

OFER GAZIT 

Plena Afterlives: Puerto Rican Music in the Wake of Irma and Maria

Introduction

3 September 2018, almost a year since the hurricanes. We are sitting in Pedro's parents living room in Bayamón. Joyce, Pedro's mom, is serving us coffee and carambola from her garden. They're fine now, she says, chasing after her little dog through the small, souvenir-packed apartment. They had no electricity for six months, but they were lucky. They used the car battery to charge their phones until there was no more fuel, and then they just waited. Her mom, Pedro's grandma, could not make it that long without electricity. She had passed earlier in the spring. "The nature," Pedro's father says, "that's the worst. It used to be so green. Now it's all brown. It will never recover, not in twenty years, not in our lifetime."

That evening, we stopped by La Terraza de Bonanza, an outdoor bar (chinchorro) with live music on Avenida Conde in San Juan. The place was already packed when we arrived. A mix of local residents and their relatives visiting from the diaspora crowded the small space between the bar and the tin-roofed stage, spilling over to the street, where cars were slowing down to pass. On the stage, a plena group led by a young singer, Leró Martínez Roldán, was playing. Surrounded by a dozen drummers-singers, Roldán held on to the

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rhythm on the güícharo, intoning lines of poetry as the chorus repeats the refrain—"¡Abuela, abuela, vente conmigo a bailar la plena!" (Grandma, Grandma, come with me to dance the plena!) Standing in the back, playing a small requinto drum was the composer of the song, Rafael Concepción Collazo, improvising loudly above the group, while making sure it all held together. In front of the stage, a crowd began to form rows, balancing their drinks as they began to synchronize, moving from left to right, shaking their shoulders as they bow forward, turning around, greening, to face the stage. I turned to my friend Carola, dancing next to me, "How's it possible? That despite everything, people are so happy?" "The people need to party," she said. "They need to feel that there's a future here."

I have seen similar scenes of collective singing, drumming, and dancing again and again over the last seven years since I've started working in Puerto Rico. With remarkable insistence—and amidst hurricanes, earthquakes, a pandemic, mass displacement, infrastructure failure, and political and economic disenfranchisement—musicians and their publics return week after week to the same venues to enact life. I'd like to use this paper to understand the source of this power—to examine the ways in which plena—an Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance practice—is used to contend with environmental and political disasters resulting from the 2016 federal austerity measures and the 2017 hurricanes Irma and María. Music scholars have long highlighted music's potential for coping with the traumatic experiences of environmental disaster (Kartomi; Kaneko), with some emphasis on the politics of government response (Macy; Sakakeeny) and international aid (Balaji; McAlister; Dirksen). While these studies emphasize affective and political responses to sudden catastrophe, in the last two decades, anthropologists and critical theorists have increasingly highlighted the temporal dimensions of environmental disaster. Scholars such as Rob Nixon, Yarimar Bonilla, Greg Beckett, and Christina Sharpe have argued that temporalities of environmental disaster are tightly linked to structural, anti-Black and anti-Latine violence in the aftermath of slavery, what Sharpe has termed "the wake." Placing Sharpe's work in dialogue with current scholarly formulations of the various temporalities of disaster in the wake of Caribbean slavery and under colonialism, I draw on fieldwork conducted with plena musicians in 2018, 2020, 2023, and 2025 to highlight how plena performances serve to mediate the long-term concerns of local residents and the temporal regimes imposed on them by US coloniality, federal austerity measures, and increasing

environmental instability. To do so, I analyze the revival of improvised plena drumming and poetry in metropolitan San Juan as a form of political resistance to post-hurricane privatization, land extraction, and cultural co-optation, arguing that these recurring performances enact affective sovereignty through life- and future-sustaining temporal practices. In this sense, plena's resistive power is not only participatory, combining individuals into an affective political collective, but anticipatory—imagining and projecting historical continuity into the future.

I begin the article with a discussion of recent theorizations of the temporal dimensions of environmental disaster and their relationship to tax colonialism and neoliberal austerity in Puerto Rico in the wake of hurricanes Irma and María, framing these processes as forms of anti-Black and anti-Latine structural violence. I will then discuss the role of plena in forming temporal collectives in Puerto Rico, particularly through a call and response of daily events between singer and chorus, and between plena groups and their public. Building upon this, I will share three ethnographic moments that illustrate how plena performers and publics entrain with each other and against these colonial temporal regimes. Ultimately, I suggest that understanding plena as an embodied, temporal practice can contribute to island studies by highlighting how temporal perspectives can indicate widely unequal political and economic power positions among residents, investors, tourists, and politicians.

