

Reggaetón: Pleasure, Perreo, and Puerto Rico

An accumulation of American hip hop, Latin American culture, and Caribbean style, reggaetón is a modern music style combining rapping and singing that arose in 1990s Puerto Rico. In a purgatory between a medium that externalizes misogynistic perceptions of women and a medium in which women can experience power through the reinvention of their sexuality, reggaetón's identity is a topic of controversy in Puerto Rican popular culture today. The first perspective views reggaetón as a medium that sexually oppresses women through its lyrics and associated dance styles, contributing to Puerto Rico's preexisting misogynistic culture. Direct lyrics from male reggaetón artists as well as academic articles, will provide a direct lens into the impact of the sexist nature of reggaetón. The second perspective considers reggaetón, specifically for female artists, as a zone for women to employ power through their sexuality. Ivy Queen is a case study that is exemplary for the second perspective. Considering both perspectives relative to one another provides insight into the consequences of reggaetón in contemporary Puerto Rico.

To understand the cultural significance reggaetón has in contributing to gender inequality, it is first essential to consider the historical implications of sexuality and race in Puerto Rico. When colonized by the Spanish, a majority of the indigenous population was wiped out by disease and forced labor, instigating the mass influx of African slavery. Black female slaves were often the victims of sexual assault and violent rape by white slave owners. Thus, there existed an inherent sexualization of darker-skinned women by Spanish colonizers because their "darker-hued black female body [suggested] a 'natural' propensity for exotic sexual labor" (Herrera 44). This consequently resulted in the justification of the sexual violation of these women by "superior" white men. Afro-Puerto Rican women since the colonization of Puerto Rico, have been hypersexualized and confined to their physical value, yet some of these women turned their derogatory label into a tool to gain further power. Just as the Europeans manipulated rape and sexual assault as an instrument for conquest, indigenous and Black women utilized sex to move up the social hierarchy, bearing children and even marrying white European men (Wade 82, 95). In addition, the social construct of honor and decency in colonial and post-colonial Spanish America is integral to understanding the ways in which female sexuality was controlled

and perceived. In colonial times, a man's honor was tied directly to the domination of a woman's sexuality, as virtue was of utmost importance, and sexual availability reflected poorly on the man's performance of traditional masculinity (Wade 89, 90). Additionally, decency extended restricted gender role rules, as women were situated in the private sphere, the home, and men in the public sphere, work and social outings (Chasteen 152, 153).

Traditional perceptions of women's race and sexuality are still prevalent today in more subtle applications. In modern-day Puerto Rico, reggaetón is a transformation of conventional misogynistic culture. Although the music industry has attempted to whiten reggaetón as a genre, reggaetón is inherently a Black music form with ties to lower socioeconomic communities. Therefore, reggaetón's roots labeled the music form as innately sexual, and many of its lyrics and dance styles express Puerto Rico's sustained concern for the control of a woman's sexuality. As a reflection of a much larger issue ensuing Puerto Rico, the ways in which reggaetón externalizes misogynistic values can be greater understood with an awareness of Puerto Rico's deeply rooted history of female subjugation. Reggaetón is more commonly recognized by researchers as a platform that hypersexualizes and devalues women. Explicit lyrics, referencing sexual advancements towards women, as well as erotic dance moves involving vigorous movements of the pelvis and hips, all amass to the greater image of reggaetón being a space for sex and insatiable pleasure (for men).

"Despacito" by Luis Fonsi is a popular reggaetón song from Puerto Rico released in 2017. Accumulating over 6.5 billion views on YouTube and taking No.1 on *Billboard Hot 100*'s for 16 weeks, the song was a global phenomenon and for many brought reggaetón to the forefront. Although being a modern song, the lyrics and music video reflect many of the same antiquated misogynistic values found throughout Puerto Rico's history. For instance, a repeated verse before the main chorus of the song "Déjame sobrepasar tus zonas de peligro. Hasta provocar tus gritos y que olvides tu apellido" [Let me surpass your danger zones. Until you provoke your screams, and forget your last name] implies Fonsi performing sexual acts, as well as forgetting the name of the woman of whom he chooses to participate in sexual activities with. In these lyrics, Fonsi associates the value of a woman to her ability to execute sexual acts, as the emphasis is on the pleasure she gives, rather than the other aspects of her entity. In forgetting her

last name, Fonsi objectifies the woman in reference, making her no longer an equal partner in the pleasure, and instead a tool that can be manipulated to satisfy his own desires. The lyrics of “Despacito” reflect the grander issue of sexism persisting in Puerto Rico. Women are perceived as foremostly sexual objects and are labeled as less equipped to succeed in spaces outside the private sphere (the home), while men are the dominant gender in Puerto Rican culture and are free to explore opportunities only afforded to them.

