

WOMEN IN FORRÓ | WORKSHOP KIT

GUIDE 7

WHOSE DANCE IS THIS?

Race, Belonging and the European Forró Scene

THIS GUIDE APPLIES TO:

FORMAT A
60 min class

FORMAT B
90 min festival

FORMAT C
dedicated event

FORMAT D
teachers + organisers

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This session asks the Forró community to look honestly at race: where the dance comes from, who holds authority in the European scene, and what responsibility sits with a predominantly white community that has inherited an Afro-Brazilian art form.

This is not a guilt session. It is a clarity session. The goal is not for people to leave feeling bad about dancing Forró. It is for people to leave with a clearer picture of what they are part of, and what they can choose to do differently.

Formats B and C are open community sessions. Format D is a closed session for teachers and organisers only. If you are running Format D, read the full guide first, then go to the Format D section.

FACILITATOR NOTES

A few things to hold as facilitator before you begin.

The history is real and worth naming. Forró has African, Indigenous, and European colonial roots. That is not a footnote. It is the ground the dance grew in.

The racial democracy myth travels. Brazil has a long history of presenting itself as a nation where race does not divide. European dancers sometimes import this framing without question. It is worth naming that this idea has been contested by Black Brazilian scholars and activists for decades.

The appreciation/appropriation debate tends to go in circles. This session does not try to resolve it. It goes to something more practical: what does care, credit, and accountability look like in this community, right now?

Discomfort is expected. White participants may become defensive. Participants of colour may feel visible in ways that are tiring. Name both possibilities at the start, and name that the facilitator is also in the room as a person with their own position in this history.

If the facilitator is white, name that at the start. It is not a disqualifier. It is information the room deserves.

If the facilitator is Brazilian or a person of colour, name that too, including that their position does not require them to represent all Brazilians or all people of colour.

Scene-specific dynamics appear as facilitator prompts only. The group brings the examples. Do not pre-load the room with scenarios.

HANDLING RESISTANCE

"But Forró is already a mix of cultures."

Acknowledge that yes, the historical roots are plural, and then hold the question: who holds power in the current scene? Cultural mixing in history does not neutralise racial dynamics in the present.

"I don't see colour / this is not relevant to Forró."

Do not argue. Ask: "What would it look like if it were relevant? What would we notice?"

If a participant of colour expresses frustration or exhaustion:

Do not ask them to educate the room. Acknowledge their presence, acknowledge that this work falls unevenly, and hold space without requiring them to perform their experience for others.

If the room becomes defensive:

Name it without accusation: "It sounds like some people are finding this uncomfortable. That makes sense. Can we stay with it a little longer?"

ON AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS

The European Forró scene is notable for being community-organised and comparatively affordable. Many communities work hard to keep ticket prices low and events accessible. This is worth naming as a genuine value. It does not, however, resolve the question of who the community is structurally set up for. Affordability and racial inclusivity are not the same thing, and one does not guarantee the other.

MATERIALS

Flipchart or alternative. In order of preference: flipchart or whiteboard, large paper taped to a wall, moderating cards or sticky notes laid out on the floor or a table with one point per card, a projected shared phone note. Bring your own materials. Flipcharts are often unavailable in Forró spaces.

Chairs optional. Floor seating is the default.

No printable cards needed for Formats B and C. Format D includes a closing commitments sheet (see annex).

WHY THIS SESSION

Forró grew in the rural Northeast of Brazil, one of the country's most Afro-Brazilian regions. It arrived in Europe carried by Brazilian migrants, and has since been taken up by European teachers and communities who have made it their own. That process has produced something real and valuable. It has also created distance from the culture's roots: the history, the people, the specific social conditions in which this music and dance were born.

The European Forró scene is predominantly white. That is not an accusation. It is an observation that is worth sitting with. This session asks: what does that mean for how the scene operates, who holds authority in it, and what gets passed on when we teach?

The European Forró scene is also, by the standards of partner dance communities, relatively accessible. Many communities are volunteer-run, keep ticket prices low, and actively try to create welcoming spaces. That effort is real and worth acknowledging. But accessibility in price does not automatically mean accessibility in belonging. Both things can be true at the same time.

This session is not about resolving the appropriation debate. It is about the community choosing to know what it is dancing, and deciding together what responsibility comes with that.

