

The Arts and Individual and Collective Agency: A Brazilian Favela Case Study

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Abstract: Brazil's favela residents have long challenged the dominant media and social narrative that has, for decades, described them via discourses of criminality. This article examines the work of *Redes da Maré*, a civil society organization that offers cultural spaces and services for community-based creation and diffusion of the arts in its namesake favela. We employ the concepts of the social imaginary as well as individual and collective agency to investigate whether and in what ways a service-providing civil society organization that has adopted a cultural development approach encourages participants' democratic attitudes and behaviors at the organizational and community level to challenge existing systemic social oppression by fostering participation in the development process and offering a platform for the expression of the voices of those it engages. Our analysis is based in part on interviews with 4 lead organizers and participants in *Redes' Free Dance School of Maré*. Our analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the roles the arts can play in encouraging democratic agency and possibility among favela citizens despite adverse political and social conditions exacerbated by neoliberal beliefs and policies.

Keywords: Brazil, civil society organization, democratic agency, Neoliberalism, social imaginary.

Many Brazilian news outlets and government officials daily offer an alienating vision of Rio de Janeiro's favelas by misrepresenting their residents—often Black, Brown, and Indigenous individuals—through pejorative discourses that associate them with criminality, insalubrity, lack, and disorder (Perlman, 2010; Rosas-Moreno & Straubhaar, 2015). This view of favelas disregards the systematic social and frequent governmental oppression of their populations. It also ignores the inequality of wealth distribution, which lies at the root of the conditions many of their residents confront. Such accounts reinforce and deepen Brazil's long-standing exclusionary race and class divisions (Lacerda, 2015).

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In fact, contrary to the socially dominant image of favelas, these communities are heterogeneous, and their populations are actively engaged in contesting the oppressive social and government narratives concerning them. Favela citizens have for decades acted not only to provide sanitation, medical care, transportation, and other public services to their residents that Brazil's governments have failed or refused to extend them but also worked generatively to create and preserve their arts and culture (Coutinho & Soter, 2019; Valladares, 2019). This article examines one such program offered by *Redes da Maré*, a civil society organization that provides cultural spaces and services for community-based creation and diffusion of the arts in its namesake favela. Our analysis contributes to existing understanding by investigating whether and how a service providing non-governmental organization (NGO), in this case through a dance program, can foster possibilities for individual and collective exercise of democratic agency and thereby develop residents' capacity to contest socially dominant frames.

The community service organization (CSO) we studied, *Redes da Maré*, focuses on knowledge, projects and actions that seek to ensure effective public policies for the more than 140,000 residents of Maré's 16 discrete micro-communities. *Redes* aims to enhance residents' quality of life by helping them exercise their rights as Brazilian citizens. We situate our effort within the context of a populist autocratic regime, whose former leader, Jair Bolsonaro, has frequently pilloried and scapegoated favela populations (Bledsoe, 2019). We know of no other study that has explored this combination of concerns.

Literature Review

Non-governmental Organizations in Repressive Regimes

In what has come to be known as the shrinking or closing of civic space, many developing nation governments have established regulatory restrictions in recent years to counteract or stymie the advocacy or claims-making of NGOs in their jurisdictions (Carothers, 2016; Christensen & Weinstein, 2013; Dupuy & Prakash, 2020; Dupuy et al., 2016). As Foweraker (2001) has argued, in fledgling democracies under duress, such as that in Brazil, the political environment for such organizations can become what Brazilians have labeled a *jogo surdo*, or dance of the deaf. In such circumstances, it becomes almost impossible to predict the political behavior of actors since everyone is dancing, proverbially, to a different tune.

According to the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (2018), most state-imposed restrictions on civil society entities focus on their establishment, registration, and ongoing operations, followed by the imposition of limits on citizens' freedom of association and restrictions on foreign funding. The last listed has proven to be particularly insidious for human rights and democracy advocacy NGOs in developing democracies, which may not enjoy strong domestic sources of revenue and are, therefore, often highly dependent on assistance from abroad.

At the same time, there is evidence that while the space may be closing for politically active civil society organizations as a result of governmental restrictions imposed on their operations and diminishing ability to obtain foreign funding, in many of those nations, including Brazil, spaces for public action and advocacy are, in fact, expanding for such institutions otherwise working to improve the quality and availability of social, health, educational and other public services (Toepler et al., 2020). This is so because authoritarian regimes across the globe have increased their efforts to enlist NGOs in public service delivery, effectively emulating the Western neoliberal model (Salamon & Toepler, 2015) that has also long been a part of the supposed good governance agenda in international development (Batley & Rose, 2011; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011).

Despite these competing dynamics, however, much of the existing literature on civil society and democratization has focused disproportionately on claims-making NGOs pursuing rights-based agendas, while service providers have commonly been regarded as a-political agents and thus less relevant. Consequently, an examination of the democracy-supporting potential of a service-providing NGO seeking to assist a vulnerable population appears both timely and necessary (Moldavanova et al., 2023).

Neo-Tocquevillian thinking, which helped shape the good governance agenda in the 1990s, ascribed certain socially democratizing functions to civil society organizations (Lewis et al., 2020). As “schools of democracy,” in this view, NGOs were seen to provide forums in which members and participants could develop democratic practices at the organizational and community levels, foster local engagement in service provision and raise their concerns in relevant public decision processes.

As such, examining the ways in which local CSOs that are not primarily advocacy organizations encourage their constituents’ capacity to act may contribute to democratization and governance studies. We investigated the role of a dance program offered by a local civil society organization as a venue through which to encourage the expression of individual and collective democratic agency among its participants in the Maré complex of favelas located in Northeastern Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Social Imaginaries, Misrepresentation, and Community Cultural Change

In common use, the concept of ‘the imaginary’ has come to refer to something invented or not real, something projected into the future, conceived beyond the existing. However, James (2019) has argued that even those seeking to invent possibilities must have a place to stand, a space from which to envisage possibilities: “We do not imagine out of nothing. And, therefore, the imaginary provides one locus to begin to understand the complexity of human being” (p. 37).

The philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) has defined the social imaginary as “the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society” (p. 156). James (2019) has similarly contended that an imaginary is not comprised of particular ideas or beliefs held by people, but is instead the collation of those conceptions into a larger shared social frame. That is, while an imaginary can be analyzed by theorists, it is not primarily an intellectual schema. James contended that it is instead a lived and generalized sensibility held by the many, including those who do not have the words to articulate its meaning as well as those who seek to analyze its condensing discourses (James, 2019). As Taylor (2007) put this point, a social imaginary, “is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode” (p. 171). Finally, “an imaginary is not totalizing, but rather a cultural dominant, layered across prior and emerging imaginaries” (James, 2019, pp. 40–41). This is to say that while an existing imaginary may be widely and commonly adopted, it is unlikely to be the only such conception at play in a society at any given time.

Building on this insight concerning the power of dominant imaginaries to shape individual and social expectations and possibilities, Fraser (2009) has argued that, “Misrepresentation occurs when political boundaries and/or decision rules function to deny some people, wrongly, the possibility of participating on par with others in social interaction—including, but not only, in political arenas” (p. 18). Marneros (2021) has described misrepresentation as an integral feature of neoliberal politics,

[T]he construction of 'the people' as 'the underdog' suggests that their construction is based on negative feelings of envy and revenge, what Friedrich Nietzsche diagnosed as the feeling of resentment. This feeling of resentment renders the political demands of populism incapable of producing an affirmative version of politics. As a result, populist discourses not only are incapable of becoming a threat to the fatalistic, neoliberal politics of the capitalist market but at worse they become their accomplices. (p. 100)

According to Fraser (2009), this dominant social imaginary, which presently enshrines capitalism as the principal force and evaluative referent in state-organized societies and structurally creates an enduring state of misrepresentation for vulnerable groups, can be challenged in two different ways, via the administrative or the transformative. In Fraser's (2009) conceptualization, the administrative challenges the dominant ideational frame within the current Westphalian state system, while the transformative begins from the premise that "the state-territoriality principle no longer affords an adequate basis for determining the 'who' of justice in every case" (p. 23)

Fraser (2009) has contended that transformative change is only possible if injustices inhering in dominant frames (again, today, in Western and most other societies, the neoliberal view) are tackled at three scales. At the first level, issues of maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation must be addressed. On the second echelon, the frame itself can be changed by "reconstituting the 'who' of justice" (Fraser, 2009, p. 25). And, in the third and most important dimension, those affected adversely by ongoing injustices arising from the dominant imaginary are involved in the process of [re]setting that frame (Fraser, 2009).

Misrepresentation complements misrecognition and maldistribution because questions of representation or the "who" cannot be met within neoliberal state politics, and therefore, claims for redistribution or recognition are not addressed (Fraser, 2009). In Rio de Janeiro, favelas are perceived by the larger population as sites of physical and social deprivation (Davis, 2013; Neuwirth, 2016). The hegemonic understanding of such communities as simply locations of criminal activities, disease, overcrowding, insecurity, informal housing and poverty has often been challenged in the last few decades by scholars and residents alike, yet the dominant social imaginary still reflects that view and its tenets are constantly reiterated in political rhetoric (Rosas-Moreno & Straubhaar, 2015), in films and in tourism. Póvoa and their colleagues (2019) have observed the role of film and tourism in this process, particularly that,

By propagating a shared representation of the favelas as exotic and dangerous, these two industries have transformed them into global commodities, which are now consumed by filmmakers (as locations) and tourists (as attractions). (p. 1537)

Such accounts of visiting the bizarre or risky are suffused with a moralizing content of favelas and their residents as "less-than." These narratives misrepresent the true character of the material, class-based differences in Brazil, and constitute a recurrent political strategy in the nation and one that has also been identified in other countries (Bennett, 2013). In general, as Fraser has noted, such rhetoric is consistently deployed as part of a discursive logic of exclusion, resulting in the systematic and widespread imposition of injustice and oppression.

Fraser (2007) has argued that for groups to succeed in overturning or [re]setting social frames, their efforts must meet two conditions: translation and capacity. She has defined translation as, “the communicative power generated in civil society [that] must be translated first into binding laws and then into administrative power,” and capacity as “the public power [that] must be able to implement the discursively formed will to which it is responsible” (Fraser, 2007, p. 22). Following Fraser, we examined the roles of a CSO-sponsored dance program in leading those engaged in it to question existing frames as well as to develop or offer fresh ones.

Democratic Agency and Social Change

Benhabib (2007) has suggested that agency is intertwined with communicative freedom and has contended, therefore, that agency and communication are “two sides of the same coin” (p. 15). Briefly, for Benhabib (2007), communicative freedom is an individual’s capacity to say “‘yes’ or ‘no’ to an utterance whose validity claims they comprehend and according to which they can act” (p. 14). This freedom reflects the exercise of agency, according to Benhabib, with that term understood as an individual’s ability to formulate aspirations and goals and thereafter pursue them.

For Benhabib (2008), voice is the capacity to engage in dialogue, discussion and debate concerning norms and laws in a given society (p. 35). It is a precondition of authorship. Political authorship, meanwhile, in their view, is the essence of democracy. It requires that individuals not only serve as objects governed by law, but are also able themselves, to influence and shape the content of those statutes and the frame underpinning them (Benhabib, 2008, p. 168). Very like Fraser’s (2007, 2009) conception of the requirements for enduring social change, embedded within both concepts of voice and authorship for Benhabib (2008) is the idea that democracy requires that those who are governed by structures must have the right and substantive opportunities to consent to and dissent from them. For our part, and following these authors’ arguments, we have assumed in this analysis that people possess multiple avenues through which to express their agency and to work together and therefore, the outcome of any individual and/or collective exercise of agency may not be known until it occurs within a specific opportunity structure and imaginary.

