CRAFTING MOBILIZATION THROUGH POPULAR MUSIC: THE CASE OF BOMBA PUERTORRIQUEÑA

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ABSTRACT

Life in Puerto Rico is shaped by the colonial relationship between the archipelago and the United States. The existing social conditions resulting from this colonial relationship have often been a key denominator for social mobilizations. Amidst this reality, music has become a tool for Puerto Ricans to express their frustration with a broader audience and push for social change; an issue that is of particular importance considering that many Puerto Ricans are being displaced or have migrated away from the island. Recognizing music's legacy as a tool for expression, I am interested in the relationship between coloniality and music. To this end, and adopting a Latinx Critical Race epistemology, I examine lyrics from *Bomba* songs to center the experiences of oppressed Latinx folks. I specifically draw from Abadía's (2015) *Nuevo Movimiento de Bomba Puertorriqueña* (NMB) to guide my study. By conducting a relational content analysis, I identify the most recurrent themes across my sample while exploring its intersections with other subthemes.

I dedicate to my parents José L. Rivera Ortiz and Jannette Ayala Ríos; to my sisters Janixa M. and Jailene M. Rivera Ayala I wouldn't have been able to do this without you and all your support. To the people who supported me throughout this process, I remain in debt

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PROMESA	Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Economic Stability Act
CRT	Critical Race Theory
LATCRIT	Latinx Critical Race Theory
NMB	Nuevo movimiento de bomba puertorriqueña

INTRODUCTION

The year 2022 marks 124 years of United States' colonial rule over the Puerto Rican people; making the archipelago one of the few colonies left in the world. Together, Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the US and the local government's corruption have created an economic crisis and a public debt that is impossible to repay according to local authorities. The economic crisis and the limited services available have pushed Puerto Ricans to the limit. Historically, these stresses have caused mass out migration from the island to the United States (Whalen & Vázquez-Hernández, 2005). In fact, just in the last decade, Puerto Rico's population has declined by almost half a million people (Bureau, 2021). For those who have stayed behind, social mobilizations and music have become ways to express their frustration and push for social change (Tanzina Vega, 2019; Rashika Jaipuriar, 2019; Graziano, 2019; Martinez & Acevedo-Irizarry, 2020; Alamo, 2022). In the Caribbean, music through its multiple genres (i.e. Reggae, Salsa, and Reggaeton to mention a few), has historically been seen as a tool to advocate for social change (King & Jensen, 1995; Rivera-Rideau, 2015; Espinoza Agurto, 2021)

While my overarching research agenda considers the effects of coloniality in Puerto Rico; in this paper, I focus my attention on music. To this end, I examine lyrics from *Bomba* songs by adopting a Latinx Critical Race epistemology to center the experiences of oppressed Latinx folks. I specifically draw from Abadía's (2015) *Nuevo Movimiento de Bomba Puertorriqueña* (NMB) to guide my study. By conducting a relational content analysis, I identify the most recurrent themes across my sample while exploring its intersections with other subthemes. Adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach, I examine *Bomba lyrics* within the frame of the "*Nuevo Movimiento de Bomba Puertorriqueña*" (NMB), coined by Afro-Puerto Rican

anthropologist Dr. Bárbara Abadía-Rexach (2015) to identify the key themes. I intend for this study to inform my larger project on music genres as decolonial projects.

This paper is organized as follows: First, I describe Puerto Rico's political and historical context. Here, the role of music as a way of expression within coloniality is highlighted. Then, I provide the rationale behind my selection of NMB. Next, I discuss my theoretical, epistemological, and methodological choices. Finally, I provide suggestions for future research centering on the experience and contributions of *Bomba* practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colonization of Puerto Rico

In 1898, Spain lost possession of Puerto Rico to the United States because of the Hispanic American War. Every policy since then has been intended, as Negrón de Montilla (1990) argues, to foster the internalization and thus assimilation of American culture and values among Puerto Ricans. In Puerto Rico's case, this assimilation or "the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society" (Prine Pauls, 2022) translated into the imposition of American holidays, patriotic gestures based on loyalty to the United States, attempts to transplant educational content from the US into PR's curriculums, as well as making English a requirement for all students from K-12.

More recently, the colonial status of Puerto Rico became once again a matter of public discussion. Through a Financial Oversight and Management Board imposed when the "Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act" (P.R.O.M.E.S.A.) was approved by the US congress in 2016, the residents of Puerto Rico have been subjected to the consequences of austerity measures that have harmed the already fragile infrastructure for essential services such as public education and health services. In addition, the failed governmental response to Hurricanes Irma and María in 2017, the tremors in 2019, and the pandemic in 2020 have worsened the already precarious situation. As a result of these conditions, many Puerto Rican residents have left the island in masses, and the participation rate in elections of those who stayed has also decreased. In short, the consequences of colonialism in Puerto Rico are experienced on a daily basis at both the individual and the collective level. Whereas other researchers focus on the relationship between colonialism in Puerto Rico and issues such as the

economic crisis and the displacement of Puerto Ricans; I am interested in examining the relationship between coloniality and popular culture, specifically music. Maldonado-Torres (2007) defines coloniality as the "long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Maldonado-Torres (2007) also argues that coloniality defines social reality in terms of "culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations." On the other hand, culture is the knowledge of unspoken social queues that is transmitted through our respective socialization processes. (Jenks, 2007). It is important to note that culture is not produced in a vacuum; on the contrary, it comes to existence in a specific time and space, an issue of special importance considering that most Puerto Ricans are located outside the island. In short, culture itself is essential to the construction of social reality.

In my examination of the relationship between coloniality and music, I am particularly interested in people's agency. Mustafa Emir Bayer and Ann Mische, (1998) define agency as "a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). It is important to note that the meaning of agency within this research project falls far away from the traditional understanding of agency as a dichotomous feature that individuals either have or do not have. Instead, I adopt the conception of agency discussed by Ayala and Murga (2016) who understand *agency* as multidimensional and occurring when people, "embedded within a patriarchal structure, adapt, negotiate, resist, and/or transform the meaning of the schemas that compose this structure as they address existing economic or affective stresses." (Ayala & Murga, 2016). Similarly, to Ayala and Murga (2016), I suggest that within a colonial context, the lyrics

in *Bomba* will reflect a social reality where adaptation and resistance are equally occurring.

