

# *Plena* and the Negotiation of “National” Identity in Puerto Rico

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## ABSTRACT

The *plena* functions as an important marker of Puerto Rican identity in musical and other aesthetic forms produced both on and off the island. Through a reading of *plena* within a broader intellectual frame that includes its presence in literature and popular art, this essay examines its long association with pervasive questions of origins and autonomy in the construction of *lo puertorriqueño*. In the “national” imaginary, the *plena* provides a space in which two particular elements of Puerto Rican identity are continuously addressed: its racial character and its cultural specificity in the face of U.S. political and social pressures. [Key words: *plena*, popular music, national identity, cultural autonomy, race]

**PLENA**

*born in the West*

*born in the West*

El amor a la música popular, en la isla,  
es tan notable que bien puede decirse  
que todas las actividades y pensamientos  
están saturados de cadencias.

María Cadilla de Martínez 1999 [1933]<sup>1</sup>

### La plena y lo puertorriqueño

In their popular *plena* titled “Cimarrón,” Los Pleneros de la 23 abajo sing the following verses:

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| El negro con tumbador          | The black with his big drum                        |
| Se fugó pa' la montaña         | Fled to the mountains                              |
| El indio y su tamboril         | The Indian with his little drum                    |
| Y el jíbaro cuatro y guitarra  | And the <i>jíbaro</i> his <i>cuatro</i> and guitar |
| La Luna va a reventar          | The Moon is going to burst                         |
| en su noche plenaria           | in its night of <i>plena</i>                       |
| Juntaron sabiduría             | They brought together wisdom                       |
| Se formaron las tres razas     | The three races were formed                        |
| Jíbaro, áfrica, taíno          | <i>Jíbaro</i> , African, Taíno                     |
| El indio que no se aparta      | The Indian that doesn't disappear                  |
| Se fugó el cimarrón            | The maroon fled                                    |
| Se escondió allá en la montaña | He hid in the mountain                             |
| Se fugó el cimarrón            | The maroon fled                                    |
| Se escondió en la montaña      | He hid in the mountain <sup>2</sup>                |

The refrain “Se fugó el cimarrón” (The maroon or runaway slave fled) is repeated several times with different responses, until the final verses of the song, when the *plenero mayor* or main voice sings “Se fugó el cimarrón” and the chorus responds with him “Y nació la plena” (and the *plena* was born). In “Cimarrón,” Los Pleneros de la 23 abajo offer us a microhistory of the *plena*, one that associates the form first with *el negro*, then with *el indio*, and finally with *el jíbaro*, Puerto Rico’s rural homesteader, cowboy, gaucho, *guajiro*, a figure usually represented as “white” (González 1980: 21). In this racial genealogy, the element of resistance plays an important role, because *el negro* is a *cimarrón*, and *el indio* “no se aparta,” that is, he refuses to leave, surviving despite his supposed decimation in the early colonial period. Here, as in other *plenas* as well as in literary and plastic expressions that incorporate the musical form as a symbol, the identity politics of origins, racial identity, and national character are played (out) by musicians, writers, and artists. My contention in this essay is that alongside the history of the *plena* as a musical practice, we can trace another distinct, though perhaps equally significant social and intellectual discourse in which various positions convene and contradict each other, revealing an extensive repertoire of doubts, fears, insecurities, convictions, and celebrations of *lo puertorriqueño*.

Due to its popular and “folkloric” character, its historical connections with lower class and poorly educated communities, and particularly with black musical and

dance forms (Echevarría Alvarado 1984: 71, 81), the *plena* has been largely neglected in formal scholarship in Puerto Rico. Paradoxically, however, it has occupied an important position in ongoing discussions of the national cultural heritage, and seems to have finally achieved canonical status as one of the principal signs of that heritage. My suggestion is that given this dearth of direct source material, we examine a literary historiography that includes commentary in the form of essay, poetry, drama, and chronicle. In fact, *plena* provides us with a textual as well as a musical soundtrack to Puerto Rican musical and cultural identity stretching temporally from the beginning of the 20th century into the 21st, and spatially across both sides of the *charco* that separates inhabitants of the island from those in the United States. While this is a complex history that reflects a number of sociopolitical postures, I want to focus attention on two tropes that appear frequently in this textual soundscape: historical resistance in Puerto Rico to *plena* and other African diasporic phenomena such as *bomba* as ingredients of a “national” culture, and secondly, the historical embrace of *plena* as an autochthonous expression of that same culture. In the first case, *plena* is “historically and discursively marginalized, erased, and dismissed as *música de negros*,” and relegated to an inferior status as folklore (Aparicio 1997: 27), while in the second, it is appropriated as a form of resistance to cultural impositions and deculturation efforts from the United States.

Though defined by music historians as both a dance and music form (Garland *Encyclopedia of World Music*) and as a sung social commentary (Echevarría Alvarado 1984: 71), in its most stripped-down form *plena* is an upbeat rhythm that provides a frame for a call-and-response vocal style (Manuel 1995: 61). In its earliest form, it was arguably even sparer, depending only on a willing vocalist and the accompaniment of the highly portable *pandereta*, a drum formed by a rigid circular band of wood, and covered on one end with an animal skin (Ortiz 1996 [1955]: 117), that Echevarría Alvarado dubs “the soul of the *plena*” (1984: 31).<sup>3</sup> The lyrics, according to the same author, generally employ an octosyllabic or hexosyllabic line pattern and assonant rhyme (1984: 71).

*Plena* is routinely invoked as part of the equation *bomba y plena*, a pairing that brings together the two most resilient forms of Puerto Rican popular music subsequent to the widespread diffusion of the *danza* and other neo-European forms, and prior to the development of salsa. In fact, Dufrasne González defines *plena*



Plena in Jersey City by Los Instantáneos de la Plena del Rincón Criollo. Photograph by Rafael Torres. Courtesy of Juan Cartagena. Reprinted, by permission, from Juan Cartagena.

as “a *bomba*, but with portable instruments” (1994: 23). While the *plena* is considered a quintessentially Puerto Rican phenomenon at the level of popular social discourse, music historians nevertheless point to the presence of similar rhythms and instrumentation in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica (Dufrasne González 1994: 25), Haiti and Barbados (Echevarría Alvarado 1984: 66, 73), and in other locales, such as the Virgin Islands and St. Kitts (*Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*). Besides its signature rhythm and dance forms, the *plena* also provides a rich history in terms of lyrics.<sup>4</sup> López Cruz finds clear parallels between several early 20th century *plenas* and earlier songs in black vernacular with references to slavery (1967: 70). The historian claims that similar forms called *cantos de plenas* were documented in Santo Domingo from the late 19th century by the Dominican folklorist Flérida de Nolasco (1956: 77). Despite these indications that the *plena* had precedents in the Dominican Republic in the late 19th century, López Cruz (1967: 85) concludes that “el aire juguetón de los acentos de la plena, los polirritmos de sus panderetas, la picardía de sus mensajes, el clima de algazara y alegría con que se desenvuelve, su llaneza y campechanería, su espontaneidad y candidez, todo ello, y algo más, constituye una naturaleza propia de *puro acervo puertorriqueño*” (my emphasis). [The playful airs of the accents of the *plena*, the polyrhythms of the *panderetas*, its picaresque messages, the climate of uproar and joy in which it takes place, its frankness and heartiness, its spontaneity and candidness, all of this, and something more, gives it the character of a *purely Puerto Rican tradition*.]

This glorification of the form and its “pure” Puerto Rican character is seriously called into question, however, by other sources. In a 1988 interview with researcher Ruth Glasser, trumpeter and composer Ernesto Vigoreaux recalled his own experiences playing *plenas* in San Juan-based *conjuntos* from the 1920s on, noting that early *plena* was associated with poverty, lax morals, and “race.” “Upper-class and official mistrust of Afro-Puerto Rican music dated from the times of slavery” and *pandereteros* were sometimes jailed, he noted (Glasser 1995: 174).

