

**A Story told through Plena: Claiming Identity and Cultural Autonomy in the Street Festivals of San Juan, Puerto Rico.**

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**Abstract:** Las Fiestas de la Calle de San Sebastián is a four day-long festival in San Juan, Puerto Rico. While the festival comprises music and dance that is a combination of various Caribbean and Latin American aesthetics, there is a small group of local musicians who insist on staying away from the larger throngs to specifically play a Puerto Rican music medium known as *plena*. By defining a distinct physical space that is separate from the rest of the festival, but also a part of the festival, they sing throughout the night speaking to contemporary issues of American imperialism, class warfare, and corrupt politicians. During the festival the complex power dynamics of Puerto Rico as a United States territory, lacking both independence as a sovereign nation and the same rights as a state, are manifested in festival performance. This performance tries to negotiate how the island remains autonomous while being attached to a more powerful mainland economy.

*Keywords:* autonomy; festivals; identity; islands; music; plena; Puerto Rico; United States

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**Introduction**

San Juan, Puerto Rico holds a yearly, four-day-long street festival called *Las Fiestas de la Calle de San Sebastián* (translation: the street festivals of St. Sebastian). Revived by a group of friends and neighbours in Old San Juan 48 years ago, the festival consists of various organized parade groups that are sanctioned by the city municipality and such corporate sponsors as Heineken, Medalla, Coors and Coca-Cola. Concurrently during the main festival acts, groups of local musicians come together on street corners to play a Puerto Rican music medium known as *plena*. This article will focus on a group of musicians that gathered at the corner of Calle San Sebastián and Calle Cruz during the 2010 and 2011 festivals. Looking at this particular group of *pleneros*, their performance during the festivals will be used for understanding ideas of Puerto Rican identity and power dynamics in relation to the continental US. These *pleneros* are not representative of every single *plenero* musician; rather, this study is based on one group of *pleneros* and their performative experiences during *Las Fiestas de la Calle de San Sebastián*.

Puerto Rico is an island in a unique predicament. Not a US state, yet not its own nation, the island currently is a US territory. Over 45% of Puerto Ricans live below the poverty line and the island has been described as “America’s Third World Country” (Long, 2012). Puerto Rico is seen as a product of “neo-colonialism” in that even though it is a self-governing commonwealth, it is subject to US authority and has non-voting representation in the US

Congress. Puerto Ricans have been US citizens since 1917 (Meléndez & Meléndez, 1993). This relationship creates a tension within US/Puerto Rican relations that persists ever since a colonial administrator was appointed to the island by the US government in 1900 (ibid.).

*Las Fiestas de la Calle de San Sebastián* take place in the neighbourhood of Old San Juan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located on the shore of the larger sprawled out capital city. It was built during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century when it was a Spanish colony. Many cruise ships dock at the Old San Juan harbour, and tourists can stay at hotels in Old San Juan, although no hotels have beach access. Most of the inhabitants of Old San Juan are Puerto Rican families, but this has been changing over the last 10 years as wealthier Americans from the mainland have come in to purchase real estate. The entirety of Old San Juan spans about 8-14 city blocks (Wikipedia contributors, 2012).

*Las Fiestas* mark the end of the Christmas season and are held during the third weekend of January from Thursday to Sunday. The daytime is dedicated to families who come from all over the island to buy arts and crafts, food, and enjoy music and dance performances. The night-time features a more youthful ambiance, and is categorized as a more bacchanalian experience of drinking and dancing. *Las Fiestas* spans six city blocks and features parade acts that walk through throngs of close to one million people (San Sebastian Street Festival, 2012).

On the main streets, parade acts range in theme and costumes from *cabezudos*, which are large wooden heads that people wear while dancing, to *vejigantes*: traditional Puerto Rican devil masks. Featured parade acts typically consist of *cabezudos*, *vejigantes*, musicians, and stilt walkers. There is also a disproportionate amount of beer and beverage companies sponsoring loud walking advertisements that also become featured acts during the evening. These parade advertisements make themselves the primary focus on the main street, and they are usually accompanied by a large number of percussion musicians constantly playing various types of rhythms on snare drums, congas, and other instruments. Many of the percussion groups play *batucada* or a *batucada* influenced sound, which is known as a genre coming from Brazil.

