

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: GENDER AND SEXUAL DISSIDENCE IN REGGAETÓN: THE POLITICS OF CUIR PERFORMANCE IN THE HISPANIC CARIBBEAN

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Global *reggaetón* superstar Bad Bunny has performed in traditionally “female” clothes, worn nail polish, and kissed men on the international stage, but has never named his identity explicitly. Many have taken to the internet to call him, among many other celebrities a “queer baiter¹.” With US representational politics and queer people in the spotlight – this thesis wonders how homonormativity² and neo-imperial respectability politics fueled these queer-baiting discourses. This thesis aims to tackle the contemporary debates surrounding racialized minoritarian subjects in *reggaetón* who are constantly caught in discourses of “too queer” or “not queer enough.” These queers frequently under colonial or neo-imperial rule, negotiate the boundaries of American homonormativity and obsession with “outness.” This thesis takes up the idea of “queerbaiting” and questions, “what happens when people outside the homo-“norms” perform their queerness in a way that is not necessarily legible to other global queers?” Utilizing

¹ André Wheeler, “Bad Bunny: Does a Straight Man Deserved to be Called a ‘Queer Icon’?”, *The Guardian*, 2020.

² Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press), 2003.

methods from performance, queer, and Latine and Caribbean studies, I argue that we need new understandings of what it means to be queer. Using case studies from the *reggaetón* genre of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, I argue that performances by Bad Bunny, Tokischa, and Ivy Queen negotiate, performances of queerness that exceed those of US imperial homonormativity. Intervention statement: this redefines how we come to understand our own queerness and futures and how we understand the most popular global music genre.

GENDER AND SEXUAL DISSIDENCE IN REGGAETÓN: THE POLITICS OF CUIR
PERFORMANCE IN LATIN AMERICA

By

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Preface

Before jumping into my case studies, I would like to establish my positionality as a scholar, and moreover as a queer person. In doing research on the three *reggaetoneros* discussed in this thesis, I realized I was certainly not the only queer being policed by my fellow queers. The kind of discourse we need now more than ever must be on negotiated queerness. How has “exploring” become a four-letter word in queer communities when we all have had to negotiate ourselves? In these next pages, I take up performances of queer gender and sexuality in reggaetón that are messy, unclear, and that don’t conform to homonormative standards for explicitly legible “outness”; recently such performances have sparked controversy over the terms of queerness, and therefore we must talk about them.

As a queer person, I have often felt left out by American ideals of militant homonormative queerness: a queerness that must be legible to other queers. For example, when I came out as a lesbian, I was told “you don’t look gay,” which was code for “you don’t look butch enough.” These essentialist statements about what queer “should” look like or how queer “should perform” gender and sexuality frustrate me and lead me to constantly question why queer people, the historical outcasts, the weirdos, the transgressives, seem to have boxes we all must fit into to be seen and deemed valid. This then led me to question what visibility, outness, and representation look like outside of homonormative ideals and/or stereotypes. In these following chapters, I hope my readers will consider how queerness is performed, and also policed both by heterosexual and homosexual counterparts. In basing my arguments and methodologies in performance studies, I aim to argue that performances of queerness have become so codified that they have damaging, reiterated heteropatriarchal effects, forcing many out before they’re ready, and putting excessive pressure on individuals to understand themselves fully in an instant.

I come to these case studies and to the phrases “You don’t look gay” to explode the need for mandatory explanations and labels of gender, sexuality, and queerness. In many ways queers all over the globe are currently facing a polarizing litany of homophobia, anti-trans legislation and hate crimes, compounded by scrutiny from LGBTQ communities for not performing their identities in a specific way. It’s important to note my positionality and privilege as a white American citizen writing on Caribbean performers in a historically Black genre. I took up these case studies as a fan seeking comradery with others and their not-so-legible performances of queerness.

Lastly, the following pages have some possibly triggering data and photographs regarding homophobia, transphobia, and sexual assault. Please take care of yourself while reading. I would also like to note that throughout this text I use “American” to mean *estadounidense* or said another way – people from the US. I preface this to note that all from North, Central, and South America are *Americans*. This text seeks to compare American (US) conceptions of queerness with that of the Hispanic Caribbean (Latine)

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Professor Kareem Khubchandani and *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* for inspiration for this playlist. There simply can't be a thesis on *reggaetón* without hearing *reggaetón*. I hope this playlist encourages you to dance and/or sing along. This playlist includes all songs I mention throughout this work, and a few others that are some of my favorites in the genre. I hope you enjoy.

Playlist

1. *Yo perreo sola* – Bad Bunny
2. *Delincuente* – Tokischa feat. Ñengo Flow
3. *Yo quiero bailar* – Ivy Queen
4. *Gasolina* – Daddy Yankee
5. *Kaleidoscópica* – Villano Antillano
6. *Ignorantes* – Bad Bunny and Sech
7. *Big Booty* – Young Miko, Hozwal, Lil Geniuz
8. *Saoco* – Wisin feat. Daddy Yankee
9. *Estilazo* - Tokischa
10. *Más maiz* – N.O.R.E. feat Daddy Yankee, Nina Sky, Gemstar, Big Mato
11. *Mujerón* – Villano Antillano, Ptazeta
12. *Al Escuchar Mi Coro* – Ivy Queen

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/25PbXScotFgtzU9pgS3En1?si=5ed462cf1b754245>

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Introduction: *¡Que barbaridad!* The History of Reggaetón, out, queer politics, and the role of “respectability”



Figure 1: Twitter user responds to leaked photos of Kit Connor and Maia Reficco.

J Cristian (@SirCristian0), “tu ídolo es etero, [Eng. “Your idol is hetero]” Twitter, August 29, 2022, 9:23 am. <https://twitter.com/SirCristian0/status/1564242428869185537>.

On October 31, 2022, British actor Kit Connor, known for his work on the gay romantic comedy series *Heartstopper*, was forcefully outed on social media after an image surfaced of him being physically close with his

female co-star of a new show, *A Cuban Girl's Guide to Tea and Tomorrow*, Maia Reficco. Connor’s character on *Heartstopper* also identifies as bisexual and struggled with coming to terms with his sexuality throughout the series. Many took to Twitter to express their dismay at Connor, and at the casting team at *Heartstopper* for casting a “straight” actor to play a queer role. Accusations of queerbaiting flew across the internet.

Queerbaiting is a term that was originally meant to call out capitalist ventures in their tactics to engage with queer communities in a disingenuous, and ultimately heteronormative way³.



Kit Connor ✓
@kit_connor



back for a minute. i'm bi. congrats for forcing an 18 year old to out himself. i think some of you missed the point of the show. bye

Figure 2: Kit Connor comes back to Twitter for a brief moment to comment on rumors of queerbaiting.

Categorized as a proverbial “bait-and-switch”, many

Kit Connor (@kit_connor), “back for a minute. I’m bi. Congrats for forcing an 18 year old to out himself. I think some of you missed the point of the show. Bye”, Twitter. October 31, 2022. [account removed from Twitter].

would criticize television show ads for running clips of scenes that indicated there would be queer representation in the show, only to find out after watching the entire series that no such relationship was actually present. Connor was forced to come out as bi on social media, after the flood of social media attacks surrounding queerbaiting. James Factora-- in their article for well-circulated online queer news/blog, *Them*--commented on the misuse and *overuse* of the term “queerbaiting”:

[Queerbaiting] has since been rampantly misapplied to describe real-life celebrities who may display signs of queerness but have not publicly disclosed their orientation, with Connor as one notable target⁴.

In queer communities across the world, there is an overwhelming desire to have access to characters who look like us, love like us, and are the main characters of a series. We want further representation in the sense that we want queer actors to play queer roles, as to play them authentically, but at what cost?

³ Factora, James. “The Problem with the Internet’s Obsession with Queerbaiting.” *Them*. *Them*, October 3, 2022. <https://www.them.us/story/what-is-queerbaiting>.

⁴ Factora, James. “‘Heartstopper’ Star Kit Connor Came out as Bisexual to Stop ‘Queerbaiting’ Accusations.” *Them*. *Them*, November 1, 2022. <https://www.them.us/story/kit-connor-heartstopper-coming-out-bisexual-queerbaiting-accusations>.

After delving deeply into queerbaiting discourse, I wondered about the population of the “questioning” queer folk; particularly those of the Caribbean with troubled, violent histories with colonial powers – many of which are ongoing. I wondered about our American⁵ obsession with outness. I wondered how “questioning”, and “closeted” became bad words, especially in the US. I wondered why it has become a transgression in queer communities for someone to “explore” their identity. “Outness,” the verbal acknowledgement or declaration of one’s identity, has become almost synonymous with queer representation in the United States. Famous out artists like Elton John or Ricky Martin are often hailed as “gay icons,” but others who do not seek to define or proclaim their queerness are often criticized.

After reading my title, you might be thinking at this point: “What does homonormativity⁶, queerbaiting, and this British kid have to do with *reggaetón*?” This is an understandable response, however the connection here is one that is frequently overlooked. I aim to utilize the framework of queerbaiting discourse as a way in to understanding how identity continues to be policed by those within the community for their “atypical” performances of queer identity; particularly those with additional marginalized identities including those of Black, Indigenous, and mixed ancestry. Using Connor as an introductory example serves as a baseline for understanding the compounding intersectional power hierarchies that work against queers of color from the Caribbean. I wondered: if a cisgender, white, European male received such backlash, how would non-white, queer Caribbeans be read by a white, queer, American audience? Moreover, I aim to use queerbaiting as a way in to understand how the reiteration of normative politics reproduces neocolonialist, anti-Black, and misogynist rhetoric in *reggaetón*; a historically Black genre. Although not all my case

⁵ Here when I refer to “American” I mean *estadounidense*; of the United States.

⁶ Lisa Duggan, “*The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*.” Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003.

studies will address connections to queerbaiting discourse, the sentiment remains clear throughout – in world of “too x” and “not x enough”, no one ever wins.

I came to my case studies as I scrolled through my Spotify playlist of my favorite *reggaetón* songs, I wondered, “why isn’t *reggaetón* more queer?” and “why can’t I think of any queer *reggaetoneros*?” As a white, non-binary, American person myself, I want to establish my positionality, and problematize my own previous misconceptions with homonormative politics, particularly in regard to a codified idea of how queerness performs. In these next pages, I aim to problematize the American desires for legible queerness. I am now seeking a queer politic of solidarity; one that is anti-capitalist, anti-imperial, and homo-exploratory. I turn these questions back on myself to understand how these artists and case studies from the Caribbean are performing a means for powerful diasporic queer futures with joy and pleasure.

History of *reggaetón*, *dembow* and Afro-Caribbean Beats

Before we launch further into queer theories, performance theories, and political activism, we must discuss the history of the *reggaetón* genre to narrow our lens. Thinking specifically of the Hispanic Caribbean for the purposes of this thesis, the influence of the United States, and the violent history of imperialism and anti-Blackness must be noted.

Infamously, the US has forcefully intervened across the Caribbean and Latin America, including the on-going occupation of Puerto Rico, and also with construction of the Panama Canal in the early 20th century. In attempt to influence American power over central America, the US manipulated the separation land from Colombia to create a new state called “Panama” in 1903 and build what’s now the Panama Canal in 1904. In order to complete this huge feat, the US contracted thousands of Jamaicans to immigrate to this new territory and build the canal. These Jamaicans eventually settled down in Panama and stayed for generations, even though they faced intense

racism, segregation, and cultural discrimination by those of Spanish-descent. In the 1970s, the Afro-Panamanians in the Jamaican diaspora introduced reggae to the Spanish-speakers of the region. Jamaican reggae's roots are inherently anti-establishment. According to ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall, the integration of reggae at that moment of Panamanian history was a desperate plea to be connected to their Jamaican and African roots to resist the continuing racism and terrible conditions for Afro-Panamanians⁷. Said another way –the roots of *reggaetón* were based in resistance against anti-Blackness.

To put it simply: *reggaetón* is a blend of American hip hop, Jamaican reggae, and Spanish lyrics, but its evolution from Jamaican reggae *en español* to the international *reggaetón* sensation we know it to be in 2023 is a long story. Panamanian El General, and Puerto Rican Tego Calderón are some of the genre's most important, yet constantly overlooked contributors. Both of African descent, these artists' riddims and lyrics set genre standards before the genre was well-known. El General and his 1991 songs “*Muevelo*” and “*Rica y Apretadita*” were some of the most commercially successful “*reggae en español*” songs. Additionally, “*Dem Bow*” released in 1991 by Jamaican DJ and performer, Shabba Ranks, became the foundation for *reggaetón*'s bouncy upbeat riddim. This 3+3+2 beat made for dancing, now called the *dem bow* beat⁸, is still used as the core *reggaetón* beat to this day. *Reggae en español* - reggae beats, and Spanish lyrics not only provided community unique to Afro-Panamanians, but also acted as a mode of resistance against a government who consumed their labor but did not view them as “real” Panamanians.

⁷ Wayne Marshall, “Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton.” *Lied Und Populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 53, (Zentrum für Populäre Kultur und Musik, Freiburg, Germany, 2008).

⁸ Wayne Marshall, “Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton.” *Lied Und Populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 53, (Zentrum für Populäre Kultur und Musik, Freiburg, Germany, 2008).

In the 1990s, *reggae en español* made its way to other parts of the Caribbean including Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba⁹. Simultaneously, *reggaetón* was strongly influenced by New York's hip hop scene of the late 1990s and early 2000s as well. In fact, in her book *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*, scholar Raquel Z Rivera notes Puerto Ricans' contributions to hip hop, and how frequently they are left out of the archive of hip hop music¹⁰. She goes on to talk about the ways that Puerto Ricans, though actively contributing to the genre, were frequently deemed less important because they were rapping in Spanish, and focusing heavily on *Latinidad* and ethnicity over Blackness:

Hip hop is a cultural realm where the blackness (Afro-diasporicity) of second- and third-generation Caribbean Latinos is affirmed and celebrated, partly through the linguistic practices they share with African Americans. Although this authenticity is certainly not restricted to African American artists, it allows only for Latinos whose creative expression is intelligible to and/or deemed desirable by African Americans.¹¹.

Rivera summarizes here the effects of the policing of the hip hop genre; she argues that hip hop does not have to be just for Black Americans. She notes further that hip hop can be liberatory for Latinos, whether they rap in English or Spanish. She hopes for an inclusive hip hop realm that affirms all Black artists. As we know from her chapter, eventually many New York rappers did accept rapping in Spanish, but it was yet another struggle for Black Latinos to be seen in their entirety, and for their unique intersections in their communities. From Rivera's interventions, I am again reminded of the "too x, not x enough" dichotomy so many Afro-Latines find themselves in...

⁹ Petra Rivera Rideau, "From Panama to the Bay: Los Rakas Expressions of Afrolatinidad", *GLOBAL LATIN/O AMERICAS*, (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Rivera, Raquel Z, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹¹ Rivera, Raquel Z, *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 154-163).

One key player in the *reggaeón* realm who faced this Black/Latino intersection was Puerto Rican-born, Miami-raised *reggaetonero* Tego Calderón. He combined *sonidos*¹² from Puerto Rican salsa, *reggae en español*, and American hip hop to create his unique style of music. What's more, Tego added a key element to what we know as *reggaetón* today – resistance against the Puerto Rican government. In her article, “*If I Were You*”: *Tego Calderón's Diasporic Interventions*”, Petra Rivera Rideau examines Tego's 2012 song “Robin Hood”, and how his presence in the genre, opposition to racist and oppressive power structures provided tangible resistance for Afro-diasporic communities through his lyric.

Calderón is known in part for his unabashed embrace of black identity, including his virulent critiques of Puerto Rican race relations and his celebrations of blackness. Many of Calderón's songs, most notably “*Loíza*” on his first album, *El abayarde*, directly call out the myth of Puerto Rican racial democracy by exposing how Afro-Puerto Ricans remain subject to racial discrimination despite rhetoric that celebrates racial harmony.... Calderón employs *bomba* and *Piñones*, both common signifiers of folkloric blackness, to make his critique legible; however, he transforms these signifiers into tools for resistance to antiblack racism.¹³

Here, Rivera Rideau touches on an important theme that's present both in his earlier work, and that of more recent songs like “Robin Hood”, which was produced in 2012. Not only does he love his Afro-Latine identity, but he advocates for people who look like him across the Caribbean in his songs. Thus, he carves out a unique space for Black Latines in the diaspora to feel seen in heard in spaces where cultural colonialism still run strong. Tego's hit 2003 album *El abayarde* that Rivera Rideau notes here included hits like *Pa' Que Retozen*, *Dominicana*, and *Guasa, Guasa*, that established the foundation these *reggaetón* beats, sonic blackness through Puerto Rican *ritmos* and American hip hop as well, but most importantly, lyric content surrounding community, where you

¹² Sonidos – Spanish for “sounds”.

¹³ Petra Rivera-Rideau, “‘If I Were You’: Tego Calderón's Diasporic Interventions”, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 63-66.

come from, and moreover, the unique experiences of growing up Afro-Latino on an island that “doesn’t see race.”¹⁴ Tego set the standard for rapping about struggle and strife in the *barrio* as a common motif of *reggaetón* music.

Though *reggaetón* continued to grow more and more popular with live performances, and DJs playing groups like The Noise in dancehalls in Puerto Rico, so did the censorship and policing of the genre. More and more reggaetoneros emerged from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Panama, but the governments were not happy about rappers talking politics in the *barrio*. The governments, most notably Puerto Rico’s Anti-Pornography Campaign, deemed *reggaetón* amoral – citing its references to explicit sexual desires, lewd dance and gestures in music videos and live performances. Many also went on to criticize both the men and women who participated in the genre, but especially the women who were deemed “sluts” for allowing the men to objectify them in music videos¹⁵.

In addition to lyric, criticisms rooted in anti-Blackness continued in *reggaetón*’s accompanying dance style, *perreo*. *Perreo* is a unique dance style associated with *reggaetón* music known for its quick hip movements. Like *reggaetón*, *perreo* comes from a long history of Afro-Caribbean roots. Many *reggaetón* music videos often portray many women *perreando* or twerking/grinding while a male-presenting body is singing about his sexual fantasies. These codified gender roles in *reggaetón* music videos have been strongly critiqued by many, and most loudly by more conservative scholars and regular listeners as well¹⁶. This dance style, literally

¹⁴ Rivera Rideau outlines this throughout her article on Tego Calderón and notes that throughout interviews in his life, and in his song lyrics, he notes that white Puerto Ricans don’t seem to take the conversations on race seriously. (Rivera Rideau “‘If I Were You’: Tego Calderón’s Diasporic Interventions”, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 65.)

¹⁵ Rivera-Rideau, Petra R, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico*, (Durham and London, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Arévalo, Lisette, ed. “*Hasta Abajo*.” Spotify. NPR: Radio Ambulante, March 7, 2023.

https://open.spotify.com/episode/4o6qXCGYOvdQY8aPC75NmY?si=we_YYd4KQsCDbZ0uSuBITg.

called “doggy-style,” paired with *reggaetón*’s sexually explicit lyrics faced strong anti-Black and misogynist sentiment; hopes of shutting *reggaetón* down all together spread across the Caribbean via conservative lawmakers.

However hard they tried to squash it, *reggaetón* continued. The Puerto Rican migration between New York and the island provided a quick gateway for American consumption of the genre, and over time, the genre grew in popularity in cities like New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. Puerto Rican Daddy Yankee is known for popularizing the genre in the clubs of Puerto Rico and migration to US fame with 2004 hit “*Gasolina*”. *Boricuas* in the diaspora felt connected to these beats, thousands of miles away from the island. In the last 20 years, the genre has become one of the most internationally successful genres, with artists on the global top charts like Bad Bunny, Rauw Alejandro, Ozuna and many more¹⁷.

