

**Bomba: The Dance of Resistance**

by

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### Artistic Aims:

As I created and produced this project, I've incorporated an artistic element into every possible aspect of Zemi. I hoped to accomplish an understanding throughout all audiences in different social groups of the result of the attempted genocide in the history of Tainos. I've organized this project in the light of the ancestors who've come before me. I feel that it is my duty as a descendant with indigenous Puerto Rican DNA to share the non-white washed version of the story to the public. Although I haven't thought of the inclusion of other indigenous groups in my production process, until I had a colleague reach out to me about how she connected to my senior project as well. This colleague expressed her admiration for the show and thanked me for having the willingness to share the story of those who are usually unheard. During the first reading of the script, my cast members thanked me for allowing them to have an experience that connected them to their roots, while learning about the truth of what has happened to our people. With this project, I hope audience members have been able to withdraw the courage to question the history that's been told through a white lens. Throughout the majority of history, like most students, history has always been my worst subject due to the falsified truths of the occurrence through time.

When writing Zemi, I wanted each character to have a sense of relatability to them, regardless of having special abilities or not. The character I regret not focusing on is Alex, I wanted to have Alex to be the universal character to relate to across all audience members. During the production, I've noticed Alex's character was underdeveloped as far as their backstory and their prior knowledge of their culture was unclear to audience members. I intended for audience members to be able to learn through Alex's curiosity about their own culture; however, I failed to acknowledge precisely how much Alex originally knew prior to the

information provided by the museum as well as their own knowledge. I neglected to include the specifics of how much Alex originally knew about her culture. For other deity character's Atabey, Guabancex, and Yucahu, I wanted them to have a familial relationship between them. Being that Guabancex and Yucahu are brother and sister, as I wrote the script, I would picture them bickering back and forth in an almost child-like manner. Yucahu was originally written to be a physical body onstage, however due to restrictions of COVID-19, the character was recast three times and rewritten to be a voiceover character. In making adjustments to Yucahu's character, I've realized that Yucahu's character was originally written to use his power to adjust Alex to a better position when becoming unconscious. While brainstorming ideas to reconfigure Yucahu's actions, I remembered Yucahu is sometimes associated with the sun, being that he is a deity that controls the fertility of crops. I figured that lighting was the best way to show this in production; Yucahu would light the area around the chair Alex collapses on to help put them in a better position. In making Yucahu's character a voiceover character, it demonstrates the different ways in which people can communicate with gods; rather the interaction being in person as well as having the deity's voice be only audible. Other deity characters, like Guabancex and Atabey, were devised by their own special abilities. Guabancex is known in Taino belief as the deity to control natural disasters and weather. When developing the character traits for the character's descriptions, it made sense to me to make Guabancex's character feel responsible for bringing the foreign voyagers to the islands. Other than having a familial relationship to the other deity characters, Guabancex's character was the sole cause to cause Alex to faint and finally be able to see the deities. Guabancex was written to be the character that fuels Alex's frustration about the loss of connection with her people's history. Atabey's character was more simple in the way of being a mother-like figure to all the other characters; however she would be stern when she had

to be. It was important to me to not keep the deity characters one-sided and to give them more of a personality, rather than solely being known for the tales of their lives. Giving personality to the deity characters allows a deeper connection with the audience,

With costuming, I've tried to keep the design simple yet meaningful. Alex's outfit was straight forward; white button down shirt, black pants and shoes, with Alex's accented vest with Taino symbols. The symbol on the right side of the vest is a stick-figure with two dots above, which is a coqui - or a frog native to the island of Puerto Rico. This symbol was chosen because of the importance the frog has to the island. They're known to be inhabitants of the island before the Tainos came to the island of Puerto Rico, much later scientists have tried to take the coquis to the mainland of the United States but the coquis died before making the trip to Florida. The symbol on the left side of the vest is a 'flower-looking shape' with a face in the middle, which is a sun. If there was a physical body acting for Yucahu's character, Yucahu's outfit would've been similar to Guabancex and Atabey's tribal outfits. However, Yucahu's petroglyph would've been on a cape rather than on the tribal skirt. Additionally, Yucahu would've had the sun symbol on the top of the cape, near the string to tie around the neck of the actor, along with his own petroglyph on the bottom of his cape. This was the original force for Alex's realization of the true identities of the deities, being that Alex had the same symbol on her vest and prior knowledge of the deities and their associations and attributes. As for the bomba skirts, I wanted to pay tribute to the African orishas that inspired the Taino deities. I organized the bomba skirts to be in coordination to the corresponding deity and orisha. The orisha, Yemaya, was the influence for the Taino deity, Atabey, representing the colors blue and white. Both Yemaya and Atabey control water and are the 'mother of all.' The deity, Guabancex, was influenced by multiple orishas - Shango/Oramfe, and Oya - all representing different types of natural disasters

