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Jose Camacho - How to Speak Puerto Rican

Jose Camacho

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“JOSÉ CAMACHO - HOW TO SPEAK PUERTO RICAN”
ON VIEW AT THE WALSH GALLERY JUNE 5 - JULY 21, 2011

ALL MEASUREMENTS ARE IN INCHES, HEIGHT BY WIDTH

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SPANISH TRANSLATION BY  MARÍA JOSÉ GARCÍA VIZCAÍNO

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IMAGE: FRONT AND BACK COVER, INTERIOR COVER, TITLE PAGE; LA ISLA ES LA ISLA (DETAILS), GRAPHITE, OIL WITH TAPE ON PAPER, 32 X 24 IN., 2009
HOW TO SPEAK PUERTO RICAN

selected works by José Camacho 2004 to 2011

CURATED BY JEANNE BRASILE
“How to Speak Puerto Rican” has been three years in the making. More accurately, my involvement as curator of this solo exhibition of Jose Camacho’s art has had a three year duration. But Jose Camacho has been engaged with the content of this exhibition his whole life. Born in Puerto Rico and now living in the mainland United States, Camacho situates himself in the midst of a discourse on the identity politics of the island and its love/hate relationship with the United States.

Most Americans are familiar with only one facet of Puerto Rico -- its resorts, casinos, beaches and nightlife. It is this caricature of the island pictured vividly in advertisements that Camacho responds to at length in his work. In “Dos Islas del Encanto,” Camacho presents a discourse on the duality of the island; the one familiar to its denizens and the other, playground of the tourists. The drawing consists of two graphite renderings of the island, one above the other. The upper image is presented in the correct alignment. The image beneath is flipped 180 degrees on the horizontal, a reverse image of the island’s actual orientation on maps. Camacho makes liberal use of the island’s outline in his body of work, often manipulating its contours. In “Folded Island” he does this by cutting it down the center and transposing the shape over itself. The shape of the island, as re-defined by Camacho, becomes a metaphor of these two distinct realities experienced simultaneously, and in varying ways, by native Puerto Ricans and those visiting the island.

Camacho uses layers in another fashion to articulate his experiences – by way of superimposed imagery. This can be seen most evidently in artworks such as “Sin título y más ná,” a mixed media work featuring stenciled and hand-styled text from lyrics of the 1937 folk song “Lamento Borincano” by Rafael Hernández. The ballad is an account of a peasant traveling to the city to sell his goods. It is both hopeful and melancholic, the peasant dreaming of his love back home and the gifts he will buy her if he is successful. Although romantic in its tone, it is one of the first songs of protest and unease about the politics and economy of the island at that time. The musical genre from which “Lamento Borincano” descends is influenced by Afro-Puerto Rican, Moorish and Andalusian musical traditions -- a pastiche of lyrical, rhythmic and melodic forms dating back many centuries. “Sin titulo y más ná” echoes the music’s affinity for the cumulative by way of layered text, paint, graphite and collaged paper.

Camacho’s affinity for layers is evinced in many other mixed-media works including “Hold Me in Paradise” and “La Perla de las Antillas,” both visual repetitions of text/shape and photographic imagery. Each individual component is rather small, but collectively and through the use of reiteration, they create a unified whole that is laden with impact. The subject matter is doleful as both works depict numerous grave markers memorializing the deceased. And yet, like the traditions of Puerto Rican folk music, such as bombas and plenas, there is a romantic quality to the work through Camacho’s labor-intensive insertion of written song lyrics (“Hold Me in Paradise”) and the carefully painted outline of Puerto Rico’s contour (“La Perla de las Antillas”).

The complexity of Camacho’s subject matter is underscored by the formal properties of his paintings, drawings, prints and installations. Like the deeply layered meanings that recur in his artwork, there are literal layers of materials in which viewers can delight. Vintage paper, stained with the residue of its past, is hidden beneath copious deposits of paint, graphite, tape, wax or oil stick. The layers are ritualistically scraped, re-applied, dissolved, sewn and adhered to the substrate, usually paper or canvas. Whether using layered paper in a collage, glazed layers of paint or a repetitive image that combines to make a whole, the visual and material strata that defines Camacho’s art impart densely deposited meaning.