Moreover, *reggaetón* is going through a period of *blanqueamiento* or white washing with more and more non-Black artists coming on the scene and gaining tremendous success. even though it has strong Afro-Caribbean roots, more and more non-Black artists are profiting from *reggaetón*’s success. Ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall posits that the industry’s lack of Black performers in a historically Black genre is due to the idea of Pan-Latin-American Identity, where all Latines feel ownership of the genre, whether they participated in its creation or not.

During the mid-90s, artists and audiences alike referred to the music as *melaza* (molasses), *música negra*, and even simply Hip-Hop and Reggae, all evoking or intertwined with symbols of Blackness. But with the move toward the mainstream in the new millennium, the genre increasingly found itself promoted as *reggaeton Latino*...”¹⁸

¹⁷ Spotify, “Top 50 Global Songs”, April 23, 2023.

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZEVXbMD0HDwVN2tF?si=0092335b0b83492b>

¹⁸ Wayne Marshall, “Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton.” *Lied Und Populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 53, (Zentrum für Populäre Kultur und Musik, Freiburg, Germany, 2008, 131).

This integration of *reggaetón* a global music genre, consumed by those in and out of Latino communities created a notion that *reggaetón* was up for grabs – as long as it was rapping in Spanish. Artists like Spain’s Rosalía, Colombia’s J Balvin and Maluma have skyrocketed on the *reggaetón* charts, leaving out space for Black/Afro-Latina women. What was once a genre deemed “too lewd”, “too scandalous”, but most transparently “too Black,” now became a highly consumed genre, worthy of praise.

The racist, misogynist respectability politics in the Caribbean (specifically Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic for the purposes of this research) are entrenched in white supremacy, and a goal of respectability politics that adheres to neocolonial ideas of identity performance. The intense effects of racism harm Caribbean subjects in all aspects of life, especially in the realm of a Pan-Latine identity, and the illusion of a racial democracy¹⁹. It is crucial to understand the racial politics of the Caribbean, and the obsession with whiteness as it has deeply affected the history of *reggaetón* and Afro-Latines as a whole.

Last, and my intentional segue into bridging the gap between discourses on reggaeton and that of queer political history, I aim to flesh out in these next pages the effects of the intense scrutiny *reggaetoneros* have faced from both conservative *and* liberal mediums. I’ve detailed how conservative critics have taken up issue with the genre’s vulgar lyrics, and suggestive *perreo* dance gesture. However, on the other side of the coin, the liberal, often white/American faction, is disappointed by *reggaetón*’s performances of queerness as well, especially in the name of queerbaiting. Many artists, Puerto Rican *reggaetonero* Bad Bunny included, have been subjected to discourses surrounding “not queer enough” because he does not identify with a label on the

¹⁹ Wayne Marshall, “Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton.” *Lied Und Populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 53, (Zentrum für Populäre Kultur und Musik, Freiburg, Germany, 2008).

LGBTQ+ spectrum. This sets up a key problem for Hispanic Caribbean artists negotiating queerness who simply can't win. From both sides of the political coin, these criticisms reenact colonial ontologies of exclusion, *homonormativity* and heteronormativity.

Homofobia en el caribe

With this historical context in mind, I considered why there were not more out *reggaetoneros*. I, like many, considered the fact that due to colonization, the Hispanic Caribbean is very wrapped up in Catholicism neo-colonial respectability politics. It's true – there is a culturally, socially accepted homophobia and transphobia that runs rampant in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Transphobia and trans-hate crimes are abundant, but not well documented. According to the United States Department of Justice reports, there have only been three hate crimes in the last 3 years, though we know that can't be all²⁰. According to the Human Rights Campaign, in a period of 15 months, between the years 2019-2020, 10 LGBTQ individuals were murdered in Puerto Rico.²¹ Pedro Julio Serrano of the *Puerto Rico Para Todos* organization was interviewed by the HRC in this article and noted “They are killing us while the government looks the other way”²². I include these facts to insinuate that this trans and homophobia are linked to the US occupation of the island, and therefore to further to question the limits of outness given and the lack of safety for trans and queer individuals in the Caribbean.

While there is blatant, multitudinous, and misrepresented accounts of transphobia and homophobia on the islands, somehow American queers are demanding visible, legible outness

²⁰ The United States Department of Justice, “State Specific Information on Hate Crimes; Puerto Rico” (The United States Department of Justice, November, 2022), <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/state-specific-information/puerto-rico>

²¹ HRC Staff, “HRC Responds to Rash of Anti-LGBTQ Violence in Puerto Rico.” Human Rights Campaign, April 2020. <https://www.hrc.org/news/hrc-responds-to-rash-of-anti-lgbtq-violence-in-puerto-rico>.

²² Serrano, Pedro Julio via HRC article “HRC Responds to....” April 2020.

from all global queers. If the queerness is not legible to Americans (out, named, proclaimed, self-hailed, etc.), they are posers, or queer baiters. Cultural commentator, André Wheeler, in his article “Bad Bunny: Does a Straight Man Deserve to Be Called a 'Queer Icon'?” argued that because Bad Bunny was not out or explicitly queer, he was performing a kind of queer baiting through his performances in drag at public events and in his music videos²³. Circling back to representation politics and these contradictory expectations of respectability and visibility, I wondered again how individuals like Bad Bunny can win; you’re either too risqué for the Latines, or not queer enough for the Americans. I wondered if our [American] intense desires for queer categorizations aid or limit our understandings of queers on a global scale.

At first, I began my research to interrogate why I could not think of many queer *reggaetoneros* in the genre. However, upon reflecting on stories like Bad Bunny and Kit Connor, I wondered if perhaps there were more queer people than I had originally accounted for if I considered the questioning, the un-confirmed, and those not “out” yet. Pushing further, I wondered if *reggaetón* has been queer all along, if we seek to remove our ideals of homonormativity, and reconfigure our understandings of queerness. In these next pages, I aim to do two things: 1) redraw the boundaries of queerness to include the questioning, the unknown, the kinky, the transgressive, and the negotiated, and 2) explore how three *reggaetoneros*, Bad Bunny, Tokischa, and Ivy Queen navigate conflicting rhetoric, living in the liminal space of “too queer” and “not queer enough.” My research hopes to question the efficacy of homonormativity, and work toward accepting the “questioning” Q in LGBTQ.

I use my own positionality as a queer person, and queer baiting discourse as a “way in” to think about highly visible queer representation in the media, and to ask important questions about

²³ André Wheeler, “Bad Bunny: Does a Straight Man Deserve to be Called a 'Queer Icon'?”, *The Guardian*, 2020.

the politics of representation, and legible queerness. I will utilize these case studies from *reggaetón* to understand how national identity, race, and language intersect with expectations and performances of queerness, and the effects of militant, out, homonormativity on Caribbean subjects. I have selected these three artists for several reasons, however mainly because they demonstrate a queerness or sexual dissidence that disidentifies with traditional performances of gender and sexuality both within the genre of *reggaetón* and American homonormativity. In these next chapters, I aim to prove my claim that *reggaetón* is queer, has been queer, and will continue to be queerer if we, as Americans, can see past our own understandings of what it means to perform queerness.

¿Ahora, que?

Though there is scholarship on *reggaetón*'s music, *perreo*, and performance, not much of it has focused on the intersection of queerness and *reggaetón* performers. In recent years, scholars like Juana Maria Rodriguez and Petra Rivera Rideau have brought attention to *reggaetón* from the scholarly disciplines of performance studies, American studies, and sexuality and gender studies. Similarly, scholars like Ramon Rivera-Servera²⁴, Melissa Blanco Borelli²⁵, Lawrence La Fountain Stokes²⁶, and José Esteban Muñoz²⁷ have explored Caribbean dance, gesture, queer identity, and performance, but not its connection to *reggaetón*.

Though queerness and Latinidad have been studied together in the performance studies realm, and *reggaetón* has been studied in socio-political realm, my work is integral to bridging the fields of study of performance studies, gender and queer studies, and the politics of representation

²⁴ Ramon Rivera Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

²⁵ Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Cuban Mulata Body*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁶ Lawrence La Fountain Stokes, *Translocas*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

²⁷ Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

to expand the discourse on reggaetón. This field of study will also move forward the field performance studies by investigating how queerness, *Latinidad*, performance studies, and music performances of *reggaetón* are in conversation with one another, and how understanding performativity, and gender/sexuality norms are influenced by the politics of presenting/passing/and “looking” queer. Above all, though, I aim to take up these case studies and create new discourse in the hopes that we can imagine new queer futures for ourselves and future generations. I hope that this new discourse sets ablaze scholars from performance studies, Latine studies, political sciences, queer studies, and beyond. I hope that these connections I make are just the beginning of new conversations of queer identities on the global stage.

Methods

Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes in his book *Translocas* posits key discursive analyses of queer subjects in Puerto Rico; he looks at the ways in which race, migration, drag, and performance can be methods to negotiate gender, sexuality, and inform how queerness is commodified. He posits a term, *cuir*, to describe Latine subjects who negotiate their positionality as gendered, racialized subjects and perform quotidian queerness that is always in flux or *trans*. He builds on an idea of *translocura* throughout his book that examines how *cuir* subjects in Puerto Rico are often pathologized as crazy and outlines the real-life ramifications for both daily and framed aesthetic performances of varied gender drag. Though he talks about several performers from RuPaul’s drag race, and some pop singers from Puerto Rico, La Fountain does not detail the reggaeton genre, a genre unique to the Hispanic Caribbean. In addition, La Fountain Stokes focuses on mainly formal drag performers who were named, out, and visibly queer. I will use La Fountain Stokes’ methods to look at *cuir* performances by Bad Bunny, Tokischa, and Ivy Queen, and specifically how these performances produce illegible or disputed queerness.

In her 1997 article “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics”, activist and political science scholar, Cathy Cohen takes up queer politics and activism and why it fails to be truly “inclusive”. Examining queerness through a queer Black feminist lens, she critically examines the role of queer American politics. She contends individuals are left out of grass roots political activist coalitions because they do not fit within the regimented and nearly inflexible ideas of what it means to be queer. Sexual dissidence, Cohen posits, is a new way to reframe how expansive the term “queer” should be: it ought to include everyone who performs sexually outside of heteronormativity. In Cohen’s definition of the sexual dissident, she aims to redefine queer as a means to open up the rigid and hegemonic queer identity of being white, cis, and gay. While Cohen’s interventions have been crucial in understanding racism in queer communities and political organizing, her objects of study were largely American and examined the Black/white dichotomy in American politics. In addition, Cohen mainly takes up sexuality in her case studies. I aim to use her framework to examine not only how Latine Caribbean identity plays a role in representation politics, but also how sexual dissidence can be translated to *gender* dissidence to discuss negotiated performances of gender identity as they pertain to the (in)visibilty of queer sexuality.

Performance studies scholar José Muñoz’ theory of disidentifications examines the ways that minoritarian subjects form communities that *lean* into essentialization as both a strategy for survival and pleasure. Muñoz uses critical theory, queer theory, and performance studies to examine intersectional subjects who have to constantly negotiate their stigmatized identities. He argues that disidentification is a way to consider the survival strategies minoritarian subjects must navigate; disidentification is the moment when you recognize something in yourself that goes against the hegemonic understandings of what “should be”. Muñoz’ intervention is key, and

similarly to La Fountain Stokes, focuses on queer subjects who are named and out. He uses largely Latine and Latine-Americans as his case studies, often those who explore performances of gender and sexuality. This will be useful in my analysis of reggaeton subjects, but I will work with these theories and that of Cathy Cohen and Lawrence La Fountain Stokes to analyze illegible, nontraditional forms of gender and sexuality as performed in the reggaeton genre.

Though queerness and *Latinidad* have been studied together in the performance studies realm, and *reggaeton* has been studied in socio-political realm, my work is integral to bridging the fields of study of performance studies, gender and queer studies, and the politics of representation. This field of study will also move forward the field performance studies by investigating how queerness, *Latinidad*, performance studies, and music performances of *reggaetón* are in conversation with one another, and how understanding performativity, and gender/sexuality norms are influenced by the politics of presenting/passing/and “looking” queer.

In this thesis, I will use La Fountain Stokes’ notions of *cuir*, *transloca* and *sinvergüencería* in combination with Cathy Cohen’s idea of the sexual dissident and José Muñoz’ idea of disidentifications as my central analytic lenses. Ultimately, I will analyze *cuir* performances by Ivy Queen, Tokischa and Bad Bunny to argue how their traditionally “illegible” performances of *cuir* sexual and gender dissidence work as a way to critically challenge homonormative queerness. I build on Cohen’s idea of sexual dissidence to bridge over into gender dissidence and use Muñoz’ intervention as a method to examine performances that move between assimilation and rejection of gender and LGBTQ norms.

Using my training in performance studies and new media, I will investigate *cuir* performances of reggaeton through examples of live performance, and filmed performance as circulated on YouTube and on social media platforms like Twitter. I have selected these

frameworks as a way to posit an interdisciplinary research mode that bridges performance studies and other modes of analysis like gender studies, Latine/diasporic studies, and queer of color critique in order to get a well-rounded, thorough analysis of how these case studies perform, and how those performances inform the politics of representation for queer POC negotiating identity. In response to a frequented question: “why performance studies?”, I aim to utilize these methodologies to bring embodiment to the forefront of conversations of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, and national identity.

Chapter 1: *Bad Bunny*

Puerto Rican Reggaetonero, Bad Bunny, has reached world-wide fame with his most recent album *Despues de la Playa*, where he’s often seen, both on tour and in music videos, dressed in genderfuck drag. Bad Bunny has never explicitly claimed ownership of a queer category like gender-non-conforming or trans, and this has ruffled many a feather in American queer communities, especially in regard to queerbaiting discourse.

In his 2020 hit *Yo Perreo Sola*, Puerto Rican reggaetonero Bad Bunny calls out violence against women in Puerto Rico and implores men to leave women alone on the dance floor so they can “twerk” or dance “doggy style” alone. In his music video for this song, Bad Bunny negotiates what I posit as varied drag performance, fluctuating between different gendered personas throughout the video. These performances are accompanied by linguistic gender slippages. I posit that Bad Bunny performs queerness through these *cuir* moves. In this chapter I consider Bad Bunny’s performances in his music video *Yo Perreo Sola*, his performance of *Ignorantes* on Jimmy Fallon’s show in 2020, and the 2022 VMAs performance of *Titi Me Preguntó* to argue that Bad Bunny’s gender negotiations - here and throughout his ongoing successful career- need not be explicit or named in order to earn queerness that is so often gate-kept. I argue that his acts of gender

and sexual dissidence help define and redefine *cuir* outside the hegemonic American lens. I contend this non hegemonic queerness produces a politic of solidarity for trans, queer and femme folks who have been the victims of hate crimes and gender-based violence in Puerto Rico and Latin America as a whole.

Chapter 2: *Tokischa*

Tokischa, an Afro-Latine, femme *reggaeton* and rap artist, known for her vulgar lyrics and unique, kinky performances has garnered the public's eye over the last year for sexually explicit content in her music videos, lyrics and social media presence. With her highly visible and commercial depictions of sensuality constantly on display in lyrical content and music videos, Tokischa is continually criticized, and from multiple angles, too. Tokischa is under fire from both conservative Catholics in the DR, and American queers. While the conservative Catholics are up in arms about her performing kink at a holy site, Tokischa and other kink-loving-queers are often rejected by LGBTQ circles and discourse. Tokischa can't seem to win as an out *cuir* in the DR, or in the US with her "untraditional" queer practices of kink.

In her Twitter post, where she uploaded four photos of performing kink at *La Virgen de Altagracia* holy site in the Dominican Republic, she called herself a "*cuero*", which in Spanish literally means "leather", but colloquially in the DR, a "slut." I argue that Tokischa here, with her kinky play on words, performs as a *cuero sinvergüenza*, utilizing the term *sinvergüencería* from Lawrence La Fountain Stokes' book *Translocas*. *Sinvergüencería* reclaims and remixes the term "*sinvergüenza*", a condemning phrase to describe someone who is shameless; often with connotations of being amoral and sleazy. I would argue, calling someone a *sinvergüenza* is often gendered, frequently used to put down women who are seen as "amoral" in the Christian sense. *Sinvergüencería*, La Fountain Stokes argues is ways in which *translocas* embrace shamelessness,

as a way to reject the negative connotations and make their performances as campy and “shameful” as possible. I argue that Tokischa’s performances of *un cuero sin vergüenza* are *shameless*, campy, kinky, transgressive, amoral, yet she uses these liminal spaces to negotiating ideas of *cuirness*, religion, and BDSM. Moreover, I argue kink, porn performance, sexual dissidence and queerness are inextricably linked and can be used to advance a politic of inclusion, and reclaim ideas of shame and morality. US with her “untraditional” queer practices of kink. Here, I aim to expand the definition of queerness to include kink, and transgressive sex.

I will examine Tokischa’s Twitter performance of kink at the *Virgen de Altagracia* holy site in the Dominican Republic, and the lyrics of her 2022 song *Delincuente*. Utilizing social media discourse surrounding her song *Delincuente*, I will link the ways kink and digital porn performance can be a site for queer cultural production and imagined queer/*cuir* utopias. I use Tokischa as a case study to look at kink and digital sex work as sexual dissidence; to redefine queerness to include kink in contemporary queer discourse. Tokischa’s quotidian and spectacle performances invoke a new kind of kinky *cuir*, a transgressive, sinful, and shameless *cuir*.

Chapter 3: *Ivy Queen*

In the late 1990s, Puerto Rican *reggaetonera* Ivy Queen was just starting on the scene as one of the first female reggaeton artists the genre had ever seen. In recorded music videos from the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ivy Queen is often seen performing in men’s clothes, dragging the expectations of women in the genre who were frequently filmed in almost no clothing²⁸. In her songs “*Yo Quiero Bailar*” and “*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*”, she drags the ideal female body; this highly sexualized, highly feminine body displayed in these music videos. In addition to her gender performance, her lyrics explicitly express her sexual desires, just like that of the male contributors

²⁸ Comparing Ivy Queen to other women in the genre is not an attempt to pit women against each other; rather, it is posed as an example of how women performed in the genre, and how gender performance varied.

to the genre. Utilizing Lawrence La Fountain Stokes' idea of *transmachismo*, Cathy Cohen's notion of deviance as resistance, and a new posited term from me, *mujeraza*, I posit that she drags or queers the genre in two distinct ways - in the way she negotiates gender in her performances throughout her career; ranging from hyper masc to hyper femme, and how she challenges heteronormative sex practices in the lyrics of her songs that demand more of cis men of this time.

In building a genealogy of gender performance in reggaeton, I look at a music video from 2022, created by two out, queer *reggaetoneras* - trans Villano Antillano, and lesbian Ptazeta. Their song *Mujerón* is a queer anthem features drag queens, pride flags in the music video, and queer rhetoric throughout the lyrics of the song. I utilize this contemporary example to show how varied performances of gender, sensuality, and sexuality have changed over the genre's history, and how vital Ivy Queen's contributions really were. Building off Villano Antillano and Ptazeta's song *Mujerón*, I posit the term *mujeraza*, or pride in whatever performance of womanhood suits you, I argue that gender performance can be negotiated throughout one's career.

In addition to the framing of contemporary *reggaetoneras* and their performances of gender, sensuality, and sexuality, I take a look at the traditional, stereotyped, gender roles within the genre, Puerto Rico's misogynist, anti-Black attack on *reggaetón*, and the history of Ivy Queen's gender performance throughout her career. She was always known as a sort of *tomboy* style, frequently performing in little to no makeup, baggy, boxy clothes, and long box braids.