Music as a Decolonial Project

Dasilva et al. (1984) suggests that individuals embody social realities with the activities they incur, including the musical, and that these activities constitute social reality themselves. As such, they propose looking into music, rather than looking *at* music to understand it as a state of mind. (Dasilva et al.,1984,1-3). I thus propose that in a place shaped by colonialism as Puerto Rico, where sovereignty is always in question, artistic expressions often become the way for people to speak of and sometimes resist their hegemonic social existence. Shepherd and Wicke (1997) further add to the importance of comparing music to language by underscoring "its capacity to evoke and symbolize the emotional and somatically experienced dimensions of people's lives." (Shepherd & Wicke, 1997). Manuel and Largey (2016) for example underscore the importance of music as a symbol of nationalistic pride and provide examples of music as political working for and against the State. Moreover, Cornelius and Natvig (2019) draw connections between music and spirituality and how music holds a central role in Yoruba religion during their worship. In other words, far from being just a way to escape from reality, history and scholarship demonstrate how music is informed by and at the same time shapes societies. Puerto Rican music is not different; multiple music genres (i.e., Plena, Aguinaldos, Salsa, and Reggaeton) often feature discussions on social matters. As such, music emerges as an independent form of expression; one that can serve, I argue, as a decolonial project.

Bomba and the New Movement of Bomba Puertorriqueña

Bomba is described as one of the oldest music genres in Puerto Rico (Quintero Rivera, 2020), and its components reflect the African heritage on the island. These elements are principally divided into four: drums (*tambores*, often called *barriles*), the voice element

(principal and choirs) the cuá, and the maraca. The *barriles*, which are the leading instrument, are divided in two: *buleadores* and *primo*. The *buleadores* are the drums that follow the base rhythm throughout the song's entirety; while the *primo* is dedicated to improvisation. The improvisations are guided by a dancer (bailador/bailadora) who also follows a set of rules for going in and out of the *batey*. Furthermore, this combination of music and improvised dance happens along with a call and response; an African music custom which involves an interchange between the speaker/singer and the audience, which Colón-León (2021) asserts is "a fundamental ingredient of *Bomba*." (Colón-León, 2021). In the case of the cuá, which is played by hitting it mostly with two wooden sticks, is described as "a small wooden barrel suspended on a stand, whose construction is similar to that of the drum but without the leather and metal needed to mount it." (Peña Aguayo et al., 2015). Along with the maracas, which are also made from wood with a round shell and seed inside, the cuá accompanies the sound of the drums.

Bomba, as a medium for self-expression, has existed since before Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony. Whereas Manuel and Largey, (2016) refer to *Bomba's* existence in the early 19th century, Baralt (1981) locates *Bomba's* first documentation in the 17th century. All scholars agree however that enslaved peoples relied on *Bomba* not only to celebrate collectively, but also to disguise their uprisings and revolts against the Spaniard oppressors. (Manuel & Largey, 2016), (Baralt, 1981). From the start, *Bomba* constituted a camouflage to fight oppression while serving as a tool to re-humanize its participants in front of a systematic effort against their existence.

As a tool for self-expression and resistance, during the early 20th century, *Bomba* practitioners fought institutional efforts to ban it. In 1906, for example, the city of San Juan approved a municipal law that prohibited any gathering where people played *Bomba* drums or danced to the beat of it in any public place within its jurisdiction (Viera Vargas, 2020).

Other municipalities, such as Arecibo in the North, Aguadilla in the Northwest, and Guayama in the South, joined or attempted to join this institutional racist agenda. Although in this case, racist policies were unsuccessful as people kept finding ways to gather and cultivate their culture through *Bomba*, "the racial logic that supported these prohibitions in 1906 persist today with all its malice of marginalization, prejudice, and discrimination against blacks in Puerto Rican society." (Bomba, prohibitions y discurso racial en los albores del siglo XX, 2020).

In this paper, I focus on *El nuevo movimiento de Bomba puertorriqueña* (NMB) as described by Afro-Anthropologist Dra. Bárbara Abadía-Rexach. The NMB refers to the recent development of *Bomba* (between 1995 and the present), which "proposes new ways of looking at and analyzing contemporary *Bomba* that in various aspects distance itself from traditional *Bomba*." (Abadía-Rexach, 2015). The NMB is primarily characterized by the proliferation of *Bomba* workshops in and outside Puerto Rico, which has broadened people's participation in *Bomba*. Abadía-Rexach argues that, within diasporic communities, *Bomba* is used "to connect with a distant homeland from which they cannot completely belong; where their Puerto Rican-ness is always under scrutiny." (Abadía-Rexach, 2015). She adds that NMB allows Puerto Ricans to reclaim their sovereignty and craft resistance in front of the colonial agenda of the United States (Abadía-Rexach, 2015).

One particularity of performing *Bomba*— from a diasporic standpoint— is that it formulates "…critical questions that complicate Puerto Ricans' racial and ethnic identities which are already marked by the 'metaphysic catastrophe of coloniality'' (Bernardino-Costa et al., 2018, 36). Abadía proposes nevertheless that the appropriation of *Bomba* from non-Black Puerto Ricans has not changed the racial hierarchies of society. (Idalissee Abadía-Rexach, 2019, 11). In fact, it is suggested that the NMB creates a space for individuals to reaffirm their

Puerto Rican-ness while presenting the particularities of being Puerto Rican while in the diaspora which for many, is a direct consequence of colonialism. Abadía-Rexach argues that, within diasporic communities, *Bomba* is used "to connect with a distant homeland from which they cannot completely belong; where their Puerto Rican-ness is always under scrutiny." (Abadía-Rexach, 2015). In other words, Puerto Ricans in the diaspora are discovering in *Bomba* a "sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the many others, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common." (Hall, 1990, 223). Likewise, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) state that the collective remembrance of places often serves as a point of encounter among displaced people, which resembles what these diasporic communities go through. In short, the mere presence of *Bomba* —and *Bomba* workshops— in the diaspora provides the means to hold on to a distant or even imaginary homeland.