On the side streets of San Sebastián, the corner groupings of *plenero* musicians feature small hand-held drums called *panderetas* and songs in a narrative structure that use call and response and improvisation. *Plena* is considered to be an Afro-Puerto Rican genre that has been around since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Flores, 2000). The *panderetas* are drums made out of animal skins stretched over wooden or metal rims that resemble tambourines. *Plena* music often also uses the *guiro*, which is a dried out gourd with grooves etched in which is played with a stick. Sometimes *plena* will use other instrumentation such as the *cuatro*. Themes of *plena* songs range from love, war, unreported news, commentary, satire, and jokes. *Plenero* musicians play publicly on streets, and are also hired for family Christmas parties, birthdays, and other local festivals. Within the festivals, *plenero* groups can be seen throughout several street corners and many festival-goers bring their own *panderetas* or *guiros* to participate in corner groups.

Historically, *plena* groups actually have enjoyed some sponsorship from beer and beverage companies. When I interviewed several *pleneros* regarding sponsorship during *Las Fiestas*, one *plenero* stated that they used to be sponsored by so many different companies in the 1980's; they would don the t-shirt of one company for an hour, get paid for the sponsorship, then quickly change into another t-shirt for a different company and get paid again. The problem that they have with sponsorship today is that companies will hire musicians to simply play "carnival sound" and this can range from the Brazilian *batucada*, to a

watered down version of a *calypso*, and there is little regard as to whether the genre is considered Puerto Rican. During the festivals, I asked *plenero* Tito Matos, who was watching a Coca-Cola parade float that had *batucada* percussionists, what he thought about sponsorship:

What do I think about the sponsorship? Everybody does it. (Shrugs) But now, because that (*batucada*) is louder, and they may be right, but it has nothing to do with the Puerto Rican root (Matos, 2010).

Musician proficiency can also vary: there are *batucada* musicians that are exceptional at what they do, but other musicians who are not very proficient. At the same time, the companies today build enormous floats that are simply advertising their product, and then will add a small element of “Puerto Rican-ness” by sometimes having dancers wear *vejigantes* or *cabezudos*.

This type of sponsorship is indicative of a conflict that exists between Puerto Rican ideas of self-representation, versus corporatized ideas of Puerto Rican representation. In looking at the *Fiestas of San Sebastián* and the performances of *pleneros* on the corner of Calle Cruz and Calle San Sebastián, this becomes a place where *pleneros* try to negotiate the position of being occupied within a neo-colonialism structure with the US while also retaining a sense of cultural autonomy. When looking at this small geographic location of the corner group of Calle Cruz versus the main festival acts of San Sebastián, the drama of Puerto Rico’s relationship with the US mainland is brought into a performative display: how to be inextricably tied to a dominant economy without allowing it to overpower the culture to the point of total cultural assimilation.

I am neither a *plenero* musician nor Puerto Rican; and, as Peter Manuel recognizes in his work with Puerto Rican music:

I am sensitive to the dangers of inserting myself, as an American, into an extensive and sophisticated body of discourse on Puerto Rican identity ... which Yankee perspectives are not necessarily solicited or welcomed for their own sake ... I undertake this article in the hopes of heightening awareness of the issues involved, to faithfully represent salient aspects of Puerto Rican ‘emic’ discourse itself (Manuel 1994, p. 250).

Like Manuel, I hope to shed light on certain aspects of Puerto Rican discourse on identity, but specifically applying these discourses as they play out in the context of the street festivals and the performance of *plena*. I will illustrate how *plena* acts as an integral force in establishing Puerto Rican identity, and how symbolic conflict (between Puerto Rican and non-Puerto Rican identities) come into conflict during the festival. I also want to reinforce and support Puerto Rican autonomy through the use of cultural performance. By researching and discussing these issues, I hope to highlight not just the importance of self-determination through music, but also to reveal the complex layers that emerge in representation through festive life that concurrently acknowledge the inherent power structures that lie at the heart of determining identity within the larger relationship between Puerto Rico and the US.

I will be using theoretical arguments from two academic areas. Ethnomusicology has a body of work focusing on *plena* that stems from an even larger body of work dedicated to salsa music. These theories have helped inform my work with issues regarding *plena*’s role in Puerto Rican society. But more importantly, it points to a long history of *plena* as a genre that speaks to a marginalized island society that continues to be relevant in its current manifestations.

The second theoretical area I will be using is folklore festival scholarship. This work discusses theories on the importance of festivals in daily life and provides a structure of analysis for festival research. This has been helpful in my work by providing a framework for looking at how *pleneros* act as part of the festival yet counteract it, and the significance of their own cultural performance.

