Minnesota Unraveled

EP 201 - Pedacito de Tierra: Music and the Puerto Rican Diaspora in Minnesota

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Chantel Rodríguez:

On a sweltering late afternoon in August, I find myself standing outside Berlin, a jazz club in the North Loop of Minneapolis. I am here to see {trés}, a chamber music trio internationally known for performing works by composers from Latin America, the Caribbean, and beyond. José Antonio Zayas Cabán is a composer and plays the saxophone in the group. He is working on a performance project on the Puerto Rican diaspora in Minnesota, which will debut at the Minnesota History Center on January 15, 2026.

> *"Hi, I'm here to pick up some tickets for the 6 pm showing. Chantel Rodriguez. Right this way..."*

I make my way through the crowded bar and into the cozy concert room. Soft, blue and white light skitters along the velvet curtains lining the walls. I find my seat in an open booth, nestled against the wall, where I have a perfect view of the dimly lit, intimate room. Small, round tables surround the stage that holds a baby grand piano and two music stands.

> *"Ryan Smith on tenor saxophone, Casey Rafn on piano and José Antono Zayas Cabán on soprano saxophone..."*

I wasn't quite sure what kind of music to expect. But then they began playing–and the sounds of the piano, flute, and saxophone came together in unexpected ways. Song after song after song.

And then, the trio played a song that had me swaying in my seat. The sound was wistful and nostalgic–and yet...joyful at the same time. A few moments later, José told the crowd the name of the song – "Preciosa," the unofficial anthem of Puerto Rico written by Rafael Hernandez in 1937. It captures the love – and longing – Puerto Ricans feel for the island.

The song stuck with me throughout the evening. I was spellbound by the idea that music without words could evoke history. How have Puerto Rican Minnesotans told

their history through music? How do their ties to Minnesota and Puerto Rico shape the music they create and the stories they tell?

Welcome to the second season of *Minnesota Unraveled*. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

To answer these questions, I spoke with two individuals with Puerto Rican heritage.

Tearra Oso:

My name is Tearra Oso. I'm a culture protector, a healer, a musician.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And José from the chamber music trio {trés}.

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

My name is José. My middle name is Antonio. My last name is Zayas Cabán. I do have a doctorate, although I don't get referred to as Doctor much anymore. I used to teach in academia, and so then I went by Dr. José. I asked people to use all four of my names because it says something about where I'm from. I am a saxophonist, I am an educator, I am an activist and I am the executive director at Our Streets, which is what I do full time. I also teach at what is currently known as St. Joseph's School of Music, soon to be renamed in St. Paul. And I do freelance music work and recording, even though that sounds like it's on the side, it's very much part of my life focus. And since 2017, most of my projects have been focused on social issues. So I've been working with living composers for a few years now on a different range of projects.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Places like Chicago and New York are known for their Puerto Rican communities. Minnesota is not. And yet....Puerto Ricans are the second largest Latinx community in the state (the largest being people with Mexican-heritage). An estimated 20,000 Puerto Ricans live in Minnesota, with about 65% concentrated in the Twin Cities.

The vibrant, and thriving Puerto Rican community is growing and creating a sense of home here, while remaining connected to the island of Puerto Rico.

Can you tell me a little bit about what is the Puerto Rico diaspora and why Puerto Ricans end up in Minnesota?

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

Yeah, that's something that has changed for me. And I would credit my work at Our Streets and in political organizing and meeting people. That's definitely changed my view of what the immigration story is, which is in a matter of speaking the story of everyone except for Native Americans in the U.S. We take different claims to some misplaced sense of ownership over this land and our position here. And that has its own nuances depending on your culture and country of origin and Puerto Rico, the nuance there is that Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States, so we are natural citizens at birth, and that kind of puts us on a different part of the spectrum of what does immigration mean. And a lot of that has happened in Puerto Rico because of decisions made by the United States Empire, whether they're economic decisions or military decisions or political decisions. And so we end up here for different reasons: to make a living, to get our education to escape climate catastrophes. Sometimes, because in Puerto Rico there's obviously a lot of propaganda that has happened over the years, the US is made to seem as the land of opportunity and then the realities that we face are different depending on our point of entry.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In 1898, the United States fought Spain in what is known as the Spanish-American War. U.S. victory led to the end of nearly 400 years of Spanish colonial presence in the Americas. The U.S. also acquired three former Spanish colonies, including Puerto Rico. Today, the island remains a territory of the United States. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth — though they have no voting representation in Congress — and can travel anywhere in the United States just like any other US citizen can.

