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Sounding Out a Rhetoric of Resilience: Curating Plena in Diasporican Activism

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Abstract

The following piece is a creative-critical, multimodal curation of scenes wherein plena sounds out a rhetoric of Puerto Rican resilience and DiaspoRican activism. Often described as the newspapers of the people, or sung newspapers, plena songs provide narratives of Puerto Rican life, struggle, and resistance. Curating plena's progression throughout the last century, including its role in DiaspoRican activism, and up to the 2019 summer protests in Puerto Rico, I demonstrate how plena sounds out a rhetoric of resilience. As a multimodal pedagogical contribution, this piece demonstrates the significance of sonic experiences that attend to geopolitical location and identity, while historicizing Puerto Rican cultural rhetorics and activism.

Introduction

The following piece is a creative-critical, multimodal curation of scenes wherein plena sounds out a rhetoric of Puerto Rican resilience and DiaspoRican activism. Often described as the newspapers of the people or sung newspapers, plena songs provide narratives of Puerto Rican life, struggle, and resistance. Plena is a percussion-driven, call and response, musical genre that typically includes different sized handheld drums called *panderos*, each of which serve a distinct function: the *seguidor* plays a pattern that doesn't change; the *punteador* is tuned a little sharper but follows a similar beat and rhythm; and the *requinto*, which improvises on the rhythmic base ([Smithsonian](#)). The requinto player often serves as lead singer, and the former sing out the chorus (which is typically a repetition of the line that starts the song off). Other instruments often used are the *guiro* (attributed to Taíno Indigenous heritage), guitars (including the Puerto Rican *cuatro*) and an accordion, among others depending on the context. The historical formation of plena is often theorized in relation to its Afro-diasporic roots, and work life in the turn of the twentieth century (Guerrero, 2003; Rivera, 2013; Miller, 2004), as well as a "defiant response" to U.S. American colonialism, a "prominent factor in Puerto Rican politics and

society at the time” (Nagashima, Bellury, and Johnson, 2017). Curating plena’s progression throughout the last century, including its role in DiaspoRican activism, and up to the 2019 summer protests in Puerto Rico, I demonstrate how plena sounds out a rhetoric of resilience. As a multimodal pedagogical contribution, this piece demonstrates the significance of sonic experiences that attend to geopolitical location and identity, while historicizing Puerto Rican cultural rhetorics and activism.

Curatorial/Artist Statement

What Puerto Ricans have called life post-Maria refers to the ways in which we experience the everyday after having survived the climate disaster that was hurricane Maria, which in late September of 2017 ravaged the archipelago and traumatized Puerto Ricans living in the diaspora: waiting to hear from their loved ones, and their loved places. Most of us were anxiously waiting for the phone to ring to find out how our parents, grandparent, extended families and friends had fared. Glued to televisions and computer screens, or simply listening to the radio in the hopes of getting any news, many of us channeled climate anxiety through activism (Soto Vega, 2017), which itself looked and sounded differently based on socio-economic, political, or geographic location. Some of us organized donation-drives and fundraisers to send to the archipelago. As illustrated in “A Message from the Future” published in [The Intercept](#), New York Congresswoman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez admits that she used the post-Maria moment as a catalyst for her Green New Deal proposition: referring to the catastrophe as the result of climate change, itself caused by fossil fuel dependency (Klein, 2019). Folks living in the territory, however, were focused on finding ways to make every day more bearable, given the fact that there was no water or electricity for months (and for some, even years). Finally, NPR’s All Things Considered highlighted one way in which Puerto Ricans were appeasing climate anxiety and life with no electricity: they played plena. Hence, plena music expresses **The Need for Resilience**.

In a way, the post-María moment made me more attuned to the ways in which plena embodies resilience, and what resilience rhetoric means for Puerto Ricans, historically and today. Puerto Rican musicians playing plena in the aftermath of hurricane Maria explicitly told NPR journalist Mandalit Del Barco (2017) that like plena, Puerto Rican people ARE resilient. On the other hand, Puerto Rican scholars like Yarimar Bonilla (2019) express

exhaustion, consistently having to rely on resilience because of corruption and systematic oppression by governmental bodies in both local and federal levels. Of course, rhetoricians have also taken up the study of resilience, where the concept “evokes the material world and the politics that shape it” (Walker and Cagle, 2019, p.2). Without dwelling too much on the complexities of resilience rhetorics and Puerto Rico’s colonial status, I find it is worth mentioning that plena’s invocation in discourses regarding recovery efforts must acknowledge such historical, cultural, and political intertwining. While curating scenes of plena sounding out a rhetoric of resilience, I highlight the genre’s multifaceted rhetoricity.

