

Rhythms and Archetypes of Contemplation: An Afro-Boricua Experience

Anthony Cruz Pantojas

Tufts University

A critical appropriation of the prophetic imagination can orient us to emergent strategies for a more interdependent commons. Given the precarious times of the Anthropocene in which we are living, a contemplative hermeneutic that responds to enduring oppressive relational practices is necessary. This reflective treatise expounds on three archetypes that underpin the exploration of an Afro-Caribbean experience that is also a contemplative practice: the Barril de Bomba, Bomba, and Flamboyán. I argue these archetypes as poetics can orient us to new relational possibilities.

The ability developed over time to contemplate and embody practices of various cultural, philosophical, and spiritual expressions has sustained people over centuries. These expressions have emerged through modes of creativity applied as responses to the already existing ecosystems and the emerging relations with sentient beings, as well as other humans, within these environments. The awareness, then, of the impact that the human produces in pre-existing ecosystems is an effect of the Anthropocene. To provide a foundation that will move throughout this contemplative reflection, the critical theorist Povinelli provides the following definition for the concept of the Anthropocene:

Anthropocene is the name that forces us to experience the threshold of a coming impossibility—namely, the impossibility of any longer distinguishing forms and arrangements of life (biology, biochemistry, philosophy of life, biopower, biontology) and arrangements of nonlife (geology, geochemistry, geontology, geontopower). (Yusoff & Coleman, 2014, para. 23)

The Italian philosopher Federico Campagna offers that “a prophetic approach to culture sees the possibility for a subject, through their activity of worlding, to escape from their captivity in pre-established frames of sense” (Campagna, 2021, p. 183). Both Povinelli and Campagna from my understanding broach a critical appropriation of the prophetic imagination that orients us to emergent strategies for a more interdependent commons. Given the precarious times of the Anthropocene in which we are living, a contemplative hermeneutic that responds to enduring oppressive relational practices is necessary. I am inviting the Black Contemplatives with a desire to engage the intersections among decoloniality, relationality, and a contemplative spiritual practice that can inform a radical understanding of moral agency, bodies, and subjectivities. I’m Afro-Boricua, I’m of the island. I hear the cries of my ancestors. I aim to honor them daily. I feel the pain of colonization that wears us down every day. I come from the vibrant dances, careful movements of the body, and sounds that animate the soul. La Bomba calls me home each time. I’m an Afro-Boricua freethinker and inquirer about the human condition. I seek radical movements that fight for collective liberation for all. I have struggled in my journey but look to mentors and movements for respite. Every day adds another layer of understanding the human experience. I embrace the unknown. My identity is in flux. I’m all in.

As a scholar and practitioner, I am informed and nurtured by my relationship with cultural production, spirituality, and aesthetics. While perhaps an unconventional way to regard the processes of challenge, change, and resistance, these archetypal components symbolize how I want to show up in the world. They remind me of who I am, my connection to cultural heritage, and to remain creative and adaptive through uncertainty. My cadence and movements towards intentional relationality invite necessary moments to contemplate my work writ large and make self-care a non-negotiable in a world moderated by productivity, efficiency, and outcomes, a deliberate contemplative inquiry, and centering resistant liveliness and my humanity. This spiritual practice that is charged with cultural significance clarifies my values and to work more conscientiously towards my personal goals and those of social justice and collective liberation.

The realities of the Afro-Caribbean experiences are complex and complicated by acts of violence throughout the histories of colonial powers who disregarded the wisdom and spiritual reservoirs of Black people, their stories, myths, and very lives extinguished and shrouded by a whitening cloth.

Multiple traditions uphold the symbol of water as integral to their cosmologies; it is a conduit between the unseen (myth) and life itself, a reflection of the multiplicity of forms within nature and its ecosystems of which human beings are part. People situated in the Caribbean islands have been, and continue to be, influenced by the waves of many cultural and spiritual practices, including Afro-Atlantic, Indigenous, Near Eastern, and European. One element which each of these ethnicities and religions has in common is the journey through water which carried them to their destinations.

