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# Corporeal Sounding: Listening to Bomba Dance, Listening to puertorriqueñxs

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Article abstract

Afro-Puerto Rican bomba, the island's oldest extant genre of drum, dance, and song, is a fundamentally sonic practice. Unique in the tight relation between the execution of movements and the simultaneous sounding of the lead drum, bomba dance enacts a challenge to the Western focus on the visual spectacle of dancing and draws attention to what Ashon Crawley calls the "choreosonic," or the inextricable linking of movement and sound. Bomba dance attends to creating rhythmic variation through specific movement choices strategically placed within and simultaneously producing the sonic framework of drumming and dancing. As such, it requires a listening that ultimately structures a relationality that interrupts the colonial, white supremacist and heteropatriarchal logic that contains Puerto Rican bodies. Through a close reading of different bomba dances, this article examines how the dancer's sounded movements claim, not space itself, but a relation to space and place, pulling bodies into the social and unravelling temporal boundedness. It argues that bomba's growing popularity on the island and in the diaspora is a measure of its capacity for "listening to flesh," "listening to flesh speak," underscoring how this particularly addresses and is attuned to a subaltern, racialized, and femme-identified flesh. As such, bomba is an important case study examining the intersections between sound studies and performance studies, blurring clear distinctions between listening to and doing sound.

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## Corporeal Sounding: Listening to Bomba Dance, Listening to puertorriqueñxs

Jade Power-Sotomayor

This article explores the danced sounding practice of Afro Puerto Rican bomba, the oldest extant music and dance form from the archipelago. This centuries-old practice that both celebrates the sacred and registers the quotidian comprises improvised drumming, dancing and singing that takes place in the *batey*—the Taíno word used to denote ball courts as well as the ceremonial space of the *areito* and today commonly used in Puerto Rico to refer to a space that is communal nonetheless separated from the outside world. The big barrel drums, representative of not just conduits to memory and ancestral knowledge but also the lifeblood of the many ancestors who made possible their survival through generations of brutality, sit at the centre of the *batey*, awaiting the flesh in whose service they will sound. While many Afrodiasporic traditions link dancing to drumming and drumming to dancing, bomba is notable for the particular way the dancer's moves are marked with rhythmic synchronicity by the lead drum. What follows below is a sustained reflection on this unique aspect of bomba practice. I offer a reading of the specific ways this exchange necessitates a practice of listening that is both resistive and restorative and, as such, maps a relational praxis that effectively reroutes both nationalist filiations and liberal investments in individual agency and liberation. The many notes that frame this text are part of this map and serve as the guiderails that help deliver this story.

### Learning to Listen

*Sometimes you don't know you have something to say until you start saying it. Sometimes you don't realize you have something to say until you notice that you are being listened to, being heard. Then it all comes out, flowing, torrential, or drop by drop, squeezed out to the point of silent exhaustion.*

It was the inauguration of San Diego's House of Puerto Rico (HPR) in 2005, the long-awaited day that would celebrate the completion of this "casita" and small cultural centre that joined the other "International Cottages" peppering the city's iconic Balboa Park. Our bomba group, Areito Borincano, had been invited to perform outside. This invitation was notable because the group's director, a Black Puerto Rican from Guayama, had made clear his tenuous relationship with the largely conservative, hispano-centric, pro-military, pro-statehood leaning board at the HPR. This entity was also, as is too often the case among Puerto Ricans of all shades and walks of life, both overtly and subtly anti-Black. Nevertheless, the experience of diaspora (especially for West Coast Puerto Ricans) forges unconventional alliances, and we had been invited to perform and duly accepted. I had recently returned from a summer spent in Puerto Rico being trained as a bomba

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dancer by master teachers so that I could, at the petition of our director, help to carry on *la tradición* three thousand miles away. In full folkloric garb—red billowy blouse, white skirt, white petticoat with red bows, red head-wrap and white character shoes—this would be my first experience dancing *piquetes*, an improvised sequence of movements interpreted by the lead drum, as part of a performance. Until that moment, I had only performed *bomba* choreographies. I was very nervous and felt horribly unprepared despite many hours spent embodying the dance language. In this moment, I was not prepared for how I would ultimately become a musician, a maker of sound, a crafter of space and relation through the drum-sounding my movements would elicit. I was not prepared for how it would completely resignify my gendered experience as a visual dance-object into a different kind of pleasure: that of moving my flesh in the service of sounding, pricking up the ears of those around me through my deep-in-the-time gestures, drops, slides, rolls. I accurately perceived the power of improvised, space-taking solo dance that I activated as a woman often denied such sustained public protagonism. But I did not yet understand that this power emanated precisely from how I would inhabit and stake claims in sonic space, fleshing the sonic, not singularly in a free-form expressive solo, but in, and because of, a radical relational accountability. A radical relationality that is feminist, anticolonial, and disruptive to logics of modernity and white supremacy. It would be many years of practice and study (and terrible performances) before I would reconsider the standard of the costumed racial folkloric image and drop into the “sonic subalternity” offered by this music and dance from my island, the archipelago of Puerto Rico (Brooks and Kheshti 2011, 333).

As a lifelong dancer and West Coast Boricua, I had always admired *bomba* but, like many of my generation, had never had the opportunity to learn it, to be immersed in it, and had really only ever encountered it on a stage. Not to mention that I did not identify as Afro-Puerto Rican. Despite having African ancestry and Black(er) family members, like the vast majority of Puerto Ricans, I move through the world as a light-skinned/white Rican. When I finally did get a chance to begin learning the particularities of the gestures, its protocols and subtleties, I felt I had finally found a dance that suited both my movement-style—already infused with other vernacular Boricua and Caribbean dance languages—and my personality. I relished the luscious feeling of a skirt unfurling and snapping across the body with the simple opening of the arm, the angling of the head to create dramatic tension as the body moves in a slide step toward the drum, the strength and precision required to make the shoulders shrug and drop with force. I enjoyed the permission to curve my lips, pursed and proud, in relation to a brow deeply furrowed with joy, pain, heart, *rabia*. I loved the rhythmic syncopation and the singer’s voice piercing the space. I especially valued the Diasporican sense of togetherness produced through the communal suspension of time and space, collapsing the ancestral and the immediate, arcing toward and claiming a still-yet-to-be-determined and increasingly threatened future, enacting what José Muñoz refers to as performance’s ability to allow minoritarian subjects to “take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names” (Muñoz 1999, 74). I was deeply aware of how I had arrived at something that had long been taking place, folding subjects in need of healing and belonging into the embrace of its circle. All of *this* was clear to me. It was the part of making the drum sound that was still murky and vague as I was trying to dance *to* the music, not *to make* the music. That felt like an altogether different responsibility.

