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Reggaetón as Resistance: Negotiating Racialized Femininity through Rap, Miniskirts, and Perreo

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Music

by

Cloe L. Gentile Reyes

Committee in charge:
Professor Martha Sprigge, Chair
Professor Dave Paul
Professor Dolores Inés Casillas

September 2023

The dissertation of Cloe Gentile Reyes is approved.

____

D. Inés Casillas

____

Dave Paul

____

Martha Sprigge, Committee Chair

July 2023

Reggaetón as Resistance: Negotiating Racialized Femininity through Rap, Miniskirts, and Perreo

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by
Cloe Gentile Reyes

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to my ancestors, my maternal grandmother, Mariana Fiss, the salsa-dancing fashionista who instilled confidence in me through leading by example. And to my dad, Guillermo Gentile, whose life was shaped by his deep resistance to fascism, and whose activist spirit cultivated my own. I would like to express an inexpressible gratitude to my mom, Linda Reyes, whose voice teaches me my history. Thank you to my best friends throughout graduate school, Serena, Megan, Lauren, and Valentina, without whom this would not have been written. And to my brilliant committee, Martha, Inés, and Dave, for treating my words with kindness the whole way through. Finally, thank you to my partner Danny and our furry companion RoRo for the life-giving cuddles.

VITA OF CLOE GENTILE REYES
JULY 2023

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology, University of California, Santa Barbara, July 2023
Master of Arts in Musicology, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2020
Bachelor of Arts in Music, Emory University (summa cum laude), 2017
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, Emory University, 2017

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Judith Tick Fellow in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies — 2022-23
Society for American Music

Dissertation Fellow — 2021-22
Chicano/a Studies Institute

Lead Teaching Assistant — 2019-20
Department of Music, UC Santa Barbara

Diversity Fellow — 2018-19
UC Santa Barbara

LECTURES/LECTURE-RECITALS AND PRESENTATIONS

"Reggaetón Realities & Imaginary Dancefloors as Queer Disabled of Color Liberatory Praxis," paper & sound-poems.
- Pop Conference (PopCon), April 2023.

"Bad Bunny/ Bad Feminist: Sonic Blackface, Queer Allyship, and Community Endorsement," paper.
- Society for American Music, March 2023.

"Reggaetóneras Resist: Fashion, Rap, Racialized Femininity" paper.
- International Association for Women in Music, June 2022.

"'Daddy Said Shoot:' Beyoncé and The Dixie Chicks' reception at the 2016 CMA's," co-written paper and presentation with Dr. Lauren Vanderlinden.
- International Association for the Study of Popular Music - U.S. Chapter, May 2021.

"'Larsen, Grever, and the Subversion of the Male Gaze in Art Song," invited speaker/panelist.
- Innovation in Art Song Summit, Indiana University Bloomington, March 2021.

"The Pan-American Bolero and María Grever's Idealized Woman," paper and performance.

- Symposium: *Displacements: Performance, Movement, and Resistance.,* Dept. of Theater and Dance, UC Santa Barbara, May 2019.
- UCSB Dept. of Music, Music History/Theory Forum, May 2019.

"Larsen as a Lens: The Male Gaze and the Female Voice," lecture-recital.

- Emory University, April 2017.

PUBLICATIONS

"Ronca Realness: Voices that Sound the Sucia Body," *Sounding Out!,* Latinx Sound Cultures Series, August 2023.

Father Ocean/ Papa Mar, *BIPOC Song Anthology*, collaboration with Nyokabi Kariũki, 2022.

Mama Bear and the Frosted Flakes, *Brown Sugar Lit,* Spring 2022.
How to Wake Latin Bodies, *Brown Sugar Lit,* Spring 2022.

Qué Quilombo, *Alloy Literary Magazine*, 2017.
Brown, *Alloy Literary Magazine*, 2017.

PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

2021-23, Research Assistant, Music Course Redesign, Mellon Foundation
Project Assistant, Latinx Sound Cultures Studies, Crossing Latinidades Humanities Project, Mellon Foundation

2019-2020, Graduate Student Researcher, UCSB Blum Center on Poverty, Inequality, & Democracy

2017-2023, Teaching Assistant, Music Department, UCSB

ABSTRACT

Reggaetón as Resistance: Negotiating Racialized Femininity through Rap, Miniskirts, and Perreo

by

Cloe Gentile Reyes

This dissertation acts as part memoir, part family archive, part critique, and fully a love letter to the innovations in music, dance, and fashion of impoverished, Black and brown, queer communities in reggaetón and beyond. It focuses on sonic and embodied resistance practices within Latinx popular culture as they take shape across several American metropoles, such as San Juan, New York City, and Miami, from the 1940s to today. This study is the first of its kind to conceptualize Reggaetón Cultura as inclusive of and descended from both Hip-Hop Culture *and* queer House Ball Culture, yet with its very own distinctive Afro-Diasporic dance, fashion, rhythms, and Black power discourses. I prioritize the resistive labor of queer, trans, and Afro-Latin reggaetóneres and explore the genre's concurrent commercialization and blanqueamiento (whitening) to examine the consequences of state-sanctioned policing and violence, as well as the ways in which reggaetóneres use La Cultura as a mode of resistance. My dissertation celebrates the sartorial politics of La Cultura and brings to light the interconnectedness of Afro-Diasporic social dance, drum, and dress customs, as well as the ways in which Blackness and queerness are often falsely positioned as mutually exclusive.

This dissertation also contributes a reading of reggaetón vocality as a form of liberatory sonic suciedad, which in effect disrupts colonial gender binaries and provides racial healing through what I call "ronca realness," or raspy realness. I am deeply invested in restoring credit to Afro-Latin artists at the heart of the genre's political power, as well as

recognizing the understated role of Indigeneity in reggaetón discourse, especially potent in social dance and drum circles. My analyses are guided by the personal experiences of being doubly, or triply, colonized, and finding that the many identities I inhabit often rub against one another and scar. This writing heals by uniting visual queerness, sonic Blackness, and poor people's rich epistemologies for living life according to the dembow rhythm. As a queer perreo dancer since youth, this dissertation is over two decades in the making, and is above all else an ode to the racialized femmes of my culture who continue to resist imperial whiteness by moving their hips, in body and in spirit.

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Reggaetón as Cultura

"Pain narratives are always incomplete. They bemoan the food deserts but forget to see the food innovations; they lament the concrete jungles and miss the roses and the tobacco from concrete. Desire-centered research does not deny the experience of tragedy, trauma, and pain, but positions the knowing derived from such experiences as wise." – Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "R-Words: Refusing Research"

This dissertation documents queer, womanist, Afro-Diasporic and Indigenous histories and contemporary practices that inform reggaetón as a cultural movement. In doing so, I elucidate the restorative relationships between reggaetón, queerness and Blackness in Latinx culture after several decades of discriminatory and reductive discourse around the genre's misogyny and homophobia. This introductory chapter fleshes out of the many aspects of lived experience, spatial politics, musical ancestries, and related artforms, like dance and fashion, that create reggaetón as a Cultura.[1]

Reggaetón Cultura is composed of a certain fashion and aesthetic style derived from transatlantic, Caribbean, and Afro-Diasporic fabrics and styles, and often functions as a sartorial practice for perreo. Perreo is a distinctly Puerto Rican iteration of global booty-shaking dances, unique in its back-to-front partnering, and the influence of Puerto Rican

[1] Capitalized in an ode to Hip-Hop Culture and as a recognition of public discourse around reggaetón's liberatory potentials and communal understanding of reggaetón as La Cultura or El Movimiento. See, Jenifer Mota Valdez's article on "Urbano" in which she explains the use of "El Movimiento," https://remezcla.com/music/editorial-note-remezcla-will-no-longer-use-the-terms-urbano-musica-urbana/. Also, Eduardo Cepeda's reggaetón column on Remezcla. Also, see El Movimiento Podcast, Katelina Eccleston's Perreo 101, and the Hasta Bajo Project, whose slogan is "Reggaetón es Cultura." https://www.hastabajoproject.com

bomba, a dance-drum tradition that emanated from enslaved West African and Native peoples. In the dance form's contemporary iterations, it was used as an antidote to persistent Catholic-colonial pressures on the island that repressed the sexual epistemologies and freedoms of poor, Black youth. These Afro-Diasporic liberatory potentials open pathways for queering not only perreo and contemporary Puerto Rican life, but also notions around diaspora and diasporic dance-drum and social dance customs. The backdrop for much of perreo is the barrio, the working-class neighborhoods on the outskirts of colonial Old Town's like La Perla in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I conceptualize these barrios as sonic safe spaces llena de suciedad (full of nastiness) where Black and brown folks may return the colonial gaze (and ear) through dembow, the anti-colonial reggae-born rhythm upon which reggaetón's musical foundations rest. Situated at the crux of several fields, inclusive of musicology/popular music studies, sounds studies, dance studies, fashion studies, disability studies, Black studies, Latinx studies, performance studies, and feminist studies, this dissertation contributes a reading of Reggaetón Cultura as a sex-positive, liberatory artistic movement cultivated through distinct Afro-Indigenous dance, fashion, and rap. I assert that Reggaetón Cultura supports a decolonial relationship to the racialized body and barrio through the disruption of colonial ideals of sex and decency. Reggaetón is disrespectability politics in action.

. . .

I grew up dancing perreo in Miami as a young mixed Puerto Rican-Italian girl. The parks and recreation department served as my community's "nannies." We all took the bus from school to the park and that's where we choreographed our first masterpieces. We would

blast Ivy Queen's "Yo Quiero Bailar" and dance like *everyone* was watching. The parks would put on dances and we would grind on boys, gyrate up against other girls, and sometimes *perrear sola*.[2] Even though Ivy Queen's lyrics "yo quiero bailar… pero eso no quiere decir que pa' la cama voy,"[3] taught us from a young age that our dancing did not imply sexual consent. I see this dissertation starting within the spaces of my youth, which means that I have actually been working on it for two decades now. The questions I ask arise from my long personal history of engaging with, and reclaiming, reggaetón. They are in many ways spiritual, ancestral, and metaphysical inquiries deeply grounded in sociological structures that determine the experiences of living in a racialized queer femme working-class body. Some of these questions are: How is it that the dembow riddim has the power to transport me to a time that my body is not physically in, i.e. childhood, Taíno sovereignty, the slave trade? How did the dembow help me resist detachment from my heritage as I have moved into predominantly white spaces? How does the dembow continue to shape my aesthetic choices, activist ideologies, and sense of self? How does it do so for other women and queer people of color? How did I find queer space in a genre that is homophobic at its roots? And how do I make sense of the ways in which a riddim can impact everything—my relationship to my body, my fashion choices, my romantic relationships, my academic goals, and my heart for my community?

My own internalized social scripts reflect the ways in which U.S. Latinx popular music and media perpetuates a long history of racist practices that valorize whiteness—in its

[2] Translation: booty dance alone. All translations are mine. The issue of dancing perreo alone is one that is integral to this work, as I investigate the ways in which it has been adapted as a (white) feminist praxis in a patriarchal context, often representing a collapse of collectivity upon which social dance, especially Afro-Diasporic dance, is based. See chapter 4.
[3] Translation: "I want to dance… that doesn't mean I'm going to the bed."

imperial, colonial, and capitalist sense—as a standard of feminine beauty. In accordance with this, the musical genre of reggaetón, although emergent from poor Black creators, has gradually elevated more light-skinned and non-Black artists as it has become commercialized over the past two decades.[4] Since its emergence in the 1980s, reggaetón and its accompanying dance form, perreo, have been policed by the United States and Puerto Rican law enforcement for being "misogynistic" and "noisy."[5] However, there is and always has been a restorative discourse of Black female beauty that emanates from reggaetón's roots in the lower-class Black and brown barrios of several American metropolises.

Many of reggaetón's Black and brown creators have countered the white colonial gaze and listening ear by using La Cultura to form urban sites of racial and sexual healing, positioning the genre within a rich history of Latinx creativity that resists policing and surveillance. In order to preserve the modes of resistance that take shape when this music circulates in everyday, localized contexts, the histories I prioritize are site-specific, ancestral, digital, familial and community-oriented manifestations of the genre and its predecessors.

Reggaetón Ancestry: Reggae, Hip-Hop, & Queer House Ballroom

Reggae

Reggaetón's most obvious ancestor is reggae. Reggae emerged in Jamaica as an anticolonial practice tying Jamaicans to the African continent and vying for their repatriation.

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[4] See Regina Solis Miranda's article "Bienaventuarado el que escuche esta liriqueo: Negotiating latinidad through reggaeton." Pg. 503 has a compilation of photos that show the pioneers of reggae en español and early reggaetón against today's stars. This diagram makes clear the whitewashing that has occurred.

[5] I am referencing here the Mano Dura contra el Crimen and Anti-Pornography Campaign in Puerto Rico, and the War on Drugs in the U.S. See LeBrón, Marisol. "*Mano Dura Contra el Crimen* and Premature Death in Puerto Rico." In *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, 95-107. New York: Verso, 2016. Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Reggae's own predecessor, Ska, was early Rastafarianism embodied, a Black nationalist political and religious movement that originated in 1930s Jamaica. Stephen A. King has distinguished between three "distinct stages" in the Rastafarian movement taking place from 1870 to 1958. The first of which is Ethiopianism and the rise of a pan-African consciousness in Jamaica. The second is the formation of Rastafarian churches between 1930 and 1949, coinciding with the rise of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, and the third is the growth of a youth militia within the Rastafarian movement between 1949 and 1958.[6] Reggae and the Rastafari movement aimed to act as antidotes to the white missionary churches that perpetuated apartheid and white supremacy on the island.

Reggae's development was impacted by the influence of European training schools in Jamaica. King explains, "The Alpha Boys' School, a kind of reform school located in West Kingston, was the best example of how European schools of music were established in Jamaica to train Jamaican musicians to emulate the 'European wind band tradition.'"[7] Regardless of the ideological motivations behind reggae and ska, these lineages of sound and realities of sonic production continue to expose Europe's ever-present colonial hold in Jamaica. But Jamaican innovation was foregrounded through the "sound system," a portable music player on wheels made to bring Ska to the people in outdoor venues all over Kingston. Julian Henriques credits the sound system with what he calls dancehall and reggae's *sonic dominance*, the way in which the music is designed to penetrate the body with vibration so that it "brings you to yourself, and through your senses, it brings you to and with others

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[6] Stephen A. King and Barry T. Bays, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), xv.
[7] King, 15. Quoting Witmer 12.

sharing these convivial joys."[8] The feeling Henriques describes is precisely what I experience with reggaetón, the way the music can take over and transform an entire soundscape, or transport me to the island of Borikén in the dead of New York winter. This is reggaetón's inherited power to make bodies move through time and space.

During that first stage of Rastafarianism, the Panama Canal was being built and acted as a major catalyst for Jamaican migration and diaspora as they labored on the canal. It is this migration history that allowed for the particular fusion of sounds and styles to create Reggae en Español, which was reggaetón's direct predecessor and a mixture of dancehall and reggae sung in Spanish. Pioneering reggaetón scholar and podcaster, Katelina Eccleston, continues to advocate for the recognition of Afro-Panamanians in reggaetón's history, as the migratory patterns of Jamaicans and Panamanians to Puerto Rico and New York City often result in credit being given to Puerto Ricans and obscuring those who made Reggae en Español big in the first place, i.e. El General, Renato, DJ Negro, El Chombo, and La Atrevida. La Gata's work shows that it was not only Jamaicans but Panamanians in New York City helping to push reggae further along.[9] She explains that Puerto Ricans, through the Jones Act, which allowed a freer exchange of products between the island and the United States, had it easier in terms of promoting artists and selling merchandise, but that did not mean Jamaicans and Panamanians were not composing for the industry. In Ivy Queen's podcast, LOUD, she discusses how Jamaicans in Queens, New York City owned the biggest reggae label, BP Records, which is still active today. Eccleston attributes the erasure of Panamanians to a

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[8] Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (New York: Continuum, 2011), xv.

[9] This can be heard on La Gata's revolutionary reggaetón podcast, Perreo 101. She uplifts Afro-Panamanians in every episode, but for their influence on reggae specifically, see the episode "Reggae Respect – 35 Truths Nobody Wants to Accept."

difference in messaging, "Panamanians support romanticism over sex, while PR supports sex over love, and understand sex sells." She explains that Panamanians were not only more romantic by choice, but by necessity, as their Central American Blackness did not afford them the space or freedom to be the sexual ones; this was a (light-skinned) Puerto Rican privilege. And I would argue it was also a Puerto Rican curse, as the Jones Act was also a means to exploit the island's talents and resources through a reinforcement of the colonial relationship between the island and the United States.[10]

Reggaetón's "sonic dominance" was both constrained and amplified by the limitations placed on the bodies that produced it. In the case of reggae, Henriques states "the sound system crewmember's ways of knowing tend to be male, compared with the young female ways of knowing of the crowd."[11] In the creation of sonic dominance, the roles are gendered. Henriques speaks to an epistemology of sound and movement that is male dominated, but an epistemology of collectivity and social interaction that is female led.[12] Thus, I make the case throughout this dissertation, that if we lose the collective in reggaetón—for example, with certain male-dominated ideals of female agency that promote liberation as dancing perreo alone (as in Bad Bunny's "yo perreo sola")—we lose a sense of Afro-Diasporic and pan-Caribbean historicity and power in "knowing the crowd" that is beautifully female (and femme). Instead of foregoing women's historical power in order to accommodate the individualist, capitalist forms of feminism we are often forced into, this

[10] Collo, Martin J. "The Legislative History of Colonialism: Puerto Rico and the United States Congress, 1898 TO 1950." *Journal of Third World Studies* 12, no. 1 (1995): 265–87.
[11] Ibid, xxi.
[12] For a more up to date examination of how women's roles are changing in reggae, see Alexandria Miller's "Lioness Order: The Women of the Reggae Revival Speak."

dissertation offers cases where queer cis and trans women reclaim ancestral powers by blurring boundaries between gendered roles and embodying collectivist ideals.

The rise of queer cis and trans women emcees in reggaetón is particularly poignant amidst the backdrop of reggae's homophobic roots. While Rastafarian ideology was Black nationalist and anticolonial, the mechanisms by which its messages were dispersed were vehemently anti-gay. The way of berating the colonizer was to call them gay and create imagery of the white man engaging in sodomy. The best example of this is the name of the rhythm that characterizes reggae and reggaetón, the dembow. [13] While several podcasts and scholarly sources gloss over this piece of reggaetón's history, Wayne Marshall reveals that the word "dembow" comes from Shabba Ranks' 1991 hit entitled "Dem bow" where he tells Jamaicans and other Black Caribbeans not to *bow* to oppression, with bowing a euphemism for male-male oral sex.[14] Though the word dembow is distanced from its original context, and for some, hardly even carries the most subtle inkling of homophobic etymology, the homophobia we see in reggaetón today can be traced back to this initial sentiment. Marshall discusses:

> don't bow to oppression, in particular the (implicitly foreign) pressures toward such deviant sexual practices as oral sex (both fellatio and cunnilingus) and homosexuality. It may seem less than straightforward to conflate (neo) colonialist oppression with these sexual practices, but it is a longstanding charge in Jamaican public discourse - particularly from fundamentalist Christian quarters and certain sects of Rastafari - that oral and anal sex and same-sex relationships are not only taboo and proscribed by the Bible but are 'decadent' products of the West, of Babylon, and are thus to be resisted alongside other forms of colonization, cultural or political.[15]

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[13] The iconic and essential boom-ch-boom-chick rhythm of reggaetón became known as dembow, though there is also a genre in the Dominican Republic known as dembow, which is influenced by bachata and merengue, and is often faster than reggaetón.

[14] See Marshall's article "Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton" in Lied und Populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture 53 (2008).

[15] Marshall, 136.

In Marshall's analysis, the role of Christianity is no small matter. In fact, much of reggae and reggaetón's development has been in direct dialogue with Christianity and the Catholic Church, as well as grassroots community organizers like the Catholic Women's League in Puerto Rico.[16] In the case of reggae, the reclamation of religion from a settller colonial framework often meant more anti-gay hate and the renunciation of sexual deviance.

With the Rastafari shift toward militancy in the late 1950's, anti-gay hate became particularly violent and continued into the 1990's and early 2000's. For example, Buju Banton's "Boom Bye Bye" (1992) advocated for a day when he could rid Jamaica of gays by going on a murder spree, and Beenie Man's "Weh Yuh No Fi Do," (2004) stated that all gays must be killed. Being protest music, the messages in reggae were not simply images or sentiments but calls to action. For this reason, a coalition of several activist organizations, such as the Black Gay Men's Advisory Group, J-Flag (Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays), and OutRage!, created the Stop Murder Music campaign. In 2007, the campaign urged artists to sign a Reggae Compassion Act, but several artists have denied doing so to this day.[17] The schism between Black nationalism and queerness had been solidified early in reggaetón's legacy and it is one of the main foci of investigation in this dissertation; particularly, instances where Blackness and queerness are engaging in secret dialogue, as in reggaetón's oft-forgotten fabric and adornment histories.

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[16] See Petra Rivera-Rideau's book, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico,* and chapter "Perrils of Perreo," which elucidates the happenings around the Anti-Porn Campaign spearheaded by Senator Velda González in 2002. Rivera-Rideau makes the case that this campaign was different from other censorship acts in the island because it focused specifically on the image of women in reggaetón music videos. She positions this campaign as part of a long history of policing Black women's bodies and Black musical practices on the island, i.e. bomba, in order to create a whitened nation.

[17] And yet, reggae has seen a rise in not only women but queer-presenting artists, like the groundbreaking young musician Koffee.

Hip-Hop Culture & Queer House Ballroom

This dissertation contributes a holistic examination of reggaetón as Cultura, and conceptualizes what this means for people who listen, live, and experience it. It follows suit of Hip-Hop Culture, which has been conceptualized as a cultural movement due to its multifaceted artistic media and the codependence of rhythm, sound, fashion, aesthetics, dance, movement, visual art, street art, and shared lived experiences. Michael Viega explains:

> Today, Hip Hop Culture is global and provides unconditional acceptance for all people whose voices have been marginalized, oppressed, and stifled by societal structures. Hip Hop culture is reflected in its artistic elements, which KRS-One (2009) calls refinitions. The refinitions include graffiti art (writing or drawing on surfaces), deejayin' (artistically interacting with precomposed songs using music technology), breakin' (commonly called break dancing, an acrobatic street dance), MCin' (commonly called rapping), beat boxing (creating rhythmic sounds and electronic drums with voice and/or body), street fashion (clothing trends of inner-city youth), street language (the linguistic code and communication of Hip Hop), street knowledge (collective wisdom and instinct of communities surviving inner-city life), and street entrepreneurialism (grassroots business practices for those without access to mainstream paths toward success, commonly called hustling).[18]

Reggaetón is not only a part of Hip-Hop Culture, but an offshoot of it, as it forges particularly Caribbean relationships to Afro-Diasporic and Afro-Indigenous creative practices and liberation praxis. This is not to say that hip-hop is lacking in Caribbean representation, but rather, that hip-hop's Caribbean influence paved the way for a Caribbean-centric culture to arise with similar grandeur. As Ramón Rivera-Servera explains:

> Attacks to the hip hop legitimacy of the genre have pointed to its commercial success and production values, its break from U.S. old-school genre-specific codes and conventions (for example, singing mcs), and its latinidad

[18] Michael Viega, "Exploring the Discourse in Hip Hop and Implications for Music Therapy Practice," *Music Therapy Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (May 2015): pp. 139. I have found some of the best literature on hip-hop culture and its potentials for catharsis and community-building within fields of music therapy and music education, presumably because these fields deal with community in the flesh rather than the abstract and are able to more deeply understand how this musical culture shapes and is shaped by lived experience.

(interpreted as not-black) as deviations or bastardizations of what is erroneously narrated as an exclusively U.S. African American cultural form.[19]

Many of reggaetón's culture-bearers, including music critics, listeners, consumers, DJ's, dancers, and scholars, refer to the genre as La Cultura or El Movimiento. Two of the most popular music critics and historians of reggaetón, Jennifer Mota Valdez and Katelina "La Gata" Eccleston, aired their agreement with replacing previous categorizations of reggaetón with "El Movimiento." Mota Valdez writes "It's time to reimagine la cultura, acknowledge that each art form has its own journey and subculture as well."[20] Mota Valdez speaks to the fact that several different Latin American genres, i.e. R&B, hip-hop, trap, reggaetón, were being conflated as "Latin Urban." In 2020, several public intellectuals alongside the community catalyzed a shift in this terminology, denouncing the way in which "Latin Urban/Urbano" plays into racial socioeconomic stereotypes and erases stylistic nuance. Mota Valdez's statement shows that reggaetón, which she calls La Cultura, had been lumped under an "urbano" umbrella and is constantly in a state of renegotiating its race and class connotations. There is a fluidity between Hip-Hop Culture and Reggaetón Cultura because its makers and consumers are often the same people or removed by a generation. Understanding reggaetón as a part of Hip-Hop Culture holds space for forging Afro-Diasporic connections through not only sound, dance, fashion, and resistance, but also through colonial impacts, heteronormativity, internalized racism, and misogyny, particularly misogynoir.[21]

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[19] Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, "Reggaetón's Crossings: Black Aesthetics, Latina Nightlife, and Queer Choreography," in *No Tea, No Shade New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 98.

[20] https://twitter.com/jennifermotaval/status/1270734985444708352

[21] Misogynoir was coined by Moya Bailey and encapsulates the inseparability of sexism and racism in the lives of Black women. I broaden it here to include Indigenous women, as well as to position bolero and sterilization laws as examples of misogynoir at macro, i.e. governmental, entertainment, industrial, levels. See Bailey,

As J.G. Schloss says, Hip-Hop Culture "suggests something that is lived rather than bought and sold."[22] While hip-hop and reggaetón alike have reached extreme heights of commodification, their cultural movements live in the roots and the people who still continue to create apart from multi-billion dollar corporations and industries. This is not to say, however, that the underground is still the only place where hip-hop remains authentic or legitimate, but that these cultures hold at their core a dialectic of commodification and authenticity that neither negates or affirms the other entirely. Schloss reminds us of the roles of academic in this discourse, as well:

> Academic writers are often consumed with hip-hop's moral or artistic legitimacy, a pursuit that necessarily focuses on the relationship between the subject of their study and the standards of whatever outside authority the argument is appealing to. This naturally tends to downplay the artistic discourse going on within the community.[23]

This community-based discourse is one that understands hip-hop as a "social and mental health outlet by and for Black and Latinx urban youth in response to the effects of industrialization…"[24] Adjapong and Levy posit that hip-hop is a vital resource for healing and encourage the use of hip-hop based pedagogy in education. They conceptualize hip-hop pedagogy as "an approach to teaching and learning that is rooted in hip-hop culture."

While several scholars have examined hip-hop's many artistic media, it is most prominently therapists and counselors who have examined hip-hop's impact on lived experience as well as the ways in which it may reflect the community's own desires, fears,

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Moya. *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*. New York: New York University Press, 2021.

[22] Joseph G. Schloss, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5. Realness refers to hip-hop notions of authenticity and lived experience in racial and class struggles. See also, Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2006).

[23] Ibid, 8.

[24] Edmund Adjapong and Ian Levy, "Hip-Hop Can Heal: Addressing Mental Health through Hip-Hop in the Urban Classroom," *The New Educator* 17, no. 3 (April 2021): pp. 242-263.

and positionalities. They find that hip-hop's multimodal practices offer several therapeutic activities, such as rap, spoken word therapy, and graffiti, in which a culturally responsive educational model may be implemented. Against the mainstream idea of hip-hop's hypermasculinity and misogyny, Adam J. Kruse asserts that hip-hop has and does serve queer people of color in a therapeutic manner as well. Kruse counters widespread misconceptions of hip-hop by saying, "Perhaps foremost among the limitations of labeling hip-hop as misogynistic and homophobic is that it situates hip- hop (and by association Black urban culture) as the source of these issues as opposed to recognizing that hip-hop exists within a misogynistic and homophobic world (Shimeles, 2010)."[25] Kruse quotes Means Coleman and Cobb's 2007 article, which highlights that "the lack of commercially successful queer hop-hop artists related to the idea that a largely white heteronormative audience had 'no way of seeing' and making sense of artists who might be both queer and a person of color."[26] Kruse, as well as several other music educators, therapists, and counselors, have begun to shift away from victim narratives toward narratives of resilience and *resistance.* Imani Perry understands hip-hop as "life-sustaining." She says, "Hip hop nourishes by offering community membership that entails a body of cultural knowledge, yet it also nourishes by offering a counter-hegemonic authority and subjectivity to the force of white supremacy in American culture in the form of the MC."[27] This framing of hip-hop has inspired and validated my view of reggaetón as a multimodal culture of resistance.

[25] Adam J. Kruse, "'Therapy Was Writing Rhymes': Hip-Hop as Resilient Space for a Queer Rapper of Color," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, no. 207-208 (January 2016): pp. 103.
[26] Robin R. Means Coleman and Jasmine Cobb, "No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop," *Popular Communication* 5, no. 2 (January 2007): pp. 89-108.
[27] Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2006).

The conceptualization of hip-hop as cultural and communal therapy informs my understanding of reggaetón culture and what it can do and provide for queer and trans people of color. I theorize reggaetón as a kind of sonic forcefield for the barrio with the power to make the neighborhood *feel* safer and more familiar for disenfranchised and displaced peoples in urban spaces. While reggaetón is the sonic element of the culture, it is a mixture of audio-visual Black Latinx worldmaking that ultimately creates these sonic safe spaces.

This dissertation is motivated by a pattern I see in Reggaetón Cultura in which Blackness and queerness are positioned as mutually exclusive via systemic mechanisms of queer Black erasure and ahistorical, communal praise of new, light- and white-skinned Latinx artists who claim queer allyship while touting anti-Black and anti-Black woman sentiments. In line with hip-hop scholar Lauron Kehrer's motivations to "push back against the assumption that hip hop is inherently homophobic by looking at its roots and overlapping histories with disco and house, two genres closely associated with Black and Latinx LGBTQ subcultures,"[28] I implicate reggaetón, and necessarily reggae, in this mission. In Kehrer's analysis of Macklemore's "Same Love," they write, "Macklemore raps, 'If I were gay, I would think hip hop hates me,' an assertion that positions black communities as a significant threat to (white) LGBTQ rights."[29] Finding Macklemore's same rhetoric in La Cultura has meant looking for places where queerness and Blackness are openly, undeniably, and unapologetically overt as well as deniably covert. I broaden the modes of inquiry by which we might marginalize homophobia by introducing fashion and Afro-Diasporic and Afro-Indigenous social dance to a list of spaces for queer potentials and histories in these genre-

[28] Kehrer, 19.
[29] Lauron Kehrer, "A Love Song for All of Us?: Macklemore's 'Same Love' and the Myth of Black Homophobia," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 12, no. 4 (2018): pp. 425-448.

cultures. In doing so, both Kehrer and I land in the same place for these queer hip-hop readings: the queer House Ballroom scene. Ballroom culture is a queer and trans Black and brown artistic movement that emerged in 1980s New York City and is comprised of organized pageants where various families, or "houses," compete to be the best and baddest. Ball and disco fashion, dance, and realness not only impact hip-hop but have acted as powerful antidotes to reggaetón's roots in Rastafarianism and iterations of reggae that are violently anti-LGBTQ.

Not only have all these genres and cultures thrived and been innovated in the cultural geography of New York City, but each one may actually serve to expose the aspects of race, ethnicity, and gender that get buried when genres and cultures transform into new categories. For instance, understanding the many ways in which ball and hip-hop share aesthetics and sonic ancestry, let alone sometimes being created by the exact same people and communities, allows us to understand how hip-hop's hypermasculinity is actually part of a legacy of liberatory gender praxis by Black and Latinx youth. Hip-hop in the mainstream appropriated the flamboyant gender fluidity of ball and channeled all of its energy into the valorization of Black masculinity, what might be considered in the ball gender system as "thug masculinity."[30] Understanding hip-hop as a queer-born culture undoes some harm from the oft-homophobic forms of masculinity it represents. Likewise, conceptualizing reggaetón as a descendant of hip-hop allows for a visibility of Afro-Latin and Latin American migrants in New York City who played a large role in solidifying hip-hop as a culture.

Kehrer's work highlights how queer ball culture acts as a platform for queer Black rappers to this day and makes sense of this influence by expounding on the overlapping

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[30] Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps. Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

histories of disco, ball and early hip-hop. Kehrer's work primarily draws out these connections by using lyrics and phrases as linguistic artifacts of queer culture, as well as an investigation of the sonic roots of house music, around which house ball culture thrives. They say of several songs, "[the] hook of the song uses Ballroom language to engage in rap braggadocio."[31] An understanding of braggadocio has led me to see these genre-culture connections in fashion and aesthetics, as well as rap. As artist-scholar Madison Moore says, the truth is "nobody woke up like this," but the artform is to make it seem like we did; that is braggadocio.[32] In Moore's seminal work on the powerful aesthetics and embodiment of fabulousness, he explains that for many queer and trans people of color, fabulousness is not actually about wearing the most expensive items, but turning thrift store snags into luxury. Though simply put, Moore's words hold profound depth as to the goals of hip-hop and reggaetón's cultural constructions of braggadocio. In many ways, the entire aim of these genres' cultural aesthetics, sonically, lyrically, and aesthetically, is to position the oppressed as enviable, luxurious, and of immense inborn worth.[33]And it works; so much so that while Black women get fired for letting out their curls and dripping in gold, white women get praised for perms and hoop earrings. This envy has been noted by minstrelsy scholars, foremost Eric Lott, in his seminal work "Love & Theft." Lott's examination of "love," perhaps more aptly called envy, purports that minstrelsy is "one of our earliest culture industries, minstrelsy not only affords a look at the emergent historical break between high

[31] Lauron Jockwig Kehrer, *Queer Voices in Hip Hop: Cultures, Communities, and Contemporary Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 54.
[32] Madison Moore, *Fabulous the Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 20. Moore writes this in response to Beyoncé's braggadocio that she wakes up (and by proxy, we all wake up) flawless in her song "Flawless."
[33] Moore 21. He writes about how the labor that goes into being fabulous, and the reasons why it is necessary, can lead to depression and rage in QTPOC, part of my motivation for my next work to deal with perreo and disability.

and low cultures but also reveals popular culture to be a place where cultures of the dispossessed are routinely commodified - and contested."[34] Ball reflects these patterns, as it is one of the main sites to view and utilize body adornment and self-fashioning as life-giving, and also a dangerous political scene with a long history of police raids, hate crimes, displacement, and commodification.

While ball as we know it today, depicted most famously by the Netflix show *Pose* and controversial documentary *Paris is Burning*, began in Harlem in the 1950's, its roots go back to Blackface minstrel traditions and masquerades, which were often safe havens for white gay men to dress in drag and/or blackface. [35] In Tim Lawrence's foreword to the iconic photo collection of ball's major figures by photographer Chantal Regnault, *Voguing,* he explains that in the 1920s, these masquerades were attended by figures in the Harlem renaissance who have noted a somewhat equal attendance rate between whites and people of color, and yet, as Lawrence reveals, "black queens were expected to 'whiten up' their faces if they wanted to win have a chance of winning the contests."[36] Moving forward from the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s to the Civil Rights and Black is Beautiful movements of the 1950s and 70s, respectively, "drag ball culture began to fragment along racial lines." Thanks to Black Power community organizations like the Black Panthers and Young Lords who held prominence in New York City, the ball scene turned into the queer and trans people of color-specific space we understand it as today. Understanding this history creates an even

[34] Eric J. Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 8.
[35] Kehrer says 1960s, 45. But in Chantal Regnault, *Voguing and the Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92* (London: Soul Jazz Records, 2011, Tim Lawrence takes it back even further.
[36] Regnault and Lawrence, 3.

greater need to expose the current iterations of sonic Blackface in reggaetón's commercialization.

Rhythm and Realness

As discussed in the section on reggae, much of reggaetón's struggle with homophobia is embedded in its rhythmic inception and the history of the essential dembow riddim. The flip side is that this rhythm is also the location of much of reggaetón's sonic Blackness. Understanding this schism between sonic queerness and sonic Blackness has opened a space for repair and constructing counternarratives. One counternarrative to the discourse on reggaetón's homophobia is in emphasizing reggaetón's place as a dance genre. For instance, Kehrer has implicated hip-hop in the same struggle by noting how "Chuck D's resistance to house, while seemingly based on musical preferences, is rooted in homophobia. It is an example of revisionist narratives that attempt to separate hip hop from other dance genres that have queer or feminine associations."[37] While the dance genres that Kehrer refers to here might be more commonly understood as Electronic Dance Music (EDM), house, and disco, there are several ways in which reggaetón may be classified as a dance genre-culture due to the importance of perreo, as well as reggaetón's embrace of house music and rave culture.[38] By inviting reggaetón into this conversation as a "dance genre," we may begin to repair its homophobic legacy and instead see its "queer or feminine associations" through dance and even through the very anti-gay rhythm that birthed it.

Another counternarrative is inspired by Tricia Rose's theorization of the voice as a percussive instrument in hip-hop.[39] This idea fosters new pathways to understand rhythm in

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[37] Kehrer, *Queer Voices in Hip-Hop,* 20.
[38] Eduardo Cepeda https://remezcla.com/features/music/tu-pum-pum-rave-reggaeton/
[39] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 12.

reggaetón that further underwrite homophobic etymologies. In chapter two, "Reggaetóneras Roncan: Bolero's Imperial Whiteness & Reggaetón's Taíno Timbres," I contrast bel canto (Italianate) singing with the kind of raspy, ratchet, *real,* vocal styles and timbres of many prominent reggaetóneres, particularly La Sista, Don Omar, Ozuna, and Ivy Queen. I conceptualize this style of singing as *ronca realness,* an antidote to colonial gender binaries and vocal purification through the sounding and embodiment of racial and class struggle. In opposition to bel canto's obsession with legato lines, ronca realness is marked by a punctuated, aggressive, and strategic exaggeration of syllables and the omission of others, as in several working-class Spanish dialects. This chapter theorizes ronca as a vocal epistemology *from* community, using Don Omar's "Ronca" (2005) and Ozuna's "Enemigos Ocultos" (2020) as defining moments of ronca realness. I make the case through La Sista's song "Anacaona" (2006), that when reggaetóneras explore hypermasculine vocalization, they sound the queerness of their bodies and spaces.

Reggaetóneres are first and foremost rappers for the very reason that their lyric delivery is percussive and often creating polyrhythms with the steady dembow. While dembow is the unflinching sound of reggaetón, it is never the only rhythm occurring at any given moment. Rose's observation about the voice in hip-hop emerges from a decolonial mindset toward rhythm, harmony, and voice, where instead of understanding the voice as existing outside of the textures of instrumentation, or as a mere vehicle for the words, the words themselves are the instrument on which the voice phonates. Rose explains that the steady rhythms of hip-hop, and I add reggaetón, while often derided as simple and monotonous by the Western gaze, actually serve a communal and decolonial function. Not only does the prioritization of tonality restrict rhythmic complexity for the sake of resolving

dissonance, but it devalues the use of rhythm as a foundation for organized sound. Rose asserts that not only are the rhythms employed by rappers Afro-Diasporic, but in their repetition, act as a "means by which a sense of continuity, security, and identification are maintained."[40] The rhythms keep the community together and offer stability through uncertainty. Hip-hop scholar Imani Perry also understands the creation of this sense of security to be the role of the MC. She says "The mc usually occupies a self-proclaimed location as representative of his or her community or group—the everyman or everywoman of his or her hood. As a representative, he or she encourages a kind of sociological interpretation of the music, best expressed by the concept of 'the real.'"[41] Thus, ronca realness encapsulates the ways in which working-class, Black, brown, queer, and femme rappers employ vocal timbres that testify to the lived experiences of their communities. Whereas many Western-derived performance practices seek to train the voice in a manner that hides the inner workings of the performers mind and body, reggaetón's rap style allows emcees to *represent* by keeping it *real.*

The third counternarrative that has the potential to repair the relationship between Blackness and queerness in the genre is that the omnipresence of the dembow rhythm is often fused with other forms of drumming and Afro-Indigenous beats. In the case of Puerto Rico, La Gata makes the claim that while all perreo is reggaetón, not all reggaetón is perreo. In fact, she argues that reggaetón is in fact the whitewashing of perreo, and that perreo is strictly an Afro-Indigenous dance form reliant on a mixture of African-derived rhythms, like dembow and Afro-Indigenous Taíno bomba.[42] As I argue in my fourth chapter, there is a

[40] Rose, 12.
[41] Perry, 39.
[42] Perreo 101 episode "reggaeton vs regueton," La Gata names Tego Calderón as the most well-known for including bomba in his sound.

reason that queer and trans reggaetón artists often create fusions with bachata, merengue, house, and edm. It is in these mixtures that historical meanings are recreated and repurposed, sometimes problematically whitening the genre-culture further.

Fashion and Embodiment

This dissertation expands on the sartorial politics of reggaetón. Fashion is a lens that is integral to understanding Reggaetón Cultura as comprised of audio-visual, aesthetic, and embodied artforms. In chapter three, I show how fashion is an overlooked, yet necessary, lens to recover ancestries in the aftermath of colonialism, and provides a mode of inquiry that values particularly matrilineal and femme-centered knowledges and epistemologies.

I am inspired by fashion scholar Tanisha C. Ford's book *Dressed in Dreams,* in which she traces the lineage of garments, accessories, and hairstyles in their significance to and from hip-hop culture. Ford says "I wanted to give queer and trans folk in the ballroom scene their props for innovating much of what we call hip-hop fashion and beauty culture without ever getting the credit they deserved."[43] As she attributes hip-hop's aesthetic glory to queer ballroom, I credit *both* hip-hop and queer ballroom with reggaetón's liberatory adornment praxis. I take inspiration from Ford in more ways than this. The way in which Ford writes about fashion and hip-hop culture, moving from the personal to the historical to the personal again, has encouraged me to draw parallels between my own life and the culture of reggaetón and empowered me to see these parallels as not only valid modes of analysis and inquiry, but necessary ones, as evidenced in the last chapter of this dissertation, "Reggaetón & Me."

Reggaetón's dance, fashion, and rap create distinctly Afro-Diasporic standards of beauty through these mediums. Cultures of resistance often create a new beauty standard,

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[43] Tanisha C. Ford, *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019), 4.

which mandates not only an examination of these new ideals, but an interrogation of how the beauty industrial complex acts as a structure that is oppressive no matter where or how it exists.[44] As Ford describes, hip-hop music videos taught that womanly beauty was not just about size but about shape.[45] Yet, these revised standards have also often been the only viable model we have had to override internalized Eurocentric ideals. [46] Frances Aparicio writes of this duality:

> …given the highly contested aesthetics of the feminine among Latina and Latin American women who choose to use bright colors, high-heel shoes, and tight dresses… the self-eroticizing impulse assumes for Latinas a cross-cultural meaning, for it conscientiously diverges from the Anglo feminist paradigm of effacing female sexuality from their own bodies by resisting the dictates of the fashion industry and society, by choosing not to wear makeup or dresses and indeed by creating an androgynous style that would blur the boundaries between the feminine and the masculine as social constructions and impositions on individuals.[47]

I join this conversation with a focus on her mention of the "androgynous" style that may be created according to Anglo feminist ideals and is in juxtaposition to the more typical high femme forms of Latina resistance. Reggaetón fashion represents a departure from this binary, as often the forms of fashion that reggaetóneras embody fuse hip-hop masculinity with queer aesthetics and femme adornment practices. They

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[44] See McMillan Tressie Cottom, *Thick and Other Essays* (New York: The New Press, 2019) for a nuanced discussion of the impacts of the beauty industrial complex on Black women. Listen to In VOGUE's podcast "The 1990s Episode 12: Rappers on the Runway: How Hip-Hop Changed Fashion" for a deeper understanding of how hip-hop and urban aesthetics changed the beauty industry and thus represent the power of beauty cultures to change industries and still be in perpetual conversation with Eurocentric beauty standards.

[45] Ford, 123.

[46] Throughout the course of this dissertation, and in my writing and language in general, I use "we" to invoke a sense of solidarity that keeps me feeling connected to my community. I do not intend that everyone in the queer or Latinx community feels the same or even similarly, but I like speaking in the collective to counteract the isolation that academic work can bring on. The use of "we" is also justified (in my opinion) by a lifelong communing with other queer people and women of color. Friends, family, and peers that have validated (and invalidated) my feelings are still present in this scholarship even if they have not written books on these topics and are not citable in standard academic ways. I honor their theories and the fact that many of my ideas have been shaped by them. Their names are present in the "we."

[47] Frances R. Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 151.

often create a femme-tomboy look that renegotiates Anglo feminist paradigms of *both* androgyny and femininity through hip-hop style references.[48] I delve into this further in chapter three, ultimately finding that this is the very visual mechanism by which many reggaetóneras queer the dancefloor. My intervention here is also to lay a foundation for understanding how androgyny embodied by women of color is brave, precarious and dangerous due to an overlooked cultural schism between queerness (and genderqueerness) and Blackness.

Reggaetón dance and fashion are deeply intertwined, as the clothes women wear to dance perreo have become the mainstream aesthetic of the genre-culture, i.e. miniskirts, crop tops, large gold hoop earrings, skin-tight jeans, high heels and Jordans. The dynamics of perreo, a dance in the same family as twerk to be covered in the next section, must be considered in the discussion of reggaetón's beauty standards, as not only does it serve as one of the main motivators for choice of dress, but music videos of perreo valorize certain shapes, sizes, and regions of body. Like Janell Hobson's points on twerk, reggaetón and perreo are also an example of "how black women's beauty is intrinsically connected to booty size, which exists in a complex history of racialized and sexualized meanings" and how such "aesthetic preferences illuminate how the real beauty challenge for women of African descent is not their skin color but their curves."[49] Though Hobson's essay speaks mainly of the role of dance in Black women's embodiment practices, these issues of curves and skin are also relevant to fashion and aesthetics, the clothes that are available to curvy women, and

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[48] Jillian Báez has written on Ivy Queen's shifting "tomboy" aesthetic throughout her career, actually making an opposite point from Aparicio, in that her more recent high femme presentation is the Anglicized version. See "En mi imperio: Competing Discourses of Agency in Ivy Queen's Reggaetón." *Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 18, no. 1 (2006).
[49] Janell Hobson, "Remnants of Venus: Signifying Black Beauty and Sexuality," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 1-2 (2018): pp. 107.

how these aesthetics are at times both racially essentialist and a space for an epistemology of Black and Afro-Diasporic beauty. Hobson's essay links Black women's bodies to their labor on sugar plantations and takes inspiration from Mireille Miller-Young's musings on Black women as akin to brown sugar, "Like sugar that has dissolved without a trace, but has nonetheless sweetened a cup of tea, black women's labor and the mechanisms that manage and produce it are invisible but nonetheless there."[50]

In chapter three, I conceive of gold, denim, and ruffled fabrics as Afro-Diasporic in nature, and particularly connected to Black and brown women's bodies and butts. As in the video for "Despacito" by Luis Fonsi (2017), Miss Universe Zuleyka Rivera acted as the emblematic woman of La Perla, though she is light-skinned and slender. It is common in reggaetón music videos to have a light-skinned, or sometimes white, woman as the feminine center of the video and then have darker-skinned (not necessarily dark-skinned, just darker-skinned) women dance in the background. Together with Sander L. Gilman, Hobson makes the point that:

> …historically the Hottentot Venus figure visually connotes "deviant sexuality," and when paired with a white central figure, the black presence "implies their sexual similarity," so much so that, eventually, the black female figure can disappear altogether while the white woman's body, presented with an endowed behind, serves as a palimpsest of the black woman's body.[51]

This white-skinned palimpsest is a figure that haunts each and every chapter in this dissertation (as well as my life). Hobson makes the case that in order to become a palimpsest, there must be some sort of theft, and here we return to Eric Lott's notion that racism is about two main tenets: love and theft.