The punitive measures officials took against the *plena* not only reflected past and present associations with slaves, rebellions and poor people of color in general but were in response to the form’s off-color or harshly critical words. Branded immoral because of the taint of its origins, the *plena* was a bit like ragtime or the *tango*, other early twentieth-century musical forms that were ‘stained’ by their association with the lower classes, blacks, and brothels (Glasser 1995: 177).

Like the Cuban *son* and *guaracha*, Dominican *merengue* and Trinidadian calypso, “the *plena* lampooned people of wealth and position, criticized government policies, and satirized powerful institutions” (Glasser 1995: 175). Early *plena* topics addressed a variety of social issues, including the development of a “national” identity and resistance to the U.S. presence and imposition of cultural norms in the island. *Plenas* also provided biting commentary on perceived social inequalities or injustice. When the American lawyer for the U.S.-owned sugar refinery Guánica Central was eaten by a shark during a visit to Puerto Rico to represent the firm in a labor dispute, *pleneros* composed the well-known “Tintorera del mar,” which commemorates the female shark “that ate up the American/from the Guánica central.”<sup>5</sup>

In a collection of essays titled *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (1993), Juan Flores focuses on the *plena* as a phenomenon with important historical precedents both in the island and in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> His chapter “Bumbún and the Beginnings of *Plena* Music” begins:

Mon, Rafa and Maelo are gone. The death of those three master *pleneros*—Mon Rivera, Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera—in recent years marks the end of an era in the history of the Puerto Rican *plena*, that form of popular music which arose at the beginning of the century in the sugar-growing areas along the southern coast of the Island, and which within a generation, by the 1930s, came to be recognized by many as an authentic and representative music of the Puerto Rican people. Despite the unfavorable odds dictated by its evidently African-based features and its origins among the most downtrodden sectors of the population, *plena* rapidly supplanted the traditions of both *bomba* and *música jíbara* as the favored sound among many poor and working people. *Plena* even superseded the *danza* as the acknowledged ‘national music’ of Puerto Rico. Tomás Blanco’s 1935 essay ‘Elogio de la plena’ was a landmark in this process of intellectual and cultural vindication, which is itself part of a larger project aimed at acknowledging the fundamental role of African and working-class expression in the history of Puerto Rican national culture (1993: 85).

Before addressing the reference to Tomás Blanco’s famous essay and other elements in *plena* iconography, I would like to compare Flores’ summary of the history of the genre to the musical history offered by Los Pleneros de la 23 abajo, cited in the song above. Flores associates *plena* history not with three races but with three time periods, the first covering the first quarter of the twentieth century to about 1926, when the first *plenas* were recorded; the second from 1926 to 1950, when it was commercialized and marketed to mass audiences; and the “final” period from 1950 to 1960, when a *plena* revival constituted a return to working-class roots and the form’s moorings in *bomba* and Afro-Caribbean rhythms (1993: 85–6). The three heroes of *plena* with which Flores begins his story become at this moment the custodians of the form, bringing it back to the “poor workers and unemployed masses from whom it had sprung” (1993: 86).

Flores admits that little is known of the earliest days when *plena* was “establishing itself as the most popular and typical genre of Puerto Rican popular music” (1993: 86), but he nevertheless provides a rather elaborate history.<sup>7</sup> The *plena*’s “towering practitioner was the semi-legendary Joselino ‘Bumbún’ Oppenheimer (1884–1929),” who was “the pioneer of the whole tradition,” the first “king” of *plena*, a plowman who would leave his house in La Joya del Castillo, a low-income Ponce neighborhood, to work the nearby fields. According to this account, the first *plenas* were work songs composed on Hacienda Estrella to “the beat of ox and mule hooves and the rhythmic thrust of the plow,” etc. Flores places Oppenheimer at the threshold of the tradition of “such better-known royalty” as Rafael Cortijo, Manuel “Canario” Jiménez, Rafael Hernández, and César Concepción, confirming that “La Joya del Castillo,” Bumbún’s Ponce neighborhood, “is the recognized birthplace of the Puerto Rican *plena*” (1993: 87).

There are a number of problems with this originary tale of the *plena*, some of which Flores himself alludes to, and some which I would like to explore further. For example, as other historians including Echevarría Alvarado have pointed out (1984: 74–9), some of the earliest practitioners of *plena*—perhaps even the musicians who introduced it in the island—were former slaves and their children, known as *los ingleses* who arrived in Ponce at the turn of the century from various parts of the British Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> Among them were John Clark and Catherine George—variously identified as being from St. Kitts, St. Thomas, and other Caribbean islands. Their daughter Carolina or Carola, and their son-in-law Julio Mora, together fused “the novel strains introduced by *los ingleses* with traditions and styles native to Puerto Rico.” Flores (1993: 88) notes, “Though it is not known how or why, it is clear that the ‘English’ sound caught on in Ponce and sparked the emergence of a new genre of Puerto Rican music.”<sup>9</sup>

Given the complex linguistic politics in Puerto Rico, where the imposition of English was a key factor in the U.S. domination of the island beginning in 1898, the early association of the *plena* with *los ingleses* presents a fundamental difficulty in its subsequent glorification as one of the island’s most authentic “national” expressions, a difficulty not fully addressed in Flores’ essay. It is deeply ironic that the *plena*, which has become such an important symbol of “Hispanic” identity in the face of U.S. cultural pressure, may in fact be the Spanish corruption of the English call to “Play now” or “Play, Ana” (Flores 1993: 88).<sup>10</sup> The *plena* was in fact the product of inter-Caribbean, bilingual interactions, a fact which Flores (1993: 88) indeed describes:

New, ‘foreign’ styles, instruments and practices arrive, attract attention for their newness and find imitations. The role of external sources in the beginnings of *plena* history, which has been ignored in most accounts of the tradition, deserves attention because it points up the regional, Caribbean context for the emergence of twentieth century song forms in all nations of the area: *son*, calypso, *merengue* and many other examples of the ‘national popular’ music of their respective countries were all inspired by the presence of musical elements introduced from other islands.

Given his understanding of the inter-Caribbean connections of the *plena*, it is surprising that Flores does not call more attention to the common denominator in the African or African diasporic experience. Beyond the differences of language, both *los ingleses* and many of their Puerto Rican working-class counterparts were descendants of African slaves who had similar backgrounds and experiences in which African cultural patterns and rhythms provided a common legacy and foundation for new musical and dance forms. Ruth Glasser (1995: 171) underlines these African diasporic underpinnings:

Most performers and observers agree that the impetus for this musical form, now considered by many Puerto Ricans to be the quintessential island sound, actually came from outside Puerto Rico. Constant contact between cities such as Ponce and the islands of the English-speaking Caribbean promoted musical exchanges between sounds of African descent.

In contrast, for Flores “the historical development of *plena* proceeded primarily in its interactions with other genres of the ‘national,’ Puerto Rican tradition, notably the *seis* and the *danza*” (1993: 88–9). As has often been the case, the characterization of *plena* as an authentic and “original” Puerto Rican expression contradicts or at least overshadows its clear provenance as a product of internal and external influences.

Whether it was these early practitioners’ shared experience as manual laborers in the difficult post-emancipation economy, or their common African (-American) legacy that produced the first *plenas*, the “boisterous syncopated rhythms, improvised instrumentation and vigorous call-and-response vocal cadences” were labelled as “primitive” and “vulgar” by the Puerto Rican elites (Flores 1993: 89). In a clear reflection of these class differences, many *plenas* were composed around the labor-related themes of migration or emigration to the U.S. According to Flores (1993: 90), the *plena* “tells of emigration, and it also emigrates, taking root in New York and enthusing audiences from all sectors of the Puerto Rican community by the late 1920s.” Studying its role in bringing together Puerto Ricans living in the United States, Glasser has argued that the *plena* was not only successfully commercialized in New York, but also managed to permeate all social classes there.