Lives and Times in Environmental Disaster

Over the last two decades, theorizations of temporality in relation to colonial histories and racialized structures of violence have added new layers to our understanding of the climate crisis. A key node in this trajectory is Rob Nixon's discussion of the racial and economic dimensions of slowly unfolding environmental catastrophe, pointing out that this violence overwhelmingly impacts Black and Indigenous communities. As anthropologist Greg Beckett argued in relation to Haiti, there's a growing consensus that disasters are not merely the result of natural hazards but emerge from the interplay of social vulnerability and structural contradictions, making them a feature rather than a failure of the systems in which they occur (Beckett). In his work, Beckett considers what it means "to keep going, to keep working, struggling, protesting—to keep living" under such circumstances (80). His emphasis on continuity is key to thinking about the temporal dimensions of living an environmental crisis. Recently, Bonilla has analyzed the experience of

waiting, and the notion of the “temporary,” (including, for example, temporary shelters, temporary infrastructure, or temporary relocation) as key to understanding affected persons’ experiences of ongoing and post-disaster contexts (Bonilla and LeBrón; Bonilla). Describing what she calls “temporalities of disaster” in the aftermath of hurricanes Irma and María, Bonilla argues that disasters “impact our experience of time, progression, social action, and political possibility” (2). She describes the period of disaster aftermath as “the wait of disaster.” When such disastrous conditions persist, the experience becomes that of temporal suspension brought on by social inequality, where some are able to “move on” while others remain in limbo. Bonilla thus connects the wait of climate disaster to the temporalities of colonialism and to the roots of Caribbean economic inequality itself.

Subsequently, scholars have highlighted the politics embedded in the temporal dimensions of bureaucratic emergency response where the intersections of race and socio-economic status have marked a highly divergent experience of recovery (Anderson et al.; Boyer and Vardy). Anderson, for example, develops the notion of “slow emergency” to highlight how emergency claims arise from—and help sustain—a racially uneven experience of time. The (white) liberal subject is imagined as moving toward a future of growth, progress, and transformation, while racialized subjects are positioned within ongoing, stagnant temporalities marked by decline, decay, and the cyclical repetition of violence (Anderson et al. 623). In her work in Las Carolinas, Puerto Rico, Sarah Molinari highlights the temporal dimensions of collective recovery following the destruction wrought by Hurricane María. Molinari notes that in order to draw attention to ongoing government neglect, “residents made a monthly ritual out of acknowledging the debris’s ‘birthday’ and decorating the piles lining the streets with Christmas ornaments” (288). In Puerto Rico, the privatization of basic services such as electricity, water, and healthcare means that the duration of crises is disproportionately longer for those with lesser economic means.

Thus, several simultaneous temporalities exist in the wake of disaster: The pace of soil, air, and water pollution, the seasonal passage of heatwaves and droughts, the temporal ruptures of hurricane and floods, the unequal wait for basic services and infrastructure repair in the aftermath of disaster, the deadlines and processing periods of state bureaucracy. This aligns with Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s suggestion that the Caribbean archipelago is “a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar” (11). As these writers note, these

regimes of temporal and territorial capture hark back to the plantation colony, presenting their own historical and temporal continuity and rapture.

To understand the tension between the trauma of the singular event and the nonlinearity of Caribbean temporalities, it is useful to turn to contemporary Black Studies. In her 2016 book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, literary scholar Sharpe theorizes Black life and death as lived in the aftermath of slavery, within ongoing systems of violence, loss, and precarity. Like Bonilla, Sharpe writes about the enduring effects of slavery and coloniality on Afro-diasporic, unequal, US citizens. Sharpe argues that part of what makes this violence systemic is its recursiveness, its rhythm of “deathly repetition” (2). For Sharpe, the various meanings of “the wake”—the trail left by a ship, a memorial service for the dead, a state of consciousness—are powerfully intertwined in contending with diasporic Black living and dying. In her chapter “The Weather,” Sharpe draws parallels between the impact of extreme weather—the drowning of two young children during Hurricane Sandy in 2012—and the societal conditions that Black individuals (including Black Latines) navigate daily. Just as weather is an all-encompassing force, so too is the structural racism that permeates various aspects of Black and Latine life. She emphasizes that these conditions are not isolated incidents (or singular traumatic events) but are part of a continuous and unpredictable climate of anti-Black/anti-Latine lives. Sharpe’s focus on the deaths of young children recalls the Afro-Puerto Rican tradition of the *baquiné*, a wake for a deceased child famously depicted in Francisco Oller’s 1893 painting *El Velorio* (“The Wake”). In this tradition, children were believed to return to the divine, and, as Oller’s painting shows, joy predominated in these ceremonies. This celebratory dimension was among the cultural practices Spanish colonial authorities sought to curtail beginning in the eighteenth century. Such joy continues to resonate in contemporary mourning practices in Puerto Rico. One of the most pernicious aspects of Puerto Rico’s efforts to recover from the destruction brought about by Irma and María was the fact these recovery efforts were taking place in the midst of a more than century old commercialization of basic human needs, an attempt to instrumentalize tax and debt for territorial and property extraction. I give a brief overview of this form of colonial violence next.