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[50] Ibid, 110. Quoting Miller-Young, Mireille, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press (2014).
[51] Hobson, 109.

In dialogue with the work of several scholars who have investigated reggaetón's queer and trans performativity, namely Ramón Rivera-Servera and Verónica Dávila Ellis, I wish to add not only a lens of queerness but a lens of kink, following seminal work on Black women, BDSM, and pornography by Ariane Cruz.[52] As reggaetón's sexual politics are often derided for being pornographic, Cruz offers a counterstance where "pornography continues to inform the pivotal nexus of black women's power and pleasure."[53] Cruz's work explores Black female sexuality as inextricably tied to queerness, kink, and perversion that destabilizes "social hierarchies and epistemologies."[54] Kink adds an extra layer of agentic performativity to queer sexuality. It operates on the premise that there is agency in conforming if and when conformity is predicated on an awareness of social structures. Female, queer, and trans agency in reggaetón looks a lot like kink— an exaggeration of what is normative in order to simultaneously poke fun at this very normativity and relish in social structures of pleasure.

Often, when reggaetón's integrity is in question, it is for the pornographic nature of the lyrics, and the images of women in music videos. Centering this musicological work on fashion in reggaetón has been one of the main modes for countering a white feminist devaluation of femme of color world-building, often denigrated as self-objectification, consumerist, and pathological. In her work on the sacred roots of twerk, Elizabeth Pérez reminds us of the overlooked role of sex workers in culture-making:

> While media coverage has emphasized the lasciviousness of twerk, virtually no attention has been paid to the role of strippers and sex workers in setting choreographic trends. In recent decades, strip clubs have served as testing

[52] Ramón H. Rivera-Servera's work, and Verónica Dávila Ellis, "Uttering Sonic Dominicanidad: Women and Queer Performers of Música Urbana" (dissertation, 2020).
[53] Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 11.
[54] Cruz, 12.

> grounds for new music (Sharpley-Whiting 2007, 119), with commercial success predicted for the tracks chosen. By Black exotic dancers to score their performances. Especially in New Orleans, Miami, Atlanta, and Houston, strippers have pioneered not only musical tastes and clothing styles but also dance moves. Often presumed to get paid for simply getting naked, strippers execute complex choreographic compositions replete with athleticism, musical phrasing, and floorcraft (Hanna 2013). The lack of acknowledgment given to strippers for promulgating twerk mirrors the ignorance of Black and Latina dancers' historical contributions to burlesque, even as this theatrical genre has enjoyed a recent renaissance.(Shteir 2004; Ross 2009; Brown 2008).[55]

Fashion illuminates visually reggaetón's pornographic legacy and implicates the Culture in a larger struggle against the pathologizing of Black women's pleasure.

The ancestral lineages of reggaetón fashion connect the genre with hip-hop culture in New York City, and hip-hop's sartorial queer ancestry is profoundly overlooked. Queer ball performers wore track suits, joggers, logomanic sets, and paired them with heels, acrylic nails, and high ponytails to form their own gender categories. This gender system, as Marlon Bailey elaborates in *Butch Queen Up in Pumps,* incorporated sexuality and only allowed certain genders for those who had certain sexualities. A Butch Queen, for example, had to be a gay cis-man in certain ball communities. The influence of the Butch Queen style on popular culture, mixing athletic leisure wear with stilettos, pumps, wedges, and boots, can be seen in the styles of white pop divas today, like Ariana Grande and Rosalía.

The interconnected expressivity of Black masculine pride in hip-hop, ball, and reggaetón is evident in the three culture's fashion and dance styles. First, all play around with high fashion. Harlem-born fashion designer, Dapper Dan, is attributed with "logomania," the obsession with reppin' high fashion luxury brands, like Gucci and Fendi, that made hip-hop a major avenue for both white-owned brands *and* Black brands. The same could be said for

[55] Elizabeth Pérez (2016) The ontology of twerk: from 'sexy' Black movement style to Afro-Diasporic sacred dance, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal, 9:1, 16-31, 19.

ball, as pageant categories devoted to couture challenges gave queer youth of color a space to see who was the the bougiest. The visibility of these brands was heightened through breakdancing crews like the New York City Breakers. Leader of the crew and hip-hop filmmaker, Michael Holman, marketed brands by using footage of the breakers and flashing the brand logo for “Puma” or “Louis Vuitton” in a hypnotic alternation of images. Whenever the beat dropped on the record, he interspersed these lightning-fast images with footage of the dancers rocking the brand’s shoes or track suits; almost like a brainwashing tactic. Holman wrote an article detailing what the essential breakdancing “crew” look should be, replete with track suits, Adidas and Converse All Stars, roadster caps, and Lacoste shirts. It was all very formulaic and designed to create a collective aesthetic.

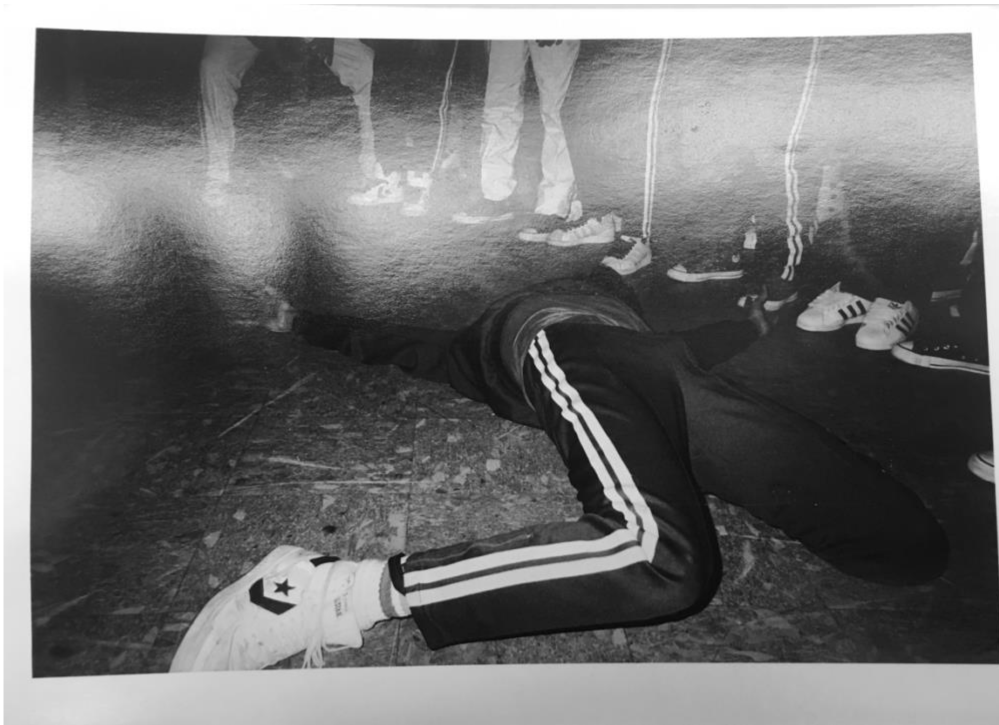

Figure 1.1 Photo taken by me. Original found in Dance Division of the New York Public Library. Michael Holman Collections. Image of break-dancer doing a death drop and wearing hi-top Converse All Star’s and track pants surrounded by crowd wearing Adidas and Converse with track pants.[56]

[56] For more on death drops as a Black queer dance gesture, see Shanté Paradigm Smalls, “#Blackdeathsmatter: Performing Transness in Public Space,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 8, no. 1 (2021): p. 104.

These images allow a window into the kinds of venues where breakdancing was occurring, and they look to be similar public spaces to where balls might have occurred, often newly gentrified regions of midtown Manhattan. Astutely, Holman clarifies that "looking crew" is motivated less by the desire to achieve "WASP status… because obviously all the alligators in the world will not pass a black person as a WASP… the designer label's instant status is considered hip by these kids merely for its aesthetic value, not for any need to obtain social status for its own sake."[57] The life and work of Holman and Dapper Dan - alike illuminate the exploitative relationship between Black kids and these major brands. Before Dapper Dan was picked up by Gucci in 2017, his store was often raided by corporate lawyers and cops for his logomanic designs. Likewise, the New York City Breakers' were asked to perform at Lincoln Center in Pumas and Lacoste, but their own personal safe havens, like Pizza-a-Go-Go, were raided and shut down.

Breakdance athleisure aesthetics, stripper bodysuits and bikini sets, and rhinestone studded ball gowns can be seen on reggaetóneres on stage and on the dancefloor. Chapter three expands on the the evolution of the miniskirt (and bodycon dresses like that pictured below in figure 1.2) as a femme Afro-Diasporic custom with roots in hip-hop's exotic dance community and queer house ballroom.

[57] Michael Holman, "Breakdown," *East Village Eye,* (Summer 1981). Michael Holman Collection, New York Public Library.

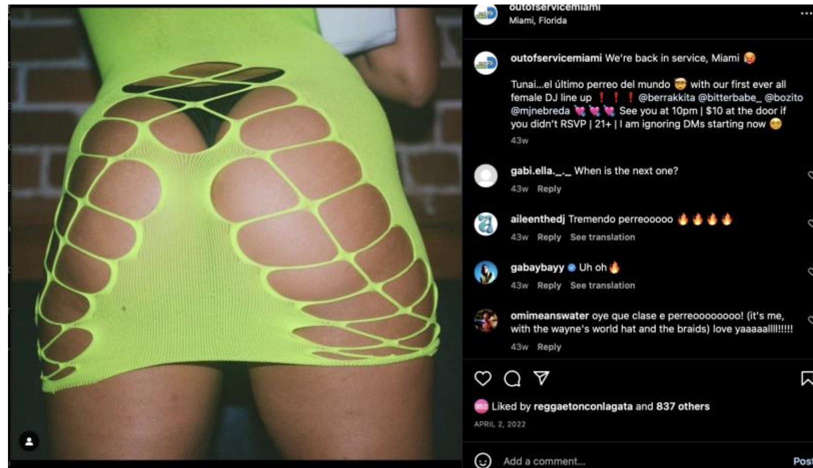

Figure 1.2 Instagram post by @outofservicemiami featuring a fishnet lime green bodysuit over a black thong publicizing their queer femme-centered perreo party.

The potentials of fashion as a lens are taken up fully in chapter three, "Subete La Falda: Black Perreo Ancestry and Agency through Fabric and Gesture." This chapter documents the ways in which Puerto Rican and Dominican reggaetóneras cultivate queer Afro-Diasporic dance spaces through their fashion choices and gender presentation. It traces the sartorial body politics of Puerto Rican and Dominican reggaetóneras like Ivy Queen and La Delfi, and contributes a reading of reggaetón's dance culture that prioritizes Afro-Diasporic aesthetic roots and queer dance potentials in order to find and examine how trans and queer women's musical agency manifests alongside their embodiment practices. The chapter takes the minifalda (miniskirt) as its focus and asserts that the garment was one of the main ways in which reggaetóneras asserted their sexual agency against the backdrop of psychosocial and physical state-sanctioned sterilization and misogynoir. The minifalda has been present corporeally and lyrically in reggaetón from its beginnings to today, and this chapter brings to light that subtle and overlooked history. I also make connections between bomba and reggaetón by exploring the bomba petticoat as a potential predecessor to the minifalda, as well as celebrate Dominican revisions and homages to the white ruffled miniskirt, Josephine Baker's

banana skirt, and Carmen Miranda's appropriation of Afro-Brazilian bahia culture in Amara La Negra and La Delfi's music video for "La Banana."

(Go on girl, do that) Dance

My ideas around dance are in dialogue with the writing of ethnomusicologist Kyra D. Gaunt and dance scholar Donna P. Hope in both content and methodology. Gaunt and Hope both blend auto-ethnography and ethnography with social media and publicly accessible content in their analyses of dance, Black girlhood, and music-making. I find a lot of inspiration in their abilities to align their own narratives with that of their communities, as well as the ways in which their work on Black social dance is deeply applicable to my own conceptions of what perreo means to Latinas. In Gaunt's work on twerking and its cooptation by white country-pop star Miley Cyrus, she contextualizes the dance form within its African roots and expands on what this diasporic origin might mean for Black girls' perceived sexuality:

> After watching over 50 hours of twerking videos, even as an African American woman who once actively participated in similar adolescent and college dance practices, doing this research has meant constantly reminding myself that outsiders—myself included—may not be comfortable nor may they have the cultural conditioning to recognize black erotic social dancing as something other than hypersexual adolescent play linked to some kind of moral panic which has always been associated with youth music."[58]

In this quote I find my own deeper motivation in writing about perreo – to give people the choice to be sexual or not, rather than having sexuality automatically inscribed onto the body that dances perreo, or stripped of sexuality to appear feminist or liberatory.

[58] Gaunt, "Youtube, Twerking, & You," 260.

I seek to learn from the repertoires of overlooked pioneering artists like La Sista, La Delfi, Jenny la Sexy Voz, and Glory, and theorize their feminisms from what their music tells me. Taking a similar approach, Jillian Báez's work on Ivy Queen has been done "holistically, emphasizing the importance of studying movement, or dance, in addition to lyrics and the music itself in understanding the meanings of music texts."[59] Báez's analysis of the music video to Ivy's hit single "Yo Quiero Bailar" recognizes that the Queen herself does not dance but her background dancers do. Ivy adopts the role of the rapper and disrupts the music video binary of female dancer and male rapper, while still delivering eroticism, and perhaps homoeroticism, to her fans. And yet, by distancing herself from the dance, as many reggaetóneras and emcees have done, Ivy denies satisfying the male gaze at the cost of distancing herself from the celebratory collectivity that comprises Black social dance forms, again revealing that her potential for queerness is simultaneous to her self-blanqueamiento.

Several scholars have asserted that perreo offers women a space to exert agency because the nature of the dance is that they are leading the dance from in front of their partner.[60] However, perreo has not been fully examined as an Afro-diasporic and Indigenous dance first. The exact origins of perreo are obscured by the colonial homogenization of African peoples and customs, but in studying mambo, there is a foundational pose that resembles the position one takes when dancing perreo and twerking. The history of the Afro-Caribbean dance, mambo, traces back to the Yoruba peoples of West Africa. African drum and dance scholar, Robert Farris Thompson, examines a signature stance of the mambo that

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[59] Baez, "en mi imperio," 66.
[60] Donna P. Hope, *Inna Di Dancehall Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica* (Kingston u.a.: Univ. of the West Indies Press, 2010). Jan Fairly "Dancing Back to Front: Regeton, Sexuality, Gender and Transnationalism in Cuba (2006)," *Living Politics, Making Music*, 2016, pp. 143-158.

serves as what he put in ballet terms, "position one."[61] The European etymology of his terminology tells of his own positionality as an outsider and older white man, and his general inability to make Afro-Diasporic creative practices legible outside of the Western gaze. However, the position he describes is created with chest forward, butt back, knee popped, and feet flat on the ground. In Thompson's presentation, the female dancer that is striking this pose is wearing heels, which Thompson called a "cultural miracle," because her ancestors would have performed this pose with bare feet. I do not agree that this is a miracle, so much as a colonial atrocity. The pain of colonialism and Westernization is physicalized in the discomfort of the dancer's feet in heels. Just as we have to celebrate Afro-Diasporic origins of perreo, we also have to understand how unique diasporic trauma informs Latine and Afro-Latine relationships to dance.[62] As someone who has tried to dance in high heels, it is physically painful and inhibits the amount of dancing one can do (what would be six hours becomes an hour or less, let's say). At some point in the night, I'd probably end up taking off the heels in order to keep going and end up looking a lot like my ancestors. In the specific pictures Thompson compares, I see not only mambo and Yoruba traditional dance, but sandungueo starting to take shape. Not coincidentally, the dancer in this presentation is also wearing a miniskirt. Miniskirts have over time become an Afro-Diasporic custom, a way to physically assert the co-constitution of gender and race for women and queer people of color, as I devote space to in chapter three.

[61] Thompson, Robert Farris. "On Fire with African Dance," *New York Public Library Lecture Series,* 2013.
[62] Ramón Rivera-Servera cites an article by Angie Vazquez who voices concerns about the perpetuation of the rape of Black women since times of slavery and sees reggaetón's perreo dynamics implicated in this original trauma. He also says "Here I am in agreement with Deborah Thomas, Beth-Sarah Wright, and Donna P. Hope, who see in the sexual explicitness of dance hall performers in Jamaica the cultural agency of black working-class women framed by a political economy of colonization, slavery, and postcolonial nation-building that demanded heteronormative conceptions of black masculinity and femininity and rigorous controls of black female sexuality" 103.

In terms of methodology, several existing descriptions of perreo have proven to me quite problematic and painful – so much so that I have often clutched my chest while reading. I find writing about dance to be one of the hardest things to do, possibly because academic writing and dancing lie on opposite ends of a spectrum of embodiment.[63] Gaunt even said herself that "academic writing always seems to resist dance, resist speaking of the body and its attendant modes of expression."[64] While writing, even if standing, the only things that really move are the fingers and the eyes, the hips stiffen. While dancing perreo, the hips swivel and rock and glide and swirl, exactly opposite of what they do when writing.

One of the main ways in which the writing has dehumanized the dancers is by pandering to (most often white) readers who have never seen or experienced perreo, twerk, or grinding. Descriptions that aim to explain the technical physicality of booty shaking tend to put the (usually) Black and brown female dancer under a microscope that perpetuates views of perreo dancers as animalistic and primitive. Thus, I intend to write poetically, colloquially, and personally about dance and dancers. In accordance with scholar Houston Baker Jr.'s feelings…"I knew immediately that no written text could fully capture the gorgeously arrayed young black people in African-print shirts and dresses set off by roped-gold jewelry and kofi hats,"[65] I do not attempt to make the written text do what it cannot. I can, however, express my *feelings* about the dance and see how well language can *dance* itself.

Latin American Racial Frames & Blackface

[63] See Daniel M. Callahan, "The Gay Divorce of Music and Dance: Choreomusicality and the Early Works of Cage-Cunningham," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 2 (2018): 439–525.
[64] Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 7.
[65] Baker, Houston A. *Black Studies: Rap, and the Academy*, 4.

The carefully chosen language around race and class throughout this dissertation emerges from the community's continual struggle with colorism and racism in the aftermath of colonialism, mestizaje, and eugenicist whitening regimes throughout the continent and the Caribbean archipelago.[66] As a result, Latinidad, as an etymological descendent of *mestizaje,* is mythical, socially constructed, and violently oppressive to Black and Asian people in the Americas.[67] Throughout the dissertation, I often use the terms "light-skinned" or "non-Black" to refer to artists whose racial ancestry is ambiguous, whether due to the artists' own lack of disclosure or knowledge, their secondary and tertiary racial characteristics, or the consensus among Latinx audiences.[68] I want to be clear that using "light-skinned" to recognize the nuanced racialization of a large population of Latines does *not* act as an excuse for the racism Afro-Latines face at the hands of light-skinned, non-Black and white Latines, or the complicit, sometimes violent, attitudes and actions of mixed-race, light-skinned Latines toward dark-skinned Black communities. Afro-Latina scholars and activists like Tanya Katerí Hernández and Dash Harris shed light on the ways in which issues of anti-Blackness have been perpetuated in our communities through the media we consume and the

[66] See chapter 2, pg 56 for more on mestizaje as exercised in Mexico through Vasconcelos and his administration. Also, Samuel A. Floyd, Melanie L. Zeck, and Guthrie P. Ramsey, *The Transformation of Black Music: The Rhythms, the Songs, and the Ships of the African Diaspora* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 43.
[67] See Padilla, Felix M, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago* 1st Edition, (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).
[68] To ground this spectrum, Ivy Queen, who has been described as "cafre" by her audiences, and has been vocal about Black pride, while also remaining ethnically ambiguous, would be described here as "light-skinned" or "mixed/mestizo," while Bad Bunny, who has discussed his "pelo malo" but refuses to talk about race otherwise and considers himself simply "Latino" would be considered light-skinned/white and non-Black. I do not want to ignore the use of light-skinned to refer to light-skinned Black Latinos as well. When I mean someone light-skinned who is outwardly non-Black, like Bad Bunny, I will say "light-skinned non-Black," or "white," depending on the context of the United States or Puerto Rico. In Regina Solis Miranda's article, she considers Bad Bunny's fame as part of the blanqueamiento (whitening) of the genre and I support her framing in my analysis in chapter 4, and position him as a non-Black white-leaning mestizo. See Regina Solis Miranda, "Bienaventurado El Que Escuche Este Liriqueo: Negotiating Latinidad through Reggaeton," *Latino Studies* 20, no. 4 (2022): 498–526.

ways in which this racism causes the heightened policing of dark-skinned Afro-Latines at the hands of white, light-skinned and/or non-Black Latinos.[69]

In many ways, the structures of power in Latin America historically granted mestizos (mixed people) power that white people and criollos had, and these structures are systemic and remain today. In Laura Inés Catelli's work on caste in Latin America, she explains that during the colonial period, there were so many racial categories that people could slip into and out of, yet the fact remained that people often used this fluidity to approximate whiteness.[70] The use of caste as a framework for understanding race in Latin America recognizes that when race and ancestry is ambiguous and uncertain for many white and light-skinned Latino artists today, anti-Blackness manifests in their inclination to lean white, non-Indigenous, and anti-Black, or to perceive Latinidad as their racial category rather than an ethnic position.[71]

In *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone,* Raquel Z. Rivera discusses the trope of the "mami," the voiceless "tropical Black" woman who affirms the sexual fantasy of male rappers. Rivera makes the case that Latinidad doesn't always take away from Blackness, but supplements an element of exoticism to the Blackness, especially in a United States context. Further, Jillian Hernandez, author of *Aesthetics of Excess*, has made astute claims about how

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[69] See Tanya Katerí Hernández, *Racial Innocence: Unmasking Latino Anti-Black Bias and the Struggle for Equality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), and DeMicia Inman, "Dash Harris Is Doing the Work to End Anti-Blackness in Latinx Culture," TheGrio, July 2, 2020, https://thegrio.com/2020/06/16/dash-harris-interview/.
[70] Laura Inés Catelli, "Caste, Race, and the Formation of Latin American Cultural Imaginaries," *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, 2017, pp. 53-66.
[71] Shannon Greenwood, "4. Measuring the Racial Identity of Latinos." Pew Research Center, November 4, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2021/11/04/measuring-the-racial-identity-of-latinos/.
Pew Research Center's 2021 Survey of Latinos finds that the majority identify as white in various modes of inquiry, including skin color and demographics, but claim that others would perceive them as Hispanic or white, not Black or Indigenous. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Manuel Pastor, "Op-Ed: Why Did so Few Latinos Identify Themselves as White in the 2020 Census?" Los Angeles Times, September 9, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-09-09/south-los-angeles-immigration-displacement-latinos-blacks-2020-census. Yet the 2020 census saw a sharp decline in the percentage of Latinos identifying as white (only U.S. applicable).

racism affects Afro-Latinas, as well as how the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality may impact light-skinned non-Black Latinas in Florida:

> For light-skinned girls, like Dimple, in Miami, with the city's powerful, politically conservative, white-identifying Latinx population, the aesthetic of excess of tattoos and gold jewelry, and their attendant references to poor and working-class Blackness, are causes for correction in the embodiments of light-skinned masculine Latina girls, or hyper-feminine chonga girls, who are inspired by hip-hop style… they are not read as white by others unless they are perceived to be both light-skinned and upper class.[72]

Growing up in Miami, just like Dimple, I was/am one of the girls that Hernandez has continued to teach and empower. Making use of light-skinned in my own construction of self, emboldens me to see the trauma of poverty and my heritage's relationship to my queerness as a force to reclaim, a force of difference, a force of strength and beauty, a force that deconstructs Latinidad and reconstructs what it means to be Afro-Diasporic, Indigenous and descended of the glorious Global South. And yet, as Hilda Lloréns told the San Diego Tribune:

> What is important to understand is that racial mixture is seen positively as long as people fit the light skin, classic Latinx look. In other words, racial mixture as a source of "exoticism" is touted largely by people who don't look Black and who thereby don't experience anti-Black racism in their everyday lives.[73]

In order to understand the privileges non-Black Latinos face *and* to first and foremost empower Afro-Latinos, it is imperative to hold dialectics of racialization. The exoticism that Latinidad may add to Blackness, especially when held as one of many

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[72] Jillian Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess the Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2020), 102, 103.

[73] See the following article about J. Lo referring to herself as "negrita del Bronx" when she has never aligned herself with Blackness before and has actually engaged in whitening efforts for Hollywood. Further, she came out with this song during the height of the 2020 BLM protests. Lisa Deaderick, "Latina Professors Discuss Use of 'Negrito' and 'Negrita' in Latin Culture, after J.Lo Controversy," San Diego Tribune, November 1, 2020, https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/columnists/story/2020-11-01/latina-professors-discuss-use-of-negrito-negrita-in-latin-culture-after-j-lo-controversy.

abject identities, might serve to illuminate the experiences of light-skinned women, but it also in effect erases the unique and specific forms of misogynoir that dark-skinned Afro-Latinas face. Lorraine Avila said it best in her article for Somos on how Afro-Latina representation is getting better in media, but not for dark-skinned Afro-Latinas. She says:

> The access I gain through my light-skinned privilege doesn't invalidate my experiences as a Black woman, but I must also hold how I benefit from it. Most importantly, I hold that my experiences as a light-skinned Black woman should never be the only narrative, period.[74]

While Avila is still speaking as a Black woman, while I speak as a multiethnic Italian and Puerto Rican with Taíno affiliation, the nuances of Avila's understanding and positionality may resonate for non-Black Latinos, especially those who inhabit Indigenous, queer, trans, and working-class bodies.

Finding it imperative to interrogate non-Black Latinx musical production within a Black genre-culture like reggaetón, my work makes contributions to musicological discourse on sonic Blackface by exposing the Blackface occurring in the commercialization of reggaetón. In chapter four, I assert that Blackface continues at the hands of light-skinned non-Black Latinos like Bad Bunny. This dissertation implicates histories of Blackface within current understandings of the tense relationship between drag, minstrelsy, queerness, dark-skinned Blackness, light-skinned Blackness, mixedness and whiteness within communities of color. While most of the musicological conversation around Blackface centers on the

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[74] Lorraine Avila, "Dark-Skinned Black Women Are Missing from Afro-Latina Representation," Refinery29, November 2, 2022, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2022/11/11138763/afro-latina-colorism?utm_campaign=later-linkinbio-r29somos&utm_content=later-30806291&utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkin.bio

black/white binary in European contexts of minstrelsy, opera, and hip-hop, I bring reggaetón into the conversation at a pivotal time in reggaetón's development.[75]

One of the main goals of this dissertation is to highlight the ways in which reggaetón's sonic Blackface is thriving alongside LGBTQ+ advocacy and allyship, ultimately presenting a schism between Blackness and queerness exacerbated by the promotion of light-skinned non-Black Latinx artists who receive all the musical credit while, *and because they are,* claiming to be queer allies. This kind of intersectional approach to race, gender, and sexuality has yet to be fully undertaken in reggaetón *and* in Blackface studies. Chapter four, "The Villain is the Hero: Critiquing Bad Bunny through Villano Antillano's Black Transfemme Collectivism," problematizes the ubiquitous praise Bad Bunny receives from an intersectionally diverse audience and fandom despite his colorblind racial politics and cisgendered (albeit potentially fluid), heterosexual, light-skinned Puerto Rican positionality. Bad Bunny is widely hailed as an LGBTQ+ advocate because of his feminine dress and outspokenness on queer and trans rights, directly in the face of certain homophobic reggaetón pioneers. However, I make the point that he is often absolved of his racism—shown through his silence in the aftermath of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests as well as his appropriative blaccent— because his queer advocacy has given him some kind of pass within the larger Latinx community. Further, I highlight a history of Bad Bunny's own misogyny and homophobia that is often overlooked because of his more recent gender

[75] I build on the work of Nina Sun Eidsheim, Geoffrey Baker, Licia Fiol-Matta, Matthew Morrison, and Eric Lott. Lott's work provides a historical grounding for the appropriation of reggaetón rooted in American popular music industries dating back to minstrel traditions of the early 1800s. Although my dissertation will only extend back to the 1940s to discuss boleros, the concept of "borrowing" Black culture in immediate post-slavery manifestations helps illuminate *how* and *why* this is still happening. Matthew Morrison's work also offers insight into what he terms "Blacksound," the sonic equivalent to Blackface, that undergirds all popular music and entertainment. Geoffrey Baker offers historical footing for specifically Latin American Blackface in the baroque era, as well as in his work on Cuban rap and reggaetón.

presentation. Utilizing Bad Bunny and Nesi's iconic "Yo Perreo Sola" video, I argue that Bad Bunny not only adopts and profits off Black musical labor and tradition while comfortably remaining racially apolitical, but that his drag performance is an example of Blackqueerface, my term for the embodiment of visual queerness and sonic Blackness at once.

To give Black and brown queer and trans artists their flowers, this chapter turns its attention to erased, forgotten, or murdered queer and trans artists like Villano Antillano, Ana Macho, La Delfi, Kevin Fret, and so many others. I use Villano Antillano and Ana Macho's song and music video, "Muñeca," as an antidote to the issues present in "Yo Perreo Sola." I assert that the song and music video for "Yo Perreo Sola" is not feminist or liberatory in an Afro-Diasporic sense, in fact it foregoes the collectivity embedded in West African social dance customs to posit a certain male-dominated vision of women's agency. Meanwhile, Villano Antillano and Ana Macho's video shows a collective of queer and trans sex workers of many shades dancing and forging homoerotic intimacy. This collaboration bridges the divide between perreo's Afro-Diasporic heritage and its queer pasts and futures. My work is in dialogue with scholars like Jillian Báez and Alexandra T. Vazquez, who have each critiqued Ivy Queen's feminist praxis for its' subtle respectability politics and heteronormativity, and whose works have empowered me to seek the same patterns and trends in newer icons, even those for whom I feel love and kinship. This chapter provides an immensely necessary and otherwise absent perspective on Bad Bunny's persona that is rooted in Black queer performance histories, as reggaetón and trap become even more mainstream and commercial, i.e. whitewashed, than ever before.

I follow in the footsteps of race and reggaetón scholars like Petra Rivera-Rideau, Alexandra T. Vazquez, and Katelina "La Gata" Eccleston, whose labors have shown that for every ten Black women visible in La Cultura, there are over sixty blancas.[76] Making similar points about the blanqueamiento (whitening) of the genre, Solis Miranda points out that even for men,

> …within the new wave of popular reggaeton artists, one of the only artists who has achieved significant levels of popularity, who is also far from the white Latino prototype, is Puerto Rican singer Ozuna, known for delivering the line 'el negrito de ojos claros' in most of his songs, openly acknowledging his raciality.

And I would add, a raciality that is light-skinned Black and openly flaunts his light eyes (ojos claros), in any approximation to whiteness available to him. Katerí Hernandez has spoken about the common diminutive use of "negrito/a" in Latinx culture:

> Given the huge imprint that slavery made across Las Americas, the racial pathologies that formed still exist today. Because White Europeans were often outnumbered, the threat of Blackness was managed in several ways. One of the management tools was the use of a rhetoric of socially acceptable "little" Black, as in "my little Black, is one of the good ones." The diminutive infantilizes Blackness, and conditions social acceptance with the imposition of a hierarchical paternalism. Extending the phrase to those who do not phenotypically look Black occurred with the Latin American refusal to build racially inclusive democracies and economies.[77]

In the same interview, Hilda Lloréns adds:

> …the use of "negrita/negrito" to refer lovingly or kindly to one another is widespread among Latinxs, regardless of race or physical appearance… In the context of Latin America and the Spanish speaking-Caribbean, "negrita" and "negrito" were historically used to take the sting out of addressing someone, particularly a well-liked individual, as "Negro" or "Negra."

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[76] We can say the same for reggaetón scholars, myself included.

[77] Deaderick, Lisa. "Latina Professors Discuss Use of 'Negrito' and 'Negrita' in Latin Culture, after J.Lo Controversy." San Diego Tribune, November 1, 2020. https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/columnists/story/2020-11-01/latina-professors-discuss-use-of-negrito-negrita-in-latin-culture-after-j-lo-controversy.

Even as Ozuna approximates himself with whiteness, he is still one of the few Black men making it big in reggaetón today. In Chapter four, I discuss the ways in which his Blackness does not afford him freedom of sexuality while straight, non-Black, LGBTQ allies like Bad Bunny are praised for their approximation with queerness.

Barrio as Sonic Safe Space

*You can walk through the projects and be gay but you can't walk through the projects and be a f**got* – quote from *Village Voice* (February 2000)

The tensions held in the above quote reflect the dynamics between fashion, aesthetics, racialization, and urbanity that working-class, queer people of color must navigate. The quote from the Village Voice reflects the life-or-death nature of not only adornment and aesthetics within low-income settings, but how those things signify and carry power to recreate gender and by proxy, racial authenticity. Zaire Zenit Dinzey-Flores has analyzed the ways in which poverty, violence, masculinity, and race overlap to construct an authentic urban experience within reggaetón. She situates reggaetón's spatial and aesthetic politics within a long line of sociological urban inquiry in which the city may be understood as the center of both "possibility and limitation."[78] She explains:

> In their lyrics and representations, reggaetoneros exhibit this same duality of the city. Tego Calderón captures this confrontation when he acknowledges that he is from the street but elegant ("calle pero elegante") in the song "Punto y aparte." In this discourse, reggaetoneros present themselves as being always inside (always poor, stigmatized, and criminal) and outside (having made it, and resisting poverty and stigmatization). The "blin-blin," I suggest, is the aesthetic marker of this duality.[79]

[78] Zaire Zenit Dinzey-Flores, "De La Disco Al Caserío: Urban Spatial Aesthetics and Policy to the Beat of Reggaetón," *CENTRO Journal* xx, no. 2 (2008): pp. 54.
[79] Dinzey-Flores, 55.

Like Dinzey-Flores's blin-blin aesthetics, Madison Moore dubs the kinds of aesthetics that emerge from oppressive circumstances as "creativity from the margins," making the *space* of creativity as important as the creation.[80]

The site of the barrio has always been an integral setting for reggaetón. The genre-culture emerged out of the working-class, subjugated neighborhood of San Juan called La Perla, which is still berated by middle and upper-middle class Puerto Ricans even with reggaetón's global fame. A series of hurricanes from 2010-2022 combined with governmental neglect by both the U.S. and Puerto Rico, has left the neighborhood completely devastated, located just outside of Old San Juan's city walls as a stark colonial reminder of the ways in which whiteness, wealth, and empire continue to suffocate and consume the poor, Black and brown people on the island. The song "Gasolina" by Daddy Yankee, the crossover hit that catapulted reggaetón into mainstream consciousness in 2004, was a track on the artist's third studio album, *Barrio Fino.* The title of the album is a celebration of all that makes life in the barrios beautiful, despite the racist and classist connotations against which people living in poor neighborhoods must fight. *Barrio Fino* is an example of what Tricia Rose would describe as reading "ghettocentricity with ghetto sensitivity."[81] To this day, many residents of La Perla are very proud of their space and all that Daddy Yankee has gone on to do with the sounds this beach barrio birthed. And yet, as you see in the figure below, the poster is an example of the ways in which the neighborhood has had no other choice but to try and utilize any tourist trap possible for revenue. As the hit song "Despacito" reached international acclaim, Yankee and Fonsi filmed the video for the song in La Perla,

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[80] Moore, 20. Here, he gives a lot of time and space to depression among the fabulous as both a force that awakens, ignites, and tires us out.
[81] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 12.

the video displayed the town's vivid nightlife and the skilled wining of Puerto Rican dancers, but the town made it clear they felt "forgotten."[82]

Figure 1.3. Daddy Yankee (left) next to Luis Fonsi (right). Taken when I visited La Perla for the first time in 2022.

In better understanding how the barrio both creates and is created by its people, I conceptualize the possibility for fabulousness and gender and aesthetic freedoms taking place within what I term *sonic safe spaces*. I theorize these sonic safe spaces as emerging at the intersections of the following structures: the listening ear, suciedad, and the counter-gaze. Queer Chicana cultural theorist Deborah Vargas' concept of suciedad "[situates] the queer analytic of lo sucio in relation to contemporary neoliberal projects that disappear the most

[82] Mandalit del Barco, "'We Feel Forgotten': In Storm-Battered Home of Musical Hit, Help Comes 'Despacito,'" NPR, October 3, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/10/03/555147455/in-puerto-ricos-storm-battered-la-perla-help-comes-despacito-slowly. Though perhaps the matter for a different essay, I find this feeling to not only be in terms of concrete resources and basic needs for survival, but perhaps the ways in which the community and its people were erased in the video itself despite high hopes for their long-awaited recognition in gifting the world with reggaetón. The woman of focus in the video is Miss Universe 2006 Zuleyka Rivera, a light-skinned Puerto Rican model and actress. Motivation for a future project is this rupture between the image of the Latin party that fills music videos and media with the reality that poverty, illness, and colonialism breeds, often not a party and often very painful.

vulnerable and disenfranchised by cleaning up spaces and populations deemed dirty and wasteful: welfare moms, economically impoverished neighborhoods, and overcrowded rental dwellings."[83] For instance, the gold, diamonds, chains, and fresh kicks that comprise the sartorial politics of the genre, or what Zaire Dinzey-Flores would call the genre's "blin-blin sensibilities," often signal to political actors that young Blacks and Latinos are inclined toward wastefulness and consumerism, when in reality, colonial readings of body adornment are completely devoid of Afro-diasporic legibility, let alone queerness *and* Blackness.[84] Sonically, dembow and reggaetón are part of an urban soundscape, or sound*space* rather,[85] that is the target of clean-up efforts by governments, renewal projects, gentrification, as well as psychological whitening regimes and manifestations of white supremacist ideology. The words that Vargas chooses, "dirty and wasteful," are often used to describe the kinds of sexuality and consumerism reggaetón promotes. The culture around reggaetón relies on reclamation of these words and stereotypes to form an analytic and epistemology of suciedad; reggaetón is suciedad in action.

According to Jennifer Lynn Stoever, "willful white mishearings and auditory imaginings of blackness—often state-sanctioned—have long been a matter of life and death in the United States,"[86] and I would add, its colonies. Stoever elucidates the mechanism of the listening ear that perpetuates the supremacy of white sonic imaginings. This specific quote describes the consequences of the white ear for Black communities and Afro-Diasporic communities that have motivated me to discover not only the physical, but the metaphysical

[83] Vargas, Deborah R. "Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (September 2014): 715.
[84] Dinzey-Flores.
[85] I conceptualize the term "sound*space*," because soundscape implies a detached gazer, rather than foregrounding the perspective from one inside the reach of sound.
[86] Stoever, Jennifer Lynn. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

and psychological deaths experienced by reggaetón's communities.[87] The listening ear is a form of sonic policing and subsequently the force with which sonic safe spaces are in direct combat.

In response to these killings by the listening ear, Latinx artists, consumers, dancers, and communities return the gaze. I use Mimi Sheller's conceptualization of the "counter-gaze" and the ways in which "Caribbean agents have not just returned the gaze but have also deflected, directed, manipulated, and parodied it."[88] Reggaetón is not only pornographic and romantic, but also sometimes comedic. It is sexually playful, open, and kinky in its overt and exaggerated performance of standard gender roles. The power to parody the white, colonial gaze and ear is not just through dance and music, but through colloquialism, language, and poetry.

All in all, a sonic safe space is a physical, spiritual, multi-dimensional place in which Black and brown dance and musical practices are free to sound through the reclamation of safe space and resistance to respectability and policing. The foundation for this dissertation is the idea that the dembow rhythm acts, and has acted for a long time, as a sort of sonic force field that counters the sterilized white world surrounding barrios in upper Manhattan and the Bronx, colonial remnants like the wall dividing La Perla from the rest of San Juan, and other working-class Black neighborhoods globally.[89] Thus, sonic *suciedad* in practice creates a

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[87] I devote part of Chapter 4 to the story of Latin trap artist Kevin Fret (1994-2019). Fret was openly gay and murdered. The case is still unsolved but the most famous theory is that the management of another reggaetón artist, Ozuna, placed the hit on Fret. I also honor the lives lost in La Perla by governmental abandonment as part of these deaths by the white listening (but deaf) ear.

[88] Sheller, Mimi. *Citizenship from below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

[89] Though I draw a comparison here, I do not want to overlook the nuance that Dinzey-Flores points out between U.S. projects and PR projects in particular. She writes: "The disjuncture between lyrical and visual representations of the barrio and the caseríos promotes a hegemonic representation of the barrio as being the same as that which can be imagined particularly in the northeastern and midwestern United States—the dark brick high-rise public housing projects on the one hand, or the run-down vacant boarded up buildings encountered in deindustrialized cities of the United States, on the other hand. However, Puerto Rico has its own

"counter-ear"—my own sonic equivalent to sociologist Mimi Sheller's "counter-gaze." Reggaetón, as sonic suciedad, creates safe spaces by crafting a counter-ear based in repetition, polyrhythms, lyrical pornography, ultimately making way for *perreo* and perreo's sartorial practices to exist.

Chapter five, "Reggaetón & Me: 20+ Years of Living Theory," examines the ways in which reggaetón has created and marked sonic safe spaces for me throughout my life and journey with poverty, displacement, and seeking community in the United States. This chapter is space for me to reflect on the ways in which perreo acts as both symptom and medicine for me. I situate perreo within different times and spaces in my life- Miami, Atlanta, Santa Barbara, New York City, and San Juan- to understand how the presence and/or absence of dembow reveals the ways in which I have adapted and manipulated my embodiment of racialized femininity. As a disabled Latina, so much of my engagement with perreo has become imaginary; it lives in my head or in my desires and dreams. Where my hips used to rock freely as a child, they now stiffen. This chapter is thus contextualized within disability and racialized femininity particularly in a pandemicized world. Part of what is so damaging about pandemics is that they take away our freedom to dance and gather. Thus, I do not see Bad Bunny's statement in "Yo Perreo Sola" as feminist liberation, but rather as representative of a collapse in the collective that has been forming between reggaetón's social dance customs and its makers own Afro-Diasporic roots; this collapse caused by capitalism and the commodification of QTPOC bodies and skills in a pandemic that has made clear how deeply we are devalued

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experience with public housing. As opposed to predominant views of United States cities (e.g., Chicago), public housing sites in Puerto Rico tend to be low-rise walk-ups. They are built of cement and are often painted in colorful hues, although they have varying degrees of decay. Nevertheless, the lyrics maintain reggaetón firmly grounded in the barrios and caseríos of Puerto Rico," 42.

by the structures that rule us. Perreando sola (perreando alone) is not the ideal, but rather a last resort when a white heterosexist and ableist patriarchy refuses to budge. Perreando en la memoria (dancing perreo in memory) however may be seen as a queer disabled praxis of continuing to dance and gather by asserting that one's desires and fantasies are in fact real. While this chapter is deeply personal and mostly a lament for what my hips used to feel like before academia, the pandemic, and continual poverty, it is also a space where all the heady analyses and forging of historical linkages, the desperate grasping backwards into racial imaginaries for connection and explanation, can be grounded in the lived experience of being a body that has moved to this music for twenty-eight years, and more if you take epigenetics and intergenerational symbiosis into account (which I certainly do). This memoir-like segment on reggaetón closes this project and serves as an homage to my favorite place and my favorite people – Latinos on the dance floor, simultaneously real and imagined. It is a celebration of the fact that as my hips stiffen, they somehow seem to pop, lock, and make more sound than before.

Chapter 2

Reggaetóneras Roncan: Bolero's Imperial Whiteness & Reggaetón's Taíno Timbres

Estas son las mañanitas que cantaba el rey David… a las muchachas bonitas… hoy te las canto yo a ti…

These are lyrics from the song, "Las Mañanitas," which my Puerto Rican grandmother used to sing to all the women in the family on their birthday.[1] Naturally, I grew up thinking this was a Puerto Rican song. Not quite – it's Mexican and was introduced to Puerto Ricans during Mexico's Golden age of Cinema. When my grandparents migrated to New York City from Puerto Rico, they were starved of Spanish-language media and music, the ocean, the mountains, the humidity and heat, and some family members, but they were not starved of community.[2] A wave of Puerto Rican mass migration from the 1940 to the 1960s meant that community was still present in certain enclaves of the City, especially the Bronx.[3] It was San Juan but with winter. Puerto Ricans would go to the theaters to watch movies like *Nosotros los Pobres,* which popularized boleros like "Las Mañanitas." This

[1] "Las Mañanitas" sung by Pedro Infante in *Nosotros los Pobres* (1948). There is some debate over who wrote the song, with most sources pointing to Mexican composer Alfonso Esparza Oteo in the 1920s. Several others credit composer Manuel Ponce with popularizing it. My point here is that Pedro Infante via the rise of Mexican cinema in the Americas amidst the Puerto Rican migration to New York City popularized the song for the Puerto Rican community at the time. "Las Mañanitas," Indiana University Bloomington, 2018. https://collections.libraries.indiana.edu/cookmusiclibrary/exhibits/show/sounds_of_mexico/las-mananitas#:~:text=In%20Mexico%2C%20birthdays%20are%20often,credited%20as%20popularizing%20the%20song.

[2] I do not use the word "starved," lightly. It is a deliberate choice to emphasize the levels of poverty my family and much of the community was experiencing in their displacement, as well as the ways in which poverty constrains families and creates distance.

[3] See Jorge Duany, "The Puerto Rican Diaspora to the United States," *Puerto Rico*, 2017. He classifies this era as the "second wave" of Puerto Rican migration to New York, particularly the South Bronx. See also Edgardo Meléndez Vélez, "The Puerto Rican Journey Revisited: Politics and the Study of Puerto Rican Migration," *CENTRO Journal* XVII, no. 2 (2005): 192–221. Nicholasa Mohr, "Puerto Ricans in New York: Cultural Evolution and Identity," *Images and Identities*, 2017, 157–60.

movie-going ritual in the wake of relocation and diaspora has provided the birthday soundtrack to my life.

. . .

