'This Is Our Grime': Encounter, Strangeness and Translation as Responses to Lisbon's Batida Scene

Richard Elliott

Text of paper presented at the IASPM UK & Ireland Biennial Conference ('London Calling', online edition), 19 May 2020. A video of the presentation is available at the [conference website](#).

Introduction

[SLIDE – kuduro/batida in Portugal]

Batida (meaning 'beat' in Portuguese) is used as a collective term for recent forms of electronic dance music associated with the Afrodiasporic DJs of Lisbon, first- or second-generation immigrants from Portugal's former colonies (especially Angola, Guinea Bissau, Cabo Verde and São Tomé e Príncipe). Batida is influenced – and seen as an evolution of – the EDM musics emanating from these countries, especially the *kuduro* and *tarraxinha* music of Angola. Like kuduro, this is a sound that – while occasionally making references to older styles – is contemporary music created on digital audio workstations such as FL Studio.[1]

Recent years have produced extensive coverage of the batida scene in English language publications such as *Vice/Thump*, *FACT*, *The Wire* and *Resident Advisor*. In a global EDM scene still dominated by Anglo-American understandings of popular music, batida is often compared to Chicago footwork and grime (just as fado has often been compared to the blues). The translation is a two-way process, with musicians taking on the role of explaining their music through extra-cultural references. This paper uses these attempts at musical translation as a prompt to explore issues of strangeness and encounter in responses to batida, and to situate them in the broader context of discourse around global pop.

Strangeness

I'll start by playing two short clips of music from the batida scene, the first by DJ Marfox and the second by DJ Lycox. While doing so, I'll flag the tropes of strangeness and futurity that frequently shape the writing about this music.[2]

EXAMPLES:
DJ Marfox, 'Eu Sei Quem Sou': https://soundcloud.com/principepromos/p001-a1-dj-marfox-eu-sei-quem (also available at the [Príncipe Bandcamp site](#))
DJ Lycox, 'Dor do Koto': https://principediscos.bandcamp.com/track/dor-do-koto (also available on Spotify)

The strangeness that music journalists hear in the music is underlined by the records on which it appears. This is especially the case with those released by the Lisbon-based Príncipe Discos, one of two prominent labels leading the local and international

promotion of batida (the other is Enchufada). Both the clips we've heard were released by Príncipe and made available on Bandcamp as limited-edition vinyl releases and permanently available digital downloads. The records come with labels and sleeves that contain little or no written contextual information but share a common visual aesthetic via the artwork of label co-founder Márcio Matos. Written context is provided on the Bandcamp release pages, normally in the form of evocative texts written by the label staff.

Understanding

The sense of confusion which comes through many of the responses to batida is arguably part of a broader set of responses to music being released in a period of hyperconnectivity and overwhelming choice. As Ben Ratliff writes at the start of his book *Every Song Ever*, 'Sounds are running ahead of our vocabularies for describing them ... The feelings of disorientation, of not knowing what process makes what sound, of not really understanding what "producers" do, are question marks now built into our hearing'.[3]

If strangeness and futurity have been themes associated with the sound of batida (as evidenced by the way the genre has been written about), how do we start to translate it into some form of familiarity? One obvious answer lies in what the music is most obviously made for. As one *Guardian* review noted, 'Although it might sound alien at first, this is party music: after the sense of disorientation subsides, your feet take over.'[4]

Perhaps this is the most obvious and immediate way we can theorise the translation of any new EDM genre: how does it translate to the dancefloor? I'll return to that obvious and not-to-be-ignored point later, but first I want to consider how the genre gets translated into words, not least because that's what many of us attending and presenting at academic conferences are in the business of doing. For many listeners, curiosity remains beyond the dancing moment. Another way to get a handle on this sound, then, is through the information that comes with the releases. As already noted, the Príncipe team have proven themselves adept at providing compelling back stories and contextual spin (I use that word in a positive way, both to acknowledge the need for PR and also as a DJ-relevant term). There has also been the media coverage mentioned earlier and it's here that we often find the challenges of translation in full effect.[5]