Consequently, within the NMB, *Bomba* not only becomes part of a national cultural heritage, but it also serves as a tool to discuss experiences and perspectives within coloniality. The latter can be seen in *Bomba's* links to politics. For example, there are more examples of women taking on a broader spectrum of roles or even creating their own groups now within NMB. Moreover, there are instances when trans-feminist groups use *Bomba* to protest and share their claims through its lyrics. In short, *Bomba* within the NMB becomes a space where social reality is reflected.

Latinx Critical Race Theory

Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) is a theoretical approach that derives from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and follows its principles of dismantling oppression systems. Although LatCrit underscores the role *race*, *class*, and *gender* play in how people experience the world, it pays special attention to the experiences of Latinx people. Consequently, LatCrit takes into

consideration other factors such as national origin, language, citizenship status. (Trucios-Haynes, 2000). By adopting LatCrit approaches, scholars create knowledge that challenge stereotypes associated with Latinx people. Adding to this point, Valdes (2005) proposes that LatCrit "works both to create scholarship and activism through community and to create community through scholarship and activism." (Valdes, 2005).

In this research, Latinx Critical Race Theory guided my main research question as it acknowledges the connection between Afro-Caribbean music and social order. I thus suggest that, by adopting a LatCrit lens, in this study I am able to examine the relationship between coloniality and *Bomba* by the examination of its lyrics. Moreover, since my study focuses on the NMB through a LatCrit lens, I take into consideration the whitening occurring within *Bomba* and its implications in my analysis. In other words, LatCrit allows me to confront the ambivalence that has characterized the Latinx community in terms of racial identity. I approach this work with the goal to explore in future work the role of *Bomba* as a music genre, as a decolonial project.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Selection

Adopting a LatCrit epistemology, I conducted a content analysis of the lyrics of a sample of 96 *Bomba* songs recorded between 1997 and 2021. Berger (1998) defines content analysis as a research method that seeks to measure "the amount of something in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular art form." On the other hand, Graneheim et al., (2017) asserts content analysis in qualitative research "focuses on subject and context and emphasizes variation, e.g., similarities within and differences between parts of the text." (Graneheim et al., 2017). Content analysis allows researchers to draw connections from data (whether in the form of a text or media) to social reality through informed interpretations of the specific time/space where the data was collected.

Once I identified the theme that was the most recurrent in my sample, I performed a relational content analysis. A relational content analysis not only involves quantifying the number of times a concept comes across the data, but it also entails analyzing and making sense of themes through their relationship with others. In other words, through a relational content analysis "individual concepts are viewed as having no inherent meaning and rather the meaning is a product of the relationships among concepts." (Content Analysis Method and Examples | Columbia Public Health, 2022).

Positionality

My methodological selection for this project was influenced by my research question, which at the same time was informed by my positionality. In this context, by positionality I refer to the compendium of identities and labels that inform my social reality. Darwin Holmes (2020) discusses the importance for novice researchers to define their positionalities; especially when

conducting qualitative research. In my case, I divide my positionality in three areas that, when contextualized, explain my worldview.

First, being raised on the island provides multiple advantages when approaching *Bomba* as a music genre. Higher language proficiency, higher location awareness, and higher cultural and social capital when compared to researchers from a different place are just some features where I could have an advantage. Secondly, the fact that I come from a racialized working-class household uncovered for me multiple manifestations of coloniality, and the social inequality between the political class and those who work to survive. Through watching and experiencing these forms of oppression, I've developed character, self-respect, and my desire to support the liberation of Puerto Rico; a social imaginary beyond colonialism that ultimately informs my research interests. Lastly, I must acknowledge that I own the privileges of been a cis man approaching *Bomba* from an academic space. Thus, My positionality has shaped the theoretical and epistemological framework I have adopted.

Sample

My dataset is composed of 96 *Bomba* songs recorded between 1997 and 2021. The distribution of the songs by year is as follows: 12 songs between 1997 and 2001; 21 songs between 2002 and 2006; 11 songs between 2007 and 2011; 54 songs between 2012 and 2016; and 6 songs between 2017 and 2021. However, although my qualitative data is essentially the group of lyrics from *Bomba* songs themselves, audio material was also taken into consideration to complete the transcription process. Hereinafter, I discuss the reasoning behind my decisions while crafting my sample.

First, the time when the songs in my sample were recorded fall within what Abadía's (2015) delineates as the NMB. Unfortunately, I was unable to incorporate songs recorded in

1995. Additionally, I selected songs until 2021 which is the time when I started my coding process. In addition, whereas I included recent *Bomba* fusions to respect the flexibility and evolution of music genres, I excluded similar genres such as Plena and Rumba which can easily be mislabeled.

Moreover, although the songs in my sample were recorded within the NMB period, it needs to be noted that some are older compositions which were either recorded a second time or passed through generations as oral knowledge. Although this may seem contradictory at first, I find their inclusion necessary because *Bomba* ensembles still include them in their repertory and because they inform the workshops across the island and the mainland, characteristics of the NMB. At the same time, their inclusion in both *Bomba's* repertory and in the workshops implies their relevance as they still portray Puerto Ricans' realities in many ways.

Considering that there is no database where I could find all the *Bomba* songs ever recorded, I decided to look for *Bomba* ensembles that I had previous knowledge of through Spotify, an audio streaming service. Using Spotify as a database to create my sample, I then found related artists through the "fans also like" feature of the platform. At the end, the songs in my sample contain songs from 19 different groups; 16 based on the island and three based on diasporic communities in the mainland. Furthermore, I was able to identify women participation in 8 of the 19 *Bomba* ensembles in my sample, which is also consistent with the broader participation of women within the NMB.