The Arts and Political Agency

If people perceive themselves as possessing capacity to act (agency), they may make choices individually and collectively to address the forces and conditions that shape their lives, that they otherwise would not have conceived or selected. Salzman (2018) has argued that culture can be a starting point from which to challenge social imaginaries:

[H]umans have an existential need to know how to be and act in the world [...] humans need a roadmap for living [...]. Culture(s) serve this essential function by providing a worldview that may be internalized that offers standards that if achieved allows for the construction of self-esteem [...], the conviction that one has value in a meaningful world. (p. 55)

Indeed, many scholars have found that arts-based communal engagement can encourage such individual “conscientization” or agential self-awareness (Adams & Goldbard, 2005; Goldbard, 2013).

More generally, a number of analysts have argued that community-based cultural development (CCD) can spur “conscious, thoughtful dialogue among individuals and groups possessing diverse values and beliefs” (Kirakosyan & Stephenson, 2019, p. 375; Meban, 2009) and thereby help populations to develop shared capacity to act and to assume ownership for social change (Adams & Goldbard, 2005; Bacon, 2012; Booth, 1995; Fleming, 2007; Kay, 2000; Sharp et al., 2005; Stephenson & Tate, 2015). By concentrating on human interactions and social stories, as Kirakosyan and Stephenson (2019) have remarked, “the arts can help groups mobilize around shared purposes, thus facilitating community change efforts” (p. 388).

Likewise, and focused particularly on dance as an art form, Lepecki (2005) has contended that dance and choreography contribute to an understanding of the politics in our times. He viewed this form of artistic expression as a way to “approach, analyze, critique, and perhaps re-invent the political dimension, one that seems always somewhat beyond the reach of danced actions, choreographed bodies, staged movements, and representational behavior” (Lepecki, 2015, p.44).

Case and Methodology

We write as members of an academic research group with members at multiple universities in the global north and south, which has collaborated with the Rio de Janeiro nongovernmental organization *Redes da Maré* since 2019. Although the authors are diverse in terms of birthplace, citizenship, race/ethnicity, and religious and political allegiances, we are cognizant of our privileged access to resources and mindful of our research in a postcolonial context not being patronizing, insulting, threatening, imperialist, and recolonizing. In consequence, we have sought to be as consistently and consciously reflexive concerning that reality as we can be. Our team includes political scientists, geography, planning, and media scholars as well as PhD students. During the (ongoing) period of our cooperation, we have worked closely with a significant share of the NGO’s leaders and assisted and supported them as they have sought to conduct community-based research to inform and advocate in their areas of interest on behalf of Maré’s citizens. We have also partnered with Redes’ leaders on a multimedia exhibition highlighting the lives, communities, and challenges of the favela’s citizens. That exhibit, for which we developed a companion volume published in English and Portuguese, has to date been displayed in Maré, at Brown University, at Bard College, at Grinnell College, at Virginia Tech, at the University of Virginia and at the University of Edinburgh (Barnes et al., 2021).

Our primary data source was semi-structured interviews with a sample of four key informants working at and/or participating in Redes da Maré-sponsored dance classes. Our university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this inquiry, including the interview questions and consent strategy we adopted. We employed a snowball sampling method of interviewee identification by asking each individual we approached to recommend another person associated with the CSO’s dance programs whom they believed could respond to our questions. We conducted online interviews due to the COVID-19 crisis and translated (in three cases) and transcribed (in all four) those recordings. One of our authors conducted three of the four interviews in Portuguese while one was conducted in English at the interviewee’s request. One of the investigators, a native Brazilian, translated the interviews conducted in Portuguese into English. Table 1 provides a profile of the age, gender, current occupation and our interlocutors’ length of involvement with the Dance School.

Table 1
Interviewee Demographics

Alias	Gender	Age	Occupation	Length of Membership	Interview date(s)
H	M	40	Art and Memory Axis Former Program Coordinator	10 years	October 13, 2021
K	F	29	Former student, Dance school Coordinator	10 years	February 16, 2022
G	M	32	Former student/instructor, coordinator	12 years	February 25, 2022
S	F	23	Former student, University student	5 years	March 16, 2022

Two members of the research team conducted a thematic analysis of our four semi-structured interviews. They applied a mix of emerging and predetermined codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Based on our group’s previous knowledge of favela art-based initiatives and the framework adopted for this project, we developed and assigned certain codes before undertaking our analysis, such as *Art as a Change Apparatus*, *Individual Agency*, *Collective Agency*, and *Epistemic Change*. The authors discussed their evolving findings bi-weekly with our larger Maré research team (then four additional individuals) to ensure consistency in the coding process.

We also utilized archival data to achieve a measure of evidentiary triangulation. We used Redes’ website to gain a deeper understanding of the NGO’s approach to service provision and advocacy. In particular, we analyzed dance students’ testimonies available on the Redes da Maré website as a mechanism by which to test our interpretation of the interviews we conducted (Redes da Maré, 2021).

Overall, as mentioned above, we sought to explore two questions in the interviews we conducted and testimonies we parsed. First, whether and in what ways engaging in community dance classes and individual/collective agency can be related. Second, in the event these concepts can be associated, whether and how participants’ self-perceptions of their agential power could contribute to efforts to challenge their misrepresentation in the dominant social imaginary.