or weather, including justice. Shango/Oramfe represents the colors red and white; Oya's color is maroon. When designing I chose to go with Oya's color scheme for Guabancex because Oya is a female warrior and represents change. This resonated with me because this is representative of the change Guabancex wanted to see in the exhibit. My intentions for this project were to avoid neglecting the influence of African culture on the lives of modern Puerto Ricans.

When the African slave trade was in effect, Africans were transported to different places of the globe, including islands of the Caribbean. The dance form, bomba and plena, was the fusion of both African and Tainos in efforts to communicate with one another. In a perfect bomba and plena setting, there would be more than one drummer to follow the dancers movements. There are typically different drumming rhythms to be played for different occasions; there is a rhythm and dance style that would be done to mock the slave owners. When choreographing the bomba dance for the production, I wanted to make sure the dance style combined well with the characters. I chose to have Alex be the drummer because it represents Alex becoming more in tune with her history and her culture. The drummer's role is to examine and anticipate the dancer's movement. For the separate dances, I originally planned for Yucahu to do dance and have his movements be mostly footwork and hip movements. I wanted to have his dance movement be closer to the ground, in order to further Yucahu's relationship to the crops and soil. Since we lost an actor so close to production time, I was unable to have another actor step in physically so we had to take out Yucahu's dance from the show entirely. Atabey's movement was fluid and calm, containing flowing motions to represent the waves of the ocean. The song chosen for Atabey's dance was slightly quicker than Yucahu's portion. Guabancex's dance was more influenced by her anger and her motions in her dance were quick and mostly sharp. The dance for Guabancex's

character wasn't choreographed because I wanted to make the dance feel authentic and more heartfelt.

This project gave me the opportunity to discover my own past through my ancestors. With help from my aunt and other relatives, I was able to receive knowledge of my Taino and African ancestors. Through tarot readings, meditation, and visiting elders in the communities, I was able to be more connected and understand what my ancestors went through. Growing up I was always told we came from the indigenous Puerto Rico, my family believed it was important to learn the importance of knowing where you came from. My family was always against the ways in which society shows indigenous people to be, like savages. I was always the student to be aware of mistreatment towards minorities. My family taught me to understand where I came from no matter how harsh the details. They believe my great grandmother and great grandfather has personal ties to supernatural beings and entities. My overall goal for this piece is to allow audience members to get a well-developed understanding of the culture of Tainos and show the uplifting spirits of the people from Puerto Rico.

## Tech Essay:

My history in theatre has mostly consisted of acting, along with minor experience in set design and director's assistant, prior to my enrollment in Purchase College. Given my lack of experience, I was restricted with the full-potential that could've been done to achieve a greater theatrical spectacle. However, I was able to describe my minimal vision to the Lighting Designer of the production and bring it to life. I was thankfully able to receive aid in the Sound Design, as well. Throughout the experience of the production, I was faced with many obstacles to overcome; moreover, with help from some people from Purchase College the production went smoothly.

I knew going into my senior project was going to be difficult at the beginning, but I had no idea how much COVID-19 would affect my production. Within all of my meetings with my primary reader, I would have many moments where I would fight my emotions when telling her of the multiple cast and crew members that would drop out due to many reasons, mainly consisting of fear from COVID-19. My first constant struggle was being able to find a second reader for this paper. Then the other senior that was in the production informed me he couldn't act in the production due to personal reasons. Throughout the online rehearsals, I realized how hard it would be to teach the choreography and the drumming in a time span of three months. My main concern about writing the script was making all the information from the tour and about the deities sound like a long monologue or informative essay. My other concern for the production was being able to find students to help with the technical side of the production and having it look flawless. I was so thankful to have the costumes (besides the jewelry) be made by my grandmother. She would check in with me and ask how everything was going with the rehearsals and production, when I would of course reply that everything was running smoothly and



knowing it wouldn't be. As I would continue to write the script, I would have the constant worry about making the script 'covid friendly' for safety purposes and my sponsor reassured me that I should write the paper as I wanted to then worry about restrictions afterwards. I had attempted choreographed the dances for Yucahu and Atabey but I realized my phone wasn't recording the whole bomba routine so it took me three days to delete enough pictures and messages from my phone in order to send the cast the videos of the choreography.