In bringing Jose Camacho’s art to the Walsh Gallery, perhaps audiences may come to know Puerto Rico with a new and enriched appreciation that celebrates the cultural complexity and rich traditions of the island. Camacho’s art can be compared to the musical refrain “le, lo, lai” a type of exclamation akin to America’s scat tradition in jazz, but with lineage in the Middle Age tradition of the cante jondo, descended from Moorish and Andalusian music. Sung between stanzas of ballads, “le lo lai” is the heartfelt expression of joy that is quintessentially Puerto Rican. Similarly, Camacho’s work can be viewed as an ardent visual outpouring that is both celebratory in his pride for his heritage and mournful in his wish to redress the conditions which define it politically as well as economically.

- Jeanne Brasile
José Camacho Speaks Puerto Rican

“It is said that every painting is a self-portrait of its maker” – José Camacho

It was around 2004 when the artist José Camacho began considering the question of Puerto Rican identity in his work. Throwing his hat into the proverbial ring of art and politics was a departure for the artist, whose abstract expressionist beginnings recalled Pollock or de Kooning. His yearning to try something new, however, motivated him to turn his attention toward the island where he was born and raised and which he now intimately explores in the works on view at Seton Hall University’s Walsh Gallery.

Camacho began his academic studies in communications at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazón in Puerto Rico but it was not long before he began immersing himself in the visual arts. A lecture series at the university offered by the great Puerto Rican artist, printmaker, and writer Antonio Martorell (b. 1939) further fueled his artistic awakening. At the urging of his drawing professor Maryann Mackinnon, Camacho volunteered to assist Martorell in installing an exhibition at the University of Puerto Rico, a role he would again take up five years later with Martorell for El Museo del Barrio’s 1991 exhibition “La Casa de Todos Nosotros.” By the late 1980s, the then nineteen-year-old artist had left the island for New Jersey, enrolling in Montclair State University’s art department where he studied painting and drawing with the Abstract Expressionist artist Miriam Beerman. Camacho remained in Montclair after graduating and worked as a frameremaker in the very space he now owns and that is home to the renowned Midland Gallery. Camacho’s studio shares the gallery’s space and there the artist continues to carefully craft the frames for each of his pieces.

Camacho maintains that he “learned how to be Puerto Rican in the United States” and that his works reflect his thoughts about how Puerto Ricans on the island and beyond talk and continue to talk about Puerto Rico. These ideas, he says, have migrated to his works and become visual departure points for larger issues such as nostalgia, politics, history and beauty. Camacho’s first foray into the thorny world of politics and polemics manifested itself simply in his interaction with the shape and lines that trace the borders of the island, a recurring theme in this exhibition. This seemingly straight-forward and near-abstract outline, which Camacho folds, repeats, reverses or insinuates numerous times in his works, appears devoid of the delimiting lines and markers found in typical island maps. The titles alone of Camacho’s maps -- Tres Islas Blancas (Three White Islands), Commonwealth, La Isla Prieta (The Swarthy Island), La Perla de las Antillas (The Pearl of the Antilles), Dos Islas del Encanto (Two Islands of Enchantment) -- are nonconforming, reflecting the various ways the island is perceived and thus challenge the viewer to decode the inherent connections between image and text. In the large-scale unfinished Miss Puerto Rico, Camacho offers his own perception of the island. Here, the shape of his homeland is outlined in a barely visible white on a saturated jet-black surface. The work’s luminosity owes to the abundant layers of oil that Camacho meticulously sweeps across the canvas in an almost ritualistic fashion. Recalling a medieval panel painting, the sheen evokes a perspiring island, an idea that preoccupies Camacho who describes the Caribbean as a “dark, sweaty, and sometimes vicious place.”

Camacho’s idea of Puerto Rico as a feminine place drenched in sweat -- at once alluring and gritty -- recalls the opening lines of Luis Rafael Sánchez’s 1976 novel Macho Camacho’s Beat, which are reproduced in stencil on the 2011 painting Untitled (Estos Trópicos Tristes). In the fictional tale’s opening scene, Sánchez’s protagonist is a mistress who awaits her tardy lover. As she waits the sweat begins to dampen her made-up face. No longer pristine and beautiful, she will have to shower again in order to ready herself for his arrival. For Camacho, Sánchez’s female character is a formidable metaphor for Puerto Rico which he sees as playing the role of political mistress to the United States. Sexy and alluring like a beauty pageant contestant the island as commonwealth is also of questionable status; at once powerful and powerless.