In an effort to better understand the ways in which Caribbean immigrant audiences shape and are shaped by transnational Spanish-language music and media in urban spaces, this chapter connects the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema with Puerto Rican migration in the 1940s. I then trace the influence of bolero's racialized imagery on later representations of women in reggaetón, which I assert has served a similar purpose for Latinx millennials and generation z'ers in the U.S as bolero had for our grandparents. To build a framework for understanding reggaetón's resistive sonic and vocal practices in relation to bolero, I call on María Grever's (1885–1951) bolero, "Te Quiero Dijiste." This song is representative of a broader trend in which boleros praise whitened ideals of femininity, in text and imagery, sonically, and vocally. This chapter zooms out from the analysis of Grever to explore how bolero's Eurocentric sonic qualities signify the perpetual colonization of Latin America's Afro-Indigenous customs. I place bolero's vocal style—which I read as descended from Italianate bel canto—in contrast with what I term, *ronca realness,* in reggaetón; the raspy, macho, *dura* vocal timbres of reggetóneres of all genders that clap back (or rap back) to colonial ideals of vocal (and bodily) purity.[4] To make this case, I invoke the work of

[4] I am in dialogue with Dara Goldman, Alexandra Vazquez, and Jennifer Domino Rudolph, who have all investigated raspy reggaetón vocalities, primarily in the case of Ivy Queen. I extend their analyses to Glory and La Sista, and well as use *ronca realness* to highlight community vocal theorizations. *In* Goldman's piece, Roland Barthes is used as a framework for thinking through the "grain" of Ivy's voice. I deliberately choose to footnote Barthes here as an aside and not elsewhere. One of the main goals of this chapter is to offer an epistemology of poor Black and brown Latinx vocality emergent from the artists and communities themselves, and that is *ronca realness.* Further, Goldman's piece importantly situates Ivy's voice as subversive to gender norms in reggaetón. *Ronca realness* builds on her points to situate the gender binary more clearly as a colonial byproduct. Thus, *ronca realness* first and foremost resists colonial standards of bodily purity and reclaims Latinx vocality in reggaetón as sucia, innovative, sexual and liberatory. Vazquez has written gorgeously on Ivy's voice as part of a lineage of raspy, chesty femme bolero singers. Domino has written on Don Omar's use of ronca. See Vazquez, A.T. 2008. Salon Philosophers: Ivy Queen and Surprise Guests take Reggaetón Aside.

reggaetón pioneers like Don Omar, Glory, La Sista, and more recently, Ozuna. This chapter closes with an example that encapsulates the dichotomous positioning of reggaetón and bolero through reggaetónera, Ivy Queen's, bolero-inspired album *Sentimiento* (2007).

Boleros, Puerto Rican Migration, & Mestizaje

Boleros are Latin American ballads that travelled internationally through new medias, like cinema and radio, and provided solace to displaced Latina/o communities throughout the hemisphere.[5] They also travelled with Mexican bodies, as hemispheric urbanization forced communities to abandon the countryside and move into the cities for employment, food, and opportunities. The Mexican Revolutionary War of 1910 left much of the countryside destroyed, in direct opposition to the efforts for rural collectivism for which the war was fought. The war was ultimately fought to preserve municipal autonomy and thwart the advances of commercial haciendas but resulted in the strengthening of capitalism and destruction of arid land.[6] The type of fantasy offered by the bolero was one of hope for a rural utopia that never existed nor came to fruition. As a result, the bolero was a means to idealize both past and present to cope with the hardships of a reality where neither was

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In Reggaetón, ed. R. Z. Rivera, W. Marshall and D. Pacini Hernández, 300–311. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Dara E. Goldman, "Walk like a Woman, Talk like a Man: Ivy Queen's Troubling of Gender," Latino Studies 15, no. 4 (2017): 439–57. Jennifer Domino Rudolph, "'Roncamos Porque Podemos,'" Embodying Latino Masculinities, 2012, 123–44. Barthes, R. 1988. The Grain of the Voice. In Image, Music, Text, trans. S. Heath. New York: Noonday Press.

[5] See Dolores Inés Casillas, *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-Language Radio and Public Advocacy* (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2014). Casillas makes the case that it was distinctly U.S. Spanish-language radio led by Mexicans in the U.S., rather than Mexican-sponsored radio or U.S. mainstream radio, that acted as a mirror for Mexican migrants, and I add, also for Puerto Ricans in New York City, and in conjunction with cinema. See also Robert McKee Irwin and Maricruz Castro Ricalde, *Global Mexican Cinema: Its Golden Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Vanessa Knights, "El Bolero Y La Identidad Caribeña," *Caribbean Studies* 31, no. 2 (2003). Jacqueline A. Avila, *Cinesonidos: Film Music and National Identity during Mexico's Época de Oro* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[6] Valeria Luiselli's sound essay *Echoes from the Borderlands,* speaks to the intricate relationships between the sterilization of Mexican women and the destruction of land, especially in this time period.

idyllic. For homesick migrants who had been pushed into big cities like New York City and Mexico City for work and opportunity, the bolero was a three-minute outlet for feeling deeply.[7] The bolero was thus a form of modern catharsis that performed the work of community-building for disenfranchised peoples through the very same new medias, i.e. U.S.-based radio and cinema, that would in turn commodify their nostalgic and sentimental collective imaginary.[8]

While the bolero served the cultural work of catharsis and cultural retention for disenfranchised immigrants of both Mexico and Puerto Rico, it was also a contentious platform that perpetuated sexist and racist imperial ideologies. Several boleros reflect a pervasive rhetoric of white superiority that emerged across several cultural, social, and political terrains, much of which had been shaped by eugenics practices under twentieth-century, post-revolutionary Mexican policies and policymakers. In the aftermath of the failure of the 1910 revolutionary war, mestizaje ideology bolstered the efforts to consolidate diverse peoples into one nation-body by 'elevating' the Indigenous and Black populations through proposed, and sometimes forced, miscegenation with white and light-skinned people, and/or sterilization.[9]

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[7] Victoria Smith, graduate student and scholar at NYU, conceptualized the idea of "feeling deeply" in her 2023 Pop Conference talk on Black women and emo music.

[8] See footnote 5, as well as Leonel Avarado, "Bolero: Sentimental Utopias, Modernity, and Mestizaje." *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 32, no. 63 (2007): 147-66. Deborah Vargas, "Borderland Bolerista: The Licentious Lyricism of Chelo Silva," *Feminist Studies* 34, no. ½ (2008). John Koegel, *Musics of Latin America,* eds. Robin Moore and Walter Aaron Clarke (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012). María Del Carmen De La Peza, *El Bolero Y La Educación Sentimental En México* (Miguel Angel Porrua, 2001). Mark H. Pedelty, "The Bolero: The Birth, Life, and Decline of Mexican Modernity." *Latin American Music Review / Revista De Música Latinoamericana* 20, no. 1 (1999): 44. Pablo Dueñas, *Bolero: Historia Documental Del Bolero Mexicano* (México, D.F.: Asociación Mexicana De Estudios Fonográficos, 1993). Mark H. Pedelty, *Musical Ritual in Mexico City: From the Aztec to NAFTA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 153.

[9] See Alejandro L. Madrid and Robin D. Moore, *Danzón: Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 116. Beatriz Urias Horcasitas, "PENSAMIENTO RACIAL Y RACISMO EN MÉXICO (1920-1950)," *Caderna de Letras* 25, (2015): 37-55.

Taking the lead from United States' sterilization practices in the early twentieth-century, the Mexican government used physical sterilization of Black and Indigenous peoples in the 1930's post-Revolution.[10] I argue that a psychosocial sterilization of Black and Indigenous women and communities went on much longer, continuing today, through the arts and education. José Vasconcelos, Mexico's Secretary of Education from 1921-1924, advocated for eugenicist practices in his book, *La Raza Cosmica.* He asserted that superiority of "the characteristics of the white race [that] will perhaps predominate among those of the fifth race (raza cosmica, the mestizo race), but such supremacy must result from free choice and taste, and not violence or economic pressure."[11] Whiteness and ideals of whitened racial mixture were thus proliferated through the cultural programming and social control of aesthetic taste, as in music, cinema, and the arts.[12] The arts became a way in which violence was enacted psychologically. The reverence of whitened racial mixture led musicians and artists to fuse European and Indigenous elements. The rhetoric that then emerged from indigenismo claimed to be inclusive and even celebratory of indigeneity. However, this fusion allowed mestizo and criollo artists to claim native ancestry and appropriate Indigenous customs without protecting the peoples or preserving their culture.[13]

This chapter takes the understanding of bolero's African, European, and Indigenous heritages and histories as violently fused into one 'mixed' Mexican product that obfuscated

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[10] I am thinking specifically of the sterilization of Mexican and indigenous women in California from 1909-1921. See, Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011).
[11] Linette Manrique, "Dreaming of a cosmic race: José Vasconcelos and the politics of race in Mexico, 1920s-1930s" *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2016): 9.
[12] Ellie Guerrero, *Dance and the Arts in Mexico, 1920-1950: The Cosmic Generation*, 68.
[13] For more on these racial politics and indigenismo as a movement in Mexican art, see Alejandro Karin Pedraza Ramos, "El Indigenismo En México Como Racismo de Estado: Mestizaje Asimilacionista y Esterilización Forzada," *Itinerarios. Revista de Estudios Lingüísticos, Literarios, Históricos y Antropológicos*, no. 29 (2019): 215–36. Richard Graham, *The Idea of Race in Latin America: 1870-1940* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2006).

credits to Black and Indigenous peoples, and instead presented it as the essentialized creative product of elite mestizos. The whiteness of bolero comes not only in the texts and images evoked most often in the genre, but in the performance practice of the song. Thus, I place importance on the voices, bodies, and sounds that created boleros.

In the 1940s, the vocal style of bel canto—a form of Italianate operatic pedagogy codified in the middle of the nineteenth century—was the standard for singing boleros. This is not to say that bolero singers, such as Carlos Ramirez, Toña la Negra, and Ruth Fernández, sounded exactly like Italian singers in the 1800s would have, but that the intonation, vibrato, amplification, and timbral choices bear strong resemblances and share vocal pedagogical histories. In fact, Fernández was the first Puerto Rican, first interpreter of popular music, and among the first Black women to appear on the New York Metropolitan Opera's roster of contraltos in the 1960s.[14]

The far reach of the boleros' influence, and Latin American bolero singers, was in many ways possible through Good Neighbor diplomacy in effect between the United States and Mexico.[15] This policy played an important role in opening Spanish-language theaters in New York City that were dedicated to Mexican cinema and allowed for elite Mexican artists to work in the U.S., even while many Mexican laborers were being simultaneously deported as part of Mexican Repatriation of the late 1920s and 1930s.[16]

Mexican cultural products were absorbed by Caribbean immigrant communities in dialogue with United States imperialism throughout the archipelago, particularly Puerto Rico.

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[14] Fiol-Matta, Licia. *The Great Woman Singer Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/14/arts/music/ruth-fernandez-singer-and-senator-in-puerto-rico-dies-at-92.html

[15] See Casillas, *Sounds of Belonging.* Also, Carol A. Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

[16] Ellie Guerrero, *Dance and the Arts in Mexico, 1920-1950: The Cosmic Generation*, 68.

In the 1930s—at the same time as Mexico—the Puerto Rican and United States government passed a law allowing sterilization in order to combat a moral panic around overpopulation.[17] U.S. eugenicists were sent to rural areas to perform the sterilization. Women often had no idea of the effects of what they had "agreed" to or were automatically sterilized in hospitals after giving birth. The parallel and intertwined reproductive histories of Mexican and Puerto Rican women, particularly poor, Indigenous, disabled, and Black populations in Mexico, the United States, and Puerto Rico, are bound up in the triangulation of the bolero's circulation. I assert that bolero in part thrived during these genocidal eras because it carried imperialist misogynoir over borders.[18] I also uphold the dialectics that as boleros enacted the mission of mestizaje, they also provided Spanish-language solace to displaced communities.

As bolero was one of the first Latin American genres to reach a substantial audience in the United States, I see it as an omen for reggaetón, which is now in the throes of commercialization and globalization. The sonic Blackness of bolero is no longer as obvious as in reggaetón, primarily due to the genre's manipulation by mestizaje ideologies and ideals of European musical superiority. In its earlier forms, boleros utilized guitar rather than piano or orchestra. Criollo composers like Agustín Lara made the piano more prominent, and then began to orchestrate their songs for Hollywood films.[19] The initial use of guitar displays the bolero's Iberian, Arab, and North African roots, while the transition to European

[17] See Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Bonnie Mass, "Puerto Rico: A Case Study of Population Control," *Latin American Perspectives* 4, no. 4 (1977): 66–82. For a more contemporary study, see Iris Ofelia López, *Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women's Struggle for Reproductive Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).
[18] See Bailey, Moya. *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*. New York: New York University Press, 2021.
[19] Wood, Andrew Grant. *Agustín Lara: A Cultural Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

orchestration speaks to the commercialization of the genre for use in American film.[20] The vocal style employed by bolero singers has varied immensely even within decades. While singers like Carlos Ramírez, Libertad Lamarque, and Toña La Negra sounded more Italianate or operatic, other singers used a mixture of techniques and affects, as in the case of singers like Ruth Fernández and Myrta Silva. The bolero represents a rupture with other musical idioms typically performed in the bel canto style, such as arias, oratorios, and art song. Operatic works are not often covered by such a diverse stylistic array of singers. Meanwhile, many boleros have been performed by singers of various styles and genres, i.e. ranchera singer Javier Solis and jazz singer Nat King Cole in the 50s and 60s, and pop singer Thalia in the 80s and 90s. Further, while operatic repertoire is more or less sung by singers trained in a particular genre or sound, bel canto is no longer the standard for boleros. This changes in the '50s and '60s, and again in the '70s and '80s, from the lovelorn belting of La Lupe to the pop twang and softness of Luis Miguel.

María Grever's Ideal Woman

I will now use María Grever's bolero, "Te Quiero Dijiste," as a concrete example of the race and gender politics of bolero, as well as the genre's European sonic qualities and performance practices. María Grever was a criollo elite Mexican composer who worked in New York City, and whose international body of work encapsulates the racial rhetorics of mestizaje ideology, while also highlighting both the compliance and subversion of women toward other women and women's image. Grever lived from 1885-1951 with the peak of her

[20] Mandalit del Barco, "Without These Latino Composers, Hollywood Wouldn't Sound the Same," NPR, October 2, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/10/02/1125328793/without-these-latino-composers-hollywood-wouldnt-sound-the-same.

career taking place in the late 1920s through the 1940s.[21] One of her most famous boleros, “Te Quiero Dijiste,” was picked up for the movie and served as the theme song for the Hollywood musical film *Bathing Beauty* (1944). It was renamed “Magic is the Moonlight,” but retained its Spanish text and original composition in the film. Although the film was produced by the North American media company, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer Studios (MGM), and starred several North American actors, Grever’s involvement coincided with and represented Mexico’s impact in American cinema.[22]

Figure 2.1. Poster advertising Bathing Beauty as “M.G.M’s Mammoth Technicolor Musical Spectacle.” Esther Williams is pictured in a blue bathing suit with a shell behind her. Red Skelton is the first name listed, and in bigger font that the rest. Followed by Esther’s, Harry James, and Xavier Cugat. Then Carlos Ramírez, Ethel Smith, Basil Rathbobne, Bill Goodwin, and Jean Porter.

[21] https://soundgirls.org/maria-grever-the-most-famous-unknown-person-you-know/

[22] See Rodríguez Lee, María Luisa. *María Grever: Poeta Y Compositora*. Potomac, Md: Scripta Humanistica, 1994. Nesme, Nayeli. María *Grever Reflexiones Sobre Su Obra*. Guadalajara, Jalisco, México: Editorial Universitaria, 2009.

Figure 2.2. Times Square, New York City in 1936. Astor Theater pictures with a blown-up sign saying "The Great Ziegfeld." Ads for Chevrolet and Spud are also legible.

Bathing Beauty premiered in Astor Theater in New York City in 1944. The film featured Colombian baritone Carlos Ramírez, Spanish bandleader Xavier Cugat, and American actor Red Skelton as the main protagonist, Steve Elliot. The "bathing beauty" herself, Caroline Brooks, was played by the American competitive swimmer and actress, Esther Williams. Grever's "Te Quiero Dijiste" is sung by Ramírez in a scene where Elliot asks him to serenade Brooks as they all mingle poolside. Elliot tells Ramírez to "put his heart and soul in it" and not let Brooks get away. Ramírez replies with "Don't worry, when I sing, they never get away." To which Elliot responds, "on second thought, you better put *my* heart and soul into it," clearly threatened that Ramírez might steal his woman. Elliot credits himself with having written the song, so Ramírez becomes the puppet used to ventriloquize the white man's authorial voice, which is actually María Grever's. When Ramírez begins to croon, Brooks reacts politely enough at first with a forced smile here and there, but is clearly bothered and backs away as Ramírez continues to approach her. Then, a band of guitarists in

mariachi attire appears to stop Brooks from running away. She wiggles her way out, and as Ramírez pursues her, she says “shoo” with an accompanying shooing gesture, as one would a dog. Ramírez follows Brooks nonetheless to a diving board, and as she climbs up to take a dive, he sings his big coda staring up at her. She dives and the scene ends.

Ultimately, Ramírez carries out the wishes of Steve Elliot. He takes on multiple stereotypical roles, as he is portrayed simultaneously as a musical servant to Elliot and as the threatening Latin lover to Brooks.[23] This relationship between musical servitude and subjugation and musical seduction and sensuality is an ever-present colonially induced dynamic between Black and brown musicians and entertainers and their white audiences and producers. It is a central theme to be explored in this chapter and dissertation as a whole.[24]

While the racial dynamics of the scene are highly visible in terms of the male actors, the racialization of the female lead is subtler, primarily because all the women in the scene are fair-skinned women with blonde or light brown hair. The visuals lack reference to the mere existence of a brown feminine form. The white women become universal and normative. This racialization of femininity is made obvious in the lyrics for the song.

[23] For more on the Latin Lover trope, see Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
[24] I explore this more in chapter 3 with discussion of Josephine Baker’s banana skirt, Beyonce’s use of it, and its iterations in Dominican dembow via Amara La Negra and La Delfi.

Figure 2.3. Carlos Ramírez (center, no guitar) singing to a group of (white) women poolside. His mariachi group is to the right.

Te quiero dijiste (I love you, you said)
Tomando mis manos (taking my hands)
Entre tus manitas (in your little hands)
De blanco marfil (of white ivory)
Y sentí en mi pecho (and I felt in my chest)
Un fuerte latido (a strong beat)
Después un suspiro (then a sigh)
Y luego el chasquido (and then the snap)
De un beso febril (of a feverish kiss)

Muñequita linda (pretty little doll)
De cabellos de oro (with golden hair)
Dos dientes de perla (pearly teeth)
Labios de rubí (ruby red lips)
Dime si me quieres (tell me if you love me)
Como yo te adoro (the way I love you)
Si de mi te acuerdas (if you remember me)
Como yo de ti (like I do you)

A veces escucho (at times I hear)
Un eco divino (a divine echo)
Que envuelto en la brisa (that flows in the wind)
Parece decir (and seems to say)
Si te quiero mucho (Yes, I love you so much)
Mucho mucho mucho (so so so much)

Tanto como entonces (as much as ever)
Siempre hasta morir (until I die)

The whiteness of the poetic object's skin is matched and symbolized by the blonde of her hair, the red of her lips, the pearliness of her teeth, and her small, doll-like frame. This construction of female beauty relies on a whiteness cultivated through much more than skin color. The whiteness in Grever's text is manifest through the interplay of size, age, skin color, and class (i.e., pearly teeth), among other factors. All these signifiers work together to make the poetic object desirable, white, and feminine.

The lyrics are crafted so that our knowledge about the speaker, or subject, is left unclear. In this case, however, the Eurocentric depiction of the poetic object's body is part of a process of gendering both the poetic subject *and* object according to heteronormative, racialized ideals of beauty. The speaker is made male by racializing and typifying the poetic object according to an ideal 'woman;' manhood thus affirmed by association with white femininity. The universality of Eurocentric beauty standards makes it so that attraction to white women becomes a normative mode of sexuality, while attraction to brown and Black women is considered a fetish or deviance.[25]

While the physical description of the poetic object in the song's lyrics is an example of misogynoir, there are ways in which Grever writes the poetic object that subverts its customary feminine passivity. The first line of the bolero is "I love you, *you said."* The 'object' is speaking. She continues, "taking *my* hands in *your* little white hands of ivory." The 'object' is active. Grever perhaps strategically used a standardized portrayal of women to distract from the fact that the poetic 'object' has intellect and agency. While the portrayal

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[25] See chapter 3 for more on this development. Also see Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar* (Barcelona: Duke University Press, 2014). Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

does not go so far as to unite the female body and mind, the woman's mind is voiced and her body has taken action. In fact, the poetic subject begs the woman to continue speaking and even imagines her voice in the wind at the song's climax, "y a veces escucho, un eco divino, que envuelto en la brisa (and at times I hear a divine echo that returns in the breeze)." The emphasis here is crucial, since Grever recreates a white male fantasy by shifting objectification from body to voice.

Mark H. Pedelty explains "whereas women were secondary subjects in the revolutionary corridos, the postrevolutionary bolero focused almost exclusively, perhaps obsessively, on women."[26] Bolerista Agustín Lara is often credited with turning the Mexican bolero into what John Koegel calls the "cult of the idealized woman."[27] Lara "felt the perfect woman was even better mute," and often wrote women as mentally and emotionally silent, or mentally and physically treacherous and in need of silencing.[28] These are the tropes with which Grever had to contend. Pedelty writes that Lara had a "fetishistic focus on the mujer divina" and this "divine woman" an iteration of the Virgin Mary and the virgin/whore dichotomy.[29]

Grever's ideal woman is not subversive in the sense that she undermines notions that women should represent "boundless love and self-sacrifice"; her character very much conforms to it.[30] But, she is different in that the poetic 'object' *voices* her love. Her voice is both the object of desire and the means by which she/they may assert themselves. This

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[26] Mark H. Pedelty, *Musical Ritual in Mexico City: From the Aztec to NAFTA,* 167.
[27] John Koegel, *Musics of Latin America,* eds. Robin Moore and Walter Aaron Clarke (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 123.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Pedelty, 167. See also, María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 288. Romero, Rolando, and Amanda Nolacea Harris. *Feminism, Nation and Myth La Malinche*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2014.
[30] Manuel Peña, "Class, Gender, and Machismo: The "Treacherous Woman" Folklore of Mexican Male Workers," *Gender and Society* 5, no. 1 (1991): 30–46, 33.

assertion alone gives her subjectivity, albeit through the eyes of the speaker . If the poetic object's voice is to speak her own body into being, then all the physical characteristics that make her archetypically feminine, as in silent and passive, come into question, and by proxy, all the conventions that make the poetic subject male, or manly. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, "the work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended."[31] Making Anzaldúa proud, Grever has thus crafted an androgynous poetic voice and ambiguous erotic relationship between two (white) *subjects.*

However, the text exposes the ways in which we may revert to and reenact whiteness through queer potentials. Her text speaks to the insidious ways in which racism seeps into sexual relationships, normative and otherwise. In the analysis of Grever, the text may be read two ways: anti-Black but queer, or anti-Black *because* queer.[32] When the lyrics are embodied and sounded in the film scene, liberatory potentials of queer subjectivity are further thwarted by the anti-Blackness and heteronormativity being enacted visually and sonically. Ramírez's voice furthers the brown musician's role as a servant to the white man. His operatic singing matches the European orchestration that backs him. Grever is often praised because she grew up under the tutelage of Europeans like Claude Debussy and Franz Léhar, and their influence can be heard in the orchestration for "Te Quiero Dijiste."[33] Harp and strings open the song with a flourish. Homage to late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century Italian opera and

[31] Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 102.

[32] This realization came about during my work on Grever and bolero in my second year of grad school. Hurt by the imperial whiteness the song carried and my reluctance to want to sing the lyrics but my desire to sing the melody, I sought out sonic spaces where I saw Blackness and queerness thriving in tandem and because of one another's presence. I found reggaetón. Again.

[33] See Rodríguez Lee, María Luisa. *María Grever: Poeta Y Compositora*. Potomac, Md: Scripta Humanistica, 1994. Nesme, Nayeli. María *Grever Reflexiones Sobre Su Obra*. Guadalajara, Jalisco, México: Editorial Universitaria, 2009.

French musical drama is apparent in the prominence of the brass section, a strong tonal center of the piece, and harmonies built off sevenths and half-diminished chords. While mariachi guitarists are present visually, they are not part of the orchestral textures and become silent representations of Latin men and music. In the big band-inflected coda, Ramírez ends with a sustained High G on the word "amor!!!," reminiscent of Puccini-esque ideals of musical climax and closure.

The orchestration for "Te Quiero Dijiste" in the film is performed by the Xavier Cugat Orchestra. Cugat was raised in Havana, Cuba and his musical upbringing was split between Havana and New York City. He is credited by many with leading the sensation that was to become "Latin music." Luis Pérez Valero has made the case that Cugat's fame emerged from his ability to use the feminine voice and body in his musical production as a means of localizing himself and the music he created as tropical. Further, Valero asserts this was made possible through the homogenization of the many rhythms and sounds that would emerge as "rumba."[34] He explains:

> Es así como el danzón y el bolero (México), el son y la rumba (Cuba), el tango y la milonga (Argentina), el choro y el samba (Brasil) junto con el foxtrot y la balada americana (Estados Unidos) se simplificaron en beneficio de una "americanización" de la música. En 1930 la música afrolatina tenía un fuerte contraste con respecto a la estadounidense, los sellos discográficos debían homogeneizar el contenido musical y cultural para la audiencia y convertir lo tropical en estereotipo de baile, fiesta y sensualidad.[35]

Valero's points expose how anti-Blackness ultimately led to a lack of genre specificity and the stereotypes of the tropics as one big, hypersexual, party-all-the-time nightclub. Cugat and

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[34] See Luis Pérez Valero, "Rumbas y Fotogramas. Presencia y Esencia de Xavier Cugat En El Cine," *Cuadernos de Investigación Musical*, no. 15 (2022): 21–34.
[35] Luis Pérez Valero, "El Sonido de La Voz Femenina En Las Primeras Producciones Discográficas (1933-1940) De Xavier Cugat. Una Multimodalidad de Lo Tropical," *Contrapulso - Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios En Música Popular* 3, no. 2 (2021): 6–23, 9.

his orchestra's role in the film *Bathing Beauty* exemplify that bolero, homogenized sonic references to tropicality, white women, and Latin lovers were co-constitutive in this era.

"Te Quiero Dijiste" now occupies a space in current classical concerts performed by Latin American opera singers. It is often programmed as a means to include oft-marginalized Spanish-language songs in recitals and has also been used to create a sense of diplomacy between Mexico and European countries.[36] The following is my own rumination on the song while preparing it for a recital.

. . .

I sing… "muñequita linda, de cabellos de oro, de dientes de perla, labios de rubí" and my pianist stops me. "Do you want to change that to muñequito lindo? I guess it doesn't translate, does it?" he asks. Meaning men shouldn't be doll-like. And I respond "well, maybe I am talking to my daughter?" But what I really mean to ask is "can I not sing to a woman because I am woman? Does the way the words attach to the page represent so clearly a man singing to a woman? If I did love a woman, would I love her like this? Do I love her like this? Do I love myself like this? Do I look like this? Does anyone in my family look like this? Why not? Are we the real Latinas, or is she? Who is she? Who am I?"

. . .

Bel Canto & Ronca Realness

Ultimately, Ramírez's operatic voice has catalyzed an understanding of the song as a type of aria. Ramírez sings in a specifically bel canto vocal style, beginning to solidify as a school of vocal pedagogy in the seventeenth-century as an Italianate way of singing that

[36] Grever's "Te Quiero Dijiste," performed by soprano Rebeca Olvera and pianist Ángel Rodríguez to celebrate 70 years of diplomacy between Mexico and Switzerland.

sought to amplify the voice naturally, as well as purify and standardize it.[37] The bel canto sound might be familiar to generations of Latin Americans through bolero as well as opera. This kind of singing seeks unmediated volume and is highly structured. Voice teachers often claim bel canto techniques to be the one truly "healthy" way of singing, which altogether creates a Eurocentric model for the ways in which it is appropriate to be loud.[38] These kinds of constraints on sound and voice impact colonized communities deeply. Words like "loud," "noisy," "boisterous," "soulful," "hoarse," "raspy," "throaty," are all perceived as antithetical to the bel canto mission and are not-coincidentally also racially coded through ableist rhetoric.[39] For these reasons, I consider bel canto expectations and vocal beauty standards to be antithetical to several Latin American epistemologies of sounding, particularly reggaetón's prominent vocal timbres.

As Nina Eidsheim has articulated "What is today cloaked in concepts of health, authenticity, and self-expression was, only half a century ago, unhesitatingly described as race and racial qualities."[40] I would add that these racial qualities categorized around ideas of what racialized bodies are *able* to do or sound. The mythmaking around vocal hygiene and health is racially- and class-coded with a colonial history of musical subjugation of Black and

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[37] See James A. Stark, *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Giulio Silva, "The Beginnings of the Art of 'Bel Canto,'" *The Musical Quarterly* VIII, no. 1 (1922): 53–68. Lucie Manén, *Bel Canto: The Teaching of the Classical Italian Song-Schools: Its Decline and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Mathilde Marchesi and Philip Lieson Miller, *Bel Canto: A Theoretical & Practical Vocal Method* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

[38] An idea that is often referenced in discussions of Latinx relationships to music and sound, see Ivy Queen's 2020 podcast LOUD. Casillas, D. Inés. "Listening (Loudly) to Spanish-Language Radio." Sounding Out!, July 20, 2015. https://soundstudiesblog.com/author/casillas04/.

[39] See Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York ; Boston ; London: Little, Brown Spark, 2022). I credit Hersey and the Black feminists with whom she is in dialogue, with elucidating how ableism is a racist tactic emergent from capitalist and colonial methods of commodifying humans. The hegemony of European sound and colonial listening has been proliferated through slavery and colonization, the same methods that dehumanize and disable.

[40] Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (University of California, 2018), 46.

brown peoples.[41] One of the main justifications for bel canto tradition was predicated on a false model of vocal hygiene. Italian and Spanish singers in the 1800s advocated that bel canto cultivated optimum vocal health and hygiene, and we now know that the medical and physiological ideas about the voice were incorrect at the height of bel canto teachings.[42] Bel canto pedagogy prides itself on the blending of what it terms "register breaks," whose goal was to create the same timbre throughout the "registers" of the voice. The registers, "chest and head," were created to denote the kinds of sensations experienced by the singer when singing at certain frequencies and became generalized as anatomical facts of the voice despite the non-universality of each distinct singing body. Many voice teachers in the late 1800s saw the chest voice as the natural voice, an idea that can deepen our understandings of why Afro-Diasporic musics, where the so-called "chest" voice is used and explored more often than in opera, have been labeled as "primitive" or "simplistic." Ronca voices in reggaetón often thrive in the deeper, throatier, chest that bel canto would consider to be "natural," and yet their ronca quality simultaneously occupies classifications as "irregular."[43]

The framework of juxtaposition I create between bolero and reggaetón has motivated my conceptualization of *ronca realness*, a sonic and timbral signifier of race and class resistance emergent from reggaetón as well as lower-class Puerto Rican critical conversations, aka kiki's.[44] Inspired by reggaetónero Don Omar and Eliel's song "Ronca,"

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[41] See Geoffrey Baker, "Latin American Baroque: Performance as a Post-Colonial Act?," *Early Music* 36, no. 3 (2008): 441–48.
[42] See James A Stark. *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. Duey, Philip. *Bel Canto in Its Golden Age*. New York: King's Crown Press, 1951.
[43] See Bradley, Brown. "Bel Canto is Not a Dirty Word." *The American Music Teacher* 28, no. 5 (Apr 01, 1979): 37. Edwin, Robert. "Belting: Bel Canto or Brutto Canto?" *Popular Song and Music Theater*, 2002. I expand on this toward the end of this section.
[44] I borrow this from film and music scholar Chaz Antoine Barracks, who has used this term to discuss the community-oriented methodologies of theorizing from Black and brown casual conversations. https://vpa.syr.edu/people/chaz-antione-barracks/

Jennifer Domino Rudolph explains, "Roncar, literally meaning to snore in Spanish, signifies making noise or making trouble in the vernacular of reggaetón…" and defines "the performative components of reggaetón and roncar [as] namely, ghetto authenticity, blackness, and masculine power."[45] My addition of ronca *realness* speaks to the way in which ronca voices reveal, or make *real,* the body rather than hiding it in accordance with colonial ideals of bodily-vocal purification and disappearance. The linking of ronca with/as realness also theorizes voice and timbre from lower-class, ghettocentric, Black and brown community ideologies of genre authenticity, sonic prowess, and colonial resilience.[46] Ronca realness encapsulates the specific sonic qualities of reggaetóneres and rappers who embody vocal and sonic suciedad, Deborah Vargas's theory for how queer Latinx bodies reclaim their own abjection.[47] Ronca voices are in the process of renegotiating their racial coding, and are often the queer, Black, androgynous voices that flip or destruct whitewashed, heteronormative and transphobic gendered binaries of vocal register and timbre.[48]

[45] Jennifer Domino Rudolph, "'Roncamos Porque Podemos,'" Embodying Latino Masculinities, 2012, 44-123.
[46] Specifically referring to discourses around hip-hop and realness as racial and class authenticity. See Mickey Hess, "Hip-Hop Realness and the White Performer," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 5 (2005): 372–89. Murray Forman, *The 'hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002). Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994). Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2006).
[47] Vargas, Deborah R. "Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (September 2014): 715. Also see chapter 1 for more on how I use this framework in the dissertation as a whole.
[48] I refer here to the coding of high voices as female and low voices as male. See Martin Ashley, *How High Should Boys Sing?: Gender, Authenticity and Credibility in the Young Male Voice* (London: Routledge, 2016). Francesco Venturi, "Creaky Voice Gender," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 201–18. Martha Feldman et al., "Why Voice Now?," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 68, no. 3 (2015): 653–85. James Stark's work on bel canto pays particular attention to the role of the castrato in the development of bel canto pedagogy. The castrato is one of the most famous examples of those who experienced life as genderqueer people before the 1900s. The Catholic Church's obsession with the treble voice of boys and the occlusion of women from musical activities resulted in the phenomenon of the castrato. Yet, these figures faced early forms of transphobia, homophobia, and classism at insufferable rates. While the castrato is often cited as the master of bel canto, bel canto was more so the master of these men. Bel canto is thus tainted with this history of queer violence, as well as its racial and anti-Black underpinnings. For more on castrati, see also Roger Freitas and Martha Feldman.

A conversation that took place between Grever and the Puerto Rican singer, Myrta Silva, shows how Latinx vocal practice exceeds bel canto demands, even within bolero, one of the more Eurocentric genres. Once Silva told Grever that since she did not "have much of a voice, I can't sing some of your songs." Grever responded to Silva by saying "you have what it takes to sing my songs, and that is heart, not a great voice."[49] This emphasis on emotion and deemphasis on voice is the foundation of sounding in many Latinx traditions, including salsa, reggaetón, and even bolero, where the goal is to express an emotion, a struggle, and the embodiment of that feeling is what should be heard in the voice; the sonic manifestation of the singer's experiences and struggles, aka their realness. Grever commends that Silva's voice reveals a feeling body. This response points to a prioritization within Latinx aesthetic cultures of what Licia Fiol-Matta calls:

> the thinking voice… an event that can be apprehended through but is not restricted to music performance. It exceeds notation, musicianship, and fandom, although it partakes of them all. No artist owns the thinking voice; it cannot be marshaled at will or silenced when inconvenient. Its aim is not to dazzle or enthrall, although it may do so.[50]

Grever gives Silva's voice permission to transcend limited ideals of bel canto vocal "beauty" with passion and interpretation. Meanwhile, the recognition of emotion in bel canto vocality did not formally arrive into the pedagogical standards until over a century into its development. Philip Duey writes "bel canto [places] emphasis on beauty of tone and brilliant virtuosity, rather than dramatic expression or romantic emotion."[51] Through the pairing of bolero and reggaetón, we better understand the colonial vocal standards that reggaetóneres are resisting, as well as the ways in which bolero singers renegotiated the boundaries of vocal beauty in their own time. At times, we can reduce the distance between bel canto and ronca

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[49] Fiol-Matta, Licia. *The Great Woman Singer Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
[50] Licia Fiol-Matta, *The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music*.
[51] Duey, Philip. *Bel Canto in Its Golden Age*. New York: King's Crown Press, 1951.

realness in order to acknowledge the sonic manifestations of Latina musical and vocal agency that transcend genre boundaries through intergenerational "thinking voices."

In early bel canto teachings, the voice was to be "protected" from certain food and drink to produce as clear a tone as possible.[52] The limits placed on classical singers' eating would be considered an asset to the ronca voice *and* to the bolero singer, as they add to the dramatic expression of the piece by allowing more of a window into who the singer is. Ronca voices reveal if the singer had coffee that morning and hot Cheetos the night before, because they now navigate tough musical contours with strain and stress. Because of the colonial reification of a specific type of bel canto "purity," ronca voices have been designated as "dirty," both their disability and their superpower. Fortunately, Deborah Vargas' theory of suciedad would argue that the dirt is in fact what is pure. Combining the thinking voice and sonic suciedad, we arrive at a sense of ronca *realness* that resists the subjugation of racialized voices by letting the heart sing *because* the feeling body is heard.

Current vocal pedagogy continues to utilize bel canto standards to denote hoarse, ronca voices as something *irregular* to even the belt, something *other* in the voice:

> rock and pop singers such as Melissa Etheridge, Britney Spears, and Jessica Simpson, do not necessarily use more chest voice in their belting than their Broadway counterparts. Rather, they introduce irregular vibrations, or noise, into their vocal tone. The sound can be, among other things, raspy, breathy, fried, or twangy… As teachers, we know there are potential dangers singers face regardless of their singing style. For example, we may see the singer who exceeds her vocal capacity and overloads her instrument to the point of hoarseness or worse; the young singer who tries to copy an older singer's sound but does not possess the vocal or emotional equipment to do it.[53]

The phrase "singer who exceeds her vocal capacity," is meant to be cautionary, but is exactly where vocal suciedad thrives and survives, in that excess. The belief held by

[52] Duey, Ibid.
[53] Edwin, Robert. "Belting: Bel Canto or Brutto Canto?" *Popular Song and Music Theater*, 2002.

the ronca singer that the voice can be and do more means the singer will chase that point of hoarseness and revel in it.

. . .

My framing of bolero and reggaetón emerge from very personal relationships with both genres, as well as my experiences in classical voice lessons as a lower-class, mixed, disabled, queer Boricua woman. In undergrad, I majored in vocal performance, and was constantly "stunted" by my severe acid reflux (which is never simple reflux, but part of a deeper relationship to food). As I tried to attend lessons and learn arias, I would often wake up hoarse –#iwokeuplikethis #ronca– sometimes completely unable to make "clear" sounds. All the women in my family have gastrointestinal issues, valid undiagnosed eating disorders, as well as cultural relationships with food coded as disorders, like our undeniable love of spicy chips. We also have internalized fatphobia, racism, sexism, and a host of mental illnesses that make us either binge or avoid eating altogether. These bodily epistemologies of being colonized affect our voices, throats, breathing, the ways we sound and are able to sound.

My mother, also a singer and hyper aware of the way she sounds, would often wake up in the mornings and say "ay, estoy ronca" (oh I'm hoarse today). Fellow Latina opera singers throughout my graduate career would often say "ugh, I have an audition today pero estoy ronca." A voice teacher I had in college, when I came in with a particularly hoarse sound that day, said, from one Puerto Rican to another, that "we" are often ronca. She was not particularly upset about this, but saw it as a cultural thing, something Puerto Ricans in particular have to learn how to manage in order to become classical singers.

This is just a few of the ways in which ronca sound has appeared in my life, as a choice, as a label, as a state of being, as a burden, as a blessing. Reggaetón has shown me how being a ronca is an asset that kept me rooted while I attempted to bloom in upper-middle class, predominantly white institutions. I place bel canto, being the "clean" and "healthy" way of singing, in direct opposition to vocal suciedad embodied by ronca singers, and utilize bolero, with its gradual separation from sonic Blackness toward bel canto, as a predecessor and cautionary tale for reggaetón. In that vein, I will now shift to celebrating reggaetón's resistive embodied suciedad and Blackness and the many ways in which they sound. The next section explains how ronca becomes a signifier of street resilience, realness, hood strength, racial pride, and genderqueer sonic suciedad when embodied by femmes.

Moaning Suciedad

Reggaetón emerged as a distinct genre and movement in the 1990s, as the Puerto Rican government turned their efforts toward fighting crime with the Mano Dura Contra el Crimen Acto, a cousin to the U.S. war on drugs.[54] This act led to mass urban renewal, displacement, and incarceration of poor Blacks on the island, as well as the creation of what Patricio G. Martínez Llompart has called the "rise of the criollo prison-industrial complex."[55] It was a continuation of the blanqueamiento (whitening) ideologies that emerged from "La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña" projects of the nineteenth century, which sought to unify peoples across classes during Spanish, and then U.S, invasion of the island.[56] The Mano Dura

[54] See Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*(Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2016). Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2020).
[55] Martinez Llompart, Patricio G. "In the Custody of Violence: Puerto Rico Under La Mano Dura Contra El Crimen," 1993-1996." *Revista Jurídica UPR* 2 (2015).
[56] Jennifer Domino Rudolph, "Roncamos Porque Podemos."

placed over 70% of the country's police force in caseríos, poor Black cities and neighborhoods, like Loíza and La Perla, leading to mass incarceration and surveillance.[57] These initiatives to whiten the island spanned all aspects of life and culture, just as the mestizaje movement had in Mexico in the '40s. Puerto Rican government officials continued to idealize the bolero as the symbol of musical "purity" in Cuba and Puerto Rico in the '90s, while dance-oriented reggaetón was considered its arch enemy, much like discourse around rap in the U.S., as Tricia Rose explains, was thought to have infected an otherwise sexism-free society.[58] In the early 2000s, the government believed perreo and reggaetón were leading to sexual misconduct (which was really just having sex at all) in these same communities, and under the guise of care for women's image, backed the Anti-Porn Campaign of 2002.[59] The campaign targeted reggaetón and rap for its sexist images of women and held boleros as the pinnacle of womanly praise. These initiatives police poor Black and Brown ways of life on the island and find their sexual desires to be criminal and backwards. Frances Aparicio has explained that one of the reasons for the reification of bolero is that their misogynoir had to be more covert because they did not have the dance-beat, or the dancing, to cover up the lyrics.[60] In effect, the sexualization of "manitas de blanco marfil" by Grever is less distressing to government and religious officials, mainstream media, and older generations than a genre like reggaetón, which praises the "tremendo culo."[61]

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[57] Marisol LeBrón. "Mano Dura Contra el Crimen and Premature Death in Puerto Rico." In *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton. (New York: Verso, 2016), 95-107. See LeBrón's work more broadly. Marisol LeBrón, *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).
[58] See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994). Aparicio, Frances R. *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).
[59] Petra R Rivera-Rideau, "Perrils of Perreo," *Remixing Reggaetbn. (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
[60] Aparicio, Frances R. *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*.
[61] Reference to Miami-based hip-hop and reggaetón artist, Pitbull, and his hit song "Culo" (2004).

Amidst the backlash, reggaetón turned up the sonic suciedad.[62] Vocal suciedad in reggaetón sounds like barking, yelling, hoarseness, and moaning. It often sounds like sex or fighting or both. One of few works to discuss the role of ronca in reggaetón is based on Don Omar's song, "Ronca" (2005). The song begins with Don Omar and Eliel introducing themselves over a track of barking dogs and shattering glass. In addition to snoring, roncar can sometimes mean, or allude to, barking. The song is a classic display of braggadocio, negating the surveilled and policed realities of the caseríos with an assertion that "roncamos porque podemos (we make noise because we can)." Don Omar creates an alternate world where noise control, gentrification, and attacks on reggaetón's character do not take away the community's ability to sound out their own existence. The song is an act of fantasy. Jennifer Rudolph says,

> In the case of Don Omar, and of reggaetón in general, this sense of community is accomplished through both highly localized, barrio-centric images and a larger pan-Latino experience embodied by language and lived barrio experiences, articulated by a masculine voice that attempts to unite Latino/a listeners largely through barriocentric and womanizing violence.[63]

In Rudolph's analysis, the masculine (ronca) voice is often seen as uttering and enacting violence. In general, discussion of reggaetón's vocal qualities have been deemed to represent the misogyny and homophobia of the genre, not exclusive of the acknowledgement of the genre's tools for Black liberation. More interested in the intersections of Black liberation, queer joy, and femme agency, I prioritize the moments of *ronca realness* employed by artists like Ivy Queen and La Sista as modes of queerly embodying masculine rap personas as racialized women. In conjunction with Don Omar's artistic choice to rap over the sound of

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[62] Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Raquel Z. Rivera, "Reggaeton Nation," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 40, no. 6 (2007): 35–39.
[63] Rudolph, 124.

dogs barking on a track called "ronca," the adoption of ronca timbres by reggaetóneras could be understood as a sonic redefinition of oneself as a "bad bitch," speaking to a more recent history of reclamation by femme rappers.[64]

Dominant scholarly discourse has often positioned reggaetón vocality and sound as misogynistic. Reggaetón often makes use of a call and response format of dale/dame to structure many of its choruses. Typically, the male rapper will say "dale," meaning "go ahead" and the woman will respond with "give it to me."[65] Jímenez has written about Glory, a pioneering reggaetónera, who appeared in the chorus of Daddy Yankee's "Gasolina."[66] He described Glory's role as that of the "automated yes-girl" whose only point in existence is to oblige the male fantasy.[67] The construction of the yes-girl hints that other women might take on the role of the no-girl. In my jotería listening —to make use of Eddy Alvarez's term for queer Latinx listening practices— I have found that the women most likely to take on a ronca, masculine sound are more likely to adopt a no-girl attitude.[68] For example, ronca reggaetónera Ivy Queen calls herself "the original rude girl," in a gender bending of "rude boys," or the gangsta and badman, in reggae.[69] By virtue of the call and response, no-girls are

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[64] Examples include Megan Thee Stallion's "B.I.T.C.H" (2020), Doja Cat and Saweetie's "Best Friend" (2021), Trina's "Da Baddest Bitch" (2000), Latto's "Bitch from Da Souf" (2019), Karol G's "Bichota" (2021). I acknowledge that many rappers have resisted the label, as in Queen Latifah's "U.N.I.T.Y" (1993) and her iconic lyric: "you gotta let 'em know/ you ain't a bitch or a hoe."

[65] A great example is Wisin y Yandel's "Rakata" (2005). The yes-girl is Jenny la Sexy Voz, whose name fell into obscurity for over a decade and was recovered by Isabelia Herrera's article for Remezcla in 2016. https://remezcla.com/features/music/jenny-la-sexy-voz-profile/.

[66] Daddy Yankee and Glory's 2004 hit song "Gasolina" is often cited as reggaetón's first crossover into the mainstream pop music industry. Glory was originally uncredited. The song is now the first reggaetón song to be incorporated into the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress in 2023. See Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Raquel Z. Rivera, "Reggaeton Nation," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 40, no. 6 (2007): 35–39. Petra R Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetbn. (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[67] Félix Jiménez, "(W)Rapped in Foil: Glory at Twelve Words a Minute," *Reggaeton*, 2020, 229–51.

[68] Eddy Francisco Alvarez, "Jotería Listening," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 4 (2021): 126–51.

