"Si Tu No Sabe Kokobalé" and the Reclamation of Collective Memory as a Praxis of Liberation

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Abstract

This paper explores the factors that led to the erasure of kokobalé, a centuries-old Afro-diasporic stick- and machete-fighting dance, from Puerto Rico's collective memory and somatic repertoire. Drawing on fahima ife's lyrical poetry, Édouard Glissant's archipelagic thinking, and Joseph Roach's concept of surrogation, the author argues that kokobalé is embedded within a network of inter-island connections across the Caribbean region and represents an enduring anti-colonial cimarrón (maroon) consciousness in Puerto Rico. As a combat dance, the choreographic elements of kokobalé can be traced to West African traditions such as n'golo. However, this paper does not focus on identifying a singular point of origin but instead considers alternative migratory routes, including the speculative history proposed by Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla, who suggests that kokobalé was incorporated into the batey after the Haitian Revolution. Rather than reinforcing dominant narratives of nationhood, extinction, or authenticity, the paper engages with the form's historical opacity and the ways it was excluded from Puerto Rico's white(ned) social imaginary, while also examining how contemporary kokobalé practitioners reimagine the form to continue forging decolonial futures. Close readings of performances by Proyecto Kokobalé and Estudio 353 highlight how kokobalé's resurgence has been facilitated

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through choreographic experimentation, community organizing, and digital activism. As new generations embody this combat dance, they come to understand the combative histories of their ancestors and reaffirm the inseparable link between cultural heritage and Puerto Rico's ongoing struggle for liberation.

Keywords: stick-fighting dance, combat dance, folklore, bomba, Puerto Rico, embodied knowledge, archipelagic thinking

As the familiar sounds of the *cuá*, the *maraca*, the *buleador*, and the *subidor* fill the space, community members gather around to form the *batey*, some holding onto the edge of their skirts, others onto long colorful scarves, but all eager to make their bodies speak.[1] The *buleador* player keeps a steady rhythm with the drum, as the first dancer enters the space of the *batey* and tilts her head downwards to bow in deference to the musicians. It's not long until the *subidor* player slices through with a deft strike, the high-pitched sound of the drum responding to and interpreting the dancer's sharp snap of the skirt. An embodied archive lies in each conversation held between the improviser and the drum, each arm toss, shoulder roll, sidestep, and swivel. From the pair of grandparents recollecting the moves they executed in their youth, to the nieces and nephews devising new ways to unfurl their scarf to complement their fast footwork, every interaction forms part of the collective memory that preserves *bomba* and continues to innovate its form and practice. Within the crowd, only a few practitioners grasp long wooden sticks, wielding them like machetes. Some wonder if this is an external practice spilling onto the *batey*, others might recognize it as an old tradition obscured with the passage of time. Nonetheless, these practitioners say ¡*presente!*, bowing in deference to the musicians just as the other dancers had done beforehand, and then commence the combat dance called *kokobalé*.

1. To use the language of "speaking bodies," as Power-Sotomayor puts forward in "From Soberao to Stage."

I used to be among those in the crowd who were unknowing. Even as a Boricua who had been born and raised in Puerto Rico, I had never encountered this movement practice before. After witnessing this practice for the first time, I even asked my peers, family members, and elders, but none of them had any recollection of the tradition either. Therefore, I write as both a spectator and a novice student of this craft, investigating why *kokobalé* has not been remembered in the same way or included in our collective memory alongside *bomba*. As I immerse myself deeper into this research, my connection to this craft undergoes a deliberate transformation. *Kokobalé*, once shrouded by unfamiliarity, has now etched itself into my memory and continues to inform my understanding of Puerto Rican history, one that unfolds against a backdrop of resistance. Tracing a few of the many factors that contributed to the exclusion of *kokobalé* from Puerto Rico's collective memory and somatic repertoire, this paper aims to foster a nuanced conversation surrounding this Afro-diasporic dance form. Moving away from easy narratives of nationhood, extinction, and authenticity, this paper instead focuses on relationality, glancing back at *kokobalé*'s past, acknowledging its opacities, and expanding the scholarship toward hopeful decolonial futures. Aiming to contribute to the emerging field of experimental dance in Puerto Rico and to *bomba* scholarship that examines folkloric stagings of the Black body, I explore how contemporary practitioners of *kokobalé* engage with the silences in the archives, embrace a creative reinvention of what it means to dance *kokobalé*, and radically insert themselves in spaces that have historically excluded Afro-Boricuas from the Puerto Rican here and now.

Due to the efforts of community leaders from the Cepeda and Ayala families alongside many other practitioners from the coastal towns of Loíza, Mayagüez, Ponce, and San Juan, *bomba*, an Afro-diasporic music genre and dance form, endures as a crucial tool for both healing and resistance among Boricuas on the archipelago and throughout the global diaspora. Across generations, these leading families have transmitted an embodied knowledge, navigating a period when

bomba faced great stigmatization. Nonetheless, despite extensive documentation, preservation efforts, and research dedicated to *bomba* the past few decades, *kokobalé*, a movement practice historically fostered within *bomba*'s stage, has been obscured, erased, and presumed forgotten. *Kokobalé*, or its orthographic variation *cocobalé*, consists of machete- and stick-fighting games that provided enslaved individuals with a means to train deceptive maneuvers and defensive techniques for life-or-death situations. In *kokobalé,* the dancers arrange their long wooden *cuá* sticks or machetes in the center of the *batey* to form a cross.[2] Dancers encircle the weapons and perform solo dances or *piquetes*. Thereafter, the dancers quickly lunge forward, as one dancer claims the weapon on top, and launches an attack, while the other dancer grabs hold of the remaining weapon to defend themselves.

It is no coincidence that *kokobalé*, as a pseudo-martial art and dance form, was not preserved with the same cadence as *bomba*, for it makes explicit the "maroon choreographies" of the enslaved population in Puerto Rico and their organized, combative resistance against the plantation owners. As a tool, artifact, and weapon, the machete unearths memories of near and distant instances of rebellions; its sharp blade possesses a centuries-old precedent that is rearticulated in our contemporary collective movements.[3] *Kokobalé* presents an unequivocal gesture of liberation in the combative use of the machete. Rather than being associated with its "productive" agrarian function, the machete is reframed as the weapon of choice for rebellion and *cimarrónaje* (maroonage). In her article "Cimarrón and the Reordering of the Living World," Ileana M. Rodríguez-Silva traces the meanings

2. Desmangles notes in "African Interpretations of the Christian Cross in Vodun" that to Vodunists, the cross is not only a medium of communication with the boas but also the symbol through which one connects to cosmological principles which they personalize, "the zero-point at which the two worlds bisect" 23–24.