A seemingly dying genre in mainstream sonic cultures, the Puerto Rican plena sounds out most loudly during the winter holidays, a practice that has carried over to Puerto Rican diasporas. As Miller (2004) points out, “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” (p.44). **Cruzando el Charco**, or crossing the “pond” of the Atlantic Ocean, plena fosters a kind of nostalgia for a Puerto Rican past that is most closely tied to cultural nationalism and celebrations of that identity. It also tends to take shape as an emblematic genre of the Puerto Rican *jíbaro*—a folkloric figure of mainly male Puerto Rican peasants working the fields under successive regimes, whether coffee or sugar, for Spain or the United States—plena is the musical genre that generated stories that were passed on from town to town, from generation to generation, including diasporic populations. And yet, “identity politics of origins, racial identity, and national character are played (out) by musicians, writers, and artists” (Miller, 2004, p.38) who associate plena with the peoples involved in the historical development of the genre: Black, Indigenous, and European descended *jíbaros*.

Historicizing La Plena, and its representations in educational documentaries produced in 1954 (*La Plena*) and 2001 (*Raíces*), illustrates how Afro-diasporic genres like plena, and its related predecessor, *bomba*, were developed by enslaved peoples sounding out stories of life and work situated in the Caribbean. Beyond work, plena sounds out stories of survival. Many of the stories told through plena involve tragic events, such as the death of a woman called Elena, or the passing of a hurricane, ironically called *temporal* in Puerto Rican Spanish. However, these stories cannot be separated from Puerto Rico’s (and arguably the Caribbean’s) context of coloniality; such is the case of the song “Tintorera del Mar” and

its references to the death of a U.S. American lawyer who got killed by a female shark. For most Puerto Ricans, then, the sound of the *pandero* signifies survivance (Powell, 2002), reminiscent of Gerald Vizenor's concept for survival and resistance in Native American communities. In its explicitly communal and narrative form, it could also be compared to the Mexican *corrido* (García, 2018). However, in the examples highlighted in this curation, I aim to emphasize how plena has also meant defiance in Puerto Rican communities against multiple forms of colonialism.

Notes on Positionality

To curate plena as a DiaspoRican *blanquita*, or white-passing Puerto Rican woman, means that I should acknowledge the potential problematic of my positionality being read as speaking for ALL kinds of Ricans. There is certainly a problematic myth of Puerto Ricans as encompassing one race—which I and many others have questioned in the past (Lugo-Lugo; Rodriguez Silva; Soto Vega and Chávez). At the same time, there are powerful convictions and questions from the majority of U.S. Americans about Puerto Ricans as not belonging to, or even being a part of the political composition of the U.S. nation-state, solely based on ethnic and racial composition. This piece, then, aims to address issues of racism within Puerto Rico (explicitly articulated by singer Ruth Fernández in **Plena as Protest**), as well as the ways in which the genre is used in moments of activism that celebrate and facilitate survivance, and in which it is most explicitly used as a counter to U.S. empire and its role in further oppressing one of its own territories, especially in light of climate chaos.

As a Puerto Rican woman, I aim to highlight how contemporary groups of *pleneras* (women playing plena) defy patriarchal tendencies in plena, where women are often referred to as objects and/or where women solely dance ([Reichard](#), 2019; [Díaz Torres](#), 2019). Groups like Plena Combativa provide critical gender and queer perspectives to their songs. Most importantly for my purposes here, they bring their songs to protests. While plena music has been used as protest in the past—for example, in the University of Puerto Rico student protests of 2010 (Everhart, 2012, p. 213-4), 2019 saw a rise in women activists using plena for political purposes.

The summer of 2019 also represented a moment in which multiple factions of the Puerto Rican community came together to demand the then-governor (Ricardo “Ricky” Roselló) to resign, after the leak of a damning

900-page document of sexist, homophobic, and ableist chat messages between him and his closest friends, who were also part of his administration, demonstrated the disregard he and his administration has had for his constituents. Being there that summer allowed me to witness the multiple ways in which plena was used as protest. But having been in Washington, DC in November of 2017 also allowed me to witness how plena has been used as protest even in the diaspora, as we demanded the U.S. government attend to Puerto Ricans who had been affected by the climate catastrophe that was hurricane Maria. Therefore, this piece crosses temporal and geographic points of Puerto Rican experiences.