My context and place of ancestry is Puerto Rico, an archipelago existing in-between the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. The island was ineluctably shaped by a multitude of traditions, from the distinct religious devotion to Roman Catholicism, to the wisdom, insights, and beliefs of people from the Near East, from Muslim influence over the past eight centuries of their presence in Spain, and aspects of African culture brought along with enslaved peoples. Place of origin plays a powerful role in personal narrative, and looking to the Caribbean, we can see Puerto Rico being one of the oldest modern colonies of the United States. Here is where I draw part of my wisdom from the stories shared, learned, and those I uncover almost on a daily basis, for example, Taino (Indigenous) cosmologies, African-based spiritualities, among many other practices.

The geographic location, histories, cultural exchanges/encounters, and narratives fuse and create the knowledges and wisdoms that are embodied into the fabric of whole communities. Such embodiment requires the development of various technologies of interpretation which can then be utilized to respond to the immediate surroundings and institutions of society. Ruminating on lived experiences as text and material for deeper analysis and contemplation opens the possibilities for re-imagining futures that are expansive and full of meaning, embracing the vast multiplicity contained in the Human.

The Human experience is embodied as both individual and collective. It requires the contributions of various sources of knowledge, cultural and material production, and transdisciplinary approaches to fields of social inquiry. In order to contemplate one needs the past and the present to converge. The past serves as an anchor and reminder of how lived experiences, memories, relationships, traumas, and identities were formed; it is the root that nurtures our unfolding, including the ways we engage new discoveries of ourselves and the world(s) surrounding us. As the Afro-Caribbean and transnational feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander posits:

What brings us back to remembrance is both individual and collective; both intentional and an act of surrender; both remembering desire and remembering how it works. Daring to recognize each other again and again in a context that seems bent on making strangers of us all. Can we intentionally remember, all the time, as a way of never forgetting, all of us, building an archeology of living memory, which has less to do with living in the past, invoking a past, or excising it, and more to do with our relationship to Time and its purpose? (2006, p. 302)

The consideration of space is necessary in order to allow for the past to continue into the present. For example, museums serve to preserve the cultural, ethnic, and religious influences of a people in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. Entering into these spaces provides an opportunity to contemplate, carefully and with intention, processes of survival and resilience throughout time, cultures, and societies, allowing us to consider how people unlocked the possibilities of “new” spiritualities as a response to their oppressive realities.

The exchange between the Spaniard colonizers and the Africans who were brought by force to the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico, depicts a clash and how the runaway slaves used their surrounding environment as a way of reinventing themselves while being informed by their past. In other words, the Africans did not relinquish their will to the European life—for them, one of servitude. Instead, they rebelled

because of their knowing. The wisdom of their people and ancestors guided them to contemplate from within their current reality, oppression and suffering, the power for transformation and expansion of new ways of life.

One of the main institutions which contributed to the preservation of knowledge and conservation of other material culture were museums. They have the capacity to serve as beacons for those who are seeking answers, understanding, knowledge, or maybe even contemplating the various possibilities of a past through processes of reconstruction. It is the human person as opposed to the institutions that is able to reconcile all the stories and the ecosystems found in the Caribbean. Specifically, in Puerto Rico a museum that served to visibilize Lo Afro in the Island was called the Museum of our African Roots (Museo de Nuestra Raíz Africana), inaugurated in 1999 and which closed in 2012. Noticing the short-lived timeline of the museum it is important to learn from life's circumstances how maintaining a malleable and fluid perspective on cultural processes allows for timely and liberatory movement to take place.

Many countries in the Global South experienced processes of colonization which altered the way people would experience their lives for generations to come. An example of how the impact of colonization can be healed is by decolonizing the mind, which then requires a re-exploration of history and how to reclaim one's Indigeneity, or come to terms with results like cultural hybridity. However, embarking on this journey requires accessing the archives of memory as a people, society, and individually; in other words, liberating the *funds of knowledge* through acts that in itself are contemplative. For example, in 2020, La Casa/El Corredor Afro, a recent initiative, emerged from Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, a known scholar, activist, and founder of various cultural institutions (in the diaspora) centering people of African descent. The location of La Casa/El Corredor Afro holds a deep historical and cultural significance because Loiza was a city founded by free Black slaves. In the words of the literary critic Santos-Febres, El Corredor Afro is an "alternative space for exploring Afro-Boricua aesthetics in the too-long colonized realm of visual arts and visual representation on the island" (Santos-Febres, 2021,