3. Alongside the figure of the enslaved African and the fugitive *cimarrón*, the machete is also commonly associated with the *jíbaro*, an archetype of the Puerto Rican peasant and self-sufficient farmer. The term "*macheteros*" (machete-wielders) was later used in the 20th century by the Boricua Popular Army, a clandestine militant organization that campaigned for the independence of Puerto Rico from the United States.

of the term *cimarrón* (maroon) across different points in history. The Spanish-derived term *cimarrón* emerges in the early 16th century to describe wild or runaway animals and Indigenous populations who eluded colonial control, before becoming primarily associated with fugitive enslaved Africans. Although the term functioned as a "technology of othering,"[4] as Rodríguez-Silva notes, it was "through [the *cimarrón*'s] unwavering sense of individual autonomy, self-reliance, strong will, and high capability for political organization" that over time, the *cimarrón* evolved into a potent political figure through which Afro-diasporic communities in Latin America and the Caribbean asserted their humanity.[5] In the 20th century, the *cimarrón* figure was primarily associated with working-class men; however, in the 21st century, Black and Brown activists, particularly women and queer individuals, have redefined the *cimarrón* as a symbol that not only challenges colonial legacies but also interrogates internalized racial and gender hierarchies.

Putting *kokobalé* in conversation with conceptual frameworks from fahima ife's *Maroon Choreography* (2021) enables me to think about an enduring *cimarrón* consciousness that lingers within this combat dance and the will of those who wish to (re)embody it. Composed of three long-form poems and a lyrical essay, *Maroon Choreography* attends to the afterlives of Black fugitivity, unsettling linear conceptions of history by highlighting the ongoing presence and significance of those who fled into rural areas to resist capture. Building on André Lepecki's *Exhausting Dance*, where choreography is understood as that which disciplines the body, "mov[ing] according to captivity's expectations for expression," ife's rebellious writing becomes a tribute to the bodies that have historically refused, and continue to refuse, the choreographies imposed by the plantation complex.[6] The text is grounded in the concept of "anachoreography," which ife develops through an engagement with Fred Moten's *Black and Blur* and his articulation of a "native fugue-state of being-composed," a mode of

4. Rodríguez-Silva, "Cimarrón and the Reordering," 113.
5. Rodríguez-Silva, "Cimarrón and the Reordering," 118.
6. Qtd. in ife, *Maroon Choreography*, x–xi.

indeterminate Blackness that resists the structures and mechanisms of coloniality.[7] Propelled by ife's evocation of an "anachoreographic opening," I redirect the metaphor back to the somatic realm, as it expands my understanding of what the fugitive practice of *kokobalé* offers its contemporary practitioners:

> to will a body, or a series of bodies, to move together, in time with nothing other than the energy of a moment, or an invisible affect, is a way of communicating beyond capture. this dance, an open dance, what i have begun to think of as a wild, anachoreographic opening, is the type of movement that wills the body upside fear. this anachoreographic opening, a slow, minimalist dance, an unruly dance, a dance of duration, is how i imagine the invisible dancers in maroon choreography move.[8]

Configuring the prefix "ana-" in ife's "anachoreographic opening" to signify "repetition" or "reiteration," the enduring anticolonial will embedded in the figure of the *cimarron* is continuously revisited and restated over time through the practice of *kokobalé*, often with variations. Also signifying "anarchy," the "anachoreographic opening" hints at a quality of chaos or disruption, where the very tenets of the combat dance push against convention, restriction, and complete control. The act of recovering and (re)performing *kokobalé* on the archipelago—spearheaded by community-based initiatives like *Proyecto Kokobalé*, a nonprofit organization founded and directed by Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla, whom I have interviewed for this article—is not necessarily an effort to claim mastery or authority over the form to turn it into a legible and profitable venture, but rather, as ife writes, it becomes a means of "communicating beyond capture," and in the case of Puerto Rico, beyond coloniality. Therefore, by remembering, reclaiming, and sharing the practice of *kokobalé*, we add these maroon choreographies to our somatic repertoire and engage in a praxis of liberation, collectively imagining a liberated future for Puerto Rico.

7. Qtd. in ife, *Maroon Choreography*, ix.
8. ife, *Maroon Choreography*, 90.

Kokobalé and its Epistemological (Re)turn to "*Lo Africano*"

Kokobalé is characterized by the duel, so much so that the chorus of Rafael Cepeda's song "Si tu no sabe cocobalé" calls out: "*Si tu no sabe cocobalé, No le vayas a tirar*" or "If you don't know cocobalé, don't mess with them."[9] As a combat dance, the feints, thrusts, and parries foundational to *kokobalé* can also be found in other dance and martial art forms throughout the circum-Atlantic world. When Xiorro began his embodied research of *kokobalé*, one of the first combat dances he turned to was Afro-Brazilian *capoeira*. *Capoeira*'s roots can be traced back to the southern region of Angola and the practice of *n'golo*, a combat dance where dancers perform inversions, kicks, dodges, and leg sweeps, accompanied by polyrhythmic music and song to communicate with ancestral spirits.[10] When the embodied knowledge of combat dances like *n'golo* migrated through the Middle Passage and into the Americas, their purpose extended beyond the spiritual or social functions they once held, providing enslaved individuals with practical methods of self-defense. These Afro-diasporic combat dances also offered, as ethnographer T.J. Desch-Obi notes, "an alternative lifestyle that provided a sense of belonging," with philosophies, honor codes, and identity markers that contributed toward a sense of individual well-being transcending the physical body.[11] Hence, the combat game's psychophysical strategies for evasion, diversion, and deception granted the practitioner the ability to adapt in any situation, stay on one's toes when conflict arises, and course through obstacles like an ocean.

While scholars and practitioners alike speculate about the origins of *kokobalé* in Puerto Rico, it is plausible that this practice was already present in the archipelago prior to its formal identification. Although an embodied knowledge of the stick-fighting games can be traced to West Africa and *n'golo*, one cannot discount the role that inter-island migration played in the formation of similar combat dances across the Caribbean. For instance, as a port city, Mayagüez served as a destination after the Haitian

9 Torres Saez, "Cocobalé: Artes Marciales Africanas en la Bomba."
10. Desch-Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 174.
11. Desch-Obi, *Fighting for* Honor, 158.