The Temporality of Debt

Diane Lourdes Dick argues that US tax policy has functioned as a mechanism of colonial control over Puerto Rico. She outlines three historical phases of this “tax imperialism”: soon after the occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898, and until the enactment of the Jones Act, US officials restructured Puerto Rico’s tax system to align with American economic interests. In the period between 1920 and 1974, policies like Operation Bootstrap offered tax incentives that attracted US corporations but ultimately led to economic dependency. The post-1970s decades saw the repeal of favorable tax provisions that exacerbated fiscal challenges, contributing to the island’s debt crisis of the mid-2010s. In 2016, in response to the debt crisis, President Barack Obama signed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). The law established a Fiscal Control Board, which oversees the activities of the Puerto Rican Government. The board, composed of seven members chosen by the US Senate without the consultation of the Puerto Rican people, had the power to alter, interfere, and cancel contracts that impede the payment of the debt, or overlook any agreement made between creditors and the Government of Puerto Rico. Under PROMESA, budget cuts and austerity measures were made to infrastructure spending, public health services, pensions, social services, culture, and education in Puerto Rico. In an effort to restructure the debt, many basic services (most notably Puerto Rico’s electric system) were sold as assets to private companies.

As sociologist José Atilés has shown, so-called “anti-corruption measures,” have allowed the US government to legitimize its colonial and capitalist expansion in Puerto Rico for over a century (Atilés). The inextricable link between accusation of corruption and colonial power relations, particularly in relation to race, class, gender, and language, has been particularly evident in the aftermath of hurricanes María and Irma, where unequal distribution of disaster relief has been tied to century-old narratives of local leadership corruption and mismanagement (see Coto). In the decade since the publication of Dick’s article, we are witnessing a return to the tax exception policies of the 1920s: Act 60, passed in 2019, offers significant tax incentives for profits from cryptocurrencies and property sales for wealthy foreign investors who move to reside on the island for a minimum of six months a year. The law has been touted by the Puerto Rican government as a cure for the ongoing public debt and infrastructure crisis but has led to a loss of billions of

dollars in tax revenue and a land grab that has significantly raised housing costs (see GAO Request Letter for Act 60 Puerto Rico Tax Review). Put simply, the government is selling public assets to cover the debt.

Throughout the last century, Puerto Rico has remained subject to US tax imperialism, without full political representation, and with all the racial overtones of a colonial relationship. In a recent analysis of the meaning of debt in Puerto Rican expressive culture, including poetry, theater, and music, Zorimar Rivera Montes suggests that the temporal interplay of coloniality constitutes time itself—the colonial past constitutes the present, and it also determines the possibility of a future. In the wake of these political-economic storms, music played a key role in keeping the threads of Puerto Rican society from unraveling. In the next sections, I zoom in and out between the various colonial temporalities suggested by Rivera Montes, Atilés, and Bonilla to understand how the rhythms and songs performed by plena practitioners helped to put things and people together in the wake of María.

Plena as Life Rhythm

Plena developed in Puerto Rico around the turn of the twentieth century, in the recently US-occupied southern city of Ponce. As a major port to the island's coffee and sugar plantations, Ponce became home to migrant laborers from across the Caribbean. Plena and its rhythms thus developed from the interactions of Puerto Rican music and dance forms such as *bomba* (themselves composed of various local and imported influences) and dance forms practiced in other Caribbean port cities. In fact, among the earliest recognized performers of plena were John Clark and Catherine George (a.k.a. Doña Catín), a Barbadian couple who arrived in Ponce around 1905 and were known on the island as Los Ingleses (Flores, López). Early plena recordings, with their sardonic tone, simple harmonies, and call and response patterns demonstrate a remarkable affinity to Jamaican Mento and Trinidadian Calypso, as well as the *coro-pregon* patterns of Cuban rumba and the *bomba* rhythm called *hollandé*, associated with rhythms played in the Caribbean Dutch colonies (Miller). As Martin Munro and others have argued with respect to Caribbean music more broadly, plena's social and musical rhythms allowed migrant workers of different origins to adapt and communicate with one another, creating a new social fabric.

A key aspect of plena (notable also in Mento and Calypso) was its use among laborers to narrate and communicate daily events, gossip, protests, crimes, and acts of injustice—thus keeping a poetic pulse on everyday life. As the *panderetas*—the frame drums used in plena—were relatively light and easy to carry, and its performers laborers and day workers, plena became the music of choice for chanting in social protests, in labor disputes, and in street marches. As such, it weaved together workers' individual lived experiences into a shared temporal, affective, and often politically resistive musical event. Plenas also created a communal record, a sung historical archive of social commentary. For example, the plena "Temporal" (the storm), which remains popular today, was composed in commemoration of the passage of Hurricane San Felipe II, a Category 5 hurricane that hit Puerto Rico in 1928, reaching 265 km/h and leaving tremendous destruction in its path. The memory of the event and its relevance to contemporary times were kept alive through its narration in plena performances over the last century (López). The timing of plena performances was also crucial as context of community formation. As Francisco Luis Reyes writes, regularly held, open *plenazos*—where every person was invited to participate—were key to the early days of the genre. These weekly or monthly events, taking place on street corners, in courtyards, or at local festivals, created temporal anchors in community life. Through rhythm and repetition, plena both reflected the community and actively produced it.

