

**PERREO FEMME-INISM: AN AVENUE TO RECLAIM, REJECT,
AND REDEFINE CULTURAL NORMS WITHIN BORINQUEN
SOCIETY**

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**PERREO FEMME-INISM: AN AVENUE TO RECLAIM, REJECT,
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To my loving parents, John and Arlene Hammond.

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SUMMARY

Puerto Rico is positioned at the epicenter of many of the debates involving questions of colorism, misogyny, sexual liberation, and gender expression in reggaetón and perreo, due to its role in shaping these cultures. What was traditionally defined as an oppressive and misogynistic expression is now being recognized as the instrument of resistance that it was created to be. The recent application of perreo, the style of dance associated with reggaetón, as a tool of resistance in Black feminists and queer movements coopts themes of reclamation, rejection, and redefinition that have embedded themselves in Puerto Rican culture. By exploring these three central themes, this research begins to build a framework for a new expression of feminism, perreo femme-inism.

INTRODUCTION

On June 18th of 2021, a music video premiered on Villano Antillano's page for the song "Muñeca". Villano Antillano, a trans musician and social media influencer, teamed up with Ana Macho, a nonbinary popstar, to create this catchy Latin trap piece that has amassed over half a million views as of July 2022. The visual aesthetic of the music video along with the lyrical mastery displayed in the song showcases how marginalized communities are creating a queered perreo space. This thesis discusses at length the development and vitality of such queered perreo spaces. Jhoni Jackson, a freelance reporter, described such a space through an analysis of the "Muñeca" music video in a 2021 article for Remezcla, a progressive Latin-focused media brand.

In the video for "Muñeca," Puerto Rican rapper Villano Antillano is crewed up with fellow glammed-up sex workers as she drops sharp-witted lines. Everyone in the shop dons pink candy-striped dresses with ruffled white aprons and matching headbands. Presented is a fantasy or a "prototype," she says, referring to the societal standards and expectations of trans women under the lens of many cisgender men. But in the context of "Muñeca," the ideal, its roots in patriarchal misogyny, is reclaimed by trans women and non-binary Latinx people. Inside the flamboyant femme walls of the track's video, released late last week, the dolls — including prominent Puerto Rican trans figures and artists — are wholly in control.

As described, the music video increases the visibility and representation of the trans community in Puerto Rico. Traditional heteronormative and misogynistic views of

femininity are challenged by this representation. Many of the femmes featured in the video are Black, leaving room to confront how issues of sexuality and femininity are complicated by issues of race. This type of representation is revolutionary, but not surprising. Contemporary Latin music, like Latin trap and its predecessor reggaetón, are defined by traditions of resistance and reclamation. Black, feminist, and queer histories all influence the creation, continued development, and overall impact of these genres and their accompanying cultures. Pieces of production like “Muñeca” provide a lens to view how these histories have created space for agency and representation of those in the margins, particularly Black queer femmes. Just by looking at the aesthetic of the “Muñeca” music video, one can see how dramatic the visibility of Black queer femmes is improved by the activation of these genres. Not to mention, how these narratives and representations are controlled by members of the community as they create culture from the bottom up.

The exploration of cultural artifacts, like “Muñeca”, is now entering into larger societal and academic conversations. However, many of these conversations still neglect to reconcile the histories at play when engaging Black queer communities. In essence, they cling to heteronormative and racialized arguments that neglect to create space for those in the margins. This blind spot can and should be rectified by creating new frameworks that consider the cultural landscapes of Latin media along with the relevant histories to appropriately define these new productions of agency. Aimed at this goal, I propose *perreo femme-inism* as a framework that names the already existing cultural and political productions of antiracist, queer, and feminist artists, producers, communities, and people.

Perreo femme-inism is heavily influenced by the work of ratchet feminist scholars and practitioners. Many of the pathways that connect hip-hop and trap pedagogies to liberatory feminist movements are paralleled through Latin trap and reggaetón. Ratchet feminism provides a valuable example of the impact that culture can have in creating diversified expressions of traditionally universal movements. Ratchet was originally a derogatory term that originated from trap culture. The word was utilized to describe a woman as ghetto, disrespectful, dramatic, sassy, and messy. An additional marker of ratchetness is sexual liberation, which defines women as “hoes” in derogatory contexts. Ratchet feminism was born from women who embodied fully what it meant to ratchet as a form of liberation. These femmes are proud to be loud. They radically embrace their sexual nature and love to twerk to trap music. They challenge the traditional, and often limiting, expectations placed on them.

Montinique Denice McEachern, a therapist and queer Black activist, wrote an article entitled “Respect My Ratchet” in 2017 that explored how Black femmes engage with ratchet.

