New York Bomba: Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and a Bridge Called Haiti

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It must have been around 1995, and I had just witnessed an energetic performance by the Brooklyn-based Haitian roots music ensemble Dja-Rara at a show produced by the Caribbean Cultural Center in a large Manhattan theater space. Dja-Rara’s main dancer had particularly captivated me: a short, stocky, young, light-skinned man with a rotund and bouncy belly. His moves were equal parts aqueous and fiery, stern and graceful—a beauty to behold.

I was still electrified by the musicians and dancers who had left the stage only minutes before and was only half listening to the mistress of ceremony, who was waxing eloquent about the cultural similarities between Latinos and other African descendants. The next group scheduled to perform was from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and her words were geared toward making the linkages between them and Dja-Rara.

A male voice behind me protested loudly, “Latino? Oh, hell, no!”

Murmurs of approval floated toward me from the same direction. I was tempted to look back but resisted the impulse.

When the mistress of ceremony said the word \textit{Latino} again, the same voice exclaimed, “We gotta stop with that ‘Latino’ thing. It just separates us from each other. If we’re black, we’re black. That’s it.”

I finally looked in his direction. He was only two rows behind me. It was the dancer from Dja-Rara, surrounded by a few other members of the group. My eyes met his bright yellow gaze, his impish smile.

Later that night, a mutual friend introduced us in the theater lobby. His
name was José Figueroa. A Dominican in his midtwenties, he was born in New York City, raised between the Dominican Republic and New York.

I did not know then that, over the next decade, his path would cross mine many, many times. Back then I considered myself a music enthusiast, not a performer, so there was no way I could have suspected that we would become fellow members of the Afro-Dominican musical group Pa’lo Monte or that he would become my teacher, an important member of my immediate artistic community, and a key individual in the musical work that would be the axis of my intellectual, artistic, and social life in New York City for the next ten years.

Back when I met Figueroa, I was conducting my dissertation research on the role of New York Puerto Ricans in hip-hop culture. His bold interjections from the audience at the Caribbean Cultural Center’s show struck me for many reasons, in part because they echoed the sentiments of a Puerto Rican MC by the name of Q-Unique that I had recently interviewed who also resented the label Latino. But Q-Unique’s qualm with Latino had to do with Puerto Rican ethnic identity being subsumed under the Latino panethnic umbrella so that Puerto Rican specificities were glossed over. Q-Unique also disliked the erroneous and much-too-common assumption that Puerto Rican connections to African Americans were more tenuous than their connection to other Latino groups. It was not that Q-Unique identified as African American or black; on the contrary, he resented just as much being lumped under the African American or black umbrella. It was just that Q-Unique felt culturally and experientially closer to African Americans than to Chicanos—to bring in the concrete example he used at the time.2

While José Figueroa, like Q-Unique, also had qualms with the label Latino, the former’s main objection was completely different: rather than the erasure of his national/ethnic identity, Figueroa took exception to having his ethnoracial identity as an African descendant and a black man from the Dominican Republic subsumed under the panethnic rubric. Figueroa is not alone either in his objections or in his commitment to combating—as an artist and cultural activist—the prevalent discourses of Latinidad (Latinoness), which claim to include blackness as a constitutive element yet also insist that the result is other than black.3 He is part of a vocal and active transnational network of artists, scholars, educators, and activists who have, in the last decade, been stepping up a long legacy of efforts that promote a vision of the African diaspora that fully includes the Luso-Hispanic black Atlantic. One individual in that wider transnational network, Figueroa has also, for years, been an important fixture within
a microcosm of folks who make and promote Caribbean roots music in New York. It is their efforts that I chronicle here.

This essay is a fragment of an ethnography (and a love letter of sorts) of an extended circle of New York musicians and dancers, most of them Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who also double as educators, cultural workers, and activists. Though an intergenerational group, I focus on those in their teens, twenties, and thirties. Through this discussion, I seek to document the artistic creativity, beauty, ideas, potential, and contradictions of a musical/social scene—a microcosm that I am also a part of.

My focus in this essay is these artists’ foregrounding of Afro-diasporic expressions, traditions, myths, knowledge, identities, and solidarities for aesthetic, political, philosophical, social, cultural, educational, and spiritual reasons—a foregrounding that questions the hegemonic notions of Latin American/Latino nationality/ethnicity/panethnicity that, under the guise of inclusiveness, perpetuate the marginalization of blackness. Through their praxis, these artists counter the dominant approaches, efforts, pronouncements, and projects that claim to be celebrating “our black traditions” (*nuestras tradiciones negras*) but that arguably succeed in colonizing, folklorizing, taming, and bringing these traditions back around to the business-as-usual white supremacist, Eurocentric, or “racial mixing as panacea” fold.

