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Joseph Spir Rechani

Abstract

¿Majestad Negra? looks at the intersection between race, national identity, and music. The film shows the powerful and sonically immersive world of Bomba, an Afro Puerto Rican music genre, and how it evolved from its racialized, highly stigmatized past through the diaspora of Puerto Ricans to North Philadelphia. The expérences seeks to converse with BOMPLÉ by looking at Bomba as conductor of a constructed, mixed-raced Puerto Rican sense of belonging for islanders living in the diaspora, in a city like Philadelphia. This multimodal project ultimately grounds itself in the questions, what does it mean to be Puerto Rican; how is Puertoricanness being exhibited and reimagined through Bomba; and how has the blackness of Bomba persisted over time?

Por la encendida calle Antillana...

Down the scorching Antillean street...

Alberto and Tony do a drumroll, silencing the murmurs of visitors making small talk and grabbing the attention of everyone in the room. The *barriles* create an all-encompassing echo as their beating hits the white marble columns of Parkway Central Library. The first verse of Luis Palés Matos' "Majestad Negra" ("Black Majesty") comes to life, and the camera's microphone fails to resist its intensity. The sound is lost for a few seconds as my co-filmmaker, Arantxa, tries to adjust the input level.

The lens catches Kim—the dancer of the group—ready to flaunt her long, red skirt by grabbing the ends and bringing them up to her hips. Her skirt contrasts with the traditional white blouse that *bailadoras* use. Tony follows the compass of Alberto, who plays the *barril primo*, the drum that converses with the dancer and creates *piquetes*, responses to the dancer’s callings. The lineup is completed by me, in charge of playing the maraca, leaning against the rail and, truthfully, unprepared for my cue.

*Va Tembandumba de la Quimbamba
Rumba, macumba, candombe, bámbula...*

*Walks Tembandumba of the Quimbamba
Rumba, macumba, candombe, bámbula...*

I try to catch up to them as they slow down their pace. The *seco* and *hondo* beats start following the rhythm of the words of the repeated line, making an ever-so-slightly longer pause every three syllables, elongating every “um”, “dom”, and “bam”.

“Rum, ba-ma-cum, ba-can-dom, be-bam, bu-la//Rum, ba-ma-cum, ba-can-dom, be-bam bu-la.” I’m only able to follow through after the second ‘Rum, ba.’

*... Entre dos filas de negras caras.
Ante ella un congo--gongo y maraca--
ritma una conga bomba que bamba...*

*... Between two rows of black faces.
Before her, a congo--gongo and maraca--
Thumps a bombastic conga that pounds...*

The rhythms of the *barriles* settle to a slow-paced *Sicá* that is accompanied by the sand-like sound of the maraca, which peaks at every other beat of the drum. The *barriles* become agents of their own: it is no longer four bodies performing but six. Their hollow bottoms make the ground tremble. The people sitting near us adjust themselves as they feel the vibrations clashing against their feet.

*... Culipandeando la Reina avanza,
Y de su inmensa grupa resbalan
Meneos cachondos que el congo cuaja
En ríos de azúcar y de melaza.*

*... Seductively the Queen steps up,
And from her immense croup there slip
Seductive grinds that the congo embraces
In curdled rivers of sugar and molasses.*

*Prieto trapiche de sensual zafra,
El caderamen, masa con masa,
Exprime ritmos, suda que sangra,
Y la molienda culmina en danza...*

*Dark mill of sweet sensation,
Her grandiose hips, cheek to cheek,
Squeeze rhythms, sweat until they bleed,
And all this grinding ends in dance...*

The performance has now become a hybrid between spoken word and musical act. Kim joins in by doing a two-step sidestep and creating waves with her skirt as she moves from side to side. The skirt is a character in her own right—she speaks for herself, she wants to make the floor of the Philadelphian library an authentic Puerto Rican *batey*.

*Flor de Tórtola, rosa de Uganda,
Por ti crepitan bombas y bámbulas;
Por ti en calendas desenfrenadas
Quema la Antilla su sangre ñáñiga.*

*Flower of Tórtola, rose of Uganda,
For you the bombas and bambulas crackle.
For you these feverish nights go wild
And set fire to the Antillean ñáñiga blood.*

*Haití te ofrece sus calabazas;
Fogosos rones te da Jamaica;
Cuba te dice: ¡dale, mulata!
Y Puerto Rico: ¡melao, melamba!*

*Haiti offers you its gourds;
Jamaica pours its fiery rums;
Cuba tells you, bring it on, mulatta!
And Puerto Rico; melao, melamba!*

The *barriles* speed up, and the poem-turned-song intensifies. My hand starts to hurt after struggling to find and keep the right tempo to satisfy the demands of the drums. Kim's skirt has taken flight, and she is now a ferocious sea of red. The sounds emitted by the drums are blended together, so much so that now there appear to be five, ten drums beating *au par*.