On Reading, or Interfacing

Offering a variety of options to interface with my curation of plena in diasporic activism, I hope to provide an instantiation of the multiple ways in which one could encounter plena. To emphasize location, the webtext starts with a Google Map that has geotags with links to the videos I have curated. Distinguishing the locations and layers of sounding out plena across oceanic borderspaces—a concept I adapt from Judy Rohrer (2010), I chronicle a DiaspoRican experience that is situated in political moments of socio-political unrest and protest, from the historical exigency in which plena originates, to the current moment wherein Puerto Ricans recover from an economic crisis exacerbated by the massive destruction of hurricane Maria in 2017, and the Puerto Rican insurgency in the summer of 2019. Just like plena, DiaspoRican activism is historically grounded and situated in and against colonial power, both of which are amplified in this piece, and potentially in its circulation.

For those who prefer a guided instruction for interaction, I have offered a somewhat linear iteration of the curated videos, with a transcript in the language featured in the video (English, Spanish, and Spanglish) or in English translations. In either option, I aim to emphasize glocal configurations of plena. Arturo Escobar defines glocalities as “cultural and spatial configurations that connect places with each other...place-based struggles reorganize space through networks, and they do so according to different parameters and concerns” (2001, p. 166). In other words, it is difficult to neatly distinguish places and time from (the need for) protest, as they continually repeat themselves in coloniality; or, rather, coloniality follows people regardless of their places. Plena, then, is a node of sound

that creates a socio-political space for modalities of survivance. Language choice is part of that modality.

After each video I provide a statement explaining the content and context for each video, signifying some of the intentionality behind my curation. The videos themselves, however, remain pretty intact, with minimum interpretive signposts. The inspiration for such an approach is based on an exhibit at the Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston in the summer of 2019, celebrating 50 years of the Stonewall Riots. A video installation in the exhibit featured contemporary drag queens dressed as iconic activists of the time, such as Sylvia Rivera, as sound from their riveting speeches played in the background. There was little context for each of the speeches, or any kind of reference to another source: instead, the viewer/listener was immersed into the artistic performance and all its symbolic layers. And yet, aware of the dearth of knowledge regarding Puerto Rico's status as a colonial territory of the United States, I find it necessary to provide some context for my video, sound, and image choices. [This curation](#), therefore, offers a cultural rhetoric about Puerto Rican activism through music, one enveloped in history and contestations of political identity.

As people interface the map, videos, and text, there are a series of potential questions that could guide such interactions:

- What makes plena music a distinct rhetorical tool?
- What is the relationship between resistance and resilience?
- In what ways does the curation counter dominant narratives of Puerto Rico?
- How can centering Puerto Rico change our understanding of protest and imperialism?
- How does plena change as it moves across space? How does the spread of plena change these spaces?

Although these questions are not explicitly answered throughout the webtext, they may provide fodder for discussion about it in our classrooms and elsewhere. Of course, these are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive, but to open up a dialogue about the implications of this creative-critical curation, and potentially inspire people to continue building on the digital archive of plena and protest across oceanic borderspaces.

Video Blurbs:

Climate Chaos and The Need for Resilience

The first video in the series “Sounding Out a Rhetoric of Resilience” aims to explain the motivation for this curation. Noticing that Puerto Rico was consistently described as resilient, given their ability to survive the catastrophic results of hurricane María, and the (mis)management of both local and federal governments, I started collecting texts that make reference to such resilience. In the process, plena was referenced as a musical genre that embodied resilience, and which was used to create community, but also to sound out resistance to the people (ir)responsible for the well-being of the territory and its peoples.

Narratives about Puerto Rico’s destruction as a prime example of the impending doom of climate chaos have been used in political efforts to shift energy consumption to a *green new deal*. New York Congresswoman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined efforts with Naomi Klein, *The Intercept*, and illustrator Molly Crabapple, to explain the impetus and future-oriented vision of the Green New Deal, and awareness about environmental (in)justice. In relation to the use of sound as part of activism regarding climate change, Mary Hocks and Michelle Comstock write, sound “is rarely considered a rhetorical resource for communicating the ongoing effects of climate change on human and nonhuman animals and ecosystems” (165). So, besides illustrations, and video, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez narrates the way in which the destruction of Puerto Rico, “the place where [her] family’s from.” She goes on to say that it was “like a climate bomb, that took as many American lives as 9/11” and connects it with all the lives that will eventually get lost if we don’t change the way we live.