I remember that the performance was almost called off just minutes before we were scheduled that day at the HPR. The organizers, neglecting to note the tight relation between the bomba dancer and lead drummer, had given us some microphones posted on a lumpy grassy mound where the dancers could barely move. Apart from what this revealed about their lack of regard for and knowledge of the island’s “Black music”—the imagined whiter *jibaro* music was always the primary feature at their

events—my performer sensibilities were offended. How would we be able to *show* our dancing with such limited space? In the end, we did our thing, the drums and the singing elevated our spirits, and we exchanged coy smiles and hollered at each other from the sidelines as we strutted our stuff in the haphazardly created centre. I strung together a series of steps that more or less resembled what I thought an improvised solo should look like. No one fell. Today, I might reconsider this moment. I might look to this as a chance to disrupt our ocular-centric estimations of dance, an opportunity to turn away from the spectatorial fetishization of danced blackness. Instead, whether draped in the costuming replicating late nineteenth-century domestic servant attire<sup>1</sup> or sporting my urban street clothes, I would bear down on my sound-making potentialities and mark the way we are pulled into relation through the sounding of a drum responding to and alongside moving, speaking, space-taking flesh. I would, of course, try to channel the style and grace of my bomba foremothers and forefathers, but also their attention to the spaces, the waiting, the silences around the corner of the slap alerting us of presence, the breath inhaled in preparation for the life-announcing exhale and release, the rehearsal for freedom, for fugitive escape, the listening that happens as an also producer of sound. In short, I would instantiate bomba dancing's capacities as a sound act as much as—if not more than—a dance act.

\* \* \*

This article explores how bomba dancing “(re)sounds” that which perhaps cannot be spoken or shown (Brooks and Kheshti 2011, 333),<sup>2</sup> bringing into being racial, colonial, and gendered Puerto Rican subjectivities through a sonic-scape that challenges dominant conceptualizations of “music” and “dance” and “performance.” In looking at variants of complex sounding, including that which is marked on the *contratiempo/las alzadas*, I argue that bomba's growing popularity on the island and in the diaspora is a measure of its capacity for “listening to flesh,” “listening to flesh speak,” underscoring how this particularly addresses and is attuned to a subaltern, racialized, femme-identified flesh. My focus here on Puerto Rican women and femme bomberxs activates what Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga calls a “theory in the flesh,” attending to how “the physical realities of our lives . . . all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983, 23). The bomba worlds I discuss in this article coalesce around and respond to the necessity for Puerto Ricans—specifically Black Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican women—to be heard, seen, and understood, not just by colonial forces, but by each other. They demonstrate the power of occupying sonic space corporeally. As a co-produced aesthetic sound practice, bomba ultimately requires and structures a relationality that interrupts the colonial, white supremacist and heteropatriarchal logics that viciously feed each other and ultimately contain Puerto Rican life.

The fundamental importance of dancing flesh to the sounding of what is most often imagined a “musical” genre reveals the insufficiency and failure of these categorizations and their reliance on the same structuring logic that transforms flesh in all its presumed excess and messiness into an ordered modern subject. In this way, bomba also helps us think about the relational potentialities of what Black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers (1987) has theorized as “flesh” and serves as an example of Rican futurity made possible through flesh, a sonic Ricanness marked in and by flesh. By “listening in detail”<sup>3</sup> to how these women move, speaking to each other through flesh—a physicality at the level of skin and sinew—I demonstrate how bomba is both theory in practice and a practice in theory-making. As such, bomba is an important case study in examining the intersections between sound studies and performance studies, blurring clear distinctions between listening to and *doing* sound.

## Bomba's Choreosonicity and the Making of "Otherwise" Worlds

Bomba is a Black practice of communality and maroonage born of plantation and counter-plantation worlds, carried into the twenty-first century by networks of Black kinship, and which, despite morphing and radically shifting throughout its roughly four-hundred-year history, retains at its core a facility for refusing the categorical distinctions between music and dance.<sup>4</sup> A collection of musical embodiments organized around drumming, it is what Ashon Crawley (2017) calls a "choreosonic" performance tradition that was varyingly used as a form of collective communion to escape harsh social realities and to enact shared belief systems—both sacred and secular. Noting its potential for disruption and resistance, the powerful (from slave owners to colonial elites to upwardly aspiring middle classes) have sanctioned, controlled, erased, derided, reformulated, and co-opted bomba's fleshy potentialities. In his book *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Crawley presents us with the portmanteau "choreosonic" to describe the way that choreography and sonicity, movement and sound, are constitutive, inextricably linked, and have to be thought together. Foundational to Enlightenment thinking, he argues, this categorical distinction produced the conditions for "complex modes of fleshy disembodiment that are called blackness" (Crawley 2017, 28). Thus, by thinking the choreo and the sonic together, we recuperate the potentialities of what Spillers has theorized as "monstrous," "ungendered" flesh which offers—as opposed to "the body" that as coherent, stable identity is emancipatable and thereby enterable into civil society—the capacity to "get us there," to "a liberative position" (Crawley 2017, 23). The choreosonic, circumventing the drive toward an inclusion/recognition conditioned by logics of containable enclosure, invests in flesh as "preparation" for maroonage, for potential change, fugitivity, the production of "otherwise" realities, "otherwise ecologies." Though vehement denials aimed at legitimizing and "elevating" bomba to the status of "cultural object" would instantiate a binary between the "secular/cultural" and the "religious/ritualistic" aspects of Afro-Caribbean dance and music practices, it unequivocally follows in this tradition of producing what Crawley calls "otherwise worlds":

Otherwise is a word that names plurality as its core operation, otherwise bespeaks the ongoingness of possibility, of things existing other than what is given, what is known, what is grasped. . . . Otherwise names the subjectivity in the commons, an *a*subjectivity that is not about the enclosed self but the open, vulnerable, available, enfleshed organism. (Crawley 2017, 24)