Though ranging widely in terms of phenotype, the majority of the artists I write about here are black-identified—and all of them are fiercely invested in centering blackness and combating racist hierarchies. Their explicit black identification is an important tool in the artistic work that I document. However, this essay will not be devoted to grappling with the “contested politics of naming.”

Robert Farris Thompson has often invoked the poignant image of New York as the crossroads of Afro-diasporic cultures. Hip-hop, salsa, dancehall, boogaloo, Latin soul, Latin funk, Cubop, and Latin jazz are but a few of his musical examples. The musical practices I discuss in this essay are contemporary testimony to the fact that New York is still a crossroads of the African diaspora. This image of the New York crossroads where the Puerto Rican and Dominican musicians featured here meet is just as important to this essay as the concept of Haiti as the mythical bridge that connects Dominicans and Puerto Ricans to each other, to the rest of the African diaspora, to ancestral knowledge, and to themselves. In a way, New York is the physical crossroads, while Haiti is the mythical/spiritual bridge—kind of like Guinee/Ginen has served for Haitians, as one of the artists I focus on in this article sharply observes.
NATIONALIZING AND TRANSNATIONALIZING BOMBA

Bomba is an umbrella term that describes the oldest known Afro–Puerto Rican music. Probably developed during the seventeenth century, it encompasses numerous subgenres—known as seises, sones, golpes—like yubá, calindá, sicá, cunyá, bambulaé, and numerous others. Many of these same (or similar) terms or rhythmic patterns are/were found in Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad, the Virgin Islands, and the southern United States, among other locales. Bomba lyrics often incorporate words derived from Kongo-Bantu languages and Haitian Kreyòl, among many other linguistic sources.⁹

Among the best-known examples of Kreyòl-derived bomba lyrics is the following song that mixes Spanish and the Puerto Ricanized version of Haitian Kreyòl. By no means an obscure example, it is part of what has become the “bomba canon” as practiced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in Puerto Rico and the diaspora.

*Miserere congo misié
¿Dónde está mi congo laré?

In an unpublished manuscript, Carlos “Tato” Torres translates the lyrics into Kreyòl as

*Misey Kongo Misey
¿Kotè ma Kongo Larèn?

He translates the same lines into English as

*My Sir Kongo My Sir
Where is my Kongo Queen?¹¹

As Torres notes in his analysis of this song, the Haitian influence is both linguistic and spiritual. While the song makes mention of the family of spirits in Vodou known as Larèn Kongo, other bombas pay homage to the *lwa, or spirit, Damballah, as evidenced by the title of “Damba Yaribe”¹² (in English, “Damballah/the Holy Serpent Has Arrived”), a song recorded in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico by the anthropologist J. Alden Mason. Damballah is also referenced in the following song collected by María Cadilla and cited by Luis Alvarez Nazario.
Dambambá, tinguiní;
que la culebra comió el aji;
Dambambá, tinguiní,
ño Sico baila, culebra, aji.\textsuperscript{13}

Widely acknowledged to be the most heavily African of Puerto Rican musical traditions, bomba is popularly explained as an exemplary product of the mythical racial trilogy that purportedly underlies the Puerto Rican cultural expressions branded "national."\textsuperscript{14} Bomba is often described as a result of the combination of three "cultures": Taíno, Spanish, and African.\textsuperscript{15} Each of these cultures is frequently explained as visible in bomba through clichéd (and often misleading) characteristics. Thus, for example, the use of maracas, or gourd rattles, is identified as being of Taíno origin, but these were musical instruments also present in the African continent prior to the European colonization of the Americas; lyrics that are unintelligible to a general public today are assumed either to have always been gibberish\textsuperscript{16} or to have been derived from African languages, but they have often been imported from the creolized languages of neighboring Caribbean islands; and the "traditional" style of dancing and dress of performing groups is explained as deriving from Spanish sources, eliding how these "traditions" have been partly invented and partly reconstructed by privileging and branding as "national" the traditions of certain social sectors at certain points in time.\textsuperscript{17}

The 2001 Banco Popular–sponsored music special \textit{Raíces}, though offering a more complex than usual portrait of bomba through the incorporation of multiple voices, narratives, and perspectives, still reiterates the much-touted trilogy.\textsuperscript{18} The myth of the racial trilogy purports to emphasize and promote Puerto Rican ethnoracial diversity and inclusiveness, but it has actually been a central tenet of Hispanophilia and Afrophobia, Latin American–style.