[69] Sonia Sabelli, "'Dubbing Di Diaspora': Gender and Reggae Music Inna Babylon," *Deconstructing Europe*, 2019, 137–52. Nadia Ellis, "Out and Bad: Toward a Queer Performance Hermeneutic in Jamaican Dancehall," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 15, no. 2 (2011): 7–23. 1. Imruh Bakari, "The Jamaican Gangster Film: Badman, Rude Bwoys, and Dons," *A Companion to the Gangster Film*, 2018, 182–207.

also more likely to be the solo artists on their own tracks, while yes-girls sound briefly on other people's tracks, leading to a higher percentage of no-girls being recognized. A higher recognition rate for no-girls perpetuates the policing of women's sexuality and praises women who get their sexuality in check, in accordance with Eileen Findlay-Suarez's ideas around governmental initiatives used to "impose decency" on women so they may represent the national body.[70]

Therefore, the following analyses praise the Black femme yes-girls and their sounded feminist knowledge, which often appear in the form of what Jennifer Sweeney-Risko calls "disrespectability politics," or the refusal to repress sexuality for the sake of seeming more dignified as Black and brown women.[71] Within reggaetón, these feminisms come in the form of fun, playful, intense, graphic sounds of sex, what I find to be widely known as kink.[72] I do not frame these sounds as kink in an effort to understand them as unburdened by racial and sexual structures, but rather find kink useful *because* of those very structures' inseparability from the sexualities of the Black and brown bodies that are sounding reggaetón. As Morgan Oddie says in a reference to Black BDSM activist Mollena Williams's work, "race play is something that is unavoidable to racialized bodies" during sexual activity.[73] Oddie here speaks to Mollena Williams's assertion that, as a Black woman, she engages in race play whether she wants to or not. The framework of kink and race play foregrounds the work of

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[70] See chapter 3. Also, Eileen J Findlay Suárez, *Imposing Decency the Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[71] Jennifer Sweeney-Risko, "Fashionable 'Formation': Reclaiming the Sartorial Politics of Josephine Baker," *Fashion*, 2020, pp. 92-108. See also Regina Marie Duthely, *(Dis)Respectability Politics: Black Feminist Liberatory Digital Rhetorics*, (St. John's University: 2017). Mali D. Collins-White et al., "Disruptions in Respectability: A Roundtable Discussion," *Souls* 18, no. 2–4 (2016): 463–75.

[72] See chapter 3 and 4. Also, See Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (New York: New York University Press, 2016). Melissa Marie Gonzalez, "Tracing, Expanding, and Making Accessible the Digital Pathways of Latinx Sexual Dissidence in the Hemisphere," (Thesis, Duke University, 2020). Gonzalez's thesis is one of the only works to formally recognize BDSM in reggaetón.

[73] Morgan Oddie, "'Playing' with Race: BDSM, Race Play, and Whiteness in Kink," *Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal,* 2, no. 1 (2022): 86-95, 86.

Black feminist BDSM activists, scholars, and practitioners, to better theorize reggaetón as a means by which "black women negotiate complex and contradictory worlds of pain, pleasure, and power in their performances in the fetish realm," to quote preeminent race and BDSM scholar, Ariane Cruz.[74] The framing of this chapter builds on Oddie's notion that "BIPOC bodies automatically possess non-normative sexuality that writes them into states of abjection through the colonial, white supremacist gaze" as well as the colonial, white supremacist listening ear that both ronca reggaetóneras and moaning yes-girls counter.[75]

Glory's song, "Gata Gargola" (2003), is a great example of the kinky vocality of reggaetón, as well as the ways in which it is used by Black femmes to negotiate racialized sexuality.[76] I perceive this song as an elongated dale/dame where she is both caller and responder. Glory is reclaiming her time as the solo artist of the song, rather than an addition to the chorus. "Gata Gargola" begins with a pleasure-ridden "ayyy papiiiii" that sounds like Glory is already mid-climax. "Papiii" then morphs into a moaning "uhhh" that will serve as the backing track for the rest of the song. Glory then begins to rap, "dale bien duro papi, papi azotame. No pare, dale, papi, besame, tocame (give it to me hard, daddy, whip/spank me. Don't stop, daddy, kiss me, touch me)." Her verse transitions to a harder delivery, ronca and firm, as she tells her listeners that she always has her girls present for protection if any man wants to try something the wrong way. While the opening of the song entices, Glory still makes it clear that her boundaries need to be met and that she will be the one calling the shots. Her second verse calls all "gothic girls" to the front and imagines them owning the

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[74] Cruz, *Color of Kink,* 32. BDSM is an acronym for bondage, discipline (or domination), sadism, and masochism as they pertain to, and are enacted during, sex and sexuality.

[75] Oddie, "Playing with Race," 92.

[76] Glory's "Gata Gargola." The song appeared on the album Álex Gárgolas Presenta: Las Gárgolas, Vol. 4 (2003). Gárgolas produced 5 volumes of the series between 1998 and 2006. The 5th volume took the 181st spot on the Billboard 200. In 2021, he came out with *Gárgolas Forever*. He and Glory worked extensively together, as he produced her 2005 self-titled debut album, *Glou.*

night. Here, Glory associates the sado-masochism of being whipped with being an animal, a gargoyle, a nightwalker, a woman who wants it rough. Unlike Ivy Queen's "Yo Quiero Bailar" (2003), discussed in the next chapter, Glory is both ronca and yes-girl, sexual *and* assertive of her boundaries. Her vocality is kinky, replete with moaning and exalted "ay, papi"'s, and her sexual desires adhere to activities considered to be sado-masochistic, like whipping and spanking. Thus, I read Glory's iconic moaning and ultra-femme vocality as kinky, as a self-fetishization that undoes white feminist ideals of sexual decency and women's agency, while also asserting that kink and BDSM are spaces to contest sexism and racism through formalized rules and boundaries (or not, if that's what all partners want).

Taíno Timbres

Glory's yes-girl kinkiness is an ultra-femme approach to Black femme-inist vocalics emergent in reggaetón.[77] One of her contemporaries, La Sista, represents the masculine, ronca timbres embodied by reggaetóneras in another approach to colonialist standards of sonic and vocal beauty and feminine decency. La Sista's first big move as an emcee was her debut album *Majestad Negroide* (2006). This album is special in reggaetón's history because of the way in which it celebrates both Blackness and Indigeneity as heritages of La Sista's Puerto Rican womanhood. Black power reggaetón artists, like Tego Calderón and Don Omar, did not include Indigeneity as a part of their rhetoric. Within reggaetón, Blackness and Indigeneity become palatable when separated. Dinzey-Flores has found that:

> Many artists mention race and describe the profile of the people in their songs as being dark, using terms such as "negro," "moreno," "trigueña," etc. Of racial terms in songs, "negro" seems to be the most commonly used. "Indio" was used twice, once in Calle 13's "Atrevete te te" and once in Zion y

[77] For more on Black femme-inism, see Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *The Color Pynk: Black Femme Art for Survival* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022).

> Lennox's "Don't Stop." Thus, in their lyrics, reggaetoneros envision themselves as black or dark people whose disadvantaged position in Puerto Rican society has been linked to the intersection of class and race.[78]

La Sista explored her dark-skinned Blackness and Indigeneity through powerful female figures of both Yoruba culture and Taíno culture. On *Majestad Negroide,* she devotes a song each to Yemayá and Anacaona.[79]

In her song, "Anacaona," La Sista's voice is lyrical, melodic, and ronca. It is raspy and percussive as she delivers her spiritual and ancestral braggadocio. In the lyrics for the song, La Sista likens herself to Anacaona, a Taíno kasike, or chief, born in Ayiti (modern-day Haiti) in the late 1400's.[80] Select lyrics are as follows:

Anacaona llegó la Anacaona, (Anacaona, your Anacaona just arrived)
Anacaona yo soy tu Anacaona. (Anacaona, I am your Anacaona)
versión africana yo soy tu Anacaona (I am your Anacaona, African version)
Soy la Anacaona, porque estoy cañona (I am your Anacaona because I am a cannon)
En tó este Egipto soy la faraóna (In all this Egypt I am the pharaohess)
Voy a ser leyenda como la llorona (I'm going to be a legend like La Llorona)
Tú te me enfoganas porque estás en la mamona, (you get mad at me because you're a sucker)
Media burlona, como Madonna, (half kidding, like Madonna)
pero más potrona que Doña Petrona (but more domestic than Doña Petrona)
En busca de lo mío voy a la cañona (those who try me are going to the cannon)
voy a tirar con to', voy en busca de mi corona (I will shoot with everything, in search of my crown)

The lyrics compare Anacaona and La Sista with other women throughout history globally, like the Mexican folkloric figure La Llorona, Egyptian pharaohs, and Madonna. We also see a historic role reversal where Anacaona is the one in charge of the cannons and gunpowder,

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[78] Zaire Zenit Dinzey-Flores, "De La Disco Al Caserío: Urban Spatial Aesthetics and Policy to the Beat of Reggaetón," *Centro Journal* XX, no. 2 (2008), 52. Regina Solis Miranda, "Bienaventurado El Que Escuche Este Liriqueo: Negotiating Latinidad through Reggaeton," *Latino Studies* 20, no. 4 (2022): 498–526. Also see chapter 3 for an analysis of Calle 13's "Atrevete."

[79] Yemayá, also sometimes spelled Yemanja or Yemoja, is the Afro-Cuban ocean deity with roots in Yoruba religions of West Africa and Santería spiritual practices. See Solimar Otero, *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the Latina/o and Afro-Atlantic Diasporas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013). See chapter 2 for more on Yemayá and Ochún, goddess of rivers.

[80] For more on Anacaona, see Olivia Tracy, "'Rise Up through the Words': Postcolonial Haitian Uncoverings of Anacaona," *Journal of Haitian Studies*24, no. 1 (2018): 101–25.

instead of the conquistadores that killed her by hanging. A line of particular importance in the song is "yo soy tu Anacaona, versión Africana." La Sista remakes Anacaona in her own image, a mixed African-Indigeneity, but always African first. In a subversion of mestizaje ideology that would seek to lighten Africans via miscegenation with Indigenous peoples, La Sista darkens Anacaona and makes her more like Africa.[81] La Sista becomes Anacaona by sounding, and in effect, actualizes Anacaona's sound through her own embodiment of ronca realness rooted in Loíza, Puerto Rico.

Anacaona's very name lends itself well to rhyming, repetition, and percussive vocality. The suffix -ona, or -ón, in Spanish is often used to designate something, or someone, big, and usually female.[82] La Sista rhymes the whole song with this suffix and references several prominent women whose names also end with those three letters. La Sista says "ona" at the ends of phrases with a big open [o] vowel and practically spits on the consonant [n] before releasing into a pleasured [a], and starting all over again with a new femme icon. With the syllabic and vocal emphasis on "-ona" at the ends of phrases, La Sista's voice becomes a ronca rhythm embedded in the dembow of Afro-Indigenous bomba drums. She also gives Anacaona's name new meaning as a big Black femme icon.

In the video for the song, La Sista is a young girl who falls asleep at her school desk and dreams of being older and powerful. La Sista acts out her own dreams and is pictured as the head of a group of femme bikers. She then ends up at a bomba circle in her hometown of

[81] See Laura Inés Catelli, "Caste, Race, and the Formation of Latin American Cultural Imaginaries," *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, 2017, pp. 53-66. 1. Natividad Gutiérrez, "Miscegenation as Nation-Building: Indian and Immigrant Women in Mexico," *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*, 1995, 161–87. Isar Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and U.S. Colonialism in Puerto Rico* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).
[82] See chapter 4 for Villana Antillana's use of this signifier.

Loíza, Puerto Rico, where she raps on stage.[83] The video ends with young La Sista's white teacher waking her up, the force that distances her from dreaming. The song, reggaetón, and the prominent figure of Anacaona, all act as an escape for La Sista from a whitewashed curriculum and educational environment. As a young girl, she is wearing a plaid schoolgirl uniform, but in her dream, she wears a baggy shirt, track suits, long flowing skirts, headwraps and long beads and necklaces. The dream is freedom, the waking world is restraint and exhaustion. The dream is ronca, the waking world is silence. The dream is the 'hood, the waking world is the schoolhouse.

The Complete Artist?

Having placed several examples of reggaetón vocality and bel canto ideology in dialogue, it is important to see how bolero and reggaetón have explicitly engaged in shared repertoires. One of the best examples of boleros influence on reggaetón, and vice versa, is Ivy Queen's album *Sentimiento* (2007), an album composed of boleros, salsas romanticas, and reggaetón, and created by a team of reggaetóneres.[84] *Sentimiento* is a title that represents the social function of boleros among Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in the U.S., that of sentimentality and nostalgia. The album features Afro-Latin artists like Divino and Mikey Perfecto from early reggaetón group 3-2 Get Funky. It also reverses gendered narratives around who sings and who raps. Ivy raps on the album alongside Don Omar, Noriega, and

[83] http://reggaetonica.blogspot.com/2007/04/mini-chronicle-of-la-sistas-show-at.html Raquel Z. Rivera discusses La Sista's use of bomba in her larger work.

[84] Each track was produced by a different male producer, including Monserrate & DJ Urba, Miguel Escobar Marquez, Andrez Zoprano Arroyo, Isidro Infante, Mikey Perfecto, Stani, Marcos Sanchez, Rafy Mercenario, Noriega, and Luny Tunes. The featured artists on the album are also all men, including Don Omar, Baby Rasta, Noriega, Divino, and Mikey Perfecto. The album won a Premio Lo Nuestro Award for Urban Album of the Year in 2008 and was nominated for Best Urban Music Album at the Latin Grammy Awards in 2007. It also made the 105th spot on the US Billboard 200.

Baby Rasta, and while she does sing at times, it is most often the male featured artists like Divino and Mikey Perfect, that do the crooning in the ballads. Ivy Queen's album mixes ballads with reggaetón to show how these genres coexist and inform each other. The album also provides space for Afro-Latin artists to reclaim their roots in bolero *and* reggaetón production. The sensitivity of Afro-Latin men is showcased through bolero style songs in a way it never had been in the 1940s through 1960s, and necessarily counters stereotypes of aggressive Black men prevalent during the Mano Dura and today. In Petra Rivera-Rideau's analysis of the album, she asserts that Ivy's need for affection disrupts stereotypes of the angry Black woman, and positions herself as loveable while simultaneously portraying Black men as loving.[85] Placing these portrayals in dialogue *Bathing Beauty*, we can see a resistance to how Ramírez was forced to display his love at the behest of white men for both the benefit of white women and to their dismay and annoyance. In contrast, *Sentimiento* prominently features the toughness and lovability of Latinas and invites the endearing softness of Latinos.

Ivy opens the album with a spoken homage to her parents and to the role that bolero has played in her familial life. She says that the guitar brings her back to her childhood, when her father would pick up a guitar and play for her mother, and her mother would sing back to him. Her album is inspired by this kind of intergenerational sentimentality toward bolero and makes the point sonically through the nostalgic vintage sound of the crackling record player. The guitar then gives way to "Qué Quieres Tú de Mí," a 1964 bolero by Brazilian songwriter Altemar Dutra. The cover is followed by Ivy's signature sound in the reggaetón track "Que Lloren," Ivy's first original song on the album and one that tells men it is not only okay to

[85] Rivera-Rideau, 119-121. See chapter 3 for more on Ivy's own relationship to Blackness. While she is read as cafre, a term meaning working-class Black, she has never self-identified as Black. See Nancy López's work on "street race."

cry, but crying is exactly what she wants from her men. At the end of the song, she says "this is sentimiento." This track thus acts as a definition for the album, telling us exactly what sentimentality looks and sounds like, replacing bel canto's, and by proxy, bolero's, emotional repression with distinctly Latinx sonic epistemologies of feeling.

In the bachatón track "Sentimientos," Ivy proclaims the most important thing in a relationship, and in a man, is their ability to express love and emotion. She says she does not care for fame or money, but respect and affection. In an interview, she delved further into this by saying ""What I wanted to say in the song is that material things have never been important to me… I look for genuine feelings, honesty, the things that come from the heart, because the material things I can get [for myself]."[86] Here, Ivy echoes María Grever's philosophies around Myrta Silva's voice; that the heart is more important and should be sounded first and foremost.

"Corazon Anestesiado," is a song that displays Ivy's chesty crooning, and acts as an example of the ways that femme ronca voices can counter the colonial gendering of vocal timbre. In salsa and reggaetón, Ivy often sings lower than the male singers, and her timbre is richer and fuller, ronca, and always serving realness. Whether it's the belt of Marc Anthony, or the sensual nasality of Elvis Crespo, the Kings of Salsa become so by showing off their high notes. La India and Celia Cruz have these notes too, but their full-bodied femininity is sounded in their rich brassy tones. These patterns in registration and timbre undo European conceptions of gender and voice. Puertorriqueña femme singers thus counter colonial systems by remaining more ronca than the men.[87] In several interviews, Ivy mentions that she was constantly told that her voice was too masculine, to which she has replied "guess what,

[86] Wayback Machine (archive.org)
[87] See chapter 4 and my analysis on Villano Antillano's ronca transfemme voice.

that was my bless, cuz no one would sound like me, honey."[88] Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Petra Rivera-Rideau have commented on how Ivy's "coarse, macho, loud" voice embodied the masculinity of the genre.[89] I build on their observations to point out that in effect reggaetóneras have detached masculinity from men and femininity from women through their ronca vocal embodiments of femme masculinity.

The ballads on the album rely heavily on piano and a docile, crooning vocal style. Divino exhibits a vocal softness that subverts tropes of Black male aggression, like reggae's badman and reggaetón's gangsta. Divino, like the other men on the album, refrain from singing or rapping in a ronca style in an attempt to reinscribe Black male bodies as soft and loving. His tone is crisp and clear, makes the melody seem easily traversed, and I cannot tell by listening what he ate the night before. Bolero's bel canto ideals of purity make a return in the album but distinctly for the men, and with the purpose of separating them from the violent, unsophisticated, ronca sounds of Black reggaetóneros like Don Omar.

In effect, the men on the album bear the burden of the Mano Dura and blanqueamiento ideologies that seek to distance the respectable Black man from reggaetón vocality. When speaking about the album, Ivy said "I think I did what has never been done in this genre… I used instruments I grew up with — the strings and acoustic guitars. I wanted to show on this album that I am the complete artist, so people do not call me just a reggaetón artist." It is the "*just* a reggaetón artist" piece that represents the reification of whitened modes of music-making and the internalized perception of Afro-Indigenous genres as subpar artistry. In all the ways that Ivy's ronca voice counters European hegemony, her reliance on

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[88] Rivera-Rideau, 112.
[89] Ibid.

bolero in order to show herself, and her Black male compatriots, as "more" of an artist affirms the opposite.[90]

Further, since her beginnings with the reggaetón collective, The Noise, Ivy Queen has advocated that her community of reggaetoneres are "raperos pero no delincuentes."[91] While some see this as an effective political move to assert the humanity of rappers and Black culture-bearers, her thoughts on this album and much of her early work with The Noise represent an overall tendency toward respectability politics. Bolero becomes the artistic force that affirms reggaetóneres as educated, palatable, respectable. In this way, bolero and its bel canto historical associations ultimately dampen reggaetón's capacities for liberatory sonic suciedad.

. . .

I'd like to end this chapter with an example of the ways in which rappers are defining themselves as sophisticated *because* of reggaetón's raunchy and ronca elegance. This song and music video also show how ronca is used to evoke realness and resilience in reggaetón today. In 2020, in response to Black Lives Matter protests, Ozuna and several reggaetón icons—all male, like Wisin and Arcangel—came out with the 7-minute track "Enemigos Ocultos."[92] Ozuna opens the song and raps the choruses while each of the featured artists take turns with the verses. Ozuna's climactic line right before the beat drops is "Con elegancia, pero siempre calle (with elegance, but always street/hood)." He is then catapulted into the bass-heavy pre-chorus, and then into the chorus, where he says:

Tanto que roncan (so many bark)

[90] To adapt Ntozake Shange's phrase: when ronca is not enuf.
[91] Ivy Queen, Baby Rasta, and Gringo.
[92] See chapter 4 for more evidence as to why Ozuna's video and song were revolutionary in terms of how reggaetóneres responded to Black Lives Matter protests.

Hablan de calle, pero ninguno se monta (ninguno se monta; ah, ah) (they say they're hood, but they never step up)
Estamo' frío', siempre chillin' (ey) (we're ice cold(?), always chilling)
Y no hay preocupación, sobran lo' Benji', lo' culo' y los Richard Mille (never any worries, always Benjies, ass, and Richard Mille)
Ustedes son tri-li (eh-eh) (y'all are trifling)

The video for the song takes place in Washington D.C. and shows the capital building ablaze amidst protests. Several reggaetóneros are surrounded by determined protesters and backed by a wall of bodies ready to fight the police and the paparazzi alike. The bodies behind the rappers belong to mostly women and femmes, replacing hip-hop video vixens for video warriors, or perhaps showing us that the vixens were always the warriors. In a revolutionary scene, Afro-Puerto Rican reggaetónero, Myke Towers, is enveloped by cops pointing guns at him. The scene flashes back and forth, and in one moment the guns are microphones held by paparazzi, and in the next, they are guns again. The scene portrays how Black Puerto Rican bodies are both commodified and policed, structurally one and the same. But the guns came first, then the microphones, press, and media. When the microphones are present, Towers is still completely surrounded, unable to move, suffocating in the center.

Figure 2.4a. Myke Towers surrounded by people in masks pointing guns at him in the video for "Enemigos Ocultos."

Figure 2.4b. Myke Towers surrounded by the same group now pointing microphones at him. Still surrounded.

Reggaetóneros have continued to negotiate and blur the boundaries between street and sophistication using ronca embodiments. Here, ronca is a signifier of being hood but also being fake. This resignification of ronca resonates with the current commercialization of reggaetón, where reggaetón's ronca sonic aesthetics are detached from their initial contexts in barrios. To counter the commodification and whitewashing of reggaetón, the line "siempre piden cacao" references the original ronca reggaetónero, Don Omar, and the introductory track to his debut album, *The Last Don* (2003), once again aligning ronca reggaetón tactics with Black liberation through disrespectability.

Ozuna and his gang redefine what it means to roncar in the middle of a global pandemic and the continual, modern-day policing of Black people in postcolonial nations. They also remind us that there is a fake way to be ronca and a real one. Being ronca is an advanced artform based in lived experience and continual dedication to Black liberation. To be really ronca, you have to step up. Ozuna and his warriors do not fight in the video, they gather. They mean-mug collectively. They stay Black.

Chapter 3

Subete La Falda: Black Perreo Ancestry and Agency in Fabric and Gesture

It's December of 2005 in North Miami Beach. I'm a whole lotta things — a young tomboy, a Lord of the Rings nerd, an aspiring chonga, and a budding emo kid with reggaetón tendencies.[1] While this whole dissertation is shaped by these childhood (and beyond) traits, this chapter explores the ways that Latines learn to dress themselves according to reggaetón's cultural influence. I investigate the gender presentations and sartorial praxis of several pioneering reggaetóneras as well as the rhetoric around their dress within political spheres. In order to understand the relationship between each artists sartorial choices, feminist politics and their racial positioning and pride, I use the symbolic and material appearances of the minifalda (miniskirt) in reggaetón's lyrics, music videos, perreo dance floors, and on the bodies of artists themselves, as case studies. Of particular interest is Glory's self-titled album, in which she is pictured with a classic white, ruffle minifalda and in jeans with legs spread, Calle 13's critique of the miniskirt in their song and video for "Atrevete," and Ivy Queen's music video for "Yo Quiero Bailar," which I discuss as a means to explain the continual blanqueamiento (whitening) of the genre by her refusal to dance and/or wear a minifalda. The chapter then refuses the simultaneous blanqueamiento and misappropriation of queer genius by asserting an Afro-Diasporic lineage to the miniskirt and praising the femme Blackness present in the booty-shaking, yellow-tutu-donning video for "La Banana" by Afro-Dominican reggaetóneras, La Delfi and Amara La Negra.

[1] For more, see chapter 5. Chongalicous video

As we saw in chapter 2, femme artists were typically "yes-girls" tasked with the role of moaning their way through the choruses of reggaetón's greatest hits, while tomboys were solo artists with ronca (raspy), aggressive vocal timbres.[2] This chapter continues the discussion of gender and vocality by linking it to visuality, material culture, aesthetics, and embodiment. I expand on the ways in which these OG reggaetóneras, like Ivy Queen, Glory, and La Sista, had to negotiate not only their vocal and sonic suciedad, but their sartorial and dance politics as well, and how their fashion may or may not have distanced them from femininity, Blackness and Indigeneity. The vocal kinkiness explored in Glory's work is extended to perreo and fashion to broaden the understanding of the plethora of ways in which femmes embody sexuality and kink as means of shaping Afro-Diasporic artforms.

This chapter serves a dual purpose, in that it also expands reggaeton's sartorial ancestry in the aftermath of colonial homogenization and erasure of specific Afro-Diasporic customs and innovations. I use the lens of the minifalda (the miniskirt) to seek and explore connections between perreo and bomba in Puerto Rican and Caribbean history. I build on Petra Rivera-Rideau's work on the relationship between perreo and bomba and her analysis that the anti-Black criticism of perreo lies in its connection to how bomba operates as a "metonym" for Blackness in Puerto Rico.[3] I also present the miniskirt as a necessary mode of inquiry that reaffirms the ancestral lineage between perreo and bomba. The miniskirt reveals the interplay between sex, sound, fashion, and dance in the embodiment practices of femmes from colonized nations. It acts as a portal for theorizing inter-island postcolonial resistance

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[2] See chapter 2. My term for Latinx voices that signify the corporeal state of the singer, i.e. if she ate hot Cheetos the night before. Ronca voices are a form of sonic suciedad, building off of Deborah Vargas's theory of suciedad, and one of the ways in which femme world-building provides a platform for queers of color to redefine their abjection.

[3] Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 64.

practices undertaken by Black and brown people throughout the diaspora in the urban spaces of Miami Beach, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, even extending to France and the French Antilles through a reference to Josephine Baker's banana skirt.[4]

The minifalda provides a portal that is intergenerational and matrilineal, and positions the bodies that wear them as archives of femme world-building through suciedad. This chapter is ultimately a practice in what Eddy Alvarez calls "finding sequins in the rubble," a queer of color methodology for locating Latinx histories through embodiment.[5] It is also a means of "fleshing sound," – as Jade Power-Sotomayor calls it– or flesh, *piel,* and the adornment of *piel* as deeply instructive for sound and movement.[6] While Alvarez deals with literal, as well as metaphorical sequins that make East Los Angeles sparkle, the sequins in this chapter are the skirts and the rubble is the colonization of the Caribbean archipelago and its erasure of Caribbean people's knowledge of how to embody our ancestries.

Politics of the Minifalda

[4] For more about these inter-island histories, specifically in hip-hop, see chapter 1. Also, see scholarship on the Black Atlantic, notably Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's article, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies.* As well as, LeBrón, Marisol. "*Mano Dura Contra el Crimen* and Premature Death in Puerto Rico." In *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, edited by Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, 95-107. New York: Verso, 2016.

[5] Eddy Francisco Alvarez, "Finding Sequins in the Rubble," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3-4 (January 2016): pp. 618-627.

[6] Jade Power-Sotomayor, "Corporeal Sounding: Listening to Bomba Dance, Listening to Puertorriqueñxs," *Performance Matters* 6, no. 2 (2021): pp. 44.

Figure 3.1. Glory's self-titled album cover (2005) displaying her two sides, one in ripped jeans and a bikini top with abundant *rizos,* and the other with a perreo-ready white miniskirt, short skinny heels, and relaxed hair.

Reggaetón scholar Ramón Rivera-Servera argues that the Black aesthetics of reggaetón go on to enable queer dance practices that "exceeded the heteropatriarchal politico-economic and representational frameworks of reggaetón."[7] I see this process as fluid and cyclical. The queerness that comes out of reggaetón helps bring hip-hop back to its queer roots and vice versa.[8] Taking Ramón Rivera-Servera's association between Black aesthetics and queer dance further, this chapter focuses on one garment in particular, the classic white ruffled miniskirt present lyrically and corporeally in reggaetón since its beginnings yet rarely given space as a central mode of inquiry into the genre-culture.[9]

[7] Rivera-Servera, "Reggaetón's Crossings: Black Aesthetics, Latina Nightlife, and Queer Choreography," *No Tea No Shade,* 99.
[8] See chapter 1 for more on this lineage and dynamic.
[9] We can see this trend in Carolina Caycedo's *El Gran Perreton* 2005, a documentary on perreo in Puerto Rican clubs.

Reggaetón fashion is functional. The clothes, shoes, and jewelry that are worn for the purpose of perreo, clubbing, and partying are most representative of the overall image of the genre-culture. The minifalda is one of the best examples of the necessity for clothes to have dance functionality. In the 1990s, under the strong thumb of the Mano Dura and the persistent colonial pressure of Catholicism, unmarried people were not allowed to engage in sexual acts.[10] Of course, this doesn't mean they didn't, but they had to get creative. The miniskirt allowed for the dancer in the back to more freely access the dancer in the front for penetrative sex.[11]

The minifalda, or miniskirt, has lived oceanic, diasporic, intergenerational lives. In the early years of reggaetón and perreo, it was customary, especially in Puerto Rico, to wear miniskirts when dancing in the club, just like the one Glory wears in the above image from her self-titled album. Glory is one of reggaetón's preeminent female emcee's from the early 2000s, and recontextualizing her album cover image within the minifalda's Afro-Diasporic lineage shows how an emcee can embody Afro-Diasporic ideals of both femininity and masculinity, but it is even more necessary to strike this delicate balance for women and queer emcees, in particular. The album cover presents a binary between the woman in the minifalda who is perreo ready, and the woman in jeans, man-spreading and ready to talk business. The binary has presented itself as a means to erase femmes for not being serious or intellectual, best exemplified by Calle 13's song "Atrevete."

[10] See chapter 1. Also, Patricio G. Martinez Llompart, "In the Custody of Violence: Puerto Rico under *La Mano Dura Contra el Crimen 1993-1996,"* 455.
[11] See Jan Fairley, "Dancing Back to Front: Regeton, Sexuality, Gender and Transnationalism in Cuba (2006)," *Living Politics, Making Music*, 2016, pp. 143-158.

Calle 13 and Anti-Porn

In the early 2000s, on the heels of the Mano Dura and the War on Drugs, the Puerto Rican government, as well as religious organizations, indicted perreo and reggaetón with sexual misconduct (which was really just having sex at all) under the guise of care for women's image.[12] Senator Velda Gonzalez alongside the Catholic Women's League sponsored the Anti-Porn Campaign, which targeted reggaetón —thus defining the genre and its cultural elements *as* pornography— for its "sexist" images of women and upheld boleros as the pinnacle of womanly praise. Francis Aparicio argues that boleros receive a pass on such indictments because of the genre's sonic and imagistic whitened standards of beauty, as well as the lack of any kind of beat behind which raunchy lyrics can either hide or become hyper-audible.[13] The pornographic vocality and lyricism of the genre-culture, but primarily the act of dancing perreo, was seen as corrupting young girls in both the United States and Puerto Rico.[14] The campaign was a government-sanctioned moral panic comprised of rhetoric that continued to police poor Black and Brown ways of life on the island and found their sexual desires to be criminal and backwards.[15] Senator Velda González, spoke of the women in reggaetón videos as helpless victims, claims that have since been refuted by many

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[12] See chapters 1 and 2 for more on these initiatives.
[13] Frances R. Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998). 125.
[14] See chapter 2 for more on the dale/dame.
[15] Rivera-Rideau is the leading source on this and there is surprisingly little written on it. Reggaetón was the focus of the campaign, if not the only cultural production targeted entirely. Rebecca Hammond's thesis has maintained that similar rhetoric of Black femme abjection was utilized in this campaign as the anti-prostitution campaigns of the 19th-century that are the subject of Eileen Findlay-Suarez's book *Imposing Decency.* See, Rebecca Hammond, "PERREO FEMME-INISM: AN AVENUE TO RECLAIM, REJECT, AND REDEFINE CULTURAL NORMS WITHIN BORINQUEN SOCIETY" (thesis, 2022). See also, Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Raquel Z. Rivera, "Reggaeton Nation," NACLA, November 26, 2007, https://nacla.org/article/reggaeton-nation. This article predates Rivera-Rideau's book and is one of the earliest accounts of the campaign, other than this article by the Orlando Sentinel. See, Ivan Roman, "Senator Wants to Slap Leash on Spicy 'perreo' Dance," Orlando Sentinel, May 26, 2002, https://www.orlandosentinel.com/2002/05/26/senator-wants-to-slap-leash-on-spicy-perreo-dance/. Rivera and Negrón-Muntaner's article reveals the way that reggaetón was manipulated by politicians for their gains, at once criminalizing poor Black barrios and using their cultural production to position themselves as hip and progressive.

of these dancers themselves in Petra Rivera-Rideau's groundbreaking work *Remixing Reggaetón*.

Rivera-Rideau explains:

> The emphasis on female sexuality that pervaded the Anti-Pornography Campaign sheds light on the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race in the construction of Puerto Rico's so-called racial democracy… respectability relied upon a female sexuality that conformed to particular heteropatriarchal gender norms such as maintaining the nuclear family and avoiding overt displays of sexuality, attributes often associated with upper-class white women. Hypersexuality, on the other hand, emphasized promiscuity and immorality, characteristics generally considered to be embodied by Black women." [16]

Deborah Vargas's theorization of suciedad, as a queer of color intersectional refusal of racial democracy, becomes implicated in policy and policing. Her work allows for a queer brown and Black reclamation of the nasty by refusing white structures of sterility and cleanliness often imposed on our appearance, sex lives, bodies, and the spaces where we live; it reclaims the ghetto of our bodies and neighborhoods.[17] I argue that sonic suciedad and corporeal suciedad, as in dance, fashion, and aesthetics, can take many different forms and vantage points toward liberation. The politics of the minifalda are thus a part of the politics of *suciedad,* reclaiming the Afro-diasporic dance and sexual practices deemed to be dirty within both white supremacist and white feminist frameworks. Since the miniskirt in reggaetón has been imbued with these colonial ideas of indecency, it has become an even more crucial part of Afro-diasporic femme sexuality and world-building, a key goal of *suciedad.*

Ramón Rivera-Servera has articulated that the interconnectedness between Afro-Diasporic customs and queerness, or femme world-building, "in these contexts, the black

[16] Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón,* 54-55.

[17] Vargas, Deborah R. "Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (September 2014). See chapter 1 for more on how this analytic acts as a framework for my dissertation as a whole.

aesthetics of Puerto Rican performance invited other Latinas/os for whom reggaetón was sufficiently familiar but not intimately known to perform their queer sexualities through racialized scripts."[18] As will be explored, the classic white minifalda is an example of the kinds of Black aesthetics Rivera-Servera references, yet often unbeknownst as such. By wearing Afro-Diasporic garments and participating in new ways in music and dance circles, reggaetóneras explore their right to be kinky. And, for this very reason, the criticism of the miniskirt and the policing of the women that wear them was state-sanctioned and even perpetuated in reggaetón and rap itself.

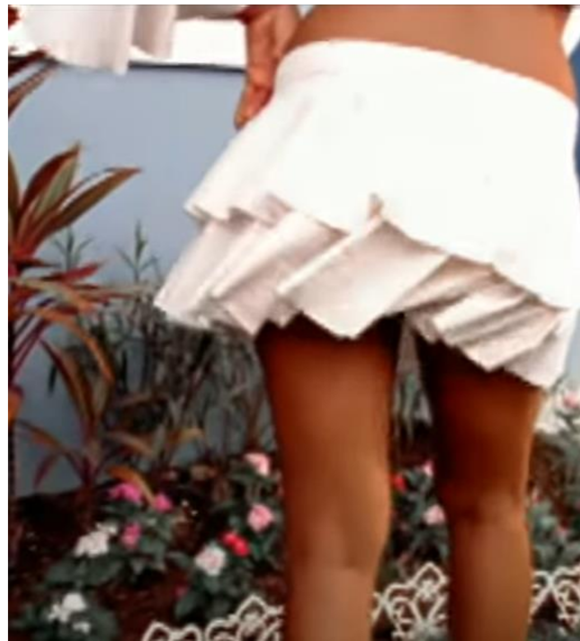

Figure 3.2. From Calle 13's video for "Atrevete" (2009). Pictured is a woman with light-brown skin and a layered, ruffled white skirt that comes down to just below the buttcheeks.

In Puerto Rican duo, Calle 13's, 2009 hit song "Atrevete," the group's frontman, Residente, tells the women in the video and by extension, his listeners of all genders, to "subete la minifalda hasta el espalda (lift your miniskirt up to your back)."[19] Even if sex was

[18] Rivera-Servera, 105.

[19] The group is incredibly popular, currently holding the record for most Latin Grammy Award's won by any group. For more on Calle 13's fame and this song's satirical (and offensive) lyrics, see Frances Negrón-

not occurring during the dance, the miniskirt became a symbol of access to sex and young rebellion. The video for "Atrevete" contains images of dismembered body parts and one of them a woman's butt in a classic perreo miniskirt (Figure 3.2). This woman is a sort of Stepford-wife with a blonde wig and she's seen putting on makeup exaggeratedly. Residente is known for being critical of the system but is here making fun of processes of femininity-building and ultra femmes in general under a guise of praising the "señorita intellectual," smart girls over "vain" girls, i.e. miniskirt-wearing girls. He even says "Pero este reggaeton se te mete por los intestinos, (this reggaeton enters you through the intestines, beneath the skirt like a submarine, and brings out your Taíno Indian)." Despite employing mostly white, mestiza, and light-skinned women in the video, Residente is aware of the racial ancestry and associations between perreo, reggaetón, and the skirt, and even perhaps self-aware of the video's whitewashing of the garment.[20] He is also displaying the very people he is critiquing, asking to see more of the señorita while deriding them as animalistic and vain. The video is an enactment of his male fantasy where he gets to enjoy the fruits of femme labor while still maintaining power over their social influence and internalized self-worth. Residente's statement is thus an example of "feminist" critique in reggaetón that is ultimately queerphobic, femmephobic, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous, overall ignorant to the ways in which makeup and clothes fashion the self to preserve and protect queer people and women of color. The miniskirt, through its subtle associations with Black sexuality and perreo,

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Muntaner, "Poesía De Porquería: La Lírica Posreguetónica De Calle 13," *Revista Iberoamericana* 75, no. 229 (June 2010): pp. 1095-1106.

[20] It is interesting that Residente connects reggaetón with Taíno ancestry because of how rarely reggaetón songs mention indigeneity and Taínos. For a thematic analysis on how many times words like "indígena" and "negro" are said in reggaetón, see Regina Solis Miranda, "Bienaventurado El Que Escuche Este Liriqueo: Negotiating Latinidad through Reggaeton," *Latino Studies* 20, no. 4 (2022): pp. 498-526. And Zaire Zenit Dinzey-Flores, "De La Disco Al Caserío: Urban Spatial Aesthetics and Policy to the Beat of Reggaetón," *CENTRO Journal* xx, no. 2 (2008): pp. 52.

served a dual purpose to label femmes as egotistical, airheaded, vain. Reggaetóneras who adopted the miniskirt were thus more likely to fall into obscurity for not cultivating more masculine rap personas.[21]

Distancing from Blackness

Figure 3.3a

[21] Rivera-Rideau writes about this in her analysis of Ivy Queen's BET interview in 2005, where the artist says "This is a hard business because the guys rule this kind of job. But when I'm on stage, I'm like a man. I act like a man, I sing like a man, and I riff like a man," 111. Glory's 2005 album *Glou/Glory* did find a substantial audience, but she is still most often referenced in conjunction with Don Omar and Daddy Yankee, as Jenny is with Wisin y Yandel. Meanwhile, Ivy and La Sista are stand-alone artists who achieved fame with their solo singles and albums. Now ultra-femme as well, Ivy's recent feature on Bad Bunny's "Yo Perreo Sola" might say otherwise. While Ivy is now commercial and being *featured*, La Sista is *featuring* male artists. This breaks the initial early-2000s dualities that align tomboy's as solo artists and femmes as featured artists, or at least adds more categories to the mix. La Sista has entered a realm where female artists are doing the featuring, broadening the scope of what is possible for reggaetóneras.

Figure 3.3b

Figure 3.3c. Ivy Queen's looks in "Yo Quiero Bailar."

First image (3.3a), Ivy is second from the right in an all-black getup with a long blonde braid, flare jeans and a tank top. Second image (3.3b), Ivy has micro braids pulled back into a low bun, and a jersey-inspired baby blue romper. Third image (3.3c), Ivy has pigtail braids, a black and white headband, thick gold hoop earrings, fishnet elbow-length fingerless gloves, and flare jeans.

Ivy Queen's fame is a great example of the need to avoid the associations of the skirt in order to become mainstream. In her video for her hit feminist anthem "Yo Quiero Bailar,"

she does not wear a miniskirt, and contradictory to her message, she barely dances.[22] Select lyrics are as follows:

Señoras y señores
Bienvenidos (welcome) al party
Agarren a su pareja (Por la cintura) (grab your partner by the waist)
Y prepárense (and prepare yourselves)
Porque lo que viene no está fácil (No está fácil no) (because what's coming is not easy)
Yeah, eh
Yo quiero bailar (I want to dance)
Tú quieres sudar (you want to sweat)
Y pegarte a mí (you hit me up)
El cuerpo rozar (bodies rubbing)
Yo te digo sí, tú me puedes provocar (I tell you yes, you can seduce me)
Eso no quiere decir que pa' la cama voy (but this doesn't mean I am going to bed with you)

Porque yo soy la que mandó (because I'm the boss)
Soy la que decide cuando vamos al mambo (I decide when we dance)
Y tú lo sabes (and you know it)
El ritmo me está llevando (the rhythm is taking me)
Mientras más te pegas, más te voy azotando (but more you hit me up, the more I whip you)
Y eso está bien (and that's fine)
A mí no me importa lo que muchos digan (it doesn't matter to me what other people say)
Si muevo mi cintura de abajo para arriba (if i move my waist top to bottom)
Si soy de barrio o tal vez soy una chica fina (if I'm from the barrio or a fine girl)
Si en la discoteca te me pegas y te animas (if in the club you hit me up and get excited)

Te quiero explicar (I want to explain)
Si en la discoteca nos vamos a alborotar (if we're going to fight at the club)
Si los dos solitos nos vamos a acariciar (if we're going to caress each other)
Es porque yo quiero y no me puedes aguantar (that's because I want to and you can't hold me down)
No te creas que me voy a acostar (don't think I'm going to go to bed)
No es así, bailo reggaetón pero no soy chica fácil (it's not like that, I dance reggaetón but I'm not an easy girl)
Si quieres ganarte mis besos y mis panties (if you want to win my kisses and my panties)
Vende esa forma, papi, cógelo easy, easy, easy, cógelo baby (lose that attitude, papi, take it easy)
Mujeres pa' la disco a bailar (ladies, in the club let's dance)
Ven demuéstrale a tu man (come, show your man)
Que es la que hay, hay, hay (what's up)

[22] "Yo Quiero Bailar" (2003) was the first Spanish-language track to hit No. 1 on Miami's WPOW Rhythmic Top 40, a station that did not usually play Spanish-language music. Kid Curry of Miami's Power 96 radio station described it as the "last reggaeton super-hit" and what I think he meant by this is that to this day in New York City it is played as if it is a new song. Billboard

Mujeres pa' la disco a perrear (ladies, in the club let's perrear)
Pero que él no se crea, puede jugar ar ar (but he doesn't think he can play)
Y como ya explique que los dos tengamos que sudar (how do I explain how we both need to sweat)
Que bailemos al ritmo del tra (Tra) (and dance to the rhytm of tra)
Que me hagas fuerte suspirar (Suspirar) (until it's hard for me to breathe)
Pero pa' la cama digo mira na', na', na' (but to the bed, look, no no no)

The lyrics to "Yo Quiero Bailar" offer a perspective of what it feels like to dance perreo in the front position, as a woman or femme in a heteronormative club space. Ivy gives testimony to the times when it's hard to breathe while dancing: "que me hagas fuerte suspirar." The song is indeed a form of testimonio, or testifying, to the Latina experience. She speaks her truth and uses it as a basis to shift dominant club scripts. I have experienced this myself – sometimes when dancing perreo, my thighs are aching so badly and if it weren't for the loud music, my heaving breaths would be the loudest thing in the room. Indoctrinated into this dance from a young age, one of the things I learned was that I am never to stop or let the man down. I am never to interrupt his pleasure to tend to my sore legs. I stop when he wants to stop, and he isn't doing much so he won't want to stop anytime soon. When imagining the scene that Ivy sets up for us, envisioning saying "no" to a man I'm dancing with is a huge mindset shift. And it changed the dynamics of perreo forever. The male voices that young female dancers internalized were now accompanied by Ivy telling them "no" was at least an option to consider.

Although Ivy Queen was one of the first "feminist" emcees to do this for us on a global level, Jillian Báez has critiqued the ways in which Ivy Queen strays away from dancing perreo in her videos in order to tend to the rapping. Báez claims that this constructs a masculinist framework – or rather maintains the masculinist framework – in which other women are forced to take on the feminine role Ivy denies. This is an example of the policing

of dance [that] reproduces what Eileen Findlay-Suarez calls "imposing decency," or "the policing of women's bodies (particularly those of the working class and of African origin) in the late 19th-and-early-20th-century in Puerto Rico through discourses of morality using a 'woman-as-nation' trope, in which women's bodies embody the national body."[23] I build on Baéz's assertion by focusing on Ivy Queen's simultaneous denial of dancing and the minifalda. The miniskirt is used as a symbol of insider knowledge around the feminine role in perreo, and reggaetón fashion may be understood as a mode of gender and racial authentication, which in turn, authenticates the dancer's and rapper's place in the social script of the club. By denying the miniskirt and dancing, Ivy is not only reproducing heterosexist structure but is doing so by distancing herself from femme Blackness first.

At her start, Ivy associated herself with masculine Blackness funneled through hip-hop, as in her music video with the collective The Noise, where she rocks oversized color block puffer jackets, long box braids, and gestural rap movements.

[23] Jillian Báez, "En mi imperio: Competing Discourses of Agency in Ivy Queen's Reggaetón." *Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 18, no. 1 (2006), 65. Also, Findlay Eileen J Suárez, *Imposing Decency the Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

Figure 3.4. (1990's) Ivy Queen in a music video with DJ Negro's collective The Noise, featuring Baby Rasta and Gringo. The video takes place throughout New York City and pictures Times Square and Flushing Meadows Park.

Ivy Queen's persona and work are great examples of how hip-hop and ball fashion have influenced reggaetón, as well as the limits of Afro-diasporic reference and queer accreditation. Ivy has been vocal about this way in which her rap persona is dependent on "looking hip-hop," as well as how she relies on support from the gay community in Puerto Rico.[24] This work on fashion and dance strives to locate Ivy's appeals to queerness and the ways in which Blackness and Latinidad play roles in its (dis)authentication.