I argue that she queers the genre both in her gender performance, and lyrically in her songs. In arguably her most famous song, "*Yo Quiero Bailar*" she sings about her sexual desires, yes, but moreover, that she is in control of the night in terms of sex, dancing, and *if* she's going home with this guy. She raps:

Yo te digo: “sí, tu me puedes I tell you: “yes, you can tease
provocar,” me,”

Eso no quiere decir que pa’ la That doesn’t mean that I’m
cama voy.” going to bed with you.

Figure 3: Ivy Queen "Yo Quiero Bailar", 2003.

In these lyrics, she challenges heteronormative gender roles by taking a dominant role in the practice. She is not only explicitly describing her desires and boundaries, but she is calling the shots; critically denying and disidentifying with hegemonic norms of heterosexual practice. I argue that this queering of gender norms in a genre in which cis men’s sexual desires have historically been prioritized in lyrical and live performed the primary focus was crucial in the start of the genre that set female and gender-non-conforming individuals in motion for the future of the genre.

This dilemma of militant outness, and queer categories and stereotypes is what I aim to delve into in the following chapters. Using methods from performance studies, Latine studies, and queer studies, I will argue that outness may not always be the end goal, and redefining queerness to include the questioning, the kinky, and the closeted is the only way forward toward a truly inclusive queer future.

I aim to delve deep into performances of queerness in these next pages including dragged gender performance, lyrical performance, and performances of sensuality and sexuality that do not adhere to American demands of queerness. I will look at select performances by a few *reggaetone*ros and examine how they challenge both hetero- and homonormative politics as they engage in what I argue are non-traditional, or “un-American” ideals of queerness. To examine these artists and their performances, I will utilize methods from performance studies, Latine and Caribbean studies, and queer of color critique to think about outness, visibility, and legibility.

In these chapters, I will interrogate those who continually have to navigate the dichotomy of being “too queer” for some, and “not queer enough” for others. Using interdisciplinary methods, I aim to highlight the need for scholarship on those unnamed, closeted, or unsure. I hope that in these next pages, my readers may reconsider their judgements on those who are still “figuring their shit out.”

Chapter 1: Gender and Sexual Dissidence in Reggaetón: Bad Bunny's Take on *Cuir*

Queer Political Histories – US & PR

In the few months we've experienced thus far in 2023, there have been a multitude of bills proposed on the state and federal level, to censor queer, trans, and gender-non-conforming individuals in the American territories. From Ohio, to Tennessee, to Florida and Iowa; conservative legislators are focusing all their energies on banning drag brunches and eliminating trans healthcare for youths and adults alike. There is no question – gender-non-conforming individuals are under attack. Since President Trump's term as

president, it's no question that things have taken a rather fascist turn, not only with these anti-trans healthcare bills, but also with book banning, and the attack on Critical Race Theory, and LGBTQ+ education by the Christian right. The American LGBTQ+ community and their allies have shown their infuriation with these far-right conservatives like Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, Tennessee governor Bill Lee, and Florida governor, Ron DeSantis. Florida residents, particularly students, have been constantly protesting since Gov. DeSantis passed the "Don't Say Gay or



Figure 4: Matt Bernstein (@mattxiv), "a cursed trip down memory lane," Instagram photo, March 5, 2023.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CpYqI8yJOTX/>

Trans” bill in 2022.²⁹ This bill felt like a stab in the back as it was passed only 6 years after the mass shooting in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando FL, killing 50.



Figure 5: Puerto Ricans take to the streets to protest Governor Ricardo Roselló, calling for his resignation. Photo by Carlos Giusti for the Associated Press.

The
Puerto Rican
people are no
stranger
conservative
politics, and
strong
homophobic
sentiment; in
2019, messages
had leaked of
Puerto Rican

governor, Ricardo Roselló of his abhorrent homophobic, sexist, and ableist rhetoric around gay Puerto Ricans, and even those affected by Hurricane Maria³⁰. Puerto Ricans protested for days on end, calling for their governor to resign, chanting “¡Ricky, renuncia!”³¹ The protests continued on for days, each organized on social media, and fervent in their mission to get the stubborn, resistant Roselló out of office, the protestors succeeded after eight days, when Roselló resigned on July 24, 2019. On the last day of these protests, queer Puerto Ricans took to the San Juan Cathedral, and

²⁹ Vela, Hatzel. “LGBTQ Community Plans to March in Broward against ‘Discriminatory’ Bills in Florida.” WPLG. WPLG Local 10, March 24, 2023.

³⁰ Investigativo, Centro de Periodismo. “LAS 889 Páginas De Telegram Entre Roselló Nevares y Sus Allegados.” Latino Rebels. Latino Rebels, October 10, 2022.

³¹ Allyn, Bobby. “Thousands in Puerto Rico Seek to Oust Roselló in Massive ‘Ricky Renuncia’ March.” NPR. NPR, July 22, 2019.

staged a “twerk-a-thon”; a movement dubbed *perreo combativo*³², or confrontational twerking, by the conservative clergy, later reclaimed by those involved. This unabashed, space taking, “vulgar” (as deemed by the priests of the cathedral) gesture created a space for queer folks who were under attack. Musicologist Jaime Bofill Calero interviewed many involved in the *perreo combativo* and noted the ways in which *perreo* can be used as a form of resistance. He writes “*Sin perreo, no hay revolución*.³³” The role of embodied gesture in performances of protest are vital in community activism.

I note these instances of homophobic sentiment from governments and instances of protest by the people to act as a framework to examine *reggaetón* and *perreo* as modes of performance as resistance. In this chapter, I aim to investigate performances of resistance in the form of drag, and queered gender performance. In this chapter, I examine a *reggaetonero*, Bad Bunny, who performs a queerness that moves against traditional, American ideals of outness.

I use Bad Bunny’s performances to theorize that other *reggaetoneros* throughout the canon may have been performing a more un-detectable queerness throughout the genre’s history. Both performances of identity are valid, though I aim to explore the more liminal and challenging-to-negotiate embodiments of queerness here. This kind of queerness is fluid and at times undefinable, but ever-present within the genre. With this idea of negotiated or liminal queerness, I examine Bad Bunny’s song “*Yo Perreo Sola*”, as a case study in challenging militant gay liberalism, redefining who and what is queer, and sexual dissidence in realm of reggaeton.

³² Telemundo PR, “Arzobispo repudia “perreo combativo” frente a la Catedral” Telemundo Puerto Rico. Telemundo Puerto Rico, July 25, 2019.

³³ Spanish – “Without twerking, there is no revolution.” Translation, author’s own.

To situate my research, I first wonder what it means to utilize or hail oneself queer, in the age of representation politics. Does a public figure need to be “out” or “labeled” in order to be hailed a “gay icon”? Does a media figure need to explicitly name their queerness for their audiences? More importantly, what happens when artists don’t follow the American notion of normative gay politics of being out, wanting a family, and assimilation? To begin exploring these ideas, I turn to John D’Emilio and Cathy Cohen’s ruminations on queer politics. In gender studies scholar John D’Emilio’s article *Capitalism and Gay Identity* he questions the “ideal” politics of outness and visibility with gay identity markers. He argues that though there are a multitude homosexual acts happening in the pre-Stonewall era, they were not “gay” in the sense that we know the word to be today. He posits a genealogy of how “gay” became an identity marker, or a way to hail individuals into another kind of normative culture. Though not *heteronormative*, the normative gay politics becomes a trap when it locks individuals into the same normative, respectable, capitalist family values as heteronormativity. This homonormativity looks like respectable ideals of family and whiteness.

Building on this idea of normative respectability politics, Cathy Cohen explores the ways in which the term “queer” can be limiting when it so frequently excludes those it’s meant to include, in terms of sexuality, gender and race. In her essay “Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens,” Cohen explores and coins the term sexual dissident³⁴, a way to define queerness I will be building off of in my explorations here. Examining queerness through a queer Black feminist lens, she critically examines the role of queer American politics, and how often individuals are left

³⁴ Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens”, 438. In her famed article, Black Queer studies scholar Cohen examines the ways in which queer activism has often failed to include many in its rigid boxes (many examples include interracial marriage at the time of the 60s and stretches as far back to the Antebellum South). She utilizes this idea to redefine the word queer or simply throw it out all together to include a more whole sexual dissident in the eyes of society that is a more accurate reading on the group of “queer” as a whole.

out of grass roots political activist coalitions because they do not fit within the regimented and nearly inflexible ideas of what it means to be queer. Queer, she defines to be in line with what D’Emilio calls respectable queer politics, or an idea that identity markers limit individuals because they reduce one to respectability politics. Sexual dissident, Cohen posits, is a new way to reframe how expansive the term “queer” should be; to include everyone who performs sexually outside of heteronormativity. In Cohen’s definition of the sexual dissident, she aims to redefine queer as a means to open up the rigid and hegemonic queer identity of being white, cis, and gay to include folks like interracial couples in the 1950s as one of her key examples. This idea of sexual dissident seeks to redefine the ways in which we define the “normal” in heteronormativity and how we include many more individuals in our understanding of “queerness”. Cohen explicitly names the rigid queer categories in the hegemonic queer identities, and the massive skew toward white gayness in queer political activism.

In addition, it’s important to posit the foundational work of Latine and gender scholar, Lawrence La-Fountain Stokes, author of *Translocas* who delves into the politics of quotidian and framed aesthetic performances of drag in Puerto Rico, and the politics of queerness in the liminal American/Not American Puerto Rico. He posits the terms *cuir* and *transloca* as ways to frame his case studies of various trans and drag performers from Puerto Rico and the diaspora to examine how they move against or in-line with American concepts of drag, like the highly visible RuPaul’s drag race, but more prominently, artists who are challenging normative conceptions of how drag or trans should be embodied. This intervention is crucial in examining sexual dissidence and gender exploration in Puerto Rico and Latin America as the term is meant to encapsulate the racialized conceptions of gender performance, and how they contrast American and Puerto Rican ideals of normativity. *Loca* a derogatory term for an effeminate gay man in Puerto Rico is

reappropriated, as well as trans, a prefix attached onto many other terms, indicating a sort of universality and flexibility of the term trans itself. I aim to use La Fountain-Stokes' *cuir* as method when examining drag and varied gender performance in Puerto Rico - specifically in the realm of reggaetoneros.

Building off these ideas of normative or respectable outness, *translocura* and sexual dissidence, I examine reggaeton performers who go against these terms. I posit that certain reggaeton performers, like Tokischa and Bad Bunny are performing queerness in the spirit of Cohen's idea of the sexual dissident. Taking that idea one step further, I argue that Bad Bunny performs a gender dissidence in his performances on the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon and in his 2020 music video *Yo perreo sola*. I argue that the hegemonic, American ideals of militant, out queerness does not always translate, and that one need not hail themselves queer to fit into the sexual or gender dissident category. This queerness is not performing to align with militant, respectable, familial ideals. This queerness stands on its own unnamed and possibly undetectable without a reframed idea of what it means to perform queerness. Looking at Bad Bunny as a case study, I argue that his gender and sexual dissidence, performed through embodied gesture and linguistics, is queering and challenging our homonormative ideals of militant, out queerness. By examining Bad Bunny through this lens, the world of sexual dissidence in reggaeton just got a whole lot queerer.

The Politics of Reggaetón

Throughout its history, reggaetón has often been criticized for its misogynist, violent content, often depicting women in a negative light. Some feel that both its lyrics and performative embodiment, particularly by cisgender men, promote real life violence against women.³⁵ My

35 Carballo Villagra, Priscilla. "Reggaetón e Identidad Masculina." *Cuadernos Inter.c.a.mbio Sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe*. no. 4, (2006): 87-101. Here, sociologist Carballo Villagra discusses, in a not-so-nuanced way, the ways in

research seeks to move away from this reductive narrative and acknowledge the ways in which artists are claiming or reclaiming their sensuality and sexuality in their reggaeton performances.

Petra Rivera Rideau in her book *Remixing Reggaetón*, examines the role of morality, Black diasporic identity, and cultural politics of Puerto Rico through the lens of reggaeton. Throughout the book, she criticizes the ways in which Afro-Puerto Rican culture is praised in mainstream cultural forms like *reggaetón*, while anti-Black sentiments are ever-present on the island, existing simultaneously and marginalizing populations. She introduces the role of Blackness in Puerto Rico, the role of diaspora and their link to hegemonic colorism and colonialism that are often the reiterated at the root of anti-Black sentiments on the island. As she details in her second chapter, “The Perils of *Perreo*”, in the early 2000s, the early years of reggaeton, the genre was often hypercriticized for its hypersexual lyrics and accompanying dance style, *perreo*. She argues that the twerking, gyrating dance style and explicit lyrics about sex were deemed immoral and a threat to family values, however she posits that it was not truly an issue of immorality, but anti-Black sentiment. She goes on to discuss the ways in which morality organizations like the Anti-Pornography Campaign aimed to “clean up” reggaeton, really asked to make the genre less Black in the name of respectability politics³⁶.

In many ways, the morality commission claimed to be in the name of the protection of women, with the common misconceptions of *machismo* and violence against women in the genre, of which there was much scholarship in early years of reggaeton.³⁷ With this information on

which reggaetón reinforces gender-based violence and gender roles. Published earlier in the reggaetón epoch, she argues that through lyrics and music video performances, male reggaetoneros reinforce gender-based violence and domestic violence against women.

³⁶ Petra Rivera Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*, Duke University Press, 2015, 52.

³⁷ Again, referencing Priscilla Carballo Villagra’s “*reggaetón e identidad masculina*”, 2006, this article aligns closely with the discourses that Rivera-Rideau critiques here in this chapter. This article argued, similarly to that of the anti-pornography campaign, that reggaeton’s violent lyrics and oversexualization of women was a threat to the moral standards of respectability. While the campaign criticized more the women dancers involved in reggaeton,

political commissions like the Anti-Pornography Campaign, Rivera-Rideau analyzes the role of the Black female body in zones of *perreo* when performing deviance through dance was a necessary act of economic survival. Though her ethnographic research of interviewing many women, she argues that this was not inherently a political act as much as it was for financial stability, but they were still lumped in with the campaign's mission to create "respectable" art forms.

Because of their associations with stereotypes of sexual deviance, working-class black Puerto Rican women have become 'visible' as racialized and gendered 'others' on the island³⁸.

With this notion, she posits that this marginalized group were seen as a threat to whiteness, feminism, and family values, as stated by the Anti-Pornography Campaign. Unintentionally or not, Rivera-Rideau is in direct conversation with Cathy Cohen's ideas of Black subjects being intrinsically correlated with the racialized and sexualized deviant.³⁹ While Cohen is speaking directly to the ways in which deviance can, overtime, be performed to accomplish political action, Rivera-Rideau is concerned more with the ways in which these deviant bodies were censored within the hegemonic respectability politics in a supposed racialized democracy - Puerto Rico.

The intersection of these two conversations provides a framework of analysis for Bad Bunny's role in commentary on Puerto Rican ideals of feminism, deviance, and morality in the 2020 hit song and music video, "*Yo perreo sola*." I am interested in examining the role of gender performance and (trans)feminist solidarity in Bad Bunny's song that aims to dismantle the hegemonic *machismo* and history of violence against women in his home country of Puerto Rico.

Carballo Villagra criticized moresos the consumers of the genre; similar veins that run together in the name of respectability and morality. Rivera-Rideau in her book *Remixing Reggaeton* argues it is actually a deeply rooted racist sentiment that is ingrained in the morality actions seen in this era of Puerto Rico's politics.

³⁸ Petra Rivera Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 52

³⁹ Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens", *GLQ* 3, (1997).

In examining this particular music video, it's important to situate its lyrical and embodied commentary in its proper historical/political context.

In many ways this song and video was a response to the killing of Alexa, a trans woman from Puerto Rico, who was harassed and murdered for using a women's bathroom at a gas station.⁴⁰ Also as discussed in La Fountain-Stokes' *Translocas*, there is a deep history of trans and homophobia in Puerto Rico, with several unsolved murders of gay and trans people in Puerto Rico in recent years⁴¹. In an attempt to address this perpetuated homophobia and violence against trans people in Puerto Rico, Bad Bunny and fellow reggaetonero, Sech, performed live on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon in February of 2020.



Figure 6: Photo from Bad Bunny and Sech's performance of *Ignorantes* on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. His shirt reads: "Mataron a Alexa no a un hombre con falda" [Eng. They killed Alexa, not a man in a skirt.]

Photo by Andrew Lipovsky for NBC; Getty Images.

Shown in Figure 6⁴², Bad Bunny performed in a shirt that said "mataron a Alexa, no a un hombre

⁴⁰ "Bad Bunny calls attention to the killing of a transgender woman", Brito, 2020.

⁴¹ In Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes' book *Translocas*, his second chapter *Transloca Espistimologies* speaks directly to trans and gender-negotiating performers and their impact on transloca identity. He speaks in this chapter about two public and out gay and trans individuals from Puerto Rico who were victims of hate assassinations. Kevin Fret, Jorge Steven López Mercado, and Alexa were all mentioned as only one of their murders have been solved. P.57.

⁴² Andrew Lipovsky, "Bad Bunny wore a shirt to draw attention to Luciano's killing during his appearance on 'The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon,'" , ca. February 27, 2020, digital. Shot for Getty Images digital archive. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/29/us/alexa-puerto-rico-transgender-killing/index.html>.

con falda,⁴³” Though not verbally stated, through embodied performance, he is explicitly naming his solidarity with Alexa and trans folk of Puerto Rico.



Figure 7: Bad Bunny, “Yo perreo sola,” directed by Rimas Entertainment, March 27, 2020, music video, 1:42.



Figure 8: Bad Bunny, “Yo perreo sola,” directed by Rimas Entertainment, March 27, 2020, music video, 1:37.

Continuing to explore the trend of (trans)feminist solidarity from Bad Bunny, I turn to these two stills pictured above from *Yo perreo sola*. I’m interested particularly in continuing ideas of music videos and live performances as sites for political action. I’d like to highlight the bright green neon “*Ni una menos*” sign in the background of Figures 7 and 8 from the music video of “*Yo Perreo Sola*”. He’s pictured here in differing drag personas mere seconds apart, but both are in front of a glowing neon sign reading “*Ni una menos*” in all caps, in the background of each photo. *Ni una menos*, though originated in Argentina as a protest campaign after an act of gender-based violence in Argentina against a 14-year-old girl, the grassroots protest has turned into an international campaign, calling to protect women against gender-based violence.⁴⁴ This protest

⁴³ Spanish - “they killed Alexa, not a man in a skirt.” Translation, author’s own.

⁴⁴ Argentinean journalism/social work scholar Florencia Rovetto discusses the importance of the *Ni Una Menos* campaign as it originated in Argentina and discusses the political impact the protests have made on the world in her article “Violence Against Women: Visual Communication and Political Action in “*Ni Una Menos*” and “*We Want*

phenomenon has reached all parts of Latin America, calling for the protection of all women against gender-based violence. Since its inception in 2015, the protest campaign has reached millions online and in person, pushing for changes in legislation and social norms.

I noticed that “*ni una menos*” and “*mataron a Alexa*” are both displayed in plain, obvious text in each of Bad Bunny’s performances examined thus far. Though the lyrical content of the song also speaks to this pro-woman coalition initiative, Bad Bunny is spelling it out clearly for his audience where his politics lie – and they don’t have to go searching for this. I’m also interested in the fact that these two performances were released within weeks of each other. The repeated action of pro-woman and pro-trans politic, both displayed in text form in the Jimmy Fallon performance and in his “*Yo Perreo Sola*” video, speak directly to his politics and solidarity with women across Latin America. With this in mind, I want to further posit that you don’t need to be named and out to employ these modes and performances of queer resistance.