Translation, as Umberto Eco observed, is about negotiation.[6] How do I negotiate the communicative, signifying concepts emerging from your world through reference to my own? How do you begin to explain these things to me? The answer tends to be that we do so by finding the common ground, by looking for the concepts we both recognise, even if our signs for them differ. And because we often can't find precise equivalences, we negotiate. It's little wonder, then, that, given the task of explaining new music to their audiences, fans and journalists often reach for the already familiar. In the case of batida, the already familiar for the Anglophone writer and reader might be footwork or grime. Sometimes it is the reviewer or feature writer who makes the

connections; sometimes, as in this *Fact* article, it is the artists themselves. It is negotiation, after all.[7]

If genres are in negotiation with each other, they are also influenced by each other. Angolan kuduro developed as a localised response to American house music and that legacy doesn't disappear when kuduro gets reworked in Portugal. But America is not the dominant player here and, to start to understand the way such musics travel, we should look to parallel scenes (such as the dance music cultures of South Africa, Brazil and Uganda) and also to a connected global network of music, clubs and scenes, stitched together however loosely through festivals, club nights, samples, set lists, sound clouds and social media.

This is the kind of work being undertaken by writers such as Jace Clayton in his book *Uproot*, by the Norient team behind the *Seismographic Sounds* project, by Jayna Brown in her work on the utopian impulse in global pop scenes, and by Noel Lobley in his account of Chicago footwork, Shangaan Electro and gqom.[8] Lobley refers to the producers and consumers of these three as 'hyperactive communities', and part of that hyperactivity is the sheer speed with which these sounds travel around the world via the kind of global networks I just mentioned. The sounds and the files and the spin travel fast, prompting new negotiations and translations as sound cargoes are unloaded into new harbours.

We also have to look to local contexts too and, with this in mind, I will say something about Lisbon before returning to the broader world of global pop. I want to consider the segregation of sound and the way in which sound acts as a marker of place and regional identity while simultaneously offering the promise of crossing borders, mixing and miscegenating.

Portugal and World Music

Prior to starting to negotiate my understanding of batida, first as record buyer, later as researcher, my encounters with the musical life of Lisbon had mostly been connected to the city's fado music, which I started researching in earnest around fifteen years ago. My work on fado sought to emphasise the connection between fado and the city of Lisbon, as did the work of other scholars such as Michael Colvin and Lila Gray.[9] This work challenged stereotypes about fado as Portugal's national music, but ultimately maintained such identifications.

With regard to the world music network that developed in the 1980s and 1990s,[10] I've often felt that the end result is a kind of United Nations General Assembly, where each country or region or genre is entitled to one representative artist, genre or style who stands in for that body. Genre and nation are often conflated in this process, so that Spain is mostly represented by flamenco, Greece by rembetiko, Argentina by tango, Mali by kora-players or griots, Tuva by throat-singers, and Portugal by fado.

As an example of 'World Music 2.0', batida has the potential to challenge the World Music Network as it threatens to displace fado as the music representative of

Lisbon/Portugal. However, rather than thinking that the torch has been passed from Mariza to Marfox, it is probably more accurate to suggest that these 'sounds of Lisbon' are heard on parallel networks, other channels, where what many have been calling 'World Music 2.0' or 'outernational music' are hipper and more important than the trad tendencies of World Music. Even though *Pitchfork* described DJ Marfox in 2014 as 'ambassador for this music around the world'—a role which artists such as Mariza and Ana Moura had previously taken on for fado—these worlds have been unlikely, for the most part, to meet.

Fado and batida are generally mapped onto very different parts of the city: the former in the central and downtown areas [shown in red on this map of Lisbon], the latter in peripheral neighbourhoods such as Quinta do Mocho, where several of the batida DJs live, including scene founders Nervoso and Marfox. [QDM is just next to and above the airport, which is visible in the top right of this map]. This geographical aspect is what most commentators on the batida scene highlight when tracing its origins, noting the disconnections that exist between the city centre and the outskirts in terms of public transport and other infrastructural elements.