### **Ethnographic case study: *pleneros* at *Las Fiestas de la Calle de San Sebastián***

For my fieldwork on *Las Fiestas de la Calle de San Sebastián*, I mostly interviewed *pleneros* that are a part of a *bomba* and *plena* group named *Viento de Agua* (translation: wind of water). I first met *Viento de Agua* when they were invited for the 2009 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC. They were part of a program called *Nuestras Músicas: Music in Latino Culture*, which featured bands from Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Paraguay, El Salvador, the US and Puerto Rico. *Viento de Agua* stood out for their intense, rhythmically infectious performances, and their ability to engage the audience so that the line between audience and performer was blurred. They often would jump down from the stage to play music with people who were dancing.

*Viento de Agua* play the genres of *bomba* and *plena*, often lumped together as simply *bombayplena* and music groups who play these genres are generally known as *bombayplena* groups. However, *bomba* and *plena* are two separate genres. In their simplest explanations, *bomba* is considered an African genre that uses barriles de bomba or barril drums, and *plena* is considered a more creolized genre of the working class, using *panderetas*.

*Viento de Agua's* performances demonstrate a current relevance, which makes it distinct. *Plena* music constantly adds songs and verses commenting on present day events, and the people who play it are not trying to revive a genre, but rather are playing because it is the medium that ultimately speaks to them urgently about their lives. I started interviewing the musicians of *Viento de Agua* at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and one particular musician, Juan 'Llonsi' Martínez told me that I had to come to San Juan for the *Fiestas of San Sebastián*. He spoke of his group of friends who played at the festivals every night, on the same street corner, while corporate sponsored bands paraded down the main street drowning them out.

With my interest piqued, I stayed in San Juan for one month (January 2010), and then for four days (January 2011). I interviewed musicians from *Viento de Agua*, one of their older mentors Ismael 'Cocolay' Rivera, artisans who ran shops in Old San Juan, and documented the festivals daily and during all hours. I wanted to see the evolution of an evening at the street corner where the same *pleneros* had gathered for many years, so I focused on the intersection of Calle San Sebastián and Calle Cruz. This corner has been the meeting point of a particular group of *plenero* musicians for over 10 years. It was on the first night that I saw the conflict between *pleneros* playing here and the louder parade acts on the main street. It quickly became apparent that these *pleneros* were trying to make a statement about Puerto Rican representation in the festival. Their performance differentiated itself from the main festivals, while also playing an integral part of it. This relationship is symbolic of Puerto Rico's relationship with the US. At the same time, the confluence of ebbs and flows during the evening between corporate sponsored acts, and the waxing and waning of the *plenero* group, reflects Puerto Rico's construction of identity and power

### Historical perspectives and Puerto Rican identity

In order to understand *plena* in its contemporary festival context, it is important to first understand its historical rise and emergence as a Puerto Rican music genre. Juan Flores in his essay “Bumbun and the Beginnings of Plena Music” breaks down the rise of *plena* in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into three time frames. This period of Puerto Rico’s history saw great changes in the labour force. The first time frame, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1926, “saw the emergence and consolidation of the distinctive form and its spread to all regions of the Island.” The second time period, from 1925-1950, marked the rise of musicians Canario and Cesar Concepcion who helped spread the genre to the “salons and ballrooms” of “the cultural elite.” The third phase spans the 1950’s and 1960’s, and is the return of *plena* to the working class, initiated by recordings from Mon Rivera, Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera, who are thought to have brought the genre back to “poor workers and unemployed masses from whom it has sprung” (Flores, 2000, pp. 86-87). Flores highlights *plena*’s intrinsic tie to a Puerto Rican working class but also its attempted entrance into mainstream music and then its return to its proletarian roots. Flores is arguing for *plena*’s ongoing relevance as working class music, and this keeps *plena* alive despite its lack of commercial success. He says:

It was work and the life-experience of Puerto Rican working people that made for the substance and social context of the *plena* in the streets and bars...where it was born, and it is that same reality which has remained the most basic reference-point for plena music down to the present (Flores, 2000, p. 91).

The working people that Flores speaks of, was the early 20<sup>th</sup> century labour force that was changing into wage labour and capitalist-led agriculture. This group was comprised of “former slaves, peasants, and artisans” that gave rise to *plena* as a way to voice strike conditions and day-to-day events. This history makes *plena* continue in its relevance, for it is used as the ultimate vehicle for voicing concerns from a people that continued to be marginalized. The roots of *plena* also make this genre the best vehicle for voicing present day concerns during the festival. The *pleneros* are often singing about class disparities, US imperialism, and corrupt politicians. As they sing through the nights of *Las Fiestas*, they continue a tradition of challenging the status quo. This group of *pleneros* feel that they are struggling with the “same reality” that Flores speaks of; where, as a class, they need to speak of their marginalization. The group of *pleneros* that convene at this intersection every year is identity-making through cultural performance. Even when singing older well-known plena songs, this history and identity come through. “Ola de la mar” is one song sung every festival night, and many audience members join to sing along:

Ola de la mar	Ocean Wave
Ola de la mar	Ocean Wave
Tráigame la paz	Bring me peace
Tráigame la paz, que mi plena va a sonar	Bring me peace, for my <i>plena</i> is going to play (Folkways Records, 2004).