Revolution for merchants, landowners, as well as enslaved individuals forced to leave the country by their enslavers; migratory movements that are evidenced in the French and Kreyol lyrics found in many *bomba* songs.[12] With regard to *kokobalé,* Xiorro's search for the etymology of this stick-fighting dance has led him to move from common expressions used in Puerto Rico to terms that connect the dance to Martinique, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Jamaica, and Curaçao.[13] Hence, many slippages arise from the act of recovery, as Julian Gerstin remarks regarding his own research on *kalenda*, another stick-fighting game in Trinidad and Tobago, since categorizing every Afro-diasporic combat dance is nearly impossible, due to the "broad range of referents" of the surviving names and the likely loss of many others, instead opting to identify several core "choreographic styles."[14] Mapping these choreographic styles alongside the presence of the stick or machete throughout the region—*tire machèt* in Haiti, *calinda* in Trinidad and Tobago, *bajan stick-licking* in Barbados, *danmyé* in Martinique, *juego de maní* in Cuba, *banot* in the Canary Islands, among many others—facilitates an understanding of how, rather than a "national" quintessentially Puerto Rican combat dance, *kokobalé* forms part of an affective network of Afro-diasporic combat dances that unites the African diaspora despite the region's fragmented histories. Unbounded from imposed geopolitical borders that separates Puerto Rico from the rest of the circum-Atlantic world, *kokobalé* moves beyond

12. Power-Sotomayor and Rivera in "Puerto Rican Bomba," 15. Oral histories recounting the forced migration of enslaved Haitians are cited in Raquel Z. Rivera's "New York Bomba: Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and a Bridge Called Haiti." For more information on inter-island migration between Haiti and Puerto Rico, see Francisco Moscoso, *La revolución haitiana y Puerto Rico, 1789–1804* (2023).

13. In a Facebook post titled "Origen de la palabra Kokobalé," Xiorro outlines three possible translations for the term *kokobalé*. The first, "The Dance of the Coco", proposes that the word "coco" can refer both to the head (as in the expression "te voy a dar en el coco," meaning "I'm going to hit you on the head") and to "cocolo," a term from Afro-Caribbean slang, and in this case, "balé" is associated with dance. The second, "The Combat of the Body", comes from the Creole *Ko Konba Le*, connecting the term to Martinique and its stick-fighting game *Konba Baton*, as well as to Haiti, where *Tiré Baton* is practiced, considered a "konba fizik" or physical combat. The third, "The Stick of the Koko", derives from *Koko Bwa Le*, linking the term to the ritual stick *koko macaco* from Haitian Vodou, the stick-fighting game of Curaçao known as *Kokomakaku*, and the Caribbean palm *Coco Macaco* (*Bactris Cubensis*).

14. Gerstin, "Tangled Roots," 25.

what Joseph Roach describes as the "the relentless search" for singular, legitimate origins, true definitions, or even a proto-Caribbean dance of origin, that more often than not, become voyages "not of discovery but of erasure."[15]

Thinking with Martinican poet, philosopher, and literary critic Édouard Glissant and his meditations on the archipelago in his book *Poetics of Relation* (1997)—where he configures the archipelago as a rhizomatic assemblage of islands with no localized center and mobilizes the archetype for his notion of a diasporic "unity within multiplicity"[16]—the bodies of water that surround each landmass becomes a crucial element for the creation of an archipelagic Afro-diasporic network. Water, as a site of connection in Afro-diasporic religions and spirituality, disrupts narratives of stagnation and "insularism" where island cultures become isolated and detached from one another due to the ocean that surrounds them. Paradoxically, as Rebeca Hey-Colón articulates in her book *Channeling Knowledges: Water and Afro-Diasporic Spirits in Latinx and Caribbean Worlds* (2023), though water seems to separate each island, it also becomes the agent that brings about the circulation of Latin American and Caribbean knowledges and lifeworlds throughout the region. Thinking materially, or rather secularly, water becomes the means through which bodies traveled from one island to another, whether by forced migration or voluntary encounters. Expanding this analysis to the spiritual realm, water also "carr[ies] the dead, the lwa, the misterios, and the orishas," among other "liquid knowledges," that as per Hey-Colón, "have survived inordinate cycles of violence, and continue to provide strength and possibilities beyond the secularly knowable."[17] As Puerto Ricans grapple with both the afterlives of slavery and an enduring colonial present, the memory of *cimarronaje* passed on through these combat dances, as well as the combative will of axe- and machete-wielding orishas Oyá, Ogún, and Shangó[18] reminds us that our fight is not yet over.

15. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 5.
16. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.
17. Hey-Colón, *Channeling Knowledges*, 18, 25.
18. Green and Svinth, *Martial Arts of the World*.

Before delving into the speculative histories of *kokobalé* in Puerto Rico, I would like to turn to Joseph Roach's theorization of memory, surrogation, and performance in the circum-Atlantic world. Roach asserts that "memory is a process that depends crucially on forgetting, [oftentimes] working selectively, imaginatively, and perversely" to fill in "perceived vacancies [that] occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric."[19] The creation of the "New World" and modernity itself was accomplished through violence and genocide in the Americas. Hence, the very premise of "forgetting" the magnitude of these acts constituted an imperial choreography of conquest and settlement. Forgetting, as per Glissant in *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), also facilitated "an imposed non-history" in the Caribbean that depended upon the erasure of Afro-diasporic traditions, and with them, ancestral memory.[20] Yet, as Roach poignantly notes, "the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible: the most persistent mode of forgetting is memory imperfectly deferred," referring to that which persists within circum-Atlantic performance.[21] *Kokobalé* offers an excellent case study of this notion of "incomplete forgetting," as the histories surrounding this movement practice encourage a narrative of extinction, yet somehow it endures. As Xiorro professes:

> In Puerto Rico the effects of colonization have been immeasurable. There has been a systematic attempt to erase from our history, and thus from our collective consciousness, all traces of struggle, resistance, and revolution. The false image of a submissive indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Creole population are examples of what we call colonized minds which try to suppress or deny any act of struggle and resistance like the *Kokobalé*.[22]

However, as the machete continues to inspire new maroon choreographies, the figure of the "rebellious" enslaved African, the

19. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 2.
20. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 64.
21. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 4.
22. Padilla Caraballo, "Kokobalé, Wakanda, Woman King," section 4. [Translation is my own.]

fugitive *cimarrón*, and the militant *kokobalerx*, adapts and transforms through time, becoming imaginary that nurtures Black, feminist, and decolonial thought in Puerto Rico.