The impulses of Sánchez’s novel are picked up time and again in Camacho’s works, appearing in Guarracho sin Sentido, Guarracho sin Sentido #2, and Y esa Letra. The novel, which Camacho read for the first time in 1989 at the suggestion of a librarian at Montclair State, remains one of the artist’s greatest influences. Since then, Camacho has re-read his now-tattered copy of the book numerous times, discovering new descriptive nuances of speech and sound with each reading that make their way into his work. In his Y esa Letra, for example, Camacho reproduces the book’s exact font in graphite, oil stains and wax. The text itself comes from one of
the novel’s many radio announcements that interrupt the narrative sections of the story. These announce-
ments form the book’s thread and chronicle the rise on the music charts of Macho Camacho’s guaracha, “Life
is a Phenomenal Thing.” Reading Camacho’s painting is to be transported to the world of radio, replete with
the cadence of the announcers whose own tempos echo the rhythms of the music they promote.

Camacho’s works are pregnant with references to sound: the hum of the fan [Y venia la brisa y fue],
portions of lyrics like “Le Lo Lai” that recall popular Puerto Rican songs [Sin título y más ná], and even the
collective utterances of a prayer such as the Hail Mary, which Camacho painstakingly spells out in orderly
bands of stencils on his large-scale Dios te Salve. For Camacho, this last work is a devotional piece, a nod to his
Catholic background, and a reminder of his grandmother and her elderly friends whom he grew up observing
at Mass. Permanent fixtures at funeral rites and processions, these viejitas huddle in groups and clutching
their Rosary beads and reverentially recite the prayer paying homage to the Holy Mother. At once devotional
and nostalgic, Camacho’s work invites the viewer to recite the prayer, thus fully participating in the Catholic
rituals so evocative of his youth.

Camacho’s artistic dialog with the island encompasses the past and the present through his use of mixed
media, old, new, and re-used surfaces and multiple and often veiled references to Puerto Rican art, music,
literature, colloquialisms, religion, and history. For example in his ¿Y qué es eso? Luis Muñoz Marín’s famous
rallying phrase “pan, tierra y libertad,” is literally interrupted by a breeze (y venia la brisa y fue), underscoring
the fragility and transience of the Popular Democratic Party’s (PPD) commitment to independence for Puerto
Rico.1 His Plátanos Negros, featuring a hanging cluster of the ubiquitous plantain, is a nod to the great Puerto
Rican painter Francisco Oller y Cestero’s 1893 masterpiece El Velorio (The Wake) and his La Perla de las Antillas
and Hold Me in Paradise both represent the picturesque Santa María Magdalena de Pazzis Cemetery in La
Perla, Puerto Rico, which was built in the mid-1800s and is located to the north and outside the walls of
historic San Juan. The latter work, which recalls paintings by the German artist Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), includ-
es etched lyrics from various Puerto Rican boleros and plenas, which Camacho, in a seemingly random way,
has added to the fractured and fragmented depiction of the cemetery. These songs of lamentation, love and
longing hauntingly serve as the lingering voices of the deceased.

Perhaps one of the most surprising works in the exhibition is Camacho’s work in progress My Blue Ay Ben-
dito. A sure departure from the slick, “sweaty,” and dark canvases that surround it, the work calls to mind a
bright, clear day. Perhaps an allusion to the Caribbean sky or Puerto Rico’s azure waters, the painting is
refreshing and happy. However, across the sky’s horizon Camacho includes in his hallmark stencils the omni-
present Puerto Rican expression Ay Bendito (Dear Lord!). This catchall phrase that conveys sympathy, frustra-
tion, or exasperation depending on a speaker’s intonation lends an air of uncertainty to the work. Like the
mistress who graciously volleys between beauty and discomfort, perhaps it is this work, then, that best
expresses the fluidity and complexity of Camacho’s ongoing artistic dialog with Puerto Rican identity.