SESSION FORMATS

FORMAT B: 90 MINUTES (FESTIVAL COMMUNITY EXCHANGE)

Duration	90 minutes
Group size	15 to 40 participants
Setting	Festival workshop room, community space
Facilitator	Two facilitators recommended
Materials	Flipchart or alternative, sticky notes
Goal	Surface how race shapes belonging, authority, and cultural credit in the scene

FORMAT C: DEDICATED SAFER SPACE EVENT

Format C follows the same flow as Format B with extended time for each exercise and a longer closing. Allow 20 minutes for the closing and include Exercise 4 (see below), which is not used in Format B.

Duration	2.5 to 3 hours for this guide within a longer day
Group size	20 to 60 participants
Setting	Dedicated event space with breakout capacity
Facilitator	Two facilitators
Goal	Deep examination of race, cultural credit, and belonging; collective reflection on what the community wants to change

SESSION FLOW

FORMAT B

- Opening and ground rules (10 min)
- Exercise 1: The History We Dance In (20 min)
- Exercise 2: Who Is in the Room (20 min)
- Exercise 3: Care, Credit and the Dance We Inherited (25 min)
- Closing (15 min)

FORMAT C

- Opening and ground rules (15 min)
- Exercise 1: The History We Dance In (25 min)
- Exercise 2: Who Is in the Room (25 min)
- Exercise 3: Care, Credit and the Dance We Inherited (35 min)
- Exercise 4: What the Scene Reinforces (30 min)
- Closing (20 min)

OPENING

Welcome the group. Establish ground rules:

- One voice at a time.
- Speak from your own experience. Use "I" not "the community always" or "Brazilians never."
- What is said here stays here.
- You can pass on any question.
- Discomfort is expected. Disrespect is not.
- We are examining patterns, not judging individuals.

Name the session topic directly. Something like:

"Forró has African, Indigenous and European roots. The scene we are sitting in right now is mostly white and mostly European. This session is about that gap, not to resolve it, but to look at it clearly and talk about what it means for how we run our communities."

Ask one opening question to the whole group. No discussion yet, just a moment of individual reflection:

"When did you first learn that Forró has African roots?"

Hold that. You will return to it at the close.

EXERCISES

EXERCISE 1: THE HISTORY WE DANCE IN

Purpose: establish a shared factual base for the session. Not a lecture. A facilitated input with space for reaction as it goes.

The facilitator shares the following, keeping it conversational and inviting brief responses throughout. This is not a presentation. It is an opening of the ground.

WHAT TO COVER

Forró grew in the rural Northeast of Brazil, one of the country's poorest and most Afro-Brazilian regions. The rhythms at its base, particularly in forró pé de serra, carry African roots brought by enslaved people. The instruments are a meeting point: the accordion arrived with European immigrants, the zabumba drum carries African lineage, and the triangle connects to both.

The dance and music were working-class and northeastern. For much of the twentieth century, people from the southeast of Brazil looked down on forró as rural and backward. It was associated with migration, poverty, and Blackness, and those associations were not flattering in a country shaped by the idea that whiteness was progress.

Forró universitário emerged in university towns in southeast Brazil from the 1980s and 90s. It is the version most European scenes practice. It was shaped by more urban, middle-class, and whiter Brazilians than those who built the original culture. The class and race dynamics of that shift are worth naming.

Forró arrived in Europe carried largely by Brazilian migrants. It has since been taken up and taught by European teachers as well. Many of those original Brazilian migrants were not from the Northeast, and many did not have deep roots in the original culture. The dance arrived already transformed, and has continued to transform as it has moved through European hands.

Then open to the group:

- What did you know of this before today?
- What were you taught when you learned to dance?
- What was left out?

Capture responses on the flipchart or alternative. Do not evaluate or debate at this stage. Just collect.

FACILITATOR NOTE

Some participants will want to discuss whether forró universitário counts as appropriation within Brazil. That is a valid thread and can be named as such, but do not let it absorb the session. Return to the question of what this community, here, does with this history.

EXERCISE 2: WHO IS IN THE ROOM

Purpose: move from history to the present. An observation exercise, not a confession exercise.

Ask participants to work in pairs or small groups of three. Give them these questions one at a time, with a short pause between each.

- Think about the last three Forró festivals you attended. How many of the teachers were Black or brown? How many were Brazilian? How many were European? Are those different questions?
- Look at the promotional material for events in your scene. Whose bodies are visible? Whose are not?
- When you see a Black or brown person at a Forró event, what do you assume? That they are Brazilian? That they are a strong dancer? That they belong there? Sit with that honestly.
- When you see a white European at a Forró event, what do you assume?

Bring the groups back together. Ask: what came up? What felt uncomfortable? What surprised you?