"Si Tú No Sabes *Kokobalé*," Observe its Speculative Histories

Xiorro theorizes that *kokobalé*, as it is practiced and performed today, emerged as a consequence of the Haitian Revolution.[23] In the book *Esclavos Rebeldes* (1981), historian Guillermo A. Baralt notes that *bomba* aided communications for these resistance efforts across Puerto Rico and the broader Caribbean, as "[d]ancing and drumming created a sense of cohesion among the enslaved population" and also functioned "as a disguise to cover up subversive endeavors."[24] Following the Haitian Revolution, enslaved communities across Puerto Rico, particularly in the region of Ponce, began conducting plans for an uprising. Despite their secrecy, the Ponce uprising of 1826 was trounced by internal informants and, as a result, twenty-four conspirators were sentenced to death. Thereafter, Governor Miguel de la Torre decreed new regulations to dictate, restrict, and surveil the lives of the enslaved population. One of these regulations was a ban on taking the machetes beyond the workstation to prevent the use of this tool as a weapon during a revolt. As Xiorro suggests, while it is difficult to identify the causality of *kokobalé*'s emergence in Puerto Rico, the Regulations of 1826 might have instigated a shift on how *la practica de la esgrima*[25] (the art of the machete) was practiced. Xiorro's speculative histories emerge from identified "intimacies" between

23. Interview with Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla Caraballo, 2023. Xiorro's writing on *kokobalé*, the origins of this combat dance, and the embodied archive of the Cepeda family can be found in his articles "Kokobalé, the Afro-Puerto Rican Martial Art" and "Towards a history of Kokobalé" in CapoeiraHistory.com.

24. Baralt, *Esclavos Rebeldes*, 66.

25. Puerto Rican nationalist Pedro Albizu Campos makes mention of the art of machete fencing, *el arte de la esgrima*, in one of his speeches: "How many know the machete fencing that every jíbaro knew, the stick fencing, the dagger fencing, the saber fencing, the foil fencing, the arts of self-defense? […] They are internal disciplines that must be cultivated for a man to be free," in *Pedro Albizu Campos: obras escogidas* (1975). [Translation is my own.]

Puerto Rico and Haiti, offering alternate interpretations of the silences in our cultural archives to imagine "what could have been" after the revolution.[26] Though speculative, this history uncovers two aftershocks of the Haitian Revolution: one that may have manifested materially, as seen in the French and Kreyol lyrics of *bomba* songs and the choreographic stylings of *kokobalé*, and another within the Caribbean imaginary, through what Pedro Lebrón Ortiz denotes as a "decolonial turn in the ontology" of the Afro-Caribbean subject.[27] *Kokobalé* thus operates in this "decolonial turn" as a means of kinesthetically enacting simulacrums of liberation in the present, a rehearsal for what is yet to come for Puerto Rico and its inhabitants.

In accordance with Xiorro's premise, the way in which *kokobalé* is practiced today indicates that the Regulations of 1826 might have instigated the conditions that led to the inclusion of these combat dances in the *batey*, *bomba*'s stage. Due to the machete ban, combat training needed to be held within the *batey*, shielded by the musical and danceable qualities of *bomba* akin to the ways in which the "more innocent" *samba* shielded the practice of *capoeira*.[28] The *batey* was one of the few aspects of plantation life that remained mostly unaffected by these regulations, as plantation owners allowed the enslaved communities their weekly celebration after Sunday mass to prevent another revolt. The shift to the *batey* might have led practitioners to wield sticks instead of the customary machete and even incorporate elements of *bomba* technique, such as the deference to the musicians before the "dance" or the duel. As a result, both *bomba* and *kokobalé* were cultivated in the communal space of the *batey*, and beyond within *cimarrón* communities, as a crucial *modus operandi* for survival. While *bomba* nurtured the internal life of enslaved individuals and functioned as an embodied means of communication, *kokobalé* provided practical skills to fight back against the oppressor. In conjunction, these dance forms made the space of the counter-plantation possible, defined

26. Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*.
27. Lebrón Ortiz, "Filosofía del cimarronaje,"149.
28. Browning, "Headspin," 166.

by Quintero Rivera as a "cimarrón or runaway social formation [that] involved two related aspects: the (economic) opposition to slave work and the (political) opposition to State rule."[29] The presence of *kokobalé* affirms a history of resistance and subversion that counteracts derogatory epithets disseminated about Puerto Rican people as being docile, lazy, weak, and subservient.[30]

After the abolition of slavery in 1873, *bomba* was "surveilled by authorities, deemed disreputable and a threat to an ordered society, a scrutiny that became further reified in the 20th century as criollo elites tried to represent Puerto Ricans as or at least near-white subjects."[31] Similar to the Penal Code of 1890 that criminalized the practice of Afro-Brazilian *capoeira*, municipalities across Puerto Rico in the beginning of the 20th century forbade the use of "*bomba*" percussion instruments in public spaces and the dances that accompanied them. Newspapers such as *La Democracia* reported on the phenomenon, as municipalities heeded the example set by metropolitan cities like San Juan and Arecibo in 1906, imposing strict bans on "the wild *bomba* dances and the nightly serenades that greatly disturbed the neighborhood."[32] According to Xiorro, after the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico, *kokobalé* was still utilized as "a method of conflict resolution where people turned the *Bomba batey* into a 'field of honor'."[33] While not explicitly stated, *kokobalé* was also prohibited, as these municipal laws extended beyond the sound of the drum over to *bomba*'s somatic practices. In defiance of the prohibition, these traditions were transmitted through clandestine means, operating in an underground fashion; nonetheless, the criminalization of *bomba* adversely affected its reputation. Following the legalization of "*bomba*" instruments, stigma lingered and even prompted practitioners in Puerto Rico "to

29. Quintero Rivera, "Rural-Urban Dichotomy," 129.
30. Epithets disseminated by Antonio S. Pedreira in *Insularismo: Ensayos de interpretación puertorriqueña* (1942).
31. Power-Sotomayor and Rivera, "Puerto Rican Bomba," 13.
32. *La Democracia*. (Ponce, P.R.) 1890–1948, February 01, 1906, Image 1.
33. Padilla Caraballo, "Kokobalé, Wakanda, Woman King," section 3. [Translation is my own.]

actively distance themselves and their families from these spaces."[34] It is also important to note that *kokobalé*, like many other Afro-diasporic combat dances, was shrouded by a "wall of secrecy because of their relationship with closed societies."[35] Hence, to begin piecing together a history of this combat dance is also to observe what is not there and granting it what Glissant describes as "the right to opacity,"[36] a refusal to becoming fully transparent, understood, categorized, or legible in the eyes of a majoritarian sphere.