By the late 1920s, plena became popular as commercial recorded music, part of a colonial urban music boom that swept across colonial cities around the world in the age of the gramophone (Denning). As a government-sponsored documentary film from the 1930s poetically captures, plena was conceived as an expression of *puertorriqueñidad*—a mix of the Spanish intelligentsia's ironic and satirical poetry and the rhythms of the Afro-descendent "workforce." As César Colón Montijo explained to me in our conversations, "plena was always 'pulled' in various directions to be utilized politically, at times by the Puerto Rican government, in others by urban elites, but it always remained alive in the neighborhoods of the working class."

La Máquina Insular

Giving one of his many plena workshops in La Goyco, a defunct school turned community center in Santurce, Héctor "Tito" Matos highlighted plena's role in forming communal ties. Using the

punteador—the medium-sized drum of plena—he explained the relationship between rhythm and local, neighborhood identity. “I learned three [pattern] variations (growing up) in Santurce for the traditional *punteador*,” he says. “They’re all just strokes (*golpes*—rhythmic parts/roles), but in Santurce, the *banao* is considered a complete rhythm on its own, that basically doesn’t need anything else, and it even spread to other musical forms (Sings): tun tun, tapatapa, tun tun tun, pa! tun tun, tapatapa, tun tun tun, pa! (Plays the *banao*). And there you have the three *punteadores*: the first one (plays), the second one (plays), and the third one: the *Banao* from Santurce. That’s not from Mayagüez, not from Ponce, not from Arecibo—it’s from Santurce” (Matos, my translation).

Using plena to form a communal identity was a lifelong project of Matos. Before his passing in 2022, Matos was a pillar of the plena community in Puerto Rico, and one of its celebrated practitioners. In 2004, after establishing himself as a plena musician and educator in New York and on the global stage, Matos returned to Santurce and established *Plenazos Callajeros*, an informal organization seeking to connect the various plena scenes and traditions across Puerto Rico through monthly *plenazo* events (Viera-Vargas). Over its seven-year run, *Plenazos Callajeros* met over seventy times, connecting the scenes of more than thirty municipalities across the island. As Hugo Viera Vargas recounts, *Plenazos Callajeros* created a sense of temporal familiarity, where the stability of monthly encounters created a sense of communal intimacy “sharing with the musicians and all those families month after month, year after year, has created a wonderful *plenera* family” (83). This temporal familiarity gave a sense of anticipation for the existence of future events, as one of the attendees in the monthly *plenazos* of the early 2000s explained: “I was getting excited preparing to attend the *plenazos* [of the] next month” (Ibid). *Plenazo* events were thus not simply important in connecting various plena styles and forming community, they created a shared set of preparation and expectation for the future—a collective rhythm.

While continuing to record and perform with various professional groups, in 2009, Matos began to organize “*Lunes de Bomba y Plena*” (Mondays of bomba and plena) at La Terraza De Bonanza. The event was a weekly *plenazo* session in which Puerto Rico’s two principal Afro-diasporic musical genres (bomba and plena) were performed and taught, where professional and amateur musicians could play, dance, and sing together weekly. These sessions gave young performers the opportunity to experience and train in plena directly on stage, mastering its repertoires, rhythms, and forms of

textual, vocal, and instrumental dialogue and improvisation. The event became a local mainstay, attracting hundreds of people to Villa Palmeras every week (Silvestrini).

The success of the “Lunes de Bomba y Plena” led Matos and his wife, journalist and radio broadcaster Mariana Reyes Angleró, to consider developing their own space. In 2016, Matos entrusted the organization of the Monday night plenazo at La Bonanza to fellow musicians Alfredo Emerson and his group *Compartir De Plena* and opened La Junta (unrelated to the PROMESA board nickname), a bar and restaurant on Calle Loíza. La Junta functioned as a multifaceted cultural center. It presented regular plena performances on Mondays, alongside jazz, bomba, and salsa, and offered music instruction for adults and children. The restaurant also showcased community theater and served as a space for community organizing for the La Asociación de Residentes el Machuchal Revive (ARMaR—Association of Residents for El Machuchal Revival). ARMaR was central to securing permits and funding for the transformation of La Goyco from a defunct public school to a culture and arts center (Reyes Angleró). Matos’s workshops at Bonanza and later at La Junta set up the model for the activities taking place today at La Goyco, and created a new generation of *pleneres*, plena instructors and plena groups—performing and giving workshops on multiple weeknights around the San Juan metropolitan area. The temporal belonging Matos was able to form through plena proved crucial in the late summer of 2017.