The particular choreosonic properties of bomba as practice and as aesthetic open up onto otherwise worlds where listening to dancing flesh, and in turn dancing to re-sound, activates radical relational possibilities, actualizing links across ancestral planes and allowing for a "togetherness" not defined by the terms of colonial containment and the subsequent production of race, or even in resistance to them. Thus, it is instructive to look at the sounding capacities of bomba dancing flesh as central to the genre's long-term survival across centuries. Importantly, the unique role of the dancer as musical protagonist is in large part responsible for the recent repopularization with generations of Puerto Ricans who are experiencing an increasingly violent colonial dismantling of the social fabric that has ensured their survival thus far. Furthermore, despite the many ways that folkloric framings of an Afro/Boricua past have flattened bomba, its choreosonicity inherently destabilizes representational attempts to narrativize Black history as a "root" existing outside of the here-and-now. While Black Puerto Rican cultural expressions have long been the matrix from which national and cultural identity is produced, blackness itself has unsurprisingly been buried or integrated into a fictitious

harmonious whole and rampant anti-Black racism on the island—violence, poverty, mis/underrepresentation—has been obfuscated or vehemently denied.<sup>5</sup> Though contemporary bomba practice is not free of these currents of power and is often directly and indirectly responsible for reproducing them,<sup>6</sup> for the most part, it nonetheless insists on blackness as *living* and *present*, not a fetishized object of the past, underscoring the continued value of, and the increasing necessity for, the relational aesthetics bomba practice instantiates.

### **Bomba Dance as Self-(dis)possession**

As bomba has increasingly found life away from the folkloric stage, and communities across the island and the diaspora activate its expressive possibilities, creating bomba performance groups, events, and entire communities of belonging, dance, I insist, has been the key to broadening participation and audience.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, as discussed below, dancing women and femme folks have especially played a central role in cultivating interest in bomba and reimagining its political and community-building potentials.<sup>8</sup> In this formulation, the dancer is an audience-participant that momentarily enters the music-dancing space and returns to the edges of the circle to hold and create the space for the next dancer. The particularities of bomba's choreosonics give dancers unprecedented musical and aural responsibility and agency, upending gendered hierarchies about music-making versus dance-making. The sonic scaffolding provided by the drums and chorus provides entry to a much broader demographic less likely to see themselves as music-makers. Dancers, who have learned how to be *in* the music, are often unprepared for the sensation of the sounding that ripples out and around their movement choices. Dancing to make music, to be *heard*, not just *seen*, challenges both patriarchal distinctions between dancer and drummer and a Eurocentric overinvestment in form that places emphasis on the visual spectacle of dancing. Prying open the exclusivity of the music-making space, bomba's proverbial "return to the dance floor" (following a period of folklorization) extends the music-making as long as there are dancing bodies present. And there are. Patiently—and sometimes impatiently—waiting their turn. At *bombazos* across the bomba world, bomberxs, women especially, hearts often racing with anticipation, nonetheless bolstered by a sense of urgency and excitement, wait for their turn in the *batey*—the cypher-like space around which drums, singers, dancers, and community gather. They wait to take their moment of being seen and heard, claiming space and sound, occupying time and place, listening to find the rhythmic gaps into which their flesh can be sonically inserted.<sup>9</sup>

Bomba dancing is an improvised solo—the mechanics of the specific drum/dance relationship require that it be danced solo—yet it is an inherently social practice.<sup>10</sup> It both requires and produces the sociality to which the sound and movement attach. Like streamers crisscrossing the overhead space of a party, the interconnectedness of gaze, embodied syncopation, and aural signification holds the space together and pulls the *batey* into being. For the dancing exchange to be successful, it requires acute attention and listening, the reading of cues, and the simultaneous appeal to kinesthetic intuition and memory while remaining aware of one's place within the greater musical exchanges. This is not an individualist endeavour. As musicologist Ángel Quintero Rivera writes, "es muy significativo que en el tipo de sociedad donde emergió esta música, su ritual simbólico comunicativo sea que el colectivo *manda* y el individuo *florece*" (it is very significant that in the type of society out of which this music emerges, the symbolic communicative ritual is one in which the collective is in charge and the individual embellishes their directive) (2009, 42).

Thus, bomba dance engages in a corporeal sounding that tests the limits of expressive resistance through the achievement of individual agency. On the one hand, the ability to dance and “be heard”—not just seen—invites and holds space for a unique sound-enacting agency typically only ascribed to “musicians.” On the other hand, however, sliding too deeply into agential expression of the “self” threatens the possibility of what Crawley describes as the “subjectivity in the commons” and what Fred Moten refers to as the party of the “non-self-possessive anindividuals” (2018, 189). As a practice born of and borne on Black bodies, bomba enacts and relies upon disinvestment in the individual, a “party of the ones in whom the trace of having been possessed keeps turning into this obsessive compulsive drive for the total disorder that is continually given in continually giving themselves away” (189). A dancer or a drummer overly invested in the logics of liberal individualism as the promised pathway to a liberative position—hear *me*, see *me*—leads to an unravelling of bomba’s aesthetic integrity: the *co*-production of the choreosonic. A bomba reliant on the logics of the liberated self effectively morphs into some other expressive practice embodying instead the logics of selfhood and domination upon which the colonial state is founded. Indeed, as Joshua Chambers-Letson writes, “freedom is not only colonized by liberalism, it is a discourse through which liberalism justifies colonial and imperial violence” (2018, 6).

Furthermore, Patricia Ybarra signals the multi-pronged failure of the impulse to privilege a “liberal subject formation as the primary mode with which to narrate Latinx experience and identity,” a formation that relies on a realization of the individual as the pathway to survival, recognition, and ultimately designation of worthiness for inclusion (2017, 13).<sup>11</sup> The corporeality at the genesis of the drum-sounding works against currents of fetishization seen in so many other Afro/Latinx musical genres. Bomba, grounded in a set of en fleshed intimacies and embodied protocols, inherently resists the commercialization—and neoliberal inclusion—that so often comes from engagement with the recording industry.<sup>12</sup> Although different entities, from politicians (San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz) to pop musicians (Luis Fonsi of Despacito fame) to veteran artists (Spike Lee in his *She’s Gotta Have It* remake) increasingly cite and/or appropriate bomba for its capacity to simultaneously signal political resistance, blackness, and tropical heat/Caribbeanness, these decontextualized representations are often extractive and fail to portray the dynamics of bomba’s *batey*. Actually creating bomba requires relationship building in real time and space and relies on a larger ethos of sociality to provide the canvas for giving and receiving the sounded and enacted gestures that define the genre.

