very specific about this procedure (1972, before plate 57, see above). To substantiate their story, *capoeira* practitioners either drew from Cascudo's publication or they heard a version of it from Mestre Pastinha.

The exact pathways of transmission may remain subject to speculation, but it is the repercussions of the *engolo* explanation that are particularly remarkable. It not only helped to assert an African identity for *Capoeira Angola* but, as the statement above illustrates, it also became central to the creation of a positive self-image for adolescent Afro-Brazilians, struggling for both acknowledgement and actual survival. For instance, Mestre Cobra Mansa grew up in *Baixada Fluminense* of Rio de Janeiro, then a rough neighborhood. Here he also participated in the well-known *capoeira* encounter *Roda de Caxias*. In retrospect, he recounts that out of the young men he knew at that time, only those who dedicated themselves to *capoeira* had physically survived (Mestre Cobra Mansa in *O Jogo do Corpo*, 2013). In this view, *capoeira* practice is loaded with an existential meaning, which captures greater interest among its practitioners. Furthermore, the *engolo* narrative represents a story involving strong characters with which Mestre Cobra Mansa could personally identify (see also Fog *et al.* 2005:39). He replaced images of a-historical and geographically dislocated slaves with those of successful African warriors. His emphatic declamation of being descended from African warriors underscores how this personal connection must have served as an important incentive for his *capoeira* practice and subsequent career.

The story not only caught the imagination of Mestre Cobra Mansa. The *engolo*, also commonly translated as “The Dance of the Zebra,” has increasingly become the main founding myth for *Capoeira Angola* practitioners in Brazil and, due to the globalization of *capoeira*, to a far-reaching community across the globe. A perusal of various websites reveals it as being related in philosophical statements or visually represented in various *capoeira* emblems.<sup>7</sup> The anthropologist Greg Downey also recounts how *Capoeira Angola* mestres have increasingly emphasized an alleged African kinesthetic of *capoeira* movements in their teaching (1998:98, 207; and 2005:195–9).

Equally, music played an important role in the dissemination and credibility of the *engolo* story. For instance, the academy of Mestre Moraes created a solo-song (*ladainha*) for their children's program in which the *N'golo* would be referred to specifically (Downey 1998:77). Unaware of the creative process involved, I have met young *capoeira* practitioners in London who seized upon the song as proof of

a link to a more distant past, thus verifying *engolo* as the exclusive root of *capoeira* (conversation on 16 July 2010, London).

The appeal of the *engolo* theory beyond Brazil needs further explanation. I would therefore finally like to draw attention to the extent to which this process of Africanization was shaped by academic claims of Afrocentricity in the United States, which extended into the personal realm of key figures on the *Capoeira Angola* scene.

Committed to the dissemination and preservation of traditional world music, the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings released their first album of *Capoeira Angola* in 1996, featuring the most prominent international “Angoleiros,” i.e. masters of *Capoeira Angola* such as Mestre João Grande, Mestre Moraes and Mestre Cobra Mansa. At the very end, the sleeve notes contain a special paragraph on the *N’golo* that demonstrates how much further this story has been transformed. Accordingly, the “ancient practice” is now attributed to the African language Kikongo, translated into “force or power,” as well as being linked to an initiation rite of young men (Liner Notes 1996:37).

The continual enrichment of the story bears witness to Afrocentric scholars’ growing interest in martial art forms of the African diaspora, from the 1980s onward (e.g., Thompson 1987 and 1991; Dossar 1988; Dawson 1994). North-American scholars such as C. Daniel Dawson and Kenneth Dossar invited Mestre Moraes and Mestre Cobra Mansa personally to attend events they had organized in the United States (see also Assunção 2005:185; Ferreira 2004). With their help, *Capoeira Angola* gained greater international visibility, secured the prestigious status of the GCAP back in Brazil, and the Brazilian teachers were assisted in opening their own academies in the United States. Thus, during the 1980s, *Capoeira Angola* entered a new era in which the collaboration and exchange of ideas between practitioners and scholars gained fresh momentum.