Besides political figures’ use of sound to counter climate change, plena has been used by musicians and activists who survived the impact of hurricane María in Puerto Rico. In a story by Mandalit del Barco for NPR, she interviews a few of those musicians who were heard in the streets of Santurce, specifically Calle Loíza. Juxtaposing screenshots of the NPR piece with images of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo from Ponce—the town attributed as the birthplace of plena, a small coquí referenced as the only sounds heard in the dark night after the passing of hurricane María, and an image of a graffiti from Old San Juan, which illustrates the figure of

the obese government officials feeding off money made from Puerto Ricans. The audio from the piece showcases how plena represents singing newspapers, telling the story of Puerto Rican resilience. The singers are featured saying how it is important to educate the people of Puerto Rico, especially the youth, about the impact of climate change, and the importance to take care of “Mother Earth,” as well as the importance of uplifting the people to continue fighting to live, “with or without f*cking Trump.” Their plena songs aim to continue telling the stories of the might of Puerto Rican survival.

Historicizing Plena

The second video in this series opens with the sound of the coquí, once again as emblematic of the sounds heard in Puerto Rico. It shifts to an image taken at an exhibition at Chicago’s National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, featuring the poster for *La Plena*, a documentary made in 1957 by the then-recently established División de Educación Comunitaria. DIVEDCO was part of the Luis Muñoz Marín administration’s efforts to preserve Puerto Rican culture. Five years prior to the release of this movie, Muñoz Marín had won a vote to establish the Free Associated State political status for Puerto Rico. A big part of his platform was based on addressing and advocating for the *jíbaro*, a racial, gender, and social class that seemed to encompass the mass of Puerto Rican voters. The *jíbaro* works the sugar cane fields owned by U.S. American corporate interests. These sounds and people meet in the southwestern coastal town of Ponce.

After the opening credits, and the emphasis on the hands playing the *pandero*, the classic documentary film opens with aerial images of Ponce, and images of the city, with people walking about. As the viewer follows a horse and buggy ride through the streets, the narrator explains how it was there where the Afro-Antillean musical expression of plena was popularized. The narrator goes on to describe plena:

“Satírica, juguetona, irónica en su contenido, aprovechándose, como el romance español, lo circunstancial del momento para comentar... como esa cosa tremenda como que esa vengadora tintorera se tragase al abogado americano de la Guánica central.”

“Satirical, playful, ironic in its content, taking advantage, like the Spanish romance, of the circumstantial of the moment to comment... like that great thing like when a vengeful female shark swallowed an American lawyer in central Guánica.”

The visuals feature people sharing the newspapers with the headline about the shark that ate the U.S. American lawyer in the nearby town of Guánica. It is worth mentioning that Guánica shores are often referred to as the place wherein General Nelson Miles and his U.S. troops occupied Puerto Rico in 1898. The film goes on to show images of a train, symbolizing how the news travelled all over Puerto Rico, and like newspapers, *plenas* telling the story would travel all around Puerto Rico as well. The depiction of the composition process of the plena song “*Tintorera del mar*” demonstrates how the call and response genre was led by one singer—the same man featured in the poster—who would write down verses based on the newspaper report, and how the rest of the musicians would sing the chorus whenever prompted. Closing the video with an image of the lyrics of that song in another graffiti panel on Old San Juan walls—images taken in December of 2018—demonstrates that the song travelled geographically, and temporally. It remains that the “*tintorera del mar se ha comido un Americano*” is a celebration of nonhuman animals combatting US imperialism. Of course, this can be opened up to different interpretations and implications.

Cruzando el charco: Plena crossing the pond

Continuing the pedagogical approach in documenting historical developments of plena, the third video of the series highlights how plena *cruzó el charco*—how it crossed the pond into the contiguous U.S., just like most of its population engaged in mass migrations throughout the twentieth century. “*Cruzando el charco*” is a popular expression meant to signal the move from the Caribbean Sea, over the Atlantic Ocean, into another set of islands, mainly New York City. The opening clip is from *Raíces*, a 2001 documentary film sponsored by Banco Popular in Puerto Rico. Focusing on the African diasporic roots that *bomba* and *plena* signify for Puerto Ricans, the producers made sure to include the impact of these genres for DiaspoRicans—or Ricans in the diaspora: “Water appears thus as a political relational space, not as a form of hegemonic insularity. In turn, *Raíces* alters the meaning of the tree and its thick foliage to open itself to

other imaginaries, the ones related to errantry, exile and Afro-diasporas” (Arroyo 214).