Our inquiry took the form of a case study. Case analysis is often employed to gain understanding and insight into phenomena that have been little investigated or when the questions and concerns targeted for consideration are somehow new (Travers, 2001). In choosing between single versus multiple site research, we opted for the former. While single-case studies can provide deeper understanding of concerns under examination, they nevertheless come freighted with fears concerning the uniqueness of the conditions investigated and/or researchers’ ties to the inquiry (Yin, 2014). Nonetheless, although we searched for other suitable cases amongst Brazil’s favelas, we were not able to find a significantly different/prominent one to justify a multi-site case study. Moreover, we found the case we examined was itself multi-valent and nuanced.

The process that led to creation of the CSO Redes da Maré began in 1997. The NGO values the social role of citizens and their individual and collective capacity to secure needed political, economic and cultural change. Redes also seeks to respect difference and diversity among those it serves. Today, Redes da Maré operates via what its leaders have dubbed five axes: 1. Arts, Culture, Memories and Identities, 2. Education, 3. Right to Public Security and Access to Justice, 4. Urban and Socio-Environmental Rights, 5. Right to Health. Redes has based its Arts, Culture, Memories and Identities programming on the idea that artistic experience amplifies the subjective territory of

each participant, increasing their ability to understand, imagine and act in the world (Redes da Maré, 2021). In partnership with artists and cultural producers committed to pedagogical processes, the NGO promotes long-term continuous actions that seek both to encourage and diffuse the arts in Maré.

The Redes Dance School

The Free Dance School of Maré was created in October 2011, as a key initiative within the Maré Arts Center. A partnership between Redes da Maré and the contemporary dance company Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças (LRCD), the School aims to expand the access of Maré residents to dance, education and employment by means of a holistic approach. The program serves about 300 students from the *Complexo da Maré* each year. Each has the opportunity to experience dance at the School's open workshops (Nucleus I) or via its more intensive and selective training classes (Nucleus II). Nucleus I is designed for, and open to, residents of all ages. It offers ongoing workshops in ballroom, street, contemporary and Afro-Brazilian dance, classical ballet, yoga and body awareness.

Nucleus II, or Intensive Dance Training, meanwhile, is a professional training program for young people from Maré that provides theoretical and applied dance classes. Applicants must audition successfully to participate in Nucleus II and to be considered for a scholarship in the program. Each cohort is typically comprised of 20-24 students. The class schedule includes exposure to, and training in, classical ballet as well as contemporary dance “workshops with invited artists, participation in the restaging process of dance pieces and learning the LRCD repertoire” (Soter & Pavlova, 2017, p. 270). Nucleus II classes are held Monday to Friday between 2:00 and 5:30 p.m. for two to three years—as appropriate, based on student progress. Many Nucleus II students enter dance programs at colleges, become teachers and/or are accepted at international dance schools on completion of their program. Others join the resident Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças.

Findings and Discussion

To explore the two research questions that framed this inquiry, we asked our interviewees to share their experiences as Dance School participants. Table 2 summarizes the main theories that informed this study and shows how our interview questions aligned with those conceptions.

The CSO's approach to its dance program aligns with the steps Fraser (2009) has argued are essential to challenging social frames. Redes engages in the issues of misrecognition, maldistribution and misrepresentation in Maré by raising dance program participants' awareness (interviews theme 1) at three levels: identity, citizen rights and epistemic consciousness. In addition, the dance programs specifically focus on issues of communication agency/voice (interviews theme 2) and authorship (interviews theme 3). Our interlocutors suggested that their capacity to engage in artistic expression through a variety of dance forms encouraged them to consider the social frame they confront afresh, in line with Fraser's second step, reconstituting the who of justice. Our interviewees also indicated that through individual and collaborative artistic creation, they had the opportunity to imagine frames other than the dominant one, allowing each to engage, at least intellectually, in the last step of Fraser's model. We illustrate these findings by referring to specific observations shared by our interviewees.

Table 2
Frameworks, Concepts and Interview Questions

Theory/Framework	Concepts	Interview Questions
<p>Community Cultural Development:</p> <p>The work of community artists who “singly or in teams, place their artistic and organizing skills at the service of the emancipation and development of an identified community” (Goldbard, 2006, p. 140)</p>	<p>Community: “a unit of social organization based on some distinguishing characteristics or affinity” (Adam & Goldbard, 2005, P. 114)</p> <p>Culture: Culture pertains to a range of shared “values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, norms, material objects and symbolic resources” (Samovar et al., 2014, p. 9).</p>	<p>- Can you give us examples of stories, music, performances or symbols you have created/shared along with other members of Redes? What was your shared vision for those efforts? What is the most important/memorable thing about those events in your view?</p> <p>- Do you see yourself as providing services to your community through the arts? If so, can you explain why and how? In your view, what drew Redes to art specifically as a way to achieve its goals? - How have people who have participated in your arts programming reacted to it?</p> <p>- How do you imagine/envision the roles of the arts in your community?</p>
<p>Agency:</p> <p>An individual’s or a community’s ability to formulate aspirations and goals and thereafter pursue them.</p>	<p>Voice: The capacity to engage in dialogue, discussion and debate concerning norms and laws in a given society (Benhabib, 2008, p. 36).</p> <p>Authorship: Capacity to influence and shape the content of a given society’s statutes (Benhabib, 2008, p. 168)</p>	<p>- After becoming a staff member of Redes da Maré, do you perceive yourself as more/less or powerful in implementing change in your community compared to the time when you were not a member? Did involvement with this NGO influence your perception of your effectiveness with other organizations? Do you have any examples?</p>
<p>Social imaginary:</p> <p>As “the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society” (Taylor, 2007, p. 156).</p>	<p>Misrepresentation: “Misrepresentation occurs when political boundaries and/or decision rules function to deny some people, wrongly, the possibility of participating on par with others in social interaction—including, but not only, in political arenas” (Fraser, 2009, p. 18).</p>	<p>- In your role/program/work, what are you personally and as an organization hoping to achieve? Who do you hope to reach? Can you tell us about a time in which you perceived that you were notably successful in securing your program aims?</p> <p>- Do you see yourself as providing services to your community through the arts? If so, can you explain why and how? In your view, what drew Redes to art specifically as a way to achieve its goals?</p>