International networks that connect scholars from Brazil and the United States are by no means a new phenomenon. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars were already working in an international arena, engaging in continuous dialogue, collaboration, and even mutually advantageous conspiracy (Yelvington 2006b). The study of the Afro-Brazilian religion *candomblé* served as an internationally acknowledged prime example, particularly for scholars such as Frazier and Herskovits in the 1940s for whom close collaboration with practitioners was a key prerequisite (Romo 2010; Sansone 2012). In a way, this interest had carved out a path in which North American scholars, travelers and tourists alike, have continued their search for African roots in Brazil (see also Pinho 2008). For *Capoeira Angola*, this has led to a fascinating dynamic which, especially in view of its current international appeal to practitioners, will continue to require a careful and broad appraisal in ethnographies.

Finally, with Assunção and Mestre Cobra Mansa at its heart, our current research project is a case in point for the future of *capoeira*’s history-making. In respect of each other’s work and life, the friendship between them has grown since the mid-1990s (Assunção in conversation with Dettmann on 7 March 2013), culminating in their collaboration on the UK-based project and the release of a feature-length



documentary (*Jogo do Corpo*, 2013). I dare to presume that, due to their cooperation and research output, *capoeira*'s history-making has embarked on another decisive chapter.

### Lessons for ethnomusicology

By closely collaborating with a historian and other team members, I have gained new insight into what interdisciplinary work may entail for ethnomusicological research into the African Diaspora. I started by outlining the present contention between *capoeira* history scholars, which can be traced back to a wider field of rationales within African-American studies, currently presided over by advocates of Afrocentric and creolizationist ideas. Ripples of tension can permeate across ethnomusicological research. For instance, by quoting a particular reference, I might be associated with one of the existing opposing camps, which could in turn hamper the opportunity to enrich and foster the current debate. The risk has increased since the notion of creolization, over-riding some of the African-American perspectives, has also offered a promising starting point within ethnomusicology, for example in theorizing and describing the history of past musical encounters in the Caribbean and other African American cultures (e.g. Manuel 2009; Baron and Cara 2011).

Surely, such scholarly discourses can be discussed, even reconciled, in order to develop new ideas and to extend arguments further—but what if many of the research outputs immediately spark a wider discussion among practitioners (see also Brettell 1993), and what if fieldwork locations have already been shaped by academic discourse? For instance, although I have argued for a counterbalanced view on *capoeira* history, one more closely aligned with a creolizationist position, I have factored in the impact of Afrocentric ideas on *capoeira* practitioners but also on scholars. It was shown that the *engolo* story meandered powerfully through the lives and works of *capoeira* practitioners and scholars alike. Indeed, the case of *capoeira* must be highlighted as an example of transatlantic research in which the lines between scholarly knowledge and “local” expertise overlap, transcend each other and ultimately blur. For instance, practitioners might consult a book or other scholarly output. There may also be extensive collaboration between scholar and *capoeirista*. Furthermore, the academic not only becomes an active practitioner, but the practitioner will also enter the academic ivory tower and get involved in publishing.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, these fluid and at times interchanging roles will require new dimensions of reflexive ethnographic writing.

In contemporary ethnomusicological fieldwork, the close collaboration between scholar and practitioner is an integral part of key practices (Baily 2001; Ruskin and Rice 2012). However, as I have outlined above, research into *capoeira* entails an encounter with a confluence of narratives ranging between scholarly and “local” realms, and performing constant crossovers. The “shadows in the field,” the term coined by Barz and Cooley to describe the reflexive experience of fieldwork (Cooley

1997:4), thus emerge in multifarious guises and discourses.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, these discourses are not confined to the spoken or written word. They are also played out in the practice of *capoeira* itself, whether in an athletic, a visual or a musical capacity. As the authors or “inventors” of such traditions are rarely identified, these signifiers in turn become equally important references, such as when laying claim to the authenticity and continuity of the practice.

Ethnographies into *capoeira* and narratives on its origin will therefore need to strike a balance between presenting these different layers of discourse and the sensitive issues of politics and identity involved (see also Briggs 1996). Herein, the growing intersection between scholar and practitioner represents a new dimension. As this paper has demonstrated, the ethnography extends far beyond conventional fieldwork sites, eventually finding its way back onto the author’s desk, in order to better understand and ground ethnomusicological research within transatlantic perspectives.