As with other improvisational musical forms, bomba music-making relies on listening and sounding that is both creatively expressive and also attentive to maintaining a grounding rhythmic centre. As such, the bomba dancer must listen to the sound being used to interpret their movements in order to make choices about their next moves. While there is a general standard for how certain moves are sounded (for example, moves made with two hands get two slaps, quick pattering steps are marked with a drum roll, etc.), it is ultimately a stylistic choice on the part of the drummer, and a dancer must be prepared to engage in various ways of “conversing” depending on who is marking their moves. An effective dancer does not “sound off” at will, but rather, through attentive aural and corporeal listening, responds to and builds upon the sounding of the drum. A bomba *primo* drummer (the more high-pitched drum interpreting the dance and thus taking the lead musical voice) must be acutely attuned to not just foreseeing the direction and speed of the projected dance moves, but also to the types of rhythmic patterns most likely to be executed and any “surprises” or “challenges” to this predictable structure as issued by the dancer. An exciting conversation between dancer and drummer is one where the drummer has to “work” not to miss any moves and where the dancer is “speaking” in phrases that, while complex, are still intelligible so as to achieve the effect of the

synchronous moving-sounding. It is imperative for both parties to be locked in deep communication, and although not necessary, it is something that is amplified by relative levels of experience and long-established relationships and familiarity between dancer and drummer. Fundamentally, however, this exchange necessitates mutual respect and acknowledgement of the value of the labours they each provide regardless of their abilities. Through attentive listening and receptiveness, they together home in on the place where skill levels overlap.

These relationships brought into being in the *batey* enact a critique of colonial logics of containment and silencing by using sounded gesture, a choreosonics, to produce alternative ways of being and relating not captured through language.<sup>13</sup> In the two examples that follow, I examine the performatively enacted relationship between dancer and drummer, sustained through careful practices of listening, practices that claim not space itself, but a relation to space and place. Dancing-sounding flesh takes over sound and space, radically and unapologetically staking a relation to each other and to place.<sup>14</sup> In the embattled rhetorical and political struggles to realize a Puerto Rico free of not just a colonial government and centuries-long relationship of extraction and exploitation, but also of corrupt and self-serving local elites, the masculinist logics of nationalism, romanticized celebrations of a Hispanic past, and the disregard for Black lives, reimagining a relationship to land, to place, based not on ownership and domination but a cultivation of and respect for its life-sustaining gifts is more necessary than ever. Bomba practice labours to produce a space in which Puerto Rico's bodies—here understood beyond the bounds of nationalism—can uniquely cultivate and sustain life. By sounding a moving flesh into relation, the terms of a racial colonial capitalism extended into indebtedness are deactivated and rerouted, at least for the moment.

### **Syncopated Togetherness: In and Because of the *batey***

While important men have long been celebrated and honoured for having preserved bomba from being driven entirely underground by the mid-twentieth century, it is unsurprising that women have been by official accounts relegated to supporting roles as spouses, dancers, and sometimes singers.<sup>15</sup> In what follows, I cite examples in which women take on unprecedented roles as bomba percussionists while also expanding the expressive precision of the dance as a way to activate the radical relationality I have described. The women I engage with here are not only fiercely talented but also act as custodians of a contemporary bomba practice that is redefining the norms for new generations of Puerto Rican women. They form part of a larger movement of queer, feminist, and antiracist Puerto Rican activism taking on the many assaults on Puerto Rican futurity.

The first [video](#) I discuss features master dancer Ivelisse “Bombera de Corazón” Díaz, pioneer Marién Torres López playing the *primo*—until very recently played exclusively by men—and the revered composer and singer Lero Martínéz Roldán. These bomberxs represent some of the most influential and powerful bomberxs of the younger generation responsible for bomba's renewed popularity on the island and in diasporic communities throughout the US. Following in the footsteps of bomberxs from the late 1990s who first insisted on the defolklorization of bomba, bringing the *batey* off the stage into the social nightlife and the quotidian spaces accessible to wider communities of Puerto Ricans, they have been leaders in their respective geographical locations: Chicago, San Juan metro area, and the island's western coastal town of Mayagüez, an important historical site of bomba practice. These three and others in the video explicitly and purposefully frame bomba practice as a site of antiracist, anticolonial, antipatriarchal *living* cultural resistance instead of the festive, re-presented fetishized object of the past used to “celebrate” a distant



ancestral trope.<sup>16</sup> The activation of bomba as a site for corporeally and aurally enacting survival in/as protest to the continued conditions of poverty and violence has become even more starkly evident in a post-Promesa, post-Hurricane María, #RickyRenuncia world.<sup>17</sup> Bomba has served as a cathartic release and communicatory vehicle of lament, and perhaps most importantly, provided an expansive network and cultural infrastructure that was key in bringing people together and delivering much-needed supplies in the days and weeks after the hurricane, and most recently in response to incessant earthquakes with no end in sight.<sup>18</sup> In other words, for these communities, bomba and the relationality it ultimately produces has served as a “way of life” that disrupts the conditions imposed on Puerto Rican futurity, alleviating the often-unbearable weight of the present. This video was filmed in March 2018 at one of the bomba events surrounding the larger 8th annual Encuentro de Tambores in Puerto Rico, an event that brings together hundreds of drummers and bomberxs more generally. Until recently, it was organized by the late bomba elder, professor, and folklorist Norma Salazar and is now spearheaded by Marién Torres López. As stated in the video caption, moments before, Torres López had danced and then challenged Díaz to dance while she played.<sup>19</sup>

The sixty-second video captures many important dynamics of the twenty-first-century *batey*: the spatial arrangement, the barrel-drum *buleadores* holding down a basic rhythmic pattern accented by the *maraca* and the *cua* (two sticks here played on bamboo), the call and response communal choral singing, the casual, contemporary clothing style, the space as both spectatorial and social, the dancer’s use of a scarf instead of a skirt, the hyper-vigilant, leaned-in, at-attention stance of the *primo* drummer, the purposeful exchange of eye-contact between *primo* player and dancer and the dancer’s directional movement towards and away from the *primo*, rapid-fire gestures juxtaposed with stillness and poise, the dancer’s reliance on opposition while using feet, shoulders, hands, head, and face, the building of suspense through a silent pause, and the satisfying intensity of a crescendo of sounded movements. The 6/8 rhythm being played is the powerful *yubá*, traditionally reserved for the elders, used to cleanse the community and express the pain and strength of the ancestors.