Speaking more specifically to “*Yo Perreo Sola*”, it is important to note also, the loud, explicit, and unapologetic support of this politic as displayed here makes his feminism inarguable. Said another way – the visual element of the sign makes Bad Bunny’s statement about feminism quite clear - he is intentionally highlighting the issue of violence against women on a global (or at least multi-national) scale and standing in solidarity.

Bad Bunny *perrea sola*

Puerto Rican *reggaetonero*, Bad Bunny brings cultural production from the club to the music video scene in his 2020 hit “*Yo Perreo Sola*”. Throughout the music video, whose title in

Each Other Alive” This scholar discusses in detail the political impact *Ni Una Menos* had specifically in the online sphere, especially on social media, noting the importance of solidarity actions by those globally.

English is “I Twerk Alone,”⁴⁵ Bad Bunny performs a range of genders, or in other words, performs a kind of drag that is perhaps contrary to our American ideals of high femme drag like that of RuPaul’s Drag Race. He fluctuates fluidly through various performances of gender that oscillate quickly and almost dirtily – they never rest in one place for long. The song’s title, however, speaks to a historic element of *reggaetón*, *perreo*, whose genealogy can be linked directly to the origins of the music genre from its inception. Similar to twerking, the *perreo* has become rather mainstream, and has been appropriated by many a non-Black *reggaetoneros*, as the genre continues to experience white-washing despite its Afro-Caribbean roots. From *reggaetón* clubs to music video performances, the nature of the dancing has historically been embodied by female-identifying individuals and consumed by male-identifying individuals; onlookers who often turn to standing behind women while they dance. This hegemonic dichotomy of the dancer and the consumer is what Bad Bunny aims to address in his song; that people are allowed to dance for themselves, and *by* themselves, without having to engage in consumption.

André Wheeler of The Guardian found Bad Bunny’s performance to be a cisgender, straight man capitalizing on the plight of women⁴⁶. On the other hand, others argued that he cannot be hailed as a “queer icon” because he has not utilized that identity marker explicitly before. Many argue that because of his use of drag performance throughout the video, he claims experiential knowledge of women being harassed at clubs. I argue, however, that Bad Bunny utilizes varied iterations of gender performance as a way of queering notions of masculinity and the reggaetón genre entirely. This conversation must go beyond solidarity and look to the performance of gender

⁴⁵ “Alone” here as “sola” is conjugated in the feminine, though Bad Bunny, a male identifying individual is singing the song. This slippage will be explored later on but can speak to the varied gender performance that he demonstrates throughout the video.

⁴⁶ Wheeler, André. “Bad Bunny: Does a Straight Man Deserve to Be Called a ‘Queer Icon’?”. 2. Throughout his op ed piece, Wheeler attempts to dispel the “queer icon” badge that Ricky Martin gave to Bad Bunny in 2020 for this video. He argues that if Bad Bunny truly wanted to address internalized and social homophobia, he would spend less time promoting himself, rather, he would lift up other self-identified queer artists.

and queerness embodied on the reggaeton stage. In this way, I argue that Bad Bunny is dismantling systems of oppression by speaking directly to the perils of *machismo* in his lyrics, but also in his varied performances of gender dissidence throughout his music video.

In examining “*Yo Perreo Sola*” more closely, I examine these more stills from the music video (Figures 9 and 10) seen above to discuss Bad Bunny’s embodiment of gender, and use of drag, or performances negotiating

queerness. In his 2020 music video, Bad Bunny goes through a range of different costumes, ranging in gender performance. In Figure 8, we see Bad Bunny appearing in an outfit that would normally be described as “women’s clothing”, including a red,



Figure 9: Bad Bunny, “Yo perreo sola,” directed by Rimas Entertainment, March 27, 2020, music video, 0:39.

shiny, patten leather skirt/top combination, thigh high red boots of the same material, gaudy rhinestone costume jewelry and rectangular tinted black sunglasses. All three pieces are fire truck red, as is the set that surrounds him. At first glance, Bad Bunny’s performance of implied drag womanhood looks quite accurate, in the sense that he is aiming to do a high femme drag look. However, it is important to note that he never fully rests in one end of the gender spectrum; he queers gender in his drag performance with each of his look, carefully piecing together costume pieces that are across the gender spectrum. He does this in Figure 9 by adding a butch wig, or a short, mullet-like brown wig that is often styled on traditionally cisgender males, to his very high

femme outfit. He could have chosen to sport a long, blonde wig that appears in many forthcoming shots, but it is clear his intention was to rest somewhere unknown on the gender spectrum.



Figure 10: Bad Bunny, “Yo perreo sola,” directed by Rimas Entertainment, March 27, 2020, music video, 2:10.

This trend of queering drag performance continues on in Figure 10, where Bad Bunny is pictured wearing a skirt, spiked dog collar/necklace, and is shirtless, showing off his muscles. It’s important to note that he is also making a very obvious and intentional visual reference to kink by

being tied up in chains to the women that surround him. His skirt is long – it resembles that of a kilt in its nearly plaid fabric, and longer length, though it does feature side panels of leather as well. He is again pictured with lots of jewelry; dangly earrings, a bold, spiky necklace and arm band, and septum nose piercing; all of which feels rather grunge and stereotypically masculine if it weren’t for the presence of the skirt. Again, he is playing with the *intercambio*⁴⁷ of gender performance by not adhering to one side of the drag spectrum. He is pictured with sweat dripping down his body as he cries out. There are also fire balls on display behind him in the background, that combined with all other features of the set, indicate a hellish presence.

From these performances I wonder many things but namely, why doesn’t Bad Bunny call himself queer? I return to the questions I had regarding his Tonight Show performance. These varied drag performances, I argue, speak directly to La Fountain-Stokes’ ideas of negotiating drag and *cuir* and directly *against* cultural critic André Wheeler’s strict definitions of queerness

⁴⁷ *Intercambio* – Spanish; exchange

mentioned above. I argue that Bad Bunny is allowed to perform *cuirness*, *translocura*, and negotiate his gender without naming himself.

This epiphany leads me to my next question: how can we define someone's entire identity without them hailing themselves with an identity marker like "gay" or "genderqueer"? Ethnic studies scholar Juana María Rodríguez speaks to the difficulties of negotiating queerness in Latin America in her book *Queer Latinidad*. This book looks specifically at activism and *latinidad* in the US and in Latin America. She examines discursive spaces where multifaceted identities are negotiated. Through ethnographic research, Rodríguez discusses grassroots organizing, diaspora, activism, and the perils of essentializing identity markers for *latines*. She, similarly, to La Fountain-Stokes, attempts to define queer *latinidad* through politics, activism, and diasporic research. She posits early on in her book that having conflicting or multiplicitous identities is another form of negotiating required by individuals who maintain these identities.

I suggest that for queers of color, and all of us who have multiple and contradictory identifications, affiliations, and political desires, the 'right to name ourselves' in a manner that encompasses the complex dimensions of difference and identification has not been served by the structuralist categories offered by [Hartsock] and others⁴⁸.

Here she argues that strategic essentialism is a pitfall that reduces large groups of people that it attempts to unite. She posits that it is not required by any means to name oneself using signifiers that might not truly encompass oneself.

Espera, ¿que dijiste?

This connection between language, identity and performance becomes

⁴⁸ Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2003), 45.

repeated, imitated, and transformed
through each encounter...each time we log
on, the scripting of identity starts anew.⁴⁹

Rodriguez continues to discuss the different elements of society and culture that inform ethnicity, queerness, and all forms of identity in her book. The quote she posits here above piqued my interest in regard to Bad Bunny's undefinable and liminal queer and drag performances. She is arguing here that language can often fail us in an attempt to describe our whole selves; they desperately attempt to be helpful to eventually become obsolete and reductive. This idea of language failing prompted me to reflect on the lyrical performance of "*Yo perreo sola*"; a song that queers itself even without the visual performance of the music video.

In addition to his embodied gender performance, Bad Bunny queers Spanish grammar standards in his performance as well. I argue, using Rodriguez' idea of linguistic failure, Bad Bunny queers the grammar norms in his lyrics by utilizing rare grammatical forms like the subjunctive and no direct object pronouns. I argue that he intentionally implements these grammatic tools to further his politics of solidarity, queer performance, and feminism by skewing hegemonic grammatical norms.

Queerness, continually being redefined and challenged in these cases lead me to examine closely the slipperiness of the language used in "*Yo Perreo Sola*". I utilize the term slippage or slipperiness to indicate a confusing or liminal sense that is implied in this performance. In Figure 10 clad in his skirt, he sings (view caption in image) "*hoy se puso minifalda*."⁵⁰ This lyric piqued

⁴⁹ Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2003), 127.

⁵⁰ Spanish - "today [they] put on a miniskirt". Translation, author's own.

my interest in regard to his gender performance as he discusses a miniskirt while in a skirt himself. In Spanish, the reflexive *se puso* or *se habla español* for example, can refer to one person, but is often used in a ubiquitous sense, like “Spanish is spoken [here]” with implied place. In this case *ponerse* is indeed used to indicate “put on” rather than *poner*’s more general “put”, however the lyric does not indicate a direct object for which it is referring to because there is no pronoun, noun or even an indirect object pronoun like *le* or *les*. This raised an eyebrow for me as a linguist to explore who he is referring to because it is implied rather than explicit. Is he referring to one girl in the club? Or is it an aim to include himself in a more general “today’s the day to put on miniskirts!”? I argue that because his language is intentionally slippery, he queers himself into skirt-wearers group visually, utilizing his liminal drag performance in his music video.

Circling back to the Tonight Show performance, and on the topic of linguistic performances of gender, I wonder how Bad Bunny views himself and possible queer identities. I notice that in his performance on The Tonight Show, his shirt reads “a man in a dress”, which is a direct quote from the police filings in Alexa’s murder case. I also notice that Bad Bunny himself is wearing a skirt; a repeated drag performance he will continue to build on in his performance in “*Yo perreo sola*” discussed below. I also notice his pink blazer that he removed to reveal the shirt with a message underneath. I wonder; does he consider himself an “*hombre con falda*” as an act of political solidarity? Or said another way; is he wearing a skirt to speak directly to Alexa’s attackers that anyone *can* wear a skirt and shouldn’t be murdered for it? I wonder; does he consider himself to be queer? Or is his performance more a political act of solidarity?

I posit that these two performances are slippery intentionally and accomplish a politic of solidarity. Together, the interventions of queered grammar norms and queered *gender* norms push forth a new avenue for transfeminist and queer political organizing. *Reggaetón* has proven to be

an important and highly visible platform for this political activism; Bad Bunny being a perfect case study. These kinds of performances push forth a new world for reggaetoneros from all over that says anyone can be *cuir*, it's ok to navigate and negotiate gender and sexual dissidence, and perform that on a large scale. It re-sensitizes audiences to the issues of violence, and compels them to not remain silent when acts of transphobia and homophobia occur.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that *reggaetón* has been queer all along, if we seek to define queer in new ways like *cuir*, gender dissidence, *sexual* dissidence, and liminal gender performances. This idea of redefining queerness to include many more varieties of gender and sexual dissidence allows for a broader understanding of who and what performs outside of the hegemonic ideas of sexuality, sensuality, and gender norms. Redefining queerness to include kink, femme sensuality, and gender fluidity will represent a larger mass of individuals in a non-essentializing manner that will only push forward politics of representation that Americans are so obsessed with. Thinking about queerness in this way and allowing negotiating of gender performance without confining to rigid classifications of “queer”, “gay”, “male” or “female”, we are able to achieve true inclusivity and decolonize queerness.

It is also important to note that *reggaetón* and *perreo* have always been rooted in sexual dissidence. Using Cohen's methods of dissidence in connection with political action, this type of politic might not play into militant out politics or *homonormativity* as outlined by Lisa Duggan or John D'Emilio. In fact, it speaks to the multiple, intersecting identities that *cuir* Latin Americans must navigate. This is to say – American ideals and definitions of outness, hailed or explicit queerness in the realm of politics don't always apply outside the realm of the US. Using this knowledge, we can then turn back to our questions like “why isn't this artist part of the

representation politic I want them to be?” and answer for ourselves; gender and sexual dissidence represents what “queer” seeks to represent American homonormativity.

In this chapter, I took up these negative outcomes of queer-baiting discourse, and the gatekeeping of queer categories. I argue that Bad Bunny’s performances are sites for cultural production and are liberatory practices. Though this performance was intentionally meant to be liberatory for the women facing machismo and sexism, it is even further creating liberatory spaces for individuals who are not “hailed” as queer. I critique the neocolonial “out” politics and consider what queer futures might look like. I argue that in order to combat the Bill Lees, the Mitch McConnells, and the Marjorie Taylor Greenes, we must stand united in our front, and support one another rather than alienate those who may be questioning.

Chapter 2: *Estilazo sexual*: Tokischa and the Search for Transnational Queer Utopias



Figure 11: Villano Antillano and Tokischa Peralta kiss at a Latin Music Awards, 2022. Photo by @fjdiazphoto, shared by Villano Antillano on Instagram.

Villano Antillano (@villanoantillano), “OTRO SOLD OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!! 🏆 todos los caminos llevan al lesbianismo, ise los vengo diciendo!...,” Instagram photo, August 23, 2022.

On August 26, 2022, Puerto Rican reggaetonera Villano Antillano, and Dominican Tokischa kissed at a live performance in Puerto Rico while performing onstage. The kiss was sensual, purposeful, and sexy. They kissed multiple times throughout the

set; on their hands and knees, leaning in, and right on the edge of the stage in the audience’s faces. This kiss shocked Puerto Rico, and Antillano and Tokischa faced extreme backlash online, ranging from homophobic, transphobic, and anti-Black responses from other *reggaetoneros* in the genre, and the general public on social media. One of the most vocal critics was fellow reggaetonero, Omy de Oro, who posted a photo of Tokischa and Antillano’s kiss on his Instagram story with the following caption “I cannot support this, for real! They have truly gone crazy, shameless. Fans and

artists who support this can fucking unfollow me.”⁵¹ This post is one of the many examples of how performances of queerness can spark upticks in homophobic and transphobic rhetoric online and reenacted in real life.



Figure 12: Bad Bunny kisses his male backup dancer. August 29, 2022, Getty images for MTV.

<https://pagesix.com/2022/08/29/bad-bunny-kisses-male-dancer-in-mtv-vmas-2022-performance/>

In response to this backlash of transphobia and homophobia, Puerto Rican Bad Bunny kissed one of his male backup dancers while performing at the 2022 VMA Awards two days after Tokischa and Villano’s show in Puerto Rico. This act was also a direct response of solidarity with Tokischa and Villano Antillano,

and it too, shocked many. The kiss was fleeting and spontaneous; the crowd went wild. He wore a silver suit, red and silver nail polish, and his hair in little braids on the top of his head. Bad Bunny has gained international popularity, especially in response to his new album *Después de la Playa* released this year, 2022. While I do not aim to compare these two performances as one and the

⁵¹ El Snack Report (@Elsnackreport), “El artista urbano Omy de Oro reaccionó a el beso con críticas y protestas en redes. ‘Fanáticos y artistas que apoyen esto que me dejen de seguir pal carajo...,’” Twitter, September 1, 2022, 5:12 pm. https://twitter.com/Elsnackreport/status/1565447478693994496?s=20&t=F7gsJyKewZ9C9hl_tzT-KA
Translation, author’s own.

same, it's important to understand their impact and their correlation in discussions of queer respectability politics in the Latine Caribbean.

As he gains popularity, he and his performances have been intensely scrutinized. It's important to note that though he is not "out" as a gay man, this kiss was not the first performance of queerness in his career. In many of his music videos he is seen in drag, in public with painted nails, and most recently, kissing people of all genders. This does not stop the haters, however. In an op-ed from *The Guardian*, "Bad Bunny: Does a Straight Man Deserve to Be Called a 'Queer Icon'?", culture writer André Wheeler argues that Bad Bunny engages in queer-baiting or pretending to be queer to gain capital or reputation. "Popular LGBTQ media and culture has always fixated on straight men who align themselves with queer causes and aesthetics."⁵² This term was originally only applied to businesses, abusing pandering tactics to appeal to the queer demographic in the name of representation, when queer folks did not feel their identities properly represented in the end. Pushing against queer-baiting discourse, I argue that this Bad Bunny kiss was a deliberate political act designed to stand in solidarity against the rampant homophobia, femicide, and hate crimes in Puerto Rico and around the world.

I am very interested in the origins of "queer baiting" discourse, and who creates these borders around who and what can be defined as queer? There are people of the same gender kissing! Isn't that "gay"? Culture scholar Lisa Duggan, in her 2003 text "The Twilight of Equality?", posits an idea of neoliberal *homonormativity*, or the codification of "gayness" as the adoption of heteronormative ideals of family and assimilation. In this text, she argues that homonormativity functions to promote nuclear family values, assimilation, and upholding power

⁵² André Wheeler. "Bad Bunny: Does a Straight Man Deserve to Be Called a 'Queer Icon'?" *The Guardian*, 2020. 2.

structures like patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy.⁵³ Duggan argues that homonormative gay identity politics are a trap – a reiteration of the structures that oppress us when it locks individuals into the same normative, “respectable”, capitalist family values as heteronormativity. Her intervention is key in understanding respectability politics that have been reiterated in queer communities and enforced on queer subjects.

With this in mind, I wonder how Omy de Oro’s homophobic response calling them “shameless” and André Wheeler’s claims of queerbaiting play into a similar kind of respectability politics. Both are policing members of their own communities rather than lifting them up. I also wonder what kind of queer utopia these culture critics and queer gatekeepers are hoping for; I wonder why they feel the need to police LGBTQ+ identity markers. Some argue queer utopic futures *should be* homonormative; playing into assimilation tactics, and “having *exactly* what the straights have”. Others argue that that it’s a world where no one would have to come out again, doing away altogether with compulsory heteronormativity, and the demand of coming out. This leaves me with two crucial questions: what happens when an individual performs a queerness outside of the legible, codified ideals of hegemonic queer identity? And how has homonormativity failed us from a transnational point of view?

In examining queerbaiting discourse, and these two queer kisses on the *reggaetón* stage, I am deeply distraught over the seemingly endless cycle we find ourselves in between “too queer” and “not queer enough”: homophobia or queerbaiting claims. I argue that this is the new neoliberal paradigm that has emerged from a desire for “true” representation politics. I particularly wonder about how this dichotomy functions in *reggaetón*, but more broadly in how the US’ ideals of homonormativity are enforced on Caribbean subjects, but how outness might not always be an

⁵³Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press), 2003.

ideal tactic. With this in mind, I argue that this dichotomy of “too queer”/ “not queer enough” is deeply troubled by racial and ethnic politics, ultimately resulting in the conflicting rhetoric from the Brown/cis/straight/Latine subjects of the Caribbean vs. “respectable” white/cis/gay/American/man, respectively. I argue here, using performances by Dominican Tokischa that these desires on both sides for a respectable performance of queerness are both rooted in normative politics that reinscribe white, heteropatriarchal, colonial ideals.

Building off my questions surrounding queer baiting discourse, I find myself most deeply concerned with notions visibility, legibility, and out politics. I wonder: is outness always the end goal? What about the questioning? I wonder how performances of queerness that do *not* operate in realms of “out” politics; the illegible, the unnamed, work against respectability politics of both the hetero- and *homo*-normative. Some examples of this would be kink, drag, or perhaps a kiss on national television. I argue that these performances, like that of Tokischa and Bad Bunny’s public kisses, work to dismantle homophobic, transphobic, heteropatriarchal, and racist ideologies.