Los Instantáneos, a group of plena musicians breaks out in song about the nostalgia they feel for Puerto Rico. The setting is Rincón Criollo, which translates to Creole Corner. Commentators interrupt the song to explain that the place was started by José “Chema” Soto, which he characterizes as a place that was a hole of approximately fifteen feet, which he turned into a little house that resembles the place where he was born, “la casita de [su] abuela”—his grandmother’s little house. Other commentators, like the late theorist Juan Flores, explain how this was a place that they occupied and cultivated, with symbolic instruments resembling historic and geographic Puerto Rican nostalgia. Before breaking into song again, Chema is featured saying, “tan cerca, como estar tan lejos,” or so close yet so far. The next song makes reference, once again, to being a jibarito, like the coquí, who sings at night and sleeps during the day. The scene closes with Chema playing the güiro and whistling sounds of the coquí. Miguel “Mickey” Sierra then says that this is the link between Puerto Rico and New York.

The next clip means to signify how plena sounds all over the U.S., with an example from Houston, Texas. The dance group of women who call themselves Hijas de Borikén (Daughters of Borikén) have danced in functions throughout Texas since 2016. In their Vimeo profile they characterize themselves as 9 women from the Puerto Rican diaspora, “*con grandes deseos de fomentar nuestra música y cultura en la ciudad de Houston,*” and based on their social media content, it’s safe to say that they have fomented Puerto Rican music and culture beyond Houston. This particular video showcases an ensemble of Puerto Rican musicians playing plena in the form of parranda—music typically heard during the Christmas holidays, where a group of people go from house to house and play music with the understanding that they will be fed and provided drinks. In other words, this is Puerto Rican party music. In the context of Houston, this song similarly asserts that there are Puerto Rican traditions that are taken with our bodies wherever we go. One of the lines is “Te cantamos desde aquí, te cantamos donde quiera. Represento a Puerto Rico, y te traigo mi bandera” or “We sing from here, we sing from anywhere. I represent Puerto Rico, and I bring forth my flag.”

Besides cultural nationalism, plena is used in advocacy in the diaspora. The last clip in this set is a video from a protest I participated in as part of a “Unity for Puerto Rico” rally in Washington, DC, on November of 2019.

Plena is Protest

The crux of the argument of this scene is that plena facilitates moments of activism. This argument could be conceived in relation to the *pandero* as an agent of Puerto Rican activism—which can surely be read as a new materialist perspective but that would miss an important humanist perspective. The human bodies entangled with the pandero to make percussion sounds rhythmically cannot be ignored in this assemblage. More importantly, I hope it is evident that the histories that bring together these human and nonhuman agents is of utmost importance, if the full potential for plena music as activism is to be considered as effective.

Beyond a rhetorical form that aims to recover traditional cultural identity, as Greg Clark argues was the case for Hawaiian music, plena has, from the start, been a genre signifying resistance. To emphasize the significance of plena’s roots, and its racialized foundation, the video starts with a clip from the documentary film *Raíces*. Even in the shifts of this rhetorical form/genre from the streets to ballrooms [and back to the streets again, as illustrated later in the video] performers contend with the racist histories that led to its formation, as well as the ways in which the form is used to signal and counter such racism. Ruth Fernández, a renowned Afro-Puerto Rican singer, tells the story of her performance at the San Juan Normandie Hotel in the 1950s, where there was an understanding that Black performers should not come in through the front entrance. Being told this, she responded with, “Por negra? Negra y qué?” or “Because I’m black? Black, and so what?” She then goes on to tell the viewers about the ways in which she prepared to make her way into the hotel using the front entrance. The scene then shifts to a ballroom performance of “Y tu abuela, dónde está?” a well-known song based on a poem that references how some creole subjects in the Hispanophone Caribbean would hide their Black grandmothers in the attic, or hide blackness in order to participate in what can be called white ascendancy (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, 2013). The lyrics of the song, and her picaresque performance demonstrate the contention of resisting exclusion based on a supposed denial of race/racism that is still pervasive in Puerto Rico.

Against state violence, patriarchal abuse of women, trans, and immigrants is how Plena Combativa open their performance at the Claridad Festival in 2018. This group of women are openly queer, feminist, and pro-independence advocates in Puerto Rico. They have performed “Libre y Peligrosa” in different settings, and the video aims to show this, ending with their smaller performance at one of the many rallies organized by the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción—a feminist organization that has been pushing the government to address gendered violence since 2016. The last clip showcases the setting for the protest: the steps in front of the governor’s mansion. This has also been the context of many other protests, such as those by the Federación de Maestros, or the Teachers Union of Puerto Rico, who have been highly affected by austerity measures imposed in the last decade. Tired of the corruption from the Puerto Rican government, there were massive protests calling for then-governor Ricardo “Ricky” Roselló to resign in the summer of 2019. The last few clips showcase videos taken as I participated in these protests.

CODA: Plena continues to sound out a rhetoric of resilience.

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