## Notes

- 1 See website Angolan Roots of Capoeira 2013: [http://www.essex.ac.uk/history/research/angolan\\_roots/home.aspx](http://www.essex.ac.uk/history/research/angolan_roots/home.aspx), accessed 20 March 2013.
- 2 Funded by the British Arts and Humanities Council (AHRC), the project *The Angolan Roots of Capoeira: Transatlantic Links of a Globalised Performing Art* started at the History Department of the University of Essex in 2010. As part of the project team, I would like to thank all my colleagues for sharing their insights with me—especially Matthias Röhrig Assunção, Mestre Cobra Mansa, Richard Pakleppa and Mariana P. Candido.
- 3 I am indebted to Matthias Röhrig Assunção and Mestre Cobra Mansa for allowing me to draw on data developed in the course of the above-mentioned project.
- 4 For instance, I am not including Paul Gilroy’s work on *The Black Atlantic* (1993) or Roger Bastide’s oeuvre on Brazil, simply because they are less frequently cited in the *capoeira* publications in question (e. g., Bastide 1971). Furthermore, Gilroy’s approach and citation practice have been criticized by scholars of African-American Studies which may be another reason why his ideas have generally not been seized upon in current discussions (Okpewho 1999:xxi–iii; Matory 1999; Matory 2006:166–8).
- 5 Due to the changeable prefix in the Angolan language Nyaneka, there have been different spellings of the combat game *engolo*, such as “*n’golo*” or “*N’Golo*.” In the project we followed the current practice of writing in Angola, which does not use apostrophes. However, in the context of quoting past authors and their views on *n’golo*, I leave their spelling unchanged.
- 6 Original in Portuguese: “[...] eu acho que esses mitos por um lado quando você é jovem, adolescente, eu acho que te ajuda muito, sabe, te cria uma certa imagem do que você pode ser ou que você poderia ser. E você se sente até orgulhoso num certo ponto, porque você está dentro de uma sociedade, né, em que o negro, ele é massacrado, ele não presta, ele não serve pra nada, entendeu. Você vai pra escola, né, aí aprende que o negro só foi escravo. E aí você cria uma imagem pra você também, que é muito negativa. Aí vem o mestre de capoeira, fala pra você: não, porque você está fazendo uma dança dos guerreiros em que os caras disputavam e que quem ganhava tinha direito a escolher a esposa e tal. Borrah, meu irmão, que coisa linda! Eu

- sou descendente de guerreiro!” (Interview Audio, Mestre Cobra Mansa with Richard Pakleppa and Matthias Röhrig Assunção on 11 March 2012).
- 7 *Kalunga* website <http://ngolohouston.org/>, accessed 12 April 2012; ICAF emblem <http://www.capeoira-angola-chicago.org/>, accessed 24 April 2013.
- 8 The most prominent capoeira masters of the past, Mestre Pastinha and Mestre Bimba, have either published in Brazil or informed the work of Brazilian writers (Mestre Bimba for Carneiro 1937:159; Rego 1968:32–3). Brazilian capoeira masters have increasingly published works translated into many languages. Among others, important works were written by Mestre Acordeon (Almeida 1986) and Nestor Capoeira (2003 [1999]). In many instances, audio CD booklets have also served as forms of publication (e. g., *Liner Notes* 1996). The growing facility of film-making brought the voices of many *capoeira* teachers to a worldwide audience, disseminated via DVDs or Internet videos (e. g., *Mandinga em Manhattan* 2006). Indeed, the global appeal of capoeira has resulted in many well-educated practitioners taking capoeira as part of their special research interest (e. g. Downey 1998); this tendency can also be observed in Brazil (e. g. Campos 2001).
- 9 So far, the close collaboration between scholar and practitioner, their interchanging roles in research and the consequences for research output have primarily been noted in studies of Afro-Caribbean religions (Wirtz 2008:152, 164–6). Regarding questions of constructing “Africa” and “blackness,” the ethnomusicologist Peter Wade raises only slight concerns over how his academic production of knowledge might further be used by local people, when envisioning their Afro-Colombian traditions (2006:376–7).

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