Flores concludes his essay by calling for a return to the “humble beginnings” of the *plena*, for a return to the canefields of Hacienda Estrella where Joselino “Bumbún” Oppenheimer composed his songs “in the process of human labor and interaction with nature” (1993: 91). It is there, and in the experience of the working people of La Joya del Castillo, that we should look for “the most basic reference-point for *plena* music down to the present” (1993: 91). But is this return to the “origins” of the *plena* the best way to approach its influence in and relevance to the present? Ultimately, it is unlikely that a “true” and coherent historical narrative exists or can be reconstructed. The desire to produce such portrayals is problematic for at least three reasons. First, a history that privileges an originary tale of *plena* obscures the complexities of the form’s political and cultural weight in both Puerto Rico and the United States throughout most of the 20th century. As Glasser (1995: 171) points out, “The *plena*’s history has been far from neutral, and a complex of motives led Puerto Ricans to either reject the music or embrace it as their own.” Second, this type of narrative generally ignores a vast array of extramusical phenomena including plastic art, poetry and the essay, drama, and dance that use the *plena* as a potent symbol of identity. Finally, and most importantly for this study, *plena* has been presented as an obsolete form, when in fact it has arguably never enjoyed as much success as it does now, in the early 21st century.

### Big Apple *plena*

As Flores and others point out, the political content of the *plena* was modified substantially by its exploitation as a commercial form, a process that began in the 1920s, when Manuel “Canario” Jiménez made several recordings with RCA Victor in New York. Ángel Quintero Rivera notes that before 1925, nearly all Caribbean music was heard within a direct experience, but with the emergence of radio and the Victrola, the musical experience became mediated for the first time, distancing *plena* and other forms from their roots in localized performance on the street or in bars or brothels. This transition of *plena* from communal to professional music resulted in several significant formal changes as well. Puerto Rican musicians working alongside Cuban, other Latin, and in some cases African-American musicians in

New York incorporated the new rhythms they heard into the *plena*, once again blurring autochthonous and “foreign” material.

On the other hand, however, sound recordings of *plena* provided a common point of reference and nostalgia for thousands of working-class Puerto Ricans who had migrated to New York and other U.S. cities from different parts of the island. While the official status of *plena* in Puerto Rico was still marked by a certain ambivalence, in the U.S. it was one more ingredient in a new mix that demonstrated once more the importance of popular music in the retention of a sense of identity and belonging for Puerto Ricans who had suddenly become outsiders. Ramón López (2002: 11) notes that:

La migración puertorriqueña fue de una clase obrera y eso determinó la predilección y fortalecimiento de la música popular en las comunidades de Estados Unidos. Por eso se conservó y enriqueció la plena, el bolero y la trova jíbara mientras se creaban nuevos caminos de salsa, jazz y hip hop. El arte musical es el que más une y comunica los dos lados del charco y su lenguaje es común y compartido.

[ The Puerto Rican migration was a working class migration, and that determined the predilection and strengthening of popular music in the communities of the U.S. That’s why the *plena*, the *bolero* and the *trova jíbara* were conserved and enriched, while new directions were being taken in salsa, jazz and hip hop. Music is the art that best unifies and connects the two sides of the ocean and its language is common and shared. ]

In a process that would be repeated later on with the development of so-called salsa music, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other “Latin” musicians living in New York collaborated to create new versions of their native “folk” traditions. Though the musical quality of the *plena* was arguably enhanced by this process, the 3-minute format of the early 78 rpm recordings also meant that the number of verses in any *plena* had to be limited, so that lyric richness and the depth of political commentary were inevitably adversely affected (Glasser 1995: 182). The *plena* recordings from the second quarter of the twentieth century, especially those of Manuel “Canario” Jiménez, established the genre as a “Latin” form, muting African elements and simplifying its characteristic polyrhythmic foundation (Aparicio 1997: 33).

In the 1940s and ‘50s, the *plena* moved uptown to New York ballrooms, where César Concepción and other orchestra leaders appeared on stage in tuxedos in a format similar to the big band. Clearly, the *plena* had been cleaned up and accorded new levels of respect, taking its place as a *baile de salón*, in the same way that the *rumba* had acquired new status in the 1930s. Faced with competition from the “mambo craze,” Concepción also developed the *plena-mambo*, which he made famous with the help of vocalist Joe Valle. Later, both *bomba* and *plena* rhythms were also folded into New York “salsa” by Rafael Cortijo, Ismael Rivera, and other musicians, providing part of the foundation of “Cuban” dance music in the United States (Berrios-Miranda 2002: 28; Moore 2002: 59).

Despite these commercial successes, few music historians dispute the consensus that the high point of the *plena* sound is marked by the collaboration

of bandleader and percussionist Rafael Cortijo and vocalist Ismael Rivera, who together recreated in the 1950s a “proletarian” *plena* sound, incorporating what Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá (1983: 31) describes as “una nueva presencia social, la del mulataje inquieto” (a new social presence of the restless mulatto character). The *plena* was associated with the *arrabales* or marginal island neighborhoods of Ponce, Santurce, and La Perla before its success in the recording studios and on the stages of New York. Cortijo and Rivera consequently adapted their *plenas* to the realities of life in the *caseríos* or housing projects constructed during the tenure of Luis Muñoz Marín, after the island’s conversion to commonwealth status. Enjoying broad popularity in both the island and the U.S., Cortijo and Rivera reflected a complex period of “national” cultural crisis and adjustment, as thousands of Puerto Ricans began to leave the island for New York, New Jersey, and other U.S. urban areas; while concurrently, urban life in Puerto Rico was becoming increasingly industrialized.

Baptized as an icon of the “revolution of the Puerto Rican black,” the Cortijo-Rivera team refused to acquiesce to demands for commercially conceived *plena* that focused on its “entertainment value” and sought to “whiten” the form for a broader audience, insisting instead on the centrality of the black experience in the development and continued renovation of the form. Because their partnership coincided with the growth of television, they also represented an important black visual presence in the Puerto Rican public imaginary, a space previously occupied primarily by whites. For Aparicio (1997: 36), Cortijo’s renewed focus on *plena* lyrics, marked by popular vernacular, double entendre, and reference to social and community concerns, provides a Puerto Rican example of signifying, self-conscious African-American verbal resemanticization or double-voicing.<sup>11</sup> “In this sense,” she notes, “Rafael Cortijo, like African-American rappers today, re-appropriated the tools of the master—technology—to reaffirm the musical and cultural presence of the marginalized” (1997: 34). As we shall see, this urban, street-inflected *plena* coexisted with other invocations in intellectual and aesthetic registers that also assessed or passed judgment on the African heritage at the heart of Puerto Rican cultural history. In these other non-musical venues, the *plena* is viewed with varying degrees of suspicion and acceptance at different historical moments in the period discussed above (1930 to the late 1950s), as a variety of intellectuals and artists enlist it in projects forged from their position in the educated middle class.

### **Elogios de la plena**

One of the most important artifacts in the aesthetic history of the *plena* is Tomás Blanco’s essay “Elogio de la plena” (In Praise of the *Plena*), published in 1934 while the author was living in Madrid. Usually read as a vindication of the *plena* in the face of attacks that it was black music and thus vulgar or savage, “Elogio de la plena” is in fact a fascinating commentary on racial dynamics in the island.<sup>12</sup> Blanco begins by saying that while the *plena* is universally enjoyed in Puerto Rico, it is not valued or respected. Few would have thought to play *plenas* for visitors to the island, and no one, it seemed at that moment, had taken the time to study the *plena*, with the result that almost no documentation existed of the style (1974: 39–40). “La plena es cosa de negros salvajes,” (the *plena* is nonsense of blacks and savages), a certain “buen señor” named Hat had ascertained, and Blanco, who later wrote *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico* (Racial Prejudice in Puerto Rico), judged the comment to be representative of the way in which blacks and their cultural expression were routinely denigrated in the island:

Creo que nuestro prejuicio racial, en la mayoría de los casos, se reduce exclusivamente a un horror irrazonable de ser tomado por mulato. Cada cual teme infundir sospechas de que en su genealogía pueda haber alguna gota de rítmica sangre de color. Se diría que vivimos subconscientemente asustados de pasar por negros bozales, y actuamos como si creyéramos que el mejor medio posible para neutralizar ese temor es el mostrar frecuentemente mezquinas puntas y ñoños ribetes de prejuicios raciales (1974: 41-2).