Historical population data for Puerto Ricans in Minnesota is difficult to find. Mostly because the U.S. Census changed how it categorized Puerto Ricans over time. The earliest documentation of a Puerto Rican living in Minnesota appears in the 1890 U.S. Census. Her name was recorded as Johaquina, a 20-year old living in Duluth, and married to a soldier of Irish-descent. Puerto Ricans came to work in small numbers as seasonal farm workers, industry workers in manufacturing, and college students throughout the 20th century. Puerto Ricans came in larger numbers after hurricane María in 2017.

Every Puerto Rican Minnesotan's journey is different. José shared with me his family's story of leaving the island for the United States.

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

I grew up in Mayagüez on the west coast of Puerto Rico. My parents are both in academia, they still are. So Mayagüez has the campus for the University of Puerto Rico that houses the school of engineering and the school of business. And so naturally after my parents finished some of their graduate studies in New York, they moved back and I was born soon after they returned. And my experience, it was definitely informed by the college experience. I spent a lot of time just roaming the halls while my dad was working, just waiting around.

So I was shocked to find out that we were moving, but it made sense. My mom didn't get to finish her doctorate, and that's something she wanted to do. And so my parents waited until we were older and they told us that we were going to move to the US so she could finish her education.

And I give her a lot of credit. Her courage is my inspiration for sure. I was 15 and my brother was, he's a year and a half younger. My sister had already spent some time, I think, for other programs in the U.S. and she was a little bit more comfortable, but it was a big shock. And we moved to mid-Missouri where we were not ready for that for sure, but that's why we moved. She was admitted at the University of Missouri. My dad was able to find employment there, and that sort of anchored the decision of where we were going.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Tearra's story is a bit different. She has family ties to Puerto Rico, but she was born and raised in St. Paul's West Side.

Tearra Oso:

My grandmother, my dad's mother, is from Puerto Rico. She was born and raised there and she doesn't have great memories about Puerto Rico because she grew up very poor and she's also African, her ancestry is African. And we could have a whole conversation about race, about colorism and Puerto Ricans or even Caribbean, Central Americans, Latinx people.

I'm actually Puerto Rican and Mexican, which is wild. I just feel like a love child. People who don't necessarily love each other, they're like, I don't know, I'm Puerto Rican and you're different from me, but I'm a love child, so I'm somebody that just really understands different sides of a lot of different stories.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Puerto Rico is home to a number of vibrant musical styles–like bomba, plena, salsa, reggaetón, Latin jazz, and more. The instruments, sounds, and rhythms are a unique blend of Taíno, African, Caribbean, and Spanish traditions. And each style has its own dance steps.

Music — and dance — have long been important forms of cultural expression in Puerto Rico. They're a way to connect to cultural traditions and tell stories about their experiences. Both José and Tearra began playing music in their childhoods. But their paths to becoming musicians and storytellers were not the same.

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

One of these awesome things that Puerto Rico does, they have an afterschool free music program, there are I think seven schools around the country. I may be mistaken on the number. They're called Escuela Libre de Música. And a lot of musicians that you meet will tell you, oh, that's where I started. And oftentimes it feeds into the conservatory in San Juan. But I did terrible. I think I got an F my first semester in saxophone, but I remember that moment because I was starting to figure out what I wanted to focus on socially. I had a really difficult time. I was an introvert and I still am a very socially anxious person.

And so any little thing I would take to heart and I would often kind of recoil and the instrument kind of provided me an opportunity to express myself and honestly, not necessarily in a healthy way or a bad way, but just kind of reinforce my need to sometimes just be alone and do things by myself.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I was wondering when you said you started playing music in Puerto Rico and that you started playing saxophone, why the saxophone? What was it that drew you to that instrument? Or was it just a haphazard thing?

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

It's much more boring than that. This is true of any music program when they're admitting students and they have certain needs or certain spaces and certain studios and so it just depends.I think in the U.S., you do these try me out things where you go through the instruments and then whichever one kind of fits best. Then there for me, you get tested for aptitude, so you had to respond and repeat sounds and rhythms or identify certain things. And then I think we had to check boxes of which were our preferred instruments. So I think it boiled down to

availability and studio space. My sister was playing flute, so I'm pretty sure I checked that box, and surely I did saxophone. I don't remember what the third one was, and that's how I was introduced to the saxophone. So I wouldn't say I ever made an informed decision about why the instrument, so sometimes I love it and sometimes I don't.

Chantel Rodríguez:

José took a big break from playing saxophone between his time in Puerto Rico and his move to Missouri. But this soon changed.

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

So the saxophone thing was a little bit waffling. I did my semesters in Puerto Rico and I met a lot of good friends and I really enjoyed doing it, and I kind of committed to it for a time. But then there was this big break, but when we ended up in Missouri, that was my first encounter with direct upfront discrimination with some level of intensity. And so like I said, I was always kind of an introvert and I was always embarrassed to just say what I needed or how I felt even at home. And I needed an excuse not to take the school bus home. So I said, I told my parents I was going to join the cross country team and start practicing saxophone. I had no background in running. I did running to exercise, but it just gave me an excuse to force my dad to pick me up from school rather than take the bus.