I would like to draw attention to two specific moments of sounding here: the first between the 0:17 and 0:20 marks and the second in the last steps in the final four seconds of the video. While they also appear elsewhere throughout the dance, these are both examples of the play with the *contratiempo*, the upbeat, or in other terms, the 2 and the 4 as opposed to the 1 and 3 downbeat. As with many other African diasporic musical genres and especially Afro-Caribbean forms, bomba accomplishes its rhythmic dynamic through an *improvised* syncopated play with the downbeat, moving in and out of the repetitive and predictable rhythmic pattern. Jazz is the most exemplary form of straying away from the comfortable and predictable—here both in terms of tone and rhythm—only to land again “on the one,” having created suspense, emotion, and interstitial, fugitive possibility in the meantime. Because of the necessarily and specifically linked gesture to sound, bomba can tend to stay away from this highly syncopated sounding. Simply put, due to the unpredictability of improvised syncopation, too much syncopation in bomba movements can make it difficult for the *primo* player to follow the dancer, thereby rendering a parallel process of soloing, not one of unison.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the dynamics of this simultaneous improvisation are produced in part by the unpredictability and the ability to create rich musicality nonetheless.

In the first example, we see Díaz dropping her scarf one level at a time, a weighted floating and landing, marking five consecutive beats before turning back toward the drummer and asking for the quick-paced twelve beats gestured from her chest outward. Notably, she starts and finishes this dropping move on the upbeat. As she turns back to face Torres López on the drum before issuing the next twelve beats, Torres López pauses briefly to smile, ready in an instant to catch the next

steps. She seems pleased at co-producing this upbeat sounding as she uses one hand to adjust her drum and follow the conversation where it is going. After another series of sounded syncopated single steps, at 0:46, Díaz pauses between movements, issuing a simultaneous smile and eyebrow lift. Her face signals satisfaction, playfulness, and possibly even an embodied articulation requiring sounding (a soft slap is heard), activating what dance scholar Sherril Dodds (2016) calls “the face as choreographic device.” The final steps in the video, which unfortunately does not capture the complete exchange which would have commenced and concluded with a bow of reverence to the lead drum, drive a repetitive series of sounds that also play with the upbeat. Here, as before, the upbeat is repeated, forecasting the next step to the drummer, giving a chance for the pattern and thus synchronicity to be established before likely breaking it again.

Buoyed by Martínez Roldán’s melodic voice, the bass of the *buleadores*, the punctuating march of the *cua*, the steady shake of seed against the *maraca*’s gourd-like *higüera*, the dependable arrival of the chorus again and then again, the generous and entertained crowd and passersby, Torres López and Díaz have sounded and listened to each other. In doing so, they have relied not on recognition from an outward source—the Puerto Rican state, the official gate-keepers of institutionalized “Culture,” colonial powers, or in this case, the male gaze—but rather from each other, actualizing self-realization and independence from within the context of community. Independence *as* interdependence.

The second [video](#) was filmed in October 2018 at the Bomplenazo in New York, a biennial gathering of bomba and plena performers across the island and diaspora that recently celebrated its twentieth year.<sup>21</sup> The organizers in 2018 deliberately chose to bring artists only from Puerto Rico (not the diaspora) as a way to provide much needed financial and moral support to many cultural workers who remain dedicated to their projects on the island despite the scarcity of resources and daily infrastructural challenges. This video differs from the one above in some key aspects. Firstly, it is a stage performance framed through a proscenium presentation, professional lighting, and an ensemble sartorially unified in specific aesthetic choices. In addition to this, the group—La Raíz Mayagüezana—comes from the western port city Mayagüez, where bomba styles vary significantly from those in the now metropolitan Santurce, the maroon village Loíza, and the more geographically isolated southern towns of the island. As part of a recent resurgence of interest in the rich variety of bomba styles from across the island, members of this group have engaged in extensive ethnographic research and practice to recuperate and identify not just the oral histories and songs but the aesthetic and stylistic specifics of bomba practice in Mayagüez. In terms of dance, they claim that “las bomberas de Mayagüez no levantan mucho el vestido,”<sup>22</sup> and footwork is privileged over the more aggressive skirt throwing and snapping commonly seen in the highly codified Santurce style. Or, as bomba elder Nellie Lebrón states in the comments on the side of the video, “she uses the skirt as an accessory to her dance not as the principal instrument.” The dancer in this video, Ángela Vázquez, exemplifies bomba Mayaguezana—a style that in its own right has been increasingly codified through Jamie Perez, the city’s primary bomba school instructor, seen here playing the *cuas*. The *primo* is played by the gifted Christian Galarza, who is also Vázquez’s husband. The singer, butch-presenting Maria Cristina Alfonso Mangual, is a treasured elder who is one of the few living people who maintains a bomba singing style relatively free of the now ubiquitous rumba and salsa influences.

In addition to the obvious stylistic differences of posture and affect, I draw the reader’s attention to the sounding relationship between Vázquez and Galarza. As the person directing the sounding choices that Galarza skilfully interprets through the drum, Vázquez not only plays intensely with the

*contratiempo* but also resists the predictable patterns of marking 4/8/12/16 beats. On a few occasions, she repeats a step for six beats but mostly relies on single percussive movements preceded or followed by two or three linked beats, one of which typically is marked on the upbeat. A good example of this can be seen from 1:00 to 1:10. At times, however, Vázquez’s syncopated sounding on the *primo* pushes against the limits of the synchronicity between the song, the *buleadores*, *cua*, and *maraca*. The sequence from 1:40 to 1:46 marks almost every step on the upbeat, and we feel and hear the rhythmic strands start to pull apart just before she punches on the downbeat again, twisting us back into the smooth and seemingly effortless coordination of the multiple sound sources. Taken to an extreme, this kind of sounding can produce a kind of “typewriter effect” where the steps are all successfully discretely marked but without ever building the energy through a crescendo of recognizable patterns.<sup>23</sup> This sounding style also requires deep attention and skill from the *primo* player, and, noting the long-term intimacy between Vázquez and Galarza, prior exposure to a dancer’s rhythmic patterns goes a long way in successfully sounding the precision of the moving flesh. Their co-produced dancing-sounding also emblemizes the exchange between dancer and drummer as a site for multi-directional learning. In listening, they learn from and about each other.