This song's call to peace from the ocean is a recognition of turbulence, but also creates an island place, surrounded by the ocean. It is also an invitation for *plena* to bring peace; when this song is played during the festivals, it speaks to discordant issues in Puerto Rico that must be resolved, but it is also an identity marker for participants who sing and play it. The performance of this song allows performers to continuously honour and create their identities.

This identity is one that greatly concerns some of these *pleneros*, as young generations are perceived as having disconnected from Puerto Rican roots. *Plenero* Juan 'Llonsi' Martinez has said in an interview:

A lot of the young people they don't have identity. And I think that's bad. They don't have any posters of any Puerto Rican musicians, artists, or athletes. From the time that you are a little kid here, you are told that you are inferior. They tell you in school you are from a really small island, you will always have to be attached to a more powerful country to be something. And I know that this is wrong. Other countries, small islands, have proven it. So we (*pleneros*) it is our job to tell them the real stories (Martinez, 2010).

Juan sees his role as a *plenero* as a sort of guardian of identity and responsible for passing on this sense of Puerto Rican pride to future generations. This desire for maintaining and creating identity makes the festival performances take on a particular intensity.

This identity creation is illustrated in Peter Manuel's work about *plena* during the 1970's and 1980's. Much of what he had written with regards to Puerto Rican music and identity remains relevant when looking at how modern day *pleneros* in the contexts of *Las Fiestas* create identity through cultural performance. Manuel wrote of a "national obsession" of Puerto Rican identity and discusses music genres as spaces that were used to establish this identity. He pointed to the island's colonial status as one reason why there was a fixation on establishing defined ideas of Puerto Rican identity; he discussed music as a primary way that Puerto Rico is able to differentiate itself from mainland US culture. Manuel pointed to this "national obsession" as a product of such factors as homogeneity, peripheral island geography, emigrant communities, and the Puerto Rican population's "high political consciousness":

Puerto Rico's ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, the relatively high political consciousness of its population, its large and self-conscious emigrant communities, and the above all, its ongoing colonial status have generated, for over a century, a persistent and explicit concern-occasionally described as an 'obsession' with national identity. Music has served as one of the most important symbols of Puerto Rican cultural identity (Manuel, 1994, p. 249).

Manuel brought to light the ever-present discourse of national identity that fed much of what was written about Puerto Rican music. He addressed this when he talked about *plena* and *bomba*. He stated:

*Plena* and *bomba* together occupy another sort of prominence in Puerto Rican national culture and discourse. Both genres are distinctively Puerto Rican creations. Thus, both have been explicitly celebrated as essential components of Puerto Rican musical culture which deserve recognition and promotion (Manuel, 1994, p. 257).

Manuel pointed to the significance of *plena* and *bomba* being upheld as indigenous Puerto Rican genres. Yet, he went on to say later, that these genres had never achieved the prominent mainstream popularity enjoyed by other Caribbean music genres such as the “son” (showcased in the documentary Buena Vistas Social Club) from Cuba. Manuel believed that “national music” signified “mass media dissemination” and *plena* had not been marketed for a mainstream audience. While, *plena* and *bomba* are sometimes incorporated in more mainstream ensemble salsa bands, Manuel was speaking directly to the kind of *plena* that is played on the streets or in smaller gatherings, and this style does not use electrified instrumentation. The most distinct characteristic of this type of *plena* are its narrative themes of social commentary. This type of *plena* is difficult to professionalize, for it inhabits a distinct public sphere that acts as counter-discourse to mainstream media. Manuel explains:

The *plena* for example, is routinely performed by meandering ensembles at informal street parties, by protesting students, and by striking labour unions in front of targeted workplaces. But in the realm of popular dance music and the mass media, they have given up their niches to mainstream salsa, rock, merengue, and other contemporary styles (Manuel, 1994, p. 260).

This style of *plena* is one that had historically faced disfavour from the government and other Puerto Ricans seeking a more urbanized and Americanized identity. As Manuel said:

A more significant factor appears to have been the negative association of *plena* with the more backward sectors of local society, at a time when many, if not most Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans, sought a more modern, cosmopolitan identity (Manuel, 1994, p. 261).

At the same time, *plena* has enjoyed periods of revivalism. Manuel said:

Since the 1970s *plena* ... [has] been the subject of a deliberate, folkloristic revival. A handful of quasi-folkloric groups have emerged which perform *plena* at town festivals and occasionally, at ordinary dance concerts (ibid.).