Theme 1: Awareness (Identity, Rights, and Episteme)

Identity Awareness

The Merriam-Webster dictionary has defined identity as “the set of qualities and beliefs that make one person or group different from others” (n.d.). Fraser (2000) has explained that one of the usual approaches to recognition politics is the identity model whose proponents contend,

[T]o belong to a group that is devalued by the dominant culture is to be misrecognized, to suffer a distortion in one’s relation to one’s self [...] the politics of recognition aims to repair internal self-dislocation by contesting the dominant culture’s demeaning picture of the group. (p. 109)

In recent years, educators have considered how aspects of sociocultural identity, including race, class, gender and sexuality intersect with artist identity formation. As Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2014) have contended, within art education, “possible futures emerge through the interplay of schooling, social class, and subjectivity formation” (p. 110). In particular, in her research on theories of dance ethnography, McCall (2005) has emphasized the significance of bodily knowledge and movement in shaping individual and collective identities. All our interviewees claimed that participating in Redes da Maré dance activities had helped them develop a more vigorous and positive sense of self. K., for example, who had moved to Maré from Bangu (a favela in the western zone of Rio de Janeiro) when she was 19-years old and had joined the dance school, stated that,

As soon as I started working in Redes, I noticed that my identity was strengthened. And from then on, this process of strengthening had begun [...] all this time that I lived in Maré was very important for me as a way of strengthening my personal identity and my identity as a favelada [being from a favela]. (K., February 16, 2022)

In their early 20s, S. found Redes da Maré a place to define themselves,

When I arrived, I wasn’t really seeking to be trained in anything or to become anything. I wanted to understand myself as a Black woman in a space of extreme violence, be it from the police officers or from armed civilians [...] It’s a process of you looking at yourself and at the other. Because we tend to sometimes put everything in the same little box. (S., March 16, 2022)

All our interviewees alluded to flashpoint experiences during their dance education as “a heightened occasion, arising from the activation of power that disturbs a seemingly fixed relationship” (Kraehe & Lewis, 2018, p. 3) within social contexts. As Travis and colleagues (2018) have argued, flashpoints are consequential in that they can alter one’s existing perspective on the world, creating a rupture of the status quo that is often educational, and that sometimes marks a dramatic shift in one’s awareness of oneself in relation to others. As K. recounted,

Wow! All the things I've done, get rewarded. Everything, all the stress, all the struggle—at that moment, you say, 'this is it.' And then you take that with you, and you keep going. This is the place that I wanted to be in. (K., February 16, 2022)

Such perceptions align with what Coe (2017) observed during her years studying dance pedagogy, “I contemplate a change of power taking place in [...] awe of new self-belief in that what they first saw in imaginative vision is actually emerging in active form” (p. 47–48).

Awareness of One's Rights

Fraser (2000) has claimed that the identity model cannot alone address the problem of misrecognition, since,

[Misrecognition] is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem. [...] In] the status model the politics of recognition does not stop at identity but seeks institutional remedies for institutionalized harms. (pp. 113–114)

H. explained in their interview, “In Redes, you have an NGO that works with rights, with access to those rights and in some ways the humanization of the residents through those rights, so it's a very expansive view” (H., October 13, 2021). While Redes da Maré mainly focuses on residents' awareness and exercise of their rights and does not seek to provide services that the government is supposed to offer, the CSO has done so on occasion to improve the quality of life for favela residents. The Redes Arts, Culture, Memories and Identities Axis programming has focused on the right to art and culture. As such, Redes has self-consciously been guided by the United Nations Office of Human Rights' (UNHR, 2010) definition of cultural rights,

Cultural rights protect the rights for each person, individually and in community with others, as well as groups of people, to develop and express their humanity, their world view and the meanings they give to their existence and their development through, inter alia, values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, institutions and ways of life. (n.d.)

G. and H. commented in their interviews that Redes views culture and the arts as a basic human need and right:

Redes also understands that and views 'culture as a basic need.' In Maré, we only have one primary public equipment [venue] for the arts in the entire favela. And Maré has as large a population as many cities located elsewhere in the country. That is, it does have the size of a city, but nonetheless has just one major public equipment for the arts. Most of the

equipment we have in general for the arts [in Rio] are in the richest zones of the city [...]. (G., February 25, 2022)

[T]he right to art, this is the work that Redes does [...] It is really an essential role that it [art] plays for residents and even for those who just consume the arts [...] It is really interesting how culture is a crucial part of dealing with violence, with these things that we lack [in our favela]. [Art] really is an essential part in the culture of favelas, for life to be able to continue, really. (H., February 22, 2022)

H. and K. depicted the ways art and culture act as mechanisms for various, often excluded, social groups to claim the Right to the City: “it is a place that the residents from either side go to because it is a space dedicated to art and culture” (H., October 13, 2021). Molina and Guinard (2017) have emphasized that the relationship between the arts and the city is framed not only by how art *works* in the city, but also by how it *represents* the city. Researchers worldwide have explored the ways that art can become visible in a city, and also highlight particular areas of an urban center (Debroux, 2017). As K. observed in her interview,

When we think about art as the cultural strength of a place then we know that the arts strengthen a place’s roots. Art strengthens the places, people, the relationships in that place. When I think about the music genre that we call funk in Brazil, it’s a connection among the residents. It connects everyone and it is an ancestral force because it has the drums also. And that beat comes from our ancestry. It comes from the past. It comes from a Black music that eventually became what we now call funk in Brazil. It is now very criminalized, it is very much marginalized, but it continues as a black art form. (K., February 16, 2022)