Coding

In the absence of written versions of the lyrics across my sample or a software that could assist in the process, I transcribed all the audio recordings verbatim. These transcriptions were either in Spanish or a combination of Spanish and English or Afro dialects. Then, after

transcribing all the songs selected, I started the coding process assisted by NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

First, I started coding by adopting an inductive approach (Charmaz, 2014). Through this process, I labeled texts in the form of verses according to what they represented. As I went through my sample and revisited the coded data, a constructivist grounded approach lens allowed me to step back and refine my coding in the process. Eventually, I stopped coding when I had identified a total of 43 themes thus reached saturation. At the end, the most recurrent theme across my sample was *Emotion*. Following the principles of Relational Content Analysis, I wanted to make sense of *Emotion* based on its relationship with other themes identified. Therefore, I used the coding matrix query tool from NVivo to group the themes with more than 100 references, through which I was able to identify the themes that most interacted with *Emotion*: (1) *Bomba as storytelling*, (2) *Revealing injustice,* and (3) *Call to Action*. Ultimately, the themes identified through the coding matrix tool were used to make sense out of *Emotion.* In the subsequent section, I discuss in depth the themes identified through the coding matrix query as well as their intersections and interrelations. Moreover, the following section serves as a bridge between my methodological framework and the conclusions I draw from my data.

ANALYSIS

Storytelling

The element of *storytelling* is present in 55 of all 96 songs in my sample, roughly 57% of them. Serrat (2017) defines *storytelling* as a vivid description of ideas, beliefs, personal experiences, and life-lessons through narratives that evoke powerful emotions and insights. (Serrat, 2017). Unsurprisingly, *storytelling* has been used within music in the past. For instance, during the *Salsa Consciente* era, lyrics would often engage with societal issues through *storytelling*. (Espinoza Agurto, 2021). Within my sample, *storytelling* in *Bomba* songs discussed a variety of themes which I divided in four subcategories: "scarcity," "disgrace," "death," and "powerlessness."

Scarcity

Songs coded as stories of "scarcity," which often related to resources needed for daily life, lyrics tended to focus on experiences of scarcity among people. Moreover, while *Bomba* songs pointed out the problems that come with scarcity, they also uncovered the reason for its existence. On the other hand, the presence of "scarcity" as one of the principal subthemes within *storytelling* supports the characteristics of people living within coloniality. In *"La Curita",* recorded by *"Tambuyé,"* it states:

La Curita

El muchacho de la esquina

Se quiso el cobre tumbar

Pa capiarse la curita

Que lo pusiera a gozar

Llamé a mi arrendadora

"Hola, ¿Cómo está usted?

Arregle mi tubería La quiero de PVC"

The *Curita*

The boy in the corner

The copper wanted to be knocked down

To get '*la curita*'

That would make him enjoy

I called my landlady

"Hello, how are you?

Fix my pipe I want it made of PVC

Like the story in "*La curita,"* many Puerto Ricans have experienced being robbed by someone who has taken away their copper pipes or electricity wires (or air conditioner units if they owned any). In this case, a crucial element is the meaning of "*la curita*" which rather than referring to something that helps to heal some disease, essentially describes the drugs the guy from the corner wants to buy. On the other hand, the author refers to the location where this happened: Río Piedras, Puerto Rico. Río Piedras is where the University of Puerto Rico is located and where the Police have a precedent of reproducing the state's oppression through violence against students and residents of the area; an area that has a large Dominican population. Furthermore, "I called my landlady" implies not owning a property. Renting thus reflects another reality experienced on the island; one where owning a property has become almost a luxury for those without generational wealth.

Disgrace

Contrary to songs coded as stories of "scarcity," songs coded as stories of disgrace involved accounts at both the individual and collective level. Notwithstanding, they shared a commonality in that the main characters were left with no one on which to rely. A collective experience is described in *Los Hermanos Ayala's* song *"Hugo"* as they retell the story of a category-5 Hurricane named Hugo that hit the island in September of 1989. The song describes how the island was affected by the hurricane and presents the lack of communication in the aftermath. On the other hand, *"Ayúdame a ayudarte"* presents an individual experience of disgrace. The following excerpt provides more details:

Ayúdame a ayudarte

Porque el vicio no tiene dueño

Tú eres esclavo y no lo ves así	**Help me to help you**
Las falsedades te tienen preso	Because vice has no owner
Tu dueño y vicio siempre fue mentir…	You are a slave, and you don't see it that way Falsehoods hold you prisoner Your master and vice has always been to lie..

In *"Ayúdame a ayudarte,"* the speaker is having a conversation with a friend who, like the guy who steals the copper in *"La Curita,"* is possibly going through a problem of drug addiction. In previous verses, the speaker references the occasions when his friend apparently stole from his family, highlighting the irony of his deeds. Moreover, in the last verses of the song, referenced above, the speaker realizes the disgrace he and his friend are dealing with; the loss of will over an addiction, while clearly telling their friends the truth. In *"Ayúdame a ayudarte,"* while the center of the narrative is related to something negative, *Bomba also* served to portray a man who chose to make himself vulnerable out of his love for a friend. Essentially, his act challenges patriarchal conceptions of masculinity, where men are discouraged from showing pain in front of traumatic events such as the loss of a loved one who died.

Death

In the songs coded as stories about "death," mortality was approached collectively. *Bomba* songs referred to a particular rhythm called *Belén*, which is one of the more than twelve rhythms from Bomba associated with the pain and sorrow that often comes with the death of a loved one. However, the intention behind organizing a *Belén* is for it to serve as a collective healing space. Rather than collectively helping someone heal from the death of someone they loved, the rationale is to help each other pass through that shared pain together referring to the

good things the deceased did while alive. An example is provided by Totín Agosto De Arará in *"Barriles de Colores"* (Colorful Barrels); where the following is exposed:

Barriles de Colores	**Colorful Barrels**
Siempre te recordaremos a Ricky Soler	We will always remember you, Ricky Soler
Tus barriles sonarán por siempre	Your barrels will sound forever
En Añasco están gozando rumba cuembe	In Añasco they're enjoying the rumba cuembe
Mi bomba, plena, rumba, Ricky Soler	My bomba, plena, rumba, Ricky Sole

In this song, Totín Agosto used *Bomba* as a path to pay homage to Ricky Soler, an artisan known for making the drums used in music genres such as *Bomba*, *Plena* and *Rumba*. Moreover, Agosto mentions Añasco and Mayagüez, two municipalities by the South-West area of the island, where I infer based on the entirety of the lyrics, Ricky Soler may have made a valuable contribution for the *Bomba* community. More importantly for this research project, the message in this song's lyrics is not one of sadness. Instead of presenting a standard reaction to death, this song is grounded in the joy that is left after Ricky Soler's death because of his dedication to produce the *barriles* used to play *Bomba*, therefore, to share culture.