El Temporal

On 17 September 2017 La Junta was destroyed by Hurricane María. The bar was hit directly by the storm, its front facade, displaying a mural with the bar’s name, collapsed inwards, allowing floodwater in, destroying the equipment and furniture inside. In the days following, Matos, Reyes, and their friends from the plena community organized street cleanings and food distribution, and put up tarps to protect displaced community members from the sun and rain. They also worked to salvage what remained of La Junta, but the building’s wooden structure became unsafe and had to be demolished. The initial impact of the hurricane was certainly disastrous, but the magnitude grew exponentially when it became clear that defunded public services meant residents were largely left to recover on their own. Matos, Reyes, and other residents of Santurce’s Calle Loíza came together to tend to their neighbors who were hurt, to clean the rubble and trees from the streets, and to

begin to assess the damage to their homes and livelihoods. As Reyes later recounted, “We had to do it on our own, because absolutely nothing worked.”

Seeking an alternative venue where plena could continue and the community’s spirits could be lifted, “Lunes de Bomba y Plena” relocated to El Boricua in Río Piedras. There, Matos resumed performances and began offering workshops again within two weeks of the storm: “Seguimos trabajando en la reconstrucción de nuestro espacio, nuestro barrio y nuestro País y mientras tanto tenemos responsabilidades que cumplir y música que tocar,” (We continue working on the reconstruction of our space, our neighborhood, and our country, and in the meantime, we have responsibilities to fulfill and music to play), he wrote in a Twitter post on 7 October 2017.

In August 2018, when I first visited the bar, Matos was performing there every Monday with various members of the plena scene. They maintained the temporal familiarity of the plenazos, creating an open format that welcomed both amateurs and professionals to participate and perform together. The fact that plena nights were not dependent on government funding, did not require a stable location or a stable source of electricity, and were offered free to a public enduring devastating economic and personal hardship, meant that the plena performances were able to surface above while other genres of popular music were struggling to return to normalcy. By 2019, plena and bomba nights were taking place several times a week at El Boricua, once a week at La Bonanza, another at El Balcon del Zumbador, and at various other locations and week-nights around the city. The plena “machine”—to use Matos’s metaphor—was again running at full capacity.

The government’s ineffective efforts to recover the island’s infrastructure and basic services meant that, in some neighborhoods, the aftermath of the disaster stretched well into the fall of 2019, when another disaster, the COVID-19 pandemic, was looming. Pablo Rodríguez, who manages several music venues in Santurce, Old San Juan, and Río Piedras, recounted to me that it took him months to get the electricity back in his venue in Río Piedras, and “many of the neighborhood’s venues couldn’t afford to stay open that long . . . they had to shut down permanently.” When I spoke to musician and radio broadcaster Juan Botta in May 2020 about the impact of the lockdowns on the music scene in San Juan, among the first things he mentioned was that “Lunes de Plena y Bomba” have stopped for the first time in years. “Unfortunately, with [the lockdown] happening, the ‘Bomba and Plena Mondays’ at Bonanza are not going to be existing anymore . . . there are still other

venues, like El Balcon del Zumbador that are still working I think, but even there, it's nothing like it used to be."

In March 2020, plena performances at El Boricua stopped for a full year, returning to operation in March 2021. Matos continued to give plena workshops on Facebook Live and continued to work on the development of the Casa de la Plena at La Goyco. Despite the long-standing damage caused by the hurricanes, with island-wide blackouts taking place in September 2021, during Hurricane Fiona in September 2022, during New Year's Eve in 2024, and in April 2025, in addition to numerous local blackouts in Río Piedras, Lunes de Plena continued uninterrupted regular weekly meetings for the last four years. A tragic week in January 2022 was no exception. On 18 January 2022, at age 53, Matos suffered a heart attack and passed away. That week, plenazos were held every night to celebrate his life. Matos's death, as César Colón Montijo recounted, was felt among pleneres as a comparable disaster to the impact of the hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic in the previous years. After Tito Matos's death, musicians including Juan "Llonsi" Martínez, Erick Noel Rosado, Emanuel Santana Rivera, and Luis "Lagarto" Figueroa have continued to steward the event in his name, now inaugurated as the "Lunes De Plena Tito Matos."

Rhythms of Austerity

"Hi Gary! It's Ofer, Nili's friend—any chance you have a spare upright bass I can borrow for a gig this weekend?" With very low expectations, I left this message for Gary Núñez, a bassist, composer, and leader of the band Plena Libre, in the summer of 2018. Núñez was one of the most important innovators of the genre since the early 1990s and an icon of plena music on the world stage. During a short lunch break—with poor signal—Gary called to make sure I had what I needed: "Hey man! Just heard your message—I don't use acoustic basses anymore, too much of a hassle to travel with. But if you can't find one, come by and pick up an electric!"