Through their respective styles, Vázquez and Díaz offer important insights about contemporary bomba practice and the corporeal sounding they produce. Both use the *batey* as a site for self-expression that draws on the particularities of bomba language, uniquely exploiting the ability to elicit sound with the flesh of their gendered bodies in a social and cultural climate that allows for challenges to gendered norms of public comportment. They flesh a sound that destabilizes both white supremacy and colonialism and, in its rebuke, opens a path to a future as yet unpromised. However, they also show us how this would be impossible without careful and thoughtful cosounding and colistening. Díaz, with the strength and vigour of her fully extended gestures, claims, indeed commands the space, unapologetically demanding a sounding that matches the heightened affect of her dancing. By dropping in and committing to repetitive phrases, which she skilfully rhythmically inverts and interrupts, she choreographs the drum’s sound in ways that pulls and holds the surrounding visual, aural, affective attentions. Spectators become additional coparticipants as they take the sounded rhythms and gestures into their own flesh, amplifying an awareness of flesh’s sounding potentiality. Vázquez engages in an extremely advanced rhythmic complexity and is given the space and patience to speak, to have the subtleties of her expression be heard. Her quieter and more contained moves are another form of self-realization that equally requires careful listening in order to accurately reflect what she has “to say.” Both dancers enact a bomba practice that notably differs from versions seen in early twentieth-century footage where couples danced together using much smaller and less clearly marked moves. Though they also clearly depart from staged folkloric depictions made popular in the second half of the twentieth century, their styles nonetheless benefit from the work of the stage to visually amplify the corporeal sounding, rendering a tighter relation between gesture and sound (Power-Sotomayor 2015).

Taken together, these videos illustrate the trend of larger moves producing more aggressive sounding as well as a greater fidelity between gesturing and sounding that reflects the dancer’s capacity for musical nuance and texture.<sup>24</sup> In other words, their bomba dancing is distinguished both by energetic power and its rhythmic intricacy. Díaz and Vázquez embody distinct energies, exemplifying bomba’s capaciousness and its ability to welcome different personalities, modalities, physicalities, abilities, and strengths.<sup>25</sup> Yet, all bomba dancing relies on the same basic ethos: connection, listening, listening in order to be heard, breath as holding space and suspending sound, sounding in response to listening, tuning into and being with flesh, singularly but together. However, even as bomba enacts fugitive escape and a decolonial way of being through these sonic

enfleshments, it can also alert us to the many dangers posed to flesh—as with the sound of drums carrying across valleys between plantations—setting into relief the violent power enacted on this same flesh.

### Slapping Flesh: La contestación de Ausuba

Before concluding, I turn briefly to one final performance that reroutes the sounding of flesh—here the drum’s skin—in the service of making public that which is so often silently concealed within gendered and racialized flesh: the mark of violence. While much of this act relies on the narrative that unfolds through lyrics, I include it here as a powerful example of how dancing-sounding flesh demands to be heard, an acute listening that is simultaneously spatial and temporal.

Singer: “Te voy a dar” (I am going to hit you.)

Drummers: Slap. Slap. Slap.

Singer: “Te voy a dar”

Drummers: Slap-slap-slap. Slap-slap-slap. Slap. Slap. Slap.

Thus begins a feminist interpretation of the disturbing misogynist song by the revered and beloved *sonero* Ismael Rivera. Here inverting the machista imperative to domesticate and control “his woman,” the members of Ausuba—the all-women bomba ensemble founded and directed by Marién Torres López in 2012<sup>26</sup>—call out the normalization of violence against women. An original composition written with Tito Rodríguez, this is, in the words of Torres López, “la contestación de Ausuba (Ausuba’s reponse)” to the promised violence. Far from being a generalized indictment against gendered violence, the verses narrate a story of control and jealousy between intimate partners. The bomba chorus repeats the looming threat “si te cojo coqueteándole a otro” (if I catch you flirting with someone else) aimed at silencing not just her words but her body, her face, her affect. The lead singer recounts the familiar narrative until she ultimately declaratively belts “tu no me pones una mano encimaaaaa” (don’t you lay a hand on me). The violent hit, rehearsed and perfected as a technology of control across centuries of plantation slavery and long maintained in service by a culture steeped in racialized misogyny, is here the ultimate promise of erasure and removal.

The song reclaims Puerto Rican women’s right to speak and be heard in multiple registers, and more importantly, to access the sociality and embodied communication necessary to communal survival and resistance *without* having to wade through the insecurities of toxic masculinity and patriarchal strictures placed on their bodies in public. In other words, their claim to space and sound with bodies and words must not be silenced through threatened and real violence. The slapping of the drum’s skin to signal hand on gendered flesh, as if receiving a slap oneself, stuns the listener into attention, alerting us to the women who sound the drum in alarm. Activating human flesh in the service of sounding as a way to recuperate strength lost in the face of violence, these slaps pull spectators into relation with the women playing, asking us to consider our own experiences of slapping and being slapped, both personal and ancestral. A dancer entering the *batey* to sound with her flesh “slaps back” to this violence not through hand on flesh but by claiming space and sound, embodied relation and communicative power.