> Ivy Queen also says she wouldn't be La Diva without the support from the LGBTQ community, who first gave her the title. "I started to hear La Diva from the gay community, a lot," she says. "Every time I go to the club, they're snapping fingers, Oh, *La Diva's* here, mama, work it! Oh she's rocking Gucci, Louis' … The gay community has been a huge part of my career. They have always [done] shows imitating me. They rock their wigs better than I rock my own wig when I have to!... I embrace them."[25]

Even if Ivy Queen might not be queer herself, we see in the gay community's support for her a desperation for a femme artist to look up to. On the spectrum of cis-woman femininity and masculinity, she might fall closer to the tomboy side, but for the gay community, she is very much the femme Diva they needed.[26]

It is also important to recognize the appropriation, both of queerness and Blackness, in which Ivy partakes in order to be able to be such an icon.[27] As fashion scholar Tanisha C. Ford states, R&B singer Aaliyah was one of the first artists to make baggy pants and tomboy

[24] RollingStone. "The First Time with Ivy Queen." YouTube, March 15, 2019. Also, Rivera-Rideau, 116.
[25] Ibid.
[26] This quote also illuminates the use of luxury brands as a signifier of realness to the gay community, echoing Dapper Dan's designs for hip-hop and ball. See chapter 1. Also, David Marchese, "Dapper Dan on Creating Style, Logomania and Working with Gucci," The New York Times, July 1, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/07/01/magazine/dapper-dan-hip-hop-style.html.
[27] See chapter 4 where I implicate Bad Bunny in partaking in what I term Blackqueerface.

vibes a *thing* in the 1990's.[28] It was also around the same time that Aaliyah's voice was being misused by light-skinned non-Black Latinas, like J-Lo, and not getting any of the flowers. Ford reminds us to give credit to masculine rappers like Aaliyah and Missy Elliot, while recognizing that queer iconicity and Black iconicity often rely on *perceived* queerness and Blackness, not always actual representation. For example, while Ivy does not identify as Black, she is read as Black, or *cafre,* by consumers and communities, speaking to the importance of what Nancy López calls "street race," or what people assume you are when you walk down the street.[29] Taking both race and sexuality as intertwined signifiers, as well as the position of reggaetón with a lineage of disco, house ballroom, and hip-hop, I assert that when Ivy looks hip-hop as a straight, light-skinned Latina, it might make hip-hop look like Queer House Ball and Disco again to her queer supporters, but it also redefines what ball and hip-hop should look like going forward from a non-queer embodiment of queer aesthetics.[30]

[28] Tanisha C. Ford, *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019). See also, Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023).
[29] See Rivera-Rideau, 109, for more on class and race associations of *cafre*. See also, Vargas, E. D., Juarez, M., Stone, L. C., & Lopez, N. (2019). *Critical 'street race' praxis: advancing the measurement of racial discrimination among diverse Latinx communities in the US*. Critical Public Health, 1-11.
[30] See Chapter 1 for more on how I conceptualize reggaetón as part of this queer Black musical lineage.

Figure 3.5. (2006) La Sista drips in a head wrap with rasta colors (green, yellow, and red), two large beaded necklaces presumably of Yoruba and/or Santería tradition, and a white tracksuit with green lining. It appears as though her hair is in locs and she has a backpack on.[31]

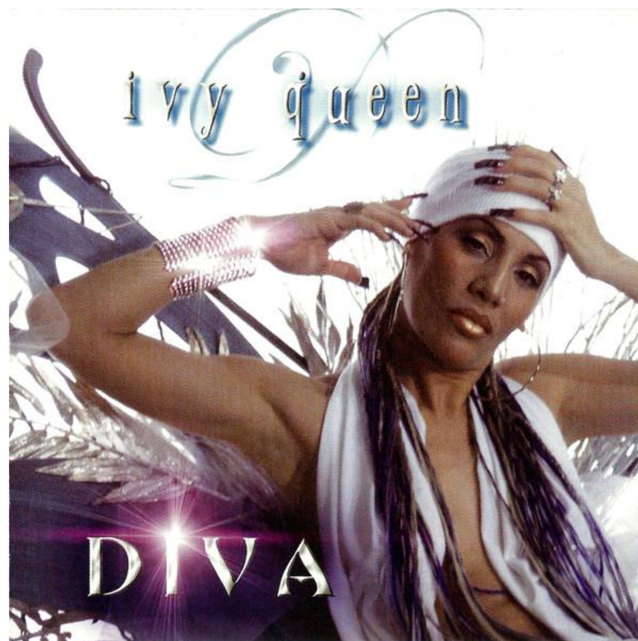

Figure 3.6. (2006 Diva album cover) Ivy shines with acrylics, large cuff bracelet, silver diamond rings, large silver hoop earrings that extend from earlobe to neck, head wrap, arched brows, golden glossy lip, and long thin braids

[31] For more on these beads, see Lourdes S. Domínguez, "Necklaces Used in the Santería of Cuba," *BEADS: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* 17 (2005).

Two tomboy reggaetóneras whose vocality was discussed in the last chapter were Ivy Queen and La Sista. While Ivy dons long acrylic nails and hair, she also rocked baggy pants, a mean mug, and long durag. La Sista rocked a durag, as well as prayer beads, and a white tracksuit, similar to what our beloved boy breakers would have worn.[32] In the above photos from the artists' early careers, I am struck by Ivy's large silver hoop earrings and La Sista's lack of earrings. In public discourse around fashion and appropriation, many women of color lament that white women get to wear acrylics and hoops without the consequences that "cool" has for Black and Latina women.[33] As Maha Ikram Cherid explains in her analysis of Christina Aguilera's video for "Can't Hold Us Down," "At the end of the day, she can choose to take off the hoop earrings, remove her fake tan, and go back to her life away from the "ghetto" without facing any of the challenges a Black woman would."[34] In the words of Jillian Hernandez in her seminal work *Aesthetics of Excess,* "this is Black and Latina scarring."

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[32] See chapter 1, section on hip-hop.
[33] Ruby Privet, "Hoop Earrings Are My Culture, Not Your Trend," VICE, Oct. 10, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/j5ga5x/hoop-earrings-are-my-culture-not-your-trend. Brooklyn White, "The History of Acrylics and Appropriation," Bitch Media, July 7, 2017. https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/acrylic-nails. Rivera-Rideau, "Fingernails con Feeling," *Remixing Reggaetón.* For more on Black cool, see Rebecca Walker, *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* (New York, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2022). Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Bell Hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
[34] See Maha Ikram Cherid, "'Ain't Got Enough Money to Pay Me Respect': Blackfishing, Cultural Appropriation, and the Commodification of Blackness," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 21, no. 5 (2021): pp. 362. Hoop earrings have been the center of a long accessory war between women of color and white women, as well as between light-skinned women of color and dark-skinned women of color. They are as omnipresent in reggaetón and hip-hop as acrylic nails. Hoop earrings, gold jewelry, and long acrylic nails all date back to Sumerian, Egyptian, South Asian, and Sudanese cultures anywhere from 2500-1500 BC. In current iterations, these accessories are extremely important to women and queer people of color since the early 1900s following a revival in Egyptian archaeology and the longtime custom of ear piercing in certain Indigenous and Latin American cultures. Hoop earrings have been at the center of growing discourse on Blackfishing, -- essentially Blackface in the digital space for profit, or the "wearing" of Black womanhood -- by white women to appeal to Black consumers.[34] Ariana Grande has been cited most often but light-skinned, non-Black Latinas, especially upper-class individuals, have also been indicted for Blackfishing. Also, see The 1960's Black is Beautiful movement undergirded the union of peoples of the African diaspora, and Latinas and Black women of the time used hoops as a symbol of their place in the fight for Black liberation. The queer ball scenes of the '60s were another key player in actualizing the dream of the Black is Beautiful movement and pushing back against Eurocentric beauty standards. Disco helped to situate hoops, colors, and patterned fabrics as belonging to Blacks and Latinx communities. In Julia Álvarez's novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents,* she

Ivy Queen's ability to wear hoops while La Sista might feel compelled to leave her earlobes bare represents the limits of access to Afro-Diasporic customs for dark-skinned women at the risk of being considered too Black. The surveillance of Black women's sartorial choices builds resentment and occlusion across color lines, making hoops a symbol of the ways in which we hurt each other. The nuanced oppressive dynamics between women of color manifests in jewelry customs and exposes how light-skinned, especially non-Black, women can feel freer to mix femme and masc aesthetics. For example, just like her ronca sound, the one aesthetic that has remained the same is Ivy's long charm-heavy acrylic nails, which Petra Rivera-Rideau credits with "recuperating her cafre aesthetics" while she transforms throughout her career.[35] In some ways, cafre and the mixed-race-working-class aura it represents has become synonymous with this fusion of femme and masc embodiment practices.

Figure 3.7. (2019) current femme Ivy rocking pink everything, cleavage, bodysuit, thigh-high boots, crown, straightened/relaxed wavy hair

explores how four Dominican sisters navigating feminism, family, and race, and describes the symbolism of hoop earrings for Latinas and the original intents and burdens for which they were worn in this era.
[35] Rivera-Rideau, 115.

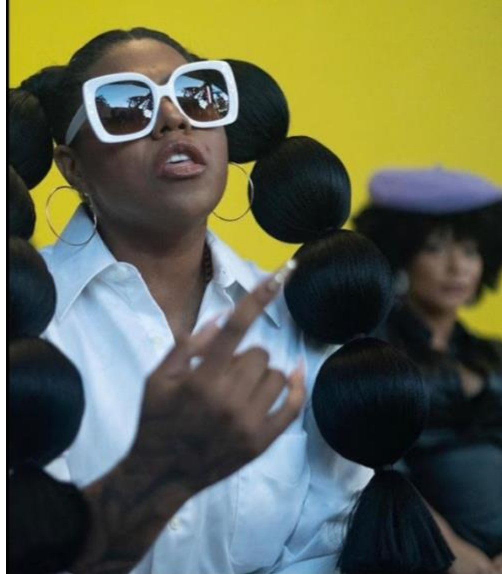

Figure 3.8. (2020) La Sista's look in music video for Awipipio; peep the hoops! <3

Regardless of where they started in relationship to hoop earrings, both of our beloved tomboys eventually became femme. As they continue to make music into the 2020s, their styles have changed immensely. The difference is that Ivy Queen's voice has not changed, while La Sista's has, so much so that I even have trouble recognizing the artist that lived through the 1990s and 2000s. In some ways, Ivy is queerer now than ever before through the dynamic between her ultra-feminine presentation and ronca voice. However, an important part of Ivy Queen's ability to remain ronca is her light-skinned privilege.

Meanwhile, La Sista has moved away from her deep, rich, masculine timbre into a lighter sound with her 2020 single "Awipipio" which features several other artists. The artist has also transitioned into singing a lot more than rapping now. Her fashion style has not become as ultra-femme as Ivy's but it is more femme than it used to be, and she is even seen rocking hoop earrings now. Another aspect that affects Ivy's ability to stay ronca is her size and body shape. Ivy has always been skinny and is now what the community might (not unproblematically) call "slim thick." Rivera-Rideau purports that Ivy's "use of artificiality

brings into stark relief the very *un*naturalness of dominant constructions of race, gender, and sexuality that position whiteness as respectable and modern, and render Blackness hypersexual, uncivilized, and outside of the boundaries of "real" Puerto Ricanness."[36] For example, La Sista is still a big girl and always has been. Her form of masculinity did not afford her the spot as "the queen of urban" and now her femme transformation reveals perhaps a necessity for change that Ivy had the luxury of choosing. Thus, there are boundaries to access of the subversive artificiality of whiteness for dark-skinned Black women whose street race offers little to no ambiguity. There are also limits to the amount that a light-skinned Latina can invoke artificial whiteness without appearing to be whitened herself.

The implications of Ivy Queen choosing certain standards of beauty, however artificial, continue a lineage of whitened *traicioneras*.[37] Ivy Queen's fashion and feminine presentation speaks to specific racial discourses taking place in her music, reggaetón more broadly, and Latin American culture at the time. During her endeavor to be taken more seriously as an artist by putting out her bolero-inspired album *Sentimiento* in 2007, as is the topic of the end of the last chapter, she began dressing more feminine, either naked as in the cover below, or in dresses. She also let go of her durags and started wearing her hair straight, blonde, and out.

[36] Rivera-Rideau, 114.
[37] See Chapter 2. Not only do bolero's sonic aspects, that of Western orchestration and bel canto vocal style, represent European artistic practices, but its imagery does as well. As aforementioned, Maria Grever's blonde muñequita is one manifestation of Eurocentric beauty standards deliberately and strategically employed by boleristas to compete with the Global North in artistic production. Lara's treacherous woman, or traicionera, trope is another. See also, Rivera-Rideau, 127.

Figure 3.9. Ivy Queen's album cover for "Sentimiento" 2007. She is pictured sitting down naked with blonde relaxed hair, hoop earrings, and studded acrylic nails.

As much as reggaetón uplifts Black female standards of beauty, it is still seeped in these genre histories. Ivy's persona during this bolero-inspired era of her career represented a white ideal of not only feminine pasts, but femme futures that are defined by blondeness. It is the reinscription of bolero standards of beauty – standards that racialize voices as well as visual aspects of body-- that I find particularly problematic, as the reification of the Eurocentric genre and sound is transferred onto her corporeally.

In her work on urbanity, Dinzey-Flores has found a duality between street and sophistication to present itself throughout reggaetón culture. She has offered the concept of "blin-blin," the means by which reggaetóneres use *bling* to subvert the visual aesthetics of poverty.[38] In Ivy's visual transformation, blonde hair may even be understood as a form of

[38] See chapter 1.

bling, a luxurious diamond-encrusted accessory that suggests a higher social class. However, the subversion would then be to redefine aesthetics of luxury as inborn Blackness.

While the relationship between queerness and Blackness was aesthetically apparent in the beginnings of reggaetón through the connection to hip-hop and ball, the rampant and entrenched misappropriation of queer and Black sartorial customs in the popular music industry today has driven reggaetón further away from its underground politics and its Afro-Diasporic lineage while invoking queerness more commonly, as in the example of Bad Bunny in the next chapter. The next section explores how recovering histories and contemporary moments of femme Blackness are important interventions in Afro-Diasporic studies and in reggaetón today.

Diaspora is in the Skirt

Baéz's argument about Ivy's dissociation from Blackness is supported by the white ruffled miniskirts Afro-Diasporic ancestry. Perreo has particularly West and Central African lineage, yet its roots are widely contested and imagined. The exact origins of perreo are obscured by the colonial homogenization of African peoples and customs, but are affirmed by practitioners and participants in Africa and the Caribbean.[39] In Kyra D. Gaunt's essay, "Twerking is African?: Origin Myths," she explains that much of our ideas around creative customs that have emerged from the Diaspora are from a racial and ancestral imaginary rather than a reality. Yet, this does not negate the interconnectedness of Afro-descended peoples, which she sees in her own way through the medium of YouTube.

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[39] Watch New York Public Library's series On Fire with African Dance https://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/fire-african-dance. See Robert Farris Thompson and C. Daniel Dawson, *Dancing between Two Worlds: Kongo-Angola Culture and the Americas: Essay* (New York: Caribbean Cultural Center, 1991).

> Twerking on YouTube or watching twerking on YouTube is not situated in the same local settings where one may experience popping, locking, or bouncing the booty to the beats and rhymes of a song as a dancer of bounce in New Orleans, popular and traditional forms of mapouka in Côte D'Ivoire, perreo in Puerto Rico or sandungueo in the Dominican Republic, or funk carioca in Brazil. In fact, on YouTube, there are dozens of dances, like disjointed limbs across the African diaspora, that may or may not connect Black Americans to specific populations of African people or the African, Caribbean, and Afro-latinx diaspora. Just as twerking is isn't one thing, neither are people of African descent.[40]

Seeing perreo as connected to booty-shaking dance forms globally, we are able to situate it within an audio-visual world that is Afro-diasporic and adjust our frameworks for locating female agency and queerness accordingly. Building on Gaunt, but adopting a fashion lens, I pick up on an avenue for perreo ancestry that is not just sonic, but visual and embodied. In Puerto Rican bomba, we have a predecessor to the classic white ruffled miniskirt.

Figure 3.10. Bomba batey in Loíza, Puerto Rico. Skirt is a long flowing white skirt with ruffles at the bottom. The dancer is surrounded by male drummers as she lifts the skirt up past her mid-thigh.[41]

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[40] Kyra D. Gaunt, "Is Twerking African?," *The Routledge Companion to Black Women's Cultural Histories*, 2021, pp. 310-320.

[41] Bomba Puertorriqueña Video taken by Tita Vazquez at the 5th Encuentro del Tambores Juncos.

Figure 3.11. Los Pleneros de la 21 in the Bronx, New York City. Drummers and dancers in a line. A male dancer and female dancer to the right. The female dancer lifts her long flowing white skirt.[42]

Melanie Maldonado –one of bomba's preeminent feminist scholars to center fashion and the skirt as a means of illuminating women's roles in the artform– describes bomba's white skirt as a successor to the petticoat, also called the enagua. She explains, "petticoat (enagua)

fashion became an unregulated realm where women could experiment and dictate their own participation."[43] In her work, she illuminates how the skirt shaped the types of poses women would take on and "how they created a figura (or elegant pose) while dancing." Bomba has regional differences, and Maldonado has found that in Loíza, a predominantly Black barrio of Puerto Rico, women are less likely to wear the traditional skirt or petticoat as a means of reclaiming that which the costume covers up, i.e. legs, groin, footwork. Ashley Coleman Taylor has found similar relationships to the skirt in her ethnographic work and

[42] www.Losplenerosdela21.org

[43] Melanie Maldonado, "Suelta El Moño: The Herstories of Change Agents and Perpetuators of Bomba Culture," *CENTRO JOURNAL* XXXI, no. II (2019): pp. 86-109, 87.

attributes it to the less structured, less colonial-inspired style of the seis corrido that is special to Loíza.[44] While the skirt can be seen as a conformity to colonial beauty standards and ideals of decency, Maldonado has found that women would lift the skirt as a gesture of "passive aggression" to subvert Western, and particularly Catholic, ideals of modesty.[45] Within the lineage of reggaetón, we can see these ideals dating as far back as the moment of the middle passage and continuing into modern-day with the Anti-Porn Campaign. The lifting of the skirt "helped create a display space just underneath the skirt that a woman controlled by when and for how long she displayed it. Her enagua wowed and tantalized, taunted and inspired."[46] Thus, I see the perreo miniskirt as a permanent gesture of passive aggression, a lifting of the skirt that no longer knows any other way to be. And the important thing here is "women controlled by, when and how long they displayed it."[47] In contrast with the moral panics and sterility forced upon women by the Anti-Porn Campaign "for their own sake," the Afro-Diasporic femme world-building of the skirt during perreo is actually a product of centuries of women taking control of their sexuality by *being* kinky. The miniskirt may be understood as Afro-Diasporic not because of its original design or intent, but because of how women across the diaspora have utilized its design to resist imposed decency.

By making the connection between perreo and bomba clearer through fabric, we celebrate that the white ruffled skirt has been in deep relationship with dancing femmes on the island throughout several centuries of shifting psychosocial misogynoir, slavery, and colonization. The skirt adds another dimension to what bomba scholar Jade Power-

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[44] Ashley Coleman Taylor, "'Water Overflows with Memory': Bomba, Healing, and the Archival Oceanic," *CENTRO JOURNAL* XXXI, no. II (2019): pp. 146.
[45] Ileana Cortés Santiago, Raquel Puig, and Dorsia Smith, *Caribbean without Borders* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 105.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

Sotomayor has adapted from Ashon Crawley's idea of the "choreosonic," or the necessity for Black communal practices to be thought through with an inseparability between sound and movement, and now, I assert, sound, movement, and fashion.[48] It can also illuminate from where certain choreographies and gestures emanate. Elizabeth Pérez has made clear the sacred uses of twerk, finding similarities in the booty shaking found in perreo and descriptions of the movement of orishas like Ochún, where her hips swivel to imitate the sounds and contours of the river.[49] The classic depiction of Ochún, and other orishas like Yemayá, is adorned in a bright yellow folkloric skirt with a white petticoat underneath, looks that have been adopted by Beyoncé, Cardi B, and several bomberes.[50]

[48] Jade Power-Sotomayor, 46.
[49] Elizabeth Pérez, "The Ontology of Twerk: From 'Sexy' Black Movement Style to Afro-Diasporic Sacred Dance," African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 16-31. See also, Melissa Blanco Borelli, "'Presencing' Pleasure and Pain in Hispanophone Caribbean Performance," *The Black Scholar*49, no. 4 (February 2019): pp. 6-19. For more on Yemayá as a symbol of Black feminine divinity, see Janell Hobson, *When God Lost Her Tongue: Historical Consciousness and the Black Feminist Imagination* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022).
[50] See more on Santería and Afro-Cuban Yoruba traditions http://www.aboutsanteria.com/ochuacuten.html. Also see, Ysamur Flores, "'Fit for a Queen': Analysis of a Consecration Outfit in the Cult of Yemayá," *Folklore Forum* 23, no. 1/2 (1990): 47–56.

Figure 3.12. Illustration by Amirah Mercer. Beyoncé as Ochún in the video for "Sorry" with a ruffled yellow dress. Background is rushing water.[51]

Figure 3.13. Cardi B in "I Like It" with a miniskirt in the front, petticoat/enagua in the back, or what many would call a "low to high" skirt. Cardi was also pregnant during the making of the video, perhaps an ode to Ochún, the orisha of fertility. The yellow of the miniskirt is discussed further in the section of this chapter called, "Femme Futures & Dominican Revisions."

Bomba, Perreo and Gender

Within bomba, the power differential between men and women has been noted in passing mostly and the skirt is also often glossed over by mention mostly in parentheticals and asides.[52] The mutual situation of these discourses represents the marginalization of feminine roles, influence on artform evolution, and taste-making. Despite the sacred and empowering role of the enagua in bomba and my point about its revised form in perreo, there

[51] Amirah Mercer, "How Oshun Helps Creatives Power through the 2020 Paradigm Shift," Other Suns, December 11, 2022, https://www.othersuns.us/stories/2020/4/13/oshun-power-paradigm-shift.
[52] See Jade Power-Sotomayor. Also, Ashley Coleman Taylor writes "they were all well-dressed before changing into their colorful bomba skirts. There were four buleadores and one main drummer. The drumming group was intergenerational and included a female drummer (which is rare, except for in Raúl's classes.) Tata led the coro (chorus) through the typical call and response style as he played the customary," 148. See also Melanie Maldonado, "the role of women is remembered as mostly ornamental throughout the early to mid 1900," 148.

is a tendency to erase women's contributions because of the male-dominated sonic environments in which resistance occurs. In reggaetón, DJ's and emcees have been overwhelmingly men that held, and continue to hold, power over the social script of the club scene, or the club scene was queered by the need for solo artist reggaetóneras to adopt the hypermasculinity of hip-hop and reggaetón.

Scholars that have written about perreo and its predecessors in dancehall assert that female agency is located in perreo's through women's resignification of the dance as pleasurable, as well as its unique back-to-front partnering, with women often in the front position, their backs toward their partner as they lead the dance and embody the virtuosity of it.[53] Aside from the work on dancehall, this assertion has often not been positioned within an Afro-Diasporic framework, but rather the dance is deemed "unique" amongst European partnered ballroom dances where partners face one another and the man leads, or critiques take on a framework of reggaetón that position the genre-culture as otherwise entirely misogynistic.[54] Therefore, the need for this sartorial connection between perreo to bomba is ever more dire for locating femme agency and queerness in reggaetón's Afro-Diasporic cultural customs. With perreo's ancestry in West and Central Africa, dance scholar Ojeya

[53] See Jan Fairley. Sabia McCoy-Torres, "'Love Dem Bad': Embodied Experience, Self-Adoration, and Eroticism in Dancehall," *Transforming Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2017): pp. 185-200. Donna P. Hope, *Inna Di Dancehall Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica* (Kingston u.a.: Univ. of the West Indies Press, 2010).

[54] See Fairley again. Núria Araüna, Iolanda Tortajada, and Mònica Figueras-Maz, "Feminist Reggaeton in Spain: Young Women Subverting Machismo through 'Perreo,'" *YOUNG* 28, no. 1 (2019): pp. 32-49. Hoban, Dairíne. "Bad Bunny's Purplewashing as Gender Violence in Reggaeton: A Feminist Analysis of SOLO DE MI and YO PERREO SOLA." Order No. 28645536, University of South Florida, 2021. Though I agree with Hoban's points about Bad Bunny's purplewashing, I disagree with the framing of reggaetón as the misogynistic insitution that Bad Bunny is rewriting with his "feminism," since my dissertation asserts that Black and brown femme agency is illegible under white feminist ideologies. See also, Nieves Moreno, "A Man Lives Here: Reggaetón's Hypermasculine Resident," *Reggaetón*. ed. R. Z. Rivera, W. Marshall and D. Pacini Hernández, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 252–279. There is a criticism about Ivy Queen's choice to "bring alone a friend" in her video for "Chika Ideal" as conforming to the male fantasy that I find to be averse to kink and Black femme self-fetishization (as discussed shortly in this chapter).

Cruz Banks' work in Guinea has relevance to discourses of Afro-Diasporic sonic agency. She has found that music and dance are often not two different words or operations, but rather, "movement invention is intrinsically tied to making good music. Time and time again, [it is] demonstrated how a dancer can play the role of a music conductor in the dance circle. A skillful West African dancer-choreographer invigorates and embellishes the music through movement."[55] This puts into question what music even is in an Afro-Diasporic Caribbean context. It also reveals the violence that Western thinking has done to incline us toward believing that because women are dancing, they are not in charge of the sonic or themselves. In fact, they are often acting as dancer-choreographer-conductors, while the drummers follow. Thus, in an ancestral sense, perreo gives agency to femme dancers not only because femmes resignify and choose the dance, but because their participation replicates an Afro-Diasporic ideal of sonic mastery inborn in perreo, inclusive of movement, fashion, and embodied polyrhythm.

Reggaeton's recontextualization within Black ancestral resistance practices like bomba redefines gender roles sonically and visually. While the emcees in clubs are historically male, especially in the early 2000s, the below image is from Ivy Queen's video for "Yo Quiero Bailar." While Ivy denies bomba and Black history through her sartorial and movement praxis in the video, she also spotlights an Afro-Latina DJ in her video.

[55] Ojeya Cruz Banks, "Fare Ra Lankhi," *Journal of Dance Education* 20, no. 4 (2019): pp. 210. For more on the Western colonial separations of music from dance and rhythm, see also Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2014). Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Cultural Resistance in Contemporary American Popular Culture*, 1993.

Figure 3.14. Black femme DJ from Ivy Queen's "Yo Quiero Bailar."

Yet another nameless Black femme, I am motivated to give her space and think about how she continues the legacy of the dancer-conductor in her role as a disc jockey. The male supremacy of the club's soundscape is thwarted by the presence of a femme rapper as well as a femme dancer. Since the DJ is the one calling the shots, choosing the songs and shifting the script, a femme DJ affirms the queerness of the scene and offers gender expansive encouragement, solidarity, protection, and homoeroticism.[56]

In her work on bomba, Jade Power-Sotomayor notes that:

> some men have learned to dance with skirts embodying femme aesthetics and gestures. Given the gendered divides of music and dance making, however, many women first approach bomba through dance, whereas men are more likely to enter via singing or percussion despite the commonly touted protocol that one begins bomba practice through dancing before ever picking up an instrument.[57]

This observation suggests that gender fluidity and practicing bomba outside one's gendered role is less possible for women than it is for men. Yet, the queering of the skirt is another angle by which we can find reggaetón's Afro-Diasporic queer pasts, presents and futures.

[56] I would like to thank Eddy Alvarez here. In a panel at Pop Conference 2023, Alvarez said something like "I don't believe you can queer a space. The space is already queer." This idea has helped me reframe the chapter within the prescient queerness of reggaetón and the spaces and bodies that create it.
[57] Power-Sotomayor, footnote 9.

Femme Futures & Black Dominican Revisions[58]

Figure 3.15. Image from "La Banana." Amara la Negra in back, La Delfi in front.

In La Delfi and Amara la Negra's 2013 music video for "La Banana" we see the queerness realized.[59] Black Dominican reggaetónera, Amara la Negra, and Black transfemme Dominican reggaetónera, La Delfi, swap the classic Puerto Rican white ruffled miniskirt for vibrant yellow tutus that may be connected to the yellow skirts used to depict orishas like Ochún, as seen in the photos of Beyoncé and Cardi B.[60] The backup dancers have tutus that are shorter than Delfi and Amara, with bananas around the waist. A couple of the backup dancers are also men in rastacaps that reassert the Jamaican influence on reggaetón and dembow. The skirts and caps are examples of how Dominican reggaetóneras redefine the

[58] The emphasis on "Futures" is a political move to center the enduring legacy of Black transfemme reggaetónera, La Delfi, despite her passing in 2020 from untreated stomach ulcers. This section finds joy not because of, or in spite of, her death, but because of her life. I also reject a Western notion of ancestry that asserts one cannot communicate with the dead, but rather, conjure La Delfi here as a lasting presence in dembow. Further, due to the economic exploitation of Black and brown workers, Caribbean migrants, and trans folks, the use of "futures" speaks to a cultural wealth that is not financially secure, as we experience the uncertainty of our futures at higher rates than cishet white people due to a lack of intergenerational wealth and job stability.
[59] See Sydney Hutchinson, *Tigers of a Different Stripe: Performing Gender in Dominican Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
[60] "La Banana" has almost 2 million views on YouTube. In recent years, Amara la Negra has gained a substantial amount of recognition, multiple Grammy award's nominations, and appeared on VH1's TV series "Love & Hip Hop: Miami" in 2018. La Delfi has also become posthumously celebrated for her coining of the theme "Leche" and also her trans representation. See chapter 4 for more.

genre-culture’s customs and make several Pan-Latin and Black Atlantic revisions. The first intervention made by the banana-encrusted yellow tutu is a reclamation of fruit as costume from Portuguese-born Brazilian dancer, Carmen Miranda, who famously wore a turban made of fruit in an appropriation of Afro-Brazilian culture. Similar to the petticoat in bomba, these turbans were remnants of colonial fashion and aesthetics. Women of the Bahia culture in Brazil would wear “simple cloth turbans" into the early 1900’s as they balanced fruit and other foods to sell on the street.

Figure 3.16. Carmen Miranda in her fruit turban.[61]

[61] https://www.wnyc.org/story/108335-o-que-e-que-a-bahiana-tem/. Lisa Shaw, “Carmen Miranda’s Fashion: Turbans, Platform Shoes and a Lot of Controversy,” The Guardian, August 5, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/aug/05/carmen-mirandas-fashion-turbans-platform-shoes-and-a-lot-of-controversy.

Figure 1.11. Rodolfo Lindemann Studios, unknown model, labeled for postcards as "Vendedora de bananas [Banana vendor]," photograph 1884, postcard (not shown) printed 1900. Courtesy of the Übersee-Museum Bremen; archival photo by Volker Beinhorn.

Figure 3.17. Cloth turban and fruit basket laid to the side, while Baiana vendor carries baby on back. Note the appearance of the petticoat skirt.[62]

Figure 3.18. Chiquita Banana logo poster by Judith George for PantherNOW.[63]

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[62] Anadelia A. Romo, *Selling Black Brazil: Race, Nation, and Visual Culture in Salvador, Bahia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022), 42. This book tries to recover the names of the models in photographs of Baiana street vendors like this one.

[63] Gabriela Enamorado, "The Dark Past Behind Your Chiquita Bananas," PantherNOW, February 18, 2021, https://panthernow.com/2021/02/18/the-dark-past-behind-your-chiquita-bananas/.

In the video for "La Banana," we see a kinky exploration of Afro-Latina's relationship to fruit, especially the banana, which even to this day is associated with Bahia culture and Carmen Miranda in the logo for the banana produce brand Chiquita Banana. Eating the banana is paired with twerk, perreo, singing, and flirting with the delivery guy. While the labor of being a street vendor emanates from colonial structures of oppression and the perpetual situation of Black and brown peoples in food, agricultural, service, and tourism industries, the music video for "La Banana" displays a fun, vibrant, and sexy relationship to food and fruit.[64]

The banana skirts and vibrant yellow tutus are also reminiscent of Josephine Baker's iconic banana skirt, worn in her 1926 performance at the Folies Bergère in Paris, France.[65] The show itself was entitled "La Revue Nègre" and emerged from a 19th-and-20th-century French fixation and festishization of Blackness and Indigeneity through ideologies and practices concerning Afro-primitivism, the "savage," and North American jazz.[66] Josephine Baker's "danse sauvage" embodied what Mae G. Henderson calls the "obsessive need of the colonizer to 'look' and the obsessive need of the colonized to be 'looked at.'" These performance dynamics are still negotiated today Black women and femmes of color in entertainment industries, and "La Banana" can be seen as an extension of this dialogue

[64] https://publichealth.uic.edu/news-stories/black-hispanic-americans-are-overrepresented-in-essential-jobs/. Valerie Wilson, Valerie, "Racial Representation in Professional Occupations: By the Numbers," Economic Policy Institute, June 8, 2021, https://www.epi.org/publication/racial-representation-prof-occ/. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/african-americans-face-systematic-obstacles-getting-good-jobs/.
[65] I would like to thank Maureen Mahon, author of *Black Diamond Queens: African-American Women and Rock and Roll,* who made me aware of this reference point during a job talk at New York University's Department of Music. For more on this performance, see Adny Fry, "Rethinking the Revue Nègre," *Paris Blues*, 2014, pp. 29-79. Carole Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism, and Primitivism, 1919-1935* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004).
[66] Mae G. Henderson, "Josephine Baker and La Revue Nègre," *Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora*, April 2014, pp. 176-196.

between audiences and performers.[67] Baker's self-fetishization and self-objectification may be understood as an ancestor to the kink in reggaetón that has been named in my work as an additional tool in the toolbox used by Black and brown raperas and reggaetóneras. Kink, self-fetisihization, and what Jennifer Sweeney-Risko calls, "disrespectability politics," "acknowledge that respectability politics, the black strategy for equality based upon conservative, middle class white values, damages Black women's ability to express themselves fully."[68]

A few generations later, Baker's danse sauvage has paved the way for trans and queer artists to continue her rewriting of normative gender and sexuality through the skirt. Several scholars and spectators have noted the way that Baker's banana skirt bends gender and henceforth, sexuality. One spectator and critic, Theodor Lessing, said "She dances so primitively and so genderless that one doesn't know if one is watching a girl or a lovely boy."[69] Scholars have also analyzed audience reactions, particularly white French male audience reactions, to the banana skirt, purporting that the banana skirt was so arousing because it alluded to Baker's "lack," understood as the absence of a penis within Freudian psychoanalysis. Cheng builds on this and connects the alluring "lack" to the colonizer's "rapacious appetite" for bananas, as banana plantations were replacing sugar plantations in the French Antilles in the very same decade as Baker's dance.[70] Thus, Baker's banana skirt

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[67] For more on how Black femmes take Baker's banana skirt overtly into their work, see this article on Beyoncé's adoption of it, Jennifer Sweeney-Risko, "Fashionable 'Formation': Reclaiming the Sartorial Politics of Josephine Baker," *Fashion*, 2020, pp. 92-108. Beyoncé's oeuvre has, perhaps unsurprisingly, proven to recur in this chapter, as she has adopted the sexual politics of a plethora of Black divas before her, inclusive of orishas and deities.

[68] Ibid, 500.

[69] Nenno, Nancy. "Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker in Berlin" in: Katharina von Ankum, ed. Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

[70] Anne Anlin Cheng, "Skin Deep: Josephine Baker and the Colonial Fetish," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 23, no. 3 (2008): pp. 50

not only invoked the colonizer's (sexual) consumption of the Black Native woman, but of the entire colony, island, and archipelago that birthed her (or rather, that she birthed).

In a resignification of Baker's performance – or perhaps an overt reenactment of the subtext of the original dance – Cheng footnotes the 2003 animated film by Sylvain Chomet entitled "Les Triplettes de Belleville," in which Baker's skirt comes undone in a striptease and the white French men rush to the stage grasping for the loose bananas. The scene depicts white French men as the savages as "they, instead, chase after the scattered bananas like monkeys themselves."[71] Amara la Negra and La Delfi's "La Banana" makes a similar statement, as the two singers sit on thrones while cismen gather them bananas, and both men and women dance for their entertainment while they slowly and luxuriously take bites out of their bananas. Amara and La Delfi are clearly queenly in this video. And unlike the case with Baker, La Delfi's yellow tutu does not signify a "lack." Much like my analysis of Muñeca by Villano Antillano and Ana Macho in the next chapter, La Delfi, and other trans reggaetóneras continue a long lineage of signifying transfemme embodiment not necessarily as excess or strangeness, but as "just right," or "more than" the lack embodied by ciswomen. The Dominican Republic is also now the powerhouse of banana exportation in the Caribbean, and the 8th largest exporter in the world. As the burden and blessing of banana production transfers across the Caribbean, so does the burden and blessing of the banana skirt.

. . .

[71] Ibid, 74. Sylvain Chomet's "Les Triplettes de Belleville" (2003).

Figure 3.19. Pictured is an all-femme party. Two femmes grind, the one in the front wearing a classic white ruffled miniskirt and the one in the back with a plaid black and blue fitted miniskirt.

To end, I invoke an image from 2021 during an event hosted by Out of Service Miami, a femme-run organization that hosts reggaeton parties in Miami, Florida.[72] We see here the classic white ruffled miniskirt that Glory wore almost sixteen years ago, and in the new context of bomba, we see a shortened version of a skirt worn 400 years ago. We also see that the moves of our ancestors have created a space for queer dance to take place because the queer Afro-Diasporic potentials were always there from the beginning. At the same time, we see the skirt in contexts that are predominantly white and light-skinned, seemingly devoid of the Black femme bodies that gave the skirt meaning.

[72] See chapter 5 for more about parties popping up nation-wide.
https://www.instagram.com/outofservicemiami/?hl=en

Chapter 4
The Villain is the Hero: Critiquing Bad Bunny through Villano Antillano and Ana Macho's Black Transfemme Collectivism

Puerto Rican reggaetónero Bad Bunny dropped his hit single, "Yo Perreo Sola," at the start of the Covid-19 quarantine in the United States.[1] In preparing to write this chapter, I looked up the exact date when the music video for the song came out and saw that it was March 27, 2020, less than two weeks into quarantine and a time that is otherwise completely soaked in the memories of collective trauma and fear. However, in my own memory of the scramble to stay inside indefinitely, I have not associated this song or video with such a traumatic time even though it may have only been a day or two away from when I found out my titi and grandma in Westchester, New York had contracted the virus. And still, I remember the song separately from this moment in time. I remember the way it made me want to dance and holler and throw my arms up with excitement, devoid from the way the quarantine made me want to stiffen, lie in bed, and just cry and shudder until I woke up from the nightmare. And I know that the song lives in the memory of others in such a way, too.

[1] Yo Perreo Sola (official video) by Bad Bunny (and Nesi).

Figure 4.1. Picture from visual artist Serena Seshadri's self-curated art gallery in our home. May 2021, sunny Santa Barbara, CA. Location of the following conversation and epiphany.

In May of 2021 – over a year into the pandemic and after the song first dropped – I was talking to some friends about Bad Bunny at my roommate's art gallery showing, which she curated at our house. These friends were telling me about how excited they were for the Bad Bunny concert in 2022, partially because the event of a concert symbolized a return to normalcy. What stuck with me from the conversation was that one of my friends said that Bad Bunny got her through quarantine. And it just kind of reverberates in my mind, because as you will read in this chapter, I am highly skeptical of Bad Bunny, and yet his music also in a way "got me through quarantine." And now I wonder if it was strategic of him to drop "Yo Perreo Sola (I Twerk Alone)" at the height of the pandemic, a time when many of us were in fact dancing "sola (alone)."[2] That was also the first time I realized that while I had been listening to Bad Bunny throughout quarantine, I had not yet associated him with the

[2] All translations are mine. "Twerk" is a rough translation, as it encapsulates a different geographical origin than perreo, yet with similar movements. For more, see Kyra D. Gaunt, "Is Twerking African?," *The Routledge Companion to Black Women's Cultural Histories*, 2021, pp. 310-320. Elizabeth Pérez, "The Ontology of Twerk: From 'Sexy' Black Movement Style to Afro-Diasporic Sacred Dance," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 16-31. Aria S. Halliday, "Twerk Sumn!: Theorizing Black Girl Epistemology in the Body," *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2020): pp. 874-891.

pandemic itself. In trying to make sense of why that is, I think it simply hurt too much to associate music that has represented bodily freedom for me since youth with a moment in time that confined my body in so many ways. And yet, Bad Bunny's music was (and continues to be) the sound of 2020 in multiple urban centers, from Los Angeles to New York City and Miami, all places where Covid-19 hit particularly hard.[3]

I was more than a bit reluctant to admit that Bad Bunny had gotten myself, them, or anyone "through the quarantine" when I am perpetually nursing a rage toward him for his silence at the beginning of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. I think my friends were partially able to see Bad Bunny in an untainted way because they were non-Latinx Black women and so the trauma of colorism, racism, colonialism, and caste in its particular Latinx manifestations might go a bit more unbeknownst to them.[4] I also think they were also able to say this because if women of color were to judge every artist by their devotion to Black rights, we would be severely and continuously hurt and disappointed. I also think most people do not know, or are happy to forget, about Bad Bunny's colorblind racial politics—

[3] I support this statement throughout the chapter by referencing personal experiences, i.e. driving with my partner's sister, listening to Bad Bunny and hearing her say "this is the sound of the summer" in 2021, the inability to go on social media and not see praise of him on any given day, my experiences in Santa Barbara and now in New York City, where I hear his music blasting from car stereos at least 3 times a week in my neighborhood of Inwood. I also make this statement based on social media posts (most of which will appear in the body of this chapter), as well as scholarly writing by several reggaetón critics for major magazines such as Rolling Stone, Billboard, TIME, New York Times, Remezcla, NPR Code Switch, R29Somos, Rapeton, and many more (most of which will also appear in the body of this chapter).

[4] For more information on caste in Latin American contexts, see Vinson III, Ben. "The Jungle of Cast Extremes." Chapter. In *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico*, 70–90. Cambridge Latin American Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Vinson III explains how the caste system in colonial Mexico consisted of over a hundred categories of races distinguishable down to the smallest phenotype. This meant light-skinned people could often debate their categorization and claim a higher social standing through an approximation to whiteness. See also, Catelli, Laura Inés. "Caste, Race, and the Formation of Latin American Cultural Imaginaries." *The Routledge History of Latin American Culture*, 2017, 53–66.

reflective of a larger Latin American racial rhetoric—largely because he poses as an LGBTQ+ ally, an issue of intersectionality that is at the heart of this dissertation as a whole.

Therefore, this chapter is one of the first scholarly interventions to take a thorough, critical stance on Bad Bunny. Amidst mountains of praise directed at him, I explain why I do not see his allyship as representation (allyship hardly ever is), but exploitation and appropriation of queer Black culture, made possible through structural and historical chasms between queerness and Blackness that this dissertation aims to fill.[5] I take up Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's call to action when she questions, "What would it mean for both queer and African diaspora studies to take seriously the possibility that, as forcefully as the Atlanta and Caribbean flow together, so too do the turbulent fluidities of Blackness and queerness?"[6] By "reading for Black queer history and theory," I find that the patterns and ideologies present in Bad Bunny's creative content and reception constrict and restrict Black multiplicity at the hands of cishet light-skinned non-Black Latinx artists in a genre-culture where Black power is foundational.[7] Thus, I argue that the message of "Yo Perreo Sola (I Twerk Alone)" proliferates a white feminist lens that furthers the collapse of Afro-Diasporic collectivity in perreo and perpetuates false narratives of Black and Latinx homophobia and misogyny in an

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[5] Taken up thoroughly in chapter 1. For more on the relationship between homophobia, anti-Blackness, and colonialism in reggaetón, reggae, and hip-hop, see Wayne Marshall's article "Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton" in *Lied und Populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 53 (2008). Lauron Jockwig Kehrer, *Queer Voices in Hip Hop: Cultures, Communities, and Contemporary Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022). Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

[6] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (January 2008): pp. 191-215, 193. This article is predicated on the foundation that "Eurocentric queer theorists and heterocentric race theorists have engaged their discourses of resistant black queerness as a new fashion…" I add that this harm is not only done by theorists, in the academic sense, but artists, culture-bearers, communities, and intergenerational epistemologies of being Caribbean and/or Latinx.

[7] Ibid. Further, my use of the term "genre-culture" is my own and developed in chapter 1 alongside the conceptualization of reggaetón as a Cultura akin and ascended from Hip-Hop Culture.

otherwise sexism- and homophobia-free society.[8] In making this point, I emphasize the role of colonized and reclaimed space, as well as the queer politics of the Caribbean barrio/hood as a means to assert that we are afforded all the more reason to highlight the Black and Afro-aligned queer and trans artists who live, and die, dangerously in the face of such hatred. I offer a reading of La Villana and Ana Macho's song and video for "Muñeca" as a womanist counterpoint to "Yo Perreo Sola" in which Afro-Latina queer and trans collectivity is foundational to reggaetón and trap's agentic potentials; where *perreando juntos (twerking together)* is the better path to liberation.[9]

While chapter three demonstrated the hidden genius of queer Black culture in reggaetón fashion through the legacy of the iconic minifalda (miniskirt), this chapter investigates the appropriation and confusion made possible when that very history is erased. Bad Bunny's ability to maintain protection from his straightness but indulge in queer Black fashion while engaging in colorblind racial politics, homophobia, and misogyny represents a broader cooptation of queer Black customs that signifies a widespread entitlement to resistant practices of the oppressed by the privileged. I do want to be clear upfront that this chapter does not devalue the queer representation that fashion can bring but that the bodies that wear the fashion matter most. My claim is not that Bad Bunny fails to queer spaces or images of Latino masculinity, but that reggaetón and hip-hop have *been* queer and the people who made it so are overlooked, while often risking their lives to be openly and outwardly queer, trans, and *cafre (Black)*.

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[8] Reggaetón is victim to the same rhetoric as hip-hop in this way. See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*, 1994.
[9] La Villana is the more recent name used for the non-binary transfemme reggaetón and trap artist Villano Antillano. La Villana translates to "the villain," which is the inspiration for the title of this chapter. Her older artist name means "Antillean Villain," or "Villain from the Antilles," displaying pride for her island as well as the Caribbean archipelago that comprises a shared culture and colonial history.

Our Hero? Praise for Bad Bunny

Figure. 4.2. Bad Bunny on cover of Rolling Stone with an N95 mask pulled down over his chin. Cover reads "Inside Trump's Crisis Response Failure at Every Level, Wall Street's Ballout Hustle by Matt Taibbi, Life in Lockdown with Latin Pop Superstar Bad Bunny."

Bad Bunny is the first Latino to grace the cover of Rolling Stone magazine, the 2022 MTV Artist of the Year, and has had 68 songs on the Billboard Hot 100 list throughout his career.[10] He has been on the Billboard Artist 100 for 253 weeks and held the number one spot for eight weeks in 2022. He is lauded by fans, scholars, and activists for his refusal to speak English in order to garner fame and attention from industry titans like Billboard Magazine, and celebrated when this refusal made him the first artist to have a Spanish-language album top the Billboard charts.[11] In his 2023 Grammy's performance, he brought up the first Afro-Latin Dominican merengue group to appear at the awards ceremony, Dahian El Apechao, and as music critic Marjua Estevez says, "on the most prestigious of stages, at the epicenter

[10] The number of songs on the Billboard charts is ever-changing so check here for updated stats. Also shout out to Cardi B for being the first artist named on the track that took the no. 1 spot, "I Like It." https://www.billboard.com/artist/bad-bunny/

[11] For such praise see Silvia Díaz Fernández, "Subversión, Postfeminismo y Masculinidad En La Música De Bad Bunny," *Investigaciones Feministas* 12, no. 2 (2021): pp. 663-676. Laura Álvarez-Trigo, "Bad Bunny Perrea Sola: The Gender Issue in Reggaeton," *PopMeC Research Blog,* April 2020. Also, see anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla's article for the New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/11/opinion/bad-bunny-non-english-grammys.html.

of the bourgeoisie, Benito let his enduring message to the Recording Academy ring around the world: "Les falta sazón, batería y reggaeton (they lack flavor, drums, and reggaeton)."[12]

Estevez also reminds her readers to remember those who have not been able to grace the stage before him but have paved the way for him to do so. I second this statement and add that there are Black, queer, and trans folks before, concurrently, and *after* him that will also not be able to grace the stage. While his fame has allowed for this moment of Afro-Dominican representation (that does bring tears to my eyes), this chapter is motivated by a reimagining of this event where Dahian may have been the one to feature Bad Bunny instead, like Cardi B did once upon a time with "I Like It."