[ I believe that our racial prejudice, in the majority of the cases, is limited to an unreasonable horror of being taken for mulatto. Everyone is afraid of encouraging suspicions that somewhere in his family tree there might be a drop of rhythmic colored blood. You might say that we live subconsciously afraid of passing for blacks fresh off the boat, and we act as if we believed that the best possible way to neutralize this fear is to frequently display tasteless signs and mean little traces of racial prejudice. ]<sup>13</sup>

Blanco dismisses this fear as unnecessary: Puerto Ricans aren't savages; nor are they blacks (1974: 42). In fact, it's evident that "Puerto Rico es la más blanca de todas las antillas" (Puerto Rico is the whitest of all the Antilles) and few "pure blacks" remain (1974: 43). And the *plena*, which he labels the great-grandson of the *bomba*, is neither black nor savage (1974: 45). The rhythm is "excelencia negra," but, "por todo lo demás la plena es —plenamente —blanca" (in all other aspects, the *plena* is —plainly—white), he declares (1974: 45).

The separation of the "black" and "white" elements of the *plena*, and the subsequent finding that the balance sheet falls to the right (or white) side, is a maneuver that is repeated in other interpretations of "national" culture from the same period, particularly in the glorification of the white *jíbaro* as the rural pillar of Puerto Rican history. Blanco goes on to emphasize the *sabor marcadamente hispánico* (markedly Hispanic flavor) of the *plena* melody line, and the relationship between *plena* lyrics and the Spanish romance. The themes—episodes and anecdotes of daily life—are also a product of the Spanish tradition, according to Blanco, so that "en este aspecto, como en la melodía, la plena es de casta española: de vena blanca" (in this aspect, as in the melody, the *plena* is of Spanish stock: of white blood) (1974: 47).<sup>14</sup> But despite this "clear" European heritage, Blanco also finds a "universal tendency" that explains why the *plena* has also been able to incorporate the *areitos*, dances, and other cultural practices of the indigenous inhabitants of the island (1974: 47). The instruments it incorporates—the gourd-shaped scraper known as a *güícharo* or *güiro*, maracas, guitar, *tambor* or drums, etc.—reflect the Indian, white, and black elements in the island population, so that the *plena* conjugates and synthesizes tendencies to form "algo propio, sin producir contrasentidos, promiscuidades antitéticas ni burundangas desarticuladas" (of our own, without any contradictions, antithetical promiscuities or inarticulate conglomerations) (1974: 48).

While *burundanga* signifies a poorly prepared mixture of dissimilar and even antagonistic ingredients, the *plena* rises above this melee in Blanco's cultural history, selecting, measuring, and coordinating its materials so that "de lo heterogéneo crea una

homogénea diversidad típica" [a typical homogeneous diversity is created from heterogeneity] (1974: 48-9). Blanco also personifies the *plena* as a "little mulatta with skin as golden as an aged rum; with straight hair and mischievous eyes that could be Andalucian; with a Castilian accent, a little bit archaic, with a sensitive and agile walk, like a beast from the jungle" (1974: 52-3).<sup>15</sup> But many of his contemporaries were reluctant to link Puerto Rico's cultural tradition even to "mulatto" forms. Glasser notes that "the music was stigmatized by its lower-class and Afro-Puerto Rican origins, and feelings about it were bound up with a national ambivalence regarding race and self-identity" (1995: 177).

In 1952, when Blanco wrote a few lines to accompany his eulogy in a collection of essays edited in Mexico, he noted that antagonism toward the *plena* had by then abated somewhat, but that the form still was not considered a topic of serious study for musicians or musicologists in Puerto Rico. In the midst of the tremendous popularity of the mambo—which he considered a symptom of cultural colonialism—Blanco advocated once more for the *plena* as an autochthonous expression (1974: 34-5). Several writers, artists, composers, and dancers took up Blanco's charge to study and celebrate the *plena*, using it as a thematic or organizing principle in works in genres ranging from lyric poetry to theatre to the *grabado* or engraving.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the best known of these incorporations is Luis Palés Matos' poem "Plena del menéalo" [Shake It *Plena*], first published in 1953, soon after Puerto Rico was accorded status as a commonwealth of the United States. The poem begins

Bochinche de viento y agua...  
sobre el mar  
está la Antilla bailando  
—de aquí payá, de ayá pacá—  
menéalo, menéalo  
en el huracán. (1995, 613)<sup>17</sup>

Rumors between wind and water...  
On the sea,  
the Island is dancing  
—back and forth, side to side—  
shake it, shake it,  
in the hurricane (2000 115)

Subsequent sections of the poem take up many of the stock elements of the quintessential Caribbean repertoire, such as the mulatta, molasses, sugar cane, and rum, as well as the *jitanjáforas* and pseudo-African language typical of *negrista* poetry from the first half of the 20th century:

Fija la popa en el rumbo  
guachinango de la rumba.  
¡Ay, cómo zumba tu zumbo  
—huracanada balumba—  
cuando vas te tumbo en tumbo,  
bomba, candombe, macumba,  
si el changó de Mombo-Jumbo  
te pone lela y tarumba!  
¡Cómo zumba! (1995 614)

Fix your stern on the rumba's  
all-this-for-you course.  
Ay, how your buzzing zooms  
—hurricaned volume—  
when bump on bump you move  
bomba, candombe, macumba...  
if the Mumbo-Jumbo Changó  
gets you drunk and confused!  
How it zooms! (2000 115)

The poetic speaker directs himself toward a female dancer, who is in turn compared to a ship at sea: "Tus nalgas son el timón" (your bottom is the rudder); and an animal in the sea: "Anguila en agua de plena" (Eel in a water of *plena*). The *plena* would seem to serve here as just one more element in the celebration of an entire catalogue of Antillean sensuality, were it not for the last stanza of the poem:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Mientras bailas, no hay quien pueda cambiarte el alma y la sal.<br>Ni agapitos por aquí,<br>ni místeres por allá.<br>Dale a la popa, mulata,<br>proyecta en la eternidad<br>ese tumbo de caderas<br>que es ráfaga de huracán,<br>y menéalo, menéalo,<br>de aquí payá, de ayá pacá,<br>menéalo, menéalo,<br>ipara que rabie el Tío Sam! (1995: 616). | While you dance, no power can change your soul and spunk.<br>Not Agapitos from down here,<br>not “Misters” from up there.<br>Swerve your stern, mulatta,<br>steer toward eternity<br>that gyration of hips<br>really hurricane gusts,<br>and shake it, shake it,<br>this way and that, that way and this,<br>shake it, shake it,<br>fanning the rage of Uncle Sam! (1995: 616). |
|---|---|

In this rather surprising ending, Palés finds in the *plena*, and especially in the dance of the *plena*, a force that simultaneously attracts and repels Tío Sam. “While you dance,” the voice assures, “no power can change/your soul and spunk”, neither “Agapitos,” that is, Americanized Puerto Ricans, or “místeres,” the North Americans themselves.<sup>18</sup> The use of the verb *rabiar* (to make furious) to describe the power of the dance on the American observer is somewhat ambiguous, suggesting a reaction that ranges from desire to anger to impotence. But Palés clearly saw the *plena*, and Afro-Puerto Rican culture in general, as a powerful tool of resistance. Soon after penning the poem, he urged an audience at the Ateneo Puertorriqueño:

... Tenemos que salvar esto, lo nuestro, de la corrosiva y disolvente presión foránea... Tenemos que salvarlo de Agapito; no del ingenuo Agapito, con el tenducho abierto en la soledad de sus montañas, sino el otro Agapito, del Agapito junior, del Agapito ciudadano, tecnólogo, fomentador y planista, que nos ha caído encima como una plaga de langostas. Ese Agapito que no cree en los valores esenciales del hombre puertorriqueño, carne y hueso de nuestro ser intrínseco... (In Díaz Quiñones 2000: 151).