In an article dedicated to examining the "folklorization" of blackness in Puerto Rico, Isar P. Godreaux argues that—the celebration of the racial trilogy notwithstanding—it is Hispanic heritage that is seen as the "essence" of the nation and that blackness, when and if celebrated, is construed as an exception. She writes,

Racial purity is, in that sense, only recognized in the past, while mixture is understood as the mark of the present. Yet, while race is mixed and de-essentialized at this point, the cultural outcome of that hybridity is construed as a homogenous national product. As a result, when the phenotypic and cultural
signs of blackness are celebrated in their own terms they are often rendered as remnants of a past era that has been replaced by a modern, mixed present.¹⁹

The nation and national culture, coded as racially “mixed,” are usually celebrated without an acknowledgment of the power relations that have informed them and continue to inform them. Bomba and plena—the genres Halbert Barton has described as the “color-coded folkloric dyad” that functions as a euphemism for “black people’s music”²⁰—are thus paid tribute to, most notably by the state, while concealing “how such creations were forged in the context of discriminatory practices that still persist.”²¹

Bomba has been praised as “black people’s ballet” and “black people’s minuet” in Puerto Rico, most notably by singer Ruth Fernández.²² She quoted her own aphorism for the cameras in the Raíces 2001 music special. Already in her late eighties when the filming took place, she starred in some of its most poignant moments. One of them is when she recounts a painful (but victorious) incident when, as a black artist in mid-twentieth-century Puerto Rico, she was expected to enter through a hotel’s back door but refused and entered (to everyone’s shock) through the main door. Another one of those most powerful moments in Raíces is when—seated in a regal-looking wicker chair and decked out in a puffy-sleeved, full-length pink gown, chunky gold necklace, and scores of rings and jingling bracelets—Fernández proudly describes bomba through the ballet and minuet comparison. Salvador E. Ferreras notes, regarding Fernández’s metaphors,

Good intentions notwithstanding, this type of characterization is no longer shared by younger participants who would rather raise the profile of bomba on its own merits rather than by linking it to an archaic dance of the European colonial elite.²³

Ferreras, paying close attention to bomba as it is being practiced by the younger generations on the island as well as in the diaspora, also remarks, “Nationalism, identity politics and an underlying racial ambiguity [emphasis mine] surface as important factors in bomba’s renewal.”²⁴ A decade earlier, Halbert Barton had also pointed out the primacy of the national framework, using Modesto Cepeda’s bomba school (located in Santurce, Puerto Rico) as an example. This national framework is not unraced; rather, it is understood as fundamentally racially mixed. After pondering the implications of the remarks of Ketty Cepeda (Modesto Cepeda’s wife) to her students regarding the unique-
ness and value of their extremely varied phenotypes when compared to the groups representing other countries that they encountered in international folk dance competitions, Barton concluded,

Their Puerto Rican group had all the colors in the rainbow, and this was something to be proud of and valued for its own sake. In the school context, then, bomba dancing became a source of reflection about Puerto Ricanness rather than blackness itself.26

On October 11, 2004, an El Nuevo Día newspaper article titled “Bomba Incites a Heated Debate” had Modesto Cepeda vehemently objecting to historian Lester Nurse Allende’s account of bomba’s origins.27 According to the article, Nurse Allende stated that his research led him to conclude that bomba is not “essentially Puerto Rican.” His examples included the fact that bomba’s “seises had names in Creole rather than Spanish,” as well as the close similarities of its various instruments (in terms of confection and nomenclature) with instruments found in Haiti, Cuba, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Nicaragua. Cepeda, visibly upset, confronted Nurse Allende: “You cannot tell me that bomba is not Puerto Rican. I completely reject that. This is disrespectful.” The article also reports that Cepeda stated he did not want to be African but was Puerto Rican and proud of it and that Cepeda questioned the accuracy of Nurse Allende’s pronouncements by brandishing his bomba lineage and Nurse Allende’s lack thereof.

While stressing bomba’s national identity is obviously Cepeda’s priority, Nurse Allende’s is not. Decentering bomba’s Puerto Ricanness strikes Cepeda as disrespectful, whereas for Nurse Allende, it seems to be an opportunity to foreground bomba’s Afrodiasporic linkages. While Cepeda places emphasis on a national framework, Nurse Allende privileges a Caribbean one.

Nurse Allende’s efforts to locate bomba within a transnational Afrodiasporic framework can be interpreted in great part as a strategy to elide the constraints of the “national” straightjacket placed on bomba. In theory, nationalizing bomba does not have to perpetuate the marginalization of blackness. Yet it does. Isar P. Godreau notes how “celebratory renderings of blackness,” such as bomba’s enshrinement as a “national” music, routinely end up perpetuating the existing structures of dominance and oppression.