Bad Bunny's fame began its ascent amidst the pandemic, a time when many prominent artists and culture-bearers looked to queer, trans, and disabled folks for guidance on how to survive such a time. This is also evidenced in Beyoncé's album *Renaissance,* where she homages queer Black culture's infinite wisdom on how to get down in times of precarity and instability. The meaning of "Yo Perreo Sola" accumulated layers of depth during quarantine.[13] In the video for the song, Bad Bunny dressed in "drag" and has since donned dresses, skirts, and heels in several photoshoots and red carpet events, displaying a genderqueer presentation despite being outwardly straight and cisgender.

In many ways, Bad Bunny's fame is reminiscent of the mechanisms by which Puerto Rican reggaetónera Ivy Queen became "La Reina," the token queen of the genre, in the early 2000's. For a long time, Ivy was supported by the gay community in Puerto Rico, while

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[12] Marjua Estevez, "Bad Bunny was Snubbed for Album of the Year at the Grammy's, but He Still Made History," Posted Feb. 6, 2023.ma https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2023/02/11277627/bad-bunny-album-of-the-year-snub
[13] The trope of "bailando sola" continues to grow post-quarantine. For example, Peso Pluma's "Ella Baila Sola" (2023).

providing them with a femme icon where there were only a handful, i.e. Lorna, Glory, La Atrevida, La Sista.[14] Petra Rivera-Rideau attributes Ivy's fame to palatable ideas around women's empowerment, as well as her relationship with the gay community.[15] She cites Ivy having said "they imitate me" as evidence that the gay community loves her. I build on Rivera-Rideau's points and intervene at this juncture to propose that rather than the gay community imitating Ivy, she is imitating them. Chapter three shows how her tomboy fashion traces back to the hypermasculinity of hip-hop, not as representative of the typical narrative of hip-hop's misogyny but its position as a legacy of gender expansion and fluidity in New York City's queer House Ball culture and disco.[16] Bad Bunny's femme presentation and fashion sense are part of the lineage that Ivy took up from queer Black culture.

In addition to aesthetics, Bad Bunny and Ivy both exhibit the vocal and embodied quality of what I term *ronca realness (raspy/hoarse realness),* a timbral aesthetic utilized by rappers and reggaetóneres that subverts colonial ideals of purification and discipline of the Black and brown body and voice.[17] Bad Bunny is often derided for his vocal timbre, the ways in which his voice sags in thick, relaxed cadences. Perceptible somewhere between speech and rap, his sound is purposefully colloquial and it matches the theme of his first studio album, YHLQMDLG, an acronym for "Yo Hago Lo Qué Me Da La Ganas (I Do What I Want)." Similar to Ivy, he speaks in a low register with a rounded, throaty sound not usual for the high tenor trumpeteering of Salsa singers, like Marc Anthony. Though not necessarily

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[14] See chapter 3 for more on these queens and their modes of negotiating their racialized femininity and Black Caribbean feminisms. Also listen to Katelina "La Gata" Eccleston's podcast, *Perreo 101.*
[15] See Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 105.
[16] For more on this relationship, see fashion scholar Tanisha C. Ford's *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion* (St. Martin's Press, 2019). Chantal Regnault and Stuart Baker, *Voguing: Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York 1989-92* (London: Soul Jazz Records, 2011).
[17] See chapter 2.

ronca in a raspy way, Bad Bunny's voice is ronca in the sense that it does not conform to Eurocentric ideals of song or vocal skill, and his use of Spanish makes his ronca sound particularly *real,* relevant. However, as a middle-class, light-skinned non-Black, cisgender-heterosexual man, the ability for his ronca realness to effect a liberatory sonic suciedad—the reclamation of the nasty in Latinx culture—is uncertain.[18] I assert that in combination with his wishy-washy racial advocacy, his lack of lived experience as a queer individual, and the fact that his messages and music (videos) represent heterosexual male fantasy, he does not actualize reggaetón's liberatory potentials in the way womanist artists like La Villana and La Delfi do, both of whom are also ronca and real.

Colorblindness, Homophobia, & Misogyny, Oh My!

While reggaetón's potentials for suciedad are realized when abject bodies access queer, femme of color world-building, Bad Bunny and Ivy Queen's politics of suciedad are fraught by their misalignment with Blackness while simultaneously profiting off of Black culture. Regina Solis Miranda includes him in the group of artists that have emerged during, and due to, the genre's *blanqueamiento* (whitening).

[18] For more on my conception of sonic suciedad, see chapters 1 and 2. For suciedad as a framework, see Vargas, Deborah R. "Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 715–26.

Bienaventurado el que escuche este liriqueo: Negotiating… 503

Fig. 1 From left to right: El General, pioneer of reggae in Spanish in Panama, and Tego Calderón and Don Omar, iconic Puerto Rican reggaeton artists. All of them started their music careers in the 1990s. *Source* Self-elaboration. Creative Commons

Fig. 2 From left to right: J Balvin and Maluma, Colombian reggaeton artists, and Bad Bunny, Puerto Rican. *Source* Self-elaboration. Creative Commons

Figure 4.3. Bad Bunny bottom right in Regina Solis Miranda's diagram displaying the whitening of the genre over the last three decades. Pioneers on the top, recent artists on the bottom.[19]

Both Bad Bunny and Ivy Queen have discussed their struggles with having "pelo malo (bad hair)," while distancing themselves from Blackness and Black struggle.[20] The best example of this is when Bad Bunny hesitated to defend the mission of Black Lives Matter in May of 2020. After the George Floyd protests, when just about everyone was posting their position on Black Lives Matter, Bad Bunny was quiet. It was not until people started asking "where is Bad Bunny? Where is the LGBT ally now?" that he came out with a statement in the form of a lyrical poem called "Perdonen."[21]

Perdonen mi silencio pero ni estoy creyendo lo que pasa

[19] Diagram taken from Regina Solis Miranda, "Bienaventurado El Que Escuche Este Liriqueo: Negotiating Latinidad through Reggaeton," *Latino Studies* 20, no. 4 (2022): pp. 498-526, 503.
[20] See Alexandra T. Vazquez's chapter, "Salon Philosophers: Ivy Queen and Surprise Guests Take Reggaetón Aside," in *Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez, Reggaeton (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009).*
[21] Raisa Bruner, "Bad Bunny Speaks out on Black Lives Matter Protests," Time, June 12, 2020, https://time.com/5852446/bad-bunny-black-lives-matter/.

Quizás es porque solo veo corazones mas me enseñaron en mi casa
Que todos somos iguales sin importar la raza, religión, apellido
Que a un hermano, se le abraza

Les juro que no me siento bien, ni bien me puedo expresar
Les juro que me duele y me duele hasta pensar
¿Que hoy aún por el color de piel de alguien lo puedan matar?
En un mundo así, yo tampoco puedo respirar

¡Fuck Donald Trump! Presidente del racismo
Tu odio y tiranía, eso sí es terrorismo
Que la lucha no pare, que nadie baje su puño
Que sepan que estamos en casa, que este es nuestro terruño

Recuerdo; al niño que tenía "pelo malo" le decían,
igual que a mis vecinitos negros, y ellos también se lo creían.
malo? malo es aquel que piensa eso todavía,
SIN SABER QUE POR SUS VENAS CORRE LA MISMA SANGRE QUE LA MÍA.

¿Quién te enseñó a ser así?
¿Por qué no quieres cambiar?
quizás ES CULPA DE LA PRENSA POR NUNCA DECIR LA VERDAD,
O LAS CLASES DE HISTORIA QUE NO CUENTAN LA REALIDAD,
Y MUESTRAN A LOS NEGROS DE ESCLAVOS CON TANTA NORMALIDAD,
Y DESCUBRIMIENTO LE LLAMARON, A LA BRUTALIDAD.

DE ASESINAR Y DE HUMILLAR A LOS DE OTRO COLOR,
QUE 500 AÑOS DESPUÉS,
SIGUE ARRASTRANDO EL DOLOR.
EL ODIO NO MATA AL ODIO, ESO LO HACE PEOR.
PERO EN UN MUNDO ASÍ, ¿QUIÉN QUIERE DAR SU AMOR?

SI FUERA POR MÍ, NADA DE ESTO PASARA,
SI FUERA POR MÍ, NADA DE ESTO EXISTIERA.
NADIE CONOCE A NADIE POR MIRARLO A LA CARA,
NADIE CONOCE A NADIE POR COMO SE MIRA POR FUERA.

Perdonen que mi furia hoy sea silente
Perdónenme por hoy sentirme impotente
Les juro que les amo y siempre estaré con mi gente
Pero que ustedes siempre luchen, eso es lo importante

Nunca esperen por artistas, ni por héroes ficticios. Ustedes son quienes tienen el poder. Enséñale a tu hijo, a tu hija, a respetar y amar sin importar el color de piel. Educa a quienes parecen no saber sobre la historia de sufrimiento y lucha que ha tenido la gente negra, sobre las injusticias con las que cargamos por siglos. Tal vez hoy no cambiemos el mundo, pero mañana haremos la diferencia

Translation:
Forgive my silence.
But I can't even believe this is still happening.
Maybe it's because I've always seen people's hearts and, in my house, I was always taught that we are all the same regardless of race, religion, and surname; that we are all brothers/sisters.

I SWEAR I don't feel well, and I don't think I can express myself properly,
I swear it hurts! It hurts to know that people are still being killed because of the color of their skin.
LIVING IN A WORLD LIKE THIS, NONE OF US CAN BREATHE!

Fuck Donald Trump! president of racism
Your hatred and tyranny, that is terrorism
That the fight does not stop, that nobody lowers his fist
Let them know that we are at home, that this is our homeland

Memory; the who had "bad hair" was told,
Just like my little black neighbors, and they believed it too.
bad? bad is he who still thinks that,
WITHOUT KNOWING THAT THE SAME BLOOD AS MINE RUNS THROUGH HIS VEINS.

Who taught you to be like this?
Why don't you want to change?
MAYBE IT'S THE FAULT OF THE PRESS FOR NEVER TELLING THE TRUTH,
OR THE HISTORY CLASSES THAT DON'T TEACH US A REAL ACCOUNT OF EVENTS,
AND THEY SHOW THE BLACKS AS SLAVES WITH SUCH NORMALCY,
AND WHO STILL CALL THIS BRUTALITY A "DISCOVERY."

TO MURDER AND HUMILIATE THOSE OF ANOTHER SKIN COLOR,
THAT 500 YEARS LATER,
THAT PAIN KEEPS DRAGGING ON.
HATE DOESN'T STOP HATE, IT JUST MAKES IT WORSE.
IN A WORLD LIKE THIS, WHO WANTS TO GIVE THEIR LOVE?

IF IT WERE UP TO ME, NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED.
IF IT WERE UP TO ME, NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE EXISTED.
YOU CAN'T KNOW SOMEONE BY SIMPLY LOOKING AT THEIR FACE,
YOU CAN'T KNOW SOMEONE BY ONLY LOOKING AT THEIR OUTER APPEARANCE.

FORGIVE ME THAT MY ANGER TODAY IS SILENT.
FORGIVE ME FOR FEELING IMPOTENT TODAY.
I SWEAR TO YOU I LOVE YOU AND I WILL ALWAYS STAND BY MY PEOPLE,
BUT WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS THAT YOU GUYS ALWAYS FIGHT FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN.
NEVER WAIT FOR ARTISTS, OR FOR FICTITIOUS HEROES, YOU ARE THE ONES WHO HAVE THE POWER!!! TEACH YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS TO RESPECT AND LOVE REGARDLESS OF SKIN COLOR. EDUCATE THOSE WHO DO NOT SEEM TO KNOW ABOUT THE HISTORY OF SUFFERING AND STRUGGLE THAT BLACK PEOPLE HAVE ENDURED, ABOUT THE INJUSTICES WE CARRIED FOR CENTURIES. MAYBE WE WON'T CHANGE THE WORLD TODAY, BUT TODAY WE CAN WORK ON MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR TOMORROW.
#BLACKLIVESMATTER[22]

The poem teeters between social critique and echoes of colorblind, mestizaje rhetoric.[23] There are times where he credits the culture, education, and family with creating

[22] See Katelina "La Gata" Eccleston's article for Remezcla on Bad Bunny's problematic reponse. https://remezcla.com/features/music/urbano-artist-slow-response-blm-dismal/
[23] Mestizaje is a 20th-century political ideology and agenda that pervaded most of Latin America and aimed to whiten the population through forced miscegenation, Eurocentric arts and education, sterilization of African and Indigenous women, and various eugenicist practices. See chapter 1 for a more in-depth discussion. Also see Findlay Eileen J Suárez, *Imposing Decency the Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). See Tanya Katerí Hernández, *Racial Innocence: Unmasking Latino Anti-Black Bias and the Struggle for Equality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), and DeMicia Inman, "Dash

the false narrative that everyone is the same (in Puerto Rico), and then times where he falls back on this narrative himself. The poem conflates the struggles of non-Black Latinos with Afro-Latinos by saying "En un mundo así, yo tampoco puedo respirar (in a world like this, I also can't breathe)." These lyrics are textbook colorblind racism and mestizaje rhetoric. Although he acknowledges the importance of skin color several times, the impact is watered down by his statement that he, as a light-skinned non-Black man, *too* cannot breathe. In the fourth stanza, he is the white boy with "pelo malo (bad hair)" and approaches a nuanced discussion of the association between Blackness and "pelo malo" by mentioning the Black neighbors with whom he shared hair struggles, but then reverts back to saying that the "same blood runs through our veins," a common phrase used by those who try to fight racism by claiming that we're all the same underneath the skin. I do take pause at the second to last sentence of the poem, where he uses "we" to include himself in the pain Black peoples have carried for centuries. In her interview with NPR Code Switch, Vanessa Díaz, an anthropologist and co-creator of the Bad Bunny Syllabus, has said: "I think that many of the ways that he has been able to navigate things and that he has climbed to fame have to do with who he is. And who he is, is someone who does not identify as queer and does not identify as Black. Those are two very clear things about him."[24] Given the second to last sentence of this poem and Bad Bunny's massive and intersectionality diverse fanbase, I do not know if these two things are as clear as Díaz says, but what is clear to me is how Bad Bunny claims sexuality/gender and ethnoracial fluidity when convenient. Much like his femme presentation is often paired with persistent misogyny and heteronormativity, the rare cases where he does

Harris Is Doing the Work to End Anti-Blackness in Latinx Culture," TheGrio, July 2, 2020, https://thegrio.com/2020/06/16/dash-harris-interview/.

[24] Vanessa Díaz's episode "Bad Bunny, Reggaeton, and Resistance" on NPR Code Switch for more about the cultural implications of pelo malo. https://www.badbunnysyllabus.com

speak about his own potential Blackness are often shrouded in this kind of ambiguous language to garner sympathy from an audience, as has been permissible for many Latinos due to the legacy of racial mixture, mestizaje mythology, and colonialism.[25]

Bad Bunny's fame has been part of a larger trend in popular music regarding gender presentation, primarily for cishet men. Depictions of masculinity in the last few years at the hands of Harry Styles and Bad Bunny have been refreshingly femme, and yet overwhelmingly non-queer. While these are two musical artists, their music is often not the mechanism by which they choose to alter ideas of what cishet men are permitted to do; it is often through fashion. Both Bad Bunny and the former One Direction star, Harry Styles, have not claimed a queer sexuality openly, but are praised for their feminine attire and wearing dresses, probably precisely *because* they are both saying straight men can look many ways. Lil Nas X, an openly gay singer and rapper frequently seen in iconic hot pink cowboy suits, on the other hand, expands ideals of Black male sexuality and aesthetics through the totality of his artistic and personal self, utilizing fashion, music, and lyrics to carve a place in multiple genres for gay Black men. In the United States racial imaginary, Bad Bunny continues to diversify masculine aesthetics as a Latino, unique from Englishman Styles and southern Black man Lil Nas X. However, unlike Lil Nas X, Styles and Bad Bunny represent trendy or palatable queerness, queerness in aesthetic, not in practice or identification, which I assert is made obvious when the artistic persona does not match the artistic content or output.

[25] Sociologist Mario Mercado Diaz has written on this idea. He says "These calculations are proof of how White Latinxs can utilize social characteristics to remain in a space of racial ambiguity. While they can claim they are racialized by way of ethnicity, language, class or birthplace, White Latinxs still benefit from having white skin in a white supremacist society." Mario Mercado Diaz, "To My Fellow Boriblancos: When We Say 'down with White Power,' We Also Mean Our White Power," NACLA, October 2, 2020, https://nacla.org/puerto-rico-white-supremacy.

Figure 4.4. Left to right, Bad Bunny in pink jumper with blue heels and white mid-calf socks near a pool for Jacquemus campaign, Harry Styles in ruffled flowing gown and black blazer in a meadow for Vogue 2020 cover spread, Lil Nas X in hot pink gold-studded Versace cowboy suit with palm trees and people in the background for 2020 Grammy Awards. Diagram showing femme clothing trend.

Bad Bunny's songs do not create queer narratives in and of themselves, nor does he feature or openly collaborate with queer and trans artists. In fact, despite a handful of instances where he has condemned reggaetóneros like Don Omar for their homophobia, he aligns himself with artists like J Balvin, who famously accepted an award from African Entertainment Awards USA for Afro-Latino Artist of the Year 2021 despite being a white Colombian, and Anuel AA, who has been outwardly homophobic in his songs and even toward Bad Bunny's aesthetics.[26] Despite this, the trio has even called themselves the "Trap

[26] For J Balvin fiasco, see Alvarez, Julaiza. "J Balvin Accepting Afro-Latino Artist of the Year Award Is Not Just Hurtful... It's Erasure." Remezcla, December 30, 2021. https://remezcla.com/features/music/j-balvin-afro-latino-artist-award-response/.
For Anuel AA homophobia, see Avila, Pamela. "Anuel AA Accused of Throwing Shade at Bad Bunny over His New Music Video." E! Online, March 29, 2020. https://www.eonline.com/news/1135525/anuel-aa-accused-of-throwing-shade-at-bad-bunny-over-his-new-music-video.
and Arroyo, Juan J. "Anuel AA Apologizes for Homophobic Diss Track: 'This Has Been My Biggest Mistake.'" Remezcla, September 13, 2018. https://remezcla.com/music/anuel-aa-cosculluela-apology-tiraera-beef/.

Kings." In casual conversation on social media Bad Bunny has also been caught saying homophobic and misogynistic things. For instance, after he posted a picture of his manicured hands, one user asked if he was gay. Bad Bunny retaliated against this homophobic and gender normative question in an equally homophobic way. He said "No I'm not gay. Bring me your woman and I'll put her to work making my babies." Even more disturbing, when called out for that, he said "it was just an exaggeration to show I'm not gay and I love women."

Figure 4.5. Screenshot of the Twitter exchange between Bad Bunny and user Miroslava Valdovinos regarding the salon debacle.[27]

Ultimately, Bad Bunny is saved by his ability to still claim heterosexuality, cis-maleness, and his approximation to whiteness. He can defend queer and trans folks precisely because he is *not* openly queer. His power and privilege is a remnant of the dynamic between racial uplift and homophobia that can be traced back to the etymology of the word "dembow," reggaetón's essential rhythmic structure. Wayne Marshall enlightens us that the

[27] Bad Bunny Says He Was Refused Service at a Nail Salon for Being a Man (remezcla.com). For more on Bad Bunny's misogyny, see Hoban, Dairíne, "Bad Bunny's Purplewashing as Gender Violence in Reggaeton: A Feminist Analysis of SOLO DE MI and YO PERREO SOLA" (2021). *USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations.*

resounding rhythm of reggaetón was first named in Shabba Ranks' 1991 reggae hit "Dem Bow." In alignment with Rastafarianism, anti-colonial ideology may often be expressed through anti-gay sentiment. The song signals:

> Don't bow to oppression, in particular the (implicitly foreign) pressures toward such 'deviant' sexual practices as oral sex (both fellatio and cunnilingus) and homosexuality. It may seem less than straightforward to conflate (neo) colonialist oppression with these sexual practices, but it is a longstanding charge in Jamaican public discourse - particularly from fundamentalist Christian quarters and certain sects of Rastafari - that oral and anal sex and same-sex relationships are not only taboo and proscribed by the Bible but are 'decadent' products of the West, of Babylon, and are thus to be resisted alongside other forms of colonization, cultural or political.[28]

This is ultimately a form of emasculating the colonizer to ‘uplift’ the colonized. In this context, queerness was not resistance or subversion, it was *compliance* to colonization. These themes were adopted by founding reggae and reggae en español stars like El General, Nando Boom, Elephant Man, Beenie Man. However, when these artists are discussed, their violent homophobia is often left out of the narrative.

Reggaetón and reggae have since become spaces where queerness thrives, and yet histories like this one, although necessary, continue to recreate false notions that reggaetón’s “machismo” culture is antithetical to queer advocacy.[29] Dominant connotations of the genre as misogynistic and homophobic further pathologize Black and brown communities and allow any person who negates that preconceived notion to be considered revolutionary, as is the case with Bad Bunny. Because of his fervent resistance to these associations through his

[28] Marshall, 136.
[29] Rhetoric that reggaetón is “anything but inclusive,” see Coraly Cruz Mejias, “‘Our Own Music’: Queer Reggaeton Artists Take the Mic,” Global Press Journal, June 30, 2022, https://globalpressjournal.com/americas/puerto-rico/music-queer-reggaeton-artists-take-mic/.
Bad Bunny’s take on machismo (and subsequent praise for that “feminist” praise) see Karla Montalván, “Bad Bunny Protests Machismo in Reggaeton Industry with This Message,” People en Español, July 26, 2022, https://peopleenespanol.com/chica/bad-bunny-protests-machismo-reggaeton-industry/.

feminine attire, he is interpreted as presenting a modern progressive spin on what many see as a backwards genre-culture. This allows for Bad Bunny to be praised as representation for the queer community despite being non-queer. He is seen as radical because he is a Latino LGBTQ+ ally within a musical context that is often derided for being Black and scapegoated as being misogynistic and homophobic. Counterintuitively, the sonic Blackness of reggaetón, i.e. rhythm, rap, and perreo, helps to mark Bad Bunny as racially authentic and thus acts as the platform by which he can enact queerness. The underlying truth is that reggaetón thus provides a platform for queerness through racial authentication and the space for queer Afro-Latin liberation has been there from the genres inception. Thus, a goal of this chapter is to show that not only are there are many queer and trans Black and brown artists and communities to praise for this work, but they do it more holistically, i.e. through queer musical narratives and videos, than Bad Bunny does.

A few months after Bad Bunny's album *Un Verano Sin Ti* dropped he kissed a male backup dancer at the 2022 Video Music Awards. While he still identifies as straight, or at least "straight for now," he took a step to engage in queer acts on international television.[30] I have to admit this one stumped me at first, maybe even excited me a little. My initial impressions ranged from "Is he finally coming out? Oh, please God, just give us a queer icon of this magnitude already…" to the feeling that this was Katy Perry's "I Kissed a Girl" all over again, essentially carrying the same message twenty years later that "experimentation is fine, just don't actually be gay." More in line with the latter, he has not come out, but the reception of the event reassured me that he cannot go unchecked for everything. Kissing his

[30] Bad Bunny on his sexuality – one of the few interviews
Bad Bunny kissing male backup dancer at the VMA's

male back-up dancer polarized homophobes and queers alike. Queers who had an inkling that he may have been queerbaiting them before are now even more suspicious, while the bros who tolerated his feminine dress now think he is taking it too far.[31]

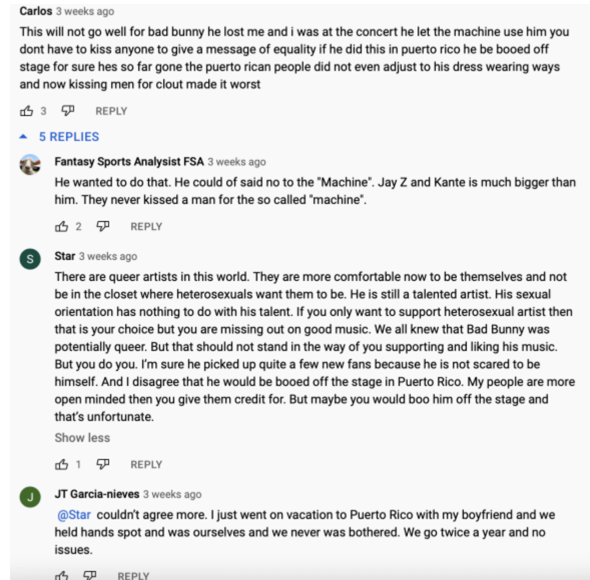

Figure 4.6. YouTube comments criticizing Bad Bunny's choice to kiss his male backup dancer at the VMA's. The critiques come from many angles, homophobia, queerbaiting, and skeptical praise.

The part that troubles me most, as a musicologist, poet, and singer, is that the song he performed at the VMA's, "Titi me preguntó," is classic machismo, with verses that name the many women he's been with all across the globe:

Me gustan mucho las Gabriela (I really like the Gabrielas)
Las Patricia, las Nicolle, las Sofía (the Patricias, the Nicolles, the Sofias)
Mi primera novia en kinder, María (my first girlfriend in kindergarten, María)
Y mi primer amor se llamaba Thalía (my first love was named Thalía)
Tengo una colombiana (I have a Colombiana)
Que me escribe to' los día' (who writes to me every day)
Y una mexicana que ni yo sabía (and a Mexicana I never knew about)
Otra en San Antonio que me quiere todavía (another in San Antonion who still loves me)
Y las de PR que todita' son mía' (And all of them in Puerto Rico are mine)
Una dominicana que es uva bombón (A Dominicana who is sexy)
Uva, uva bombón (sexy)

[31] Bad Bunny isn't queerbaiting. Even popular queer news source, *Them,* says Bad Bunny isn't queerbaiting but got in on the debate https://www.them.us/story/bad-bunny-vma-backup-dancer-kiss-wasnt-queerbaiting.

La de Barcelona que vino en avión (the one in Barcelon who comes in airplane)
Yo dejo que jueguen (I leave them to play)
Con mi corazón (with my heart)
Quisiera mudarme (I want to move)
Con todas pa' una mansión (into a mansion with all of them)

Bad Bunny employs not only the common hip-hop trope of having women across the globe, but a variation of this trope in reggaetón where the women are primarily in Hispanophone countries.[32] This serves the dual purpose for audiences of boosting the male ego and bringing Latino audiences together by appealing to an idea of Pan-Latinidad. The song also relates to young Latinx audiences dealing with the traditional questions from their elders about marriage and love. For men, the question titi's ask is often "why do you have so many girlfriends? Just find one good woman." For women, it's "why don't you have a boyfriend yet?"

Bad Bunny's issue in the song is not that these questions are often hetero and gender normative (as it could have been), but that he is unable to commit to any of the women he sleeps with because he is broken inside and "vo'a romperte el corazon (will break your heart)," too. My issue is less with the trope of having women all over the world—as one of my favorite reggaetón hits is N.O.R.E, Tego Calderón, and Nina Sky's "Oye mi Canto"—but that it was a missed opportunity to deconstruct gendered conversations that occur in Latinx households.[33] In terms of the VMA's performance, I would have been more impacted if before he kissed a man on stage, he changed his lyrics to reflect a queer scenario. For example, he could have changed the pronouns to "titi me preguntó sí tengo muchos novios

[32] See Don't Mind by Kent Jones, All Over the World by Bruno Mars, Girls Around the World by Lloyd ft Lil Wayne.
[33] See Oye Mi Canto by N.O.R.E. Lyrics adhere to "women around the world" trope "Boricua, Morena, Dominicana, Colombiana… (Puerto Rican woman, dark-skinned woman, Dominican woman, Colombian woman)."

(titi asked me if I have a lot of boyfriends)," from the recurring line "titi me preguntó si tengo muchas novia' (titi asked me if I have a lot of girlfriends)." This would have taken the performance from trendy queerness to realness, not to mention it would have been the first time his lyrics reflected a queer situationship. The permanence of recorded songs disallows for such subversion to exist. The fleeting moment of a kiss in a performance is not something people have to engage with if they want to listen to the song, but if he changed the lyrics, listeners would have to be equipped to digest sonic homosexuality every time they pressed play. Meanwhile, queer Latinx artists engage in poetic politics like this all the time, as will be seen later in the analysis of Villano Antillano and Ana Macho's song "Muñeca."[34]

. . .

When I first listened to Bad Bunny's 2022 album Un Verano Sin Ti*, I have to admit that my favorite song was in fact "Titi me preguntó." Apparently, it was everyone else's on my block, too, given the sheer number of times I heard it from passing cars. It was definitely the funniest track on the album, and having just lost my grandma at the time, it reminded me of the persistent "do you have a boyfriend" questions she used to ask. Over time, the song began to sadden me. I realized as I was singing along that although I could relate to the overall sentiment of the song, the specific reality of the lyrics was so far from anything I could, or would, ever experience. It can be summed up in this simple fact: I wish my titi would ask me why I have so many girlfriends. I used to like singing along to the song because it allowed me to utter these fantastical words, but when reality sets in, the distance between real life and fantasy can inflict pain. Even though I am out to my friends and my*

[34] This theme is in dialogue with chapter 2 and my analysis of María Grever's ideal woman, the importance of pronouns in lyrics, and the liberatory practice of poetic queerness.

mom, I am not out to many older people in my life. I don't know if there will ever be a time where my titi asks me this question, but for now, I am openly envious that Bad Bunny's titi asks him.

Disparities in Death and Dying

The structure of the genre and culture from its beginnings was built to carry intersectional experience. When interviewed about Bad Bunny's meteoric rise to fame and his politics, revolutionary reggaetón podcaster, La Gata, said "it's a political genre."[35] I read this as a strategic move on her part to credit the genre as a whole, i.e. the Black founders in the caseríos as well as contemporary Afro-Latin producers, with Bad Bunny's ability to be openly political in the mainstream. Nonbinary reggaetónere Ana Macho, whose song "Muñeca" serves as a case study in womanism in this chapter, echoes La Gata by saying reggaetón is "a genre of music that's tightly tied to irreverence, and that attracts many oppressed bodies: feminine bodies, queer bodies."[36] Patricia Velazquez, founder of the Hasta Bajo Project, one of reggaetón's first digital archival efforts, reminds that it is in reggaetón's original underground social critiques on race and poverty that the ability for a queer socio-political perspective first emerged.[37] This chapter is motivated by the notion that when an ally is taking up more space than those who they are advocating for, structural oppression and erasure are being reproduced under the guise of progress and representation. Laura Álvarez-Trigo writes that "the genre is currently searching for new types of discourse that fit into the different sensibilities of international contemporary audiences… Bad Bunny's 'Yo

[35] La Gata on Al Punto with Jorge Ramos
[36] 'Our Own Music': Queer Reggaeton Artists Take the Mic by Coraly Cruz Mejías for Global Press Journal
[37] Visit the Hasta Bajo Project for more about their archive and mission.

Perreo Sola' is a prime example of how artists are becoming aware of said change and are thus setting the basis for a new discourse within the tradition of reggaetón."[38]

It is part of the work of this dissertation to provide historical and contemporary evidence for ways in which the genre emerged as a new type of discourse and never stopped negotiating boundaries despite the harmful narrative that because there is homophobia in a culture or a genre, queer and trans people somehow cease to exist. We see this in La Sista's album in chapter three, where her discourse on Indigeneity and Blackness nearly erased her from reggaetón history. If we are looking for specifically queer discourses emerging in reggaetón, we should look to queer and trans people, like La Villana and La Delfi.

La Delfi was a Dominican reggaetónera and dembow artist who came on the scene in 2012. [DP14] La Delfi and Jhon Distrito's song "Dame Leche," is a Black transfemme anthem. La Delfi and Jhon employ sex-positive rhetoric through lyrical and sonic pornography, i.e. moans and graphic images of sexual desires and acts.[39] The song is built for dancing with its repetitive lyrical phrases and fragments, syncopated "hey! Hey!" vocal punctuations, and turntable-esque scratching. "Dame leche" actualizes reggaetón's queer sucia (dirty) potentials through the pornographic lyricism that made reggaetón so loved and so hated in the 1990s.[40] The lyrics have one simple message: "Yo quiero leche. Dame cocoro. (I want milk. Give me cock)." In the music video for the original song in 2012, La Delfi appeared in both masc and

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[38] Laura Álvarez-Trigo, "Bad Bunny Perrea Sola: The Gender Issue in Reggaeton," *PopMeC Research Blog,* April 2020, 1.
[39] Jhon Distrito is known for promoting and collaborating with transfemme and transmasc Afro-Latin artists like La Caito and Onguito Wa. He also calls himself "el malcriao" which roughly translates to mean someone who is built differently (or incorrectly), a possible acknowledgement of his sexuality and advocacy.
[40] See chapter three for more on the Anti-Porn Campaign and the Mano Dura contra el Crimen (Hand against crime) in Puerto Rico. Both were sanitizing efforts by the government to rid the island of Black sexuality deemed to be deviant and harmful to the image of Puerto Rican women. See Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón.*

femme presentations. The remix for "Dame Leche" came out in 2018 and featured La Delfi solely in her femme-inized form in the video. She held glass jugs of milk and flirted with the camera.[41]

La Delfi died at the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, from complications with stomach ulcers. The comments on the video for the remix are a mixed bag of mourning La Delfi and praising the rise of La Materialista, an up-and-coming Dominican reggaetónera.[42] Personally, her music also got me up and dancing during the pandemic.

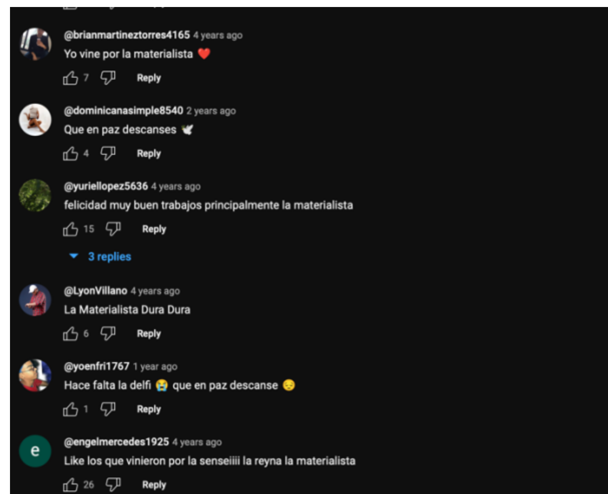

Figure 4.7. Comments from YouTube users saying "que en paz descanse (may she rest in peace)" and "veni por la materialista (I came for La Materialista)."

While La Delfi is certainly loved by many, the fame and praise that she garners now are relegated to grief and mourning. During her life (as well as in her death), she did not reach fame anywhere near Bad Bunny's, signifying that Bad Bunny's fame is in large part due to a young audience that cares about LGBTQ+ rights in the abstract, not necessarily in action. This elucidates the danger of reifying non-Black cishet men in the genre, even if they do dare

[41] Related to a later discussion of how female emcees are often separated from their backup dancers in reggaetón music videos, but not in contemporary hip-hop; one way in which womanism appears through collectivity in dance. See

[42] Dame Leche (Remix) by La Delfi, Jhon Distrito ft. La Materialista

to defy in certain ways. Due to the ways that their identities give them space and power, they are able to speak over the queer, dark-skinned, Dominican reggaetón *pioneers* who have died of surely preventable conditions.

Even though a large number of queer and trans artists in reggaetón are Afro-Latin, the ability to be openly queer and Black in certain barrios, as well as in mainstream media, is tenuous. While I assert that Bad Bunny's approximation to whiteness is a form of protection and privilege that allows for his queer aesthetics to be acknowledged and celebrated, I recognize that for many light-skinned queer people of color, their lightness is sometimes not enough to save their lives. I mention this to make clear how dangerously queer and trans Latines and Afro-Latines must live, in contrast with the precarity that wealthy, protected allies like Bad Bunny do not experience.

In the case of Kevin Fret, one of the first openly gay Latin trap artists in Puerto Rico, his light-skinnedness could not protect him. He was murdered the night of January 10, 2019 in Santurce with eight bullets to his body.[43] The shooter is still unknown and so few pieces on the matter have been figured out since April 2019. There are some people, including Fret's own mother, who think Fret's murder was orchestrated by Dimelo Vi, the management of Afro-Latin reggaetónero, Ozuna. The motivation for these accusations is that Fret allegedly held videos of Ozuna engaging in intimate acts with other men, potentially even with Fret himself. The matter is doubly complicated because Ozuna might have been underage in the videos. The FBI recently concluded that Fret did not extort Ozuna, yet Ozuna

[43] Death of Kevin Fret Highlights Crisis of Violence in Puerto Rico by Suzy Exposito, *Rolling Stone,* January 11, 2019. Also see, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Translocas: The Politics of Puerto Rican Drag and Trans Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

sent him $50,000 and proceeded to file a report with Miami officials about the alleged blackmail soon before Fret was shot.[44]

Ultimately, once word got out about the video following Fret's death, Ozuna's response was to send out a message to all teenagers advising them not to make videos like this, and apologized to his family for the "evil" this (alleged homosexual act) has caused.[45] It was never quite clear what Ozuna was apologizing for, whether it be his queer acts or the fact that he failed to protect his privacy, the implications of his actions on Kevin Fret who was later killed, or all of the above. The fact that he felt the need to issue an apology signals internalized homophobia and the fear that the video would have tarnished his macho presentation in the eyes of the record label officials and parts of the community, even his own family. His apology reads:

> Like many young people, I made a mistake, fueled by ignorance," he wrote. "Today, I'm not only sorry for what happened, but I condemn it. That's why I looked for help and I am certain everything will be cleared. Likewise, I'm following the process and am always willing to collaborate with authorities to prevent the evil that resulted from this big mistake. More importantly, I ask my family for forgiveness. They are my life's priority and I will continue to fight for them always.[46]

His apology leaves many open-ended questions. When he says he "looked for help," does this mean he sought some type of conversion therapy, or that he looked to his record label to stop the extortion? The framing of the situation as a "mistake" of his own doing leads me to believe that he is apologizing for engaging in sexual acts with men at the age of sixteen. Though we do not have evidence of what his family thought about this, his plea for "forgiveness" implies that they would have seen his queerness as an embarrassment to the

[44] Ozuna Wasn't Extorted by Lucas Villa, *Remezcla,* January 12, 2023.
[45] Ozuna Claims He Was Extorted by Lena Grossman, *E!,* January 24, 2019.
[46] Ibid.

family honor. Ozuna continues to create artistic content with heterosexual messaging and fantasies and has stayed silent on the matter.

In 2022, Ozuna is almost as commercially famous as Bad Bunny, primarily due to his collaboration with Sia and Doja Cat in "Del Mar" (2020). Unlike Bad Bunny, Ozuna cannot be queer *and* Black if he is going to be a mainstream reggaetónero. While Ozuna might have engaged in queer acts, he is unable to own this, while Bad Bunny is not queer and not Black and thus able to present as queer in a Black genre whenever he pleases with little burden of his own intersecting identities. When the scandal between Fret and Ozuna made headlines, Don Omar, a famous Afro-Latin founding reggaetónero, made homophobic comments toward Ozuna.[47] Bad Bunny responded to Don Omar's comments saying "homophobia in this day and age? How embarrassing." The usual paternalism of the genre would have meant that Bad Bunny would never speak to a founder in such a way, as he profits off the work of Afro-Latin artists like Don Omar. Ozuna did not even defend himself, but Bad Bunny's position and power in the mainstream ensured his protection. So, the duality of queerness and Blackness in mainstream media presents itself, as we have Afro-Latin, homophobic Don Omar on one side, and light-skinned, colorblind, LGBT ally Bad Bunny on the other.

Disparities in Praise

Bad Bunny often receives praise for "creating space" and "assisting" queer and trans artists, even when he had nothing to do with their artistic content, production, or publicity. Ana Macho is one such queer artist whose efforts have been accredited to Bad Bunny. In an

[47] Don Omar Sparks Controversy Surrounding Homophobic Social Media Posts about Ozuna by Caitlin Donohue, *Remezcla,* January 23, 2019.

article for the Global Press Journal, Coraly Cruz Mejías thanks a few artists for paving the way for the queer culture of reggaetón to thrive. She expresses gratitude for Puerto Rican singer and rapper, Lisa M., Ivy Queen, and of course Bad Bunny for being the "gender-bending man" who "assisted" in making Ivy Queen "more mainstream" recently.[48] Vanessa Díaz has said "It's not necessarily about if Bad Bunny stands up and says, I'm queer. It's about Bad Bunny creating the space for it to be a possibility and for him to not have to check the box."[49] Sentiments like this one are all too widespread, and they ultimately attribute a man who does not feature or collaborate with queer artists like Ana Macho with Black queer and trans labor and impact. He was even awarded the Advocate for Change Award by GLAAD, the world's largest LGBT media advocacy organization. While his oeuvre is produced and created by an artistic team that may include queer and trans people, they also remain nameless to the public. Crediting Bad In Cruz Mejías' article, crediting Bad Bunny with the mainstream fame of Ivy Queen erases the coming-of-age of Ivy Queen's fans (like me) and the work we are doing to make sure her name is still said. It obscures the networks that have built Ivy's career from the ground up, which she herself attributes in large part to the gay community in Puerto Rico. It jeopardizes the legacy of queer and trans networks and communities whose organizing, activism, desires, tastes, and collective actions have created this (sub)culture in reggaetón being overshadowed by the big bad bunny.

[48] Our Own Music': Queer Reggaeton Artists Take the Mic by Coraly Cruz Mejías for Global Press Journal
[49] "Bad Bunny, Reggaeton, and Resistance," *NPR Code Switch,* by Gene Demby, Adrian Florido, Christina Cala, Alyssa Jeong Perry, Dalia Mortada, With Vanessa Díaz, January 18, 2023. See "Reggaeton is booming, thanks to artists like Bad Bunny and Calle 13's Resīdɛntə who continue to enhance the genre's appeal with their focus on political and social change." Netflix Forgot to Include Puerto Ricans by Denise Zubizarreta, *Hyperallergic,* February 12, 2023. See GLAAD award for Latinx queer visibility, Dino-Ray Ramos, "GLAAD Media Awards to Honor Christina Aguilera, Bad Bunny, and Jeremy Pope at 34th Annual Ceremony in Los Angeles," GLAAD, April 13, 2023 https://glaad.org/glaad-media-awards-honor-christina-aguilera-bad-bunny-and-jeremy-pope-34th-annual-ceremony-los/.

Bad Bunny's allyship might be an example of the proper use of power and privilege. However, I take issue with allyship as a concept, as it praises those with power and privilege in the first place. Indigenous Action Media's manifesto on the Ally Industrial Complex, "Accomplices, Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex" also interrogates the idea of allyship and its usefulness for actualizing justice.[50] They explain how various types of harmful behaviors get coded positively as allyship. The type of allyship that Bad Bunny enacts, with the aid of those who praise him for labor that is not his own, falls under a white savior dynamic. IAM's category for this allyship is "Salvation aka Missionary Work & Self Therapy":

> Allies all too often carry romantic notions of oppressed folks they wish to help. These are the ally 'saviors' who see victims and tokens instead of people. The victimization becomes a fetish for the worst of the allies in forms of exotification, manarchism, 'splaining, POC sexploitation, etc.

The discrediting of Ana Macho's own power is a form of exploitation and victimization where queer and trans artists are turned into 'tokens' to increase Bad Bunny's social currency. Anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla has written about Bad Bunny's "romantic notions of oppressed folks":

> This supposed symbol of violence and criminality is not a child of the criminal underworld, but rather the product of a stable and supportive middle-class family. As such, his songs do not represent chronicles, but rather fantasies of the underclass. This is very common within many popular music genres, in which exaggeration reigns among young people seeking to represent themselves as heroic protagonists of what is in reality a banal and stifling day-to-day existence. Perhaps this is why Bad Bunny so deeply stirs the fears of the Puerto Rican middle class: He clearly reflects their fantasies and their prejudices.[51]

In June 2022, Bad Bunny performed at the Jose Miguel Agrelot Coliseum in Puerto Rico and surprised this middle-class Puerto Rican audience that Bonilla references with a

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[50] Admin, "Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex," Indigenous Action Media, May 4, 2014, https://www.indigenousaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/.
[51] Yarimar Bonilla, "Bad Bunny, Good Scapegoat: How 'El Conejo Malo' Is Stirring a 'Moral Panic' in Post-Hurricane Puerto Rico," *CUNY Academic Works,* 2018.

guest, La Villana. By doing so, he enacted in part one of the main calls to action of this chapter, which is for him to step back so that actual queers can step forward. What happened, in effect, was that he took more steps forward by doing this. The praise grew louder than ever on social media, and even came from La Villana herself, going so far as to call Bad Bunny "the number 1 artist in the world," and herself the "first trans artists in the movement (genre)," forgetting entirely about La Delfi. In an interview with Billboard she said "Bad Bunny is an artist who has been merited as an artist with truth, and there is a lot of talk about how he implements and utilizes queer culture in all of his work...at the end of the day, I'm just a girl who got to get on stage with him, and that's amazing."[52] The logic here seems backwards. When queer and trans people need to be given the floor despite the usage of their aesthetics, culture, and customs, we are still caught in a system of exploitation and dependency. If Bad Bunny is an artist that utilizes and *respects* queer culture and people, then he's just a boy who got to get on stage with La Villana, and that's amazing.

Muñeca, not muñequita

"I'm creating music knowing very well I may be killed for this, but you know what? We have to be proud and stand tall." - La Villana in an interview with Rolling Stone[53]

"No soy una chica normal, todos saben que yo soy una muñeca (I am not a normal girl, everyone knows I'm a doll)," are the opening lines to Villano Antillano and Ana Macho's hit song "Muñeca" (2021). Villano Antillano, more recently addressed as La Villana, is a transfemme nonbinary Puerto Rican rapper, reggaetónera, and trap artist. Her work is openly queer, trans, femme, and Black. Although she is not the first trans artist in the

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[52] Isabela Raygoza, "How Villano Antillano Dismantles Hate Speech with Bad B–Ch Wordplay," Billboard, June 29, 2023, https://www.billboard.com/music/latin/villano-antillano-interview-latin-artist-on-the-rise-1235206361/.
[53] Katelina Eccleston, "Villano Antillano Is Making History: 'We Have to Be Proud and Stand Tall,'" Rolling Stone, August 2, 2022, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/villano-antillano-1388154/.

movement by any means — as she mistakenly said after her performance with Bad Bunny— she is the first trans and nonbinary artist to ever reach the Top 50: Global on Spotify. Ana Macho is a nonbinary Puerto Rican popstar and drag queen. They were drawn to drag by RuPaul's Drag Race and began performing when they moved to San Juan at the age of eighteen. They describe their music as emerging from a "plethora of musical genres that are rooted in the Caribbean while blending it with pop melodies and soundscapes. It's very dreamy, honest, and sincere."[54] Macho's description of her music makes room for how reggaetón fits into a broader catalogue of interconnected Caribbean sounds, genres, and musical cultures.. Often, reggaetón and trap artists are placed in the same categories and spaces under the somewhat antiquated yet still utilized term "Música Urbano (Urban Music)," due to each genre's racialized and classed connotations. Heeding this, I consider all of the artists in this chapter to be part of reggaetón Culture, even though their music may at times belong stylistically to trap or be fused with merengue, bachata, dembow (genre).