FACILITATOR NOTE

Some participants may say "I don't see colour" or "Forró is for everyone." Acknowledge that the intention behind those statements is often genuine, and then gently note that the question is not about intention but about what the scene actually looks like and who it is structurally set up for.

EXERCISE 3: CARE, CREDIT AND THE DANCE WE INHERITED

Purpose: move from observation to responsibility. This is the session's central discussion.

Frame it clearly before opening it up:

"There is a debate in many social dance communities about whether learning and teaching a dance from another culture is appropriation. That debate tends to go in circles. What tends to be more useful is a different question: what does it look like to engage with this culture with care and accountability? What would we be doing differently if we took that seriously?"

Offer these prompts to the whole group:

- Do you know the names of any Black Brazilian Forró musicians? Any from the Northeast? What does it mean that you may not?
- When a Brazilian teacher comes to your community, are they invited for their cultural knowledge, or for their body and their technique? Is there a difference? What about European teachers who teach Forró: what are they understood to carry?
- Does your community teach any history alongside the steps?
- What would it mean to credit the roots of this dance in the way you talk about it, teach it, and promote it?

Let the group find its own conversation. Hold space for disagreement. It is fine if people arrive at different answers. The goal is that people have thought it through, not that they have agreed.

FACILITATOR NOTE

If the group goes quiet, a useful push is: "What would you want a Forró community to look like for someone who is Black and Brazilian and living in your city? What would they need to feel genuinely at home, not just temporarily welcomed?"

EXERCISE 4: WHAT THE SCENE REINFORCES (FORMAT C ONLY)

Purpose: a short structured reflection to close the exercise sequence before the full group closing.

Ask: without naming anyone, what patterns do you notice in your scene that connect to what we have discussed today?

Let people speak. Capture on the flipchart or alternative.

Then ask: what is one thing, structural or cultural, that you think your scene could change?

This is an observation exercise, not a commitment exercise. Commitments are for Format D. For Formats B and C, the goal is clarity.

CLOSING

Return to the opening question: "When did you first learn that Forró has African roots?"

Ask if anyone wants to answer it now in a different way than they might have at the start.

Close honestly. Not a call to action, not a round of applause. Something like:

"This is an ongoing conversation, not a topic that gets resolved in one session. What matters is that we are willing to keep having it."

Remind the group that what was said here stays here.

FORMAT D

FOR TEACHERS AND ORGANISERS

Closed session | 90 minutes | Peer-to-peer

This format is for people who hold a teaching or organisational role in the Forró community: teachers, teaching assistants, festival organisers, DJs, and anyone who regularly shapes the experience of others in the scene. It is a closed, peer-to-peer session.

The questions here are operational and deliberately uncomfortable. That is intentional. The people who run the scene have the most direct influence over who feels at home in it.

Duration	90 minutes
Group size	4 to 15 people
Setting	Private, not open to general participants
Facilitator	One person, ideally with peer authority in the group. Facilitator also participates in the exercises.
Materials	Commitments sheet (see annex), flipchart or alternative
Goal	Surface how booking, programming, teaching, and community decisions reproduce or challenge racial dynamics in the scene

OPENING (10 MIN)

Establish the Chatham House rule: what is said here stays here. People may share that the conversation happened, but not who said what.

Name the session directly:

"We are not here because any of us are doing it wrong. We are here because the people who run this scene have the most influence over how it feels to be in it, including for people who are not in this room."

Run the same opening question as Formats B and C:

"When did you first learn that Forró has African roots?"

Take brief responses. No discussion yet.

ROUND 1: THE HISTORY WE DANCE IN (20 MIN)

Run Exercise 1 as written above. In Format D, the facilitator participates in the reflection rather than standing outside it. The question at the end is adjusted:

"As someone who teaches or runs events: what history do you pass on alongside the steps? What do you leave out?"

ROUND 2: STRUCTURAL QUESTIONS (45 MIN)

This is the section that distinguishes Format D from the open community formats. The questions are about what participants actually do with the authority they hold.

Introduce the round:

"The previous round was about awareness. This one is about practice. These questions do not have clean answers. If you run this scene, you have responsibility to sit with them."

Work in small groups of three to four. Each group takes one or two of the following questions and reports back.

THE BOOKING QUESTION

The European scene now has both Brazilian and European teachers. When you book a Brazilian teacher specifically, what are you paying for? Their technical skill? Their cultural knowledge? Their Brazilianness as an aesthetic quality? Are you paying them at the same rate as a European teacher of equivalent standing? If not, why not?