[ ... We have to save this, what’s ours, from the corrosive and dissolving effects of foreign pressure. We have to save it from Agapito, not the innocent Agapito, with his little shop in the solitude of the mountains, but from the other Agapito, Agapito, Jr., from Citizen Agapito, the technologist, developer and planner, who has fallen on us like a plague of lobsters. That Agapito who doesn’t believe in the essential values of the Puerto Rican man, flesh and bones of our intrinsic being... ]

Palés directly acknowledges the danger of U.S. encroachment on cultural values and production. Faced with that threat, he suggests in “Plena del menéalo” a reaction based on the recognized power of the Puerto Rican woman dancing the *plena*. Is this merely another appropriation of the female body for male purposes, or another exotic and exoticizing version of national culture, or does the performance of the *plena* constitute an active form of resistance?

In his 1982 study *El almuerzo en la hierba*, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones judges “Plena del menéalo” the most explicitly political of all Palés’ poems, a call for total mobilization and revolutionary rupture in the face of inertia (1982: 96). An alternate reading is provided by José Rivera Meléndez (1986), who sees in the production of the *plena* for the American tourist audience a mask for the profound pessimism that surrounded Puerto Rico’s new status as an Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State or commonwealth). Ultimately, it would seem that Palés’ highly musical poem portrays the ambiguity of the *plena* as a tool of cultural resistance in the face of U.S. domination: Puerto Rico is at the same time observed and consumed by Uncle Sam in the performance of the *plena*, but she also proves herself to be ultimately untouched and invincible to U.S. desire in that same situation.

A less well-known literary intervention that takes up the *plena* as a pretext for dealing with tensions around the issue of Puerto Rican identity is playwright Francisco Arriví’s *Bolero y plena*. Conceiving the work as “two dramas in one act,” Arriví began the *plena* section of the play, also titled “Medusas en la bahía” (Medusas in the Bay) in 1955. It was published soon after in the journal *Asomante*, and premiered at the Teatro Universitario in 1956 (Arriví 1971: 6). The work’s protagonist Augusto is a quadroon who finds himself “in the abyss between his white family and his colored family.” A successful sales representative for a soap company that promises cleanliness and “whitening power,” Augusto has married a white Puerto Rican woman who insists every measure be taken to hide Augusto’s black grandmother from her family, the couple’s acquaintances, and even their own daughter. The couple moves from Puerto Rico to the United States, because as Augusto’s wife points out, “We have to make sure we are not contaminated by that riffraff that is beginning to invade the social circles” (Arriví 1971: 103). The well-known *plena* “Tanta vanidad” (Such Vanity) serves as a kind of chorus to the dramatic action, calling attention to Augusto’s predicament within a society that exerts considerable effort to deny its black constituency:

|                    |                      |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Tanta vanidad      | [Such vanity         |
| Tanta hipocresía   | Such hypocrisy       |
| Si tu cuerpo,      | If your body,        |
| Después de muerto, | After death,         |
| Pertenece          | Belongs              |
| A la tumba fría... | To the cold tomb...] |

Though the song does not specifically address the problem of race, in *Bolero y plena*, Arriví provides a 20th-century snapshot of a Puerto Rican society obsessed with whiteness, in which the *plena* is called upon to reveal the hypocrisy and vanity of such a preoccupation. Whereas in Palés’ poem, the *plena* resists *external* pressure from the U.S., in Arriví’s work, it exposes and resists *internal* tendencies to negate blackness. In both works, then, the *plena* functions as a marker of Puerto Rico’s complex identity, or perhaps, as a mirror of the competing tensions in which that identity is being worked out.

One more extramusical appropriation of the *plena* that has left a lasting imprint in Puerto Rican cultural history can be found in the art of Lorenzo Homar and Rafael Tufiño, who collaborated on the portfolio *Las plenas*, printed in 1955. The twelve engravings based on well-known *plena* compositions, including “Tintorera del mar,” “Los muchachos de Cataño,” and “El obispo de Ponce,”

demonstrate the dexterity with which Homar and Tufiño bridged or brought together several disciplines at once, including music, plastic and graphic art, literature, and portraiture.<sup>20</sup> Using a range of typographic elements, Homar and Tufiño were able in *Las plenas* to create or simulate rhythms in a graphic environment that further emphasized the pre-eminence of popular music in the construction of a local identity, a phenomenon later explored by critics such as Aparicio, Quintero Rivera, and Flores (Díaz Quiñones 2000: 126, 137).<sup>21</sup> Now considered a cornerstone of the Puerto Rican graphic tradition, *Las plenas* was produced under difficult circumstances: it took a year of printing the portfolios one by one at night to complete the 800 copies, each of which were sold for \$6.50 apiece.<sup>22</sup> Teresa Tío (1995: 21), writing in the catalogue for the 1995–1996 exhibition *El cartel en Puerto Rico* at the Universidad de Puerto Rico in Río Piedras, noted that

Homar, Tufiño, y los pintores de la generación del cincuenta, fueron los que, junto a un importante cuerpo de escritores, ensayistas, poetas, músicos, actores, entre otros, mantuvieron vivo un sentido de auto estima, sacaron del anonimato a los tipos comunes para darles voz y hacerlos tangibles, crearon un repertorio visual significativo que está aún presente en el subconsciente colectivo. Esta contribución a nuestro sentido de identidad y aprecio a los valores de nuestra cultura, se sumaba a una larga tradición de luchas incesantes por defender nuestra identidad tan vulnerable, sobre todo a partir de la invasión norteamericana de 1898 y la frustrada intención de suplantarnos la lengua.

[ Homar, Tufiño, and the other painters of the generation of the '50s were those who, along with an important body of writers, essayists, poets, musicians, and actors, among others, kept alive a sense of self-esteem, and rescued from anonymity a group of common topics, giving them voice and weight, creating a visual repertoire that is still present in the collective unconscious. This contribution to our sense of identity and appreciation of the values of our culture was one more element in a large tradition of an ongoing struggle to defend our vulnerable identity, especially after the North American invasion of 1898 and the frustrated attempt to supplant our language. ]

Tío explicitly addresses the artists' attempts to insist on a new evaluation of popular elements, recognizing the importance of this re-evaluation in maintaining Puerto Rican cultural integrity challenged by U.S. economic and aesthetic imperialism.

The winsome and visually rich portfolio of Homar and Tufiño, along with the poetic and dramatic works of Palés and Arriví, had the dual effect of blurring the lines between “low” and “high” cultural forms and consecrating the *plena*'s place in Puerto Rico's cultural legacy beyond the limits of the working class sector. All took up the *plena* as a local practice in the face of aggressive U.S. efforts to make of Puerto Rico a center of U.S.-style production and consumption. Their texts “interrupted the

tale of progress and questioned the rational abstract principle of the new project” that Puerto Rico constituted for the expansionist-minded U.S. business and political sector (Díaz Quiñones 2000: 151).<sup>23</sup> The portfolios and posters of Tufiño and Homar are now coveted collectors' items for the intellectual and artistic elite, further deepening the central role of the *plena* in the continuing celebration and preservation of a “national” identity.