La Villana orbits in the trapetón sphere a bit more than the reggaetón sphere, and she is not alone in doing so. Kevin Fret was also known as more of a trap artist, non-binary artist Arca uses electronics and trap backing tracks as well, lesbian reggaetónera Chocolate Remix blends cumbia with reggaetón (though not unproblematically as a white Argentinian). A pattern among queer reggaetón artists is that they are not just engaging in the solo use of the dembow rhythm, nor is it necessarily their primary choice of beat, quite literally reclaiming, and perhaps renaming, dembow's homophobic history by queering it. As Marjua Estevez wrote for Refinery29's SOMOS, – a well-known magazine dedicated to "comunidades of

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[54] https://schwarzman.yale.edu/artist/villano-antillano
Ana Macho Talks 'Realismo Magico'

Latinxs rewriting our narratives, redefining freedom, and finding joy in our nuances together:"

> Antillano and other queer Latines in música urbana, a complicated and imperfect umbrella term for reggaeton, Latin trap, dembow, R&B en Español, and other Latin genres with underground origins, iterate how gay, sexually fluid, and nonbinary people continue to disrupt popular culture and make revolutionary homes out of the very spaces hellbent on snuffing them out."[55]

In this way, queer artists have expanded the genre of reggaetón to at times act as an umbrella term for Latin trap, cumbia, merengue, chapata, rap, and hip-hop, much like Música Urbano used to (and sometimes still does). Just as these queer artists defy gender and sexual categorization, they expand the genre to reflect fluidity and interconnectedness.

The first verse to the bass-heavy, trap song "Muñeca" opens with the words "Barbie, Bratz, MyScene," a list of popular dolls marketed toward girls. This opening line positions La Villana and Ana Macho as the dolls that every little girl dreams of being and/or being with. Both artists reclaim the harmful perfectionism of the doll-like beauty standards placed on women while also calling out transphobic ideals of "normal" girlhood in Latinx culture. While La Villana might not be a normal girl, per se, she does assert that she is the epitome of a doll, and by being a doll, she has achieved a level of femininity that no "normal girl" can achieve. The "normal girl" strives toward doll-like hair, features, figure, and clothes, while La Villana has all of this naturally, innately.

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[55] Marjua Estevez, "Latin Music Has a History of Homophobia - These Queer Artists Are the Solution," Refinery29, June 29, 2022, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2022/06/11022385/queer-latine-artists-urbano-homophobia.

The world "muñeca (doll)" has multiple layers for the trans community. In the "About" section for the music video on YouTube, the connotation of the word "muñeca" is explained to viewers.[56] It is a word that is used to refer to transwomen in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially transwomen who are sex workers. The influence of sex workers and strippers on reggaetón and trap has often been overlooked, but they play a large role in the tastemaking of the Culture's audiovisual aesthetics and preferences.[57] La Villana and Ana Macho give them their flowers through this word association, as well as by naming rappers and ex-strippers like Cardi B as their influences.

Ana Macho reflects on what it means to be a muñeca, "Para Ana, ser una muñeca es ser una perra ante todo. [es] Celebrar mi feminidad sin miedo. Soy una muñeca porque me celebro tal y como quiero ser. Ni más ni menos. Vulgar, provocativa y coqueta, 'Muñeca' es un himno para toda mujer y/o femme sexualmente liberade (For Ana, being a *muñeca* is being a bitch before anything else. It's celebrating my femininity without fear. I am a *muñeca* because I celebrate that and how I want to be. Nothing more nothing less. Vulgar, provocative, and flirty, 'Muñeca' is a hymn for all the sexually liberated women and femmes)."[58] Ana equates being a muñeca with being a bitch, a boss bitch, and the kind of bitch for whom perreo is named after. Being a bitch, for Ana as for many other women of color, is about owning our femininity loudly and revolting against ideas that femininity means passivity, kindness (at all costs), and demure sexual sensibilities. Macho continues, "Crecer en Puerto Rico y saberse maricón es (dentro de tantas cosas negativas) tener acceso a una felicidad y una magia que nadie más tiene (Growing up in Puerto Rico and knowing that

[56] Muñeca (Video Oficial) by Villano Antillano and Ana Macho
[57] Elizabeth Pérez, "The ontology of twerk: from 'sexy' Black movement style to Afro-Diasporic sacred dance," 19.
[58] Ibid.

you are queer is (although other negative things) having access to a happiness and magic that nobody else has).” Both Ana Macho and La Villana have spoken about a sense of magic to being trans and cuir/queer in Puerto Rico because not everyone has this knowledge or experience.[59] Thus, a “normal girl” is lacking in this magic. Ana and La Villana allude to this magic emerging from the resilience of queer femmes in the Caribbean, a place, in their words, with “a horrible history of atrocious abuse, colonialism, and enslavement. Puerto Rico is still to this day a colony of the United States with absolutely no sovereignty, and growing up in a place without freedom is confusing.”[60] I would qualify this idea with the notion that the magic itself has been resilient through us. It has predated colonial gender systems and been preserved through bodies that continue to resist binaries and dualities.

La Villana says she uses magical realism in her songwriting to bring a sense of urgency to issues of homophobia and transphobia, while still using her songs to envision a world where the power and magic that queer and trans femmes of color hold is respected and wielded lovingly. In this vein, the lyrics to the “Muñeca” are abundant with indulgent, gluttonous food-related euphemisms and sexual innuendos. The video mirrors this as it takes place inside a brothel painted bubble gum pink and littered with hot pink sex toys. Villana and her friends are dressed in pink and white candy-striped French Maid dresses that show off every inch of leg and even offer a rendition of the classic white ruffled perreo minifaldas (miniskirts) that took the spotlight of chapter three. La Villana, at different points, says she has the “bizcocho (cake),” “leche (milk),” and that her partner (us, the listener technically)

[59] For more on the use of magical realism and colonial trauma in their music, see https://pr-newsroom-wp.appspot.com/2022-12-07/radar-artist-villano-antillano-delivers-her-magical-brand-of-latin-rap-to-fans-around-the-world/. See Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[60] Ibid.

has the “icing” and the “leche” too. “Cake” in this context can be either the “pussy” or nalga (butt) and has meant different things in hip-hop and trap. Leche references La Delfi, who is credited by fans for resignifying “leche” with her transfemme anthem “Dame Leche (cocoro),” aforementioned in this chapter.

Figure 4.8. YouTube users saying “La delfy fue la primera que creó el tema de la leche, descansa en paz delfy (La Delfy was the first to create the theme of the milk, rest in peace Delfy).”

Though La Villana has made statements that she is the first trans artist in the movement, she does also recognize La Delfi and pay homage to her in this song. She also explicitly thanked La Delfi in her interview with MTV, “It cost the lives of people that came before me, like [Puerto Rican rapper] Kevin Fret and [Dominican dembow artist] La Delfi. It's all from different circumstances, but they were people who were breaking through.” [61] In the context of La Delfi, “leche” is supposed to signify semen, but La Villana spins this on its head by recognizing the milk that femmes and women can bring to the table during sexual

[61] Lucas Villa. “Villano Antillano Is Claiming Her Space in Latin Rap,” MTV, June 23, 2021. https://www.mtv.com/news/odu427/villano-antillano-interview-muneca.

activity. She says "when I make women come, there's more milk than the Borden cow," creating both non-gender- normative and queer sexual narratives.

La Villana and Ana Macho's words create new narratives within reggaetón as well as play on old narratives that trace back to reggae. Ana Macho's verse illuminates this fact:

¿Qué te he dicha? (What have I told you?)
Tú no puede ser así de bicha (You can't be that bicha)
Siempre que le llego toda' gritan "mamabicha" (Whenever I get there, they all shout "mamabicha")
Dicen "bicha, no pueden moverme ni una ficha" (They say "bicha, they can't move me a token")
Si en calle muero, guaynabicha (If I die in the street, guaynabicha)[62]
Ese es mi juego, digo lo que digo porque puedo (That's my game, I say what I say because I can)
Empujo lo' botone', yo me atrevo (I push the 'button', I dare)
Me encanta ser primero, mi ego e' grande igual que mi dinero
(I love being first, my ego is as big as my money)
Siempre llego tarde porque puedo (I'm always late because I can)
Yo soy la arma letal, yo soy la femme fatale (I am the lethal weapon, I am the femme fatale)
Yo soy la que está haciendo pauta, tota monumental
(I am the one who is making the pattern, monumental pussy)
Revísame el historial, no le he podido bajar (Check my history, I couldn't download it)
Yo me levanto to'o lo' día' y solo sepo ganar (I get up every day and I only know how to win)
De mí siempre se va a hablar, maricona colonial (They will always talk about me, colonial fa*got)
Desde El Caribe pa' la munda, vuelo internacional (From the Caribbean to the world, international flight)
Andamo' muy lyrical, tú me la quiere mamar (We are very lyrical, you want to suck me)
Mi palabreo es de la calle, léxico coloquial (My word is from the street, colloquial vocabulary)

This verse carries the weight of violence that Caribbean queer and trans people face and resist in their daily lives, as well as the ways in which they manage to create vibrant

[62] Guaynabicho is used to refer to high-class snobs from the area of Guaynabo, Puerto Rico and is a play on the word "bicho" meaning dick (in its pejorative sense). Mamabicha (used in the sentence prior) means "cocksucker."See also, Juan J. Arroyo, "7 Things to Know about Guaynaa, the Puerto Rican Rapper Whose Song 'Rebota' Is Everywhere," Remezcla, June 12, 2019, https://remezcla.com/lists/music/guaynaa-rebota-what-to-know/. See Frances Solá-Santiago's article for NPR Codeswitch, in which they interview Dávila Ellis, and discuss Bad Bunny's romanticization of lower-class struggle. Frances Solá-Santiago, Frances, "The Classist History behind Bad Bunny's 'Bichiyal.'" NPR, March 17, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2020/03/17/816479053/the-classist-history-behind-bad-bunnys-bichiyal%20%C2%A0.

resistance practices through language. Ana Macho plays on the word "bicha" derived from the Puerto Rican slang word "bicho," meaning "dick." Bicha, when changed to the feminine, refers to a bitchy woman, whereas mamabicho is a homophobic insult often directed at men, meaning "cocksucker." In Ana Macho's verse, they use the word "mamabicha," again changing it to the feminine, and reclaiming the idea of sucking dick in a sexually free social context. All this word play reflects Ana Macho's last line "mi palabreo es de la calle, léxico coloquial (my word is from the street, colloquial lexicon/vocabulary)." They are proud that their vocabulary emerges from the street and that they can shift colloquial meanings and contexts. This is Ana Macho's superpower, as well as that of many queer, trans, Black, and brown femme rappers.

Macho's verse reiterates the idea that magic and artistry emerge from the colonial legacies of violence against queer and trans people. The line "De mí siempre se va a hablar, maricona colonial (they'll always call me a colonial fa*got)" speaks to reggaetón's emergence from musical customs that wrongfully situate homophobia and toxic heterosexual masculinity as the antidote to racism and colonialism, as in the etymology for the word "dembow." Ana Macho specifies that they have not just been deemed a fa*got, but in the context of the Caribbean's colonial traumas, their queerness is equated with the means by which colonized peoples have sought to bring down the colonizer through an assertion of anti-gay male superiority. Ana Macho revises these narratives by saying it is actually the "guaynabicha," a slang term for an upper-class snob from the city-suburb of Guaynabo, who is out there killing Black and brown queer and trans folks. This verse reverses, and rectifies, the colonial legacy of homophobia and transphobia in the Caribbean. Ana Macho places blame on those who retain power from colonial systems rather than those who have chosen to

battle internalized racism and oppression with anti-gay hatred, i.e. Rastafari militancy.[63] The verse also reminds us that language is most powerful when speaking to the Culture, la calle (the street), and subverting colloquialisms to create lyrical magic.

La Villana and Ana Macho employ similar models of agency and femininity as current Black and Afro-Latin rappers like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, who do so through explicit sexuality and kinkiness.

Figure. 4.9. Screenshot. Megan Thee Stallion (center left) and Cardi B (center right) dancing *with* their entourage in the music video for "WAP (Wet Ass Pussies)" (2020) in stunning mesh and leather bodices and knee pads.

These artists do not shy away from brilliant thick descriptions of their "wet ass pussies" and if their background dancers are wearing stripper heels, you best believe their heels will be even higher. In Cardi's song, "Money," she even tells us she not only dances in those heels, but "rides dick" in them too. Feminism in hip-hop is often saying yes, screaming yes![64] They operate under an added layer of awareness that informs the sex they sell – what I recognize as kink. Kinky and queer perreo and twerking occurs in the safe(r) spaces that pioneering

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[63] See chapter 1, section on "Reggae & Reparation." Also see Stephen A. King and Barry T. Bays, *Reggae, Rastafari, and the Rhetoric of Social Control* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014). Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

[64] See Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2006). Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (Simon & Schuster, 2000).

reggaetóneras worked so hard to create. For instance, La Delfi was a pioneer in the vulgar sexual narratives that comprise many anthems by queer Black femme artists. Her song, "'Toy Moja' (I'm Wet)" could be seen as an antecedent to "WAP (Wet Ass Pussies)" when she repeatedly, playfully sings "I'm wet" and dances in a pool with other women, just like Cardi and Megan do in their video. In their thesis, Verónica Dávila Ellis examines the patriarchal subversions employed by Dominican reggaetónera, La Materialista, who has worked with La Delfi on the remix to "Dame Leche (cocoro)."[65] In one instance, Ellis finds that

> she (La Materialista) resorts to an infantilizing affect and presents herself as 'tu pequeñita (your little one)' conforming to the male pornographic fantasy of idealized petite, almost underage woman. variants in vocal texture effectuate a schizophrenic performance that confuses listeners, it sonifies both the violently hypersexual woman as well as the conforming subversive one of the dembow male fantasy. By shuffling through these registers Yamiery doesn't necessarily defy the expectations of the genre, but troubles the distinctions between both positionalities.[66]

Kink as a lens furthers Ellis's nuanced understanding of the figure of the pequeñita. and makes La Materialista's positionalities legible as a retelling of the archetype of small and passive women through a sexually playful and self-conscious self-infantilization. La Villana cites Nicki Minaj as one of her greatest inspirations and role models, and this can be seen in the mutual messaging of their work as each of them reclaims and reconstructs notions around Black and brown women's butts where bigness is valued, as in La Villana's song "Culo" and Minaj's song "Anaconda."[67] When asked about her inspiration, Villana lists:

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[65] Verónica Dávila Ellis, "Uttering Sonic Dominicanidad: Women and Queer Performers of Música Urbana" (dissertation, 2020).

[66] Dávila Ellis, 91.

[67] The butt is a big part of asserting "normal" girlhood and serves the dual purpose of racial authentication (and essentialization), as well as reclaiming the abjection of Black and brown women's butts. See Janell Hobson, "Remnants of Venus: Signifying Black Beauty and Sexuality," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 1-2 (2018): pp. 107. Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). Frances R. Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 151. Raquel Z. Rivera, "BUTTa

> Sade, Gustavo Cerati, Willie Colón, Rubén Blades, Silvio Rodríguez, Buika, Myrta Silva, La Lupe, Bebe, Tego Calderón, Héctor "El Father", Ivy Queen, Frankie Ruiz . . . the list goes on. Nicki Minaj has also been one of, if not THE biggest inspiration in my musical development. Maybe it's a Caribbean connection, but the way we bend colonially imposed languages and adapt them to us, we both speak in very magical ways. To me she's a writer, and a lot of people don't catch half of the metaphors or puns Nicki crafts into her verses. She elevates anything she touches and I admire and respect that a lot.[68]

This quote highlights the ways in which La Villana, Minaj, and many Caribbean and Black femmes find rap to be a weapon against colonialism through the Black feminist praxis of *bending* and being sucia (nasty) with language. Kink ultimately marks an expansion of the toolkit afforded to Black and Brown women for dealing with oppression.

What is so powerful about La Villana is not only that she bends semantics and meaning, but that her voice sounds suciedad. In chapter two, I conceptualize *ronca realness,* a means to describe the vocal quality of many reggeatóneras who defy colonial gender norms and use reggaetón to create and reclaim sonic suciedad.[69] These reggaetóneras have raspy, aggressive, deep, rich vocal timbres that sound the abject body's classed and racialized femininity. As was elaborated on in chapter two, Eurocentric ideals of vocal purity were transmitted as part of the colonial project in Latin America.[70] These ideals sought to divide the voice from the body through false ideologies around hygiene, race, and gender. Thus,

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Pecan Mamis," in *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Aria S. Halliday, "Twerk Sumn!: Theorizing Black Girl Epistemology in the Body," *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2020): pp. 874-891

[68] La Villana Interview with MTV

[69] Ronca realness is a form of enacting a "counter-ear" —a la sociologist Mimi Sheller— to colonial standards of sound and decency. See Sheller, Mimi. *Citizenship from below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. For more on my conception of sonic suciedad, see chapters 1 and 2. For suciedad as a framework, see Vargas, Deborah R. "Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 715–26.

[70] As well as through craniometry and other audile measurements of race by scientists. See Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 40. Eidsheim elucidates how the voice was believed to "sound" cranial dimensions.

what makes these reggaetóneras real is that their raspy, hoarse, breathy, I-ate-hot-cheetos-last-night acid reflux-embossed vocal folds sound the body rather than hiding it in the way colonial systems of sound and voice would insist. La Villana belongs to this group of *ronca, real* reggaetóneras. La Villana's magic is not only in her kinky, nasty, sucia wordplay and magical realism, but in her kinky, sucia vocal delivery that makes obvious her bodily dispositions.[71] La Villana's voice is often gravelly, low in pitch, and in the vocal fry register. The vocal fry is often described by speech pathologists, linguists, sociologists, and musicologists as a "creaky" vocal quality and means of production that is perceived as masculine, arrogant, shrill, and annoying when women produce it.[72] The connotations of the word "creaky" also imply an aged —often associated with increased masculinity— quality to the voice that negates a youthful Eurocentric ideal of femininity.[73] Vocal fry has also been heavily racialized, as well as utilized in dialects by colonized and subjugated peoples to resist the disciplining of the voice, though responsible and thorough examinations of these

[71] Ibid, 45. Eidsheim notes that "timbre is a barometer of one's inner state and health," according to Western ideals of the voice.
Also see Cusick, Suzanne G. "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex." In *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity and Music*, edited by Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, 25 – 48. Los Angeles: Carciofoli Verlagshaus, 1999. Cusick asserts that "voice performs the relation of inside and outside of the human body. It thereby produces cultural conceptions of the interior of the body, of its inner truth and subjectivity as inner life."
[72] See Anderson RC, Klofstad CA, Mayew WJ, Venkatachalam M, "Vocal Fry May Undermine the Success of Young Women in the Labor Market," *PLOS ONE* 9(5), 2014. Bryn Taylor, Karen Wheeler-Hegland, Kenneth J. Logan, "Impact of Vocal Fry and Speaker Gender on Listener Perceptions of Speaker Personal Attributes," *Journal of Voice*, 2022. Jessica A. Holmes, "The 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth-Pop World' and Her 'Baby Doll Lisp,'" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 2019): pp. 131-156.
[73] See L. J. Müller, "Hearing Sexism – Analyzing Discrimination in Sound," Popular Music Studies Today, 2017, pp. 225-234. I have also been subject to this kind of racist vocal disciplining in the context of my classical voice lessons. I had a teacher who told me that "Puerto Ricans are guilty of using vocal fry all the time" and calling that to my attention so that I would not repeat it in our lessons, as it is indicative of improper vocal health and hygiene. What can I say, the sucia in me is strong. Eidsheim has mentioned a similar event happening in her voice lessons, where "conversations that began on topics of 'healthy' vocal use and the 'authentic' timbre of a given singer's voice ended by discussing race and ethnicity." She continues. "What is today cloaked in concepts of health, authenticity, and self-expression was, only half a century ago, unhesitatingly described as race and racial qualities." *Race of Sound,* 45.

resistance practices are still needed.[74] La Villana disrupts colonial gender binaries by being an ultra-femme artist with a rich deep voice, like many reggaetóneras before her. Villana follows suit of femme, ronca pioneer reggaetónera, Glory, whose ability to position herself as a perreo dancer as well as purvey the dancefloor as an emcee is lauded in chapter three. La Villana's timbre redefines feminine sound by associating "masculine" vocalization to femme bodies. Her embodiment of ronca vocality brings sonic suciedad into contemporary queer and trans reggaetón spaces and mandates a renegotiation of when and whether being ronca signifies masculinity, femininity, both or neither.

Through being ronca, Villana and Ana Macho's reimagine the historical trope of the "muñeca" sonically as well as lyrically. The archetype of the "muñeca," aside from current connotations with sex work, existed in the time of María Grever and was used as a term of endearment and infantilization in boleros, as is the subject of chapter two. In "Te Quiero Dijiste," María Grever's ideal woman was not a "muñeca," but a "muñequita." Size matters. La Villana is not claiming to be a little doll, or little lady, but a full-ass woman-sized doll. La Villana has another song with Spanish rapper Ptazeta called "Mujerón." The song outlines an event where the rappers ogle and admire a woman who is big, thick, and confident. The suffix "-ón" implies big or large —which often signifies masculinity— but through La Villana's use of "muñeca" instead of "muñequita" and "mujerón" in place of "mujer," womanliness is redefined as being big, thick, full-bodied, wise and mature; all things that subvert colonial ideals of feminine embodiment. The mujerón and muñeca meanings that Villana provides create a femme-inist semantic praxis that takes into account size, race,

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[74] One of the only studies on this exact the racialization of vocal fry and its use among communities of color is a 1986 study. See Richard D. Saniga, Margaret F. Carlin, and Susan C. Farrell, "Perception of Fry Register in Black Dialect and Standard English Speakers," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 59, no. 3 (1984): pp. 885-886. See Eidsheim, *Race of Sound* for more about the disciplinary neglect of racialized vocalization.

gender, sexuality, class, and colonialism and is predicated on a possession of magic by those who continue to deconstruct colonial gender binaries and reclaim their own ancestral sacredness.

Figure 4.10. Still from music video for "Muñeca" by Villano Antillano (third from right) and Ana Macho (second from left). They are surrounded by friends and community of queer and trans femmes. All wearing matching candy cane stiped French maid dresses.

La Villana and Ana Macho's music video for "Muñeca" positions both emcees amidst a larger group of trans women and non-binary femmes, queers and queens. In effect, they are mutually emboldened by each other presences, and hierarchy between the background dancer and front-woman is lost. Thus, La Villana and Ana's music video subverts a common hip-hop trope where the lead singer/rapper is surrounded by women, his "video vixens."[75] The video hoes/emcee model was previously employed by reggaetónera Ivy Queen in her video for "Yo Quiero Bailar" (2006), in which she exuded a reluctance to dance with the women in

[75] See, Murali Balaji, "Vixen Resistin,'" *Journal of Black Studies* 41, no. 1 (February 2008): pp. 5-20. Amber Johnson, "Confessions of a Video Vixen: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (May 2014): pp. 182-200.

her video. This contributed to not only the perpetuation of the rapper's hegemony over other women, as asserted by scholar Jillian Báez, but is also a reproduction of the genre's blanqueamiento (whitening).[76] These are the mechanisms by which Ivy —and many others who take on the title and token position of the queen in hip-hop and reggaetón— became La Reina (the Queen). Ultimately, Ivy's feminism separates her from other women, while La Villana positions herself amongst the other "dolls," other women who are also not "normal girls." While both artists undertake the "I'm not like other girls" trope, Ivy does it in a way that denies sexual desire and positions her as the masculine ringleader, while La Villana uses her privileged position as the emcee to act as the ultra-femme voice of the dolls.

In the video for "muñeca," La Villana and Ana Macho create a fierce collective of queer and trans Black and brown women and femmes. In an interview with MTV, La Villana explains her motivation for the video and what is was like to work with Ana Macho and her friends,

> That was a blessing because me and Ana Macho have mutual respect and admiration for each other. Ana Macho is a complete artist. With "Muñeca," we take it even further, and we play with the term. Only the girls could do it. It just had to be us. In the video, it's all girls who are my friends. It's all trans people. For me, it was very important that everything surrounding this song is trans and of the trans experience. It's very empowering.[77]

I am interested in Villana's point that Ana Macho is a "complete artist." Much like my ideas around trendy queerness in the mainstream and the artistic differences between Bad Bunny, Harry Styles, and Lil Nas X, I read between the lines to understand Villana's point as a nod to the fact that Ana Macho —being queer, nonbinary, and Black Caribbean— lives the life

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[76] Jillian Báez has written on Ivy Queen's shifting "tomboy" aesthetic throughout her career, actually making an opposite point from Aparicio, in that her more recent high femme presentation is the Anglicized version. See "En mi imperio: Competing Discourses of Agency in Ivy Queen's Reggaetón." *Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 18, no. 1 (2006). Frances R. Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).
[b]a

they write and rap about. In other words, they are *real.* This reading is supported by Villana's statement on the importance of redefining queer narratives *through* queer- and trans-identifying people's lived experiences. She asserts "only the girls could do it. It just had to be us."[78] Taking this statement in conjunction with Villana's other interviews, it can be inferred that "it has to be the girls" not only because they are the only ones that can responsibly enact representations of their own lived experiences, but because they possess the necessary Black trans girl magic to be able to do so meaningfully for their own communities.

Yo Perreo Sola

Bad Bunny's "Yo Perreo Sola" meaning "I dance/twerk/grind alone" came about at a time when most of us were, in fact, dancing alone – in our bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, any place we could find in the house – during quarantine. The song is about a woman who dances alone, except in a nightclub, "la disco prende cuando ella llegue" (the club/party starts when she walks in). Bad Bunny, through the embodiment of this female character, tells men to "tranqui, ella perrea sola" (relax, she dances alone). The lyrics to this song are one of the only attempts Bad Bunny has made to create a queer musical narrative, referring primarily to the line "Los nene' y las nena' quieren con ella (the boys and the girls want to be with her). The song was written with the help of reggeatón artist and producer, Tainy, and co-writer and singer Nesi. While the message of "Yo Perreo Sola" is always relevant to gendered dancefloor dynamics, it is also something we have heard before.[79] Ivy Queen's "Yo Quiero

[78] Ibid.

[79] Here I am referring to the social script of the dancefloor that allows men to feel entitled to women's moving bodies. Often, men will come up behind women without asking to dance. See, Shelly Ronen, "Grinding on the Dance Floor," *Gender & Society* 24, no. 3 (2010): pp. 355-377. Miguel Muñoz-Laboy, Hannah Weinstein, and Richard Parker, "The Hip-Hop Club Scene: Gender, Grinding and Sex," *Culture, Health &Amp; Sexuality* 9, no. 6 (2007): pp. 615-628.

Bailar," for instance, is all about wanting to dance but not necessarily wanting to have sex. While sex is not outwardly mentioned in "yo perreo sola," it is alluded to in the line "de los hombres lo tienes de hobby (she has men like a hobby)," signifying a normalization of casual sex and the subject's satisfaction without a long-term romantic partner. In some ways, Bad Bunny's lyrics provide a spin on Ivy Queen's message, as he crafts a woman who has sex when she wants to and dances when she wants to, yet both songs have one ultimate message: dance does not equal sex or sexual desire, and certainly not from or toward just any man.

While "Yo Perreo Sola" is catchy and feminist (at least on the surface), the element that has both garnered more attention and, in my opinion, most compromises Bad Bunny's feminist position, is the video. In the video for "Yo Perreo Sola," Bad Bunny adopts three female personas, replete with boobs, hair extensions, acrylic nails, and body-contour dresses and skirts.

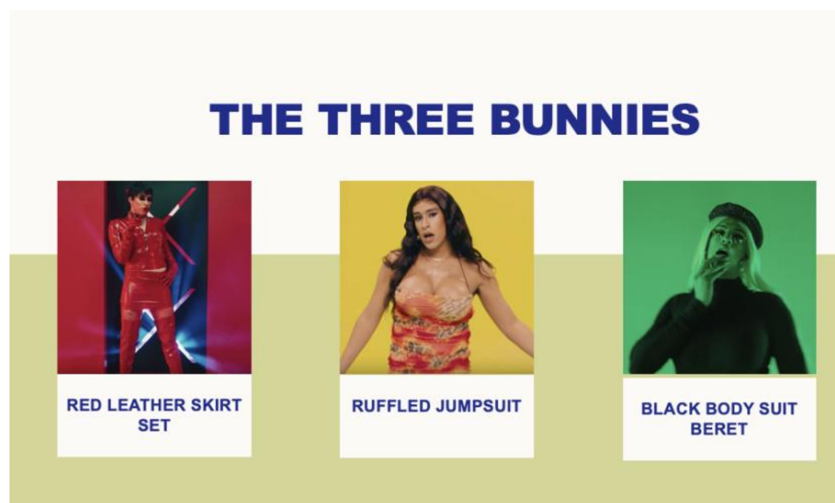

Figure 4.11. The three Bad Bunny personas. Compilation mine. Left to right, red leather bunny, ruffled jumpsuit bunny, and all-black plus beret bunny.

He dances alone for most of the video and takes turn becoming one of three characters that he and his stylists —Storm Pablo, Chloe and Chenelle Delgadillo— have

created. Lauded and categorized as a "drag" performance by several mainstream news outlets and music industry titans, Bad Bunny utilized the voice of his co-writer and fellow artist Nesi as his lip-synching track during the choruses and bridge of the song.[80] Yet, through his own embodiment of femme aesthetics and personas, he draws attention away from the disembodied voice of Nesi. Not only is she not seen in the video, but she was not featured as an artist on the track.[81] This mimics older models for reggaetón videos, where the woman who sings the chorus is nameless and often replaced by a (typically) whiter-looking woman in the music video.[82] In this case, Bad Bunny himself replaced Nesi. In an article on the video by NPR's Isabella Gomez Sarmiento, this dynamic of erasure is alluded to in the title "Bad Bunny's Shows Us His Version of Old-School," and yet, there were ways in which an homage could have been done that still gave Nesi credit. In so doing, this would have also given credit to the old-school artists that did in fact champion women, like Don Omar in his collaborations with Glory. Sarmiento critiques Nesi's erasure in a parenthetical. In a review of the album by Pitchfork, the critique was also sandwiched between immense praise, as is the format in which many of the critiques of Bad Bunny occur:

> This is no aberration; as Bad Bunny's budgets have swollen and his creative control solidified, he's used the medium to flip the script on tropes that have made urbano feel stale, offering visibility to the underrepresented, or placing

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[80] Bad Bunny Drag Transformation, *Rolling Stone.* Watch Bad Bunny Get an Epic Drag Makeover, *E! Online.* Bad Bunny Dresses in Drag, Twerks with Himself, *Entertainment Weekly.* Bad Bunny Gets Drag Makeover for Fierce "Yo Perreo Sola" Music Video, *People Magazine.* Bad Bunny Dresses in Drag for Empowering "Yo Perreo Sola" Music Video, *Billboard Magazine.* Bad Bunny in Drag for New Music Video, Empowering Women and Gender Fluidity, *Forbes.*

[81] Nesi's erasure has only criticized in parenthetical by NPR: "However, "Yo Perreo Sola" lacks complete follow-through on its message of empowerment — Genesis Rios, a.k.a. Nesi, who sings the opening hook, is credited only as a writer and not a performer on the song."
Isabella Gomez Sarmiento, "Bad Bunny Shows Us His Version Of Old-School," NPR, March 2, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/03/02/811180499/bad-bunny-review-yhlqmdlg-yo-hago-lo-que-me-da-la-gana-la-dificil.

[82] See chapter 3. My work is one of the first scholarly interventions to make this pattern clear. Analysis in chapter 3 based on erasure of Jenny la Sexy Voz by replacing her with a blonde video vixen in music video for "Rakata" (2005) by Wisin y Yandel.

> himself firmly in opposition to misogyny and homophobia. Genesis "Nesi" Rios' missing performance credit on "Yo Perreo Sola"—a song defined by her hook—proves he still has some work to do. But even if he makes some of the same mistakes as his reggaetón forebears, he's still doing more than most to bring progressive politics into the Latin mainstream.[83]

Because Nesi has in fact mentioned that it was part of the initial deal to only provide her voice to the song, Laura Álvarez-Trigo argues "the fact that the song is written by a man does not impoverish the representation of the female narrative," and asserts that Bad Bunny "allows for a different subject to speak: the feminist subject. Furthermore, it appears to do so from a place of empathy and understanding."[84] However, by displacing Nesi, in adherence to systemic erasure of women who sing hooks and choruses —most often Black women— in the genre, Bad Bunny reinforces the cultural reluctance to allow women to either desire or reject sex *for themselves*. In the final statement of the video, "Si no quiere bailar contigo, respeta, ella perrea sola (If she does not want to dance with you, respect her, she dances alone)," the only thing that differentiates his message from Ivy Queen's in "Yo Quiero Bailar," is fifteen years and now a man is the one saying it. The persistent need for Bad Bunny to disseminate this Public Service Announcement means that he is profiting off of an ever-present misogynistic industry by playing the "good guy." If Ivy's message had been heard and understood the first time, we would not need Bad Bunny's words now. Ivy is featured in the remix of "Yo Perreo Sola," affording the artist the chance to reiterate a message that was hers originally, and yet I am of the opinion that she shouldn't have to repeat herself or be granted access to this space by a man. If we are only respected when a man tells another man to respect us, we are not truly respected, we are property.

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[83] Matthew Ismael Ruiz, "Bad Bunny: YHLQMDLG," Pitchfork, March 5, 2020, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/bad-bunny-yhlqmdlg/.
[84] Álvarez-Trigo, 6.

Bad Bunny crafts a female persona that mirrors the archetype of the "soltera (single woman)," the elusive minx who is hard to get and strong-willed, often fetishized and commodified as some kind of prize or trophy once she succumbs to a man's desires.[85] In the context of male-dominated musico-poetic traditions, Bad Bunny does not achieve feminism by crafting a woman who wants to dance alone, *or* erasing Nesi from the narrative, but rather joins a long list of male artists who have accounted for a lack of women's agency in the narrative by making them up themselves.[86] While I wholeheartedly agree with Álvarez-Trigo that reggaetón is held to a higher standard of gender issues because of "a reluctance to accept that this is in fact what the woman wants, reflecting a moral judgment commonly passed against sex in general," the answer is not to then remove women's perspectives and substitute that of Bad Bunny's, as he does in "Yo Perreo Sola," but to show women desiring sex despite these infantilizing rhetorics, perhaps employing a heightened level of kinkiness and collectivity.

Linking this analysis to chapter three of this dissertation, Bad Bunny sings "y hoy se puso minifalda (and today she put on her miniskirt)" in "Yo Perreo Sola." Donning the miniskirt at the club is part of constructing the image of an empowered woman —a move I can absolutely get behind— as chapter three celebrates Glory's ability to align herself with Black femininity by wearing this exact garment in her role as an emcee. However, due to Bad Bunny's positionality and politics, he still problematizes the ways in which the miniskirt can and should take on new forms. In an interview with Billboard, Storm Pablo recalls that "He (Bad Bunny) didn't want to look like a man dressing as a woman, he was just thinking

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[85] Seen in recent reggaetón songs like "Soltera" by Lunay, as well as in other Latin American genres, like boleros by Agustin Lara. Again, my work is the first to explicitly outline this archetype.
[86] Mark H. Pedelty calls this "the cult of the ideal woman." See chapter 2. Also, Mark H. Pedelty, *Musical Ritual in Mexico City: From the Aztec to NAFTA,* 167.

outside the box to support the community."[87] One can see this in the outfit where Bad Bunny wears a red leather body-con miniskirt and thigh-high leather boots, a more militant, dominatrix take on the classic miniskirt from the 2000s. Leather is perhaps a direct homage to the male gay Leather subculture, kinky communities, and even the '80s house ballroom scene.[88] However, this portion of the analysis aims to show why Bad Bunny's drag moment is more appropriative than supportive.

In Ivy's video for "Yo Quiero Bailar," she wanted to dance but did not want to have sex, a point that garnered her fame in a society that agreed with such a stance and "imposed decency" through a white-mestize Catholic lens.[89] For Bad Bunny, his decision to wear a skirt is packed with the baggage of reggaetón's sartorial traditions and customs. In my analysis of perreo and the politics of the minifalda (miniskirt) in chapter three, I work to negate ideas that "the heteronormative dynamics of the dance and the dressing codes associated with the genre construct it as an embodiment of systemic violence toward women."[90] I examine how the *absence* of the minifalda could also mean systemic violence toward women and femmes. Several artists, Ivy Queen *not* included, have gone on to have empowering careers while donning the mini-skirt despite, or even due to, its associations with sexual availability. Even more importantly, the mini-skirt has become an Afro-diasporic garment in its dancehall and nightclub significations, and the erasure of these dress codes not only implies violence against women via sexism but via Eurocentric ideas of femininity and

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[87] Yo Perreo Sola: Everything You Need to Know by Suzette Fernandez, *Billboard Magazine*.
[88] See Ariane Cruz, *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography* (New York: New York University Press, 2016). Robert B. Ridinger, "Things Visible and Invisible: Leather Archives," *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 1 (2002): pp. 1-9.
[89] See Findlay Suárez. Rivera-Rideau.
[90] Verónica Dávila Ellis, "Doing Reggaetón However He Wants: Bad Bunny's YHLQMDLG (Review)," NACLA, March 23, 2020. https://nacla.org/news/2020/03/23/bad-bunny-YHLQMDLG-review#:~:text=Ranking%20at%20number%20two%20in,provocatively%20transgressive%20performer%20who%20is.

decency, double colonization at its finest.[91] Similarly to Ivy, Bad Bunny disassociates miniskirts with dominant symbols of Black female sexuality in an effort to be subversive or "feminist." In turn, this polices and hypersexualizes Black women and those who adhere to Black feminist and sexual praxis. The dissociation of sartorial choice from sexual appeal and desire is antithetical to many of the visual goals of the examples given by La Villana, Ana Macho, La Delfi, Cardi, and Megan.

The erasure of women's sexuality in order to promote feminism is a unique discourse in reggaetón and a commonly negotiated tactic across reggaetóneres who do feminist work within the genre; feminism is often either saying no or being alone. However, as Sabia McCoy-Torres writes about dancehall – reggaetón's grandmother, so to speak – there is so much potential for "introspective eroticism," or the "the expression of embodied and self-focused pleasure, or gratification that arises from celebrating, and claiming ownership of one's physical being."[92] This is an idea employed in the last thirty seconds of the video, where women (who are not Bad Bunny) are shown twerking alone and enjoying their bodies in their solitude. There is certainly a lot to be said about the rewards of twerking for one's self, yet these ideals and modes of self-adoration must come from Black women themselves, or they verge on respectability and have tendency to exhibit the white, middle-class, Puerto Rican feminism that has caused La Villana to remind us that "only the girls could do it. It just had to be us."

Blackqueerface: Intersections of Drag and Sonic Blackface

[91] Double colonization refers to the status of women living under both colonial rule and patriarchy. See Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*(Oxford: Dangaroo Press, 1986). Also see Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gloria Anzaldúa.

[92] Sabia McCoy-Torres, "'Love Dem Bad': Embodied Experience, Self-Adoration, and Eroticism in Dancehall," *Transforming Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2017): pp. 185-200.

The performance in "Yo Perreo Sola" has been described as "drag." I take issue with the discrepancies of realness, i.e. lived experience, between Bad Bunny and contemporary drag performers. The issue of defining drag is highly nuanced and personalized, lacking a critical consensus among gender and sexuality scholars, drag performers themselves, and community members. While it may be true that not all drag performers need to be or have been queer, the cultural significance of drag is historically, contemporaneously, and deeply queer. This chapter defines drag according to Leila Rupp, Verta Taylor, and Eve Ilana Shapiro's simple, straightforward, albeit exclusive, definition of drag queens and drag kings, as well as Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes's expansive, multifaceted theorization of *transloca drag of poverty*. Rupp et al. define drag in terms of its performer's positionalities:

> Drag queens are gay men who perform in women's clothing, although they are not necessarily female impersonators, as the descriptions of the 801 Girls will make clear. Drag kinging includes female-bodied individuals performing masculinity, transgender identified performers performing masculinity or femininity, and female identified individuals performing femininity, the latter known as 'bio queens.'[93]

La Fountain-Stokes —inspired by trans activist Sylvia Rivera's "transvestism of poverty"— presents a conceptualization of "transloca drag of poverty:"

> Drag, in this context, means a challenge, a difficulty, or something undesired, similar to and profoundly linked to the transloca drag of race that I will discuss in chapter 5. But "drag" is also the cultural practice of cross-dressing that often implies humor and camp sensibility, and that in fact might entail aspiring to the recognition and glamour of the pageant beauty queen even when one is abjectly poor, as we will note particularly in our discussion of Lopez, Woodlawn, and Hillz.[94]

I seek to also highlight Rivera's feelings toward drag as one of the main means by which I find Bad Bunny's drag performance to lack realness. Rivera is known to have been wary of

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[93] Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, "Drag Queens and Drag Kings," *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2007, 276.
[94] La Fountain-Stokes, 74.

drag, "opposing its episodic and performative/camp nature in favor of lived experience."[95] La Fountain-Stokes's conceptualization of her sentiments adds multiple layers by which to investigate positionality. Under the framework of transloca drag of poverty, class becomes integral to the conversation of impersonation and appropriation. Just as Yarimar Bonilla has spoken about Bad Bunny's inclination to forge fantasies about lower-class people, transloca drag of poverty incorporates the ways in which Bad Bunny's non-Black alignment *and* middle-class privileges intersect, as well as his able-bodied, cishet personhood. These definitions foreground positionality of the performer, much like La Villana has stated is necessary. Rupp et al.'s methodology echoes this, as they explain that individual biography and personal gender and sexual identity is the most effect mode by which we can understand drag's liberatory nature:

> In order to understand the differences and similarities between gay male drag queens and female-bodied and transgender drag kings and bio queens, we consider how the personal gender and sexual identities of drag performers affect and are affected by their gender performances in drag. This question can only be addressed by examining the biographies and the sexual and gender identifications and embodiments of individual drag performers…[96]

All in all, my position on drag is that the embodiment of the performer matters. Gender and sexuality matter. Class and race matter. Lived experience is everything. Drag as a phenomenon occurs when a person in the queer and trans community utilizes femme world-building to explore and affirm the fluidity of gender and sexuality. And it becomes even more complex for queer people of color, who negotiate their racial authenticity and queerness simultaneously. The lived experience of having to consistently negotiate ones racialized femininity and queerness is the realness that Bad Bunny lacks. Thus, I do not fully see the

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Rupp et al., 278.

video for "Yo Perreo Sola" as drag. However, due to the widespread reception and understanding of it as such, it is important to contextualize and debunk it within a drag framework.

The experience of drag is one that is both a display of the queen's chops *and* an homage to the female voice. While the drag performer is lip synching to a woman who is not present physically, there is deep respect for the singer surrounding the drag queen's performance.[97] Although Whitney Houston or Beyoncé may still be disembodied in a drag context —or reembodied by the drag queen perhaps— they are not erased, they are worshiped in their physical absence and vocal presence. By denying Nesi physical space in the video, leaving her voice nameless in the song credits, and then proceeding to lip sync her verses, the original intent of drag is unmet and decontextualized in Bad Bunny's performance. In drag's definition wars, there is often the question: is it drag, or is it female impersonation?[98] Many drag queens go to great lengths to allow the singer's voice to count for something. Bad Bunny's erasure of Nesi and essentially, *becoming* of her, signals female impersonation because she is subsumed under his wholeness. In effect, the video erases the woman and prioritizes a straight man's femininity over a woman's sexuality in order to be "feminist." As La Villana and Ana Macho show, the emcee can give agency to the backup dancers and women surrounding her by joining forces with them, by she herself becoming a video vixen and undoing the rapper/dancer dichotomy. Bad Bunny joins the ranks of the likes

[97] See Jacob Mallinson Bird, "Haptic Aurality: On Touching the Voice in Drag Lip-Sync Performance," *Sound Studies* 6, no. 1 (May 2019): pp. 45-64. Stephen Farrier, "That Lip-Synching Feeling: Drag Performance as Digging the Past," *Queer Dramaturgies*, 2016, pp. 192-209. Langley, Carol. "Borrowed Voice: The Art of Lip-Synching in Sydney Drag." Australasian Drama Studies, no. 48 (2006): 5–17.
[98] Ibid, 286.

of Ivy Queen, whose displacement of backup dancers ultimately pits reggaetón and hip-hop praxis against one another.

Bad Bunny's personal identities disqualify him as a drag performer under the frameworks for drag with which I have resonated and chosen. Although La Fountain-Stokes would probably disagree with my analysis, as he has described Bad Bunny as "a genderqueer trap artist," and has also written leniently (and wonderfully) about cisgender usage of drag, his conception of transloca drag of poverty helps me interpret what Bad Bunny's performance is doing on a structural level.[99] As a non-Black man experiencing fame in a historically Black genre from the caseríos (poor neighborhoods in Puerto Rico), Bad Bunny is not only profiting off of his ability to deliver Black music without Black bodies to an industry and culture that has erased Black traces but amplified Black sounds, he is simultaneously engaging in queer acts without requisite lived experience or identification toward queerness. This is ultimately a result of the violence done toward reggaetón's history, separating Blackness and queerness in the Culture, erasing and killing Black queer innovators. Thus, I designate Bad Bunny's performance in "Yo Perreo Sola" to be an act of Blackqueerface, occurring at the intersections of Black music without Black bodies *and* drag without queerness.[100]

Within reggaetón —whose queer house ballroom culture and hip-hop influence has been heretofore inexplicitly mentioned— most occurrences of sonic and visual Blackface are also instances of Blackqueerface. La Villana has said in an interview that most of reggaetón's aesthetics have come from queer and trans communities. She explains: "Also, because most,

[99] La Fountain-Stokes, 60.
[100] My term and one of the major interventions and contributions of this dissertation.

if not *ALL*, current cishet artists, both male and female, are presently benefiting and profiting off of queer culture, it makes perfect sense for the people who invented said culture and trends to be at the forefront of their own revolution."[101] Bad Bunny's performance is situated amidst a long history of exploitation and Blackface practices in popular media, as well as in contemporary debates around racism and Blackface in contemporary drag.[102] Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui have employed intersectional frameworks to understand how "raceplay" in drag casts a burden on drag performers of color, recognizable through reactions and ratings by judges on RuPaul's Drag Race.[103] They find that "it was not just any stereotypes that offered queer legitimacy, but the stereotypes that effectively troubled gender ideologies, while reifying racial ideologies. This was especially true for the black/brown characters on the show inhabiting bodies historically deemed inherently non-fungible or inassimilable to whiteness." This is exactly the mechanism by which Bad Bunny receives racial authenticity through reggaetón. Reggaetón's sonic Blackness and its associations with homophobia and sexism create cognitive dissonance when paired with Bad Bunny's visual queer advocacy and femme aesthetics, forging the image of him as a radical or visionary without necessitating that any of his work actually *sound* queerness. The cognitive dissonance is founded by historical erasure of queer and trans Black femmes, only healed when we start to credit the queer and trans Black artists like La Delfi, Ana Macho, and La Villana with the queer spaces they've *been* forging in reggaetón.

Implications

[101] RADAR Artist Villano Antillano Delivers Her Magical Brand of Latin Rap to Fans Around the World
[102] See Chapter 1, section on "Queer ballroom." Also, Matthew D. Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): pp. 781-823.
[103] Sabrina Strings & Long T. Bui (2014) "She Is Not Acting, She Is", *Feminist Media Studies*, 14:5, 825.