This “folklorization” of *plena* had actually garnered a certain amount of commercial success, in that folklore festivals and record companies targeting “roots” music have contributed to this revival both in terms of generating some revenue for the selling of *plena* music, and also exposure to a wider audience. Smithsonian Folkways Records, National Geographic and other “world music” labels have all produced *plena* albums. Regardless of this success, *plena* still remains on the fringes of mainstream popular music, or as Manuel says, “*plena* and *bomba* no longer occupy a significant role in mainstream popular music, which has for some time been dominated by rock and salsa.” At the time that Manuel was writing this, the 1970’s was exploding with salsa and rock and roll music; but *plena* today is still not seen as mainstream music, as this is an area dominated by reggaeton and hip-hop groups.

For Puerto Rico, mainstream music is heavily influenced by US commercial music because of the island’s mainland diaspora. Duany (2000) provides a framework of how the diaspora has shaped and constructed Puerto Rican identity. Since a significant percentage of

the Puerto Rican population lives on the mainland, this inhibits the ability of defining national identity simply through a geographic boundary. Duany says:

Nearly 44 percent of all Puerto Ricans were living in the United States in 1990. Between 1991 and 1995, nearly 170,000 island residents moved to the US mainland. By 1997, an estimated 3.1 million Puerto Ricans resided in the mainland compared to the 3.7 million on the island...In 1990, more than 321,000 residents of Puerto Rico, or nine percent of the total population, had been born abroad (Duany, 2000, p. 6).

Jorge Duany points to this mass migration as a “nation on the move” with no distinct geographical parameters to create a collective identity. These numbers indicate a population that is in constant contact with American influences and are therefore constantly reshaping their own borders in terms of a collective nationhood. This “nation on the move” is constantly navigating two discourses of identity, which Duany discusses. The first is the struggle for independence in order to retain a national cultural identity. The second, those who believe that a “national identity” creates a “homogenizing, essentialist, and totalitarian fiction called ‘the nation’” (Duany, 2000, p. 6). These two competing arguments have attachment to distinct ideological camps. The first, Marxists who are typically labelled “Hispanophiliacs” because of their belief in a unifying Spanish language and Hispanic heritage that can band them together against US imperialism. The second argument is usually attributed to post-modernists that think, “the Hispanophilia of the native elite is a discursive practice that glosses over the internal diversity of the collective imaginary” (ibid.) Duany frames these two arguments as being manifestly devoid of the diaspora, and thus frames his argument for “the invented, hybrid, and contested texture of cultural identities in Puerto Rico,” which shape discourses of sovereignty versus annexation. Duany says:

To a large extent, the politics of decolonization (whether through statehood, independence, or increased autonomy) is contingent upon competing discourses of identity (Duany, 2000, p. 7).

During the *fiestas*, these discourses become reflected and refracted in the context of festival cultural performance, for they manifest through main street festival acts and competing counter-performances of corner street musicians. For *pleneros*, there can be a unifying Puerto Rican identity, but not one based on “Hispanophilia.” Rather, *pleneros* feel that *plena* is indicative of an Afro-Puerto Rican aesthetic, which has traditionally been marginalized and not recognized by members of the elite. These elites are typically involved in the shaping of both the main discourses cited by Duany, but they are not the only discourses represented during the festivals. Instead, there are clashing ideas of Puerto Rican-ness versus American-ness. *Pleneros* feel they are representative of Puerto Rican roots, those based on islanders of African descent, going against wealthier Puerto Ricans who yearn for American-ness and statehood.

*Plena* went through a period of folklorized revival during the 1970’s and 1980’s and this has continued through the 1990’s and to today where it is still enjoying a certain degree of popularity. Marilyn Miller’s article “Plena and the Negotiation of ‘National’ Identity in Puerto Rico” discusses two common tropes in the discourses of *plena*. The first is “the historical resistance in Puerto Rico to *plena* and other diasporic phenomena.” This resistance is because of *plena* being attached to Afro-Puerto Rican working class sectors of society. The second