#### Death and resurrection of the *plena*

Juan Flores does not stand alone in lamenting the passing of Mon Rivera, Ismael Rivera, and Rafael Cortijo in his essay on the beginnings (and end) of *plena* music. The funerals of Cortijo and Rivera were events that drew thousands of mourners, who also celebrated the legendary musical legacy of the maestros. Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá's chronicle *El entierro de Cortijo* (Cortijo's Wake) paints the black musician as a kind of African griot or storyteller-historian, one of a long line of Puerto Rican heroes that goes back to the late 18th century and the participation of slaves and free blacks in the defense of the island against the English.<sup>24</sup> He notes that some of Cortijo's most successful songs were “inspirations” that his mother Doña Margot had written down word-for-word from her communications with the spirits, and included strange terms from the secret language associated with *espiritismo* (Rodríguez Juliá 1983: 72). Whereas Canario had arguably been able to gain fame as a *plenero* due to his light skin and straight hair, the memorable collaboration of Cortijo and Rivera left little doubt that the *plena* remained a black or neo-African form. Nonetheless, Rodríguez Juliá reveals that for certain Puerto Ricans, Cortijo was considered *otro tecato degenerao*, just another low-life drug addict who had finally died (1983: 70).

Despite this lingering associations of the *plena* with the poor, black sector, even into the 1980s and beyond, its status as a symbol of Puerto Ricanness continued to grow. Performers who had made their mark as *salseros* were sometimes canonized as *pleneros*. At the funeral for salsa great Héctor Lavoe in 1993, “*plena* and salsa were performed interchangeably during the ceremony illuminating the fluid movement between both musical styles in memorializing Lavoe” (Valentín-Escobar 2002: 171). One of the *plenas* the crowd improvised even included Lavoe in the list of fallen *plena* heroes, an immortalization that resulted from a “fundamental understanding of *plena* music as the national music of Puerto Rico,” and exemplified the complex way in which “collective memory functions to mitigate racial and class boundaries while also claiming them,” according to Valentín-Escobar (2002: 173–4).



*Plena in Manhattan* by Segunda Quimbamba. Photograph courtesy of Segunda Quimbamba. Reprinted, by permission, from Juan Cartagena.

Assuredly, Flores and others could not have known in the early 1990s of the *plena* revival that would take place in the last years of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st, a resurrection that has touched nearly every cultural venue in Puerto Rico. Although the Festival de Bomba y Plena had been functioning since the early '70s, it wasn't until 1992, on the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World, that the creative sector began to focus attention on the "recovery" of the *bomba* and *plena* as local "indigenous" forms. In 1994, November 19th, the holiday commemorating the discovery of Puerto Rico was declared Día Nacional de la Bomba y Plena, and in early 1995, the San Juan newspaper *El Nuevo Día* published an article titled "Renace la plena" (The *plena* is reborn). In 1996, Los Pleneros de la 21, directed by Juan Gutiérrez, received the National Heritage Fellowship Award of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a rather strange honor given the *plena*'s profile as a form used to protest U.S. economic and cultural domination in the island.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the most visible effort to recognize the importance of the *plena* amongst other historically significant musical forms can be found in the 2001 multimedia production *Raíces* (Roots), sponsored by the Banco Popular and available in CD, video, and DVD formats (Rosario Cepeda 2001). Incorporating a host of Puerto Rican musicians from both the island and the mainland, *Raíces* presents a history of Puerto Rican music in which *bomba* and *plena* play starring roles, and in which these traditional forms take their place alongside newer phenomena such as rap. Filmed in the ruins of the Central Aguirre in Salinas, *Raíces* enlists groups such as Los Pleneros de la 21 and Plena Libre alongside pop stars such as Marc Anthony, Olga Tañón, and La India to suggest that all forms of contemporary Puerto Rican music are in some way informed by *bomba* and *plena*.

The recent re-emergence of the *plena*, not only in the traditional or neo-traditional work of groups such as Los Pleneros de la 23 abajo, Plenéalo, Plenarium, and others, but also in the performances of Plena Libre in the world music sector and with the internationally known Latin jazz musician Eddie Palmieri, presents an entirely different trajectory than the elegy with which Flores begins his essay, bemoaning the death of Cortijo, Rivera, and, implicitly, the *plena* itself. The *plena* now seems to be ubiquitous, at least in the island, where it has shown up recently in everything from dance productions in the Centro de Bellas Artes by Ballets de San Juan to religious music by Plena Sacra. Plena Libre's *Más libre* (2000) was nominated for a Latin Grammy for Best Traditional Tropical Album alongside recordings by international superstars Celia Cruz and the Buena Vista Social Club, confirming the rhythm's popularity with a wide audience beyond Puerto Rican communities in the island and the U.S.<sup>26</sup> Besides the famous Festival de Bomba y Plena, groups of *pleneros* are regularly enlisted now to play at a wide range of neighborhood and civic events, holiday celebrations, and for the arrival of international cruise ship passengers to San Juan. The *plena* also shows up in concert halls: a 2002 concert of classical piano commemorating renowned Puerto Rican maestro Jesús María Sanromá included a lively rendition of Héctor Campos Parsi's "Plena Número 1: 'Santa María.'" All of these events and performances would seem to prove the overwhelming acceptance of the form as a multiracial, intergenerational, and cross-class phenomenon that also defies categorizations as "popular" or "high" art.

Still, the ambiguities of the *plena* as a form that defines Puerto Ricanness and at the same time is appropriated for and absorbed into a generalizing post-national "Latin" or "world" cultural matrix, demonstrate its increasingly complex role in discussions of "national"

identity. This absorption into what certain Puerto Rican critics have labelled "tropical multiculturalism" means that the *plena*'s acerbic nature, its historic ability to take political and social institutions to task, has to a large degree ceded to a market-driven celebration of *lo latino*. The *plena* still goes hand in hand with national pride, but not necessarily as a reactionary agent to cultural pressure from the United States, or as a critique of internal sources of social injustice. Unlike its status a quarter century, half century or century ago, the *plena* now functions, arguably, as an icon of *lo nuestro* for Puerto Ricans of all political persuasions, even those who favor statehood or another version of complete incorporation into the U.S. corpus. One still frequently hears the *plena* standard praising the beauty of the Puerto Rican flag,

Que bonita bandera  
 Que bonita bandera  
 Que bonita bandera  
 La bandera puertorriqueña

but such lyrics seemingly present little resistance to the other flag that flies over the island, its monuments, and its institutions.<sup>27</sup>

As Ramón López (2002) has noted, the lyrics and style of Los Pleneros de la 23 abajo, with which I began this essay, developed as a reaction to the overt commercialization of the *plena*, and represented a return to biting social commentary and a sound unconcerned with being "radio-friendly." The group, diverse in terms of both age and race, plays with as many as six or more *panderetas* as well as congas, guitars, and *güiros* to reproduce a "traditional" *plena* sound. In their focus on local conditions marked by police repression and other forms of social injustice, Los Pleneros de la 23 abajo return to the *plena* as a form of resistance within a political environment in which government institutions, whether internal or external, threaten the space of social commentary, the space in which members of the community retain interpretive and discursive power exercised in musical, textual, and dance forms. They insist in their "Plena del Solar" that this "national" rhythm, born and revived in the poorest and most marginal sectors of the island, can still provide a wealth of expressive riches for its players and listeners:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Eh, traigo la rica plena                 | [Hey, I'm bringing the <i>plena</i>                               |
| Nuestro ritmo nacional                   | Our national rhythm   |
| Y al son de las panderetas               | And to the sound of the <i>panderetas</i>                         |
| Te lo vamo' a interpretar, y dice así... | We're goin' to interpret it for you,<br>and it goes like this.... |
| Eh, nacida en los arrabales              | Hey, born in the slums  |
| Siempre retumbará                        | It will always reverberate  |
| Eh, nacida en los arrabales,             | Hey, born in the slums,   |
| Siempre retumbará.                       | It will always reverberate.]                                      |

Although the Pleneros de la 23 abajo may be upstaged by new "national" musics such as rap and *reggaetón*, and even by contemporary *pleneros* whose sound is engineered to fit the needs of a world music recording market rather than a street corner in Santurce, their engagement with the *ritmo nacional* demonstrates that *plena* and the *plenero* tradition are still alive, well, and actively engaged in revealing the complexity, richness, and enduring ambiguities of Puerto Rico's sonorous history.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In her foundational work, Cadilla de Martínez (1999 [1933]: 40) describes the *plena* as “otro bailable de difícil clasificación y oscuro origen. Tiene algo de la rumba cubana, pero indudablemente hay ritmos africanos en su música alborotadora. En ellas se cantan temas de la actualidad pero a veces les imprimen cierta modalidad caricaturesca...” [another danceable rhythm of difficult classification and obscure origins. It has something of the Cuban rumba, but there are undoubtedly African rhythms in its turbulent music].