And that's when I really got started. I was of course using the music building and I wasn't enrolled in anything music. And then director of bands, John Patterson, who was a music professor, came into my practice room and I eventually became a student, and he told me, which felt very late in the game, I think you can do this. And so that kind of gave me the idea that I could do music and I went on and on. I auditioned, got into school, and I continued to get into the places where I auditioned; moderate amount of success.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Meanwhile, on the West Side of St. Paul, Tearra started to learn bomba music and dance at age 7.

Tearra Oso:

I grew up in St. Paul actually learning bomba. There was a woman named Mila Llaugher, who brought people together from Puerto Rico, from Chicago, from New York. So it was really beautiful growing up in St. Paul in a space where people gave

money to the arts. And so it was fun. It was fun learning about my heritage, learning about ancestral wisdom and what our ancestors did when they were enslaved in Puerto Rico.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The importation of enslaved African peoples to Puerto Rico was the direct result of Spanish conquest. Spain began the process of colonizing Puerto Rico in the early 1500s. They forcibly employed Taíno – the indigenous people living in Puerto Rico – in the mines. The violence of Spanish conquest and the labor-intensive mining practices led to the substantial decline of the Taíno population by the mid-1500s.

This is how Spain justified the importation of enslaved African peoples. There were no longer enough local Taíno to do the harsh labor. While some enslaved African peoples labored in the mines, the majority worked on sugar plantations along coastal towns—most notably San Juan, Ponce, Mayagüez, and Loíza.

Tearra Oso:

Bomba is something that our West African ancestors created on the sugarcane plantations in Puerto Rico.

So they're using West African rhythms that they had in their bodies already, but they weren't able to bring their instruments, their djembes, their drums. So they ended up making new drums from washed up rum barrels and cheese barrels that washed up on the shore.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Enslaved African peoples and their descendants incorporated elements from various cultures into bomba. For example, they incorporated the maraca – a Taíno musical instrument. The drums reflected West African traditions. And the dance styles were a mixture of European and West African influences.

Bomba helped enslaved African peoples and their descendants build community and process their anger, sadness, and frustration in the face of enslavement. They even used bomba to coordinate resistance and rebellion across plantations.

For Tearra, bomba became a way for her to connect with her Puerto Rican roots and broader community in the West Side neighborhood.

Tearra Oso:

I saw so many kids that were able to go to these classes and then their parents were able to go do what they had to do for a while. So as a kid, I kinda looked at it like that, well, this is what I'm doing. And honestly, there was a lot of things in the eighties and in the nineties that were really harmful to our communities, to our black and brown communities, whether that was drugs, whether that was violence passed down through generational trauma, historical trauma. There's a lot of things that our communities dealt with. So for me as a kid to be able to practice this music and to be able to be in community with people and then even to be able to gain some mentors, really, I was able to talk to Mila Llaugher about my issues that I didn't feel comfortable talking to my family about. So it became a culture for us, even though we weren't born in Puerto Rico.

Chantel Rodríguez:

José's most recent project, "Pedacito de Tierra," weaves together oral histories, soundscapes, and music to tell the stories of Puerto Ricans in Minnesota. Here is a brief clip from the beginning of the song.

> *Heaven on earth. I get very homesick. And although I've been here 23 years, I'm homesick all the time. I miss the people. I miss the warmth, the humor I miss. I don't have to read people because I know where they're coming from.*

Chantel Rodríguez:

Let's start off first with your project. Can you tell me more about "Pedacito de Tierra"? What is it all about?

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

Tierra is a multidisciplinary collaborative project about the Puerto Rican diaspora here in the Twin Cities. And I say it that way because it is just one story that is made up of several stories that we compiled. It is not the story and the idea behind the project was to bring in a composer in residence, Angélica Negrón, to interface with community members in the twin cities that are from Puerto Rico, whether they were born here or moved here or anything in between. Provide a workshop to get them thinking about Puerto Rican-ness, so to speak, and then to ask them to share their stories. Those stories then became the impetus for an Angélica's composition, which is called "Pedacito de Tierra," which is a title that she had been working with for a while. The project had evolved many times. I went through different iterations.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The foundation of “Pedacito de Tierra,” which translates to “little piece of land” lies not at the piano, saxophone, or pen and paper. It was born, in the words of composer Angélica Negrón, “out of collaboration…and in conversation with a community.” For José, this project is about elevating individual stories. This, among other things, spotlights the impact of US policy on Puerto Ricans, both on the island and the mainland.

So going back, who am I?