para. 1). This Corredor embodies and creates an aesthetic by, for, and from Afro-descendants to integrate the knowledge of the Social Sciences, the devotion to the orishas, and the decolonization of the mind for those curious enough to enter through its doors. Entering denotes an awareness of movement into a pathway where the Black creative is revitalized, nurtured, and allowed to engage the identity that has been held captive by a white imaginary and institutions who have modified the Afro descents as part of the “main three races,” but one that is not worthy of being centered and celebrated. As a response, a fluidity of identities is tapped into in order to emerge as a transformed being.

Two cultural and community initiatives that have emerged in Puerto Rico to foster, nurture, and sustain the Afro-Puerto Rican as well as the Caribbean interiority are the museum of African Roots and La Casa/Corredor Afro, which provide two distinct perspectives of engaging the Afro-Caribbean experiences in their multi-layered realities and providing the tools for dialogues, education experiences, and lectures so that current socio-historical, economic, political, and religious issues can be explored. As such, they can serve as contemplative artifacts. The Casa/Corredor Afro, however, takes a grassroots approach by keeping a pulse on current social issues in North America, Puerto Rico, and the African diaspora. Through the Corredor new aesthetics become represented not only in terms of visibilizing but through a lens of decolonializing. A clear example of how Afro thought is in itself an act of decolonizing is through concepts like Sankofa, which emerges from the Akan philosophical tradition, whose popular definition is, “Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone, or been stripped of can be reclaimed, revived, preserved, and perpetuated” (UIS, n.d., para. 3). By becoming aware of the past—for example, aspects of diasporic experiences by choice or force, religious syncretism, the porous boundaries around identity and belonging—it requires a sense of contemplation, and from an institutional, collective, or personal perspective it evokes an “Aesthetics [as] an inquiry into how artists, in their products and processes, utilize sensory and emotional stimulation and experience to find and express meaning and orientation in the world and to deepen relationships amongst artists and their partners across differences” (Gurgel,

n.d., para. 4). Furthermore, by allowing creativity and a contemplative praxis to flow, the Barril de Bomba, Bomba, and Flamboyán are some of the liberatory modalities within a Caribbean context.

The three archetypes interconnect a spirituality which is polyvalent and as such could be considered as part of the art expression of the human experience. An important part of constructing “the social imaginary is the space from which we imagine, and then become; the space we inherit, reproduce, and inflect with the difference of our beings” (Pérez, 2021, p. 2). It is these spaces that serve as containers for contemplation and action; it involves an awareness of the fullness of self in all of its ramifications and manifestations.

The researcher Angel Quintero provides a framework of the body as an extension of the self, including how the body is able to break away from dominant cultural influences. Quintero states that

Saliendo de esa cárcel de larga duración, la corporeidad emergía radiosa cómo sede y modo de ser humano en este mundo y ponía al desnudo su relación con el poder. Pero cuerpo es también la sede y el destino del placer, de todo placer y del dolor, de todo dolor. El cuerpo es toda la persona, su sede y su horizonte / Coming out of that long-term prison, corporeity emerged radically as the seat and way of being human in this world and laid bare its relationship with power, but the body is also the seat and destination of pleasure, of all pleasure and pain, from all pain. The body is the whole person, its headquarters, and its horizon. (Quintero, 2009, p. 39)

The first archetype is the Barril de Bomba. The Barril is described as “the kind of drum used in performances of the Afro-Puerto Rican musical tradition known as bomba” (Smithsonian, 2021, para. 1). Such an instrument requires a spiritual intention from a person in order for sounds to be produced. The individuals transmit into the instrument their memories, sensibilities. It evokes from the performers a sense of call/vocation alongside the community, in service to the ancestors, elders, and

orishas. The movements are contextualized by the dancer in which the relationship between the drummer and the dancer are both products of their socio-historical realities. And it is alternative spaces like these which allow for a reclamation of traditions which have experienced acts of erasure, violence, and defamation, where people can reclaim their ancestral roots, reenact, and embody a relationality with ancestral wisdoms and knowledges found in the Bomba. “[W]hen Puerto Rico finally reaches a point where it recognizes the value of its folklore, it will fight to defend its honor” (Aparicio & Khadra, 2020, para. 11). There comes a time after a process of contemplation that new epistemologies allow for a relationality to self and others, and is then enacted as an instrument of freedom from forces like imperialism, colonialism, and other effects that impact the way in which people are able to visualize themselves.