Decades later, the introduction of *bomba* into folklore by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP), founded by Governor Luis Muñoz Marín in 1955, meant that it would form part of a commodified unidirectional linear exchange, where the audience members become consumers, paying for a spectacle, and departing without acknowledging the labor that lies behind the curtain. Within the communal practice of *bomba*, specifically the *soberao*, there is not a strict division between witnesses and performers, as it requires everyone's participation to a certain degree, as dancers, musicians, or (call-and-)responsive bodies. Hence, since the cypher-like structure of the *soberao* was difficult to maintain when performed in the proscenium and other touristic stages, performances began to be choreographed, movements gendered, and costumes codified; changes made often at the expense of its femme-presenting performers. What was performed in hotels, films, television, and state-sponsored cultural events became the image of *bomba* that remained in Puerto Rico's collective memory during the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. As the reconstruction of national identity by the ICP relegated all that was Afro-Boricua to an idealized past, audience members were, as Power-Sotomayor puts it, "separated from the performers not only spatially, but also temporally through the period costumes, effectively distancing *bomba* from the immediate lives of the Puerto Ricans viewing the performance."[37] The ICP's fabricated image of *bomba*,

34. Power-Sotomayor and Rivera, "Puerto Rican Bomba," 14.
35. Desch-Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 2.
36. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation.*
37. Power-Sotomayor, "Corporeal Sounding," 712.

which for years remained in our collective memory, erased the lived realities of Afro-Boricua communities in favor of a sanitized spectacle that perpetuated a white(ned) national identity. Meanwhile, practices like the *soberao* and, by extension, *kokobalé*, led a "double life," safeguarded within "insider" communities and circulated mostly beyond the folkloric stage.[38]

In an interview with Rafael Cepeda's son, Roberto Cepeda, he asserts that *kokobalé* was incorporated into their family's *bomba* stage performances only a few times during the 1960s and 70s.[39] The narrative showcased in these folkloric displays was not one that was explicitly tied to *cimarronaje*. Instead, Cepeda recalls the portrayal of a love affair and a match between two rivals:

> The first scene involves a man that obviously tries to steal the affection of another man's female friend. This leads to a physical and verbal confrontation which sets the stage for the stick fighting. […] We would also have many people to re-create a crowded scene. Women would talk, encourage the men, shout and so on. All of these elements were present in the choreography.[40]

Although these stick-fighting games also "acted as a form of conflict resolution" and were "tied into a larger social system of a reflexive honor code," there appeared to be dissonance between the performers and their unknowing audience.[41] The performers, reenacting scenes with varied significance in specific cultural contexts, were perceived as aggressive when it lacked a comedic narrative such as the one highlighted above. Xiorro recounts a conversation with Jose Cepeda where the performers were "in the middle of the stage about to perform *kokobalé* when the police interrupted them, thinking they were going to fight for real."[42] While these staged

38. Barton, "Challenge for Puerto Rican Music," 84.
39. Cartagena, "Introduction," 3–4.
40. Qtd. in Cartagena, "Introduction," 4.
41. Desch-Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 34.
42. Interview with Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla Caraballo, 2023.

performances preserved *kokobalé*'s technique as an interplay between dancing *piquetes* and partnered sparring, the practice's illegibility compounded by the enduring stigma of the combative Black body made it difficult to replicate in many spaces. For this reason, Xiorro believes that *kokobalé* suffered "double the oppression, first for being a tradition of African origin, and second for being an art of war that emphasized freedom."[43] What Xiorro articulates here highlights a persistent fugitive and elusive element within the practice of *kokobalé*, one that endures both because of and in spite of ongoing surveillance and state violence directed at Afro-Boricua populations.

"*El futuro es cimarrón*": (Re)imagining *Kokobalé* in Contemporary Performance

Kokobalé's "return" to the public eye in recent years signals a radical re(action) to exacerbated colonial conditions in the aftermath of Hurricane María, a climate catastrophe that left the community-at-large without essential services such as electricity and water for months, displaced many families with the destruction of 70,000 homes, and accumulated a death toll of approximately 4,645 people.[44] The hurricane, however, did not create these conditions but rather amplified the structural precarity imposed on historically marginalized populations through colonial extraction, neoliberal austerity measures, and systemic neglect by both local and federal governments. Prompted by a spirit of *autogestión* (self-reliance), defined by Puerto Rican feminist scholar Karrieann Soto Vega as a "coalitional counter-praxis of survival,"[45] practitioners on the archipelago and the diaspora[46] have taken it upon themselves to train

43. Interview with Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla Caraballo, 2023.
44. Adapted from Mayra Santos-Febres' assertion "El futuro es cimarronaje," and ideas shared in her panels on Afrodescendence in Puerto Rico.
45. Soto Vega, "Puerto Rico Weathers the Storm," 40.
46. In a short video titled "Cocobale: The Forgotten Stick Fighting Dance of Puerto Rico," Milteri Tucker Concepción, founder and artistic director of the Bronx-based *Bombazo Dance Company*, collaborates with *kokobalero* Miguel Quijano to lead a group of New York City dancers in an embodied exploration of *kokobalé*. Tucker Concepción and her company have also performed at Congo Square in New Orleans.

kokobalé and activate *cimarrón* futures in the here and now with every slash, dodge, and parry. *Proyecto Kokobalé*, founded by Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla Caraballo with the help of Marien Torres from Taller Tambuyé and his partner/collaborator Melissa Santos, is an organization informed by Xiorro's twenty years of experience as a *bomba* practitioner and fifteen years as a martial artist. Initially introduced to *kokobalé* during his early days practicing *bomba*, curiosity led Xiorro to conduct extensive research on *kokobalé*, beginning with the Cepeda family's oral histories, a "living library" of Afro-diasporic knowledge in Puerto Rico. Rather than adhering to the narratives of extinction that surrounded *kokobalé*, Xiorro conducted "practice as research" by traveling to other islands in the Caribbean to learn from and train with elders from other Afro-diasporic communities as entry points into *kokobalé*'s "forgotten" technique. In 2019, Xiorro began disseminating these maroon choreographies by teaching adults at *Taller Tambuyé* in Río Piedras. In 2021, Xiorro expanded his efforts to the children of La Perla—a historically disenfranchised community that remains highly visible in the Puerto Rican imaginary—by offering classes free of charge and forming a group he named *Lxs Pequeñxs Cimarronxs*. By transmitting these maroon choreographies, Xiorro *le pasa el machete a la juventud* (passes the machete over to the youth), entrusting them with the responsibility of carrying this knowledge forward. As Xiorro writes:

> Beyond the physical and psycho-emotional benefits that modern *Kokobalé* can provide, new forms of oppression and slavery will always appear. Understanding the changing nature of this 'old monster,' it is urgent for us to investigate, rescue and promote *Kokobalé* so that future generations have tools to identify and combat it. This is why the space of freedom and conspiracy that the space of the *batey* within *bomba* provides us and the spirit of resistance, struggle and marronage that the *Kokobalé* provides us with in the search for new freedoms will always be relevant.[47]

47. Padilla Caraballo, "Kokobalé, Wakanda, Woman King," section 3. [Translation is my own.]

Proyecto Kokobalé does not stop at remembering a "cimarrón consciousness" as if it were a static artifact in a museum, but rather it is rehearsed, reactivated, and reimagined with every movement, every action, and every collaboration. Through combative movement, Xiorro not only teaches the history of *cimarronaje* in Puerto Rico, one that is often absent or inadequately addressed in formal education, but also fosters an embodied understanding of survival that becomes ever more relevant as more Puerto Ricans are displaced from their homes.

Rather than reinforcing a nation-building project, the recovery of *kokobalé* is fugitive, resisting containment within Puerto Rico's geopolitical borders. Instead, it extends outward to the circum-Atlantic world, reimagining Puerto Rican identity beyond its captive relationship with the United States empire and positioning it in relation to Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, West Africa, among many others. Xiorro's engagement with other Afro-diasporic artforms to better understand the practice of *kokobalé* gives rise to what Paul Emiljanowicz terms "polyrhythmic counterpoint," a metaphor he uses to describe the "sim-poetic becoming" of Caribbean entanglement, wherein "borders, frontier worlds, identities, and moments of founding are intertwined, performative, co-constitutive, and called into interrogation."[48] Expanding Emiljanowicz's metaphor into the realm of dance, polycentrism introduces a non-hierarchical framework in which multiple points of origin for movement coexist, without a single, central locus of authority. "Counterpoint" becomes a generative addition as, in music, it refers to the harmonic interplay between two or more independent melodic lines, each preserving its own integrity. In dance, counterpoint operates similarly, as multiple choreographic fragments, each with distinct uses of space, time, and intent, unfold simultaneously to contribute to a cohesive choreography. "Polyrhythmic counterpoint," akin to Glissant's notion of "unity within multiplicity," provides a framework for understanding *kokobalé* and other combat dances in the Caribbean, as regionally specific, but

48. Emiljanowicz, "Cockfight to Polyrhythm," 35.

Figure 1: Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla y Pablo "Micha" Parra practicing kokobalé accompanied by Tato Torres, Frangie Rivera, and Manuel Pérez Kenderish in "Proyecto Kokobalé y Taller Tambuyé" (2019). https://youtu.be/WPXBXuU3znc?si=JhPsiBsUWrkP7pru.

entangled, nonetheless. Just as the specific sociomaterial conditions in Puerto Rico push and pull the practice of *kokobalé* in different directions, it remains part of a choreographic unity with the Caribbean, one that moves against neoliberal forces and the afterlives of slavery.

A video documenting Xiorro's "practice as research" early in the restoration of the technique in 2020 presents a duel between himself and fellow practitioner Pablo "Micha" Parra that begins not with clashing weapons but with the sound of the *buleador* (see Figure 1).[49] Both practitioners prepare for the duel by squatting next to the *cuá* sticks placed in a cross. After exchanging a gesture of respect in the form of a handshake, they begin throwing feints at their opponent, keeping the spectators on their toes, wondering who will grab the first *cuá* and commence the duel. Xiorro quickly grabs onto the first *cuá*, but before the stick-fighting occurs, he bows in deference to the musicians and begins his own *piquete*, an improvised solo. Xiorro makes his body speak, often performing quick patterned steps accentuated by the *subidor*'s drum roll, while Micha, his opponent, remains at the edge of the circle with his hands behind his back, two-stepping to

49. Taller Tambuyé, "Proyecto Kokobalé y Taller Tambuyé."

the base rhythm of the *buleador*. Afterwards, Xiorro shares the floor of the *batey* with Micha and when his opponent finishes his solo, the stick-fighting begins. However, the line between the *kokobalé* duel and the *bomba* dance is blurred in this interaction, as Xiorro's feint is punctuated by a winging motion of the knees and Micha keeps his feet together to perform a more stylized shuffle backwards when dodging Xiorro's potential attack. The *subidor* continues interpreting and sonically translating the practitioners' interjecting steps as well as each strike. The practitioners are competitive yet playful in their attacks and in the integration of *bomba* steps into their duel. They move in and out of the *buleador*'s repetitive rhythmic pattern, just as one would in the practice of the *soberao*, keeping a base rhythm while sparring and enacting improvised syncopation in moments of standoff, performing feints alongside unpredictable *bomba* steps to trick their opponent. I follow Power-Sotomayor's lead in reading this aspect of the *kokobalé* performance, as she writes that, "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," hence, when performing *kokobalé*, we see the dynamics from the *soberao* at play as well.[50] In addition, the practitioners' tactics of evasion—their rhythmic rocking as they prepare to strike, their unceasing circular movement, and the lateral curving of their torsos deployed to confuse their opponent—exemplify how Xiorro's restoration of *kokobalé* is enacted through the shared movement vocabularies of other Afro-diasporic combat dances, such as *capoeira* and its accompanying stick-fighting dance *maculelé*.