Powerlessness

In the case of songs coded as stories of powerlessness, *Bomba* songs tended to start with a description of powerlessness as a feeling itself, but like narratives of "scarcity" they pointed out systems of oppressions. Gender oppression was a recurrent theme, although the state also features as a perpetrator of oppression in some cases. For instance, in *"Amiga Lola"* by *Desde Cero*, *powerlessness* is reflected as follows:

Amiga Lola	**Friend Lola**
Tú no sabes amiga Lola Lo que me pasó	You don't know Lola What happened to me
Que uno de tus hermosos amigos	That one of your beautiful friends
Me comprometió…	Engaged me...
… Me comprometió	... He engaged me
Sin saber por qué	Without knowing why
A las 5 de la mañana	At 5 o'clock in the morning
Al amanecer	At dawn

While the lyrics within the song don't necessarily support thinking that the woman in the song is mad or angry about this situation, the lack of knowledge about the rationale for this relationship to happen reflects power inequality and powerlessness from the woman in the song; in fact, at the end the speaker eventually states that this man *"no estaba en na"* an expression used to refer to someone who is no good or that doesn't have aspirations in life. Far from having control over the things happening, in this song, events take place, but the woman of the story doesn't have any word over them. This inaction could also be an example of the multidimensional agency discussed in Ayala and Murga (2016) where women adapt their behaviors to resist and navigate within patriarchy. On the other hand, in the song *"Lloré"* by the Bomba ensemble Buya, "powerlessness" is something caused by the state which has incarcerated a family member of the speaker.

Lloré	Yo le pedí a los santos Yo le pedí a un juez
Mi madre lloraba Yo también lloré	Saquen a mi primo de esas cuatro paredes
Saquen a mi primo de esas cuatro paredes	**I Cried**
	My mother cried, I cried too

Get my cousin out of those four walls

I asked the saints I asked a judge

Take my cousin off those four walls

Although the song doesn't answer what happened before the speaker's cousin was incarcerated, "powerlessness" is a subtheme surrounding the message in *"Lloré"* as the future of the incarcerated is at the mercy of higher powers (in this case, legal authorities). Nonetheless, the requests appeared to be useless since the song itself is written in past tense. Moreover *"Lloré"* is another example of how narratives focus on experiences at the individual level, in this case related to "powerlessness". In this case, *agency* took the form of crying as a sign of frustration because of the situation controlled by a higher authority, where acting outside of what is expected can result in an even worse outcome.

Ultimately, human agency in *"Lloré"* is shown using *Bomba* as a means of expression. However, the stories portrayed across the *storytelling* subtheme involve a variety of factors and reasons that guide the actions taken by the characters in the songs. Narratives of "scarcity" challenge conceptions regarding *class* by centering the discussion on the claims towards the owner of the building while narratives of "disgrace" challenge patriarchal conceptions of masculinity. In stories about "death", *Bomba* was presented as a healing space, and finally in stories regarding "powerlessness" adaptation was a key element present.

Across the songs where *storytelling* emerged as a recurrent subtheme, I also identified 159 instances where an autobiographical approach was adopted within the lyrics, only 26% of these references interacted with *storytelling*. Rather than weakening the presence of *storytelling* among the songs in my sample, these biographical approaches suggest that *storytelling* in *Bomba* tends to adopt a third person approach. Moreover, the use of *storytelling* in *Bomba* is consistent

with LatCrit Race Theory's principles that acknowledge the value of experiences from the standpoints of oppressed people while considering them as learning opportunities.

While we can't expect music or artistic expressions in general to dismantle oppression systems by themselves, *Bomba* songs supported LatCrit principles through *storytelling* that uncovers these types of injustice from the oppressed standpoint.

Revealing Injustice

To further contextualize the meanings and purpose of *Emotion* in *Bomba* songs, I turned to analyze their intersections with *revealing injustice.* I identified *revealing Injustice* as the most prevalent subtheme from the matrix coding queries. Moreover, this subtheme was at the core of narratives about "scarcity*"* and "powerlessness*"*, and *storytelling* in general.

Within the context of this research, I found that while *revealing injustice* interacted with *storytelling*, my identification of *revealing injustice* as a subtheme uncovered previously unnoticed messages in *Bomba* songs. Specifically, I found out that across all the *Bomba* songs in my sample, *revealing injustice* emerged as a theme in 33 songs, and almost half of them (16) interacted with *storytelling*. More importantly, eight of those songs discussed gender oppression in some way. In short, songs that had *revealing injustice* as a subtheme tended to center gender oppression.