trope is “the historical embrace of plena as an autochthonous expression of that same culture” (Miller, 2004, p. 43). The first trope, of the resistance to *plena* because it comes from an Afro-Puerto Rican proletariat, is relevant for modern-day *pleneros* who play at the festivals. Presently, as has been stated earlier, plena is enjoying a folklore revival, and as Miller states, “*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 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Miller (2004) continues to give examples of this success, by pointing to the creation in 1994 of November 19<sup>th</sup> being “Dia Nacional de la Bomba y Plena” and a year later in 1996 the *plena* group *Los Pleneros de la 21* being awarded the National Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Humanities. She also writes about the multimedia project *Raices*, sponsored by Banco Popular which is a history of Puerto Rican music in which *bomba* and *plena* are featured prominently. Miller goes on to point to the host of music awards, music videos, and the large number of *plena* groups that are regularly hired for community and civic events, and also greet passengers of international cruise ships (Miller, 2004). All of these examples point to a rise in popularity for *plena*. No longer is *plena* rejected, but supposedly is embraced as emblematic of Puerto Rican identity, and more specifically a folkloric form that showcases a rural, island aesthetic. But in the context of the festival, something entirely different takes place. *Plena* is not embraced; but rather, in the words of *plenero* Hector ‘Tito’ Matos, “becomes relegated to a second light” (Matos, 2010). So, while *plena* has enjoyed a recent revival, the festival becomes a contested space, where certain music genres are highlighted more than others. *Plena*, in contrast, is played off to the side, and inhabits its original intent: performing and informing a critique of politicians, social strata, and US cultural imposition. This happens specifically because the festival is taking place; therefore, *Las Fiestas* becomes the stage where actors display the intricate relationship between Puerto Rican mainstream identities, as constructed by perceived US mainland influences, versus Puerto Rican marginalized identities. This performance is symbolic of larger issues of identity at the core conflict between local autonomy and globalism.

The start of the festival is marked by a mass in honour of San Sebastián, patron saint of archers, soldiers, and athletes. He is often depicted tied to a tree and shot with arrows. Some historians date the San Sebastián festival back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but resources document that in 1954 Father Juan Manuel Madrozo of the church of San Jose in Old San Juan came up with the idea with other Old San Juan residents. He raised money for a festival, but a few years later he was moved to another parish and the festival stopped. In the mid 1970’s, a historian named Ricardo Alegria asked resident Doña Rafaela Balldares de Brito, to restart the holiday to continue to celebrate San Sebastián. Dona Rafaela was an Old San Juan resident dedicated to promoting and supporting cultural projects in Puerto Rico. She was known as the matron of *las fiestas* until her death, aged 97, in 2011 (Wikipedia contributors, 2012).

The festival starts on the east side of Old San Juan at Calle Taca and Calle San Sebastián, and the procession makes its way west ending at the Instituto Cultura de Puertorriquena. Calle San Sebastián is packed with close to one million people during the festivals, and there are other concert stages occurring in different plazas in the neighbourhood, along with food vendors clustered in different side streets (Rico, 2012). Calle San Sebastián is predominantly filled with bars and restaurants that stay open later in the night for the festival. The main festivals acts parade down Calle San Sebastián starting in the early evening around 6pm until around midnight. The festival was originally two weeks long but in the last 10 years it has been shortened to four days. It used to continue well into the early morning hours, until

the street cleaning trucks came and people would slowly filter out. However, the city government has recently enacted a curfew: all festivities must end and bars must close at 11pm on Thursdays, 1am on Fridays and Saturdays, and 10pm on Sunday. These regulations were put in place as a response to noise complaints by residents of Old San Juan. Although, according to Tito Matos, these residents are newer US residents, and other residents contested these regulations. In an interview with Tito, he said:

This 'new' citizens' neighbourhood group has been complaining about the noise, saying there is a lot of crime. But Old San Juan is really expensive; it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And now, a lot of people who used to be homeowners in Old San Juan can no longer afford it. But people from the US have been buying these homes, and created this new neighbourhood group. When the older residents of Old San Juan went to the town meetings to contest the new regulations, it was too late. The regulations were already in place (Matos, 2010).

Tito's interview reflects how regulations reflect the divide between newer and older residents of Old San Juan. He sees older residents as Puerto Ricans, while newer residents come from the US. This is another manifestation of the tensions of the festivals, as regulations are put in place in order to appease newer US residents.

The festivals are certainly loud, raucous and, perhaps to a US resident, a bit crazy. But Tito sees this as tied to a Caribbean cultural tradition, and these regulations are an attempt to change Puerto Rico to a more mainland US culture. He states that the government in charge is pro-statehood, and the regulations are an attempt to appease US mainland ideas of cultural appropriateness. I asked why the regulations were put in place. Tito and Jose Calderon, another musician, responded:

Tito: The government in charge is pro-statehood and they don't want to be associated with the Caribbean root. They want to be associated with the more ... quiet culture.

Jose: They want us to be more American than the Americans (Matos, Ramos, Calderon, & Martinez, 2010).