This inclusion and celebration of blackness is not distinct from but instead complements ideologies of blanqueamiento because it is rooted in some of the same ideological principles that distance blackness, geographically and tempo-
rally, from the imagined margins of the nation. This distancing has the effect of locating the phenotypic and cultural signs of blackness “somewhere else.”

Lester Nurse Allende’s transnational, Caribbeanist, and Afrodiasporic perspective seeking to destabilize the status quo of bomba as folklore and bomba as national is the one that the circle of musicians I document here find extremely inspiring and insightful.

**SICAMÁ MOYÓ AND URBAN MAROONAGE**

Alma Moyó was founded in 2002 by New York-raised Puerto Rican Alexander Lasalle, then twenty-three years old. It is a New York-based musical group whose name translates as “Soul Soul”—Alma being in Spanish, while Moyó is the creolized version of a Kikongo word widely used in the Afro-Cuban Palo Mayombe religious tradition Lasalle is initiated in.

Presently, most of Alma Moyó’s members are in their twenties. I was twenty-nine years old when the group was founded and have since been one of its “elder” members. Though the group attracts audiences of all ages, our core following consists of people under forty. We play most often at music festivals, bars, nightclubs, spiritual ceremonies, activist fund-raisers, and colleges and schools in the tristate area. Eight of Alma Moyó’s eleven members are Puerto Rican, and three of its key drummers are Dominican. The group is dedicated to playing bomba.

“To hell with ballroom bomba! This is maroon bomba!” irreverently exclaimed Alma Moyó’s founder and director during a 2005 performance in the East Harlem bar Jake’s. Lasalle’s statement was, in part, a reaction to the colonial/European “costume” and dance movements promoted through the dominant “folklorized” expressions of bomba. He—along with other practitioners of the younger generations—characterizes the costumes women often wear as frozen-in-time, caricaturesque “mammy outfits.” Regarding wearing the outfits, Lasalle later told me in conversation, “It’s like performing in blackface!” The “maroon” aesthetic self-consciously promoted by Alma Moyó includes emphasizing the participatory, jamlike quality of bomba musical events (rather than its “performance” aspects) and vindicating the much-vilified community tradition of street bomba in the town of Loíza, which has been described as “vulgar” (too much hip movement, backs not straight enough, movements not “elegant” enough) and “impure” (due to incorporation of Afro-Cuban instruments, songs, and rhythms).
Lasalle’s defiant remarks struck a chord with the crowd that night at Jake’s, particularly for those who had been present during an infamous incident a few months earlier in late 2004 when Margarita “Tata” Cepeda, a Puerto Rico–based high-profile dancer and niece of Modesto Cepeda, stopped a Bronx bombazo (where she was a guest) because she felt affronted by the disrespect bomba was allegedly being treated with, particularly by the younger participants. Her complaints? The sensual brashness of some dancers’ movements, the throwing of elegance out the window, the mixing of bomba steps with hip-hop and rumba. Her irate actions that night were undoubtedly informed by the reigning bomba dance aesthetic promoted by the most influential exponents of bomba in the last fifty years: her own Cepeda family, whose key words for dancing bomba are “elegance,” “posture,” and “firmness” (elegancia, postura, firmeza)—straight backs are privileged, and too much pelvic movement is shunned. “Elegance,” being in the eye of the beholder, is a highly contested aesthetic concept. Ironically, the Cepedas—hailing from the northeastern town of Santurce—and their disciples have been criticized by elders from the southern region of the island for not being “elegant” or “graceful” enough.
Of course, arguments about dance aesthetics are never objective or just about aesthetics. Underpinning Tata Cepeda’s feeling of entitlement to stop the music at the Bronx bomba jam and reprimand the participants—particularly the teenagers and twenty-somethings—was not only her national/international renown as a bomba dancer and her membership in bomba’s best-known family but also underlying assumptions about New York bomba not being as “authentic” as bomba on the island. As part of its alleged lack of authenticity, it is precisely that it is being “fused” with other dance forms like hip-hop and rumba. Her comments generated months and months worth of conversations, writings, and public puyas (veiled criticism).

Tata Cepeda is actually well known for her signature and innovative bomba steps developed through the incorporation of flamenco-inspired moves. The irony was not lost for observers present during the Bronx public admonishment. Some of the younger ones later observed that at least the dance forms being fused in New York are all Afro-diasporic (bomba, hip-hop, rumba) and part of the same “family,” while bomba dancers in Puerto Rico are incorporating dance moves from further removed sources like flamenco and ballet. These observers were undoubtedly placing a premium on fusing bomba with other Afro-diasporic practices. Awilda Sterling Duprey, a highly regarded performer in modern dance as well as bomba, seems to agree.