Asuba's performances and Marién Torres López's projects, more broadly speaking, contribute to a larger movement on the island coalescing around the trailblazing work of La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, who tirelessly labour to make Puerto Rico more liveable for its inhabitants, including rebuilding communities after Hurricane María, publicly demanding the government recognize the normalization of intimate partner violence and other forms of gendered violence, and spearheading the protests that ultimately unseated the governor in 2019.<sup>27</sup> Their campaign #NiUnaMenos has brought unprecedented attention to the relationship between murdered women, toxic masculinity, victim-blaming and police violence, underscoring the quotidian behaviours that create this "state of emergency" that the government still refuses to recognize as such. Centring anticapitalist critique and Black feminism along with anticolonialism, this intersectional project has also unsurprisingly privileged the politics of individual and collective embodied pleasures that contest the disciplining of gendered bodies and their relational practices, such as those I have been discussing. Torres López, as the founder and director of multiple projects including the bomba school Taller Tambuyé, has been especially clear in unequivocally naming and continually recalibrating bomba's role in actualizing the imperatives of Puerto Rican liberation, taking aim at that which stands in the way: capitalism, anti-Black racism, US colonialism, debt imperialism, poverty, educational infrastructure, militarism, masculinist nationalisms, environmental abuse and neglect, queer and transphobia, and macro and micro-level misogyny. Bomba is much more than simply a site for "having fun," "representing" Puerto Ricanness and blackness, generating cultural pride, or participating in a trending cultural practice. Rather, it is a performed refusal to disappear or to align bodies to the state.

### Conclusion: More Life

In his book *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, Joshua Chambers-Letson makes a case for performance being "a vital means through which the minoritarian subject demands and produces freedom and More Life" in the face of the promised death of Black, Brown, trans, queer, immigrant, colonial, women of colour subjects. Chambers-Letson focuses on "the party," the "commons," and "our communism," not as politics but as performative interruption of capitalism and a rehearsal for a not-here, not-yet, not-known freedom. His analysis is devoted to understanding freedom not as an achievement, but as a feeling produced in performance/song/dance/embodied interruption, momentary, ephemeral but nonetheless markedly pointing to a "something better than this." As such, his writing deeply resonates—proverbially and sonically—with bomba's actualization of "More Life," gesturing toward the "otherwise" that precedes and precludes the terms of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism. As we daily witness a purposeful and systematic depopulation of Puerto Rico and the disappearance and devaluing of Puerto Rican life, the most effective means of resistance and rebuilding have come via the *autogestión* of individual communities and small-scale organizing. This infrastructure is modelled and replicated through the repeated enunciation of bomba networks scattered across the island and throughout the diaspora. As with the person listening to Ausuba perform "Te voy a dar," bomba spectators, themselves participants in producing the space of the *batey*, come to know/feel/hear the "something better than this." Chambers-Letson writes, "when this sense of freedom is generated across the body and through performance, the body becomes aware that the rest of the time *something's* missing, *something* better than this is possible and that, *something* must be done" (2018, 7). Bomba is a call for this *something*, for Black Life, for Puerto Rican Life, increasingly for Puerto Rican Women's Life and for Queer and Trans Puerto Rican Life. Bomba teaches us how to listen for freedom, how to listen to flesh. As the dancer sounds the *contratiempo*, goes off and away towards a recognizable pattern and then pivots, she enacts a fugitive freedom even as she calls us into the space with her.

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“What allows the party, or a performance, to serve the will toward freedom and More Life is that another night beckons and it can happen again. And again. And again” (Chambers-Letson 2018, xxii).

*The dance is brief, for dancing too long is viewed as indulgent and repetitive. The song ends and another begins. Eventually the drums stop, exhaustion most likely dictating an end. Or a curfew. Or a lover waiting. Maybe they start again. Maybe there is more to be said. Maybe not tonight. But there will always be more. They will always come back. We will always come back, looking to listen and know and to feel and remember and imagine. Conspire. Together. Again.*

## Notes

1. The relationship to the folkloric costume codified in the twentieth century by the revered intergenerational bomba knowledge holders the Cepeda family can be nuanced and complex for many bomberxs, especially women. While contemporary practice has tended to privilege pedestrian sartorial practices in a move to reclaim bomba from a static racial image, many dancers also take great pride in the elegance and historical import of the traditional dress, celebrating Caridad Cepeda de Brenes' visions and innovations as a designer while simultaneously disidentifying with its stereotyping effect.
2. Brooks and Khesthi go on to write, “So although in the historical archives we find only a small handful of subalterns who literally speak in the textual format . . . this paucity is overshadowed many times over by the subalterns who ‘(re)sound’ through history using sonic means.”
3. I am inspired here by Alexandra Vazquez when she writes that to listen in detail “is to listen closely to and assemble that inherited lived matter that is both foreign and somehow familiar into something new” (2013, 8). In doing so, she questions both the ability and the desire to be able to produce a comprehensive description of Cuban music while focusing instead on an interaction with other details of sound, affect, story, even while maintaining that it is a method not invested in “possession or clarification” (24).
4. Ángel Quintero Rivera (1992) identifies the counter-plantation as a group of subalterns that operated beneath the radar of the surveillance and controlling forces of the plantation society, often forming maroon communities. Quintero Rivera describes the dialectic of the plantation/ counter-plantation as a dynamic tension between these two worlds. Bomba, though a documented part of plantation society, was developed in the spaces that (mostly) avoided censorship and control, its sonic capacity for travel linking communities across geographic divides.
5. For scholarship on the long history of anti-Black racism in Puerto Rico and the specific ways that blackness circulates both as a distinct marker of cultural “exceptionalism” and/or that which is excisable from Puerto Ricanness as a whole see (Torres 1998; Lloréns, García-Quijano, and Godreau 2017; Godreau 2015; Román and Flores 2010; Rodríguez-Silva 2012; Dinzey-Flores 2013; Abadía-Rexach 2012; Rivero 2005). Notably, much of this urgent and unprecedented scholarship has been written by Puerto Rican women, many of whom identify as Afro-Latina.
6. See Abadía-Rexach (2019).
7. For more discussion about the dynamics across the stage and the twenty-first-century “soberao” see Power-Sotomayor (2015).
8. Below, I discuss women’s work in the *batey*; however, it is also important to point out the critical organizational role that women have increasingly played in bomba worlds, envisioning, creating and sustaining numerous projects from founding schools to crafting performances and inter-diasporic networks, spearheading research endeavours and activist work.

9. While I focus here on women-identified dancers, there are many inspiring men that dance bomba, both virtuosic and amateur. In scrambling and resignifying the gendered norms of different dance movements and styles, many women have drawn on the “male dancer” vocabularies and, while less common but nonetheless significant, some men have learned to dance with skirts embodying femme aesthetics and gestures. Given the gendered divides of music and dance making, however, many women first approach bomba through dance, whereas men are more likely to enter via singing or percussion *despite* the commonly touted protocol that one begins bomba practice through dancing before ever picking up an instrument.