In these next pages, I will analyze two performances of *reggaetona*, Tokischa, to explore the dual expectations from American queers, and Caribbean heterosexuals for their versions of respectability politics, and how she resists both in her queerness. With these following examples, I aim to broaden our understandings of what queerness can look or *feel* like, looking at Tokischa’s modes of queer resistance including kink, risk, and pornography. I argue that her performances imagine utopic, transnational, queer futures, and they seek to disrupt oppressive ideologies on both sides. I use Tokischa as a case study because she challenges hetero- *and* homonormative politics to perform a different kind of queerness, *contra del estilo americano*⁵⁴; homonormativity. I further argue that Tokischa’s performances produce performative effects of non-essentialized, complex,

⁵⁴ Spanish; “Against the American way”.

queer representation and identity that might be overlooked by traditional hegemonic, homonormative narratives. Her transgressive performances, whether with men or women, queer or not, are what enact transformation and new utopic, decolonial queer futures.

Takes on Queer Utopias

To examine how Tokischa is moving against, or imagining new definitions of queerness, let's first dive into some of the history behind homonormative ideals, and ideas for queer futures. Utilizing these methodologies, we will be able to frame Tokischa's performances and how they identify (or not) with these ideals.

It's important to note before we begin that having markers and labels is *not* what I'm arguing against, here. Many members of the LGBTQ+ community revel in being able to call themselves gay, myself included, and are often key points of self-discovery that are crucial to many. There *are* capitalist ventures that pander to the general LGBTQ public, that hope to queer bait for profit. I am, however, arguing against homonormativity explicitly, due to its reiterated, heteronormative power structures that reinforce hierarchies of passing politics, legibility, and essentialism. I am arguing against the idea that queerbaiting discourse should be applied to individuals in media, and the ways in which forced legibility and outness reinforce key structures of power that we as queer folks seek to resist.

As a queer person, I have often felt left out by American ideals of homonormativity; a queerness that *begs* to be legible. For example, when I came out as a lesbian, I was told "you don't look gay", but what they really meant was "you don't look butch enough, and that's what a lesbian really is". These essentialist statements about what queer "should" look like or "should perform" gender or sexuality frustrate me and lead me to constantly question who created these rules and definitions regarding how different types of queerness read to others, and how validity is earned

through legibility. I argue that homonormativity *cannot* be synonymous with queer utopias if it is forcing individuals into categories that might not align with their unique experiences.

When did it become mandatory to name one's identity, or hail oneself into a distinct category of queer? Gender studies scholar John D'Emilio, in his chapter *Capitalism and Gay Identity*, questions the "ideal" politics of outness and visibility with gay identity markers. He argues that "gay" identity is a relatively new phenomenon. Though there were a multitude homosexual *acts* happening in the pre-Stonewall era, they were not "gay," at least in the sense that today the word is used as an identity and cultural marker. D'Emilio posits a genealogy of how "gay" became an identity marker as a way to hail individuals engaging in homosexual acts into a new kind of category. He argues that "gay" as the marker we know it today began with homosexual behaviors and *transitioned* into a homosexual identity marker with ascribed traits. He then describes the way that this identity marker reiterated heterosexual norms, like desires for nuclear family structure⁵⁵. D'Emilio's intervention is key to understanding the history of queer politics as a relatively new genre.

D'Emilio, similarly to Lisa Duggan explore the past, while performance studies scholar José Muñoz, in his introductory chapter of his book *Cruising Utopia*, posits a theory for the future of queer politics. He argues that a queer future is constantly on the horizon. Muñoz further argues that we have not arrived at queerness yet, that it is ever-changing and something that we are always working toward. "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."⁵⁶ Here, Muñoz is advocating a shift that

⁵⁵ John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity" *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).

⁵⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: Feeling Utopia." *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

imagines queerness as an ideal or a future that is not here yet, queerness that is constantly negotiated and worked toward to one day achieve utopia.

Thinking of the present day, the quotidian queer, sociologist Caterina Nirta argues against Muñoz' ideal for futurity in her article "Actualized Utopias: The Here and Now of Transgender." Nirta insists that queer utopia is in the here and now, the spontaneous, and the quotidian. She contests Muñoz's idea of the future as it relates to trans subjects.

I contend that in order for utopia to be generative and productive, it needs to be located in the present and framed as an impulse of the now. My argument is that it is possible to think of an ethical utopianism that feeds from the materialism of everyday life and manifests itself as an act *of* the present, *in* the present, and *for* the present.⁵⁷

Nirta explains here that thinking of queerness as an unreachable place is not helpful as it is always unattainable, but the queer *present* brings small, materializations of queer utopia.

Last, performance studies scholar, Jill Dolan, in her 2001 article "Performance, Utopia, and the Utopian Performative", posits a key intervention which she calls the "utopian performative". She argues that the utopian performative is activated when we go to the theatre; we are observers turned activists when we see an imagined utopia on stage. She argues that though we are watching a framed aesthetic performance, this still enacts a performative in real life, because we are compelled to make changes in real life to see these utopias come to fruition in real life. She makes clear that not every audience member might feel the utopia, but those who do emerge with fervor to enact the changes they wish to see.

I'm not suggesting that every spectator will find feelings of utopia in performances by Hughes, Shaw, or Margolin, or for that matter any feminist or queer performance artist. Their performances inspire me, move me toward such feelings of possibility, hope, and political agency.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Caterina Nirta, "Actualized Utopias: The Here and Now of Transgender," *Politics & Gender* vol. 13, no 2. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2-3.

⁵⁸ Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 477.

Dolan's intervention is key when thinking about how utopias move from the imagined to the real; the hoped to the enacted.

I note these key interlocutors to begin my discussions on imagined utopias, performance, and how queerness can move beyond one set of ideals. I want to posit here that homonormative ideals of "out" & visible queerness, even when applied internationally, don't achieve the imagined or actualized utopias Nirta and Muñoz are aiming for. I further posit that this policing, this micro-hegemony of surveillance and mandatory self-hailing within the LGBTQ community is a form of neocolonialism that reinforces white, capitalist, nuclear-familial, assimilation tactics to maintain positions of power over Latine and other global subjects. I also want to posit that Tokischa enacts the utopian performative with her photo-porn performance at *La Virgen de Alta Gracia*, and with her 2022 kinky, risky music video/song "*Delincuente*". I argue that through her performances of *cuero*, *tiguere*, and *sin vergüencería*, Tokischa helps us see her imagined queer utopia of reclaiming narratives of slutiness, transgressive sex acts, and sexy futures that don't give a fuck!

"Tengo un delincuente en mi habitación": Tokischa's transgression as queer

Queer, femme, Afro-Dominican Tokischa grew up in Puerto Plata, DR; *en el barrio* as she calls it.⁵⁹ She is no foreigner to performance; she frequently utilizes Twitter and OnlyFans to post performances of her dancing naked, feeling herself. Tokischa is constantly performing her sensuality AND sexuality; like in her 2021 song, *Linda* she raps about "kissing her friends"⁶⁰ and has kissed Madonna, Rosalía and, as we've seen, Puerto Rican Villano Antillano, on live television

⁵⁹ Tokischa "Tokischa "*Delincuente*" Letra Oficial Y Significado | Verified," November 18, 2022, video interview 0:01. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBWj4WRMa44>.

El barrio; Spanish for "the hood".

⁶⁰ Tokischa "Tokischa x Rosalía – *Linda* (Official Video)", September 1, 2021, music video, 0:34. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmmTz3W-JOQ>.

performances. She also sings about *chingando*⁶¹ *con* men as well, like in her songs *Singamos*⁶², and *Perra*⁶³. It is my general consensus that Tokischa identifies somewhere on the bisexual spectrum, singing about having desires for both men and women, though never explicitly claiming a sexuality category. Though the *gender* of the person she is kissing varies song to song, almost all of Tokischa's songs talk about her sexual desires, whether it be fantasies or real-life experiences.

Tokischa, in a recent video-interview with Verified/Genius on YouTube, talks about how she was inspired to write her song 2022 “*Delincuente*”, explaining in detail (and in mostly in English/Spanglish) the lyrics and inspiration for the song⁶⁴. She said she was inspired by a memory of sneaking a bad boy; *un tiguere, un delincuente*⁶⁵ into her room when she was living at her brother's house. She talks further about how she often seeks out sex with bad boys because they please her better “*¡Los tigueres son los que singan bueno porque son malos!*”⁶⁶ (0:13-0:15). Tokischa also mentions in the Genius interview a key element of *cuero*⁶⁷ behavior: this *tiguere* is married (3:13), and she asks him to ejaculate in her in the lyrics of the song. This case study is crucial on two key registers: 1) it acts a reclamation of slutty behavior, it's transgressive, sexy, kinky, and risky, and 2) I argue it curiously invokes queerness somehow, even though she is having a “heterosexual” encounter.

⁶¹ *Chingar* – Spanish; colloquial, dirty way to say “have sex with”.

⁶² Tokischa “Tokischa x Yomel El Melosa – *Singamo* (Video Oficial)” December 2, 2021, music video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poBsrfLF4Ew>

⁶³ Tokischa “J. Balvin, Tokischa – *Perra* (Official Audio)”. September 10, 2021, audio clip. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8Ehj3e2Pac>

⁶⁴ Tokischa. “Tokischa ‘Delincuente’ Letra Oficial Y Significado | Verified”. YouTube. RapGenius Video. YouTube, November 18, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBWj4WRMa44>.

⁶⁵ *Delincuente*; Spanish, literally a delinquent. Colloquially, someone from the hood.

⁶⁶ Spanish; “The bad boys are the ones who fuck good because *they're* bad!” Translation author's own.

⁶⁷ *Cuero*; Spanish, colloquial for “slut”.

Throughout the song, Tokischa talks very explicitly about the kinds of sex she wants from this bad boy she just snuck into her room and doesn't leave out *any* details. I'm interested in a particular part of the song; the first two verses, because they describe not only high kink, but clandestine, secretive sex as well. I want to highlight two key moments of performatives for this passage: the meta moment of filming her twerking, and the risk of pregnancy. These two performatives engage what Melissa Blanco Borelli would call hip(g)nosis⁶⁸. Tokischa revels in risk, and isn't afraid to reclaim her sluttiness, letting the audience know all the juicy details of her sexual encounters.

<i>Dejame lo lleno 'e leche</i>	Leave me filled with your milk
<i>Y no hagamos mucha bulla que mi hermano no sospeche</i>	And let's not make too much noise so my doesn't suspect that
<i>Que tengo un delincuente en mi cama</i>	I have a delinquent in my bed
<i>Que me rompe el culo en cuatro, después que me lo mama</i>	Who breaks my ass in four after he blows me
<i>Vamo corriendo pa'l baño</i>	We go running to the bathroom
<i>Meteme pa' la bañera que ya me sacaste el caño</i>	Put me in the bathtub 'cause you already took out the pipe
<i>Sacame moja' pa' la escalera</i>	Make me wet on the stairs
<i>Ponme bellaca y putona y grabame perriando encuera'</i>	Make me horny and slutty and film me twerking naked
<i>Metémelo hasta dentro del closet (closet)</i>	Put it in the closet (closet)
<i>Dame lengua, dame de'o, rompémelo en to' las poses</i>	Give me tongue, give me a finger, break me with it in all the poses
<i>Muérdeme, jálame, chupame, estréllame</i>	Bite me, pull me, suck me, smash me
<i>Subeme la nota, singandome arrebatame</i>	Make me cum, fuck me, grab me. ⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body*, 2015. A term that Blanco Borelli coins to discuss how Afro Latina women had to carve space out for themselves...literally when thinking about the history of African dance in Cuba.

⁶⁹ Translation – author's own.

Figure 13: Lyrics to Tokischa's *Delincuente*. Translation, author's own.

In this passage, Tokischa works within both a memory of the past, and the present moment. She makes demands of her sex partner, but also breaks the fourth wall by sharing a secret with the audience: “*que tengo un deliciente en mi cama!*”, that she has a bad boy in her bed. She goes between talking to her partner and talking to the audience about her experience. In the highly erotic first line of this passage, she explicitly demands that her partner ejaculate in her; in previous and forthcoming passages, Tokischa raps that sometimes they fuck with a condom and sometimes not.⁷⁰ With the important insight she shared in her Genius interview that this guy was married, this act of risk is doubly risky – not just of her getting pregnant but also her having a child with a man who has a whole other life with a wife and children.

The history of gender and sexuality performance in the DR is a complex one, with a storied history rooted in anti-Blackness, and a Pan Latino “we don’t see color” rhetoric. Sydney Hutchinson in her book *Tigers of a Different Stripe*, she delves into performances of Dominican music, gesture, and gender performance. In her sixth chapter “Temporary Transvestites”, she takes up gender performance in Dominican music genres including *bachata* and *reggaetón*. She notes that atypical gender performances have their roots in Afro-Caribbean traditions, and often do not align with American understandings of queer politics. She spoke to various queer members of the music scene in the DR regarding out politics:

Since, as noted, gay Dominicans do not follow the same kind of identity politics as North American gay men and women, it would be unfair for outside observers to expect the performers described in this chapter to play by the same rules – that is it may not be to their best advantage to be outspoken about their sexual preferences, whatever they may be...as Chancy argues ‘Though visibility has its advantages, it also has drawbacks; physical and ideological backlash and, in some instances, violence, may constrain individuals to the same degree that imposed by mainstream identities.’”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Tokischa “Tokischa x Anuel AA X Ñengo Flow – *Delincuente* (Video Oficial)”. YouTube. August 19, 2022. (1:12.)

⁷¹ Sydney Hutchinson, *Tigers of a Different Stripe*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 172.

Here, Sydney Hutchinson touches on a key historical moment – the Afro-Caribbean traditions of gender performance have been criminalized and demonized by the neo-imperial homonormative politics of “global” queerness. She argues it might not be advantageous for Caribbean queers to be out in the same way that American queers are – not just for safety, but for the connection to Afro-Caribbean tradition.

Melissa Blanco Borelli in her book *She is Cuba* examines a similar connection to the Afro-Caribbean tradition of gender; the *mulata, cubana* body as case study. She delves into the historiography of Afro Cuban dance, mixed-ness, and the politics of hip gestures. Blanco Borelli focuses her research largely on Cuba’s history colonization, and systemic racism that Black, Indigenous, and mixed Cubans have experienced, and the link to dance, performance and gesture. “I argue that it is through those acrobatically skilled hips of hers that she finds an opportunity for self-authorship, pleasure, and discursive contestation. Through her embodiment and performances of what I call hip(g)nosis, the *mulata* can step outside the limits of tragedy”⁷². Though she is focusing on the Cuban *mulata* body, I believe her analysis can be bridged over to Tokischa, as a mixed Caribbean woman herself. Thinking of hip(g)nosis and Tokischa together is clear in a key moment of performance in the lyrics “Make me horny, make me slutty, film me twerking naked.”. It’s important to note that the genre of reggaeton has an accompanying dance style called *perreo* which literally means “doggy-style.” As you can probably imagine, it’s performed usually back-to-front, and emulates what we would call in the US twerking or grinding. We can imagine Tokischa’s erotic within the lyrics of the song, but moreover, we can hear her desperate desire for pleasure. I argue these performatives of *perreo*, and reclaimed pleasure harkens to Blanco Borelli’s

⁷² Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She Is Cub : A Genealogy of the Mulata Body*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7.

idea of hip(g)nosis as she reclaims her own pleasure in being filmed, and dancing for him. She carves out a space for her own desire, and revels in the secretive act.

Tokischa is carving out new spaces for her career, as well; even after over thirty years of *reggaetón* lyrics about kinky sex, somehow the public is still shocked when women write songs about their sexual desires. What compels me most about the public discourse around this song is the backlash Tokischa has faced for this song. I would argue that there are deep-seated notions of anti-Blackness and misogyny that go into her critiques, as many of her cis/het/male counterparts frequently rap about nonnormative sex practices⁷³. With this being said and thinking about similar backlash she faced when she kissed Villano Antillano at a performance in Puerto Rico, I'm interested in the public's reaction to this song, especially on platforms like TikTok. Recently, there's been a TikTok trend featuring young Latinxs showing "*Delincuente*" to their parents and filming their reactions.⁷⁴ The reactions are almost always something along the lines of "*que barbaridad!*"⁷⁵ or "turn that shit off!", with the child giggling in the background. There's something to be said about the *chisme*⁷⁶ of it all, the gossip factor. Tokischa does an excellent job in leaning into the shock factor – both with the lyrics of this song, and the online responses. What's interesting to me about this trend is that regardless of the response of the public, the more videos

⁷³ Tunes, Luny. (feat. Daddy Yankee, Wisin, Don Omar, Yandel). "Luny Tunes, Daddy Yankee, Wisin, Don Omar, Yandel - Mayor Que Yo 3 (Lyric Video)." October 29, 2015.

This reggaetón hit from 2015 not only features several of the genre's biggest male stars, but all of them rap about having sex with a woman older than them. In fact, that's the whole theme of the song! The song details the foreplay and sex acts between the singer and the older woman, with explicit depictions of the acts. This is just one example of the many, many reggaetón songs, sung largely by men, that explicitly discuss nonnormative sex.

⁷⁴ Marquez, Julio @julionatem, "JAJSJAJH ME MEO 🤔 #mamáreaccionando #tokischa #delincuentetokischa," TikTok, November 8, 2022.

https://www.tiktok.com/@julionatem/video/7163774364226211077?_r=1&_t=8Y0pBUZtP7T&is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7163774364226211077.

⁷⁵ "*Que barbaridad*"; Spanish – literally "what barbarity!", colloquially used to describe something horrible, awful, and immoral. When used on a Black subject, there are implicit racial implications, especially in regards to colonization, and white Spaniards calling Black and Indigenous subjects "barbaric".

⁷⁶ *Chisme*; Spanish – gossip.

like this are made, the more visibilities and possible capital is achieved by Tokischa in a rather passive way.

Connecting this to queer representation and discourses around “not queer enough”, I wonder how the morality discourses, the *chisme*, the negative backlash, all play a role to alienate and other Tokischa. Somehow, Tokischa faces the same level of backlash when she performs queer or heterosexual acts. What does this say about power structures that relate to hetero and homonormativity? I argue that Tokischa is not performing an explicitly queer act in *delincuente*, but she evokes a kind of deviant, immoral, slutty resistance that *feels* queer. The queerness is not explicit, rather, the song *feels* queer, or at least in line with queer politics, because of her engagement with risk, transgression, and kink. By referencing her filming and twerking, Tokischa engages in hip(g)nosis and dark play. She also engages in risky play when performing unprotected sex with her *tiguere*. I argue that her performances of erotic delinquent, bad boy sex, and risky play *feel* queer because they resist heteropatriarchal norms of sex and challenge the same power structures that queer activists aim to combat. This key moment of connection leads me to think about how queer resistance, queer activism, and queer identity politics go beyond formal categorical labels, and how a future for queer politics lies somewhere in this negotiation of multiple power structures and cultural hegemony.

Los cueros (cuirs, tigueres, etc). también oran....Tokischa's Prayer for Queer Future



Tokischa Peralta ✓

@tokischa_



Los Cueros también Oran 🙏🕊️🌟

[Translate Tweet](#)



11:56 AM · Aug 5, 2021

Figure 14: Tokischa Peralta (@tokischa) "Los Cueros también Oran 🙏🕊️🌟," Twitter, August 5, 2021, 11:56 am, https://twitter.com/tokischa_/status/1423311949283082240?lang=en

Using Twitter as an uncensored platform, Tokischa posted four photos at La Virgen de Altagracia,⁷⁷ a holy sanctuary in La Vega, Dominican Republic on August 5, 2021. The sanctuary that Tokischa used as her backdrop is a covered structure, with open spaces cut out to be windows, showcasing the trees behind it. The walls are made of stucco, painted sky blue, with orange tiles on the floor, and depictions of the virgin and Jesus himself hang rather haphazardly on the walls. The Dominican Republic has strong ties to Christianity with about 49% of the population practicing Catholicism, and 26% practicing some form of protestant Christianity, according to the “2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Dominican Republic” by the US State Department.⁷⁸ This sanctuary is a place many religious Dominicans visit yearly, and often light prayer candles on the alter and leave flowers for their deceased loved ones. In fact, this *virgen* of “high grace” is celebrated all over the DR because she is their patron saint – with a national day dedicated to her, celebrated every January 21st⁷⁹.