To my understanding, the act of dancing, in the case of the popular genres, is an intuitive response of rhythmic/musculoskeletal associations blended by the idiosyncratic sensory framework that the dancer possesses. Accordingly, it is perfectly acceptable (that is, if one’s mind is receptive to the reasoning behind contextual change) that in New York so many stylistic variants are added to the traditional patterns danced in Puerto Rican bomba, given the variety of homonymous cultures with the sociopolitical and economic distortions and processes that are in constant interchange in the city.

As a witness to the underpinnings and aftermath of Tata Cepeda’s public reprimand at the Bronx bombazo, I was struck by the level of heat, anger, pain, and controversy that can be generated by debates regarding aesthetic standards. Ironically, rather than serving to tame the “disrespectful” New York bomberos, it made many of them even more defiant and committed to locally based community standards where mixing bomba, rumba, hip-hop, and Dominican roots musical traditions may be framed not as “inventing” or “experimenting” but as employing practitioners’ “maternal” expressive languages. Given the intense
participation and interaction in the bomba scene between New York–raised Puerto Ricans and Dominicans (more on this topic in the next section)—folks often having grown up more exposed to hip-hop and rumba than to bomba, palos, or other roots musical traditions of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic—the quest for “roots” takes on very particular characteristics.

**BARÓN/BAWON AND A BRIDGE CALLED HAITI**

Another important element of Alma Moyó’s self-described maroon aesthetics is the acknowledgment of the Afro-Caribbean spiritual dimension of bomba, an aspect that has been consistently denied in both popular and academic forums—though it has been gaining credence in the last few years.

During another full-house performance at Jake’s during 2005, Alma Moyó played well-known traditional bombas as well as a number of original bombas and traditional Dominican palos songs dedicated to San Elías (Saint Elijah), a spirit also known as Barón del Cementerio (Baron of the Cemetery) in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic and as Bawon Simityè in Haiti. Lasalle regaled the spirit—much beloved within certain branches of Puerto Rican espiritismo (Spiritism), as well as in Dominican santería/vudú/espiritismo and Haitian Vodou—with two new songs. One of them we performed as a 6/8 leró rhythmic pattern:

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Leró leró San Isidro
Leró leró sanse mué
Leró leró San Elías
Padre de los muertos, San Elías priyé
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Lero lero Saint Isidore
Lero lero my saint
Lero lero Saint Elijah
Father of the Dead, pray for us
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The lyrics pay homage to both San Elías and San Isidro Labrador. The reason for the double homage, Lasalle explains, is that both spiritual entities often “work together” in espiritista traditions. Furthermore, following the example of other bomba songs passed down through the generations, Lasalle has integrated Kreyòl into his compositions, choosing the same Kreyòl words that of-
ten appear in much older, traditional bombas that mix Spanish and Kreyòl: 

mué (mwen; in English, “me “ or “my”) and priyé (priye; in English, “pray”). The term leró itself is a term derived from Kreyòl, though there are different takes on the original term: while some have said it derives from “le rose” (the rose), others say from “le rond” (the circle).\footnote{39}

Lasalle and Ernesto Rodríguez, then an Alma Moyó member,\footnote{40} traded verses in the U.S. spiritual “Lay This Body Down” (Oh graveyard, oh graveyard / I’m walking to the graveyard to lay this body down) to a cunyá bomba pattern. Lasalle also sang another of his originals, this time to the rhythms of a bomba holandé, and Ernesto Rodríguez later sang a song from the Dominican salves/palos tradition—both songs dedicated to San Elías, their lyrics closely mirroring each other. Though I wrote down many of the night’s details the day after this performance, I failed to note if the percussionists played a bomba holandé for Rodríguez’s song or if they played palos or salves. Though I wish I could remember the choice made that night, I find my own lack of clarity and precision somewhat befitting to the degree of fusion between the two national traditions as Alma Moyó and others practice them. Oftentimes we have sung Dominican tunes to a bomba rhythmic pattern and on bomba drums, and almost just as often we have sung them to salves or palos rhythmic patterns played on bomba drums.

