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Reseña de "Los bembeteos de la plena puertorriqueña" de Ramón López
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popularity rating of any President in recent history, would expend what little political capital he has left on a defense of Latino immigrants.

Geraldo: The warrior
Rivera shows himself willing to jeopardize his own career by taking on the media for stoking anti-immigrant hysteria. He names Rush Limbaugh “the dean of the academy” of conservative right-wingers in leading the most savage talk radio campaign in history against illegal immigrants. He refused to shake hands with CNN news spokesman Lou Dobbs at the William Morris annual reception, “so destructive have his editorial choices and solemnly delivered bullshit been to the cause of sensible dialogue” (p. 23). He openly criticizes Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity on Fox Television, his own employer, for their ultraconservative views on Latino immigration.

One of the shortcomings of His Panic is that, while rich in information and verifiable sources, it lacks footnotes and a bibliography. While the reader can Google these sources, it leaves the work subject to attack for its reliance on secondary sources.

To the standing-room-only crowd at Hostos Community College attended by immigrants of many nationalities, Geraldo remarked “I have had a good life and been very successful in my profession, which is why I …must present this defense of Latino immigrants.” The comment brought applause and a standing ovation by the participants. Within the media arena, at the age of 65, Geraldo Rivera has truly emerged as a true warrior in defense of the Latino community and immigrant rights.

NOTES
1 “Hispanic” is Geraldo’s preferred term, but he recognizes, as does this writer, that “Hispanic” and “Latino” are interchangeable. For the purpose of this review, I have chosen the term Latino.

Los bembeteos de la plena puertorriqueña
By Ramón López
San Juan: Ediciones Huracán, 2008
260 pages; $15.95 paper
REVIEWER: MELANIE Maldonado, Northwestern University

Cultural anthropologist Ramón López unpacks the AfroPuerto Rican music genre of plena through a detailed analysis informed by his multiple roles as intellectual, plena practitioner, and barriado (from the barrio). In addition to his research of plena, López has examined the Three Kings of Puerto Rican lore, transnational Boricua movements, and other manifestations of cultural identity and memory. As a plenero, the author utilizes an auto-ethnographic perspective to delineate the hybridization of plena and its translocality. He also employs archival research and historiography to unveil plena’s generational shifts, theorize hegemony, and deconstruct romanticizations of this creole genre.

This monograph is an important contribution to Puerto Rican, diasporic, and Caribbean music studies. López’s book builds on the work of Félix Echevarría Alvarado’s La plena: origen, sentido y desarrollo en el folklore puertorriqueño. Whereas that 1984 text serves primarily as a historical survey, Los bembeteos expands this body of knowledge with
an examination of plena that moves beyond the Christmas music of the contemporary social imaginary to that of a disembodied cultural movement within Puerto Rico and throughout the Diaspora. He credits this “movement” with defying the hegemonic state-imposed strictures designed to regulate plena and thereby make it more generalizable. He takes issue with the romantic label of plena as “the sung newspaper,” arguing that this folklorized version runs counter to its status as a barrio manifestation. López’s principal argument is that plena is *bembeteo*, that is, frank and unmediated interpersonal communication, which is in stark contrast to the impersonal, reportorial character of journalism. In this way, López disassociates plena from a hegemonic state memory and returns it to the people in what he terms *memorias barriadas*.

In his explication, López asserts that plena’s transgressive character has protected it from censorship. However, he demonstrates how its rebellious quality has negatively affected the narrative of commercial plena lyrics, which he posits have become superficial articulations of consumerism. He also critiques the hybridization that has resulted in the accelerated rate of singing and has changed the way many *pandereteros* slap their hand-held drums. While he cites Cuban music as the most dominant external cultural influence, he neglects to acknowledge that the very word he uses to describe the lead drum, *quinto*, is itself a reference to one of the Cuban *timbas*. His recurring use of *quinto* instead of *requinto* (the traditional Puerto Rican term for the high-tuned lead drum of plena) becomes a marker of his generational influence and reaffirms his status as a contemporary practitioner.