By 2021, *kokobalé* had gained greater visibility as *bomba* practitioners across the archipelago and its diaspora took up the stick and the machete, engaging in their own experimentations with this revived combat dance. While this resurgence can be partly attributed to *Proyecto Kokobalé*'s memory activism, the growing interest in these combative movements also reflects a sense of urgency when confronted with dire sociopolitical

50. Power-Sotomayor, "Corporeal Sounding," 50.

conditions. Amid an alarming rise in femicide rates—a 62% increase from 2019, with at least 60 women killed in 2020—*bomba* groups composed of femme-presenting and queer performers led the charge against the patriarchal norms embedded in Puerto Rican culture.[51] For years, femme-presenting performers were largely relegated to the mic and the skirt, singing and dancing, while male-presenting performers dominated the drums. However, groups like *Las Barrileras del 8M* disrupted this tradition with their all-femme *comparsa*, directly challenging the rigid gender roles historically inscribed in *bomba* and utilizing the communal space of *el batey* as a platform for feminist resistance. Their artistic contribution to Puerto Rico's *#NiUnaMenos* movement was an independent production and reinterpretation of "Canción sin miedo," a song by composer Vivir Quintana that denounced gender-based violence and became an anthem for feminist protests worldwide. The viral video featured the voluntary participation of 97 women, queer, transgender, nonbinary individuals, and allies who answered *Las Barrileras del 8M*'s call to the *batey*.[52] Though the *Barrileras*' video is indeed worth watching and closely examining, I would like to turn our attention to another contribution to the *#NiUnaMenos* cause that similarly reclaimed another male-dominated practice within the *batey*, but did not receive as much attention.

The opening sequence of *Estudio 353*'s "La Cocobalera"[53] introduces viewers to a familiar scene of childhood gender policing in the streets of Mayagüez (see Figure 2). A young girl in a white off-shoulder dress reminiscent of folkloric bomba or *jíbara* attire pushes a toy truck along a cement sidewalk, the scraping of its tires audible against the pavement. A "Se Vende" (For Sale) sign lingers in the background, a bleak reminder of the archipelago's economic crisis and the ongoing displacement of local communities. The camera then zooms in on an arm severed from any identifiable body, evoking a sense of eerie anonymity. The disembodied arm snatches

51. Acevedo, "Puerto Rico's new tipping point," section 2.
52. Taller Tambuyé. "Canción sin miedo."
53. Estudio 353, "La Cocobalera."

Figure 2: Opening scene in Estudio 353's music video "La Cocobalera" (2021). https://youtu.be/U55YW-FLQL0?si=jGbvuRQORSb4AjVo.

the girl's toy truck, waves a finger at her in reprimand, and places a blonde Barbie doll dressed in a fitted blue gown into her hands. The pouting girl defiantly throws the doll to the ground, and as it lands next to the discarded truck, the camera lingers on the stark contrast between the two seemingly unrelated objects. Despite the straightforward portrayal of gender norms, the video's most radical intervention lies instead in its reclamation of *kokobalé*. The limited archival and research materials on the combat dance only showcase male-presenting practitioners, much so that some accounts describe it as a practice exclusively for men, "La Cocobalera" strives to recover the figure of *la mujer kokobalera*, the machete-wielding woman.

As the still image of the discarded toys fades from view, the voice of Jamienette Pérez Mercado emerges:

> *Yo soy la bomba de Mayagüez*
> *Saque la venda pa' que sepa usted*
> *Que de tambores y cocobalé*
> *Hoy los barriles son de la mujer*[54]

54. "I am the bomba of Mayagüez / Take off the blindfold so you may know / That with drums and kokobalé / Today, the barrels belong to women," in "La Cocobalera" written by Jamienette Pérez Mercado. [Translation is my own.]

As Pérez Mercado sings, "with drums and kokobalé / Today, the barrels belong to women" the music video shows her rallying masked women wielding sticks throughout Mayagüez, who join her in an all-femme *bombazo*. Now standing among the guerrilla-like women, Pérez Mercado delivers more verses, as the other women take turns in the *barriles*, keeping the rhythm of the *buleador*. The camera shifts to fast-paced shots of the adult women in the *batey*, some intermittently slapping one end of a stick against their open palm, a well-known gesture that signals a looming confrontation: you're about to get a beating. Amidst this, we return to the young girl from the opening sequence, now locked in an intense duel with another girl, both rehearsing the *kokobalé* that the adult women invoke through song and gesture. "La Cocobalera" responds to a persistent gut feeling, the intuitive sense that women must have always practiced this art form, even if their presence was erased from the historical record. These archival silences may stem from stereotypes of combative women as "hysterical" or from the possibility that their participation in *kokobalé* occurred beyond the folkloric stage or even the performative space of the *batey*. Hence, the music video not only affirms the presence of *la mujer kokobalera* but also challenges the structures that have historically kept her off-screen, beyond the lens, and obscured in the record.

With national figures such as the machete-wielding *jíbaro* and the *cimarrón* portrayed almost exclusively as male, the imagined *mujer kokobalera* emerges as a necessary disruption, a figure who exists not within the canon of Puerto Rican nationalist iconography but in what Roach calls "counter-memories," defined as "the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences."[55] For instance, Pérez Mercado's lyrics summon the visual and affective presence of a *cimarrona* crowned with flowers and adorned with a spiked necklace, a maroon woman fleeing to the mountains not just for safety but in search of *kokobalé*:

55. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 26.

En su cabeza corona eh flores
Lleva en su cuello collar de espinas
Cimarrona se fue a la huida al monte… pa'l cocobalé
Cocobalera ganga mondé
Grito de guerra de las paleras
Epiyeyé mi Congo, epiyeyé mi cocobalé[56]

La mujer kokobalera is enacted by the women of Estudio 353 through what Roach terms "kinesthetic imagination," where "the truth of simulation, fantasy, and daydreams," when performed, becomes a generative force with "material consequences of the most tangible sort and of the widest scope."[57] Here, the mountain becomes a site of refuge, and the war cry "*cocobalera ganga mondé*" invokes a lineage of warrior women, the *paleras*, who, perhaps not named in official archives, are felt, heard, and imagined anew. Extending this reading into the spiritual realm, the imagined *mujer kokobalera* also recalls Oyá, the orisha of wind and storm, described as a warrior woman whose "tongue is represented by a small pair of swords, by an ornamental sabre, or, in the Americas, by a heavy-duty machete."[58] As an African and Pan-Caribbean deity, Oyá cannot be fully understood in isolation, as Jacob K. Olúpònà and Terry Rey assert in their introduction to *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*, the Yoruba religion serves as a "shared devotional center" and becomes a "taproot of African diasporic life."[59] In this allusion to Oyá, these *paleras* tap into a spiritual juncture that transcends national borders, where the practice of *kokobalé* serves as a conduit for ancestral wisdom and forms part of a larger corpus of Afro-diasporic knowledge.

