

## ALESSANDRA AZEVEDO

### *Story of Self*

My earliest memory? I am seven years old and volunteering in the church my cousin had brought me to. I loved it -- there was music, and a piano, which I thought was so fancy – and there was a little book that I could hold with the songs, and even though I wasn't singing, I felt I was. I loved the ceremony, the talk about Jesus, the stories about love and compassion. It all resonated with me and my family life, which I remember being happy, in spite of the harshness of the world. Living in an underprivileged place, there were often made things happening around us, but we did our best to ignore them. Ever so often, catastrophe would enter our lives, there would be shock, and then things would settle down again.

Eventually, catastrophes became normalised, and at some point I knew I was lucky to reach my twenties and attend university, the first in my family. By that time, we had been without my father for nearly a decade. He was killed when I was 12 years old, and I still remember the feeling of shame going back to school, everyone knowing, thinking he was some kind of bandit, and my mom having to carry on, no time to grieve, back at work as a cleaner within three days. Everything changed then. The innocence of childhood was gone, my father was gone, but some of the things he knew and loved were alive in me.

Capoeira, something that my dad had first told me about, introduced me to my cultural roots, and a rooted spirituality, although I didn't know that then – but just like in the church, there was community, music and dance. While many friends were obsessed with the latest clothes, phones, shoes, I was more excited by rap & poetry, Brazilian literature, which felt like a secret protection against the waves of consumerist superficiality. But I had worked a bit in retail and found a flair for beauty and artistic expression through clothing, so when the Capoeira network led to an invitation to France when I was 21, I jumped at the chance.

I lasted three months, overwhelmed by the new language and culture, and the disappointing realisation that racism was everywhere, not just in Brasil. Still, the cultural caché of exposure to fashion and culture in Paris paid off when I returned to Brasil; I started to get better paid jobs, to feel more confident being myself, unafraid to shine in my own skin and with my afro hair. I never lost touch with Capoeira. It was always Capoeira and the people I knew in that community, that moved me in the world, and that eventually brought me to Ireland.

### *Story of Us*

Every migration story is unique. And every migration story shares with every other migration story elements of struggle and survival. In Ireland, sharing flats with up to 12 people in the middle of a housing crisis, being undocumented and exploited, a piece of paper between being a resident or an illegal alien, getting treated as second class citizens, getting sexualized and judged as Black, Brown or Asian women, working as cleaners, even working in strip clubs – that said, everything that people see as marginalised, shameful work, I did it proudly and took it as an opportunity to understand people and myself.

Another story that's often told about us is that we're brave and resilient, and while that's true, that comes at a high cost that many people can't talk about very easily. Mental health is still stigmatised in many places, including Ireland, where people who have suffered mental dis-ease have historically been shamed, put away, and disenfranchised from society. But is it not the sanest response for the mind to reject a violent and unjust reality?

After almost 4 years, the promise of a new life in Ireland was nowhere to be seen and I could feel a strong shift happening inside of me. I became very anxious, unable to sleep for days, hyper-sensitive and suspecting people around me of bad intentions, all the tell-tale signs leading to a breakdown. I was sure I could sense everyone's true intentions, which were often not good. Completely overwhelmed, I was brought to the Mental Health Hospital.

Many nurses are full of compassion, but mental health care is too often neither healthy nor caring. At the hospital, a nurse asked, barely bothering to be present with me, 'Alessandra, do you know what day it is today?' I responded quickly and proudly, 'it's my birthday', in response to which she summarily judged me unable to connect to reality, then paused, pen in hand, as she read on my chart that it was in fact my birthday! My Irish family were present in the room, and they still laugh about this moment. I was soon let out with prescriptions for pills, but there was no acknowledgement of or change in the conditions that had led to the breakdown. And like the catastrophes of my earlier life, these conditions felt too normal for too long. This can be the detrimental side of resilience, when you are conditioned to power through things that are crushing your spirit because it's the only way you know to live. This is too often the case for migrant women – by the time we have arrived in Ireland, we have already lived dozens of stories, dozens of lives and unimaginable struggles.

*Story of Now*

From the outside, you can say I've made it. From scraping by to taking courses at Trinity (where I had previously worked as a cleaner), being the first woman to teach Capoeira in Ireland, setting up an Afro-Brazilian dance group alongside Go Dance For Chance, getting invited to festivals and shows, gaining momentum, respect and sharing my ancestral art form with people, working with renowned choreographer John Scott and having our performance reviewed in the *Irish Times*. I am even seen as an ambassador of Afro-Brazilian culture by the Brazilian embassy, as I work on my own first major dance piece connecting Irish, west African Yoruba & afro-Brazilian culture and dance.

I'm proud and grateful to every hand that helped me along the way. And at the same time, I want to see a shift in the culture around the migrant struggle. It can't all be about fighting against the odds endlessly, about always needing to prove yourself as an activist, about pushing through everything. We also need to find the places of softness, to grieve and to rest, to give our bodies and minds the space and compassion they need to recover, and to process and integrate everything that happens.