My close reading of “Muñeca” has shown why queer lyrical, visual, and sonic narratives are still so essential to queer and trans liberation, and reflective of a Black feminist praxis. La Villana and Ana Macho rectify Bad Bunny’s individualistic approach to drag, queer allyship, and women’s liberation. There are many times when Bad Bunny had the opportunity to include queer and trans women in his video for “Yo Perreo Sola,” to dance with and amplify their voices, but instead chose to take up 90% of the video. When Bad Bunny does include other people, they *appear* to be cis-women and they are not participating in drag themselves. Meanwhile, La Villana implements a queer-of-color-centered practice of community-building, and additionally includes scenes of herself engaging in sex work with femme clients. La Villana’s video thus provides an outlet for real queer sexual relations to be seen and heard, while Bad Bunny prefers to grind with and watch himself. Further, La Villana features her community of queer and trans Caribbeans in her videos, as well as collaborates musically with other queer and trans artists like Ana Macho, Chesca, and Young Miko. This is the difference: when queer and trans femmes of color do it, *la hacen completa* (they do it fully).[104]

Bad Bunny’s performance perpetuates the idea that trans and queer women must be the ones to say no to men in order to empower cis- and straight women. Trans and queer women not only have a heightened responsibility toward women, but the added pressure of proving their authenticity to both queers and non-queers alike. Especially for bisexual and pansexual women, their relationships with men are often weaponized against them to invalidate their sexuality, while the difficulties of being queer are nonetheless present even when engaging in heterosexual acts. Bad Bunny adopts a femme persona in the video in

[104] A call back to La Villana’s compliment toward Ana Macho, “they are a complete artist.”

order to convey the message that sometimes women want to dance alone, while La Villana asserts her better-than-normal girlhood by servicing men and women alongside many other queer and trans people. In doing so, La Villana shows herself and the other trans women as desired, desirable, desiring, and chosen, while Bad Bunny reinforces the narrative that to be saved from male entitlement, we have to be alone.

Collapsing Ourselves

In the summer of 2022, it became impossible for me to get on Instagram without seeing some kind of ode to Bad Bunny. Big-name Latinx culture accounts like @rapeton, as well as smaller, grassroots accounts like @nuevayorkinos posted homages to him this summer. One such post by nuevayorkinos particularly stood out to me.

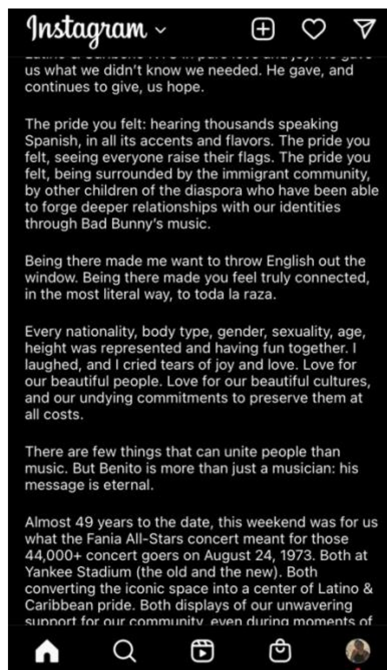

Figure 4.12. Post by @nuevayorkinos about Bad Bunny's concert at Yankees Stadium in the Bronx, New York City. Important Text: "The pride you felt: hearing thousands speaking Spanish, in all its accents and flavors. The pride you felt, seeing everyone raise their flags. The pride you felt, being surrounded by the immigrant community, by other children of the diaspora who have been able to forge deeper relationship with our

identities through Bad Bunny's music… There are few things that can unite people than music. But Benito is more than just a musician: his message is eternal.[105]

What often happens with an icon, or "voice" of a genre, is that an individual is being given credit for the labors of the collective when they do not create content that exhibits or uplifts the collective. This individual does not even have to personally represent all that makes the collective what it is, but they must declare openness to what their audience might be. Posts like this one show me that we are witnessing the collapse of the collective in Bad Bunny's oeuvre and proceeding to collapse our collective power to make him who he is. For example, the post celebrates the body, gender, sexuality, and age diversity at the concert, regardless of whether Bad Bunny himself embodies any of these characteristics. The other piece to this is that Latinx iconicity gains power from the all-consuming whiteness and Anglo hegemony of the immigrant experience in the United States. The post's emphasis on Spanish as liberatory might be problematic when examined in a strictly Latin American context, recognizing that Spanish is a colonial language imposed on Native and West African enslaved peoples, when in the context of English domination in the United States, Spanish is subversive, empowering, and unifying. The post ends with a quintessential example of the "Great Man" narrative, and the often-accompanying phenomena where music is described as the universal —in this case "eternal"— language, and this Great Bunny is the only one who can speak it.

While Bad Bunny is praised as the savior and hero, La Villana, Ana Macho and La Delfi, along with so many other queer Caribbean artists, provide *complete* queer artistic personas through their messaging, fashion, music videos, self-identification and lived experience. Although Bad Bunny's widespread fame and recognition can ultimately convince us that he is the representation and embodiment of queer and Black peoples' hard work to

[105] https://www.instagram.com/nuevayorkinos/?hl=en

create more inclusive spaces, we must remind ourselves that we are the ones who still carry the pre-colonial magic. Again, I return to the significance of Deborah Vargas' theory of *suciedad* for queers of color. The crucial element to reclaiming one's worth through *suciedad* is the foundation of abjection, of being *sucia* first and foremost; the very foundation that Bad Bunny's non-Black cis-heterosexuality lacks. Viewed in this way, we see abjection as an asset to femme world-building, something to treasure and tend to, something that makes us better than "chicas normales (normal girls)," a lá Villana. *Suciedad* maintains that we thank the dirty, abject, queer brown body for the dialogue it gives us with pre-colonial times; the body is our portal.

This chapter has put into practice the ideology behind Villano Antillano's own stage name. As La Villana explains, we must always be critical of the heroes. She explains, "Villano Antillano is who I am… Going back to shows like *The Powerpuff Girls* and many Disney movies, the villains have a lot of queer characteristics. I'm playing with that mindset. They're the bad guys, so to speak, but they always end up being better than the heroes in my opinion."[106] So, I need to leave y'all with some questions: why are we attributing our beauty, resilience, uniqueness, and complexity to this one man? We are the ones who come out every day looking like walking works of art, we are the ones who fight and labor, we are the ones who keep languages alive, we are the ones who make movements and change cultures. If you're reading this, you are the hero.

. . .

When I was twelve, I started kissing friends that were girls. Word got out. And one of my friends— whom I wasn't kissing— called me disgusting. This was a friend with whom I grew

[106] https://www.mtv.com/news/odu427/villano-antillano-interview-muneca

up dancing to Ivy Queen, screaming Rihanna's 'Unfaithful,' and binge watching the Scary Movie's. We fell out because of my bisexuality. But when I was moving from Miami to Georgia at age fourteen due to eviction, she came over to help me pack up, even though she hadn't been over to my house more than a handful of times in the past couple of years. After we were done packing, my mom and I took her back home, and I had to say goodbye to my friend's mom, Faye. Although Faye had never spoken to me about what happened between me and her daughter, and I didn't realize she even knew, she squeezed me really tight, took off one of her silver studded rings, handed it to me, and said "the heart wants what it wants." She was the first person to instill this notion in me. Faye was my Jamaican second mom from ages five to fourteen. This chapter is for her. Not because she needs it, but because we need her.

Chapter 5
Reggaetón Realities: 20+ Years of Living Theory

This chapter departs from a study of icons. Here I study myself. I am concerned with myself and the ways I have navigated concrete dancefloors throughout my life. I am curious about myself and how the presence and/or absence of reggaetón tells me where, and who, I am.

<u>Miami Beach: My First Island</u>

Reggaetón has been there since the beginning. As far back as I can remember, reggaetón and all its aspects have shaped my life. This is my homage to that fact. How lucky am I that I get to make sense of my life and the lives that lived before me through music. This feeling is the meaning of cultural wealth.

Growing up in Miami, we were never taught that we were on Seminole land or about the Seminole wars and resistance. I didn't know any Seminole people, but I also didn't know any people who were from Miami itself. We were all immigrants ourselves or children of

immigrants. As Jillian Hernandez teaches us in *Aesthetics of Excess,* “Seminole” comes from the Spanish “Cimarrones,” meaning runaways, and referred to Natives and Blacks fleeing enslavement. To this day, Miami is a place of runaways, of immigrants, forced laborers, refugees, or even Nuyorican moms leaving home for the first time, like my own. Growing up in Miami means growing up in a place where migration is the norm, where transience and displacement shape everyone’s lineage. However, because of this shared identity, the nuances of our experiences as migrants and descendants of migrants are often obscured under the label of “Hispanic.” Hispanidad and Latinidad erases the Indigeneity and Blackness in the consciousness of Miami. Hernandez speaks to her experience with this, “I learned firsthand how an ethnically and racially diverse social space can nevertheless replicate the anti-Blackness that is also found in more homogenous cities in the U.S. — let us recall that Trayvon Martin was murdered by a Latinx man in South Florida in 2012.”[1]

From the 1870’s to the 1920’s, developers cut up the island of Miami Beach, my first island, in order to create bridges to the Florida peninsula.[2] These same developers built coconut and avocado plantations and elite beach resorts. Development has continued to this day and has contributed to Miami Beach’s precarious existence. It is now seen as a land drowning. In the last 20 years or so, Miami’s population growth has slowed. This stagnation reflects the rising sea levels, ongoing gentrification, and anti-immigrant policy, as well as the large population of immigrants well-acquainted with the survival strategy of picking

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[1] Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess,* 46.

[2] See Anthony P. Maingot, *Miami: A Cultural History* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, an imprint of Interlink Publishing Group, Inc., 2015). Martin Zebracki, “Urban Preservation and the Queerying Spaces of (Un)Remembering: Memorial Landscapes of the Miami Beach Art Deco Historic District,” *Urban Studies* 55, no. 10 (2017): 2261–85. Carolyn Klepser, *Lost Miami Beach* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014). Abraham D. Lavender, *Miami Beach in 1920: The Making of a Winter Resort* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2002).

everything up and leaving. In 2011, the recession caused many of us to move around the United States, in my case to Atlanta.

I grew up in Miami at the height of the chonga revolution, a subculture rooted in embodied suciedad and led by working-class Latina teenaged girls in South Florida. Jillian Hernandez writes about chonga aesthetics as a working-class brown girl praxis that is highly political and representative of Black and Latin relational embodiment. In her work, she discusses how Miami's race riots were often the domain of Black and Latino men, a rupture between them, and reminds us of Miami's deep historical anti-Blackness even as, and because, it is a Latino metropolis. One of her most critical insights is that among Black women and Latina's, the racial discord and resentment has been understudied and undervalued, mostly because the study of fashion and aesthetics are gendered and racialized, seen as devoid of meaning or depth. Hernandez says, "This is not because there has been harmony [between Black women and Latina's], but rather because these struggles occur in gendered contexts that garner less attention yet are no less insidious, as we scar each other through intimate readings of our body aesthetics."[3] These modes of inquiry create friction with academia's obsession with "probing beneath the surface," as Madison Moore tells us.[4] People like myself, Hernandez, and Moore see the depth of history, embodiment, and relationality in that very corporeal surface.

The chonga aesthetic always felt out of reach for me. I was "la rubia" (the blonde) of the family because my dad is Italian-Argentinian, and I knew there were certain things I could rock and certain things that were not for me. My mom, being from New York and generally unfamiliar with Miami-specific chonga aesthetics, also did not have the know-how

[3] Hernandez, 46.
[4] Moore, *Fabulous.*

to get me gold bangles at 2 dollars a pop. My best friend growing up was Jamaican and her mom had that knowledge. She and her sisters were always adorned in gold and I can’t lie, there were times I wanted to be just like her. I also wanted to be like other girls, who wore what we called “Brazilian pants,” basically leggings with pockets on the butt, but my mom was never a fan of how skin-tight they were. So I tried out dickies, and I really wanted that baggy look, but had to settle for a more standard flare khaki because my thigh to waist ratio never really allowed for the baggy look (to this day, I struggle to find this). My childhood was marked by a frustration and longing for my own personal style and was mitigated by my mixed-race outsider status, curvy figure, and experiences with gender dysphoria.

I used to wear my hair in a ponytail every day, probably the most chonga thing about me, and probably also the most masculine thing about me. Madison Moore’s book *Fabulous* taught me about “genderfuck,” and looking back, I think I really had a gift for taking feminine things and serving masculine, or tomboy. To me, tomboy aesthetics are a feminine variation on masculinity, defined by the knowing that one is looking at a girl or woman, but seeing her inner toughness or sportiness reflected outwardly. Most days it wasn’t even a conscious choice, just a habit. I never felt comfortable with my hair down. I had adopted the label of a tomboy mostly because there was a certain look and persona that came with playing basketball, and basketball was my life in elementary school. My dream was to play for the WNBA and I had high hopes because I was 5’4” by 5th grade; little did I know I would stop there. In 5th grade, I begged my mom to take me to this specific mall that was far away from our home but had great shoes at more affordable prices. I got two pairs of Jordans and wore them down to the ground over the next few years. They were black so they even fit with my goth/emo aesthetics in 7th and 8th grade.

I played basketball throughout both my aspirational chonga phase and my emo phase. Basketball was a constant and influenced my fashion and gender presentation. Basketball was a love of mine whether I was listening to Wisin y Yandel or My Chemical Romance. Basketball fashion has an innate capacity to hold gender expansive aesthetics. For me, basketball fashion was a mode of both femme and masc world-building. There were days where I would take pride in being the only girl on the court, days where that angered me (I mostly feel this way now), and days where I didn't feel like a girl on the court. I didn't know it at the time, but I now recognize my relationship with basketball as a coping mechanism for gender dysphoria. I mitigated my desire to inhabit a different body with loose-fitting basketball shorts, Jordans, and white tees. A look that confirms basketball fashion *is* hip-hop and reggaetón fashion. I remember the first time a camp counselor told me I had to go buy a bra because I was now a woman and the white tees were no longer hiding everything that needed to be hidden. Even the basketball shorts felt like they never fit loose enough around my hips. And so sometimes I would mitigate bodily discomfort by leaning the other way entirely. If the basketball shorts did not fit right, I would opt for the "Brazilian" skintight pants many girls were wearing. I just wanted clothes that fit, that was number one.

. . .

<u>Stillwater Park</u>

I owe you all my skills

My life

My sanity

My joy

My pain

You held me as I learned to

Dance

. . .

As reggaetón grows across the United States, each major city has garnered its own reggaetón themed party. In Miami, those parties existed in a more informal fashion, and it is my generation that is creating these events now in several major U.S. Cities, like Atlanta, Miami, and New York. In Miami, one of the premiere reggaetón events is called Out of Service Miami. Their slogan is "for the chongi phase you never grew out of.' This slogan says a lot about the connection between the fashion and aesthetic culture I grew up with and the sonic environment that accompanied it, and vice versa (those who prioritize sound might think the sartorial aesthetics succeed the sonic, but that may not always be the case – we are used to thinking, what does a reggaetón style look like, but not necessarily what do baggy pants sound like?). Out of Service Miami's slogan reveals that chonga and reggaetón are somewhat analogous to b-boys and hip-hop. Chongas are (at least in the Miami context) a visual, embodied, living manifestation of sonic suciedad. They/we represent sound corporeally – they/we are walking manifestations of a synesthetic relationship between sound and fabric, sound and makeup, sound and body. They/we wear the sonic and the sonic sounds them/us. Their/our relationship to reggaetóneres is reciprocal. They/we shape the sonic as much as sound artists do. They/we ask the question - If I am going to paint these eyebrows on, are you going to give me a beat that tests how long they can withstand my sweat? If I am going to wear this miniskirt, what is it you would like my ass to do? If I am going to wear this much gold, are you going to hold an event at night where I can sparkle through the darkness? In chapter 3, I make a connection between perreo and the white

minifalda, and there is almost an implicit cause and effect in which the minifalda follows the dance, but really both the dance and the skirt follow the chonga. Miami perreo would not exist without chongas, and without chongas, the minifalda is a mere piece of cloth.

Acworth/Woodstock: Landlocked

My mother and I moved to Woodstock GA after we were evicted during the recession of 2009. A year before we moved, I remember overhearing that a friend in school was moving to Atlanta, and I could not understand why she was moving *there.* My world even back then was just Miami and New York City. Those were the only places I had ever been and I didn't understand that in order to get from one place to the other, we would have to traverse a place called *The South.* I don't know if my peer's story was the same as mine. My instinct tells me there were probably more similarities than differences, but maybe my instinct is more a hope for solidarity, rather than truth.

When my mom, my dog, and I left Miami, we were headed for New York to go and live with my grandmother, but we didn't have enough gas money to make it all the way. My mom had a friend in Woodstock, GA, who told us to come stay with them. She said there was a good school for me in the area, and that made my mom feel better. So, there we stayed. Just me, my dog, my mom, and our clothes in the car, fourteen hours north of Miami. We called this "moving," but it felt more like being stuck. I learned we don't often call things what they really are.

I went from a predominantly Black and brown environment to an all-white school. Two of my closest friends were the only other Latinas I knew in the school. I don't even think we were aware that we had found each other at the time but looking back it amazes me.

Acworth/Woodstock sounded how flipping (or scrolling) through empty pages feels. Confused. There must be some mistake. I guess the person in charge made a mistake. She messed up. She needs to format this differently. She needs to act differently. There's nothing here. No substance. This is not scholarship. This is not smart. This says nothing about music. This says nothing. This is what a world without dembow was like for me. I did not know myself. My entire body had code switched. I wore dresses and ballet flats. My hair was down. I listened to… *dun dun dun* musical theater.

Atlanta

In Atlanta there was little to no dembow in the early 2010s. I would have to hear its cousin, the hip-hop bass, in order to affirm that rhythm still existed, that it wasn't just a dream of a childhood, that I had in fact been born in and spent the first fourteen years of my life in a place called Miami.

Atlanta taught me so much. Hotlanta offered me a rich cultural tapestry rooted in Blackness by which to understand American history and my own place in the black/white binary. I went to Emory University in Decatur, which some people think of as a whole other city from Atlanta, but having come from Woodstock, this was the closest I had been to living in the city again since leaving Miami, and I wanted to consider it close enough. I didn't party too much in college, which part of me regrets, because I now have the wisdom to understand that when people of color dance and laugh, it heals the ancestors and the land. The reason why I didn't party also has its roots in the colonial disciplining of Black and brown bodies. Partying usually came with drinking, or at least yelling and staying out late, and I was an aspiring opera singer. I was also a working-class aspiring opera singer constantly healing from racial trauma. I did not have the physical fortitude to stay out late and go to class the next day, let alone sing well. When I don't get enough sleep, I can't do much of anything. And singing is body work. Even in its colonial tradition, singing is connection to breath and back, it is athletic. I think that is what kept me in it for so long; it was a place within the settler colonial educational system where I was allowed to practice my breathing. As a child asthmatic, breathing was never intuitive for me. So, by singing I would learn to breathe and there were times when I felt I was getting really good at it. And there are times now where I realize I am still learning to exhale.

I also struggled with acid reflux in college and it impacted my progress as a singer immensely, exacerbated by alcohol and lack of sleep. Not only did I have the discomfort and pain of acid reflux, but I felt frustrated and ashamed that my body was presenting challenges unfit for the singer life. I understand this now as ableism. Tricia Hersey, the Nap Bishop, has taught me that ableism and white supremacy are in cahoots, their power over us weakened

little by little during sleep and rest.[5] White supremacy maintains itself by creating an ableist system in which it handicaps Black and brown folks, women, queer people. I've always had a nervous stomach, nausea, binge eating, reflux, and I understand this now as my body's response to the trauma inflicted on brown bodies by white supremacy. In attempting to sing in a Eurocentric style, I was coming up short. And boy did it wear me down. However, when I sang with my a cappella group, the rasp and breathiness that came with acid reflux and a complicated relationship to food, was actually an asset. This is the way that *ronca realness,* instilled in me as a survival tactic at a young age by listening to reggaetóneras, saved me.

My *ronca* voice was my superpower in college. It was/is alluring, real, cathartic, unique. These words are careful reframings of the words that were often used to describe my voice by others, i.e. seductive, sultry, soulful, perplexing, different. In fact, I was once told by a professor that because I had two boyfriends in succession who were both singers, my voice must have "put a spell" on them. I love the idea of myself as spellbinding, but the interpersonal dynamics of a white male professor naming my brujería is not lost on me. I am continually learning how to hone the power my voice has and to do so I must purge racist coded language and rewrite these external observations of others as my magic. Part of this healing process is understanding the ways in which I have been made illegible, and seeing that as an opening to write my own narrative.

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One time I was asked to audition for a solo on a spiritual in choir. It was a treble solo and there were no Black women in the choir, not that it mattered to those in charge. When I sang the solo the first time, I did it in a quasi-classical style when the conductor stopped me.

[5] Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York ; Boston ; London: Little, Brown Spark, 2022).

"No just do it like Cloe." I didn't know what he meant. "Do it in a pop style. Belt it." Apparently, he had seen me perform with my a cappella group and thought "oh *that's* how she should sound." I imagine that my body and voice clicked in a way that made him feel comfortable, that no longer confused him, that confirmed a symbiosis between the racialized body and sonic Blackness. My *ronca* voice was not a choice. It was shaped by environmental, social, and physical factors, i.e. asthma, Spanglish, acid reflux, childhood rap and hip-hop participatory learning. In this instance, my voice felt like a curse. I didn't know there was a desired "Cloe" way to sound. I thought any way I sounded had to be a Cloe sound, but I was wrong. I didn't get the solo in the end. It went to a white woman with a big operatic sound. I was and had neither. My failure to "do it like Cloe" resulted in being passed over for a white woman. My failure to confirm people's assumptions of brown and Black voices made me obsolete.

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Now Atlanta has perreo events just like most of the major U.S. cities. Perreo404, Atlanta's premiere perreo organization, is celebrating their 5-year anniversary 2 weeks after I'm writing this. It warms my heart to know that little Latinas migrating from sinking Miami to Hotlanta will have the opportunity to dance perreo in their new land. Maybe their chonga dreams will be realized even after leaving chonga headquarters.

Santa Barbara: Return to Ocean

By some act of Goddess, my randomly assigned roommates in graduate school turned out to be some of my best friends. They were the people I didn't know I needed. The timeline

is unclear but somehow in 2017, our first year of living together, we all became re-obsessed with the 2005 reggaetón hit "Noche De Sexo" by Aventura and Wisin y Yandel. I think it was a moment of kismet when one of us played the song and realized everyone knew it. Six years later, we still laugh and sing along really loudly when Romeo says "lay in my bed and prepare for sex." We make fun but it's truly a great line. What man has ever given a woman the time necessary to prepare for sex? It's a nice idea. This song introduced our apartment to the sounds of Latino belonging, the walls echoed with a sound manifest by four women of color displaced and remembering home. Little by little, over the next four years, our stereos would adjust to become more heavily dominated by reggaetón. It was like we were the ones awakening the town to this music even though it was happening on a global scale simultaneously.

Although I would still lock myself in my room all weekend trying to learn a new language and understand really dense theoretical texts, there were times when my roommates would drag me out and we would go downtown to dance. The first time we went out one of my roommates let me borrow her earrings. They were big, slender, silver hoops. When I put them on, I felt something shift. I don't think I had worn hoops since Miami. Looking back it is so clear to me what was happening, but it's only become clear after pouring so much time and effort into understanding reggaetón, culture, colonialism, race, gender, sexuality, hip-hop, opera through singing, dancing, therapy, and late night Project Runway marathons, among many other things. The club-going, hoops-wearing, noche de sexo-singing me was reentering reggaetón culture, and we had both changed and remained the same during a ten-year hiatus.

The culture had never left me and that's why my aspirations toward classical singing had been so fraught. Who I was and who I was trying to be represented a colonial schism and rupture that signified connection via brokenness.

I entered graduate school with interest in Latin American "art song," a term that still makes my stomach turn. I continued to take voice lessons for the first 2 and a half years of graduate school, but it was not my main focus, and in many ways, this allowed me to flourish. I did not have to prove my skill to people the same way and that made me better. Desperate for repertoire by Latinas, I learned several boleros by María Grever. Everything started moving toward more popular forms of entertainment, and soon my reggaetón reawakening reached every corner of my life.

I stopped voice lessons when covid hit, which was mid-way through my third year of graduate school and smack-dab in the middle of a strike. The historic UC-wide COLA strike affirmed my disillusionment thus far, and opened my eyes to the sad reality that I had believed for a while that my worth was not more than a measly poverty wage.[6] I still battle this belief. I'm not sure if I would have kept doing voice lessons if it had not been for covid, but I'm glad I didn't. Don't get it twisted, I'm not grateful in any way for covid, but I am in agreement with some of the ways in which I adapted to the trauma.

I learned in Santa Barbara that my favorite place is the dancefloor, real or imagined. And I say this knowing full well that it is a place I have at times been hesitant to go and currently, *can't* go. It is a place I am guilty of deprioritizing. It is a place I fear. It is a place where I am both my best self and my most limited. The dancefloor has been imagined more often than it has been real. When I was a kid, the dancefloor was the sidewalk paved in

[6] https://payusmoreucsc.com

hopscotch patterns. The dancefloor was everywhere. And it progressively became more and more in my head. When I stayed inside in college, I sat in the library imagining myself dancing. During covid, we danced alone in our rooms for a few months until we could throw outdoor parties. But it was never the same. The outdoor parties and our bodies held the weight of all that we had lost, both literally and figuratively. As someone with depression, I would go almost a whole week without going outside at the height of covid. My body was changing rapidly. As I write this, I am still getting to know the ways in which it was transformed by living through a pandemic, and by grieving those who did not live through it.

Beyoncé's 2022 post-quarantine album, *Renaissance,* is about the concept of imaginary and makeshift dancefloors. The dancefloor suffered so much due to covid. While I do not agree with the idea of another straight cis person utilizing queer culture for profit, I do think Beyoncé understands what queer culture is all about and that's why her album is inspired by the queer and trans people of color who create(d) vogue and ball. We are the demographic that nurtures the dancefloor, we recreate the dancefloor as a safe, fluid space that holds us in motion. What better way to pay homage to makeshift dancefloors than to engage in queer culture? I realized this myself in my fourth year of graduate school. So, it was time to move to New York City.

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Before moving, I jotted down my fears. This is what I wrote: *What if I leave here and there is less reggaetón where there should be more… less meaningful reggaetón anyway… perhaps it is meaningful because it transports me to community where there is none… if the community is there, will I even like it? Am I leaving marginalized reggaetón community for the hegemonic one?*

Manhattan: My Current Island

I was feeling pressure to prove in this chapter why I needed to move to NYC to do this dissertation and the truth is it's not in any big event or interview, but in the everyday: coming home at night and seeing cops on every block, surveillance cameras pop up in new places, hearing the motorcycles and reggaetón blasting at 4 am from my downstairs neighbors and cars driving by, passing block parties on my way to the dentist, having the community around me to sustain me through the difficult times of this work, the real thing right there when I get lost in the abstractions of theory, the abuelas on the bus reminding me it's not all so bad while also telling me to open my eyes because things were worse than I thought, the kids I teach and the reggaetón we created together, returning to a community that looks like childhood in vital ways, immersion in self through immersion in community.

The history of police surveillance and our resistance is not in the records but in the here and now.

In my introduction, I theorize the barrio as a sonic safe space. Growing up in Miami and now living in Inwood Manhattan, I am blessed and cursed with the ability to see that safe spaces are often also surveilled spaces. The spaces of my youth bred a familiarity of the dembow, reggaetón, bass-y music that heals the body through vibration. But the dembow was also punctuated with the polyrhythm of gun shots.

Trigger Warning: gun violence (skip to the next paragraph if you don't want to read this account). As a young nerd, I once forced by best friend to sit through the entire Lord of the Rings trilogy in one day. As we got toward the middle of Return of the King, we heard gun shots outside. We ran to the balcony to see what was going on. My hands still shake, and my vision goes fuzzy as I write this. We saw another friend's cousin lying on the adjacent crosswalk – I can still see his foot twitching as if in a sick and twisted dance to Howard Shore's film score. I understand now how one person's safe space can be another's nightmare, as well as how safe spaces can often be fabricated in hindsight as people go on to occupy spaces that are unsafe in ways that spaces prior might have been safe. My childhood neighborhood is a safe space to me now *because* I have spent so much time in white spaces, but I can also access the old feelings of fear and paranoia that I felt while growing up there.

In Inwood now, I can recognize how my outsider status shields me from experiencing the violence I did as a child in my own hood. My positionality as a Latina and femme in particular, however, positions me less as an outsider, as I am more accustomed to dealing with catcalls from Black and brown men than white men. I find that I know how to maneuver around the male gaze in Inwood whereas I am completely bewildered around the Financial

District's "FiDi bros." I don't know how to predict their reactions to my existence the same way I can prepare myself for the *hola princesa's* and *dios te bendiga's* of uptown. To me, white men feel like loose cannons, much more dangerous in their unpredictability, and in their ability to get away with terrible things. Despite feeling much safer in my neighborhood than in midtown perse, the entire area surrounding Dyckman street is constantly swarming with cops. I'm pretty certain I've seen ICE vans here as well. While my sense of safety here is dependent on my own positionality as a working-class Latina and knowledge around how to deal with different kinds of street harassment, it is also shaped by a familiarity of sounds. The same men who might bless me for my beauty as I walk down the street are often playing salsa or boleros from their storefront speakers. I often hear my favorite reggaetón hits from passing cars and I can give a little wiggle of solidarity to the driver whose turned his head around to watch me walk by. I hear Spanglish dialects that remind me of my own family. There are sounded signs and symbols of protection as I walk down the street. There are respectful young brown men trying to make their abuelas proud. There are old men playing dominos on fold-out chairs in the middle of the sidewalk like my dad used to do. There are abuelas giving advice to their granddaughters. I am continually confronted with the idea that the places I feel safest in are sensationalized to the white mainstream media as dangerous, dirty, sad, at risk, or needy. This is one example of how my safest space is more heavily surveilled, and precisely because it is a safer space for Black and brown folks. It is also an example of how Black and brown folks counter the gaze through sonic suciedad, through reggaetón and Spanish-language media, games and laughter. Sonic suciedad returns the colonial gaze and invites it. They can hear where our safe spaces are, and so they send ICE. I say this to you *pa' que lo sepa.*

Dyckman Street is home to imaginary dancefloors, except the dancefloors are right there in front of you. You can see, touch, taste, and smell them, but you can't dance on them. It is not the floor that is imaginary, it is the dancing. There are a couple of clubs on the block that I've tried to go to with some friends and they've had signs that say no dancing allowed. We learned that many of the bars here don't have cabaret licenses, which is required in NYC in order to allow dancing. Cabaret licenses are expensive and they also make your spot more of a target for police raids. Again, if they know where our safe spaces are, they are more likely to send cops. To me, this is one step away from the more well-known raids like Stonewall in the West Village in the 1960s, and Pizza-A-Go-Go in the '80s, entire safe havens and clubs shut down for catering to the needs of Black and brown folks. On Dyckman, the places are open, but our bodies are policed and immobilized. It's almost torturous because these bars play *the best* music. Do you know what it's like to hear El Alfa and be told you can't shake your ass? It feels like psychological warfare. And it is! I have been so baffled to see that Dyckman is more about hookah than dancing. It is more about repression than release. I was not here before covid so I don't know if this is a reaction to quarantine and social isolation, but it feels like a big shift in Latinx culture. When I have tried to leave the sedentary confines of my house on the weekends, I head to Quisqueya Plaza only to hear great music and see people sitting down. In chapter three, I theorize that female emcees are vital to the queering of perreo dance and that women and queer folks must be in charge of the sonic in order for femme agency to exist in Afro-Diasporic social spaces. In practice, I am seeing that the rise of (white/light-skinned) women in reggaetón and the commercialization of the genre is coinciding with less perreo period, forget queer perreo.

I also want to pause and consider the flipside of what sitting down more means for the culture. As a disabled person, twerk has often been my medicine and my symptom. Booty-shaking dances require hip flexibility and mobility that is limited for me lately, as I've begun to develop Bertolotti's Syndrome, a pain syndrome that people with lumbar birth defects can develop in their 20s and 30s. Maria Elena Cepeda says "Crip time is pandemic time. It is, in the most basic of senses, an open-ended exercise in adjusting one's everyday movements and activities in the pursuit of well-being—and, indeed, survival." Assuming that we are all in pandemic time, time has been queered and crippled, and so have we. The reggaetón music video's portray fantasies of Latino parties that just aren't the reality for many of us across the diaspora. So, before I lament a loss of dancing, I need to ask myself – is it better that we sit down?

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There are times when reggaetón, though emerging from barrios, feels unsuitable for New York City life. On Christmas Eve, my partner and I excitedly opened presents at midnight. The next day our downstairs neighbors told us that we were too loud and had been for a while. I had no idea because we rarely threw parties or played music after hours. When my neighbor had come to me the first time, she told me that she got up for work really early, so our midnight gift-giving made it hard for her to get enough rest. I genuinely felt bad so we tried to laugh a little quieter and step a little lighter, but it was the holidays so we had guests over often. It became hostile after a while. After our Christmas festivities dwindled to nothing, they were still throwing these weeknight parties until 4am. The dembow became like a weapon. I couldn't sleep and the pounding would shake the floor. On top of this, their

parties would turn into screaming matches. I often woke up to the sound of fighting that even in my frustration toward them, had me wondering if they were okay or if I should call 311.

I think of this as relevant to the pattern I'm seeing on Quisqueya Plaza, where the vibrancy of Latinx partying has been dulled by arguing, in-fighting, covid, exhaustion, and ableism. My partner is a composer and pianist, and even though he never plays after 8pm in the home, they would turn up their dembow whenever he played, like clockwork. We are engaging in an age-old battle, one that has inspired what I'm writing. Since I live in the house upstairs with the piano, I feel forgotten and misunderstood by the people who play the same music I would, and I simultaneously represent the side of colonization even though on any given day I would probably rather listen to the music they were playing. Their late-night parties turned my favorite music into a weapon. And so the idea of reggaetón as a symbol of safety is always malleable, relational, and contextual. At 4am, punctuated with the sounds of yelling, reggaetón was panic-inducing. At 4am, in a club with enough money and white clientele for a cabaret license, reggaetón is familiar and nurturing. What is so heartbreaking about this is the inability for community to live in harmony within a capitalist urban environment that weaponizes our cultural wealth, often the only form of wealth we have and we protect it well. In this system, we end up policing each other until neither one of us is partying or laughing, and all because we have to go to work in the morning.

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Living in New York City has shone a light on the gap between my actions and my beliefs, and I believe we should all live in a place that does this for us at one point or another. Chapter four takes a critical look at Bad Bunny and places him as the figurehead of sonic Blackqueerface. Yet, you can often catch me repping him in my attire. My best friend got me

a "Yo Perreo Sola" shirt in the style of a Supreme logo for Christmas 2020, and my boyfriend got me Bad Bunny Crocs stickers for Christmas 2021. Both of these Christmases preceded the chapter I wrote and the conversations I had with both of them about Bad Bunny's problematic iconicity. But… I have not taken the Crocs stickers off and I still sometimes wear the shirt. And I like what it does for me when I wear it. I like that people see it and know I listen to reggaetón. One time I found it particularly subversive when I wore it to a choir rehearsal. In my last year of grad school, I joined Cantori New York because I missed singing and making music with people. Although the programming is particularly responsible and interesting, I still find myself at times repressing how much Eurocentric sound I am making. So when I wore my "Yo Perreo Sola" shirt to rehearsal, I felt like I was representing the sounds I advocate for on a daily basis, the sounds that saved me from internalized hatred and low self-worth. And yet, I now do not believe "Yo Perreo Sola" to be a feminist statement, but rather a statement on the collapse of the collective in which perreo's Afro-Diasporic roots survive. And yet the only way I know how to be legible as *something else* is to conform to problematic Latinidad or be whitened.

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While writing this dissertation, my grandmother passed away from the effects of long covid. She was one of the first people hit when covid got to the United States. It's not surprising – poor Black and brown folks are often the first and the last to feel the effects of disaster. Her passing influenced a lot of the work on fashion in this dissertation. My aunt has asked me so many times to help clean out my grandmother's closet, and I haven't been able to. Her closet is an archive. My grandmother was a fashionista and she taught me how to survive and build self-esteem through fashion and aesthetics. She would always wear some

combination of cheetah print and red leather, even into her 80s. My favorite thing to share about her is that she would wear pants that said "Juicy" on the butt spelled out in rhinestones into her 70s. She is/was the fashion icon of the family and was also an incredible salsa dancer, so her closet is full of ruffled skirts and sequined gowns. By viewing her closet as an archive, I am protecting how sound cultures manifest in lived experience and honoring a femme-centric, matrilineal framework that transcends liveness and patriarchal systems of documentation. Her closet also speaks to a particularly immigrant-woman lens by which to understand fashion. In season 3 of the Hulu show Ramy, there is a scene where his parents are trying to sell their house and find that they have too many belongings. A white lady real estate agent comes over and tells them they will need to get rid of their "immigrant clutter." I thought this was the perfect phrase to describe the type of hoarding that has impacted every woman in my family, and has in effect made me a neurotic neat freak. Immigrant clutter manifests from the scarcity that marks the immigrant experience. I remember watching my grandmother clutter her mouth with food every time she ate, barely taking a bite of what was already in her mouth before piling more in and taking a swig of a Sam Adams. This, too, is immigrant clutter. Reggaetón polyrhythms, immigrant clutter. The idea of clutter spans our relationship to food, clothes, people, sounds. We gather and hoard until it makes us sick or it makes us dance, sometimes both. And this is another reason why I won't go near her closet – it's filled to the brim.

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New York City has so many thriving perreo parties hosted by collectives like ArrebatoQueer and perreo2thepeople. When I moved to New York City, I had the goal of going to so many parties, and again, because I am working-class and I have to work, this goal

has not nearly been met. I wish I could say that one can write a dissertation, work 3 part-time jobs, maintain a stable relationship, care for family, *and* go to lit parties, but I can't. And so often I've been mad at myself for writing about dance more than I am actually dancing. Then I consider the many hours dancing that have made me an expert and I calm down. And I have said it before, but writing this dissertation on dance and dancing are antithetical when we take the lens of hip mobility into account. Throughout the course of this dissertation, I have dealt with sciatica, plantar fasciitis, and chronic back pain. In some ways, writing has offered me a way back in to dance, has allowed me to imagine what dancing is like, or could be like, has provided me with an imaginary dancefloor. And other times, writing means sitting, stiffening, documenting, rooting myself in a false permanence through my words, and this is the opposite of dance. Dance is mobility, movement, transience, and ephemerality. In trying to heal my low back pain, I've turned to many different medicinal sources, and have been thinking about the root chakra. Twerk is medicine for the root chakra. It is grounding and a form of pelvic self-massage. The root chakra is connected to our sense of safety and security, so it only makes sense that at the end of this PhD, I am questioning where I am/have been safe. I do not know where my money will come from after filing this away, I do not know what people will think, I do not know. In a capitalist world where twerk and perreo have become marginal to existence, how can we feel safe?

Puerto Rico: My Ancestral Island

<u>Aguacero</u>

I would run through rainstorms
For my ancestors
I would climb mountains
For my ancestors
I would swim oceans
For my ancestors
I would curb lightning
For my ancestors
I would ache
For my ancestors
I would break
For my ancestors
I would dance
For my ancestors
I would breathe
For my ancestors

And I have
But still cannot see their faces
Their idols
Their skin
Fresh from the aguacero
I have not been cleansed
By the waters
I hide
In cars
In houses
Afraid of being
Drenched
Why is that

When I drove through rainstorms
Gawked at the foliage
Studied the people
My people
Surveyed the island
Attempted to dance
They could not tell my face apart

I would change my face
For my ancestors
Surrender my eyes
For my ancestors
Trade (ear) drums
For my ancestors
Barter for sun
For my ancestors
I would move
For my ancestors

And I have
Not knowing this
Is why I cannot see their faces
I cannot see
My own

. . .

After getting back from Puerto Rico, I stayed in bed for two whole days. It was the middle of October in New York, a full forty degrees colder than in PR, and constantly overcast. I am the type of person that needs the sun in order to get up.[7] Getting up is one of the most difficult things I ever do, second to getting dressed and leaving the house. I have a strict routine where I have to stretch before I can leave the house, mostly because I'm always afraid I'm going to pull a muscle out there and stretching is the best way I know to protect myself from that. But sometimes it makes it even more impossible to get places on time, go for a simple walk, or have a breath of fresh air. Rhythm helps a lot. When I put on music in

[7] See my work in *Brown Sugar Lit*.

the morning, it helps me get up. In Puerto Rico, I didn't need the music because the sun was already there. And yet, it's funny how the music would have been there already too. Each morning, I would open the door to my Airbnb and sit outside on the patio. Patios are so important. Every house in San Juan had one, and it would do wonders for people like me, who need to be outside but might not be fully ready to get dressed or stretch or face the world. The patio is a liminal space, outside but inside. Most of the patios lock, so you're vulnerable yet protected. You can greet people as they pass by in the street, but you are out of reach physically. I saw a lot of abuelas sitting in their patios while I was in PR. And I envied them. And I felt guilty for doing so.

Upon meeting my family in PR, we drove through the back roads of Cabo Rojo to find farmland and rolling wet hills, and their big house on the top of one small incline. My family has horses, a dog that comes and visits, friends and family nearby with their own small zoos filled with parakeets, dogs, and turtles. They live better than we do in the States. Granted, this was the side of the family that shunned my great-grandmother because she came from a poor family, and was not married to my great-grandfather when they had my grandmother. When my great-grandfather died, my grandmother was five years old, and Abuelita went knocking on this family's door for money to feed the baby, and they shut the door in her face. My mom took me to see my cousins this trip because this particular cousin was an angel who had housed my mom in her 20s when she went on her own journey to Puerto Rico. This is the way that the American Dream burrows in, confuses, and lingers for generations. I am supposed to understand why my family came to New York City, but then I see an abundance in Puerto Rico that I have not ever had in my own life.

In Puerto Rico, I faced similar relationships to power and privilege as I had growing up in Miami Beach. I had not been in a space where my white/light-skinned privileges gained me power since then. And this is about demographic changes. I am blancita, gringa, la rubia, in Latinx spaces, and I can hold that this is true, even when I am ethnically ambiguous, brown, angry, soulful in white non-Latinx spaces. In Atlanta and Santa Barbara, I had grown to wear my tokenism like a badge, taken on the burden of representation even when I may not be the best voice, the most able voice, but I did it none the less, and tried to listen well and regurgitate other voices in the process. In visiting Puerto Rico, I remembered the importance of honoring phenotype, that letting myself be the white girl would allow others to be the Black girls. Although it is anti-racism 101, I am constantly reminded that privilege is contextual. And being mixed-race, a daughter of immigrants, white on my dad's side and brown on my mom's, means sometimes shutting up about my own brownness to honor those who don't have access to whiteness like I do.

Now, class is another thing. My class status has never changed. It refuses to support the American Dream, my wallet keeps resisting even when I tell it to sell out. Please, wallet, sell out… give in, be corporate, do harm. I just need money. Anywhere I am placed in the world, I need money. The money has always been the denier of my access to whiteness. Latinas, especially Afro-Latinas, are the lowest paid people in the United States, because on top of our ambiguous and exoticized racial otherness, we face what the United States calls language "barriers." Even though we have *more* knowledge and linguistic capability than non-Latina women, we speak a language that has been racially coded as degenerate. So instead of a pay raise, we get docked. Our (forced) migration is fresh, and although many of us were historically colonized and enslaved in our own countries, the United States feels no

obligation to give us even the meager scraps of reparations that non-Latino Black Americans receive. This is how the Black/white binary and its friend, Latinidad, continues to erase Black people. It denies them of their multiplicity, their Latin Americanness, their immigration status, their histories. All Latinos with Indigenous and African ancestry are erased by the binary, but the ways in which it manifests for brown and Black people differ. Black Latinos are erased but even their erasure is denied, while brown Latinos are erased but it is known.

. . .

We were driving to Utuado, Puerto Rico, to try and see the Indigenous Center where Taíno petroglyphs are kept, and we were on top of a large mountain when it started to thunderstorm. Our visibility was low, the roads were narrow, and over the edge was a huge drop-off. I kept seeing these red flowers in the rainforest, the flor de maga, and the red would take my attention away from the fact that with one wrong turn, we would all die. This was three weeks after Hurricane Fiona hit Puerto Rico, and we had driven an hour and a half through the mountains to get to the Center. Ten minutes away, we couldn't go any further. The side of the mountain had collapsed. My mom swore she heard someone yelling "está cerrado!" but I couldn't stop, I had been waiting for this my whole life.

This is the reality of being from a colony. You can save up and work your entire life to return home, and right as you are about to make it, a hurricane can wipe out your island. And three weeks later, people will not have power and roads will be unsafe, and the skies will be crying. This is the reality of extraction.

None of the Indigenous sites I wanted to visit worked out. Even the Botanical Garden in Caguas only had replicas of Taíno batey's and petroglyphs. The worst part was that the Garden was hosting a haunted house and had set up a "Witches Ritual" with gaudy Halloween decorations on top of a Taíno burial site. The Garden was made after a real estate developer had bought the land, and some students found Taíno burial mounds. I saw no difference between a building and a haunted house – both are a tourist trap, both bring in money, both dishonor the ancestors, and both are fake. The Puerto Rican claim to Taíno heritage was a cashgrab. This is the reality of extraction.

On our way back from the mountains of Utuado, we played the radio. My mom always says that the radio has a way of connecting you to the outside world and offering comfort more than playing music from your own device. And we needed comfort that day. We found a great station that played non-stop boleros. Even in New York City, it's rare to hear boleros on the radio – it's mostly Salsa, Bachata, Merengue, and Reggaetón on the Spanish-language channels. After a while, there was an announcement from the station where we learned the name – Catholica Radio. Noooooooo! We all screamed. And given my understanding of bolero and white imperialism, the Catholic Women's League's sabotage of reggaetón, I shouldn't have been surprised, right?

. . .

Our Airbnb was in a predominantly Black area between Santurce and Loíza. My partner and mom are huge Mets fans, and the team was playing in the wild card round to see if they would go to the Playoffs. Just a block away from where we were staying, there was a bar where people huddled. They were playing Salsa, but it was mixing with a bar across the street that was playing Reggaetón. The polyrhythms made my heart beat faster and happier.

We got to the bar and there was no place to stand except smack dab in the middle of the street, but they were playing the Mets game, so we stayed a little bit. A couple of nights prior, we went to La Placita in Santurce, and there was a Mets game being shown on TV there, also in the midst of a live Salsa band and some faint dembow around the block. The Mets game was often the music video for the sounds we were hearing. Baseball and Salsa converged to entangle New York City Puerto Ricans and San Juan Puerto Ricans.

When we arrived back in NYC, the airport felt very similar to SJU. Same amount of Spanish being heard, same music, beautiful brown and Black people. But it was colder, and people were sadder. I cannot imagine how the matriarchs in my family made that transition. It is no little thing to leave the sun behind. I think the only thing that got them through it was the portability of music, the Catholic bolero, the two-step of Salsa, and now, the thing that gets me through it is the dembow. We do not stop getting through it. We are constantly mourning the island with rhythm.

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