Committed to preserving the plena tradition of Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera while staying current with the times, Núñez had no qualms about combining *panderetas* and *güicharo* with a full *conjunto* that included a brass section, keyboards, timbales, congas, and electric bass. This aspect of Plena Libre—the size and sound of the ensemble—not only made them unique among plena bands but also presented logistical and financial challenges. Their concerts required more transportation, amplification, and stage space than the "drums-only" groups. They faced an uphill battle: they carried

the costs and complexity of a large band, but their music relied on communal participation, not on chart-topping hits. As Núñez told me in a later conversation: “This is Puerto Rican music. Plena was always played with larger bands, since the 1950s. But it never became a hit outside the island. It’s up to us to keep it going.” Attempts to keep modern plena “traditional” with a full horn and rhythm section were thus faced with an economic and logistical reality—as percussionist Héctor Barez explained to me, during the years of austerity, promoters have normalized paying less to plena and bomba ensembles, making it harder for them to perform in larger ensembles.

When I met Gary in 2023, in a small coffee shop on Avenida de la Constitución in Santurce, he seemed tired and a bit pale. He was in his early seventies then and fighting an ongoing battle with cancer. He spoke in a soft voice, but with the same enthusiasm for the music he loved. I told Gary I was interested in how so-called “amateur” plena and bomba gatherings had become increasingly popular in the aftermath of María. He pointed out an aspect I had not considered—how the confluence of austerity and environmental disaster had not only fueled the growing popularity of plena but also constrained its professional development. While there was certainly more bomba and plena being played throughout the island after Irma and María, it was often informal music-making: performances on street corners, in bars, or in courtyards. Professional plena bands—the kind that had produced popular artists for over a century—were finding it increasingly difficult to secure paid work. This shift was not simply driven by a renewed need for musical and communal participation. That need had long existed on the island. What had changed was the availability of public funding. Groups like Plena Libre and other local popular music artists had relied on these funds for the majority of their concerts. Without them, the infrastructure supporting professional plena was eroding.

Musical life in Puerto Rico has long depended on a calendar of holidays and *fiestas patronales*—around eighty yearly events held in different cities and municipalities to commemorate the cities patron saint (some are now referred to as *fiestas del pueblo* to reduce their religious associations). These local festivals, dedicated to the patron saint of each city or neighborhood, showcase local food and artistic traditions, in addition to music. Dependent on public funding for their production, the festivals have been drastically affected by the austerity measures implemented by the “Junta” (as the PROMESA board is colloquially known), shrinking

from weeklong programs of activities on high holidays and saint days to just one or two nights, depending on the size of the city.

Núñez explained that the changes to the fiestas patronales can be easy to miss at a superficial glance, because there is indeed more plena played in public than ever before in Puerto Rico. But from his perspective, this is also a difficult moment—one in which professional music-making and the continuation of musical traditions are under threat. While in previous years bands were able to charge \$5,000–\$6,000 to cover their own salaries, expenses, sound, and transportation for a twelve-member group, the number of cities that can afford four or five days of concerts has been drastically reduced (perhaps only Fiesta San Sebastián in old San Juan can afford such an investment). Most now offer only a night or two of live music at most. To make up for the lack of funds for live performances, municipalities prefer to invest in popular reggaetoneros (which perform with a backing track) in salsa bands (that remain popular) and are increasingly hiring DJs to play commercial dance music. Local plena and bomba bands are often invited to perform partially acoustic sets for a smaller compensation.

The drastic reduction in public funding reshaped the yearly rhythms of performance for professional plena bands in Puerto Rico, disrupting what had once been a predictable circuit of municipal festivals, cultural events, and public concerts. These bands had long depended on government-sponsored gigs—especially fiestas patronales and other civic celebrations—to sustain their income and maintain visibility. As austerity measures slashed arts budgets and municipalities scaled back events from week-long festivals to just one or two nights, many of these bands found themselves with far fewer opportunities to perform. From the perspective of professional bands, the result was a fragmented calendar, with sporadic engagements replacing the steady flow of work that had previously structured their musical lives. It placed at risk the very notion of a professional plena or bomba musician. As I show next, engaging politically with the austerity measures and creating an alternative communal infrastructure for the arts became central to La Goyco's mission in the years following Matos' death.

Plenapolitics

During a visit to Puerto Rico on 22 March 2024, then Vice President Kamala Harris made a stop at La Goyco Cultural Center in San Juan. Formerly the Pedro G. Goyco School, the building was closed in the spring of 2015 amid Puerto Rico's deepening

economic crisis and austerity measures that shuttered hundreds of schools across the island (Brusi and Godreau). In the wake of its abandonment, local residents and artists came together as La Asociación de Residentes del Machuchal Revive (Association of Residents for El Machuchal Revival). Their goal was to reclaim the space, transforming it into a thriving cultural and community hub. Securing a promise during a gubernatorial election cycle, residents obtained permission from the municipality to operate it as a self-managed cultural center, relying primarily on volunteer work, a combination of federal and private grants (such as those from the Ford and Mellon Foundations), and paid rentals.

Showcasing the grassroots initiative, the municipality invited multiple nonprofit organizations to a handshaking event, using La Goyco as its own success story. In fairness, the city's contribution of a building in a sought-after real estate zone did contribute to the center's success, but La Goyco's leadership was criticized for agreeing to go along and be used as a photo-op for the vice president. For her part, Harris sought to use the visit to align the Biden administration with the grassroots resilience and community efforts that brought the building back to life in the wake of Hurricane Maria.