Lastly, all the interviewees highlighted the role of art and culture in connecting Rio’s favelas to the rest of the city. By bringing artists from inside and outside of Maré and encouraging artistic encounters, Redes has contributed to a broad sharing of more authentic social imaginaries of these misrepresented areas. As H. noted,

The biggest result is perhaps when we managed to connect the local culture to the city and the city’s culture to the favela. That connection tied favela artists with the rest of the city and then those artists became the reference for the city itself and for the world. Redes has had a fundamental role in making this connection. (H., October 13, 2021)

Epistemic Awareness

Epistemic awareness refers to an individual’s capacity to understand how reasonably justified truth claims are produced by themselves and others (Fricker, 2007). That is, it is their personal awareness of the choices they make about what counts as facts and reasonable interpretation, and how they have constructed those. This could apply to how they know the world about them, or more narrowly to how they perceive a particular actor, regardless of media format, as constructing nominal truths.

The interviewees viewed their involvement in the CSO's arts programs as beneficial to helping them perceive existing realities and misrepresentations of the favela and its residents more accurately and profoundly. K. related their strengthened identity, gained through dance, to attaining a deeper understanding of their life in the favela,

[T]he arts strengthen the identity of a place, of the people in a place. Dance reflects, and we see ourselves reflected in dance in that beat, in that energy, in that pulse and the rhythm that it has. [... That] identity put me in the place of understanding the strength of our favelas' culture, the strength of our elders and the strength of being a favelada, as well as what is good and bad about being from a favela. When I went to Maré, I didn't really have that awareness yet. I had a memory in the sense that I knew I was a favelada. I felt a lot of things, but I didn't know how to verbalize many issues related to my identity. (K., February 16, 2022)

She shared her observations regarding Dance School students who had developed new understandings of the world in which they live through dance: “Older women, for example, will start dancing by connecting to their Black ancestry in a particular dance class later in life, things that they didn't necessarily think about before. And that will really change their vision” (K., February 16, 2022). Similarly, H. considered the Dance School a space for epistemic awareness, “[T]his is a space through which you can have an idea about what is really happening in the place where you live and then you can start understanding and make connections between things that previously you did not understand” (H., October 13, 2021). S. highlighted the power of art in liberating individuals from dominant limiting frameworks. She suggested that, for her, dance,

Makes me feel free from myself, and from all these chains that life brings for us. Dance for me, is freedom, like being a bird. And I like having wings and I fly without actually leaving the ground. [...] Redes formed or trained me. The art center freed me from myself and Redes de Maré transformed me into a person who wants to obtain knowledge to continue weaving this web. (S., March 16, 2022)

For her part, S. emphasized the generative process of epistemic awareness and change, I will say that Redes helped me see certain details in myself that I could not notice before because of a question of victimizing myself really, or a question of self-victimization, and understanding that I come from a system that tries to oppress me, that tries to kill me. So, I understand that Redes only opened my eyes to something that was already within me and made me believe that it's something that already exists. But I wouldn't say that it legitimized me as an empowered woman. It instead made me see that I am an empowered woman. (S., March 16, 2022)

G. claimed that not only at the individual level, but also collectively, participants in the Dance School gradually come to grasp a shared understanding of the agential power they innately possess,

It can be just dance, it can be, you go there, you take your class, you go home, but at the end of the day, it's never just that, because we're always talking about being part of a group, being part of our community, getting to know the place where you are, and you know, getting power from the people who are with you, getting power from the place you're at, getting to know Redes da Maré and how it can change your life in many, many ways. (G., February 25, 2022)

Theme 2: Communicative Agency/Voice (Oral Expression, Performative Expression)

Benhabib (1999) has argued that communicative agency is a vital step towards generative empowerment, “it is not what the story is about that matters but, rather, one’s ability to keep telling a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and others” (p. 347). Drawing on Benhabib’s work on communicative agency, Lucas has defined narrative agency as “a subject’s capacity to make sense of herself as an ‘I’ over time and in relation to other I’s” (Lucas, 2018, p. 123). We argue that community cultural development projects have the potential to spur such communication through various modalities (Boal, 1993; Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2006) including artwork(s) as inextricably interwoven with an artist or artists’ agency (Gell, 1998). Dance is a powerful form of artistic expression that allows individuals to communicate and convey emotions, thoughts and ideas through movement. It provides a unique and embodied means of expression, transcending language barriers and connecting people on a visceral level. The relationship between dance and the capacity for expression is multifaceted and profound. As a non-verbal communication form, dance can convey a wide range of emotions and narratives. The non-verbal quality of dance allows for a more immediate and direct form of communication, as it taps into the universal language of the body.

All our interviewees mentioned that participating in Redes da Maré dance programs had enhanced their ability to voice their concerns regarding existing issues in the favela. Part of this capacity developed through dance class discussions, during which everyone is asked to talk. K. recounted, for example, that the instructor suggested to the students, “‘You guys need to have an opinion. Everyone has to speak, even if it’s just to repeat what someone else has said.’ Everyone has to talk. So, we really couldn’t be quiet” (K., February 16, 2022). Scholars have researched this reflective methodology in dance pedagogy and found that it enhances learners’ capacity to express themselves verbally and physically. Coe (2017) has argued that the reflective nature of the creative process in dance demands deliberation. She has contended that such efforts find students transforming their initially imagined idea into physically expressive dance. Writing or orally sharing critical reflections of this process allows individuals to recognize how their artistic propensity develops into a personal choreographic style. We next discuss participants’ individual and collective development of oral and performative expression as a result of their engagement with the Dance School.