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

It's a combination of many of the things that I feel should go together in order for these projects to be successful. We're doing story collection, we're doing community engagement, we're nourishing the people who are participating. We are sharing it back with the community. It's focused on a particular social issue, but it's also a continuation of a project that I started with Miguel Zenón, which is called *El País Invisble*, which focuses on the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States.

And that one stays at a high level, the invisible nation. Most people don’t know that Puerto Rico is part of the United States. Most people don't know the history of that relationship and it starts to dig into that. And this project is very intimate because I've learned over time as I've been working and organizing that the best way to tell a story is through someone else's voice. The best way to talk about themes is to directly connect them to an individual experience. So the result of that, so what is it? It is an exhibit that we're going to have at the Minnesota History Center to highlight these stories. It is a performance that utilizes some of the voices that we captured in the interview and is underlined by a composition that Angélica wrote. It is a soundscape for people to listen to these stories with sound underneath. It is a documentary, it is a story and it is history at the same time, living history.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Yeah. And you spoke about all the different people that you interviewed, their different backgrounds, whether they were born on the island and then came to the mainland. How many people did you interview and what would you say are some of the common threads or the common stories that you're getting out of the interview about their experiences of either coming from the island to the mainland or what it means to be Puerto Rican?

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

It was eleven, including my own and Angélica's, and of the people that we interviewed, I think something that came up for me is that everyone has a certain yearning or intentionality to stay connected to their roots in some way. And I think that was something thematic. Depending on when they came, there was some encouragement to lose the accent or some encouragement to stay connected, but it felt like throughout folks had, to varying degrees, they had to take steps, proactive steps and intentional steps, to stay connected to their culture or to the island.

And so that comes up in one of the excerpts that's in the performance when you hear someone talk about, people think that when you move here, you forget about Puerto Rico and she says no. It never leaves you. And there's another one where he says, you could remove the child off the island, but you can't remove the island from a child. And it's interesting to see that, especially in the folks who are born on the mainland. And that's something that's more directed at Puerto Ricans and immigrants in general. Sometimes we get looked at a little differently after we leave and come back or we get looked at a little differently if we're born on the mainland or somewhere else. But there was definitely another theme of claiming their identity. And that's I think at the heart of this particular piece, that it is about Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican-ness, but it's specifically about folks who now have been here for a period of time and the evolution of that. And so there's always an intentional claiming and intentional yearning, and there's a perpetual state of displacement. And that came up too. I think one of the phrases that was said, I don't belong here. I don't belong there. And that's something that a lot of us who are here experience, when we go back, we don't quite fit anymore and we sound a little different. And depending on where we live here, we start to get a little lighter because there's not enough sun.

Chantel Rodríguez:

You mentioned a few of the people that you worked with. I think Angélica sounded like a really important person. Can you tell me more about her work and the sort of connection she had to "Pedacito de Tierra" to begin with? Is she also a musician or how she connecting into the project?

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

Well, we connected through a former student of mine, one of her mentors was Angélica, so Angelica came up and then we just talked a few times and I brought up the idea that there's this artist residency program, the American Composers Forum had, I think it's funded by McKnight Foundation, and proposed the idea of her being in residence and doing something that was focused on Puerto Rico and she was agreeable to it and got the funding to do the residency. Angélica is very prominent in her field in her own right. She's a sought after composer. That's all she does. And for those of you who are musicians, you know what I mean, when somebody can make it enough that they can make a living out of what they do, that's pretty remarkable. And she does that. Her works have been featured by major orchestras across the country and I think abroad.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The musical performance for the project is done by José's chamber music trio {trés}. It is composed of two saxophones and a piano, something José says is distinctive for this style of music.

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

The trio started, I would describe it as a project. I wanted to play some chamber music while I was working on my doctorate. And when you're getting a degree in saxophone, you play in a lot of saxophone quartets. Because the saxophone is a younger instrument you get put in ensembles where there's more, let's call it contemporary music, even though it's pretty old now. It's a music that was written at the beginning of the 20th century, the saxophone was invented in the 1840s and in classical saxophone, which is my field of study, the repertoire is even smaller. We work with a lot of living composers and we commission a lot of new music, but because the instrument is much younger, we also play a lot of transcriptions.

And so that's what {trés} is as a collective of three people that was focused on playing music for other instruments at the time and interpreting them through the saxophone. And so most of it was stuff that I was interested in performing or recording.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The song "Pedacito de Tierra" is about 11 minutes long. Tremolos – the rapid repetition of more than one note from the piano – and punctuated sounds from the saxophone overlay the voices of the storytellers from the oral histories. The

instruments crescendo, growing louder and louder as the song unfolds. The sounds and rhythms capture the feelings of loss and longing for Puerto Rico recounted by the storytellers.