As she was walking out, a group of pleneres had set up in front of the school courtyard. Among them were Emanuel Santana Rivera, Ricardo Pons, Mónica Anna Delgado Reyes, Juan "Llonsi" Martínez, and Marcelo, the ten-year-old son of Tito Matos and Mariana Reyes. They were all members of La Casa de la Plena Tito Matos—a small classroom and exhibition space dedicated to plena and to carrying on the life's work of Tito Matos, its former president, within the La Goyco center. They were the very same musicians who ran the Plena nights at El Boricua.

As soon as the vice president arrived at La Goyco's front staircase, Emanuel Santana began singing the following *verso*, in perfect timing for the plena to be captured by official news outlets:

Chorus

Queremos saber, queremos saber,
queremos saber, Kamala,
¿qué es lo que viniste a hacer?

Verse

Queremos saber, Kamala,
¿qué es lo que va a pasar,
si vas a hablar de la Ley 60
y la Junta de Control Fiscal?

Llegó la vicepresidenta,
 haciendo historia.
 Queremos saber
 qué piensa de la colonia.

Seguiremos tocando
 la plena de mi país.
 ¡Viva Palestina libre y también Haití!

Chorus
 We want to know, we want to know,
 we want to know, Kamala,
 what did you come here for?

Verse
 We want to know, Kamala,
 what is going to happen,
 whether you're going to talk about Law 60
 or the Fiscal Control Board.

The vice president has arrived,
 making history.
 We want to know
 what she thinks of the colony.

We will keep playing
 the plena of our country.
 Long live a free Palestine,
 and Haiti too!

Translation by the author

With the opening drum break signaling everyone to join in, the drummers took their respective roles—singing the chorus and playing the *seguidor*, *punteador*, *requinto*, and *güicharo* patterns. Surprised by the performance, the vice president began to smile, fulfilling her role as an audience member to the plena, clapping her hands to the rhythm.

It is quite an unusual and contradictory situation to be both the subject of a politically critical plena and a participant in its collective rhythm at the same time—what Ana Hofman, Jocelyne Guilbaut, and others have referred to as the affective political power of music. As a final gesture to the ways in which pleneres

and their publics use poetry and rhythm to contend with the temporalities of environmental and political disaster, I would like to listen closely both to the pleneres' protest and to Harris's particular predicament.

"Queremos saber," the plena performed by Santana and others, made palpable the different temporal considerations between local residents and various forces operating in Calle Loíza, among them tourism, urban development, and politics on the local and federal levels. While the city administration, Harris's staff, and news media were interested in a quick, short-term photo-op, members of the La Goyco community had to use the tools at their disposal to raise awareness of long-term, structural environmental concerns, and mobilized plena to do so. By addressing Harris by her first name—Kamala—the pleneres were using plena as an affective, temporal vehicle, drawing her in with a question: Kamala, what did you come here for? But the meaning of the text, as it is for most anglophone tourists, was not evident to her. In combining personal address with the ensnaring power of drums on bodies, the group highlighted plena's political power—the ability of drums, practiced for centuries in continental and Afro-diasporic contexts, to challenge a leader through political satire (Gazit 181). By clapping along, Harris unknowingly signaled her agreement with the questions posed to her—and perhaps even with the critique itself. This captured the viral potential of the moment, which circulated widely on social media in the following days.

Yet Harris represents a particularly complex subject of address. As the daughter of Jamaican and Indian migrants to the United States who has broken through innumerable glass ceilings to become vice president, she can be seen poetically as the Caribbean incarnate—carrying both the gifts and burdens placed upon her. At the same time, as the vice president visiting her country's own disenfranchised, century-old colony, she represents an administration that has wielded that country's colonial and imperial power in significant ways around the world. In this sense, Harris is both a representation of the oppressor and the oppressed—the power structure and a subject trapped within it.

Yet plena has the poetic and musical—structural tools to deal with such complexity—the twist in the fourth stanza, bringing a melodic conclusion and charging the text with its full potential, was also a way to connect the personal and formal. Addressing her in the second person (and not the honorific third), the *pregonero* asks—so, what is going to be? *Qué es lo que va a pasar?* Are you going to talk about the elephants in the room? *Si vas a hablar de la*

Ley 60 Y la Junta de Control Fiscal? Here United States–Puerto Rico colonial tax domination and austerity measures are placed front and center. No longer is Kamala an individual, but a representative of a regime of control and extraction. Nonetheless, this domination is personal, and Harris is a collaborator with this oppression.

In the second call phrase, the gap between the representative role of the vice president and Harris—the person—is closed. This moment—the historical ascent of a Black woman, descended from Jamaican and Indian parents to a position of formal power within an oppressive structure—is made explicit. The plena also addresses Harris the vice president, now referred to in the third person, in relation to that very system. The double address thus culminates in the plena framing Harris’s role within a colonial relationship, while also pointing to recent manifestations of coloniality and hypocrisy associated with the Biden administration’s final year in office—namely, its support for Israel’s genocide against the Palestinian people and its continued military intervention in Haiti.