Oral Expression

G. described the dominant frame in which, “people [in favelas] are not heard or are not given chances to speak up and to say what’s good and what’s not for them. To say what kind of changes they want” (G., February 25, 2022). To highlight the importance of art in bringing residents’ opinions to the surface, S. recounted her experience as a dance student and suggested that it gave her willingness and wherewithal to speak,

Another thing that dance gave me was the capacity to speak because I used to never speak up. When I first arrived at the Art Center many people thought that I was mute because I wouldn't talk and now being able to come and do an interview and talk about different points is amazing. [...] If I need to say something now, I do, because otherwise someone else will speak for you. (S., March 16, 2022)

All the interviewees considered their participation in the dance programs to be generative. As G., now an arts program coordinator observed, “We give them the space. I wouldn’t say we make them speak. But they feel that they have the space to speak” (G., February 25, 2022). Or as K. put it,

No one gives voice to anyone. Come on. We’re already over that. That's a horrible thing to say. No one gives voice and no one gives anything. People are only just staying quiet and listening and learning to listen so that someone else can talk. I think “develop” is a good word [...] [the arts] help develop a person’s capacity to develop their own thinking and [to learn] how to express their thinking to the world. (K., February 16, 2022)

Performative Expression

Dance requires a high level of physicality and kinesthetic intelligence. Dancers develop an acute awareness of their bodies, space, and movement possibilities. This heightened physical mindfulness enhances their capacity to express themselves through precise, controlled, and fluid movements. Basso and colleagues (2020) found that “we engage in dance for the purpose of intrinsic reward, which as a result of dance-induced increases in neural synchrony, leads to enhanced interpersonal coordination” (n.d.). In G.’s view, facilitating residents’ access to art making and cultural representation, has contributed to faveladas/os being able to express their concerns related to existing frames; “[P]eople want to be seen. People want to be heard. People want to make their art reflect their reality, their lives, the problems that are affecting them, the problems that are affecting the society (G., February 25, 2022). K. pointed up the formative epistemic power of the arts:

[A]rt comes as a place from which we can question, from which we can reflect and challenge what is being imposed on us. This is really what we want. [...] I think art comes with this purpose in our lives [...] because art talks about and reflects all the time. So, it has this role of breaking what is established, what is not good. Art has the role of questioning; art makes us question. So, in the formation or training process, it was really essential that I put myself in the position of someone who challenges and questions. (K., February 16, 2022)

In G.’s view, meanwhile, artistic expression begins as an individual decides to create a work of art. This notion aligns with Gell’s idea of artwork as an extension of the artist’s voice and agency. Therefore, training favela residents in dance, as one example, ensures that there will always be space for artistic expression in the everyday life of the community. K. and S. shared similar views:

When we talk about choreography, we're talking about space, the body movement in the space, we're talking about the place. What surrounds you, what's within you, the connections. So, yeah, making it possible is a piece of art. Walking around the favela, thinking about the architecture, how does your body move inside of the favela, inside of the small streets going up and down? Does it feel afraid? So, I think that prompted imagining is also choreography, it's also a performance somehow. (K., February 16, 2022)

But I can also do thousands of other things and continue dancing, but dancing politically. I dance while I work and serve as a teacher. I am dancing while I am a social worker. I dance while I give out the food baskets to the people who are hungry during the pandemic. I'm on this stage, but I also have a performance, but I can also dance outside of it. I have a performance outside of the stage. It's another way of dancing. (S., March 16, 2022)

As noted above, interviewees alluded to the role of art and dance specifically, in strengthening their capacities to express their thoughts and to reflect on and question the often unfavorable social and economic conditions they face daily. Such capabilities to express oneself facilitate, indeed, almost demand, dialogue, a precondition for questioning oppressing frames. Fraser (2009) has argued, that any discussion of justice “must envision a dialogical process for applying the all-subjected principle to disputes about the who” (p. 68). Nonetheless, she has contended that defining the who of justice via dialogue will not alone produce change, “As soon as we accept that conflicts concerning the frame must be handled discursively, we need to envision a way in which public debates concerning the ‘who’ [can] eventuate in binding resolutions” (Fraser, 2009, p. 68). The following discussion of our last interview theme, explores the ways that our respondents indicated that art has influenced their ability to propose new frames.

Theme 3: Authorship

For Fraser (2009), the last and most important dimension of transformative social change is that the oppressed claim opportunities to (re)set the unjust frames shaped by dominant imaginaries. This chance to influence and author new frames is analogous to the concept of political authorship in Benhabib’s (2007, 2008) work. McCall (2005) has emphasized the importance of considering dance as a valid and insightful form of inquiry within the broader realm of the social sciences. She has explored various theoretical perspectives adopted in dance ethnography to highlight the art form’s potential to disrupt and subvert normative social structures. McCall (2005) underscored the value of dance as a means of knowledge production and of challenging existing social imaginaries and expanding one’s understanding of society. S. reflected on the importance of one of the Nucleus II class requirements, an assignment that requires participants to tour Maré, and argued that it has a discernible impact on students’ artistic expression and authorship,

The creative process goes beyond me making up or inventing or creating a move or a movement. A movement that is closed off in itself, that is about putting on some music and then moving to that music. We need an inspiration. Where do I take my inspiration from? What am I trying to say

with my choreography? What message am I trying to send? So, when I pass through these territories in Maré, I am able to see other realities, different realities and similar realities to my own. Some people in Maré live really well, some people live more or less well and others are suffering from hunger. So that opens my mind and that gives me a critical view of the space where I live and this helps me to create art. (S., March 16, 2022)