These reflections on the regulations are a manifestation of the power dynamics that are at play during the festivals. For this group of *pleneros*, maintaining the "Caribbean root" becomes important in the face of changing ideas of Puerto Rican culture as imposed by government entities that want to appease US residents.

### **Festival scholarship**

Festivals have always been highly contested performative spaces, and the last 30 years have produced shifts in festival research as the focus tends to be on the effects of globalism on local festivals. In his introductory chapter, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, p. 9) states, "Thus the carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter." But then, he goes on to specify:

Something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. Without this sanction there is no festivity (ibid.).

The *fiestas* are a respite from normal routine for most people that attend, but the *pleneros* are also trying to keep an ideological sense to the *fiestas*, something that is lost in the corporate-sponsored acts. Alessandro Falassi (1987) talks about festivals serving two functions. First is the symbolic inversion of everyday life or the flipping upside down of reality. The second is the mirroring of everyday life during the festival, and this is sometimes a performance of exaggeration or enhancement of everyday events. These two competing and complimentary ideas lead “to renounce and then announce culture” (Falassi, 1987, p. 3). This announcement can be both celebratory and critical, and take on symbolic meaning that infuses the community with “creating new energy.” For Falassi, “inversion and intensification” leads to a sanctioned space where people must ultimately disrupt their daily lives, in order to have a performative conversation (ibid.). For the *Fiestas* in San Juan, mirroring and intensification is seen through the relationships of the different performances happening simultaneously. Corporate sponsored acts drown out the *pleneros* on the corner. While this may seem accidental, the *pleneros* are aware of their symbolic resistance in not participating as audience members for the main festival acts. The intensification is made starkly apparent every time festival acts come down the street, featuring Coca-Cola t-shirts and banners, drowning out *pleneros* on the corner in normal everyday clothes. But inversion occurs when *pleneros* attract bigger audiences than the main parade acts, and their audiences will at times block the main street and stop all parade acts from proceeding forward. For *pleneros*, Puerto Rican identity is intensified during performance in the *fiestas*. For the *pleneros* on the corner of Calle Cristo, they come together to play *plena*, without the sanctioning of either state or corporate business. This becomes an intensification of the struggle for Puerto Rican identity within the context of its relationship with the US. *Las Fiestas* aligns with definitions outlined by Falassi and Bakhtin, but also exists beyond their outlined parameters. Inversion and intensification are at play because of a resistance to the sanctioned parade acts by corporate sponsors and the city government.

Guss (2000, p. 8) argues that there “is no single analysis that will apply to all performances of the carnival. He adds that Abner Cohen’s work on London’s Notting Hill Carnival is central to asking about what a carnival can be; it asks whether popular culture is an ‘opium of the masses,’ inspired by the ruling classes as part of the dominant culture; counter culture, an ideology of resistance and opposition; or a contested ideological terrain. Guss concludes that carnival is all of these, driven by people performing with different motives:

In the end, it is all of these things at different times. Yet to understand exactly which it is at any given moment demands that the carnival be understood as an historical creation performed by actors who often have competing interests (Guss, 2000, p. 9).

For Guss, a festival is a multi-vocal performance of “competing interests.” For *Las Fiestas*, those interests range between monetary to ideological. In essence, the *Fiestas* are a dramatic enactment of an ideological war between Puerto Rican identities. The tension that exists in the evenings are a framing of competing interests that happen in many island nations and communities. The retaining of local identity is intensified as it tries to resist against corporatized ideas of identity and nationhood.

During the festival gatherings of *plenero* musicians on the corners, members of the audience are invited to dance and participate in singing both old songs and new songs that are made up on the spot. It is not uncommon to find one person leading and singing the *plena* song on a megaphone, so they can be heard over the noise of the *fiestas*. This creates an easy way for call and response audience participation, and also allows larger crowds to gather around the