THE CREDIT QUESTION

Does your event, your school, your promotional material name the roots of Forró? Not as a footnote, but as part of how you present the dance? If you removed the word "Brazilian" from everything you do, what would be lost? What would that tell you?

THE ACCESS QUESTION

The Forró scene in Europe is comparatively affordable and often community-organised. Many communities make a genuine effort to keep events financially accessible. That matters. And it is worth asking alongside it: who still does not come? Who is not reached by your promotional channels? Who may find the social environment itself unwelcoming, regardless of ticket price? When you picture the person your community is for, what do they look like?

THE EXPERTISE QUESTION

Who in your scene is treated as a cultural authority on Forró? Is that connected to their actual knowledge of the culture's roots, or to their status and visibility in the European scene? Are those the same people?

THE SILENCE QUESTION

Has race been discussed openly in your scene before today? If not, why not? Who has the power to start that conversation? Who bears the cost if it goes badly?

Bring the groups back. Each group shares what came up. The facilitator does not resolve or summarise. Hold the discomfort.

CLOSING COMMITMENT (15 MIN)

This is not a personal intentions exercise. It is a structural commitments exercise.

Ask each participant to write down on the commitments sheet one thing they will do differently in how they run or contribute to their scene. Not a feeling. Not a goal. A practice.

Examples offered as prompts, not as expected answers:

- I will add historical context to how I introduce Forró in my classes.
- I will ask the next Brazilian teacher I book whether my fee is fair, and listen to the answer.
- I will make sure that the promotional images for my next event do not only show white bodies.
- I will read one thing written by a Black Brazilian about culture and race.
- I will start one conversation about race in my scene in the next three months.

Participants keep their sheet. It is not collected. Chatham House rule applies.

Close the same way as Formats B and C. Return the opening question. Close honestly, without resolution.

ANNEX

FORMAT D COMMITMENTS SHEET

Cut-out section, one per person. Chatham House rule applies to this session.

COMMITMENTS SHEET

One structural commitment I am taking from this session:

One conversation I will start in my scene:

One thing I want to learn more about:

This sheet is yours. It will not be shared. Chatham House rule applies to this session.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER GUIDES IN THIS KIT

GUIDE	CONNECTION
Guide 3: Bystander to Ally	The bystander framework is relevant when someone raises race in a scene and is shut down. That is a bystander moment. Guide 3 gives tools for it.
Guide 4: Power in the Scene	Cultural capital, symbolic capital, and gatekeeping are all operating in what this session examines. Facilitators comfortable with the Circle of Power framework may want to name those connections explicitly in Exercise 3.
Guide 5: The Box We Dance In	Guide 5 examines culture clash between Brazilian and Northern European norms. This session goes further: it asks who has the power to define what is normal in the first place.

FOLLOW-UP READING

These resources are offered for participants and facilitators who want to go further after the session. They are starting points, not a reading list.

ON FORRÓ AND BRAZILIAN CULTURAL HISTORY

Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil* (1999). Examines how music from marginalised, Afro-Brazilian communities became nationalised and whitened in the process.

ON RACE IN BRAZIL

Abdias do Nascimento, *Brazil: Mixture or Massacre?* (1979, English translation 1989). A foundational text by a Black Brazilian activist and scholar on the myth of racial democracy.

Lélia Gonzalez, essays collected in *Primavera para as Rosas Negras* (2018, Portuguese). One of Brazil's most important Black feminist thinkers. Not yet fully translated into English; excerpts are available online.

ON CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND SOCIAL DANCE

Juliet McMains, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* (2015). Examines how Latin dances travel, transform, and get commercially and racially repackaged in the Global North. Not about Forró specifically, but directly relevant.

SwingStep, *Lindy Hop and Anti-Racism* (available at swingstep.com). Written for the Lindy Hop community but applicable to any predominantly white community dancing a Black art form.

ON ANTI-RACISM PRACTICE

Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017). Written from a British context; useful for European readers new to structural racism as a concept.

Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019). Accessible introduction to anti-racist frameworks.

SOURCE MATERIAL

This guide draws on the following sources, adapted for the social dance community context:

- HeForShe Barbershop Toolkit 2.0 (2025), UN Women. Module 7: Intersectionality and Inclusive Masculinities; Module 9: Men and Boys as Allies for Gender Justice.
- The historical framing in Exercise 1 draws on the body of knowledge produced by Black Brazilian scholars and activists on race, culture, and the myth of racial democracy, particularly the work of Abdias do Nascimento and Lélia Gonzalez.