To move between downtown tourist spots of Baixa-Chiado and Alfama and the 'social' neighbourhoods of Quinta do Mocho and Cova da Moura is to move through multiple Lisbons. The latter areas haven't been completely immune from the massive rise in tourism that Lisbon has witnessed over the past decade—tours of the former ghettos are available for those willing to seek them out—but the geo- and demographic fragmentmation of these spaces remains a powerful reminder of the legacies of postcolonialism.

Within Quinta do Mocho, though, attempts are being made to address the fragmentation via three locally organised strategies: to bring people to the neighbourhood; to export knowledge of the neighbourhood to the world; and to create local jobs. The first of these has been quite successful. I just mentioned tours of the former ghettos and in QDM's case this involves taking visitors to see the more than one hundred artworks adorning the outsides of the buildings, transforming the status of the neighbourhood from ghetto to 'bairro de arte pública' (public art neighbourhood).[11] Connections between music and space are remembered here, as in these murals of DJ Nervoso—a founding member of the DJs do Guetto and mentor to DJ Marfox—and fado star Amália Rodrigues.

If the first aim of bringing visitors to a once-feared neighbourhood has been a success, there is less certainty around the other aims of increasing QDM's visibility outside of Lisbon and of securing work for its residents. Nevertheless, the neighbourhood provides a compelling example of an attempt at 'reassembling the social'. In adopting that term from Bruno Latour's account of Actor-Network-Theory, I am thinking of the necessity to recognise the multiple actors who create, maintain and narrate a scene like the batida scene and negotiate the translation of its localised spaces to its globalised configurations. I am also thinking of the designation of QDM as a 'social neighbourhood' and thinking of how this further connects batida to grime, footwork and baile funk; this is what Marfox means, after all, when he says 'this is our grime'.

There are concerns about a too-swift move from the local to the global (some of the DJs voice concern about the scene changing as it becomes well-known). Similar concerns come from residents who have tourists traipsing past their houses, peering through their doorways and windows, treating them as spectacles. But there's also a recognition that the forced segregation brought about by 'social policies' was and would be much worse than this new attempt at translating experience. The way to reassemble the social, for many, is through gradual translation of the spaces and places and cultural practices of the neighbourhoods for the benefit of those who would otherwise perpetuate divisions through fear and prejudice. This is translation as education. To connect this to my starting point of thinking through response to batida, translation can be thought of as a route to cosmopolitanism in the sense that Kwame Anthony Appiah develops the term.[12]

The members of the Príncipe team, like those of fellow label Enchufada, recognise the inequalities at work between metropolitan centres and the colonies that helped make them so. Yet they also draw strength from the cultural legacies of Lusophone Black Atlantic and simultaneously tap into the networks of the present and future. The music they release is tied to place and circumstance, but also Afrofuturist, an ever expanding collection of what Kodwo Eshun has called 'sonic fictions'.[13] As the 2016 Príncipe compilation *Mambos Levis d'Outro Mundo* would have it, this is music from another world, both in emanating from a world that had virtually no representation in mainstream Portuguese culture and in being futuristically otherworldly.[14] It's also otherworldly in its multi-mundiality - sampling musics and beats from all over. 'For me', says DJ Marfox, 'the most important quality of this music is that it allows me to go and drink from other sound sources and integrate what I want ... You can influence yourself and draw upon other strains of music and use what you see fit. I think that's the most fantastic and admirable quality'.[15] We heard something of this in the DJ Lycox track I played earlier, with its koto samples. Other examples include Marfox's "Swaramgami' and Nidia Minaj's remix of Elza Soares.[16]

To conclude

As Dhanveer Singh Brar has noted of Chicago footwork, the strange cargoes of new dance genres can be more easily unloaded when the unloading is taken on by seasoned hands, or feet. Brar notes that 'The sense-memory London carries of jungle ... meant that it was suitably primed for the arrival of footwork'.[17] The dancefloor, as a space of cosmopolitan encounter, is where translation happens. And not only the dancefloor: to play the vinyl records or the digital files in any situation—home, car, office, neighbourhood, through open windows, across almost empty streets, in playgrounds and hanging-out spots—is to summon to affect the dance-primed mind.