That night, Lasalle wore a huge top hat, a black suit jacket with a purple handkerchief tucked in the breast pocket, and sunglasses, in tribute to El Barón/Bawon and the way that he is traditionally rendered. Though not explicitly stated during the performance, Alma Moyó paid homage that night to the powerful spirit that rules over cemeteries and thus over the dead—and we did it by stressing the commonalities among diverse African-derived musical and spiritual traditions in the Americas. But these were not haphazardly chosen commonalties: just like the Barón del Cementerio was the numinous entity providing the spiritual glue for our performance that night, Haiti was the historical and mythical bridge linking the traditions of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and even the southern United States.

Manuela Arciniegas, another of Alma Moyó’s Dominican members and one of the very few female percussionists who plays the lead drum among existing bomba groups, was raised “speaking Puerto Rican Spanish” in the South Bronx. The twenty-eight year old began playing Dominican and Puerto Rican roots music as soon as she returned to New York once she completed her undergraduate degree at Harvard. She says:
My spirit called me to bomba, early. I had access to palos and I loved it, but then something happened with bomba where it was a new beginning. I always felt like it was mine and it’s strange cause I’m Dominican. But it’s like my spirit is like, “No, this is a big part of who you are.” So when I started hearing about the Haitian roots [of bomba] I got really excited. I’m like, “Oh, the point of connection was like three generations ago with my Haitian ancestors and your Haitian ancestors and they’re on both islands!” Let’s celebrate that. It’s important to get rooted in those spaces where the cultures overlap, the times overlap, descendancies overlap.  

Rather than just celebrating bomba as a national Puerto Rican musical tradition or a Latin American music phenomenon, Alma Moyó places a greater priority on practicing/performing bomba within the context of Afro-diasporic traditions and exploring most profoundly the connections between roots music in Puerto Rico and the rest of the African diaspora—particularly the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The group’s self-description provides a good example.
Alma Moyo’s signature contribution to La Bomba includes promoting spiritual and revolutionary Bomba songs and practices obtained through years of research throughout the island of Borinquen. Our music celebrates the connection between all descendants of the African Diaspora in the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Our goal is to create a cultural revolution that promotes our Afro-Caribbean identity through an exhilarating rhythmic journey.\(^{44}\)

In that challenging of the dominant discourses that perpetuate the blackness/Latinidad divide or that promote the national framework as the most important one, Alma Moyó is certainly not a lone exception but an example of a larger cultural phenomenon in New York City. They are merely part of a small but vocal circuit of Caribbean roots musicians—many of them Puerto Rican and Dominican—who know and collaborate with each other. Between four to six members of Alma Moyó have at one point or another been part of the Dominican roots music groups La 21 División, Pa’lo Monte, Palo Mayor, Claudio Fortunato y Sus Guedeses, and Kalunga Neg Mawon. Other examples of New York–based musical groups that include (or have included) both Dominican and Puerto Rican members (and that, to varying degrees, highlight the connections between the musical traditions from both countries) are Yaya (Puerto Rican and Dominican roots music), Ilú Ayé (Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban roots music), Bámbula (Puerto Rican roots music), and Tato Torres’s Yerbabuena (Boricua roots music). Then there are groups like Pa’lo Monte and Kalunga Neg Mawon whose focal point is Haitian-Dominican music; the core of their membership is (or has been) Dominican but has also included Haitians and Puerto Ricans.

Juango Gutiérrez, director of Grammy-nominated plena and bomba ensemble Los Pleneros de la 21, believes that the contemporary youth-led roots music scene in New York City builds on the musical and community-based work of groups like his (founded over two decades and a half ago) and many others.\(^{45}\) What he does notice as a distinct difference between his generation and the younger ones is the heightened degree of collaboration and musical hybridization between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. In the spirit of description and not judgment, Gutiérrez characterizes the prior musical collaborations between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans using the popular aphorism “juntos pero no revueltos” (together but not convoluted), while aptly describing the younger generations’ praxis as “juntos y revueltos” (together and convoluted).\(^{46}\)

While playing in the same groups and hybridizing Dominican and Puerto
Rican roots musical and spiritual traditions, the younger generations have posed a challenge to the primacy of the nation as the guiding principle in the perpetuation of roots musical traditions (a perpetuation frequently guided by attempts at preserving a static nation-identified “folklore” rather than nourishing living traditions). Likewise, these younger generations of roots musicians have been self-consciously laboring to break with the blackness/Latinidad dichotomy. New York Dominicans and Puerto Ricans have been reimagining their national and/or ethnic musical traditions by challenging Latino and Latin American Eurocentrism and narrow-minded nationalisms and stressing their connections to the wider African diaspora. In the process, they have also been constructing and reconfiguring social, political, and spiritual alliances and re-shaping/reimagining history.