-Niria E. Leyva-Gutiérrez

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1Camacho’s title ¿Y qué es eso? (What is that?) is taken from a 23 September 1949 speech in which the Puerto Rican Nationalist Pedro Albizu Campos questions the merits of the PPD’s program for Puerto Rico. “Pero sonaba bonito,” he says; in other words, it sounds pretty but what has really been achieved?
José Camacho habla puertorriqueño

“Se dice que cada pintura es un autorretrato del pintor” – José Camacho

Fue por el año 2004 cuando el artista José Camacho empezó a considerar el tema de la identidad puertorriqueña en su obra. Lanzarse al proverbial ruedo del arte y la política supuso una salida para el artista, cuyos comienzos expresionistas abstractos recordaban a Pollock o de Kooning. Sus ansias de intentar algo nuevo, sin embargo, le motivaron a desviarse atención hacia la isla que lovio nacer y crecer. Es esta isla la que ahora él explora de forma tan íntima en las obras que se exponen en la galería Walsh Gallery de la universidad Seton Hall.

Camacho comenzó estudios universitarios de Comunicación en la Universidad del Sagrado Corazón en Puerto Rico, pero no mucho después empezó a adentrase en el mundo de las artes visuales. Una serie de conferencias ofrecidas en la universidad a cargo del gran artista, profesional del grabado y escritor puertorriqueño Antonio Martorell (1939) sirvió para alimentar aún más el despertar artístico de Camacho. Ante la insistente petición de su profesora de dibujo Maryann Mackinnon, Camacho se ofreció voluntario para ayudar a Martorella instalar una exposición en la Universidad de Puerto Rico, misión que volvería a repetir cinco años después con Martorell para la exposición “La Casa de Todos Nosotros” el Museo del Barrio en 1991. Para finales de la década de los ochenta el entonces artista de 19 años ya se había marchado de la isla rumbo a Nueva Jersey, donde se matriculó en el Departamento de Arte de la Universidad de Montclair State en el que estudió dibujo y pintura con la artista de expresionismo abstracto Miriam Beerman. Camacho se quedó en Montclair después de graduarse y trabajó enmarcando cuadros en el mismo espacio del que ahora es propietario y que alberga la reconocida galería Midland. El estudio de Camacho está alojado en esta misma galería permitiéndole así trabajar en los marcos que tan cuidadosamente prepara para cada una de sus piezas.

Camacho sostiene que él “aprendió a ser puertorriqueño en los Estados Unidos” y que su obra refleja sus ideales acerca de cómo los puertorriqueños de la isla y fuera de la isla hablan y siguen hablando de Puerto Rico. Estas ideas, dice el artista, han emigrado a sus obras convirtiéndose en puntos de partida visuales para temas más amplios como la nostalgia, la política, la historia y la belleza. La primera incursión de Camacho en el espíritu en el mundo de la política y la polémica se manifestó simplemente en su interacción con la forma y las líneas que trazan los bordes de la isla, tema recurrente en esta exposición. Este aparentemente sencillo y casi abstracto contorno, que Camacho despliega, repite, invierte o insinúa en numerosas ocasiones en sus obras, aparece desprovisto de las líneas divisorias y las marcas que normalmente se encuentran en los mapas de islas. De por sí los títulos de los mapas de Camacho (Tres Islas Blancas, Commonwealth, La Isla Prieta, La Perla de las Antillas, Dos Islas del Encanto) reflejan unavivamiento que no conformista de la isla, transmitiendo las distintas formas en que ésta se percibe y desafiando así al espectador descodificar las conexiones inherentes entre imagen y texto. En la obra incabacada a gran escala Miss Puerto Rico, Camacho ofrece su propia percepción de la isla. Aquí, la silueta de su tierra natal se perfil a en un blanco apenas visible sobre una superficie saturada de un negro intenso brillante. La luminosidad de la obra consigue gracias a las numerosas y abundantes capas de óleo con las que Camacho meticulosamente barre el lienzo casi como si de un ritual se tratase. Recordándonos la pintura de un panel medieval, el brillo y lustre de esta obra evocan una isla que transpira, idea que preocupa a Camacho quien describe el Caribe como un “lugar oscuro, sudoroso y, a veces, vicioso”.