Reggaetón’s influence on perceptions of gender extends beyond its lyrics, with music videos and accompanying dance styles exemplifying the hypersexualization of Puerto Rican women. In “Luis Fonsi - Despacito ft. Daddy Yankee,” the music video focus shifts from Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee to shots of a beautiful woman, focusing specifically on her body, to the dancers. For the majority of the music video, the focus is on Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee, yet in the background, there is a large sum of dancers performing. The dance style being executed in the music video is formally known as “perreo,” meaning “doggy style”—stemming from the word *pero* (dog)—in which the dancers participate in grinding against one another, more commonly with the man facing the woman's back or when both the male and female thrust towards one another. Perreo’s aggressive sexual nature builds upon traditional gender roles, as males are withholding the power as the aggressor and the females are the submissive. Additionally, the video focuses on an attractive woman, Zuleyka Rivera, specifically zooming into her breasts and posterior. As a significant focal point of the music video’s structure, this clearly represents reggaetón’s preoccupation with female hypersexualization and the gravity of a woman’s body relative to her value in Puerto Rican culture. Lastly, the music video contributes to deeply entrenched racial stereotypes through the focus on a Black female dancer. In portions of the video, a Black female performer is focused on solo shots, in which she is recorded grinding against a partner (*perreo*) and performing sexually explicit, “dirty,” dance movements. Compared to the lighter-skinned Zuleyka Rivera featured throughout the video, the Black dancer’s movements are considerably more vulgar and vigorous compared to the subdued and sensual movements of Rivera. Evidently, the hypersexualization of darker-skinned women in Puerto Rico can be linked back to African slavery, and in the present-day has transformed to be expressed through dance styles and music connotations.

The values in reggaetón and specifically “Despacito” are both drawn from traditional Puerto Rican values and are projected in a modern, digestible medium for newer generations to internalize. Likewise, in Raquel Z. Rivera’s study, he recorded the discussions of his students on reggaetón and issues of gender roles in Puerto Rico. Notably, one of Rivera’s male Puerto Rican students, Max, expresses his opinions stating, “‘Women have in their bodies the capacity to feed the child. They are better equipped for child-raising.’... ‘Men have greater strength, greater muscle mass’... ‘You really think you guys [women] should make the same amount of money?’” (Rivera 329). Max exposes many of the underlying ideas Puerto Rican men have towards gender, such as that women are subservient to men due to their bodily make-up and do not deserve the same opportunities appointed to men. Moreover, ideals preserved from African slavery emphasize the role of women, especially women of color, to serve as a sexual commodity for pleasure and reproduction. Additionally, in Rivera’s research, he found that many of the male students recognized gender inequality as wrong in Puerto Rico, but were content with the endurance of the status quo. This may as well be affiliated to media’s and reggaetón’s normalization of sexism and objectification of women’s bodies. All of these issues of gender and sexism that arise from Rivera’s recorded discussions expose the harmful contingencies that come from reggaetón and specifically songs such as “Despacito.”

Contrastly, some researchers believe that reggaetón is a platform in which Puerto Rican women can exploit their power through the reinterpretation of their sexuality. To support their claim, researchers often adopt Ivy Queen, a successful Puerto Rican female reggaetón artist, as a case study when discussing the usage of reggaetón in creating a new narrative on female sexuality. Ivy Queen, known by the media as the “Queen of reggaetón,” started her career at the age of eighteen in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and has had a hugely successful career in the male-dominated music genre, reggaetón. Throughout her musical career, Ivy Queen has produced music that has challenged the stereotypical perceptions of reggaetón and has pushed the boundaries of misogynistic and homophobic culture in Puerto Rico. Not only have her lyrics incited discussion and reinterpretations of female sexuality, the ways in which Ivy Queen presents herself to the media through her style, performances, and cover art all garner to the greater impact of Ivy Queen.

Known by her fans as her “claws,” Ivy Queen’s long extravagant nails are a crucial feature to breaching Puerto Rico’s definitions of white femininity. Consistently throughout Ivy Queen’s musical presence, she has sported excessively long nails adorned with loud patterns and embellishments. This flashy nail style originates from the working class and Afro-Puerto Rican culture. As Blackness in Puerto Rico is inherently tied to sexual availability, the culture and fashion deriving from these communities are consequently perceived by white media as unfeminine. Through pairing traditionally feminine clothing with her long decorated nails, Ivy Queen challenges the association between whiteness, femininity, and respectability in Puerto Rico (Rivera-Rideau). In doing so, Ivy Queen also reveals the substantial prevalence of white decency in contemporary music and media.