An example from my sample is *"Juanita"*, recorded by *Tambuyé*, where the story of an abused woman is told. In *"Juanita,"* instead of focusing on Juanita's standpoint as a victim of gender violence, the author describes the features that make Juanita's partner an abuser. Furthermore, throughout the song, there is a repetitive chorus reinstating Juanita's desires to stay away from him. The following excerpt exemplifies it:

Juanita Coro—Si Juanita no quiere ir, que no vaya

(No no no, que no vaya)	Chorus-If Juanita doesn't want to go, she shouldn't go (No no no, she shouldn’t)
Lo que tiene es un hombre muy malo en la casa	What you have is a very bad man in the house
(Coro)	(Chorus)
Si no le gusta el café lo tira con to’ y taza	If he doesn't like coffee, he'll throw it away with all and cup
(Coro)	(Chorus)
Ese hombre es una bestia y ella pura melaza	That man is a beast and she's all molasses
(Coro)	(Chorus)
Una vez la corrió con un palo en la casa	Once he ran her through the house with a stick
(Coro)	(Chorus)
Ese hombre animal la mando pa la casa	That animal man sent her to the house

Juanita

While this portion of the song expands on the physical and psychological abuse of which Juanita is a victim, her role as a woman within an abusive relationship is also revealed through the imposed responsibility of providing coffee. Moreover, the fact that her partner was following her with a stick implies more about the kind of abuse she has been subjected to. However, the repeated choir (No, no, no, she shouldn’t) validates Juanita’s desires and the trust the speaker has in her. Ultimately, by portraying a story of abuse and revealing the standpoint of the speaker, the song *“Juanita”* is an example of the *revealing injustice* subtheme.

A different example is found in “*No me va a dar*” recorded in 2020 by *“El Colectivo”*

featuring Barbara Pérez and *"Ausuba"* (an only-women Bomba ensemble). In *"No me va a dar"*, the story is told in first person and the woman abused acts by herself. Moreover, the song's choir, although repetitive, serves a different (double) purpose. Bringing the expression "*Si te cojo coqueteándole a otro*" from a *"Si te Cojo"*, composed by Bobby Capó and popularized by in 1977 by Ismael Rivera*; "No me va a dar"* serves as a space to contest abusive behaviors and warn of the apathy the oppressed, in this case women, can externalize if they decide to. Consistently, as shown in the following excerpt, the song is directed towards the abuser himself:

No me va a dar	**You Will Not Hit Me**
Te di un chance y te entregué mi corazón	I gave you a chance and I gave you my heart
Me sentía muy bien en esta relación	I felt so good in this relationship
Y el día de nuestra primera discusión	And on the day of our first argument
Tú no me pones una mano encima	You don't lay a hand on me
coro (Si te cojo coqueteándole a otro)	Chorus: (If I catch you flirting with someone else)
Dime, ¿Qué vas a hacer canto e' loco?	Tell me, what are you gonna do, you crazy?
coro (Si te cojo coqueteándole a otro)	Chorus: (If I catch you flirting with someone else)
No me vengas con ese alboroto	Don't come to me with that fuss

Within this portion of the song, the author expanded on the reasons why the main character is in this situation. In addition, I identified another similarity between this specific song and *"Juanita"* as they both reveal gender oppression at the individual level. However, this case is different from Juanita's because the main character's postures are not questioned by anyone.

Adopting an autobiographical approach, *"No me va a dar"* presents a story where women's sovereignty over her bodies and lives is validated.

A different approach is found in *"Canción sin miedo"* recorded in 2021 by *"Barrileras del 8m"* where *Bomba* serves to recount victims who have died from gender violence. *"Canción sin miedo"*, which textually translates into "Song without fear", points out how the state, through continuously failing to protect women's lives in Puerto Rico, becomes accomplice. Furthermore, the author highlights some of the recent femicide victims and asks for the government to not forget their names. The following quote further expands this:

Canción sin miedo	**Song without Fear**
Hoy a las mujeres nos quitan la calma	Today they take away our calm from us women
Nos sembraron miedo	They sowed fear in us
Nos crecieron alas	We have grown wings
Cantamos sin miedo, pedimos justicia	We sing without fear, we ask for justice
Gritamos por cada desaparecida	We shout for each disappeared woman
Que resuene fuerte; nos queremos vivas	Let it resound loudly; we want us to live
Que caiga con fuerza el feminicida	Let the femicide fall

Different from the aforementioned songs within this section, women present themselves as a collective demanding better living conditions. More specifically, in front of a state and a society that works against their well-being, women can only rely on themselves and warn about their actions if the abuses continue. In a sense, *"Canción sin miedo"* starts by pointing out the reason for *revealing injustice*. Ultimately, this song provides the rationale for the need to reveal injustice and moreover, mobilize others through a *call to action*.

Both the recurrence of *revealing injustice* and its intersections with *storytelling*, reflect how *Bomba* becomes the vessel for manifestations of multiple agencies that describe the injustice experienced. More specifically, gender oppression is discussed and women across the songs resist and adapt depending on the circumstances. In other words, my findings exemplify once again the relationship between music and social reality. Raussert's (2021) argues the following: "…Both cultural production and social movements have the self-reflective capacity to detect conflicts and breaks in the sphere of the social and to articulate them to a broader culture." (Raussert, 2021). Upon this, we can look at *Bomba* to present societal issues to a broader audience.

Call to Action

Finally, I identified *call to action* in over 58% of the songs across my sample. Within the lens of this research, I describe *call to action* as "a speech, piece of writing, or act that asks or encourages people to take action about a problem" *(McIntosh & Cambridge University Press, 2013).* Consequently, as I coded songs as *call to action*, I was able to divide them into two sub themes: "invitations to Bomba*"* and "requests for solidarity.*"*

"Invitations to Bomba" portray *Bomba* as a welcoming space to new practitioners. Here, references to *Bomba*'s origins and techniques are made. Moreover, *Bomba* emerges to spread

Rulé sondá

Mi bomba es africana
Mi bomba es antillana
Repícame la bomba
Rulé sondá
(Coro)

Mi bomba es africana
Y ustedes cantarán
Repícame la bomba
Rulé sondá

Rulé sondá

My Bomba is African	My bomba is African
My Bomba is Antillean	And you will sing
Play the Bomba for me	Play the Bomba for me
Rulé sondá (Chorus)	Rulé sondá

Although "invitations to Bomba" portray *Bomba* as a cultural asset or as an opportunity for entertainment; at the end *Bomba* serves as a sharing space. While in *"Rulé Sonda",* the author states that *Bomba* is both African and Antillean—and thus referring to its origins—, the call is to play *Bomba* and sing along in harmony. In other words, while *Bomba's* translocation does not prevent its practice and enjoyment; in *"Rulé Sondá"* Bomba becomes a common ground to nurture a sense of belonging. Raussert (2021) makes a similar argument, concluding "music as a community building medium goes beyond entertainment and cultural consumption." (Raussert, 2021). Nonetheless, although invitations in *Bomba* support a sense of belonging through the shared practice of *Bomba*, they don't necessarily ask for change.