Once we've established dancing as a dominant way of translating the sounds of batida, or indeed any other forms of music, we are ready to reconsider the written response to. Despite the declarations of strangeness, in fact the music finds journalists who are quite ready to use language to express what they hear as new in batida while using

terms with which their readers are familiar. A common strategy is to combine existing terms in new combinations, which sounds a little bit like dancing, which means, perhaps—building on Dhanveer Singh Brar's identification of the architectural qualities of Chicago footwork[18]—that writing about music really is dancing about architecture, after all. Which dancers will get to delineate the architecture for batida? What comes after translation? The music has had its moment of quickfire journalistic response, had its strangeness marked, measured and metaphorised. It now awaits the more extensive multi-stranded narratives that have begun to emerge around grime and British bass culture and around other elements of global bass and DJ cultures. The shape of its journey is still to be negotiated, the voices of its various actors still to be heard.

---

[1] From the accompanying slide, a very brief overview of batida in Portugal:
- 1990s: *kuduro* gains international profile
- Early 2000s: DJs in Portugal adapt Lusafrican beats in neighbourhood parties (inc. DJ Nervoso)
- *DJs do Guetto* released (2006)
- Buraka Som Sistema (from 2006)
- Batida [Pedro Coquenão] (from 2007 as DJ)
- Príncipe label (from 2012)

[2] Excerpts from reviews and features:
'You wonder: what the hell is this stuff? How can it sound so familiar to the club music I know, and yet so alien?'. Philip Sherburne, review of DJ Marfox, *Eu Sei Quem Sou* EP, Resident Advisor, 27 Jan 2012, https://www.residentadvisor.net/reviews/10337.
'one of the strangest, most distinctive dance 12"s of the decade'. Robert Barry on Nigga Fox's 'O Meu Stilo' EP (https://www.factmag.com/2013/10/18/this-is-our-grime-dj-marfox-dj-nigga-fox-principe-records-and-the-sound-of-the-lisbon-ghettos/2/).
'Jellied and atonal, it's the kind of fourth-world vanguardism both M.I.A. and Ricardo Villalobos have been struggling for years to articulate, from different angles, without ever achieving this degree of deeply intuitive strangeness.' Spin on DJ Nigga Fox's 'O Badaah' in their best dance singles of 2013 feature: https://www.spin.com/2013/12/50-best-dance-tracks-of-2013/131218-nigga-fox_by_diogo-simoes/.
'there is a clear feeling here of wanting to imagine a music for your friends but also for a planet that is as yet untravelled.' From liner notes to reissued *DJs do Guetto* comp (2016)
 'Hwwambo' reminds us of the sheer alterity of first-wave eski – a lo-fi, pressure cooked fusion of impossible rhythms, written for unborn dancers pulling shapes that don't exist yet.' Fact Best 100 tracks of 2013: http://www.factmag.com/2013/12/16/the-100-best-tracks-of-2013/5/
[3] Ben Ratliff, *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016, 8-9. This passage is also cited in an essay by Noel Lobley on the local, global and networked articulations of genres such as Chicago footwork, Shangaan electro and gqom from Durban. These musics—intimately connected to local spaces and yet flourishing internationally via networked online platforms such as YouTube, SoundCloud and Bandcamp—bear strong similarities to batida's situation, making it perhaps unsurprising that these and other contemporary global scenes are spoken of together. See Noel Lobley, 'Hyperactive Musical Communities On- and Offline : Dancing and Producing Chicago Footwork, Shangaan Electro, and Gqom', in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Local Musicking*, ed. Suzel A. Reily and Katherine Brucher (New York: Routledge, 2018), 55–66. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687353-6.
[4] Adam Bychawski, 'Príncipe Discos: the new club sensation from the Portuguese projects', *The Guardian* (27 October 2015), https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/oct/27/principe-discos-batida-marfox-firmeza
[5] Further examples of media coverage of batida, focussing on 'translating' the genre:
'reminds us of the sheer alterity of first-wave eski' – FACT