The first two images she posted depict Tokischa in braids, makeup-less, kneeling and praying in all white. Behind her in the sanctuary, though small, the altar is painted a vibrant sky blue, and is inundated with mosaic images of the Virgin Mary, crucifixes, and prayer candles. In Photo 4, she faces the virgin, but in Photo 2, she looks at the camera, breaking the fourth wall. In Photo 1, she is photographed in a white headdress shaped like the head of a bull with white lace and long white horns. Her breasts peek out of her white corset as she leans back against the altar, grasping at her breasts, with arms crossed, almost as if to keep them from falling out. In Photo 3 she is photographed with the same white lace top that hangs off her shoulders, with no bottoms. She covers her genitalia with her hands, one over the other, with the same headdress as Photo 1.

⁷⁷ *La Virgen de Alta Gracia*; Spanish – “The Virgin of High Grace”.

⁷⁸ United States Department of State, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT, Office of International Religious Freedom, Section I Religious Demography, 2019.

⁷⁹ Colonial Zone, “Virgen De La Altagracia,” *Guide to the Colonial Zone and Dominican Republic*, Colonial Zone DR, 2019.

Religious gesture is abundant in these photos, but most prominently in the tweet that accompanies these photos, like a caption that reads: “*Los Cueros también Oran*”⁸⁰.

The religious community of the town of Jarabacoa, La Vega - where the sanctuary is located - was outraged by her performance⁸¹. The mayor of the town demanded she issue a public apology for her actions, and she was nearly sentenced to jail time., but town ultimately decided to ban her from the site indefinitely and issue her a fine. She released a statement via Twitter apologizing for any disrespect she caused the community. In her apology she makes a clear distinction for what she is lamenting; not for her actions, but the hurt she caused.

I didn't take these photos with the intention of offending anyone, but more so to show that anyone can pray, no matter where they're from or what they represent.⁸²

This is a crucial distinction she makes in her apology – she does not apologize for who she is or what she stands for. In addition to this key performance of resistance, she performs again her steadfast dedication to non-censorship; she refused to take down the images from Twitter. Of course, nothing is really ever deleted from the internet, but these photos are easily accessible, and still available to access from her account. This performative is key when thinking about dedication to resistance, and the multiple layers in censorship, politics, and identity.

In the caption of her Twitter post, she called herself a “*cuero*”, which in Spanish literally means “leather”, but colloquially in the DR, a “slut.” I argue that Tokischa here, with her kinky play on words, performs as a *cuero sin vergüenza*, utilizing the term *sinvergüencería* from

⁸⁰ Spanish; “sluts also pray”. Translation, author's own.

⁸¹ @AlexaNeyomi. “Im at the salon and the Dominican ladies are furious about the Tokischa altar photoshoot, wishing her the worst and I'm like, well that's not very Christian of them but what do I know...” *Twitter*, 7 August 2021. Dominican woman notes on Twitter the cultural backlash of Tokischa's actions at the *Virgen de Altagracia* sanctuary.

⁸² Roberto Cavada (@rcavada), “Tokischa ofrece excusas públicas por fotos que se tomó en el Santuario a la Virgen de la Altagracia en Jarabacoa por la que muchos se sintieron ofendidos. Este video es parte del acuerdo de la artista con el ayuntamiento de Jarabacoa. @FelixPortes @tokischa #rcnoticias,” *Twitter*, 24 August, 2021, <https://twitter.com/rcavada/status/1430272517336350722?lang=en>

Translation: author's own.

Lawrence La Fountain Stokes' book *Translocas*. I also utilize Cathy Cohen's ideas of the sexual dissident to discuss how her performances engage in new ideas of queer activism, Jill Dolan's utopian performative, to connect Tokischa's performance at this holy site with reiterated performances, and finally José Muñoz's "disidentifications" to show how Tokischa moved with *and* against DR's religious cultural norms.

Sinvergüencería reclaims and remixes the term "*sin vergüenza*", a condemning phrase to describe someone who is shameless; often with connotations of being immoral and sleazy. I would argue, calling someone a *sin vergüenza* is often gendered, frequently used to put down women who are seen as "immoral" in the Christian sense. *Sinvergüencería*, La Fountain Stokes argues is ways in which *translocas* embrace shamelessness, as a way to reject the negative connotations and make their performances as campy and "shameful" as possible⁸³. We can see Tokischa performing *sinvergüencería* across both performances, as she constantly embodies, or explicitly names her sensuality, kink, and love for sex. Her performances ARE campy – they are dramatic and conjure spectacle with their vulgar lyrics or pornographic photographic content. She leans into the camp, the shamelessness, and almost turns it into a kink of "bad girl behavior".

Circling back to queer utopias, and theories on the future of queer politics, I turn to key intervention by Cathy Cohen, sexual dissidence, to look at Tokischa's performances. In her 1997 article "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," Cohen talks about the ways in which queer activism and politics have failed, largely with respect to Black lesbians, and other doubly oppressed individuals within the LGBTQ community. She argues against a queer essentialism, calling attention to the often black and white dichotomy of queer vs heterosexual. She notes that

83 Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Translocas: the Politics of Puerto Rican Drag and Trans Performance*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 37.

queer oppression and heterosexual privilege are not in direct opposition, when you consider nonnormative heterosexual sex acts.⁸⁴ She goes on to explain that there are multiple factors at play regarding one's oppression, and it is key to understand that, though heterosexual acts will always be favored over queer ones, the answer to queer politics is not down an essentialized route.

This analysis seeks to make clear the privilege and power embedded in the categorizations of, on the one hand, an upstanding 'morally correct', white, state authorized, middle-class, male *heterosexual*, and on the other, a culturally deviant, materially bankrupt, state dependent, heterosexual, woman of color, the latter found most often in our urban centers...⁸⁵

Cohen's intervention is key when analyzing Black queer politics and the role of intersecting oppressions because they move against essentialist ideals of what "the queer agenda" really is. She argues that the true key to political organizing is to step away from ideas of "one fight", and shift focus to looking at examples of nonnormative sex practices.

José Muñoz also famously posited the idea of *disidentifications*, an idea that those with intersecting identity markers may exist in liminal spaces that don't quite assimilate or break away from cultural norms. "...Gomez's disidentification with this concept, helps us imagine an expansive queer *life-world*, one in which the 'pain and hardship' of queer existence within a homophobic public sphere are not elided, one in which the 'mysteries' of our sexuality are not reined in by sanitized understandings of lesbian and gay identity..."⁸⁶ Tokischa must disidentify almost constantly, as a Black, femme, Latine woman who engages in sex work, porn performance, and a misogynist, patriarchal society, both in the DR and the US. She disidentifies with rigid ideals of queerness, as hers doesn't always perform in American, homonormative practices, but performs

⁸⁴ Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens", (Durham, NC, GLQ/Duke University Press, 1997), 452.

⁸⁵ Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens", (1997), 458.

⁸⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 34.

bisexuality often implicitly. She also negotiates disidentifications with religion in this performance as she cites with the prayer gesture, links back to the Catholic church's practices, claiming that "sluts pray too". What's more – Tokischa performs a kind of queerness Muñoz is speaking explicitly about here in regard to sanitized understandings of lesbian and gay identity; she negotiates her queerness in ways that might not always be understood to the outside eye.

This photo series somehow evokes or performs a sort of queerness can be linked to Cohen's ideas of the sexual dissident, and La Fountain Stokes' idea of *sinvergüencería*. Resistance somehow *feels* queer; being queer feels like resistance. If we look at queer politics from Cathy Cohen's standpoint, we can see how often nonnormative heterosexual encounters play into power structures similarly to that of queer sex acts. If we seek to redefine queer politics, or even identity politics, to look outside just categories like bi, gay, lesbian, etc, and examine the intersecting oppressions of a queer, Black, Latina woman, we can see the ways in which this song challenges systems of power in a queer way. Her performance of *sinvergüencería* and even disidentifications also play into this idea because she is doing an act of reclaiming her sluttiness - she knows how she is perceived, and she leans into it. It's almost as if her act of resistance *IS* her leaning into the rhetoric she always receives. This is a direct response to the multiple structures of power that oppress her; said another way - there is more to her oppression than just her queerness.



Figure 15: Two queer femmes kiss in front of the same holy site as Tokischa to pay homage to her.

Mirla, "Jóvenes Se Besan En Santuario De La Virgen En Jarabacoa Para Rendir Homenaje a Tokischa." *El Veedor Digital*. October 22, 2021.

Last, but certainly not least; returning to Jill Dolan's intervention of the "utopian performative", I argue that Tokischa's performance at this holy site invoked an imagined utopia for queer futures and was successful in affecting performatives beyond her embodied gesture. On October 21, 2021, a Dominican op-ed site *El Veedor Digital* published an article and this accompanying photo of the two teenage Dominican femmes kissing at the altar.⁸⁷

The two are in almost the same gesture as Tokischa – in front of the altar – but this time *kissing* one another. The two Afro-Latines are pictured with palms together, kneeling - repeating the gesture of Tokischa, as they lean in toward each other to kiss. This is explicitly queer – and faced the same backlash of immorality, sacrilege, and *sin vergüenza* remarks that Tokischa's post did. As Dolan states, these performatives are meant to be reenacted, iterated, and performed and interpreted by the spectators. I argue not only does Dolan's intervention work, but it also real life, tangible -or material, as Nirta stated – moves toward a queer future. Tokischa's gesture at this holy site, while not legibly queer, produced this performative effect of these two Afro-Latine queers also reclaiming this holy space for themselves.

⁸⁷ Mirla, "Jóvenes Se Besan En Santuario De La Virgen En Jarabacoa Para Rendir Homenaje a Tokischa." (Santo Domingo, DR: *El Veedor Digital*), October 22, 2021.

Queer Conclusions

In US/diasporic Latine culture, it is very common to hear the phrase “*ni de aquí ni de allá*”⁸⁸ in reference to first or second generation Latine children. It implies shame in both regards because it implies that these individuals are “too American” for their Latine families in their countries of origin, but “too Latine” for American culture that often automatically hails them as Latine from first glance. This sort of “neither here, nor there” mirrors this negotiation of “too queer” or “not queer enough”, or constant pressures bi folks feel by being “not gay enough” or “not straight enough”.

I want to make clear that Bad Bunny and Tokischa are no way meant to be examined in a binary lens, or in binary opposition to one another. Rather, frame them as two examples of individuals disidentifying with expectations thrust upon them by communities. Rather, I aim to draw attention to the fact that Tokischa and Bad Bunny both perform liminal utopias that I want to name as the future of queer identity politics, both in quotidian and larger than life, theatrical spaces. Both artists are “failing” in certain regards, namely in ideals of acceptance and assimilation of hegemonic groups, policed from within and outside of the structures. However, I argue that they’re both (in their own ways) *disidentifying* and queering these expectations that create new utopias, new imaginings of our future that are too fleeting, too spontaneous, too risqué, and too indigestible to be essentialized to fit within categorical, homonormative labels.

In a recent interview with Paper Magazine, Tokischa talks about her career, the backlash she’s faced, her connection to politics, and her sensuality and sexuality.⁸⁹ Toward the middle of the interview, Tokischa talks about the lack of queer representation in her childhood growing up

⁸⁸ Spanish; “Not from here, or there,” translation – author’s own.

⁸⁹ Pulgar, E.R. and Tokischa, “Tokischa: Personal, Political, Popola,” (New York, NY: Paper Magazine), August 29, 2022.

in DR. She talks about how she never really saw pride flags, or “out” people in her hood. She shares with the audience her first experience at a pride parade:

I felt really happy, to be honest. I felt like a part of that, because the community accepted me in a really beautiful way, and I identify with them in a big way. Growing up, I never felt like I belonged. I felt rejected and not accepted. That goes beyond my sexuality, but it was about belonging to a community and feeling like I belong to a community where the core values are love, respect, acceptance. That’s what I love and identify with the most.⁹⁰

This passage is key to understanding how queer performatives continue to be iterated and translated through individuals and generations of performance. I find it deeply intriguing, especially in regard to my own research questions, that she notes that her lack of belonging extended beyond her sexuality. This gets to the core of my intervention; queer utopias must look to the future to imagine nuance, difference, and layers to one’s identity to move forward in a truly meaningful way.

It’s not *just* disidentifications, or *cuero*, or *sinvergüencería*, or hip(g)nosis; Tokischa is above all enacting a utopian performative at this holy site. Tokischa and her unshakable dedication to performing her idea of utopia that has real effects, like the femmes at the altar. As Dolan argues, performances and performatives give us hope, it helps us imagine new life-worlds. Tokischa’s act, while not explicitly “queer” in American homonormative ideals, enacted a queer performance on the same stage. This is the key intervention I hope to make here on these pages; performances and gestures toward queerness won’t *always* be legible or easily understood, but they have real, queer outcomes. As Cohen said, if we only aim to look at queer politics from one angle, we miss so much nuance, and intersectionality that play into power structures and systems of oppression. Queerbaiting discourse is not the future of queer utopias – it is the opposite. When we force ideals

⁹⁰ Pulgar, E.R. and Tokischa, “Tokischa: Personal, Political, Popola,” (New York, NY: Paper Magazine), August 29, 2022.

of homonormative queerness on *every* global subject, we miss out on infinite performances of queerness. The clandestine, the risky, the illegible – that is the queer future Muñoz hoped for – one on the horizon, one that we work toward in quotidian or framed ways, to achieve futures that bring queer joy, and quite literally...pride.

Chapter 3: *Cuir drag, mujerazo*, and the Women of Old School Reggaetón: On Ivy Queen, *La reina luchadora*

In 1997, *reggaetón* group The Noise released an album *The Noise 7*, featuring a song “*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*” in which Puerto Rican *reggaetonera* Ivy Queen is featured front and center, rapping the lead part. The Noise is how Ivy Queen, now known as “*La reina del reggaetón*”⁹¹, got her start, most notably the only woman of this group of male *reggaetoneros*. In a music video nostalgic of the MTV music video era, The Noise released a compilation video that featured snippets of music videos from several of the songs from the album. For Ivy Queen’s starring moment on her song “*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*” she is pictured rapping in a boxing ring, dragging boxing clothes to include a masc-of-center performance. Wearing a black sporty outfit, she has a



Figure 16: Ivy Queen, “*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*,” produced by The Noise, 1997, music video, 2:01.

black sports bra with a v-cut down the center, black oversized pants, black high-top sneakers, white boxing gloves, oversized gold hoops, and dark purple lipstick. Her long, dark braids are secured in a ponytail that highlight her almost makeup-less face. One minute into her performance, a white appearing man wraps her wrists for boxing gloves.

The imagery of boxing is symbolic of her presence in *reggaetón*; no one was going to open the door for a Black woman in a male dominated genre, she had to fight her way in. In the lyrics

⁹¹ Spanish – “The Queen of Reggaetón”, translation, author’s own.

of the song, she raps about how she is the champion, the queen, and how people need to “move over” for her because she is not going anywhere. I do not highlight this key moment of performance to invoke a “pussy is power”, first wave, TERF⁹² episteme. Rather, I would like to introduce Ivy Queen as a key pioneer in dragging the genre of *reggaetón* through her costume choices, stereotypical “male” gesture, rejection of white, heteropatriarchal sex norms, and explicit sexual lyrics detailing her desires.

As I look back on this performance from the 1990s, I am initially shocked by this seemingly straight woman performing what reads to me as a butch/masc lesbian performance, at the same time she is rapping about sleeping with men in most of her lyrics. I think back to Cathy Cohen, writing “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” the same year, in 1997, and how she would read Ivy Queen’s performance. She would encourage us to look at all of the pieces of the political puzzle – not just the ones that are hyper-visible, out, and normative.

Thinking about Cathy Cohen’s ideas of deviance working toward resistance⁹³, how did old school reggaetonera Ivy Queen trouble expectations of her as an Afro-Latina woman? Utilizing Ivy Queen as a case study, I argue that *reggaetón* has been queer all along, but the performances of queerness might have been hidden from those who don’t know what they’re looking for. Ivy Queen, though not out as gender-queer, or gay, queered and dragged the *reggaetón* genre and its expectations of her to perform her gender, racial, sensual identities in a “respectable” way. I argue that Ivy Queen’s deviant, *transmachos* performances, including that of “*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*” and “*Yo Quiero Bailar*”, carved out new understandings of Black Puerto Rican nationhood,

⁹² TERF is an acronym that stands for Trans-Exclusionary-Radical-Feminism. In this sense, these cis-gender people; mostly cis-women; want feminism to only apply to cisgender women. They do not “believe” in trans womanhood.

⁹³ In Cathy Cohen’s articles “Deviance as Resistance” and “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens”, she explores the role of Black women, particularly Black lesbians and those who engage in nonnormative sex practices, in the realm of queer activism. She argues that these individuals are often left out of the conversations of political activism.

womanhood, and most importantly, redefines queer identities through the use of costume, gesture, lyric, and voicing in her songs.

Moreover, I argue that Ivy Queen's varied and negotiated gender performances throughout her career function to dismantle hegemonic power structures of race and gender and construct new possibilities for queer *reggaetón* futures. I further argue that posit that it's *through* her dragging of stereotyped expectations of both masc *and* femme gender performances that these power structures are dismantled, paving the way for other women and gender-non-conforming individuals to perform gender in their own ways. Utilizing Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes' interventions of *transmachismo* and *translocura*, I further posit that Ivy Queen drags or *cuiers reggaetón* in two distinct ways – via *transmacho* and *transloca* gender performances, employing various modalities like costume, embodiment, and lyric, and her lyrics employ narratives of nonnormative sex practices that challenge heteropatriarchal, “moral” ideals of women. Her complicated, at times contradictory, performances of gender paved the way for queer *reggaetoneras* in the industry today.

“Safe Sex” – Notes from the morality police, and the gender binary

In order to understand how Ivy Queen *dragged* her genre, it's important to note the standards and expectations of the gender binary in performing masculinity and femininity. Indeed, reggaetón overwhelmingly relies on heteropatriarchal performances of the femme/masc divide. Moreover, the genre has historically been highly policed. It is policed socially through circulation of social norms, like the Twitter examples I've shown, and officially by the Anti-Pornography Campaign. Throughout the genre's history, reggaetón has always been pathologized as a morally corrupt genre; the “morality police” formally the Anti-Pornography Campaign, claimed that the lewd

lyrics and sexual gesture in the genre were immoral⁹⁴. However, in Petra Rivera-Rideau's book, *Remixing Reggaetón*, she links the policing of a genre based in Afro-diasporic rhythm, dance, and gesture to the inherent and rampant anti-Blackness on the island. In the following section, I will outline the history of the genre's policing of gender standards, morality, and Puerto Rican identity, as a way to white-wash or "clean up" the genre. This section is crucial to understanding how Ivy Queen, a mixed-race, Latina woman, disidentified with expectations of Black Puerto Rican womanhood in the genre.