La idea de Camacho de Puerto Rico como un lugar femenino empapado de sudor —una vez atra-yente y llamativo— recuerda a las líneas que dan comienzo a la novela de 1976 de Luis Rafael Sánchez La guaracha del Macho Camacho, las cuales quedan reproducidas en las plantillas de letras de la pintura de 2011 Untitled (Estos Trópicos Tristes). En la primera escena de este cuento de ficción, la protagonista de la novela de Sánchez es una amante que espera a su amor que llega tarde. Mientras está esperando, el sudor empieza a cubrir su cara maquillada. Como ya no está linda y reluciente, debe ducharse otra vez para estar preparada para su llegada. Para Camacho, el personaje femenino de Sánchez constituye una metáfora perfecta de Puerto Rico que él ve como desempeñando el papel de amante política de los Estados Unidos. Sexy y atractiva como una participante en un desfile de belleza, la isla como territorio autónomo y a la vez asociadotiene también un estatus cuestionable, al mismo tiempo autorizada y desautorizada.

Los impulsos de la novela de Sánchez quedan recogidos una y otra vez en las obras de Camacho y as aparecen en Guarácho sin Sentido, Guarácho sin Sentido #2, y también en Y esa Letra. La novela, que Camacho leyó por primera vez en 1989 por recomendación de un bibliotecario de la Universidad de Montclair State, sigue
siendo una de las influencias más importantes del artista. Desde entonces, Camacho havuelto en numerosas ocasiones a su copia ya gastada y manida de la novela releyéndola y descubriéndoen cada lectura nuevas utilidades descriptivas del discurso y del sonido que se abren paso en su obra. Por ejemplo, en Y esa Letra Camacho reproducia letradel libro de forma exacta en grafito, manchas de óleo y cera. El texto procede de los muchos anuncios de radio que interrumpen las secciones narrativas de la historia. Estos anuncios constituyen el hilo de la novela y sirven como crónica al ascenso de los gráficos musicales de la guaracha delMacho Camacho“La vida es una cosa fenomenal”.Leer la pinturade Camacho supone transportarse al mundo radiofónico, repleto de cadencias de locutores cuyos propios temposponen un eco de los ritmos de la música que ellos promueven.

Las obras de Camacho se nutren de referencias al sonido: el zumbido de un abanico [Y venía la brisa y fauc], partes de las letras de canciones como “Le Lo Lai” que recuerdan canciones populares de los puertorriqueños [Sin título y más ná] e incluso las frases colectivas de una oración como el Ave María, las cuales Camacho reproduce meticulosamente ordenadas tiras de plantillas de letras en su obra a gran escala Dios te Salve. Para Camacho, esta última obra es una pieza de devoción, una reverencia a su formación católica y un recuerdo a su abuela y a sus amigas mayores con las que el artista creció yendo a misa. Piezas fijas en funerales y procesiones, estas ancianitas se apían en grupo y, agarrando las cuentas de sus rosarios, recitan respetuosamente la oración como tributo a la Madre Santa. A la vezfervorosay nostálgica, la obra de Camacho invita al espectador a recitar esta oración haciéndole de esta forma plenopartícipe de los rituales católicos tan evocadores de su juventud. Por otra parte, el título de la obra tiene un doble sentido ya que además de hacer referencia a la Ave María, literalmente “Dios te salve” transmite un tono de incredulidad e irreverencia recordando al espectador que cuando se trata de la salvación al fin y al cabo todo queda a la suerte de uno.