While getting ready for an online rehearsal about three weeks before our first show, I received a call from the actress who would play Yucahu to say she will not be able to be in the show anymore and she sent best wishes for the show. After getting off the phone, I screamed and fell to the floor crying while wishing that this was a nightmare and I would wake up soon. I had to scramble to see if there would be anyone that is available in such a short time. I wasn't able to find a student on campus in such a short time but I asked my uncle who has experience with film to help me and he said he would. I figured if he couldn't physically be on campus, I would be able to record his voice to play over the speaker. This technique worked well because Yucahu's character is sometimes associated with the sun and he also plays a deity character. Most of the time when people pray to a greater being they look or tilt their heads upwards. It created an illusion as if the deity was speaking to you personally. I also had to change the script for all the adaptations to Yucahu's character, as well as the reason for how Alex finds out that they are deities by allowing her to see Guabancex's skirt instead of Yucahu's cape. Being that I had little to no help until the end of production for the technical aspects, I had to find the audio samples of wind and make sure the songs were edited together. I had help with the lighting; I wanted to keep it as simple as possible because of my lack of experience. When partaking in dress rehearsals I

was still stuck on what my lines were, even though I wrote the show, because I was too busy worrying about everything else.

I've decided to add a few pages of the blocking from a notebook I wrote in during the production:

start - 2:45 → 0:10 - 3:05 → 8:46  
 semi      patria      Baila  
                  borinquena      Julia  
                                       Loiza

## Blocking - General

Set up:

- 3 podiums lined up upstage (Zemis)
- 2 chairs center stage
- chair + drum downstage left

P3: - Alex walks in from downstage right (iPhone on person)

- Zemis (left - right: Yuca, Karissa, Kiara) kneeling next to the podium
- Alex ~~sits~~ stands after the song is played then

P4: ~~if~~ the dieties ~~stand~~ and walk downstage ~~to talk~~

- treat "Myphens" as pauses / time to think and back slashes as cutting off points

P4-5: - Alex occasionally looks at <sup>Zemi</sup> script for confusion of info/pronunciation

P6: ~~the~~ dieties walk downstage when Alex talks about zemi

- ~~G vents~~
- ① Atabey steps forward
- ② Ata + Yuca switch
- ③ Yuca + G switch

P7: - Alex gets closer when talking about the theory

- Alex falls and leans ~~off~~ one of the chairs

P8: - Yucahu in line w/chairs  
when "positioning" Alex then starts <sup>to</sup> wand  
- Alex now sitting in chair  
unconscious

- Atabey waves arm over Alex  
P10: - ~~Atabey~~ Alex get up on "wait"  
but lose balance  
- finally get up "Even if"  
- Yucahu comes to Alex "oh nevermind"  
- Guab still seated at drum  
- Atabey gets up and bows/curtsy

P11: - G gets up  
- Atabey steps up to G  
- G steps up to Alex then walks  
off stage right  
- Pause for Alex to take in "been allowed"  
- Yucahu sits at one of the chairs  
"Not every"

P12: - ~~Atabey~~ G & walk in and stands  
down stage right  
- Alex picks up the box and flips the  
<sup>empty</sup> chair around and places the box  
on the chair going through the  
artifacts (skirts, slave shackles,  
african doll)

- Atabey slowly approaches Alex ~~and~~  
~~Yucahu leaves the sits back~~ ~~take both~~  
skirts off stage

"Bomba has evolved"

P13: - Yucahu gets up and paces around  
the drum and finally takes off sheet  
- Alex sits back  
- Yucahu invites Alex to sit, then  
takes both chairs off stage

### Research Essay:

Children are taught growing up about events in history such as the discovery of America and Thanksgiving. Events like these are exaggerated versions of what actually happened in history. The victors of the wars have had the privilege to write their own history, leaving the ‘others’ to fend for themselves. For the Tainos, the ones who were able to survive the attempted genocide and slavery took shelter in the caves and in the mountains of the rainforest of what is now called El Yunque. Tainos around the island have slowly revived their culture on the islands of the Caribbean, especially in Puerto Rico. The tainos once had scriptures describing each aspect of their way of life, in order to be passed down from generation to generation, however, the Spaniards forced the Tainos to burn these scriptures as they were not the Christian way of life. Since the scriptures were taken, Tainos in the communities have been trying to piece together what they remember or have been taught from elders before them. During times of slavery, both native and african descent shared the desire to join cultures to help protect themselves. However, they decided to white wash their culture in order to have some aspects of their life still intact.