> *It's like, you don't belong. You don't belong here. You don't belong there. So it was pretty hard until then.*
>
> *There were no Puerto Rican kids in the neighborhood, let me put it that way or anywhere.*

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

And Angélica also uses a little bit of field recording from Puerto Rico at the end. So when it's absolutely over, you get left with what I think is a really fun mixture of, we are clicking our keys to kind of sound like insects of nature or something of nature. And that's embedded into the field recordings that she used. And there's always a debate because in the field recording, I think there are birds, but the way the birds sound, it reminds people of the coquí, which is a frog that's unique to Puerto Rico. So you can decide for yourself. Are there coquís in there or are there not?

But yeah, so like I said with Angélica, because she does soundscapes and she's worked in film, it's very apparent that her skills kind of came into this thing that can feel like a recording, but can also feel like a documentary. And there is a video that goes with it, which is very rich. I've not listened to it once without getting emotional. It's really powerful because the themes are so strong and the things that people say are so resonant.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For José, the “Pedacito de Tierra” project has been a way to connect with the Puerto Rican community in Minnesota and contribute to the growing Puerto Rican music scene in the Twin Cities.

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

For me, these have been my first few steps to introduce myself to the Puerto Rican community. So I know there is some work around bomba and plena and the performance and preservation of those styles of music. Tearra, for example, is one of those people that through that journey of self-discovery is uplifting some of those traditions. And so those are the two styles that are historically tied to the West African presence in Puerto Rico during the times of slavery. Beyond that, I know there are

some groups that sometimes perform in dance situations and they touch on some of those styles.

But it's also important for Miguel [Zenón], for Puerto Ricans that they're taking our traditions and embedding them into other styles and genres. But I do think it's important for our culture to be represented in sort of the purer forums to be elevated and illustrated in other spaces here.

Chantel Rodríguez:

To learn more about bomba in the Twin Cities and how this musical style has shaped her journey, I spoke with Tearra.

You spoke earlier about the origins of bomba about being sort of steeped in the plantation experience for enslaved peoples, and you've mentioned a few times some of the instruments. So I'm wondering if you could, for listeners who've never heard of bomba or listened to bomba, how would you describe what bomba sounds like, right? And what kind of instruments do you tend to have in that sound of bomba?

Tearra Oso:

Yes. So I would say the main instruments, like bare bones, we use what we call barilles. So they're hand drums, they're kind of like what a djembe is mixed with a conga, but they're shorter and wider. You can think of a cheese barrel or a rum barrel that's emptied out, and then you put sheep hide over it. So that is the barille. And really we want at least two of 'em.

We have a buleador, which is tuned lower, so it's a lower tone that holds the rhythm, the main rhythm down. And then you'll have another drum that's pitched a little higher that we call a primo. And the primo is what the lead drummer plays. So you have at least those two barrel drums, and then you're going to have what we call a cuá, which is two sticks, just played on anything. Some people have a cuá that looks like a mini barrel and they'll hit the sticks on that wood. We've been using just a wood box that we play on. We've used a skateboard before when we didn't have nothing, we're like, let me just use these sticks on this skateboard. And I thought it looked great, and I thought it was just like our ancestors being resourceful.

And then we have the maraca, which is attributed to the indigenous people that were already living on Borikén. That's what Puerto Rico was called before it was called Puerto Rico. And before it was called Porto Rico. So barrel drums, cuá, maraca.

I would say voice, vocals is a big part of it. This music is call and response music. So you'll have a main singer singing verses that are usually kind of shorter, and then everybody is supposed to sing the chorus together. We call it a coro.

So vocals, and then I would even say dancers are an instrument too. One of the big parts of bomba is a conversation between the lead drummer and the dancer. So whenever the dancer comes forward, they end up coming and kind of bowing to this lead drummer. And that starts a conversation where the lead drummer is tasked at following the dancer. So there are some traditional movements that the dancers do, but it's really about expression and sometimes even trying to trick the drummer to see if they can keep up and follow along. So yeah, I would say those are the main instruments in bomba.

And then now you've heard people add different things. Sometimes you want to hear some horns or sometimes people will add accordion, things like that. A lot of bomba fusion now, but I would say mainly bomba is drums and vocals and dance.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And in your role in playing bomba, are you voice or do you kind of switch around between voice and dance or even play drums sometimes?

Tearra Oso:

Yeah, I switch around a lot. I think a lot of times I get put in the singer role as a singer, you have to know the verses too. So sometimes people don't want to do that, so I'll do it. And I feel like I've gotten really good at just doing that for decades now. And then I really love to drum though. I really love to drum. It's my favorite. And really, I'm a wellness educator too, so I've learned about resonance and how resonance from the drum can really help break up tension in your body. So maybe that's a part of it too.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Bomba is also a musical style rooted in storytelling. Growing up, Tearra learned about the different elements of bomba, from the instruments to the dance. The art of storytelling in bomba through spoken words is something very personal. It is also made more complex by language itself. Songs can be in English, Spanish, or both. And sometimes words are not recognized as “officially” being part of any of the languages.