The second archetype is the Bomba, the endemic dance with its rhythms, movements, and protocols serving as a testament to the diversity found in the histories, narratives, and wisdom found in this Afro-Puerto Rican practice. When I reminisce about Bomba and contemporary figures and their families who are known in the island for their work and contribution to the celebration of our Afro roots, I think about la familia/family Cepeda, Ayala, among others. The Master Folk artist Cartagena defines Bomba as

the traditional, participatory dance which is associated with bomba in its truest form—also exhibits significant regional variations. Regional variations, overlapping terminology, and even idiosyncratic expressions of bomba throughout Puerto Rico are indicative of the oral traditions that have preserved bomba for over 300 years. (Cartagena, 2004, p. 19)

The rhythms found within the Bomba center the importance of the bodies. Its performance and praxis call for a communal, spiritual, and ethical praxis of liberation. Its roots in the African experience and transmitted as a mode of resistance, communication, and devotion recognizes the polyvalent nature of Bomba and its recognition that movement encompasses an intimate knowledge of identity, histories, belonging,

and contemplating the interplay of time, space, and location. For the enslaved Africans (ancestors), Bomba “was a source of political and spiritual expression. The lyrics conveyed a sense of anger and sadness about their condition, and songs served as a catalyst for rebellions and uprisings” (Taller Puertorriqueño, n.d., para. 2).

The third archetype is the Flamboyán, where “for Puerto Ricans, this tree is a symbolic tree which symbolizes pride, hope, and rest” (Ramirez, 2018). Growing up on the island el Flamboyán is seen in more rural areas of the island, used on postcards and artwork. In my own contemplative practice, the tree archetypes could represent mirrors of legacies which until this day are being experienced in the Island of Puerto Rico. Because the Flamboyán is not endemic to the Caribbean but an import from the Europeans, it turned into a symbol of Puerto Ricans of rest. Similarly, if we consider that a tree needs water for its survival, growth, and flourishing, the Flamboyán also symbolizes being transplanted and experiencing a diasporic process, needing adaptation. Similarly, the body goes through the same processes.

Conclusion

Accessing wisdom found through practices of contemplation—through those known and those in need of excavating or being rediscovered—has served as a catalyst for Afro-descendants in the Caribbean for decades to transcend their lived realities and processes of transculturation to slowly make for themselves alternative spaces that serve as community-based education centers and artistic containers. By pushing the boundaries of traditional cultural, ethnic, and religious/spiritual definitions, those who embrace hyphenated identities (e.g., Afro-) have begun to be more visible in society, and national conversations are being had. The usage of archetypes allows for multiple perspectives or processes of thought to exist and be named within the vast spiritual traditions that serve as conduits of liberatory aspirations. Tending to the Afro is not only an act of survival, but it is an act of resistance leading to self-determination and the right to exist. Religious and cultural symbols have served throughout time as technologies which have held hidden wisdom and untold stories of transformative realities. Now there

are emergent generations who are invested in recovering, exploring, and conserving the knowledges, be it through the contemplation of a curated temporary or permanent exhibit at a museum, the Barril, the Bomba, or the centuries of ongoing colonization. The Caribbean region and the dominant class, those who hold to the discourses of oppressive hegemonic regimes, have benefitted from the contribution of the labor, knowledge, technology, and wisdom of Afro-descendants throughout time, and the sounds, rhythms, and waters cannot be stopped: the liberation of a people will emerge as the fruit of contemplation of the inner world(s) and their (im)possibilities—which could be possibilities for Black futures.

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