Born and raised in New York City, Alma Moyó’s Alexander Lasalle is the child of parents from the town of Moca in the western part of Puerto Rico, a member of a family of bomba practitioners, and a descendant of Haitians who were forced to leave the country by their enslaver after the Haitian Revolution. Evidently, the concept of Haiti as a link or a bridge is more than just poetic collective history to him. But neither is it for many other key players in this New York roots music scene.

Pedro “Único” Noguet, founder of the plena group Capá Prieto, was raised in Mayagüez, the largest town on Puerto Rico’s western coast (adjacent to Lasalle’s hometown). In a 2004 community forum of bomba practitioners, convened to air out preoccupations and strengthen collective bonds, Noguet replied to a Dominican participant’s mention of New York Puerto Rican examples of institution building serving as inspirational models for the New York Dominican community.

My great-grandmother was Dominican. The first time I saw a pandereta used to play salves was in Mayagüez. It’s very important that the unity between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans is respected. It’s a unity that is centuries old. I’m very interested in emphasizing that.

To Noguet’s statement, Ernesto Rodríguez added,

Dominicans and Puerto Ricans are two branches of the same tree. From my Mom’s hometown in the Dominican Republic you can see the lights in Mayagüez. When I got to New York, the first community that opened their arms to me were Puerto Ricans.
This last statement brings us back to Manuela Arciniegas’s childhood remembrances of a tight Dominican/Puerto Rican link, based on shared New York City experiences but self-consciously tied by New York-based bomba practitioners to previous historical moments of shared experiences in the Caribbean, such as those centuries-old ones along the western coastal towns of Puerto Rico, particularly Mayagüez. Whereas bomba aesthetics as re-created by Santurce and Loíza-based folkloric groups dominated popular conceptions of bomba for most of the second half of the twentieth century, long-standing efforts to include Mayagüez in bomba’s narrative culminated in the prominent inclusion of Don Félix Alduén y Sus Tambores in the 2001 music special Raíces.

Mayagüez and nearby towns and their traditions have served to inspire young researchers/musicians—like Lasalle, Rodríguez, Arciniegas, Noguet, and many others—to investigate and develop further what their ancestors started (and the linkages between them). When I first became a bomba enthusiast in the mid-1990s, Mayagüez songs like “Liberté,” “Sepúlate,” and “Obli Mablé” were not yet part of the bomba “canon”; today, they most certainly are. Though the exact meaning of the lyrics is still being debated, the Kreyòl origin of many of the terms is agreed on. The most obvious is, of course, the first: liberté is the Puerto Ricanized version of libète (freedom/liberty). Sepúlate, though much less obvious, is said by researchers and practitioners (often one and the same, in the case of the folks featured in this essay) to be possibly derived from c’est pour la tèt (in English, “it’s for the head”) and has spiritual underpinnings derived from Vodou, where the lwa closest to a devotee is known as the mèt tèt (in English, “owner of the head” or “master of the head”).

The song “Mwe Ale” is an original composition by Osvaldo “Bembé” Lora and Niko Laboy of Ilú Ayé, a group founded in 2004 that gathers some of the best young New York Puerto Rican and Dominican percussionists and singers. The group performs both sacred and popular genres such as plena and bomba from Puerto Rico; palos, salves, and congos from the Dominican Republic; and batá, güiro, and rumba from Cuba. The lyrics to “Mwe Ale,” a remix of Kreyòl into Caribbean Spanish and set to a bomba cuembé, are a poignant homage to the town of Mayagüez as a meeting point for Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Haitians. The first part of the chorus is in Kreyòl: “mwe ale, mwe ale” (I’m going, I’m going). The second part is in Caribbean Spanish: “pa’ Mayagüez” (to Mayagüez).

Ironically, Haiti—the much-maligned blackest country of the Caribbean in the imperial/racist imagination, the one that has fueled what Halbert Barton has termed the “voodoo-phobia” against bomba—has become the bridge that con-
nects New York Dominican and Puerto Rican musicians to each other. Haiti is also the mythical bridge that connects New York Caribbean Latinos to the blackness within. In a conversation regarding the same ideas I am elaborating here, Alexander Lasalle perceptively described his generation’s hunger to connect to Haitian traditions as a modern-day equivalent of the inspiration drawn from the Haitian Revolution by African descendants all throughout the Americas.