Although aspects of Ivy Queen’s identity are significant to understanding her greater impact in Puerto Rico’s interpretation of femininity, her lyrics and music are a keystone for discerning reggaetón’s reuptake of female sexuality as a form of agency and empowerment. For example, “Quiero Bailar,” released in 2014, discusses women asking men to dance provocatively with them yet simultaneously not to expect their dancing to resolve in the performance of sexual activities later in the evening. In the chorus of the song, Ivy Queen states, “Yo quiero bailar (Yuh), tú quieres sudar (So) y pegarte a mí, el cuerpo rozar (Yuh). Yo te digo. Sí, tú me puedes provocar (Ey). Eso no quiere decir que pa' la cama voy” [I want to dance (Yuh), you want to sweat (So) and stick to me, the body rub (Yuh). I say yes, you can provoke me (Hey) that doesn't mean that for the bed I go]. Through these lyrics, Ivy Queen is advocating that women can express their sexuality while still being considered respectable. Ivy Queen’s lyrics in “Quiero Bailar” “challenges the pervasive virgin/whore dichotomy in suggesting that women can express their sexuality and still be respected and considered complex individuals. IQ also creates a space for asserting agency on a very grounded level with everyday interactions such as dancing.” (Baez 71). Additionally, Ivy Queen is resisting traditional views of gender, as the women in her lyrics are withholding the power from the men through abstaining from sexual acts and denouncing the role of the submissive. Similarly, in Nora Gámez Torres’s journal article on emerging values of reggaetón, she discusses the concept of sexual convertible currency. The sexual dances deriving from reggaetón, such as perreo, are often utilized by women to achieve power, money, and

ultimately success. This parallels tactics employed by colonial Black and indigenous women, as they used their sexuality to gain stature in the social hierarchy. Both in which transformed their role as the submissive into a tool for them to achieve greater dominion. However, sexual convertible currency also forces women to be dependent on the exploitation by men.

The analysis of reggaetón cannot solely be perceived through a singular perspective, and instead must take into account the validity and discrepancies of both perspectives to fully understand the capabilities and constraints reggaetón has in influencing Puerto Rico's perception of women. Recognizing reggaetón as a platform that exclusively sexually oppresses women through the hypersexualization and objectification of the female body ignores the potency of an artist like Ivy Queen in the music genre. Likewise, identifying reggaetón as merely a medium for female empowerment disregards a vast majority of the sexist music, dance, and accompanying content produced from reggaetón. An important detail to acknowledge is some of Ivy Queen's inconsistencies in how she presents herself to the media. Although Ivy Queen's lyrics and style have surpassed traditional boundaries of female sexuality in Puerto Rico, many of her initial expressions of resistance altered to conform to whitened and more sexualized ideals found in mainstream reggaetón as she grew in popularity. For example, over the years, Ivy Queen has changed her initial aesthetic of baggier clothing and Afro-Puerto Rican hairstyles, such as braids, to straightened lightened hair, provocative clothing, and she has undergone a breast augmentation. Ivy Queen also, although she does not perform the dance style herself, has female background dancers in her performances dance perreo. Lastly, in Ivy Queen's most recent album, *Diva*, very few of the songs on the tracklist address working class oppression and empowerment compared to her original records. Therefore, Ivy Queen "remains located within the symbolic and political economy of a media industry in which women of color are forced to whiten, thin, and hypersexualize their bodies. In this way, the case of IQ signals that for women the body is site of cultural struggle and contestation" (Baez 74). Buying into traditional expectations of female artists in reggaetón, Ivy Queen has bought into many of the beliefs she once stood against to gain further success in a male-dominated industry.

Although reggaetón has demonstrated its capacity as a vehicle for women to counter race and gender norms, as well as achieve and withhold power through the manipulation of their

sexuality, reggaetón is ultimately a contemporary medium masking and bolstering outdated sexist views of women in Puerto Rico. Despite their attempts to promote more accessible definitions of femininity and female empowerment, female artists, like Ivy Queen, continue to rely on a system built on outdated gender roles to succeed in a career in reggaetón. Having acknowledged reggaetón's current limitations, it is essential not to overlook a model such as Ivy Queen. Though imperfect in her advocacy of new positive female narratives, she substantiates the potential reggaetón has in ensuring the revision of Puerto Rican attitudes of female sexuality. The analysis of reggaetón is necessary for there to be a change in the misconstrued perceptions of women in Puerto Rico. Optimistically, by further researching reggaetón, both musicians and listeners of this music genre can participate in the awareness of negative female narratives and incite diverse feminist voices in reggaetón.

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