Tearra Oso:

Bomba is an oral tradition, so we learn what we can from each other. If you end up looking up bomba online, there's some things that you can find and some things that you cannot. I have a funny story actually. There's a song I've been singing for decades now, and it's called “Yuba la Marilé.” I didn't grow up learning Spanish at home, so I had to learn in school. So some of these songs I thought were just in Spanish, and I thought, I just don't know that word. Nobody taught me, but I'm going to sing it anyways. So decades later, I'm teaching this song and then I realize Marilé is a made up word. It's two words put together. Mar means sea in Spanish, and then ilé means home in Yoruba. So our ancestors put those two languages together to make up a new word, and they use that in different songs.

Hi I’m Alex. Hi, I’m Tearra!

Chantel Rodríguez:

In the Twin Cities, bomba is a musical style that transcends Puerto Ricanness. It brings together Minnesotans with African heritage, whether they were born in Puerto Rico or not.

Alright, so I would say grab a drum and grab a seat!

Tearra Oso:

As an adult, I've been able to play with people right now teaching classes at the Black Youth Healing Arts Center. I taught classes for over two years now, and I have two or three folks that come with me who just learned bomba with me, who end up doing shows with me out in public. And it's not just shows, sometimes we're playing together and practicing and they're not Puerto Rican at all, but they're African. Bomba is for everybody, I will say. And what does it even mean to say that you're Puerto Rican, right? Some Puerto Ricans are only African. It's just one stop on the boat that our ancestors went to. So yeah, you can say there was different people from the diaspora and even different people that were not from Africa, or you could say they were maybe everybody was, from a long time ago.

Let s see if some of these work today, let’s see what we’ve got. I want to do a new rhythm...

Actually earlier today, this week, I've been presenting with the Black Youth Healing Arts Center in Irreducible Grace Foundation. We've been presenting at Adolescents Mental Health Summer Institute, and I end up playing bomba a lot of times, whether it's just the rhythm and I talk about it, or sometimes I'll sing a traditional song, I like to sing “Campo” in Spanish, and then I'll sing it in English so people can understand what we're talking about. And I see particularly three kinds of people that are moved by this. I'll see Latino people who feel like, oh my gosh, I don't know my heritage, and you're telling me that you didn't know either, but you learned through music or you didn't know Spanish either, and neither did I. So we're just doing our best and we can learn from where we're at. So people like that are really moved.

And then also I've seen a lot of either African people or African-American people who understand a little bit deeper the African diaspora, and then also European people who are like, wow, this is really powerful. The drumming, the healing aspect, the transformational practices that our ancestors did. And really just seeing Africans and Indigenous people in a different light has been really powerful. And then for us to practice it together, for us to understand that this is a gift and an offering that we get to practice today together with everybody, it's been really powerful and a blessing.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Tearra, bomba is an important part of her Afro Puerto Rican heritage and spirituality; it connects her to Puerto Rico and her ancestors. But that doesn’t mean she only plays traditional bomba. She is also putting her own spin on the music.

Tearra Oso:

I would call myself a Bombera, that's what we call people who practice bomba. And it's like my spirituality. And since my grandmother didn't really relate to bomba that much, I don't know exactly why, but I will say that some people might look at bomba as a poor thing because this is what our enslaved ancestors were doing. But for me, since I've been able to play it, I feel so empowered, I feel so bad in a good way that I am more than honored. It's beautiful to me. So since I talked to my grandmother and she wasn't so into bomba, she was like, I like salsa merengue more. And as a musician I was like, I really appreciate bomba so much and I would love to take the rhythms that we use in bomba and maybe make some new songs over it.

> *So I move and shake and scream anything to get it out of me. I can tell you from experience, nothing is forever. Things will get better...*

So I was able to get a beautiful grant from the Cedar Cultural Center in partnership with the Jerome Foundation, and I was able to write some new music and I call it Bomba Pop. It's like a new genre where I mix bomba with pop, funk and R&B music. And so because of that I've been able to make up new songs that are just half an English half in Spanish and just relatable to right now to maybe people who don't speak Spanish or don't know about bomba. So now my family's getting more into bomba too, or I teach drum circles at a couple of different places, the Black Youth Healing Art Center every week, and then also Indigenous Roots Cultural Center. So because of that we're learning so much more about the African diaspora and different drum rhythms and different people are coming together and playing together from Brazil, from Venezuela, from here, from Puerto Rico, from St. Paul, all different kinds of people. So it's been really beautiful to have bomba as a base for me and I really hope that other people can learn about it and be able to practice it, whether it's youth trying to figure out different ways that they can express themselves or adults who want to understand parts of their culture better or even other people who are looking for more ways to be able to calm themselves or empower themselves through music.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Tearra's bomba community in the Twin Cities has helped build her connections to her African heritage and ancestors. She shared with me one of her favorite memories of playing bomba and what it meant to her.