In the book *Esclavos rebeldes*, the author said that a lot of black Puerto Ricans saw Haiti and the Dominican Republic as the freedom land and almost heaven-like. And that’s the same concept among the Haitians when they speak about Guinee. Guinee for them is like heaven, but not like the actual country Guinea. It’s what they remember as being beautiful and free and good. That’s why when they speak of heaven, they speak of Guinee.\(^\text{53}\)
In the same conversation, Manuela Arciniegas added the poetic clincher to Lasalle’s statement: “Everybody keeps pointing somewhere else as heaven. Its like heaven is the stop on the slave ship before this one.” Thus, Haiti—today as yesterday—serves as a mythical bridge between matter and spirituality, between the outside world and the universes within, and between Afro-diasporic populations of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean who refuse to let their blackness be steeped in the bleaching waters of Latino self-denial.

Notes

1. These are not direct quotes but my recollections from that night.
2. Rivera, New York Ricans.
4. Rivera, “‘Real’ Puerto Rican Culture”; Rivera, “Between Blackness and Latinidad.”
5. The pronoun our functions here less as a familial term and more as a proprietary one.
11. Torres and Mbumba Loango, “Cuando la bomba ñama . . . !”
12. There is also a New York-based bomba group, cofounded by Alexander Lasalle and Halbert Barton, called Damba Yaribe.
13. Álvarez Nazario, El elemento afronegroide.
14. For critical reflections regarding cultural praxes and products labeled “national,” see Rivera, “‘Real’ Puerto Rican Culture.”
15. See, for example, Petra Cepeda’s interview in Yves Billon’s 1991 documentary Salsa Opus 3: Puerto Rico.
16. See ethnomusicologist Luis Manuel Álvarez’s comments in the 2001 Banco Popular music special Raíces.
18. For a critical assessment of the Raíces music special, see Ferreras, “Raíces.”
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Modesto Cepeda is one of the sons of Don Rafael Cepeda, the deceased folklorist dubbed “the patriarch of bomba.”
27. Rivera Marrero, “Provoca la bomba un encendido careo.”
30. “Sicamá Moyó” is the title of an original bomba composed by Alexander Lasalle and performed by the musical group featured in this section, Alma Moyó. The full chorus is “Sicamá Moyó, que un alma libre traspasa todo” (Raise/wake your spirit/life force because a free soul can transcend anything). Sikama means to “wake up” or “lift” in Kimbundu/Kikongo.
31. Moyó is related to the word mojo as used in the United States.
32. The translation is mine. His actual words were in Spanish: “¡Pa’l carajo la bomba de salón! ¡esto es bomba cimarrona!”
34. Maldonado, “Bomba Trigueña.” See also Ferreras, “Solo Drumming in the Puerto Rican Bomba,” 261: “Women’s traditional wide fringed skirt, with their corresponding decorated slips, typical of staged bomba, have given way to informal outfits that minimize fashion and maximize movement. When they are ready to dance they pull clothes from their purses or fitness bags and fasten wrap-around skirts over whatever their outfit happens to be.”
35. See Barton, “Challenge for Puerto Rican Music,” for an account of the 1990s rise in Puerto Rico of bombazos, tailored to reintroduce bomba (originally a community event, later folklorized for the stage) to the streets.
36. Ruth Fernández, incidentally, is from the southern town of Ponce.
39. Quoted in Rivera, “Elogio de la bomba de Nueva York 3.”
40. I was told by a bomba practitioner who asked to remain anonymous, “You know, body movements are, to a certain point, involuntary . . . If people, especially our youth, is mixing in bomba with rumba and hip hop it’s because these are often the maternal language, the principal language, that their bodies speak” (quoted in Rivera, “In Praise of New York Bomba”).
41. Salvador E. Ferreras subscribes to the “le rose” theory: “It is believed that its name is a contraction of the French ‘le rose,’ the circle formation dancers once assumed when performing its steps” (Ferreras, “Solo Drumming in the Puerto Rican Bomba,” 117).
42. Percussionist Ernesto Rodríguez grew up between the Dominican Republic and New York City. A year or so after this 2005 performance, he left Alma Moyó and co-founded the Haitian/Dominican roots music group Kalunga Meg Mawon.
43. Manuela Arciniegas, personal communication, 2005.
44. www.almamoyo.com/wedo (accessed March 5, 2008).
46. Ibid.
47. Barton, “Challenge for Puerto Rican Music”; Barton, “Thousand Soberaos”; Rivera, “‘Real’ Puerto Rican Culture.”
48. This is certainly not to discount the internal debates within this generation, though, in practice, there is a high degree of musical and dance hybridization; debates regarding how much is too much abound.
49. These are not direct quotes but my recollections from that night.
50. “Obli Mablé” and “Liberté” are included in the 2006 album ¡Candela! (Casabe Records).
52. Alexander Lasalle, personal communication.

Bibliography