In old school *reggaetón* songs like "*Gasolina*" by Daddy Yankee, "*Saoco*" by Daddy Yankee and Wisin, and "*Mayor que yo*" by Wisin y Yandel⁹⁵, artists frequently rap about their sexual desires, leaving roughly nothing to the imagination. One other clear example would be from "*Saoco*" where Daddy Yankee asks: "*¿Quién tú eres?*"⁹⁶ and the female backup singer replies "*Tu bizcochito*"⁹⁷." This dichotomy of the cis-man as sexual aggressor and the cis-woman as the passive, sexual object became the standard for the genre. *Reggaetón* became constantly scrutinized for its explicit lyrical content, hypersexualized women in music videos, and its "exploitation" of women's bodies. The Anti-Pornography Campaign in particular went so far as to criticize the women who participated in the genre, citing respectability politics, and corrupt morals of women twirling their hips in the background of these music videos.

Rivera-Rideau talks about the Anti-Pornography Campaign's dedication to "clean up the genre", arguing that the attempts to police reggaetón had broader meanings for the construction of Puerto Rican nationhood and identity as linked to whiteness, Christianity, and heteropatriarchal

⁹⁴ Petra Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁹⁵ In "*Mayor que yo*", Wisin raps "*a mi me gusta la fruta madura*" in reference to sexual desires for older women; "I like ripe fruit".

⁹⁶ Spanish; "Who are you?"

⁹⁷ Spanish; "Your little cookie."

ideals of female sexuality and the nuclear family. Rivera-Rideau highlights the APC's attack on the performance of female sensuality in the genre:

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. Attributing characteristics such as hypersexuality or respectability to the sexualities associated with different racial groups contributes to larger processes of racialization and has implications for how these groups are included or not within a specific society or nation.⁹⁸

This understanding of the Puerto Rican government's intention to link respectability and morality to whiteness sheds crucial light on how Afro-Puerto Rican women were blamed for the immorality of the genre, while almost never being part of the creative collaboration. I would argue that this misogyny cloaked as a "women's issue" point directly to how and why female *reggaetoneras* were so frequently overlooked, or ill-represented in the beginning of the genre.

In the next pages, I will work to create a new analytic to analyze *reggaetón* performance. This analytic seeks to dismantle the neocolonial, colorist, misogynist rhetoric surrounding women and gender-non-conforming folks in the *reggaetón* genre. I argue that Ivy Queen, through her negotiated, varied gender performance throughout her career, explored new queer futures that resisted the pigeon-holed rhetoric that women and feminists "can't like *reggaetón*"⁹⁹.

Fingernails con Feeling

In her fourth chapter of *Remixing Reggaetón*, "Fingernails con Feeling", Petra Rivera-Rideau explores Ivy Queen's varied gender performances throughout her career and wonders what possibilities exist in contradictions. She explains how Ivy Queen actively and consciously worked against sexism and anti-Black sentiment in the genre as a mixed, Puerto Rican woman writing about her own sexual desires. Rivera-Rideau, like me, is very interested in how Ivy Queen's

⁹⁸ Petra Rivera Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 54.

⁹⁹ Lisette Arévalo, ed, "*Hasta Abajo*," (NPR: Radio Ambulante), Spotify, March 7, 2023.

unapologetic, unexplained, messy negotiation of her gender performance over the years troubles or *drags* expectations of women in the genre by reclaiming narratives and performances of gender. Rivera-Rideau notes Ivy Queen’s “contradictory” gender performance; masc presenting, baggy clothes and elaborate femme nails, to argue that her gender performance addresses the inherent racism and sexism within the genre. She goes on to use this understanding of gender performance to argue that her nails work to undo hegemonic understandings of Black Puerto Ricanness. She writes “As excessive representations of what would otherwise be signifiers of a normative, heterosexist femininity, her fingernails trouble the boundaries between respectability and disreputability, femininity and masculinity, and modesty and aggression. I argue that the artificiality of these nails ultimately calls attention to the equally artificial constructions of racial hierarchies that privilege whiteness at the expense of recognizing black humanity”¹⁰⁰. Rivera-Rideau’s intervention here sets the stage for understanding how these socially reinforced gender



Figure 17: Ivy Queen, “Al Escuchar Mi Coro,” produced by The Noise, 1997, music video, 0:45.

norms are constructed, just as Puerto Rican identity is linked to whiteness...at least according to the Anti-Pornography Campaign.

Gender “standards”

Pivoting to performance analysis of gender in the genre, I have selected a few key photographs from the *reggaetón* vault that I believe expertly display the expectations and social performance norms

¹⁰⁰ Petra Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 107.

that established gender norms. Noted in Figures 17, and 18, the masc look included baseball caps, baggy, oversized clothes, and large, chunky jewelry. The jewelry was gaudy, often functioning as a symbol of wealth status. Their body language is frequently comfortable; legs wide open, faces neutral or “mean mugging”. In music videos, as shown in figure 19, their body posture gives a feeling of “I’m a badass”, with a backward lean, hips and groin on full display.



Figure 18: Ivy Queen, “Yo quiero bailar,” produced by The Noise, 2003, 2:20.



Figure 19: Ivy Queen, “Yo quiero bailar,” produced by The Noise, 2003, 2:23.

Contrary to the men being “overly dressed” in the sense that their shirts would often come down to their thighs, their pants oversized and baggy, women were expected to perform the opposite. Typically cast as background dancers, or the “response” to call and response lyrics, the women were frequently shot wearing bikinis, or a mini skirt and bra. They frequently wore heavy makeup and jewelry, often hypersexualized, and commodified; sometimes their faces being cut

out of the frame entirely, the shots focused on their hips and midriff. Figure 19, from Ivy Queen's own video for "*Yo Quiero Bailar*", we see a woman featuring heavy makeup, beaded jewelry, and midriff showing in an all-white, rather skimpy outfit.

Seen in Figure 20, Ivy Queen is dressed to fight, *con feeling*. Sitting in the boxing ring, Ivy Queen leans forward with her legs open, hands resting on her knees. Behind her stands a buff, handsome man who is shirtless with his hands on her shoulders. His gesture points to a coach prepping a boxer for a fight, rubbing the fighter's shoulders. Ivy Queen wears a color block sweatshirt of red and yellow, with her hood up, just covering her hairline. She's wearing the same black box braids from the earlier shot, this time they are down and nearly touching her waist. Her jeans feel like an authentic throwback to 2000s hip hop fashion; dark blue baggy jeans that are almost too big, so she wears a big belt with a shiny silver buckle. What intrigues me most about this costume, however, is the inclusion of her long, white acrylic fingernails. These nails would not fit



Figure 20: Ivy Queen, "*Al escuchar mi coro*", produced by The Noise, music video, 1:56.

in boxing gloves, but they set her apart. As she raps, demanding those to take her seriously and "listen to her chorus", she reminds the audience she's quite literally "not like the other girls."

I build on
Rivera-Rideau's

arguments to argue that Ivy Queen's performance of gender and sensuality as a Black Puerto Rican woman is actively dismantling neo-colonial, American ideals of *queer* respectability. Her deviance-turned-resistance creates new understandings of what it means to be queer, and what it means to be Puerto Rican. Rivera-Rideau notes the power of contradictions, and I'd like to posit one more; Puerto Rican/American. This contradiction, this confusing, complicated understanding of identity, nationhood, and desire; sexual desire and also desire for belonging. is present in Ivy Queen's negotiated drag performances. I argue that in Ivy Queen's performances she reimagines queerness to dismantle hegemonic racism, and homonormativity, and to create new spaces of belonging.

Contemporary *mujeraza* “¡Eso no quiere decir que pa' la cama voy!”

Before Bad Bunny was *perreando sola*, before Tokischa was a *delincuente*, hiding *tigueres* in her brother's house, Puerto Rican Ivy Queen was shaking things up in her own way. Throughout her career, indeed, but more specifically in her video and hit song “*Yo Quiero Bailar*”, Ivy Queen created new possibilities for Black Puerto Rican womanhood, queerness, and national identity by dragging gender norms of women in the genre. She does this by performing what I call *mujeraza* at the same time as performing as a *transmacho*, a term coined by Lawrence La Fountain Stokes. It is through these two seemingly contradictory, performances that Ivy Queen reimagines what it's like to be *la reina del reggaetón*.

Through autoethnographic research as a drag queen himself, and through his research of other Puerto Rican queens, author of *Translocas*, Lawrence La Fountain Stokes provides readers with key insights into how queerness or *cuirness*¹⁰¹ as he posits, specifically performs,

¹⁰¹ Lawrence La Fountain Stokes in his 2021 book *Translocas* speaks on what it means to be a queer Latine, or *cuir*. *Cuir* is how you would phonetically spell “queer” in Spanish, giving it a sort of new spin that encapsulates the two intersecting identities.

understanding the layers of intersections. He posits the term “*transloca*”, a term he coins by combining “trans” to mean in flux, and “loca”, literally meaning “crazy” but also a pathologized term that is often applied to femme gay men. He goes on to explain how *transloca* is a mode of resistive politic for these subjects as they are often challenging palatable notions of drag. He posits this term as a way in to understanding Puerto Rican identity, history, and queer politics. He uses drag as his case studies to examine specifically *cuir* Puerto Rican identity, *cuir* politics, and homophobia.

One key intervention of La Fountain Stokes’ work is his key discursive exploration of *machismo* and femininity as it relates to militant gender performances in PR. He takes the reader through a genealogy of Puerto Rican drag performance, and highlights performers from Rupaul’s Drag Race to lesser-known performance artists to map how drag has performed. La Fountain Stokes utilizes performance artist Jorge B. Merced’s drag performance as a case study to examine not only how this queen was pathologized as a “*transloca*” but also posits a new term “*transmacho*”; a loud, expressive, hypermasculine, sensuous drag identity, while *transloca* is feminine, demure, and quiet¹⁰². Utilizing his methodology of *transmacho/transloca*, I argue that Ivy Queen employs both of these methods of performance as an act of resistance. she negotiates between this liminal space between “too *macho*” and “too *loca*” through her gender performance, which plays out across several modalities including her costumes and masc gesture in her music video for “*Yo Quiero Bailar*”¹⁰³, the lyrics of this song, and her deep voicing of the song, as well.

¹⁰² Lawrence La Fountain Stokes, *Transloca*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 170.

¹⁰³ Caraballo, Ecleen Luzmila. “100 Greatest Reggaeton Songs of All Time.” Rolling Stone. Rolling Stone, September 8, 2022. Released in 2003, “*Yo quiero bailar*” has become one of the most popular reggaetón songs ever. In fact, in 2022, Rolling Stone named “*Yo quiero bailar*” as the second best reggaetón song of all time, second only to Daddy Yankee’s Gasolina of his 2004 album Barrio Fino.

Performance analysis – “*Yo Quiero Bailar*”



Figure 21: Ivy Queen, “*Yo quiero bailar*,” produced by The Noise, 2003, 2:20.

In the music video of “*Yo Quiero Bailar*”, the audience sees Ivy Queen fluctuate through a number of costumes, all varying in gender performance. In the music video¹⁰⁴, she rocks blonde braids; this time a bit longer and pulled back out of her face into a flared bun,

or in two braids. She is frequently filmed with either a headband or durag over her hair, big, silver hoops, and 90s style clothes. I am deeply compelled by the way she mixes and matches men and women’s clothes in this video; this is not as masc as “*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*,” but rather combines elements of femme and masc costume and gesture. In this case, it’s more her gesture and lyrics that are masc, while her costume is more femme. In addition to her jewelry, she has very thin, black, drawn on eyebrows, bold, dark eyeshadow, and dark, glossy lipstick.

I am particularly interested in two stills from this video that I argue are at the crux of Ivy Queen’s power as a gender-chameleon. In Figure 21 we see Ivy Queen sitting on a bar, with over twenty kinds of alcohol on the shelf behind her. She is seated on top of the bar with her legs spread

¹⁰⁴ It is important to note that this video, much like that of “*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*,” and others of the time, is very grainy; often only accessible from a third-party upload to YouTube. This raises many questions for me regarding the archive on early *reggaetón* and the morality police. Why wasn’t the genre invested in like it is today? Of course, we can gather why – this Afro-Diasporic genre was not valued, period. The videos were not properly archived or filmed, leaving 2023 viewers in the 400p era. This doesn’t stop the fans, though; the unofficial YouTube video of “*Yo Quiero Bailar*” has over 475,000 views.

open, her legs resting on two barstools below her. She leans forward as she raps and places her hand on the bar, between her legs for support. Her hand is perfectly placed, as it acts as a gestural “don’t touch me”, right between her legs. This gesture is an intentional blocking of the “money shot”, performing the same “I make the rules” rhetoric she raps about in her lyrics. Throughout the video, she performs with a masc swagger; frequently leading with her hips as she moves, and raps with her hands constantly in motion. She looks directly into the camera while she sings part of the chorus of the song “*tu quieres sudar y pegarte a mí, el cuerpo rozar*”¹⁰⁵. The staging and gesture work in tandem here to maintain Ivy Queen as the central focus of the filming, but also to highlight her IDGAF attitude, and assert her dominance and power. As she looks into the camera’s lens, the audience can tell that the camera is at bar level pointing up at her. This reiterates that feeling of control from the queen on her throne.

In terms of costume, *la reina* sports her braids in two long braids that cascade over her breasts, and almost touch her thighs as she leans over. She wears a glittery silver, butterfly shaped top, exposing her cleavage, a black and



Figure 22: Ivy Queen, “Yo quiero bailar”, produced by The Noise, music video, 2:50.

silver headband to match, black, fishnet gloves, and long gray pants with a big buckle belt. In this still, Figure 22, she’s photographed in a similar costume; durag covering her hair, breasts out, baggy pants, but this time she leans into a man in the scene and sings to him. Her mouth is curled

¹⁰⁵ Spanish; “You want to sweat and stick to me, our bodies grinding.”

up in a half-smile, and as she leans in, her cleavage is on full display. She holds eye contact with the man she is singing to, again queering *reggaetón* expectations by having them sit side by side rather than in front/behind. She further queers heteronormative gender performances, as she is coming on to the man, expressing her interest, and stating her desires and boundaries. Her stance is unapologetic, and she is in control.

While she leans in suggestively to her man, she raps about her boundaries! I argue that Ivy Queen's lyrical performance, in addition to her gesture in the video, queers reggaetón further by utilizing stereotypical *macho* lyrics; focused on sex, desire, and foreplay that contributes to the shift in power in her drag performance. She raps:

Yo quiero bailar

I want to dance

Tu quieres sudar

You want to sweat

Y pegarte a mí

and stick to me

El cuerpo rozar

the body touches

*Yo te digo: "sí, tu me puedes
provocar"*

I tell you: "yes, you can tease me"

Eso no quiere decir que pa' la cama voy."

That doesn't mean that I'm going to bed with
you

Figure 23: Lyrics from "Yo Quiero Bailar" by Ivy Queen.

As shown in the lyrics shown above, Ivy Queen performs a lyrical resistance, as well. She names her desires, her partner's desires, and sets a boundary with them; just because we're dancing together doesn't give you the green light for sex! Cathy Cohen talks about sexual dissidence in her 1997 article "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." She discusses nonnormative sex

practices, including that of interracial marriages, and sex work itself, and the lack of discourse on those who navigate the heteropatriarchy in ways that are not explicitly “queer” or “gay” in our 21st century sense¹⁰⁶. She advocated for the inclusion of nonnormative sex practices to imagine a new future for Black, queer politics in the 90s. She noted how many of these in the marginalized group of sexual dissidents are frequently not included in examinations of power hierarchies enforced by heteropatriarchy and respectability politics. I’d argue, and I believe Cohen would agree, that Ivy Queen performs here a sexual dissidence in the way that she reverses the role of who calls the shots in sexual relations. Cohen noted how hon-normative sex practices aren’t inherently queer, she argues, but they do perform a transgressive-ness that threatens power structures and forces us to look at queerness through a different lens. Ivy Queen is a sexual dissident, and she challenges many power structures just in this one song: the dominated male genre of *reggaetón*, respectability politics for Black Puerto Rican women in naming her desires, and her sexual desires themselves.

Thinking about sexual dissidence, here we have a mixed, Afro-Latina, masc woman employing the same type of sensual lyrics as the male counterparts of the genre; just her presence is deviant on its own, but the demands set in her lyrics further drag her performance of masculinity. This dissonant dissidence highlights another element of the song she queers; it sounds masc., too. Sonically, the song has the famous *reggaetón* beat, thumping away as Ivy Queen raps alone for a whole three minutes and four seconds. Ivy Queen’s voice is famously lower in register, almost sounding “like a man”, or someone with a traditionally baritone voicing. Petra Rivera Rideau also notes this in her chapter “Fingernails con Feeling” that Ivy Queen was often thought of as *marimacho*, a derogatory term for lesbians. In this sense, many thought that Ivy Queen *sounded* queer without even seeing her perform.

¹⁰⁶ Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens”, (Durham, NC, GLQ/Duke University Press, 1997).

How can we make these assumptions, though? How can we construct identity so quickly...and the inextricably linked social baggage that comes along with terms like *maricon* or *marimacho*? How can we escape rigid ideas of how gender performances create identity? In her chapter in *Blacktino Queer Performance*, “Voicing Masculinity”, scholar Tamara Roberts analyzes a performance of Teatro Luna’s play, *Machos*. This play is performed by a cast of female-identified actors, who all play male parts in order to highlight the performativity of masculinity. Roberts argues, like Rivera-Rideau, that the contradictory, complex nature of the performance is actually vital to understanding negotiations of identity onstage. Roberts notes the performance was not all perfect; the show was still rather heteronormative, and there was no queering of gender roles in the sense that the women did not talk about loving other women. However, she notes the power in their performance as it “queers” masculinity, and confirms the performativity of gender. She goes on to say that in this performance, it is clear – masculinity must be constructed if women can embody it so accurately. Roberts goes on to talk about the performances of masculinity performed by those of *Machos*, but further notes the role of race, class, and gender in constructing subversive identities. She writes: “...in drag kinging, masculinity is most apparent when attached to the performance of nonnormative race or class, something I believe is often rendered through some degree of exaggeration or stereotype in order to be legible”¹⁰⁷. Connecting *Machos* and Ivy Queen, two things are clear to me; 1) masculinity is not *only* reserved for men and can be employed by women and 2) the way gender is pathologized is so closely linked to race, and ethnic identity, so are notions of respectability politics and cultural identity.

Using Roberts’ methodology to think about complicated, untraditional performances of masculinity, I turn back to Ivy Queen. Much like *Machos*, Ivy Queen’s gesture, staging, and

¹⁰⁷ Tamara Roberts, “Voicing Masculinity”, *Blacktino Queer Performance*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 160.

costume work together to drag normative masculinity of the *reggaetón* canon. As Roberts expresses throughout her chapter, the construction of gender identity is inextricably linked to race; Ivy Queen's gesture, lyric, and costume work together to create a unique Black Rican female identity. Ivy Queen claims her spot in the genre and empowers gender-non-conforming individuals through her lyric narrative and sensuality, but moreover, establish new futures of Afro-Caribbean queers. Her gender performance is neither hypermasc nor hyperfemme; it is somewhere in the middle – performing both *transmachismo* and *translocura*.