<sup>2</sup> All translations, unless otherwise indicated in the bibliography, are the author’s.

<sup>3</sup> Ortiz (1996 [1955]: 118–9) discusses the *pandero* and *pandereta* in chapter 15 of *Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana*, but does not mention Puerto Rico. The instruments are distinguished from other forms of the drum because their width exceeds their height, and because they are lightweight and portable. The *pandereta* often has *sonajas* or small metal plates that add to percussive capability, making it a close relative, if not synonym, of the tambourine. Ortiz claims that the *pandero* and *pandereta* are not common instruments in Afro-Cuban music, although their use has been documented in Spain and Africa and even earlier in the Roman Empire. He suggests that at certain moments in history, the *pandero* or *pandereta* may have provided a suitable alternative when the authorities frowned on or repressed the use of larger, more obviously “African” drums (1996 [1955]: 120), a suggestion with important implications for the development of the *plena* in Puerto Rico. The few examples of the *pandero* Ortiz finds in Cuba are those used by certain *santeros* in rites associated with Eléggua, particularly in *santería lucumí*.

<sup>4</sup> The basic step of the *plena* is simple, as suggested in this lyric:

Yo te doy un pasito pá lante,            [I take one step towards the front  
tú me das pasito pa tras;                You take a step back  
eso es lo que a ti te gusta, mi negra...    That’s what you like, my black woman.]

<sup>5</sup> Frances Aparicio (1997: 32) analyses a version of these lyrics in her chapter “A Sensual Mulatta Called the *Plena*,” pointing out the *plena* can here be read as an allegory of Puerto Rican resistance in the face of the masculine hegemony of the United States, and that the symbol of that resistance is notably female.

<sup>6</sup> Flores’ more recent book *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* (2000) for the most part does not address the *plena* in its examination of the connections and continuum between *bomba* in the island and Puerto Rican hip-hop.

<sup>7</sup> A single endnote to Flores’ essay affirms that “the main source for information on early *plena* is the book by Félix Echevarría Alvarado, *La plena: origen, sentido y desarrollo en el folklore puertorriqueño* (Santurce: Express, 1984),” but perhaps because it is an “unassuming work,” Flores does not cite it directly in the text of the essay. He also notes that a 1988 essay by Jorge Pérez in *Anales*, “La bomba y la plena puertorriqueña: ¿Sincretismo racial o transformación histórico-musical?,” provides valuable historical and political analysis and questions assumptions underlying earlier work on the *plena* in “standard writings” such as María Luisa Muñoz’ *La música en Puerto Rico* and Héctor Campos Parsi’s *La gran enciclopedia de Puerto Rico: Música, vol. 7*. He also acknowledges a brief comment on the *plena* in José Luis González’ *Literatura y sociedad en Puerto Rico*, and the testimonial account of Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá’s *El entierro de Cortijo*. Flores notes that his essay was a sketch of a longer work that would accompany a film on *plena* produced by Pedro Ángel Rivera and Susan Zeig (1993: 233), *Plena canto y trabajo / Plena is work, plena is song*.

<sup>8</sup> López Cruz ties the name *plena* to the practice of playing and performing under a full moon: “El origen de esta forma musical autóctona ha sido tema de controversia.

La primera versión sobre los orígenes de la plena circuló hace unos treinta años y señala que a principios se cantaba y se bailaba al aire libre; en noches de luna, la tradicional actividad cobraba mayor esplendor. Se cantaba y se bailaba, pues, bajo una primorosa luna llena o luna plena. Con el tiempo, el adjetivo quedó como nombre de la forma musical y del baile: la luna plena, plena” (1967: 67). [The origin of this autochthonous form has been the topic of controversy. The first version concerning the origins of the *plena* circulated about thirty years ago, and notes that in the beginning it was sung and danced outside; on moonlit nights, the traditional activity took on more brilliance. People sang and danced under a lovely full moon or *luna plena*. With time, the adjective remained as the name of the musical and dance form: *la luna plena, plena*.] According to Augusto Coén, one of the few composers who studied the *plena*, “fue una noche, mientras un grupo se entregaba con placer al nuevo baile, el ritmo llegó a ser tan excitante que alguien, poseído de extraño frenesí, desde su inconsciente exclamó: ¡Plena! Desde entonces, todos siguieron llamando plena al nuevo baile” (López Cruz 1967: 67–8); [One night, while a group was enjoying the new dance, the rhythm became so lively that someone, possessed by a strange energy, from his unconscious exclaimed ‘Plena!’ From that moment on, all began calling the new dance *plena*.]

<sup>9</sup> While the *plena* is generally referred to as a “mulatto/a” form, in writing ranging from Blanco’s 1935 “Elogio de la Plena” to Aparicio’s (1997) more recent “A Sensual Mulatta Called the *Plena*,” the pictures Echevarría Alvarado (1984) includes of Carolina Mora Clark and other early figures of *plena* in his study demonstrate they were dark-skinned blacks. In compiling his account, the author notes that “Es en extremo difícil señalar con exactitud cuándo y dónde ocurrió la génesis de la plena puertorriqueña... se explica por el hecho de que la mayor parte de los acontecimientos que se fraguan en el ámbito de las zonas marginadas por nuestra sociedad, quedan envueltos en una especie de bruma que no facilitan el percibir con claridad cuando nos aventuramos a hurgar en el pasado” (1984: 74). [It’s extremely difficult to ascertain with exactitude when and where the Puerto Rican *plena* began... this is explained by the fact that the majority of the events that take place in the marginal zones of our society, remain shrouded in a kind of cloud that makes it difficult to perceive with any clarity when we attempt to delve into the past.] He concludes, “A la producción musical de la plena, siempre se le ha negado acceso a los anales de nuestra historia” porque “en su mayor parte es obra de iletrados desconocedores de técnicas, estilos y refinamientos” (1984: 147). [The musical production of the *plena* has always been denied access to the annals of our history, [because] it is in large part the work of uneducated practitioners unfamiliar with techniques, styles, and refinements.] In terms of *plena* as a mulatto form, Glasser writes that “toward the end of the century, for example, the *plena* developed among a lower-class, primarily *mulato* population on Puerto Rico’s southern coast, later spreading throughout the island with the workers from those communities” (1995: 21).

<sup>10</sup> Some music historians contend that a similar linguistic slippage accounts for the development of *forró* in Brazil, where English immigrants would hold country dances “for all”. For a variety of viewpoints on this controversial topic, see the discussion in Portuguese at <<http://www.cursodeforno.hpg.ig.com.br/forro.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> In Henry Louis Gates’ elaboration of the term as a parallel concept to white signifying, he usually presents it as “Signifyin(g)” to emphasize the predominantly oral nature of black signification. For a more lengthy discussion, see Gates (1988: 44–51).

<sup>12</sup> Aparicio comments that “to acclaim ‘Elogio’ as antiracist discourse is to ignore the racial and gender constructs underlying Puerto Rican cultural thought that permeate Blanco’s writings” (1997: 38). See her subsequent discussion (1997: 38–44), in which she characterizes Blanco’s position as one of ambivalence.

<sup>13</sup> The translation of *negros bozales* as “blacks fresh off the boat” indicates that the term was used to describe enslaved persons who arrived directly from Africa without having previous experience elsewhere in the Caribbean or the New World, but obfuscates the

connections of the term to voicelessness and suppression, since *bozal* also means muzzle. For colonial slave traders in the Spanish Caribbean, Africans were *bozales* and thus muzzled or inarticulate, if they did not speak Spanish.