The names of the deities I decided to use for this play were Yucahu Bagua Maorokoti, Guabancex/Juracan, and Atabey. From the Taino language: Yucahu means ‘yuca spirit’ or ‘cassava giver’, Bagua means ‘the sea on this land’, Ma-orokoti means ‘without grandfather.’ Through translation, Yucahu’s name explains his origin and how he came to be; yuca or cassava is a vegetable grown in the soil, ‘the sea on this land’ represents the fertilized soil when growing crops or being the son of Atabey (who controls the waters), and Atabey had no father and was believed to give birth to herself. As mentioned in the play, Yucahu is believed to be, according to Taino culture, the deity that controls the growth of crops as well as growth in prosperity. The

cemi of Yucahu has been buried in the earth and prayed to to ask for well grown crops. Yucahu is one of the children of Atabey. According to Puerto Rican indigenous Tainos, Yucahu resides in the mountainous region of the rainforest of El Yunque, which is why his zemi is in the shape of a mountain. In Taino belief, Atabey is the supreme deity who controls the horizontal waters, often played to when a woman in the tribe is pregnant or experiencing fertility problems. Atabey has also conceived all of her children immaculately. Atabey's cemi is a woman in a deep squat position, a position used when giving birth, with her elbows on her knees and hands holding her head. Some may describe her cemi as a 'frog woman' given the way her hands and legs are positioned. Atabey's other offspring, Guabancex has been known throughout Puerto Rican indigenous Tainos to be the deity to control natural disasters, including storms, winds, hurricanes, and rain. Guabancex is believed to contain the fury of mother earth to destroy and clean.

The influence the African belief system of gods/goddesses/deities has on the Taino belief system is grand. The different deities of African culture have a much broader spectrum when it comes to which power each deity controls. Most people believe the tainos gained inspiration and influence from the powerful beings in order to create their own belief system. During times of slavery, the tainos learned from the people taken from the african tribes of their belief system as a way to keep one another company and more at piece, given the circumstances of their situation. In my research I've found that each Taino deity has one or more African deities to correspond with their abilities. Firstly, Yucahu being the deity to control all crops and growth has similar properties as Ogiyan, Onile-ile and Oko. Ogiyan is the closest representation of Yucahu, being the god of crushed cassava (yuca). Online-ile and Oko both have powerful properties having to do with earth's soil and farming/agriculture. Next, Guabancex had one African deity that most

closely resembled her; Shango or Oramfe, who is the goddess of thunder, lightning, and justice. Shango/Oramfe is also recognized as a responsible leader. Lastly, Atabey has the most African deities that closely resemble her, some of which are: Oshun, Yemeya, Olosa, Olookun, and one aspect of Oranyiman. Oshun and Yemeya resemble Atabey the closest, being that Oshun is the goddess of the river, sweet water, sensuality, fertility, healing, and beauty. Yemeya is the goddess of the waters, messenger of the ocean, mother of all, and comfort/healing. When creating the play, I decided to pay an homage to the African gods to appease my African ancestors and took note of the color that represented the African gods and goddesses: Ogiyan, Oshun, Yemeya, Oya and Shango/Oramfe to incorporate them into the production.

One of the ways in which the Taino and African tribes would communicate is through bomba. Bomba is a collaboration of both Taino and African styles of music using instruments such as; djembe drums or empty barrels of wine, cuas, maracas, and their voices and bodies. Bomba is usually performed in a circular space with a group of four or five people playing the drum and one or more dancers. Bomba is known as a 'call and response' dance/song style, at the beginning of every song the main singer tells the chorus what to sing. Before the dancer starts, they traditionally walk/dance in a circle to claim their space and bow their head to the main drummer as a form of a greeting. While the dancer is dancing, the main drummer follows their moves with specific drumming sequence for each move. There are different rhythms for different situations; for example, there is a rhythm and dance style the Tainos and Africans would use to mock their owners. For my original plan for Yucahu's character, I would've had the actor/actress use dance moves for the mocking dance style since his character is a mischievous jokester. I planned to have Yucahu's dance be as if he was teasing Alex (the drummer), however, I was unable to have an actor or actress for that character. I also wanted Yucahu's dance to have 'street

elements' and have him playing with some of the rhythms. For Atabey's dance style, I choreographed her dance so she would have more fluid motions by playing with her skirt and using arm brushing motions to represent washing away or cleaning history. For Guabancex's dance, I did not choreograph her dance because I wanted it to feel authentic and have raw emotion of anger and regret, ending with acceptance. Guabancex's dance had more linear arm motion to represent the self-hatred and guilt she had, the song used for her dance was also faster.