In thinking about Afro-Caribbean dance and gestures, and their history of gendered connections, I consult dance and performance studies scholar Melissa Blanco Borelli's book *She Is Cuba* she details how dance, particularly African dance forms, were policed in diasporic populations of African women in the Caribbean, but moreover, how these women reclaimed their gesture. She coins here the term *hip(g)nosis*, which details how women use their hips in Caribbean dance for liberation. "I argue that it is through those acrobatically skilled hips of hers that she finds an opportunity for self-authorship, pleasure, and discursive contestation. Through her embodiment and performances of what I call *hip(g)nosis*, the *mulata* can step outside the limits of tragedy"¹⁰⁸. While her analysis is explicitly on the Cuban woman's body, I would argue her idea of *hip(g)nosis* and hip liberation can be applied to *reggaetón* more broadly in relation to the accompanying dance style, *perreo*, but also in the gestures highlighted here with Ivy Queen. She uses her hips like men do in the genre – she leads with them. Blanco Borelli goes on to posit that the use of a woman's hips is a way for her to "mark her space" through the use of her body, and a conscious response to a politically/historically/consistently oppressive narrative about the body. As Lawrence La Fountain Stokes notes, *translocura* is a discursive method to understanding the history of Puerto

¹⁰⁸ Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She Is Cuba*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

Rican gender identity and *national* identity. I'd argue that *transloca* and *hip(g)nosis* are inextricably linked, not only to constructing new understandings of Latine identity but to Ivy Queen as well.

This hip(g)notic, *trans* gesture seen in “*Yo quiero bailar*”, I argue, is deeply political, resistant, and makes a statement as loud as her sparkly silver top. In addition to Lawerenec La Fountain Stokes’ and Melissa Blanco Borelli’s methodologies, I turn back to Cathy Cohen and her article “Deviance as Resistance.” She argues in this paper that though deviant acts are not inherently politically resistant, they *can* be, and their connections are strong. She emphasizes the analysis of queer and transgressive sex practices to examine how those *not* in the white, cis, gay (I would add American) category of queer challenge homonormative, conformist tactics. She writes:

I hypothesize that many of the acts labeled resistance by scholars of oppositional politics have not been attempts at resistance at all, but instead the struggle of those most marginal to maintain or regain some agency in their lives as they try to secure such human rewards as pleasure, fun, and autonomy.¹⁰⁹

Blanco Borelli and Cohen here are pointing to marginalized, hyper-censored bodies searching for agency and pleasure. In their search, and achieving their goals not only performs deviance, but brings about resistance as well.

Through the modalities of costume, gesture, lyric, and voicing, Ivy Queen drags the genre by reclaiming the role of the male narrative. I argue that in Ivy Queen’s performance of “*Yo Quiero Bailar*” and through her negotiation of gender expectations throughout her career functions as a mode of deviance as resistance. She performs *transmachismo* and *translocura* simultaneously, and in different ways throughout her career, and rejects people’s expectations of her, no matter the performance. In the sense of *transloca*, she is redefining and reclaiming her sensuality and is in a way saying “I am a woman, I have sex, I *like* sex, and I make the rules. *Y punto*.” She does

¹⁰⁹ Cathy Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance,” *Du Bois Review*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 38.

transmacho performance by reiterating the gestures of her male counterparts, while singing about having sex with men. As a very masc woman singing about having sex with men, it *feels* inextricably gay.

Mujeraza

After years of fighting the Anti-Pornography Campaign, and the general public scrutinizing not only her participation in the genre, but also her presentation as a *transmacho*, Ivy Queen went femme! Yet somehow, the public was still disappointed. Felix Jiménez in his article “(W)rapped in Foil: Glory at Twelve Words a Minute” writes on one of the only other femmes in *reggaetón* from its inception, Glory¹¹⁰. You can hear Glory on Daddy Yankee’s *Gasolina*, but you cannot *see* her. In an attempt to highlight Glory, author Felix Jiménez does analysis of Glory’s clandestine performances, almost “behind the scenes” of the *reggaetón* stage. He notes the paradox of how Glory had not had many moments in the spotlight, but her supporting vocals were integral to the construction of some of *reggaetón*’s greatest hits.

Though aiming to shed light on the proverbial underdog, Glory, he compares her to Ivy Queen, who he makes into Glory’s inferior competitor with all the fame. In pinning the two women against each other, he argues that Ivy Queen “sold out”, and turned femme for vanity, while Glory continued being the backbone of the genre.

The narcissistic reflection goes beyond a face-off between the writing and performing Ivy Queen and Glory the Recording Machine. It unites them as opposites...In a break with the carefree, untraditional image she had carefully constructed, Ivy Queen entered the realm of über-feminine trials and tribulations, feeding off the fashion-conscious press and the judgement of red-carpet fashion criticism.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Felix Jiménez, “(W)rapped in Foil: Glory at Twelve Words a Minute”, *Reggaetón*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

¹¹¹ Felix Jiménez, “(W)rapped in Foil: Glory at Twelve Words a Minute”, *Reggaetón*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 240.

Jiménez goes on to share compare Ivy Queen and Glory’s trajectories, comparing solo song releases, and the ways in which they came up together. He argues, however, that Glory’s consistency should be celebrated, while Ivy Queen’s “sell out” to high femininity goes against her core ideas in her lyrics. Here, he implies some sort of “hey look over here!!”, at the expense of Ivy Queen, implying hypocrisy on her part. This comparison is not only sexist but does not serve either woman as it merely reiterates the power structures of the Anti-Pornography Campaign all those years ago. This policing of womanhood, pitting women against each other, and judging of women’s gender/lyric choices is inherently anti-feminist and works to reinscribe simultaneously heteropatriarchal and homonormative ideas of representation, legibility, and respectability politics.

Ivy Queen became known for the masc gender presentations, especially from early performances that I’ve outlined thus far. I’ve also argued that Ivy Queen oscillates between *transmacho* and *transloca* performances, sometimes even in the same video! I would be remiss if I did not also note her more recent gender performances that started emerging after 2005 that presented almost entirely high femme. Many felt that this transition to a high femme look was a betrayal of her OG style; a buy into the patriarchy she fought so hard against years before. She was highly criticized for this dress at the *Premios Lo Nuestro* awards in 2005, as



Figure 24: Ivy Queen photographed by John Parra for Getty Images, digital image, September 22, 2005.

many were shocked by this transition from tomboy to diva. Her outfit from the awards is shown in Figure 24, her long, colorful nails, white, flowy dress, long, sparkly earrings, and elegant, long wavy hair certainly did evoke a jarring contrast to her early days.



Figure 25: Ivy Queen at the Billboard Women in Music Awards, 2023. Photo by Amy Sussman, WireImage.

<https://www.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/entertainment/music/2023/03/02/billboard-women-music-2023-photos/11380846002/>

In Figure 25, we can see just how far to the end of femme she presents in 2023. Photographed at the Billboard Women in Music Awards in 2023, where she was awarded the Icon award for her contributions to reggaetón, Ivy Queen sports an over-the-top silver gown with cleavage, a blonde, silky updo, and giant, ornate silver flowers attached to the shoulders of her dress. This appearance features her curvy frame, hugging her hips, and legs with a slit that goes right down the middle.

I argue, going firmly against Jiménez' arguments that gender performance *can* be negotiated, it can change throughout time,

and forcing people, particularly Black, Caribbean women to be palatable, succinct, and one-dimensional is neocolonial at best. People can change, things can be nuanced, and again we find ourselves in the dichotomy of “too queer” and “not queer enough”, modified slightly to “too macho” and “too *loca*”. When will Ivy Queen be enough? When she defies the genre's expectations, or when she conforms? I further argue that her negotiations of gender throughout her career do not point to selling out, betrayal or anything of the sort – I argue that this is a continued deviance against expectations of her. This deviance provides us, especially as queer folk, new

possibilities of what it means to be in liminal spaces with our gender. Accepting that Ivy Queen might perform her gender differently than the beginning of her career provides us with new imagined queer futures because she does not fit perfectly in one box.

At this point of analysis, I am thinking back to analytics of gender performance, and how they do or don't serve us. Thinking back to Lawrence La Fountain Stokes' methodologies of the *transloca* and *transmacho*, I find that though I have originally used these as analytics for Ivy Queen, they actually are not capacious enough to encapsulate all oscillations of Ivy Queen's gender performances. Thus, moving forward, I want to posit a new analytic with the term *mujeraza*; a term that is meant to be expansive, ever-changing, simultaneously in the future and right now, of what it means to own womanhood. *Mujer*, the Spanish word for "woman", I pair with the suffix "-aza", an augmentative meant to encapsulate something large, expansive, and sometimes even something that does not have a definable mass. Simply translated to "big woman", but what's more, it's a space for women and gender-non-conforming folks to be "allowed" to negotiate how their gender performs day to day. Performing *mujeraza* also encapsulates the unabashed, bad-ass-ery of being confident in dressing masc on Tuesday and high femme on Wednesday; gender performance is simply too big to fit into the dichotomy of masc/femme. Understanding the importance of *mujeraza* is crucial to performance analysis because it explodes the binary and allows womanhood to perform it in whatever way it pleases; from the highest of femme, to the butchest of masc, changing daily, and/or everywhere in between. In this sense, I employ this grammatical structure, this made-up word to support my analysis that Ivy Queen has been performing *mujeraza* all along, and this paved the way for other women in the genre to perform their gender- and later- sexuality.

I want to be clear that Ivy Queen was not the only, nor the first, to employ *mujeraza*, but her performances of it paved the way for other *reggaetoneras* to take up space in their gender and sexuality performances. To show how *mujeraza* has been employed throughout the genre, I will highlight two gestures of the same performative to draw a genealogy of the power of Ivy Queen's negotiation: a video of Ivy Queen's from 1997, and one from two queer *reggaetoneras* from 2022. I also want to make clear that these two stills from two music videos do *not* serve as a comparison of women, but rather a celebration of reiterated gesture. I will argue moving forward that perhaps Ivy Queen wasn't "dragging" anything; she was performing a few of the multitudinous iterations of how womanhood can be performed.



Figure 26: Ptazeta, Villano Antillano, "Mujerón", directed by Kinofónica y Mambo, August 17, 2022, music video, 0:21.



Figure 27: Ivy Queen, "Al escuchar mi coro", produced by The Noise, music video, 3:40.

While I was researching the *reggaetón* vault and stumbled upon this video of Ivy Queen and The Noise, I discovered a recent release from two queer *reggaetoneras*, Spain's Ptazeta, and Puerto

Rico's Villano Antillano, a song called "*Mujerón*". Upon first viewing of *Mujerón*, I see glimpses throughout of proud drag queens, gay flags, and hear lyrics about trans identity, sapphic relations, and the power in being who you are. As a queer lesbian myself, I feel joy, but also reflect upon how much the genre had shifted over the years and wonder how many years had to pass for other queers to feel seen in a *reggaetón* song. Ultimately, this video acts as a point of departure for me in which I question: "how did we get here?" To begin answering this question, I think back to 1997 and Ivy Queen.

In the introduction of this chapter, I introduced Ivy Queen's performance in her music video with The Noise for her song "*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*." I want to revisit that performance to highlight a key moment of performance pictured in Figure 27. Ivy Queen wears the same black sports bra, bold, gold hoops, and her hair tied back, ready to fight from the first figure featured in this chapter. In this scene, she is getting ready to fight, with a man wrapping her hands to be put into boxing gloves. Shockingly similarly, the 2022 *Mujerón* music video starts with a silent scene of Ptazeta gearing up to right-jab her opponent in a boxing match. Then, as shown in Figure 27.2, someone is also wrapping her hands to put them into boxing gloves. This time, though, Ptazeta has black painted short nails, where in 1997, Ivy Queen was sporting her long, white acrylic nails. The power of the boxing gesture seen in the 1997 "*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*" is exemplified in the music video *Mujerón*, pictured in Figure 27; they're ready to defend themselves.

This repeated gesture speaks volume to the effect Ivy Queen had on the genre, but moreover the unapologetic presence of women and gender non-confirming people in the genre to carve out space for themselves. Whether deliberately or not, this repeated gesture ultimately points to the transformation this genre has had over the last 30 years. The lyrics, and *reggaetón* beat of *Mujerón* create a danceable anthem for every woman, sung by two out queer women; one trans, one lesbian.

The lyrics invoke the idea that there is not one way to perform womanhood, except for one that panders to the male gaze. In the opening moments of the song, Villano raps “*Esa nena es una jeva, un mujerón. Esa nena es una malvada, tiguieron. ¿Sufrir por macho? Esos son problemas de fea.*”¹¹² The song feels like the quintessential queer *reggaetón* anthem because of its danceable beat, and pro-femme lyrical content, for queers and by queers.

Paying homage to Ptazeta and Villano Antillano’s song *Mujerón*, my idea of *mujeraza* is big, unapologetic, undefined, and exploratory, and helps us understand negotiations of gender. *Mujerazo*, as I would define it, is a limitless, messy, troubling of the constructed “standards” womanhood, that is too big to fit into the word *mujer*. You do not have to perform the stereotyped expectations of womanhood, but moreover, the infinite number of combinations of gender attributes that can combine to create bad-ass-bitchery, or *mujeraza*. In that sense, performances of *mujeraza* are not definable, they are complex, femme, masc, and everywhere in between. Said another way, *mujeraza* functions as a tool to understand the limitlessness of womanhood, whether that be with long nails, or masc clothes, or both. *Mujeraza* is a tool of performance; it says “I’m here, I’m she, get used to it!” I utilize this new analytic, *mujeraza*, to look at performances of womanhood that establish new norms, or at least confront heteronormative or respectable notions of womanhood. In Ivy Queen’s case, her *mujeraza* performances imagine futures for Puerto Rican womanhood that constantly negotiate ideas of femme gender performance. All iterations of her gender performance throughout her career point to new futures of how gender performances can act to resist normative, respectability politics, as they confront palatable, and complacent notions of the Afro-Latina woman.

¹¹² Spanish: “That girl is super-hot, a strong woman. That girl is an evil, bad boy. Suffering for men? Those are ugly girl problems”. Translation, author’s own.

Further, I argue that Ivy Queen's performance in "*Al Escuchar Mi Coro*" was revolutionary because gestured that created a space for discovery, messy, negotiated performances of gender and sensuality that had enormous impacts on the *reggaetón* community, and out queer artists today. This is not to say that all queer artists in the genre *owe* their careers to Ivy Queen, but Ivy Queen's gestures and performances imagined possibilities for future representations of queer, Black, and gender-non-conforming artists in the genre like they'd never been seen before. Though Ivy Queen might not outwardly identify as queer, her unabashed dedication to represent women's desires in *reggaetón* set the stage for queer women years later in the genre. This reiterated gesture again queers norms of femme performance in the genre, and reminds the audience that there is not one way to perform femininity. There is not one Latina identity; there are infinite imaginations of Puerto Rican Latina identity.

Using the methodologies from Lawrence La Fountain Stokes' book *Translocas*, Cathy Cohen's theories on the sexual dissident, and deviance as resistance, and Melissa Blanco-Borelli's notion of hip(g)nosis, I argue that Ivy Queen, though not an out trans/gender-queer individual drags expectations of women in the *reggaetón* genre, and these performances point to new understandings of Puerto Rican identity, in terms of sexuality, sensuality, and race. Tracing out a history of Puerto Rico's "morality" problem, and gender stereotypes/power dynamics, I will examine the music video of Ivy Queen's song "*Yo Quiero Bailar*". Using this case study, framed with a contemporary 2022 example, I argue that Ivy Queen drags not only the stereotyped expectations of femme gender performance, but also reclaims the narrative of Puerto Rican Black womanhood. I will further argue, using Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes' intervention *transmachos*, that Ivy Queen disidentifies with the genre in a new, innovative way that set the path for other women and gender-non-conforming artists to perform their gender in whatever way they choose.

I posit that she drags or queers the genre in two distinct ways - in the way she negotiates gender in her performance through costume and gesture, and challenges heteronormative sex practices in the lyrics of her songs.

Moreover, Cohen argues in “Deviance as Resistance” that deviance is a liminal space for possibility, opportunity, and more¹¹³. I further argue that not only does the deviant behavior negotiate liminal space, but also carves out possibilities for future deviance, resistance, and pushes against the normative politics. She writes:

These individuals are not fully or completely defining themselves as outsiders or content with their outsider status, but they are also not willing to adapt completely or conform.¹¹⁴

Ivy Queen has always had a desire to reject conformity and expectations. We can expect her to continue to change throughout time, and still love her music. If we release our preconceived notions of how someone is “supposed to” drag gender, or how someone is supposed to perform respectability, we might actually reach those queer futures we seek to create.

I argue that in Ivy Queen’s performance of “*Yo Quiero Bailar*”, and through her negotiation of gender expectations throughout her career functions as a mode of deviance as resistance. She performs *transmachismo* and *mujeraza* simultaneously, and in different ways throughout her career, and rejects people’s expectations of her, no matter the performance. In the sense of *mujeraza*, she is redefining and reclaiming her sensuality and is in a way saying “I am a woman, I have sex, I *like* sex, and I make the rules. *Y punto*.” She does *transmacho* performance by reiterating the gestures of her male counterparts, while singing about having sex with men.

Since the beginning of her career, Ivy Queen has been 100% authentically herself. As a mixed, Afro-Latina woman in a male-dominated genre, she faced a much higher level of scrutiny,

¹¹³ Cathy Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance,” *Du Bois Review*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004),

¹¹⁴ Cathy Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance,” *Du Bois Review*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 43.

frequently being criticized for participating in a “*machista*” genre. Ivy Queen started her career almost exclusively performing *transmachismo*; a visibly and notably masc performance that is loud, unapologetic, and sexy, frequently accompanied by traditionally noted “male” gesture and lyric. Though she negotiated her gender throughout all kinds of performances and appearances throughout her career, never totally landing in one realm of drag, Ivy Queen remains a pillar of light in times of homonormativity, and racist, heteropatriarchal norms.

Though her gender performance was not always the same every time, what was undying was her support of women in the genre, support of the LGBTQ+ community¹¹⁵, and dedication to dismantling hegemonic racism and sexism faced by Black women in Puerto Rico. As Petra Rivera-Rideau notes in *Remixing Reggaeton*, there is value in contradiction. There is value in perceived inconsistency as these liminal spaces carved out by people like Ivy Queen allow us to imagine new futures, new possibilities, and new opportunities to imagine what a three-dimensional idea of identity can be.

¹¹⁵ Petra Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 104.

Glossary

Here, I will note key words and terms I've listed in Spanish as a point of reference for non-Spanish speakers reading this text. It will also include acronyms, and cultural reference points.

APC - Anti-Pornography Campaign; an organization of the conservative right of Puerto Rico who hoped to put an end to *reggaetón*, claiming it had negative effects on women and children due to its hyper-sexual lyrics and sexual gesture.

Cuero – say it “kweh-ro”; Dominican slang for someone who has a BDSM kink.

Cuir – say it “queer”; posited by scholar Lawrence La Fountain Stokes in his book *Translocas*

DR – Dominican Republic

Latinidad – Latin-ness, or Latine identity

Maricon/pato/marimucha – derogatory terms for queer-identified individuals in Spanish

Mujeron – say it “moo-hair-own”

Mujeraza- say it “moo-hair-ah-sah”

Latine – say it “La-tee-nay”; a gender-inclusive term to refer to those from Latin America. This is a replacement for variations on *Latino*, of which there have been many including Latino/a, Latin@, and Latinx. I use Latine because research has shown that the -x is not natural to native Spanish-speakers, and thus is not used, or understood by many in the community.

PR – Puerto Rico

Reggaetón – say it “reh-gay-tone”; Caribbean music genre that emerged from Panama and became popular in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in the 1990s and early 2000s. Reggae, due to its Jamician influences, and *-tón* to indicate that there is a big influence on the music.

Reggaetonero/a – say it “reh-gay-tone-era”; Someone who performs *reggaetón* (male, female)

Sinverguenceria – say it “seen-ver-gwen-ser-eea”

Tema/temazo – say it “teh-mah” or “teh-mah-so”

Tiguere – say it “tee-geh-ray”; a bad boy,

Transmacho – say it “trans-mah-cho”;

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