<sup>14</sup> *Areito* is a Taíno word that appears (with a variety of spellings) in the work of the earliest Spanish chroniclers living in the Antilles, and refers to indigenous performances that included elements of music, dance, and poetry. Here, Blanco seems to be participating in a tendency, still very common, to accentuate “indigenous” elements of national culture while de-emphasizing African roots.

<sup>15</sup> “Mulatica de tez dorada como ron añejo; de pelo lacio y ojos pícaros que pueden pasar por andaluces; de parla castellana, un poco arcaica; y, de ágil paso sensitivo, como de bestezuela selvática.”

<sup>16</sup> Díaz Ayala (1998: 58) attributes the widespread interest in the *plena* during this period to the articles published by Augusto Coén in the journal *Alma Latina* between 1951 and 1955, which “despertaron el interés público en nuestro país por conocer más a fondo las raíces de este género autóctono” [awakened the public interest in our country in knowing more deeply the roots of this local form].

<sup>17</sup> A version of these same lines appears in Kalman Barsy’s short story “La leyenda del cemí” (The Legend of the Cemi) in the collection *Del nacimiento de la isla de Borikén* (1982: 9–19). The children’s story recounts how a piece of rock on the ocean floor wished it could reach the surface. In a certain moment, the rock starts to dance a “plenita,”

with the lyrics:

menéalo

menéalo

de aquí p’allá

de allá p’acá

menéalo

menéalo

que se te empelota (1982: 10 ff).

Through the movement of the dance of the *plena*, the rock rises to the surface and becomes the island of Puerto Rico. In Barsy’s story, not only is the *plena* born in Puerto Rico, but Puerto Rico is born of the *plena*.

<sup>18</sup> Mercedes López-Baralt provides interesting anecdotal information regarding the use of the term *agapito* in “Plena del menéalo”:

A principios de la década del cincuenta hubo en Puerto Rico un bar que se hizo famoso por la controversia que causó el anglicismo de su nombre. La polémica se musicalizó en la canción popular “Agapito’s Bar” que parodiaba la mezcla del español con el inglés [Oh boy, qué champion, atta boy qué colosal, es el Agapito’s special en el Agapito’s bar...]. El contexto de la polémica fue claramente político. Luis Muñoz Marín, el gobernador, se quejó al dueño del bar por su nombre híbrido. Hacía poco que el Comisionado de Educación, Mariano Villaronga, había hecho del español el idioma oficial de la enseñanza pública en el país, en franco desafío a la Ley Foraker, que desde 1900 decretó que fuera el inglés el idioma oficial para la educación y el gobierno de Puerto Rico. El problema de la lengua en el país—en el fondo, el problema de la nacionalidad—se debatió álgidamente en la prensa local a raíz del incidente de Agapito’s Bar, que fue tema de un discurso político de Muñoz Marín (Palés Matos 1995, 616–7, footnote 342).

[At the beginning of the ‘50s, there was a bar in Puerto Rico that became famous for the controversy caused by the Anglicization of its name. The polemic was musicalized in the popular song “Agapito’s Bar,” which parodied the mix of Spanish and English (“Oh boy, qué champion, atta boy qué colosal, es el Agapito’s special en el Agapito’s bar...”). The context of the polemic was clearly political. Luis Muñoz Marín, the governor, complained to the bar’s owner about the hybrid name. Only recently the

Commissioner of Education, Mariano Villaronga, had made Spanish the official language of public instruction in the country, a frank challenge to the Foraker Law, which since 1900 had decreed the English was the official language of education and government in Puerto Rico. The language problem in the country—at base, a problem of nationality—was hotly debated in the local press following the Agapito’s Bar incident, which was the topic of a political speech by Muñoz Marín.]

<sup>19</sup> “Hay que evitar que se contamine con esa chusma que comienza a invadir los círculos sociales.” The wife also confesses to her Washington, D.C. neighbor, “Salí de Puerto Rico porque allí no existe una división clara y se corre el riesgo de mezclar las sangres” (Arriví 1971: 115) [I left Puerto Rico because there is no clear division there and one runs the risk of mixing blood].

<sup>20</sup> As Díaz-Quñones notes in *El arte de bregar* (2000), Homar was the most “literary” of Puerto Rico’s graphic artists, having provided memorable illustrations for editions of poetry, narratives, and essays by noted authors including Eugenio María de Hostos, Luis Lloréns Torres, Palés Matos, Ramón Emeterio Betances, and Pedro Juan Soto.

<sup>21</sup> Both writers have focused on salsa in these negotiations. See Aparicio (1997) and Quintero Rivera (1998).

<sup>22</sup> Homar explains this process in the catalogue for the exhibit *El portafolios en la gráfica puertorriqueña*, held at the Museo de las Américas from November 12, 1995 to March 31, 1996. The catalogue features an excellent introductory essay by Teresa Tío (1995) titled “El Portafolios Gráfico o la Hoja Liberada.”

<sup>23</sup> In *La raza cómica*, Rubén Ríos Ávila writes, “La plena es un *joy ride*, una trillita, una oportunidad para la diversión, que es una poética de la digresión. Acaso haya en la música un modo del gozo que nos defienda del goce.” (2002: 87). [The *plena* is a joyride, a bit of a fun-drive, the chance for diversion turned art of digression. There might very well be in music a mode of enjoyment that keeps the perils of jouissance at bay]. Many thanks to Rubén for providing a finely nuanced translation and a fascinating discussion of his understanding of *plena* in the context of Rodríguez Juliá’s text. In that text, Ríos Ávila notes, the narrator expresses himself with a mix of admiration, respect, fear, and perhaps some measure of horror and abjection. The *plena* and the popular function as a symptom of otherness, that, as something “outside” the intellectual horizon, ironically comes to constitute the writerly subjectivity of the narrator. In this vein, Ríos Ávila sees a vital relationship between the *plena* and the poetry of Palés Matos, especially in his poem “El secreto de la danza” (The secret of the dance), in which art is presented as a way of conjuring or controlling the excesses of pleasure, of redirecting urban energy towards an enjoyment not merely physical but also metaphysical.

<sup>24</sup> “Aquellos pardos, negros libres y esclavos de Cangrejos que tan heroicamente lucharon contra los ingleses en el 1797, dejaron sus apellidos regados por estos solares, desde Piñones hasta Loíza, desde Sunoco hasta la notoria Revuelta del Diablo. Los Falú, los Cepeda, los Cortijo, los Verdejo sí que son los puertorriqueños más antiguos, su tradición se remonta hasta los albores mismos de aquella antillanía puertorriqueña forjada por el contrabando y la pirataría, la esclavitud y la codicia de los imperios europeos” (Rodríguez Juliá 1983: 61–2). [Those mulattoes, free blacks, and slaves of Cangrejos who so heroically fought against the English in 1797, left their legacy planted in homes from Piñones to Loíza, from Sunoco to the notorious Revuelta del Diablo. The Falús, the Cepedas, the Cortijos, and the Verdejos are the oldest Puerto Ricans, and their tradition goes back to the dawn of that Puerto Rican Antillian identity forged in contraband and piracy, slavery, and the greed of the European empires.]

<sup>25</sup> Díaz Ayala (1998: 182–3) provides an interesting overview of key political moments in *plena* musical history.

<sup>26</sup> This was the first time that a *plena* recording had received this type of nomination, according to Plena Libre’s leader Gary Núñez. As a result of the nomination, the group signed a new recording contract with LatinWorld Entertainment Group, hoping to broaden their

distribution throughout Latin America. “Queremos que se conozca en esos países hermanos la música nuestra,” Núñez told reporters for *El Nuevo Día* (Viernes, 6 de diciembre de 2002, entretenimiento p. 3). (We want our music to become known in our brother countries.)<sup>27</sup> The seemingly felicitous coexistence of both flags in the Puerto Rican political imaginary was also evident in the 2002 license plates, which commemorate 50 years’ status as a commonwealth, with the U.S. flag on one side, and the *monoestrellada* on the other.

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