*pleneros* in the centre since it is easier for people to hear the music. Sometimes these clusters and groupings spill over into the main street festival parades and block the main street acts from being able to pass through. These *plena* groupings are pulsating with energy, the leader singing out verses to the festival crowd, and *plenero* musicians and audience members singing back choruses, and the energy continues to grow and shift as *plenero* musicians take turns playing solos and improvising verses. The songs can be old *plena* songs that everyone knows, or songs improvised in the moment, calling out and criticizing politicians, or announcing news and stories that have recently occurred. The beats are infectious and easy to dance to, and anyone can join into the groupings to sing along, play a *pandereta*, dance, or just listen. When participating in a *plena* song on these street corners, every single person participating can feel the festival ethos as its known in its heady, Dionysian, crazed, and passionate glory. It is joy and celebration exhibited with such frenzy, that it touches onto the border of madness. But at the centre of the group keeping the musical structure from unraveling, is always made up of experienced older *pleneros* that have known each other and have played together year after year on the same street corners. Their sons join them in taking turns playing and singing. While traditionally *plena* music has been a heavily male-dominated sphere, it is common to see at least several younger women playing *panderetas* with the core group, although they remain a minority. However, the mixed gender audiences sing along and clap with the *pleneros*. The core group camaraderie reflects lifelong friendships. Jokes are traded, solos invited, verses created on the spot, as they continue to play, sing into the megaphone, and hug each other laughingly, while the grouping grows, gets smaller, grows again, and ebbs and flows as the night continues. *Pleneros* at the festival reflect the essence and meaning of festive life. They are pied pipers among a throng of tourists and locals, using their musicianship and kinship to bring people into a heightened state of festival ecstasy; at the same time celebrating an identity that may be contested, but few who attend the festival can ever forget.

## Conclusion

The following year (2011), when I attended *Las Fiestas*, the *pleneros* at Calle Cruz and Calle San Sebastián staged a protest. They wore orange shirts with slogans saying “la calle es nuestra” (Translation: The street is ours), protesting against the imposition of the city curfew. The *pleneros* went on the main street and disrupted the festival acts, singing and chanting. Security personnel stationed on top of roofs watched with interest where the *pleneros* were heading, talking on their walkie-talkies. Tourists and other festival-goers joined in the chanting, and the group swelled bigger and bigger, until the bulk of the street consisted of the *plenero* contingency. Unfortunately, they ran into one of the *batucada* ensembles, and at that point the *pleneros* retreated back to their original corner. When I asked Tito what happened, he said “we don’t really have an issue with the *batucada* guys. Some of those guys are our friends” (Matos, 2010). While *batucada* is seen by some *pleneros* as a genre imported from Brazil and not indicative of Puerto Rican identity, this avoidance of a possible clash during the festivals is symbolic of an even deeper notion of Puerto Rican identity. Many *plenero* musicians know and work with *batucada* musicians. As a densely packed island with a population of over 3.5 million, locals still recognize one another and, despite the massive swelling of tourists in Old San Juan, Puerto Rican families and friends come together to enjoy the parade. The confrontation between *batucada* musicians and *pleneros* could have become something more serious; but, in the end, maintaining equanimity was valued more than protest.

In these moments of contestation, the issue of Puerto Rican identity remains a heavily complex paradigm. How does one claim cultural space, when identity is shaped by diasporic influences and complicated by power relations between an island nation and a larger, more powerful mainland state? Through the festival, inversion and reflection are used to talk about the struggle of retaining cultural autonomy in an era of globalism. These conversations are stoked by the cultural performance of *plena*, in stark contrast to corporate-sponsored main street acts. If scholarship shows that festival is a place where performers speak to “competing interests,” then *plena* is the language used by a section of the populace to speak to their interests of maintaining cultural autonomy. Using the festivals as a lens for witnessing layers of oppression, celebration, festiveness, subalternity and power dynamics weaving throughout Puerto Rican society is key to understanding issues of Puerto Rican identity and nationhood.

I interviewed an artisan shop owner in Old San Juan named Jose Cruz Candelaria one day before the festivals started. He is a teacher and is also known for being a local expert on Three King’s Lore. He showed me many of the items in his shop and then mentioned that he had to start selling alcohol during *Las Fiestas* in order to stay in business. When I asked him why he thought it was important to continue to sell local Puerto Rican art, he replied:

I think it’s important because it’s part of our culture. Many people both here and abroad, have no idea that Puerto Rico has its own unique culture. We are a composite of African, Indigenous, and Caucasian decent. We’re a nationality, not a race. And if we don’t accept that, as a rule, then we don’t love each other, and we don’t love ourselves (Cruz Candelaria, 2010).

In this interview, Jose is evoking the importance and relevancy of being able to demarcate identity. It is directly attached to how an island people feel about each other and themselves. Self-love, and the love of those around you, is perhaps one of the hardest yet most important struggles of all. In the festivals, this love is celebrated, sung about, danced with, laughed at, embraced, reinvented, and most definitely, fought for.

### **Postscript**

A referendum on the political status of Puerto Rico was held in Puerto Rico on November 6, 2012. Voters in Puerto Rico were asked whether they agreed to continue with Puerto Rico’s current territorial status and, to indicate the political status they preferred from three possibilities: statehood, independence, or a sovereign nation. 54% voted ‘no’ to the first question, and 61.1% chose statehood on the second question. At the time of writing, Puerto Rico’s status is still up for debate (Koebler, 2012).

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