On the other hand, the "requests for solidarity" subtheme exhibits a much more common manifestation of agency, especially when calls to action are used to present claims or to reclaim sovereignty. In this case, I use "solidarity" to describe the sense of unity built over communal interests, objectives, and standards. In other words, practicing solidarity comes along with leaving aside differences and practicing empathy. Consistent with narratives about "scarcity" across this project's dataset, instances where claims were presented also uncovered who was responsible for the problems. More importantly, many of the songs coded under *call to action* intersected with *gender* as a subtheme as well.

Instances where *Call to action* intersected with *gender*, often fell under those where a reclamation of sovereignty is pursued. Unsurprisingly, references that result from these intersecting subthemes tended to support the empowerment of the oppressed (women) while pointing out the abusive behavior of oppressors (men). This is consistent with trans-feminist collectives' educational efforts regarding the validation of testimonies from victims of gender violence on the island. Similar to collective healing exercises such as the Self Affirming Soul Healing Africans' (SASHA) process discussed in Johns (2008), *Bomba* can serve as a curative tool from the systemic oppressions. For example, in *"Mujer Boricua"*, women's sovereignty is highlighted throughout the chorus and verses.

Mujer Boricua	***Boricua* Woman**
Coro: Eres una mujer fuerte,	Chorus: You are a strong woman,
Una mujer hermosa, Una mujer boricua	A beautiful woman, A Boricua woman
Madre de este pueblo que con su ejemplo nos dignifica.	Mother of these people that with her example dignifies us.
Verso: Sé dueña de tu cuerpo, nunca permitas que nadie te exija	Verse: Own your body, never allow anyone else to demand
Controla tu cuerpo	Control your body
Controla tu ser, Controla tu vida	Control your being, Control your life
Tú eres la tuya	You are your own
Seamos como Blanca	Let's be like Blanca
Seamos también como Lolita	Let's also be like Lolita
Mujeres patriotas	Patriotic women
Que dieron su vida por ser dignas	Who gave their lives to be worthy

By underscoring features that make them powerful, *Tambuyé's* song serves as an ode to Puerto Rican women. Here, affected by oppression at many intersections, the speaker doesn't need to make specific references of who wants to control them. Contrarily, the author exhorts to emulate the work and behavior of other illustrious women who fought for better common futures. More specifically, they make references to pro-independence women Blanca Canales and Lolita Lebrón among others, who devoted their lives to the quest for the freedom of the Puerto Rican people.

"Mujer boricua", along with other songs such as *Anita, Juanita, Canción Sin Miedo, A la buena sí*, and *Adolfina Villa Nueva*, exemplify how women are using *Bomba* as an empowerment tool while creating bonds to support each other. Within the scope of this research, through pointing out injustices, *Bomba* fosters the empowerment of women and centers the role male partners play as perpetrators of women's oppression. Moreover, *Bomba* songs that use storytelling to point out gender violence —while demonstrating their author's commitment with social change through stories that challenge hegemonic discourses surrounding the idea of what it means being a woman in Puerto Rico— resemble LatCrit principles of working towards the dismantling of oppression systems. Furthermore, the presence and discussion of such themes in *Bomba* occur at the same time when an alarming rate of femicides terrorizes Puerto Rican women's lives on the island and while in over 1,149 out of 1,368 reported cases of domestic abuse between 2019 and 2020 alone, a female was the victim.

Discussion on Blackness

Far from what I expected from a music genre known for its close relationship with Blackness, references to *race* in *Bomba* were in most cases brought over to exalt the abilities of Black people in *Bomba*; whether it is through dance, or through playing the *barriles*. Cases

where racism was criticized were uncommon across my sample. More specifically, the presence of *race* as a theme across my data translated into highlighting the abilities of Black bodies across *Bomba* components, such as the ability to either dance or play the music itself. Nonetheless, by practicing Lugones' faithful witnessing as cited in Figueroa-Vásquez (2020), which "makes visible the often-unseen consequences of the coloniality of power, knowledge, and gender" (Figueroa-Vásquez, 2020); I identified instances where Blackness and gender intersected.

First, in *"El Sombrero de Yaré"* by "Hermanos Ayala", the speaker states: *"Como baila esa mulata, de ella yo me enamoré".* Although in this case, the spirit of the expression *mulata* is to highlight the racial complexion of a woman, the use of the word *mulata* itself can often become problematic as its considered dehumanizing, especially referring to Black women in one of the oldest colonies in the Americas where enslaved peoples had to *trabajar como mulas*. Secondly, in *"Medias Colorá"* by *Desde Cero* a woman is asked to not use her red socks. The relevance of the" red" reference lies in that red is believed to highlight Blackness and is sometimes avoided in clothing to give the impression of a lighter skin; negative reference to kinky hair were also made in this song. A third, and my last example of references to Blackness is found in "*La llave"* by *Desde Cero* where the following is stated:

La llave	**The key**
Querían que se fuera por negra tú ves	They wanted her to go black, you see
Mi reina la bomba ay la remué	My queen the bomb oh *la remué*
La llave, que casi se fue	The key that almost went away

While the center theme in *"La llave"* is not *race*, this fragment leaves uncovered a case of discrimination where *race* and *gender* coincide. Moreover, the fragment references the French influence in *Bomba* by incorporating the expression *"la remue"* which translates from French to

English as “stirs it”. Ultimately, while it is not clear if with *la llave* the song is referring to an actual key or to some kind of inspiration, *race* is presented as reason to suffer from discrimination.