*Los bembeteos* also includes generous references to the work of plenera/os of the Diaspora. Many texts treat island-based Puerto Ricans as distinct from their continental-based counterparts, but López himself moves back and forth between Puerto Rico and the United States, traversing the planes that intersect and connect practitioner communities and crossing state and other boundaries. According to López, this movement is not fixed to either national pole nor to any of the individual sites he mentions; rather, it is present in all of these locations and is an example of what he refers to as the “transboricua.” The work of the Diaspora demonstrates the traveling nature of plena he describes as migratory. Other delineations he makes include three periods of plena history: 1) its birth and folklorization; 2) its commercialization and introduction to the diaspora; and 3) its return to the barrio. The author also provides excellent information about little-known recordings, contemporary barrio practices such as the *plenazos callejeros*, the artisans and visual artists who have contributed to the plena community.

The timing of this publication is critical for AfroBoricua music studies. The last ten years have produced numerous events and resources centered around or incorporating research related to plena or *bomba*. These include two films—*Bomba: Dancing the Drum* (2001) and *Raíces* (2001)—and educational projects such as El Bombazo de Puerto Rico (1998–2002), the Congreso Nacional de la Bomba (2004), Congreso Nacional de la Plena (2004), Bomba Research Conference (2005, 2007), and Fiesta Nacional de la Bomba (2008). These either evolved from within a practitioner community or were heavily influenced by practitioners. Groups in New York City, Chicago, and in the San Juan Metropolitan area are also excavating AfroBoricua music from the 1914–15 field recordings of anthropologist John Alden Mason. This surge of action from within practitioner communities toward research is producing a growing wave of interest in the documentation and exchange of knowledge. Ramón López’s *Los bembeteos* comes at a time when the hunger for knowledge about plena is at a peak and the scholarship on the topic is negligible. Because it is the first book in almost a quarter of a century devoted exclusively to this creole music genre, it has been warmly received both on the Island and within the Diaspora.
Lopez’s investigation has a myriad of strengths, including a reading of history that allows plena to literally speak for itself through reprinted lyrics (among which are those of labor activist Jesús Colón, musician Manuel Jiménez “Canario,” and the author). Also welcome is his theorizing of bembeteo and memorias barriales, gifts for scholars employing cross-lingual citation.

Certain topics would have benefited from more in-depth analyses. Among these are: 1) the confused association of the collective cultural memory that incessantly groups plena and bomba together as one genre (“bomba-y-plena”); 2) the contribution of women to contemporary practice; 3) the argument of mayagüezanos that plena has its roots in their town; and 4) the marginalization of black cultural product in Puerto Rico. Los bembeteos inexplicably omits references to interviews or other information obtained from lay researchers or practitioners. While López’s literature review and other references cite the current body of scholarly work related to plena, the lack of sources related to his ethnographic fieldwork contributes to widespread elision of native knowledge by the academy. While a few readers may be overwhelmed by the breadth of information presented in the book’s mere 248 pages, the combination of diverse facts and critical review is necessary to a holistic understanding of this cultural practice.

The importance of this examination cannot be understated. In a few months, Los bembeteos has quickly entered the canon of a few but celebrated books about AfroBoricua music. The book itself reflects López’s theorizing about the migratory nature of plena; it moves from practice to his pages and then into collective thought and appreciation.

Ramón López’s perspective as a native ethnographer provides an “insider’s look” that will appeal to both academic and lay readers. In particular, the book may be used by advanced undergraduates and graduate students in cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, performance studies, gender studies, Latino and Latin American studies, diaspora studies, and Puerto Rican studies.

This monograph asks many questions, including: What is at stake when an active music culture is folklorized and appropriated as state memory? How might women revolutionize plena if they were to recuperate the early female history of it and take up the pandereta to honor it? What is the role of artisans and visual artists in music culture? How might plena music be transformed if it returned to its narrative roots? Does plena as a practice perform cultural memory or is plena merely informed by it? and, Has commercialization dislocated plena from its barrio practice?

Boricua weaver Ramón López uses Los bembeteos to relate a contemporary chronicle of plena; in doing so, he pulls an analytical thread through song lyrics, migration accounts, scholarship, and contemporary practice. Over and under these he interlaces anecdotes, primary and secondary sources, and film analysis to produce a tapestry of social criticism. As a seasoned plenero, López uses repetition as a simulated plena coro (chorus) to establish and reiterate important themes. This device transforms his audience from mere readers into participants of his plena performance. As a barriado, López employs bembeteo to draw us into his stories and encourages us to contribute our own. As a scholar, López invites future researchers to engage his work and to build upon it as they make room for the marginalized voices they represent. His multiple perspectives, experiences, and approaches will likely elicit strong responses, in the form of newly composed songs, academic analysis, or community commentary.

References