El diálogo artístico de Camacho con la isla abraza el pasado y el presente por medio del uso que él hace de los medios mixtos, las superficies viejas, nuevas y reutilizadas y las múltiples y con frecuencia veladas referencias al arte, música, literatura, coloquialismos, religión e historia de Puerto Rico. Por ejemplo, en su ¿Y qué es e so? la famosa frase de Luis Muñoz Marín “pan, tierra y libertad” es literalmente interrumpida por una brisa (y venía la brisa y fauc), subrayando así la fragilidad y fugacidad del compromiso del Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) a la independencia de Puerto Rico. Su obra Plátanos Negros, que representa un racimo delos omnipresentes plátanos puertorriqueños, supone una reverencia a El Velorio (1893), obra maestra del gran pintor puertorriqueño Francisco Oller y Cestero y La Perla de las Antillas yHold Me in Paradise(Mantenme en el paraiso)ambas representan el pintoresco cementerio de Santa María Magdalenade Pazzisen La Perla, Puerto Rico, que fue construido a mediados del siglo XIX y está ubicado al norte y fuera de las murallas del histórico San Juan. La última obra, que recuerda las pinturas del artista alemán Anselm Keifer (1945), incluye grabados de las letras de diversos boleros y plenas puertorriqueñas, que Camacho, de forma aparentemente aleatoria, ha añadido a la imagen fracturada y fragmentada del cementerio. Estas canciones de lamento, amor y anhelo funcionan a modo de encantamiento como las voces rezagadas de los fallecidos.

Quizá una de las obras más sorprendentes de la exposición es la obra en curso de Camacho MyBlue Ay Bendito(Mi Ay Bendito azul). Como una firme partida de los brillantes, oscurosos “sudorosos” lienzos que la rodean, la obra nos invita a evocar un día claro y lleno de luz. Quizá una alusión al cielo caribeño o a las azules aguas de Puerto Rico, la pintura resulta refrescante y alegre.Sin embargo, a través del horizonte celestial Camacho incluye con sus características plantillas de letras la omnipresente expresión puertorriqueña “Ay Bendito”. Esta frase, que puede servir para describir múltiples situaciones y que transmite simpatia, frustración o desesperación dependiendo de la entonación del hablante aporta un aire de duda a la obra. Como la amante que se mueve con gracia y rapidezentre la belleza y la incomodidad, quizá sea esta obra tambiant la que mejor expresa la fluidez y complejidad del diálogo artístico que tiene lugar entre Camacho y la identidad puertorriqueña.

-Niria E. Leyva-Gutiérrez

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¹El título de Camacho “¿Y qué es eso?”procede de un discurso pronunciado el 23 de septiembre de 1949 en el que el nacionalista puertorriqueño Pedro Albizu Campos pone en cuestión el verdadero valor del programa del PPD para Puerto Rico. “Pero sonaba bonito”, dice. En otras palabras, suena bonito, pero ¿qué se ha logrado realmente?
Commonwealth
Graphite and wax on paper
22 1/4 by 30 1/8 in.
2005
La Isla Prieta (The Swarthy Island)
Graphite, compressed charcoal and wax on paper
29 3/4 by 41 1/2 in.
2005
La Perla de las Antillas
Collage and watercolor on paper
29 1/4 by 29 7/8 in.
2006
Dos Islas del Encanto
Graphite on tracing paper
mounted on paper
19 7/8 by 15 3/4 in.
2008
Y ESA LETRA, señoras y señores, amigas y amigos, esa letra de religiosa inspiración, esa letra que habla verdades, esa letra que habla realidades, esa letra que habla las cosas como son y no como tú quieras. Porque, vamos a ver, señoras y señores, amigas y amigos, ¿quién me discute discutidamente que la vida no es una cosa fenomenal?
Miss Puerto Rico
Oil on canvas.
54 by 98 in.
2011
Composición Criolla
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
2011
Photograph courtesy of the Walsh Gallery
Sin título y más ná
Oil, acrylic, graphite and paper collage on paper
49 3/4 by 58 3/4 in.
2010
Dios te Salve
Graphite on paper
mounted on canvas
60 by 48 in.
2010
Y Qué es eso?
Mixed media, graphite, carbon transfer, tape and collage on aged paper
41 1/2 by 29 1/2 in.
2010
Hold Me in Paradise
Charcoal, wax crayon, acrylic and tape on photocopy mounted on paper
49 by 35 3/4 in.
2011
La Isla es La Isla
Graphite, wax, tape and oil on paper
32 by 24 in.
2009
My Blue Ay Bendito
Oil and graphite on canvas
47 1/4 by 52 3/4 in.
2011
José Camacho and the Walsh Gallery extend their gratitute to those who made this exhibition possible

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Xueming Bao
Frank Capra
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