*...Sus, mis cocolos de negras caras.
Tronad, tambores; vibrad, maracas.*

*...Relax, my adored cocolos of black faces.
Jangle, drums; tremble, maracas*

Right before "*tronad, tambores*," a pause. It allows me, us, the instruments, and everyone in the audience to catch their breath. A second drumroll comes in, this one even more passionate than the previous one. *Vibrad, maracas* is my cue to let the maraca embrace the song.

*Por la encendida calle Antillana
--Rumba, macumba, candombe, bámbula--
Va Tembandumba de la Quimbamba.*

*Down the scorching Antillean street
--Rumba, macumba, candombe, bámbula--
Goes Tembandumba of the Quimbamba.*

The same "Rum, ba-ma-cum, ba-can-dom, be-bam, bu-la//Rum, ba-ma-cum, ba-can-dom, be-bam bu-la" is repeated. The *barriles* blast off their sound into the open air. The beat is faster than I could have ever expected. As he finishes his third repetition, Alberto lets out a scream. There is one last *seco* beat, followed by the roaring of drums and the applause of the spectators, who gaze in awe. So begins Bomplé's performance in the Philadelphia Central Library.

Please see the link for the accompanying video:

<https://vimeo.com/680412619/59d1a37845>

BOMPLÉ, a documentary by Joseph Spir Rechani

Bomplé is one of three Bomba music groups in Philadelphia. Though there have been many member transitions throughout the years, the group has always tried to maintain at least four members. I joined Bomplé in the Fall of 2019, about a week before our performance in the library, though I had been going to Bomba classes for a while. This was the first public demonstration of my skills, my passion for Bomba, and the months of practice that I had whilst also collecting ethnographic material. Through Bomplé, we are able to represent an island that has been subjected to several colonizers and broken by political regimes, economic negligence, and natural disasters. This constant battering has, in effect, made many of us feel increasingly proud of our shared heritage, one that combines the different races that have inhabited the island. However, despite such a narrative, Bomba in and of itself is unequivocally, proudly, unapologetically Black. The story of Bomba is a story of diaspora, a story of slavery, a story of mutiny. It is the story of Loíza, and San Antón, and *negritud*.

“Majestad Negra” is a poem that highlights the Black Caribbean and specifically the Black Puerto Rico—non-autochthonous, forced, brutalized, emancipated, and assimilated into a made-up “culture.” Yet none of the performers—including me—are Black. How did we, a group of Puerto Ricans who don’t identify as Black, get to perform the epitome of the poetic and musical celebration of Puerto Rican blackness, and what does it mean that we did? Complicated as this is, Luis Palés Matos, the author of “Majestad Negra” and a pillar amongst Black Antillean Poetry, was an affluent, White Puerto Rican coming from a well-standing family in San Juan, the capital of the island and the city where Black enslaved people fled from so they could create their own communities within the periphery.

The history of blackness is by no means forgotten in our performance—rather, I believe we have created somewhat of an ode to Bomba’s blackness. But, this history has been muddled through the years by the intervention of races—races that ultimately make what is commonly known across the island and within Puerto Rican diasporic communities as the “Puerto Rican racial tríflecta.” Likely as a cause of the diaspora, this tríflecta has molded the Puerto Rican nation into its own enclave, engulfed by an imperialistic majority.

The marginalization of Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia, and more broadly in the Continental U.S., is an aspect of diasporic life repeatedly reflected in conversation and observations, as well as in my own life. Kim has talked with me about being stereotyped, being looked at differently because of her parents’ accent, and being a minority in a predominantly White environment in Delaware. Roberto, another member of Bomplé, told me stories about growing up in the midst of gang wars in Philadelphia and the humiliation of being stopped and frisked just for the color of his skin or the way he spoke. Alberto, the most outspoken member of the group, shared the constant “Othering” he and other Puerto Ricans faced in Philadelphia. He describes being constantly and openly seen as non-White citizens, or subcitizens. Despite this social and institutional disenfranchisement, or maybe as a result of it, Bomba has been a way for Alberto to connect to the island, as it is what he calls “the voice of a people and a nation.” Kim and Roberto echoed his thoughts, speaking of the history that comes with each beating of the drum, the heritage that comes with each song. I’ve certainly felt that too—the feeling that Bomba comes from my island, and the desire to circle around and sing, dance, and enjoy the music that suddenly takes over me. I’ve felt it with Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia. I’ve felt it with Puerto Ricans on the island.