The use of plena during Harris’s visit was clearly a well-planned political stunt, intended to embarrass and capture headlines. It was not only an expression of “working people” speaking (or singing) truth to power, but also a reflection of the renewed elevation of plena to the highest levels of political discourse in the wake of María—led by sophisticated activists, some of whom belong to Puerto Rico’s academic and cultural elite. Performing “Queremos Saber” also presented a risk to the participants and to the La Goyco project itself. La Goyco depends after all not only on the volunteer work by members of the community, but also on municipal, federal, and private support. It reflects the complexity of performing protest within a colonial cultural system seeking to present itself as liberal and multicultural.

The risk however was calculated and deemed—as Santana later recounted—worth their while. “There were entities that supported us in the past, that told us ‘if you go with this political posture, you better not count on me to provide access to these funds in the future,’” Santana recalled, “but I have been broke all my life and will continue to be broke—you’re not going to buy my conscious for four pesos” (Santana, my translation). Once again, long-term versus short-term temporal considerations are key to the rejection of colonial dependency.

Plena has been used for over a century to express resistance to US colonial occupation in Puerto Rico and has been cyclically recruited by various political actors, campaigns, and movements throughout that time. What was new here was the attempt to

circulate widely the deadly consequences of colonial dependence beyond Puerto Rico—consequences that this plena helped disseminate broadly. Topics that are constantly on the mind of Puerto Rican activists—coloniality, La Junta De Control Fiscal and the austerity measures, Ley 60 and the tax incentives for short-term residents, solidarity with Palestine and Haiti—all these were not foreseen to present themselves in this handshaking visit.

The long-term questions posed by the pleneres underscored how Puerto Rico's everyday political realities remain largely absent from US political discourse—so much so that the vice president was unprepared for what La Goyco, a defunded public school, and the artist-activists working within it would reflect back to her. At a moment when Puerto Ricans feel trapped between incompetent—if not corrupt—local politicians who offer the island's resources to foreign investors through tax breaks unavailable to Puerto Ricans themselves, and a federal government whose austerity measures they cannot overturn and whose relief funds remain inaccessible, the politics available are those of attention: resistant performances and acts of public shaming. These must be precisely timed—striking when the cameras are watching—and are often fleeting, lasting only until the vice president returns to colonial business as usual. What endures are the pulsating rituals of life, marking agency and resilience in the wake of disaster.

Conclusion: in the Wake—Un Belén de Despedida

As a note of closure, I would like to return to Sharpe's notion of the wake—the cycles of Black and Latine life and death lived in the aftermath of slavery, within ongoing systems of violence, loss, and precarity. Sharpe argues that part of what makes this violence systemic, is its recursiveness, its rhythm of “deathly repetition” (2). What I argue in this piece is that anti-Black and anti-Latine violence has yet another temporal feature that makes it structural, its short-term view, or amnesia to past instances of violence. Resistance to this violence lies in remembering past violence and celebrating past lives. In the Afro-Boricua tradition, especially among musicians, the word *belén* (from the Spanish form of Bethlehem, *Belén*, ultimately derived from *Bet Lehem* or *Betlem*) denotes a memorial procession or farewell gathering. A *belén de despedida* is a celebration of the life and legacy of the deceased, accompanying a member of the community into the afterlife.

On Sunday morning, 29 June 2025, I was walking down the streets of Villa Palmeras, following a *belén* procession escorting the

drum of revered master plenero and composer Joe Medina to his family home. Known among pleneres not only for his compositions, but for his performances celebrating the lives of past pleneres, Medina was among those who gave tribute to Tito Matos and Gary Núñez after their passing. Just over a month before his death, on a weekly Monday performance at El Boricua, he sang a tribute to the old masters of plena, Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera. On that morning in June, as we were walking, singing, and drumming in the hot sun toward Medina's home on Calle Buenaventura, his own name and memory were inscribed into the lyrics:

Un belén para Cortijo (a belén for Cortijo),
 Un belén para Ismael (a belén for Ismael),
 Un belén pa' Joe Medina (a belén for Joe Medina),
 cómo le gustaba a él (just the way he would've liked it).

Accompanying him on his way was also a plena he wrote foreseeing his own passing:

Si he de morir (If I have to die),
 he de morir como quiera (I'll die however I please).
 Si he de morir (If I have to die),
 ¡será cantando mi plena! (it will be singing my plena!)

It is in these *belén* songs, those that rhyme death in the midst of life, that is where plena's long term anticipatory power—social, political, resistive, affective, temporal—comes out most clearly. The ongoing pulsation of life amidst short-termism: colonial occupation and land extraction, austerity measures and tax havens, environmental disaster and depleted infrastructures. Pleneres continue to sing and drum every day, every week, every month. As long as there's a future plena, there's life. A Lively-repetition.

N O T E

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