In short, although *race* takes part within the discourses shared through the songs in the sample, it was not as recurrent as it was expected based on the history of *Bomba* and literature discussed where Blackness seemed like part of *Bomba*’s essence. At the same time, the ways in which *race* is present across my sample reinstates Abadía-Rexach’s assertion regarding how, although the NMB has allowed for white Puerto Ricans to become part of Bomba spaces in the name of culture, the racial hierarchies of the island haven’t changed. (Abadía-Rexach, 2015).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, adopting a LatCrit lens I examine *Bomba* lyrics in specific, within the context of coloniality and identify its key themes. By conducting a relational content analysis, I identified *Emotion* as the most recurrent theme across my sample. However, by making sense of *Emotion* based on its relationship with *Storytelling, Revealing Injustice,* and *Call to Action;* I found *Bomba* to serve and resist the colonial legacy experienced by Puerto Ricans.

Emotion in *Bomba* was present mostly relying on storytelling as a way to support principles from LatCrit by presenting stories from the standpoint of the oppressed. Through narratives of "scarcity," "disgrace," "death," and "powerlessness," *storytelling* as a subtheme focused on describing social conditions that applied to both individual and collective scenarios while challenging gender roles within patriarchy.

S*torytelling,* as a coded subtheme, interacted the most with *revealing injustice.* However, in my analysis of *revealing injustice, gender* emerged as a core element too. Moreover, the songs where *revealing injustice* was a subtheme interacting with *gender* included stories of physical and emotional abuse. In these stories, the abuse against women came from the state, but mostly from their male partners. More importantly for this study, narratives that centered *revealing injustice* and *gender*, portrayed different manifestations of agency; while stories where the state was the perpetrator, the state's inaction is underscored in its' role as an accomplice.

Lastly, I identified *Call to action* across my sample principally in the form of "invitations to Bomba" or as "requests for solidarity." "Invitations to Bomba" presented *Bomba* as a space for community building where a sense of belonging was fostered. On the other hand, in songs *where call to action* translated into a "request for solidarity", the cause to act was highlighted. More specifically, in cases where "request for solidarity" intersected *with gender*, songs tended to

support the empowerment of the oppressed women while pointing out the abusive behavior of their counterparts.

Whereas I briefly discussed the role of coloniality in Puerto Rico and its relationship to popular culture, the adoption of a LatCrit lens allowed me to uncover not only the key themes of *Bomba* songs from NMB, but in doing so continue my research agenda which focuses on *Bomba* as a decolonial project. Approaching *Bomba* through a relational content analysis allowed me to identify the nuances between songs and the underlying messages in their lyrics. In fact, throughout this research, my positionality played a critical role allowing me to interpret Puerto Rican jargon within the different contexts portrayed in songs. Moreover, I was able to draw connections between *Bomba* and trans-feminist groups on the island as various messages across my sample resemble values from trans-feminist collectives; making *Bomba* a mirror of social reality by uncovering stories of gender oppression, presenting answers to it, and relying at the end mostly on oppressed women themselves to solve this problem in the Puerto Rican society. While my relational content analysis provided me with valuable findings and allowed me to draw connections between *Bomba* and social reality in Puerto Rico, I've also identified some limitations behind my research project.

Regardless of my Puerto Rican-ness, by approaching *Bomba* and reaching conclusions counting mostly on my previous knowledge and the lyrics in *Bomba* themselves, it would be irresponsible to consider myself an expert in comparison to all the people who spend their time within *Bomba* spaces on a daily basis. In other words, while choosing relational content analysis as my method made me rely on my previous knowledge about *Bomba,* Puerto Rico's current political and economic landscape, and the actual lyrics from the songs, it does not consider other valuable insights from *Bomba* practitioners.

Far from diminishing the findings from this study, the limitations I encountered raise critical questions regarding the development of *Bomba* as part of Puerto Rican culture. For instance, through my inquiry I found that songs addressing gender oppression didn't discuss gender's intersection with *race*; leaving *race* mostly in the background. While this reinstates Abadía's assertions about how regardless of *Bomba's* openness to white practitioners within the NMB, racial hierarchies haven't changed on the island (Abadía-Rexach, 2015); it becomes pertinent to discuss what role race plays in *Bomba* within the NMB for the work done by trans feminist work collectives in Puerto Rico. For instance, conducting interviews with *Bomba* practitioners involved in trans-feminist efforts across different *Bomba* community circles, and implementing participant observation and ethnographic field notes from protests where *Bomba* is featured could draw light on such perspectives.

With this study, I identified discussions in *Bomba* that position it as a way to express *emotion* within coloniality, while also reflecting people's agency. Furthermore, across my sample *Bomba* was used to point out gender oppression and a space where sentiments of belonging are nurtured. More importantly, calls to action in *Bomba* resembled social reality in Puerto Rico and suggest a path towards equity. Ultimately, this study aims to guide and inform future research projects that aspire to further our understanding of how Puerto Rican continue to create their own nation within coloniality.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Complete list of codes
Full list of codes:

- Agency
- Critique
- Defense
- Commitment
- Bomba & Imaging
- Bomba's Purpose
- Bomba as a way to Honor the memory of those who die
- Bomba as being the group
- Bomba as a healing mechanism
- Bomba's communal nature
- Bomba as culture
- Spiritual Component
- Bomba as Fiesta
- Autobiographical approach
- Bomba's component
- Bomba as Storytelling
- **Emotion**
- Bomba & Relationships
- Class
- Greetings
- Family
- **Race**
- Invitation to Participate in Bomba
- Couple Relationship
- Resistance
- Power
- **Revealing Injustice**
- Gender
- **Call to Action**
- Bomba & Space
- Displacement
- Reference to Regions
- Not understandable
- Food or Drinks
- Outlaw
- Shortage
- Pop culture reference
- Non Bomba music reference or influence
- Clothing
- Uncertainty
- Nature
- Identity
- Afro dialect reference

Codes in **bold were highlighted in the findings and discussion section**

Appendix 2: Link access to Spotify playlist with the songs analyzed in this research project. (More songs were added after the data collection process was concluded)
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7qvfTqfvHEYcTTC35nRTap?si=be3dbf01985248d7