What once symbolized the story of Black Puerto Rico became what is now the story of Puerto Rico—a community that has been ousted, disregarded, and left in misery. Bomba, which once was by and for communities of freed enslaved people in the periphery of the island’s capital, is now the same for the communities of Puerto Ricans in the periphery of Pennsylvania’s cultural capital. The ‘Othering’ of Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia has felt, for many, like the ‘Othering’ of Black Puerto Ricans in the island. Black or not, Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia suffer from a shared struggle. The powerful sounds of Bomba echo through rooms and buildings of the historical capital of the United States, chanting between the lines that they are present, that their roots are now and forever

ingrained in the city streets. Bomba is an artistic way of evoking mutiny—one that I have had the privilege to be able to study and that I am now a part of.

This multimodal exploration of Bomba started as two separate projects: a poetic documentary showcasing the presence of Bomba in the city of Philadelphia and a conventional research paper on understanding Puerto Rican diasporic racial politics. It was not until the first editing process for the short film that I realized that imagery and sound itself could not—and would not—capture the complete nuances of Bomba, for it is, in and of itself, tied to a complicated history of race, racism, racial survival and racial erasure. Without the proper words, the film would have likely done more harm than good in expanding the narrative of the (Black) Puerto Rican diaspora. Yet, without seeing and hearing Bomba, a research paper would have followed the limited data-driven and detached literature of the (Black) Puerto Rican diasporic experience in Philadelphia.

As I became more knowledgeable about Bomba, the Puerto Rican diaspora, and North Philadelphia, I started embracing a project that would try to honor their respective complexities. I am a White Puerto Rican, and my first-hand experiences with Bomba came primarily from an academic perspective. Thus, I decided to make a collaborative film where I could take an active, participatory role and try to balance my insider knowledge with my outsider standing. Exploring Bomba as a Puerto Rican means celebrating the music that originated on my island. Exploring Bomba as a White Puerto Rican means that neither I nor my ancestors are part of the gruesome history, physical and psychological violence, generational trauma, or neglected peripheral communities that birthed Bomba. I was, and am, an outsider to something that became the musical and folkloric representation of my island: I am an outsider to my own cultural manifestation.

This project had to be multimodal because Bomba *is* multimodal in nature. The Puerto Rican, and specifically Black Puerto Rican, cultural impact within Philadelphia could not only be shown through film and sound, so I explored them through words that attempt to complement and broaden their context. Combining sound, visuals, poetic narrative, and reflective analysis in the same project allowed it to become fuller, yet I am aware of the limitations I am presented with by virtue of who I am and who I am not. I do not intend to explain Bomba or Puerto Rican racial politics; I merely hope this project showcases a fraction of the layers of what Bomba is, what the Puerto Rican diaspora is, and of who Alberto, and Kim, and Roberto are.

Alberto takes to the microphone. “This music is only from Puerto Rico. It has an African influence, as everything in Puerto Rico, which is something that some people don’t know. It was created, born in a poor neighborhood... very similar to hip hop.” He continues talking about the history of Bomba. “It’s a very old music, brought to Puerto Rico by African slaves, and eventually it got mixed as the people mixed themselves with Spaniards and Taíno Indians. Everything got mixed, and that’s what we are.”

I pick up the maraca again and prepare to continue performing Puerto Rico’s folkloric music—Puerto Rico’s Black music—in front of Philadelphians, as part of Bomplé. The songs we perform are collections of stories from communities of freed enslaved people. They are odes to an African past, one that did not involve any other race. They are representations of a present that succumbs them to an “Othering” in Puerto Rican society. I perform very well knowing that what, for some, is their strongest connection to the island, for others, was—and still is—their strongest connection away from the island. Ultimately, the music that echoes through our instruments brings out the beauty and the fault of Puerto Rico’s racial politics. It brings out the beauty and the fault of Boma.

Joe is a graduate from Haverford College, where he studied Anthropology, with minors in Spanish and Visual Studies, and a concentration in Latin American Studies. At his core, he is interested in the intersection of diaspora, performance, and latinx identity/ies, all through the lens of the camera. His senior thesis was awarded high honors, and his documentary, BOMPLÉ, was shown at the 2020 Philadelphia Latino Film Festival. He is a lifelong polyglot, inquirer, and emerging leader. He currently lives in Lewiston, Maine where he works in Higher Education.