56. "On her head, she wears a crown of flowers / Around her neck, a necklace of thorns / A runaway fugitive, she fled to the mountain… to the cocobalé / Cocobalera ganga mondé / War cry of the paleras / Epiyeyé my Congo, epiyeyé my cocobalé," in "La Cocobalera" written by Jamienette Pérez Mercado. [Translation is my own.]
57. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 27.
58. Gleason, "Oyá," 73.
59. Olúpònà and Rey, *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion*, 4.

Inquiring further into *la mujer kokobalera*, the women of *Estudio 353* do not dream in vain, as a warrior woman left her trace in Rafael Cepeda's notebook. In my interview with Xiorro, he shared that while reviewing Cepeda's notes for information on *kokobalé*, he came across the following verse: "Doña Juana baila Conquest, baila Cocobalé" (Doña Juana dances Conquest, dances Cocobalé).[60] Though fragmented, the figure of Doña Juana lingers as a spectral presence, "forgotten but not gone" from our collective memory.[61] Her identity remains elusive, yet the performative force of her figure reverberates through a lineage of insurgent Puerto Rican women such as Lolita Lebron, Luisa Capetillo, and Julia de Burgos. Although she wielded not the machete but the pen, Julia de Burgos—whose image is invoked in the video through the carving in Pérez Mercado's earrings—honored her Afro-Boricua heritage, expressed fierce anti-imperial sentiment, and championed Puerto Rican independence in her poetry, particularly evident in "Río Grande de Loíza" (1938), where she writes:

> *¡Río Grande de Loíza!… Río grande. Llanto grande.*
> *El más grande de todos nuestros llantos isleños,*
> *si no fuera más grande el que de mí se sale*
> *por los ojos del alma para mi esclavo pueblo.*[62]

My research rabbit hole also led me to another combative Juana, a lesser-known yet crucial figure in Puerto Rican history. Known as the "Joan of Arc" of Comerío, Juana Colón was an Afro-Boricua woman whose leadership in labor strikes and the women's suffrage movement had been overshadowed by accounts focused on *los obreros ilustrados* (working-class intellectuals).[63] Colón led a tobacco manufacturing union, founded the Socialist Party in

60. Interview with Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla Caraballo, 2023.
61. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 31.
62. "Río Grande de Loíza!… Great river. Great flood of tears. / The greatest of all our island's tears / save those greater that come from the eyes / of my soul for my enslaved people." [Translation by Jack Agüeros.]
63. Meléndez-Badillo, "Mateo and Juana." 114.

Comerío, provided alternative medicinal care for her community, and, whether leading marches or confronting police with stones, her physical presence in every protest earned her another warrior title: *La Machetera* (Machete-Wielding Woman).[64] Therefore, Doña Juana, *la mujer kokobalera*, beckons us to read her trace in Cepeda's notebook not as a historical footnote, but one that affirms the "gut feeling" that women have always played pivotal roles in the fight for liberation. The women of *Estudio 353* find political potential in "kinesthetic imagination," (re)performance, and recursion, as they conjure the spirit of *la mujer kokobalera* to bolster their combative stance against gender-based violence in Puerto Rico.

As an open-ended coda, I return to ife's evocation of the "anachoreographic opening," which summons bodies to move together with nothing but an invisible affect. *Kokobalé*'s (re)introduction into Puerto Rico's collective memory in the coming years reflects a greater movement toward decolonial and relational thinking. Decolonial, in the sense that it is fueled by injustice, as Puerto Ricans "woke up" the Summer of 2019—putting bodies on the frontlines, dancing, chanting, and calling for the ousting of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. Decolonial, too, in the sense that it is driven by a spirit of *autogestión* and self-determination, attending to the wounds inflicted by Hurricane María, the femicides, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Relational, in the way it ignites our desire to understand the technique of *kokobalé*, urging us to learn from our Caribbean neighbors, their combat dances, and our shared, fraught histories with empire. Relational, too, in the way that, by conjuring our *cimarrón* ancestors, and perhaps the *orishas* as well, we nourish ourselves from the taproot of Afro-diasporic lifeworlds that bridge the African continent, the Caribbean, and the Americas. In (re)performing *kokobalé*, we affirm an epistemological turn toward Blackness in Puerto Rico, rejecting the colonial structures that have long positioned Afro-Boricua people and culture as peripheral. In (re)performing *kokobalé*, we reiterate the will of the 19th-century *cimarrón* who saw liberation in

64. Meléndez-Badillo, "Mateo and Juana," 111–5.

battle, in escape, and in Haiti. In (re)performing *kokobalé*, we enter into a polyrhythmic counterpoint with the circum-Atlantic world. We enter into a dance that, as ife suggests, is slow, minimalist, unruly, durational… an open dance that wills the body beyond fear.

By incorporating these dances of perseverance into our collective memory via small-scale organizing and individual collectives across the archipelago and the diaspora, we ensure the longevity of these histories, which, in turn, informs how we move in the present. In response to economic crises, natural disasters, failed infrastructures, and corrupt governments, *kokobalé* becomes a gesture of resistance, akin to how Power-Sotomayor describes the crucial function of *bomba* as it accomplishes more than "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."[65] Practitioners engage in maroon choreographies, asserting their refusal to surrender to colonial powers and reinforcing the inseparable link between cultural heritage and an enduring struggle for liberation. Though the *kokobalerxs*' call to action is ongoing, I conclude this inquiry into *kokobalé* with the song "Palo y Machete," an anthem of resistance, struggle, and marronage, sung to an upbeat melody which, according to Xiorro, "was done with all premeditation since in the Caribbean we fight while singing, playing drums, dancing and even 'twerking'. We smile in the face of danger with joy and the certainty that we are doing the right thing" (see Figure 3).[66]

Palo y machete cimarrón
Palo y machete
Coge el machete cimarrón
Nos llama la revolución[67]

65. Power-Sotomayor, "Corporeal Sounding," 54.
66. Proyecto Kokobalé, "Sobre la canción Palo y Machete." [Translation is my own.]
67. "Stick and machete maroon / Stick and machete / Take the machete maroon / Revolution calls for us," in Proyecto Kokobalé. "Canción: Palo Y Machete (En Vivo – Live)." [Translation is my own.]

Figure 3: Melissa Santos and Carlos "Xiorro" Padilla Caraballo in "Canción: Palo y Machete (en vivo – live)" (2022). https://youtu.be/_ahLGHH7krA?si=2oG6SqrxvA50gN4k.

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