Tearra Oso:

I've had a lot of really awesome memories with bomba. Oh my goodness. Traveling to different places where people don't see a lot of culture and showing them that and opening them to that. I will say I had a transformational moment probably in the past year at the Black Youth Healing Arts Center where we were just practicing, just playing in a drum circle, what we've been doing every week. And I had this insight where it felt like it wasn't just us drumming, it felt like our ancestors were connecting, my ancestors were connecting to my friend RA's ancestors who were also connecting to my friend Savon's ancestors. And so whoever was in the room, it felt like our ancestors were able to meet each other and play too, and I just had this overwhelming feeling of, wow, what we're doing right now is impacting the present, the past, and the future. This is so powerful. So that was in a space where it wasn't a performance. We weren't dressed in a specific way. We were just relaxing, sitting in regular chairs in a circle in a room.

Chantel Rodríguez:

These connections deepen when she visits the island.

Tearra Oso:

Last year I went to San Sebastian in 2024, so that's in January, and that is a big festival in San Juan, Puerto Rico. And it was so beautiful. We were like, you can't park very close. It's wild. People come from all over to go see the bands and be there for the weekend.

Bad Bunny was there not performing just to go see and to be there. And I remember walking up, we're walking past the old, what is it called? Old San Juan, the old castle. And we heard bomba, we heard it playing, and I was walking and kind of just looking forward, and my eyes just started watering so much. And I was thinking, what is wrong? What is happening? And I look over and my cousin was with me and she was crying too, and I was like, oh yeah, this is very powerful. And we've been playing this music for so long, and now we're connected to other people that have been playing this music for so long. And we're like family, but really this music is just pulling our hearts so much and connecting us so hard.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Like Tearra, many Puerto Rican Minnesotans feel like their identity – their sense of self – bridges two very different places, the island and Minnesota. Here's a clip from José's "Pedacito de Tierra" where Puerto Rican Minnesotan storytellers recount this feeling:

> *My family, of course, and my people, my people still, other people think that because you move here, you forget about Puerto Rico or you are just forgetting all about it. No, no, no, no. That's not true. That's not true at all.*

> *I'm Puerto Rican. My parents are Puerto Rican and I just happened to be born here, but that doesn't make me less, right? And so I'm very, very proud of who I am, and my culture.*

Chantel Rodríguez:

This pride is fostered in organizations like the Boriken Cultural Center in St. Paul. Founded in 2019, its mission is to connect traditional Puerto Rican culture, arts and music with families in Minnesota. The term "Boriken" originates from the Taíno word

for the island, Borikén. It means "land of the brave." People of Puerto Rican descent, whether born on the island or not, often use the term "Boricua" to self-identify and to express pride in their cultural heritage.

The work José does – is in part—aimed at helping audiences understand the value of Puerto Rico's music and cultural traditions.

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

A lot of our cultural traditions, both in Puerto Rico and Latin America are seen as cheap. People want to pay less for them, or they don't want to pay anything at all for it. And just because our traditions are a little bit groovier, they have a little bit more swagger and they're a little bit more accessible, doesn't mean they're less. And that's a problem of perception that's difficult for us to overcome that if you're in the southern half of the hemisphere, then what you're doing has less value. I would argue the opposite, that some of the best art that's come out in the world and world history and why it's so deeply appreciated has come from a place of scarcity. And we should celebrate the perseverance without simultaneously holding it down. Just because it comes from those places doesn't mean that we should continue to struggle to get platforms and opportunities to put that stuff out there.

But I use that word emphatically and intentionally. We're seen as cheap, cheap labor, and that permeates all of the other things that we produce and do. And I think the fact that our stuff is accessible is a testament to the horizontal community practices that we bring to the table that have always been under duress, or under siege or under threat of being wiped out.

Chantel Rodríguez:

That's such an important point.

You've been talking a lot about, throughout this entire conversation about music and storytelling and history. Could you perhaps reflect on why you think music is such a powerful tool for telling stories, for telling history?

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

I've always been fascinated by the idea of casting a net and bringing unusual things together through points of intersection. I know sometimes it's called multi-sector, sometimes it's called interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary. I just love looking at things that might feel like they're far apart and thinking about how they can come

together, what's that commonality? And I feel like some of the best experiences that we have in life come with a soundtrack, even if we don't think about it in that way. We remember what we hear. We remember what we smell. That's the way memories kind of stay with us. And also how memories are triggered.

Chantel Rodríguez:

With José's project set to debut at the History Center on January 15, 2026, I wanted to know what's next for him.