With my experience with bomba, I've felt more connected to my ancestors and only regret not learning about it sooner. My aunt introduced me to bomba in middle school when I was at a low point in my life and she not only taught me about bomba but my Taino ancestors as well. She helped me understand where I came from and showed me how I can better my relationship with the spiritual world. I was introduced to a group called Los Pleneros de la 21, where they showed me all I know about the different techniques of bomba. Los Pleneros de la 21 holds annual programs for people of the community to learn bomba and showcase their knowledge at a recital at the end of the program. The theme of my first program with Los Pleneros de la 21 was recycling. Bomba is not only a form of entertainment but it is also a way of self expression. We danced to different songs about saving our world and how to make the world a better place physically. Finishing the program made me realize how being involved in my community and speaking up using performance was so relieving and reassuring to me. After deciding to join another program, I was honored to be asked to dance a solo at the end recital; however, they didn't tell me how I would dance or what the rhythm would be. Once it was time to go onstage, they told me I was to be dancing as if I were the African goddess Yemeya. I then panicked because I was nervous about upsetting anyone with higher status than me, but they reassured me and gave me a brief synopsis of who Yemeya was. Since Yemeya is similar to

Atabey's traits and characteristics, I decided to use dance moves that resembled water and royalty. In June of that year, I was invited to perform in the Puerto Rican day parade alongside Los Pleneros de la 21. Performing in the parade was such an amazing experience and it made me feel honored that they had asked me to perform. Ten years after that program, I was unable to partake in any other programs for Los Pleneros de la 21. This past summer I was able to go to the homeland of Puerto Rico itself and I was constantly on the search for a live performance of bomba. I was finally able to find one in the town of Old San Juan being performed by La Familia Cepeda, which is a well known group in the bomba community. As they performed with their drums and singing, they held the area to dance open for fellow citizens to express themselves, worry and doubt free. I've always admired how open the bomba community is. There was a big crowd of people watching as people from every different level of knowledge of the dance would go and give their all. I was anticipating for it to be my turn to dance; however, I was worried about how long it had been since my last time dancing bomba. I started to doubt myself until I closed my eyes and felt a strong breeze of wind, it felt as if my ancestors were giving me strength. Being able to bring bomba to the Purchase College stage was an enriching and nerve wracking experience; however, I'm glad I was given the opportunity and praise for the production.

Bomba is still to this day used as a dance of resistance, since the Taino and African people of the tribes would use it to resist the reign of their slave owners. In today's society, bomba is used to speak out in Black Lives Matter protests in a civil and just way. There are several videos addressing the topic of the harsh treatments of Black bodies in the world. Different groups of people have been dancing to take a stand for Black bodies that have been taken from us as well as the Black bodies of the past, present and future. Being that bomba was



created as a collaboration between Taino and African culture can be seen as a way of bringing the ancestral bodies into light and showing that we can all come together to put an end to this brutality.

In today's society, there have been more bomba groups being created. One specific group that comes to mind is an all female plena group, Plena Combativa. Plena is influenced by bomba music played with hand drums, called panderos, resembling a tambourine without the cymbals on the sides. Plena songs are also used as a form of protest against society's wrongdoings. Plena Combativa's mission is to "make visible and demand a leading role for women percussionists, composers, and full-time singers, promote the plenary as a tool for struggle, protest and proposal, and denounce the patriarchal, racist, capitalist, colonial system, and its violence against women and LGBTIAQ + communities." Each of their songs are written by different members of the group, most of which translate to speak out to situations that have happened in history.

In modern day society, there are many ways in which the taino legacy continues to prevail. Through rituals and healing are some ways in which Taino practices tend to preserve their culture. The most common way of preservation is by word of mouth and stories past down by generation. Most people I've encountered of Puerto Rican descent have not heard of the term Taino or know of their existence. With my project and future projects, I hope to help Tainos become relevant once more and more well known.

Sources:

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