K. discussed choreography as her site of artistic creation:

Thinking about this issue of developing my own thoughts on certain things. [...] The culture of a place, the thought of a place, all the issues that are constructed and built in a favela, that is taken with us in our body because it becomes part of us. It becomes so much a part of each of us that I become the territory and the territory becomes me to the point that we then become a territory that travels. [...] I did a dance based on this that thinks about Negritude, favelas and issues of the body as a territory. I think that [dance piece] articulates all of these issues. (K., February 16, 2022)

The above observations from our interviewees offered multiple examples in which each indicated how their involvement in the arts—in dance specifically in this instance—prompted them to reflect on problematic features of the socially dominant frame and to ponder possibilities for engaging, exercising their agency, to change it. As community cultural development analysts have suggested, art making encourages participants to ponder not only their own place in the social order, but also to consider how others can so engage to allow a co-authorship of their future collectively. Our observations align with Lepecki's (2015) argument concerning the innately political character of choreography and dance,

The many tensions emerging between choreographic imperatives (or the illocutionary force of the score) on one hand, and their execution by dancers (or the materialization through labor, of those scored imperatives) on the other, reveal a particular political-aesthetic dimension that reflects, refracts, and attempts to answer one of the crucial questions of our times: how to claim agency for our movements and actions within our highly (even if subtly) choreographed societies of control, societies where, 'nothing is left alone for long'? (Lepecki, 2015, p. 44)

Conclusions

Former President Jair Bolsonaro was known for making repeated dehumanizing remarks about favela residents (Jornal Nacional, 2018). However, the demonization of Black favela residents is not limited to Bolsonaro. That is, it is not a state of exception in Brazil (Bledsoe, 2019). When political space is unjustly framed in this fundamental way, the result is the denial of political voice to those who are cast outside the universe of those who “count.” Thus, representation concerns the intersection of symbolic framing and democratic voice (Fraser, 2009).

This article has investigated a cultural development CSO dance program in Rio de Janeiro to examine the ways in which collective art making may contribute to challenging a misrepresentative and oppressive social imaginary. Our first question was whether and in what

ways individual/collective agency and engaging in community dance classes might be related. We learned during our interviews that each of our participants perceived themselves more capable of changing the conditions of their personal lives after participating in Redes dance programs. They suggested that they felt confident in formulating goals and aspirations and pursuing them as a result of their involvement with dance. As community cultural development analysts have argued, collective art making helped our study participants become more aware of, and to re-examine, their internalized cultural values and thereafter not only to shift those, but also to realize their innate power to encourage such change in others through their art and dialogue. Redes' dance programs encouraged our study participants to become more conscious of their own voice and agency as they also helped those individuals gain a clearer understanding of their community and their relationships to other residents within it. More concretely, and to a person, our interviewees suggested that their involvement in dance led to heightened personal awareness of their voice and individual and collective agency.

Our second question addressed the relationship between immersion in the arts and individuals' willingness to embark on efforts to seek change in how they are represented or misrepresented in the dominant social imaginary. Employing Fraser's (2007) conception of transformative change, we examined the influence of Redes da Maré's dance programs on participant awareness of existing frames, their capacity to question those and their ability to suggest/create fresh ones. Our interviewees all indicated that their engagement in the dance courses had helped them develop a much more robust and confident sense of self while also recognizing the importance of creating a political strategy to counter and ultimately replace the dominant frame of misrecognition.

More generally, the CSO's approach to culture as a right has challenged continued maldistribution of resources in various ways. First, participants indicated they had become more cognizant of their right as citizens to have access to cultural facilities akin to those found in wealthy neighborhoods. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Redes' efforts to ensure its program participants access to local culture, art making venues and performance areas have facilitated the preservation of favela art while simultaneously "awakening and mobilizing resistance to imposed cultural values" (Goldbard, 2006, p. 20).

Our interviewees indicated that their engagement in dance classes had encouraged their awareness of their individual roles in constructing social reality. Higher levels of epistemic awareness among the dance program participants we interviewed led each to heightened recognition of existing misrepresentations of favelados and their cultural values and living environment. Those we interviewed confirmed Benhabib's (2008) insight that deepened self-awareness is a precondition for personal and collective voice and authorship.

Fraser also argued that sustainable social change must arise from processes that permit the oppressed opportunities to question the frames that misrepresent them, or as Benhabib (2008) has put this point, to exercise their communicative agency. The dance program participants we interviewed stated that they had acquired both oral and performative expression capacities during their various practices and performances. While Redes self-consciously encourages dancers to voice their concerns during discussion circles, interviewees also saw the nonverbal expression of dance as a powerfully inclusive medium of self-expression, agency and voice.

Finally, Redes da Maré's community cultural approach has addressed the third step in Fraser's (2009) model—(re)setting the frames or, in Benhabib's conception, practicing authorship—through artistic creation. As Arlene Goldbard (2006), a leading advocate of community cultural development has contended, the art making "process reframes possibility [...]. I do not think of politics as being different from theatre. We are masks in the world. It is all about

enriching the theatricality in the daily life” (Goldbard, 2006, p. 53). Our interviewees likewise indicated they had felt free to challenge and even to offer alternative frames in their daily performances in order to highlight the lives to which they aspire for themselves and their community and to showcase the cultural values they hold most dear.

The limitations of this study included lack of physical access to interviewees due to geographic distance and the then existing COVID-19 situation in Brazil, which limited in-person dance classes. Future research can investigate the longitudinal effects of dance education for individuals from oppressed communities for their perceived personal agency and efficacy. Similar to other qualitative studies, the findings of this analysis are not statistically generalizable to other contexts, yet we hope that other scholars can benefit from the analytical generalizability that can arise from methodical use of the theoretical frame offered here. Finally, civil society actors, especially those subject to authoritarian and hybrid regimes, may see potentials in adopting dance education as a powerful form of communication to assist those they are serving in questioning dominant social frames and imagining more democratic futures.

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