'the kind of fourth-world vanguardism both M.I.A. and Ricardo Villalobos have been struggling for years to articulate' – Spin

'takes a variety of motifs and idents and converges them into one warehouse-friendly cut. UK Warp-era bleeps and squeals, a chugging Detroitian bassline, retro drum boxes and a European techno aesthetic' – Picadilly Records (source)

'like the maddest Chicago jack track you've never heard' – Boomkat

'bear comparison to early grime – all clattering FruityLoops beats and syncopated square waves' – The Wire (source)

'like an ultra-vivid hybrid of grime and trance' – Spin

'brings to mind reggaeton, grime, baile funk, and footwork' – Pitchfork

[6] Umberto Eco, *Mouse Or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003).

[7] DJ Marfox, quoted in Robert Barry, '"This is our grime": DJ Marfox, DJ Nigga Fox, Principe Records and the Sound of the Lisbon Ghettos', *Fact* (18 October 2013), https://www.factmag.com/2013/10/18/this-is-our-grime-dj-marfox-dj-nigga-fox-principe-records-and-the-sound-of-the-lisbon-ghettos/.

[8] See Theresa Beyer, Thomas Burkhalter and Hannes Liechti, eds, *Seismographic Sounds: Visions of a New World* (Bern: Norient, 2015); Jace Clayton, *Uproot: Travels in Twenty-First-Century Music and Digital Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); Jayna Brown, 'Buzz and Rumble: Global Pop Music and Utopian Impulse', *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (2010): 125–46. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2009-063. Noel Lobley, 'Hyperactive Musical Communities On- and Offline : Dancing and Producing Chicago Footwork, Shangaan Electro, and Gqom', in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Local Musicking*, ed. Suzel A. Reily and Katherine Brucher (New York: Routledge, 2018), 55–66. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687353-6.

[9] Michael Colvin, *The Reconstruction of Lisbon: Severa's Legacy and the Fado's Rewriting of Urban History* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008); Richard Elliott, *Fado and the Place of Longing: Loss, Memory and the City* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Lila Ellen Gray, *Fado Resounding: Affective Politics and Urban Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

[10] By which I mean the connected print, broadcast and online media, the concert and festival promoters, the specialist record labels and retailers, and a curious world music audience.

[11] See the Facebook page for Guias do Mocho at https://www.facebook.com/GuiasdoMocho.

[12] Kwame Appiah refers to 'color language', noting that recognition of colour may be universal but the complexities of naming colour(s) move toward the local and specific: 'Whether you have a word for the color purple … won't just depend on whether you've ever seen something purple; it will depend, too, on the resources of your language'. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 96. He goes on: 'the points of entry to cross-cultural conversations are things that are shared by those who are in the conversation. They do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common. Once we have found enough we share, there is the further possibility that we will be able to enjoy discovering things we do not yet share' (97).

[13] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. See also Ian Penman, Mark Fisher.

[14] See Pedro Gomes's comments in Pitchfork interview: https://pitchfork.com/features/electric-fling/9490-lisbons-batida-revolution/.

[15] DJ Marfox quoted in Thump, https://thump.vice.com/en_uk/article/78j4dz/dj-marfox-levels-up

[16] DJ Marfox, 'Swaramgami' (https://principediscos.bandcamp.com/track/swaramgami); Elza Soares, 'Pra fuder' (Nidia Minaj remix) (https://maisumdiscos.bandcamp.com/track/pra-fuder-nidia-minaj-remix-2).

[17] Dhanveer Singh Brar, 'Ghetto Thermodynamics', *Cesura//Acceso*, no. 1 (2014): 60.

[18] Dhanveer Singh Brar, 'Architekture and Teklife in the Hyperghetto: The Sonic Ecology of Footwork', *Social Text* 34, no. 1 126 (March 2016): 21–48. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-3427117.