10. The formulation in which a singular dancer’s moves are marked by the *primo* drummer is a more recent development that has crystallized in contemporary bomba practice. In popular settings throughout the first half of the twentieth century, multiple dancers would enter the space in front of the drums in pairs throughout the song and, at different moments, the men would have a chance at soloing for the drum as they moved in front of the lead drummer. Women did not typically solo dance. The current practice is in part influenced by the solo dancing used in stage performances, where often two people would enter the stage bately in a heterosexual pairing with each partner getting a turn to *pedir piquete*. The singular dancer has also become normalized for how it allows for a broader expressive movement vocabulary but also challenges the containment of women in accessing sonic and gestural improvisatory power.

11. See also Leticia Alvarado’s (2018) powerful argument against the politics of respectability and liberal inclusion that drive Latinx desires for visibility.

12. There are indeed multiple important and widely circulated bomba recordings; however, the number is still relatively limited in large part because of the difficulty in capturing the sonic quality and texture of the deep bass of the *barriles*. Bomba has thus more often been present in recordings that combine the rhythms and the instrumentation with other forms. Ismael Rivera was the first to do this. Other examples are William Cepeda and, most recently, Loíza’s very popular *La Tribu de Abrante*, which combines bomba (along with other local genres like plena) with a second-line brass-heavy sound.

13. In writing this, a beloved member of the West Coast bomba community, *primo* drummer Nelson Piñeiro, struggled through his final days of metastatic cancer. Following his wish, we organized a group of bomberxs to gather with him at the beach with the drums. Almost unable to form sentences or to even speak, and overwhelmed by the energies of many people wishing to direct their words of love at him, he was still able to mark the different rhythmic patterns with a stick, locked into the collective conversation that more accurately expressed and encapsulated the decades-long peri-linguistic shared relationship of fleshy listening.

14. Given the loud bass of the *barriles* used to play bomba, it is no overstatement to say that they do “take over” sonically, thickly permeating the air, pouring out windows and travelling across city blocks, a sonic “take-over” that follows a long history of drums resounding across valleys to neighbouring plantations, choreosonic messages delivering encoded meanings.

15. These men include patriarchs Don Rafael Cepeda and Don Castor Ayala and lesser-knowns like Domingo Negrón, Pablo Lind, Eustacio Flores and many others. See Melanie Maldonado’s considerable work to recuperate the histories and erasures of women in bomba, not only naming and detailing the lives of many of these women—La Ponchinela, María Texidor, and Salome Villodas, among many others—but also excavating material practices such as the sewing and designing of elaborate underskirts as a way to frame the micro and more meta ways that women asserted presence and agency in bomba’s male-dominated spaces (Maldonado 2019).

16. For more about folkloric blackness as presented in festivals in Puerto Rico, see Godreau (2015).

17. The 2016 “Promesa bill” has created an “emergency management” board appointed by the US Congress that effectively makes dramatic fiscal austerity decisions, dissolving local democracy along with whatever vestiges of autonomy granted the island through Puerto Rico’s 1952 designation as a “Free Associated State.” #RickyRenuncia refers to the widespread popular uprising in July 2019 that ultimately removed the island’s governor Ricardo Roselló after the leak of a series of chats in which he displayed outrageous sexism,

homophobia, racism and a cold disregard for Puerto Rican life, including the many lives lost to Hurricane María.

18. See Jervis (2017). Also, Amarilys Ríos, the island's leading female bomba percussionist, shared with me how in the weeks following the hurricane, her drumming classes were fuller than ever before, even though she held classes in the dark. San Juan musician and cultural worker Tito Matos held free outdoor workshops for children unused to being “unplugged” from technology. Taller Kenuati, makers of artisanal bomba instruments on the west coast, similarly held workshops for children while parents waited in line for food, gasoline, or other supplies. Colectivo Umoja in the south of the island where the earthquakes have been strongest collected and distributed many thousands of dollars' worth of supplies to families in need via bomba networks in the diaspora.

19. Though I was not present for this live performance, I have made bomba with and enjoyed watching these same bomberxs on many occasions, such as the one here captured in the video.

20. Historically, the relationship between the dance and the drum, while clearly linked, did not require the kind of exactitude seen today. Moves were marked in more broad strokes. Increasingly there is a close attention to the minutiae of the dancer's movements and the drummer's ability to mark them.

21. I was an audience member at this performance.

22. “Bomberas in Mayagüez don't lift their dress much” is the chorus of a song written by Kily Vializ (2020).

23. Thanks to bomba sister Ines Mangual Cabassa for the useful image of the “typewriter.”

24. It should be noted that this sounding is deemed by many older generations, including many of those who initiated bomba's return to the *batey*, to be far too loud and thus missing subtle dynamics. Younger groups increasingly have a very loud, very strong, and muscular style of playing the *barril*.

25. One way to imagine the distinction between Díaz's and Vázquez's styles is by looking at the orishas Ogun versus Ochún, one being a warrior and spirit of metalwork and the other the fierce but coquettish and pleasure-loving river goddess. To be clear, the bomba dancers are *not* invoking Yoruba religious practices; rather, I use this here as a performative point of comparison.

26. Grupo Nandí, the first all-women bomba ensemble in Puerto Rico, was founded by Oxil Febles in 2006. Ausuba members Torres López and virtuoso drummer Amarilys Ríos were a part of this group and as such have been leaders in creating new spaces and modalities for women in bomba. Primarily relying on a cis-hetero framing, only more recently has their work begun to attend to an actual queering of gender in bomba. For more about queer and expressly trans and nonbinary bomba projects, see Julia Cepeda and Denise Solis's Taller Bombalele in Oakland, California.

27. For the Colectiva's manifesto, see “La Manifiesta—Colectiva Feminista En Construcción” (n.d.). Following feminist interventions across the Spanish-speaking world, one of many interruptions they perform is to resignify gendered language, such as changing the grammatically “correct” “el manifiesto” to “la manifiesta,” or instead of “los cuerpos” they write “las cuerpos.” For more on their activism, see Jackson (2017, 2018) and Santiago Ortiz (2020).

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