José Antonio Zayas Cabán:

The History Center, to me, represents sort of the top of that mountain that I feel I've been climbing professionally. There's going to be Puerto Rican food, there's going to be Puerto Rican artwork. There's going to be an exhibit about these stories. There's going to be history to provide that context. And then there's going to be a performance of something that is also multi-dimensional, and it feels like a full experience.

And where I'll say, and this is where I'll end, I feel like I fall short, but I'll probably say I'm excited about the next chapter of my life at Our Streets, is that there's no action step. And I realized as my music career, my advocacy career, have melded together, that it's alluded to in this album, *Pedacito de Tierra*, that the question of what's next? And now I want to be in the business of having an impact on people, inspiring people, gathering them together around these ideas, informing them and motivating them. But then also being able to provide the "so what?" or "what can we do?" leveraging that history, that public history, that present day history into what do we do next?

And that's why I feel like this is a great moment in my career, even though it might seem a little sad to step away after this is done, is because I feel like I've reached the top of what I can do through the artistic medium. And I want to get into the business of using art in third spaces as moments for activation. So when you listen to this, if you feel like doing something about it, great. And then for me personally, I'm ready to do this and then move on to the next phase and really meet the moment of today. So I'm not leaving the arts, but I am evolving into something where the arts are part of that process.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Tearra, she is a cultural protector of bomba. She plans to keep the tradition alive, not just for Puerto Ricans, but for everyone.

Tearra Oso:

It makes you feel like you have a responsibility to continue to play the music for yourself and then also share the information for other people. I've talked to a lot of folks in Minnesota who are Puerto Rican or their spouse is Puerto Rican that have never heard of bomba. And I'm like, okay, well that's so interesting because bomba is so amazing. And if there are more people that don't know about it, they should. I guess my work's not done. And then when we do know bomba, we're able to practice it, to again, empower us. There are a lot of things that we all go through, even though we are so much better off now than our ancestors were and what they had to deal with. We can still use these practices. We do deal with a lot of heavy stuff too. So this is something that we can use to transform each other.

And I started doing wellness work and I realized bomba is not just for musicians. Bomba is not just for historians. Bomba is not just for kids. Bomba can be used for so many beautiful reasons, and I want to make sure that I continue on my healing path. And bomba has been a way for me to do that, to stay on track, to provide offerings that are impactful. And then also a lot of us don't know who we are. So whether you're Puerto Rican or not, I think learning an ancient practice, learning a practice from hundreds of years ago that was really impactful is important for us because then we can walk into our own power too, by seeing that possibility.

I would say in Minnesota, bomba is alive and well. We love to drum. We love to sing. We love to make up new songs over these rhythms that our ancestors knew for probably hundreds of thousands of years from Africa. We love to continue the tradition of a casual space where we can just practice and have fun, no pressure. We also like to go to the other angle of teaching people who've never heard of bomba before, who want to understand our culture better. We also turn bomba into performances where we are showing people, Hey, we're going to be entertaining you, kind of entertaining ourselves too, but we're also going to be learning our history and talking about that together.

Or even with workshops, you see us really working with youth, or really adults too, but especially with youth and giving them an opportunity to learn about our culture, but

also practice some of these rhythms and get the rhythms and even the songs into their bodies.

Bomba is so alive and well. We love to continue to play it, to practice it, and really modify it to be a wellness tool in so many different ways. I love it. I'll be playing it forever. I can't wait. I can't wait to see myself as an 85-year-old woman dancing really hard outside with the drums, barefoot.

Chantel Rodríguez:

As I walked out from Berlin and into the warm evening air, the sounds and rhythms from the music stuck with me. They had resonated in ways I hadn't expected. Speaking with José and Tearra, I had a better understanding of why.
Puerto Rican music is not just music. It has always been a way of building community, telling stories, and connecting to culture. José and Tearra are taking part in a long held Puerto Rican tradition of using music—and dance—as a form of expression and storytelling.

The music they create captures the in-betweenness felt by many in their community. They miss their families and cultures. They miss the very land itself. There is sadness in this music. But also joy. They celebrate the island's culture and heritage. Music is one way Puerto Rican Minnesotans maintain a cultural connection to the island.
At the same time, they also use music to build community *here* in Minnesota. They infuse Puerto Rican musical traditions with their experiences in the mainland. Creating sounds and beats that tell the story of what it feels like to belong neither here, nor there. Puerto Rican music is just as much about recounting the past as it is about the present and future of their community.

You've been listening to *Minnesota Unraveled: pulling on the threads of Minnesota history*. I'm your host Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

Special thanks to Jamie Kherbaoui for her help on this episode.

You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources and MNopedia articles at our website mnhs.org/unraveled

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Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious, and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you, just waiting to be unraveled.