Ratchet is the embodiment of Black femme liberatory consciousness. Ratchet is a cultural knowledge, performance, and awareness of an anti-respectability that can be shared across Black communities and is not bound by geography, social class, or level of traditional education. (79)

Within this context, McEachern, as well as other academics, refer to liberatory consciousness as a state of living that neglects to internalize the rules and regulations imposed by oppressive regimes and instead leans on intentionality and awareness to

subvert these regimes. As stated, there is a required “awareness of anti-respectability”. Anti-respectability is defined by respectability politics, which are a set of rules determining what is acceptable and unacceptable when oppressed communities are attempting to enact change (“Democracy Limited”). The liberty to be expressive and enact change by standing in your truth is an especially important distinction for Black queer communities. Institutions of white privilege continuously ostracize blackness, while heteronormative narratives ostracize queerness creating layers of oppression that affect those who identify at the intersection between Black and queer. Even within these marginalized communities, rules and social expectations dictate what expressions may be deemed more or less acceptable. For femmes, who often are faced with confronting these expectations, anti-respectability creates space to engage in ways of being that affirm and uplift blackness, queerness, and femininity.

Similar to ratchet, perreo is a cultural knowledge that is based on performance and anti-respectability. Perreo allows femmes to embrace their perceived “messiness” and perform their sexual liberation through movement. The similarities between the movements of perreo and twerking reflects how each dance developed through Afro-diasporic traditions. Despite these similarities, perreo exists within a different set of cultural parameters than its ratchet counterpart. The cultural landscape of Puerto Rico dictates a unique set of rules under respectability politics that requires its own unique pathway to rejection. This research looks to ratchet feminism as a guide in applying ideas of ownership and agency to the complex cultural landscape of Puerto Rico. To do so, I coopt three themes of reclamation, rejection, and redefinition that have embedded themselves into the essence of reggaetón and by extension perreo. Through the theme of

reclamation, I explore the role that blackness plays in the social positioning of women in Puerto Rico. I compare perreo, as a newer cultural artifact informed by black culture, to one of its predecessors, bomba. Next, I explore the impact of sexuality on black femininity through the theme of rejection. I analyze how censorship and the colonization of Black women's bodies affects perreo and the ways in which sexual liberation and autonomy are achieved through perreo. Finally, I explore how perreo can affirm queer lives through ownership. I return to the case study of "Muñeca" to tie together learnings of each theme. Through exploring these three central themes, I aim to build a framework and incite dialogue for a new expression of feminism, perreo femme-inism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of perreo is much like the history of the Caribbean. It was developed through flows and exchanges that traversed countries, genres, classes, and gender. Antonio Benítez-Rojo speaks about this phenomenon in his book *The Repeating Island* through the lens of chaos theory. Benítez-Rojo asserts that the disorder of the Caribbean, including the various ethnic groups, languages, and traditions, allows for avenues of repetition among its societies. Reggaetón and perreo are born through this tradition of repetition and reproduction. Ivy Queen describes the origins of reggaetón and subsequently perreo through her podcast, LOUD. Ivy Queen, also known as *La Reina de Reggaetón* (The Queen of Reggaetón), is one of the original curators of the genre. Her immense contributions towards growing reggaetón into what it is today makes her uniquely positioned to tell the story of how the genre came to be. Within the first few minutes, Ivy Queen defines this history as one where issues of race, sex, class, and censorship take center stage. As she states, “for some people reggaetón is just party music, but the real story behind reggaetón is a story about *resistencia*, resistance.” She continues on to explain how the seeds of reggaetón were planted in Panama when descendants of Jamaican workers, who were brought to the country to work on the Panama Canal, began translating reggae and dancehall music into Spanish. Shortly after, reggae and dancehall in Spanish blew up as a genre, with artists, like El General, creating music that was loved across Latin America. Ivy Queen describes the popularity of the genre and El General by stating, “[H]is songs became the kind of hits that everybody knew from Mexico down to Argentina.” (LOUD). While this movement occurred, a

similar process of translation and later adaptation was taking place in New York. Nuyoricans, or Puerto Ricans who resided in New York, formed a crucial part of the advent of hip hop. Hip Hop and rap are intrinsically Black genres informed by “R&B, funk, soul, jazz, rock and roll performers; poets, and writers like Iceberg Slim; and stylistic forebears like Muhammad Ali and Richard Pryor.” (Codrington). Eventually, Puerto Rican artists like Vico C and Lisa M began leading the way for the new genre of hip hop in Spanish. Finally, in 1990 Shabba Ranks released “Dem Bow”, a song that introduced a beat that would change the fabric of the Caribbean forever. The sounds of reggae, dancehall, hip hop, and dembow, all met and married into one through underground clubs in the projects of San Juan, Puerto Rico. With these sounds also came many of the raunchy and explicit lyrics and dance movements that define perreo.

Eventually, artists of the underground realized that hard stories about street life might not be relatable to all audiences, but something that was relatable was sex. By the early 2000s raunch, sexually explicit lyrics, and perreo became key signifiers of the genre. Perreo is a style of dance that involves movements of whining, grinding, and twerking commonly between a pair of dancers who participate through giving and receiving roles. Typically, the giving partner dances with their backside turned to the front of the receiving partner. It is important to note that these pairings are not the only possible configurations for participation in perreo. Giving roles can also be performed to audiences through solo performances. (See Betancourt “Perreo Comabtivo” for a video example).

The creation of perreo as a culture is hard to pinpoint. One influence that is known is the role of West African dance. Twerking, being one of the influences

contributing to the creation of perreo, specifically bears resemblance to the traditional Mapouka dance of the Ivory Coast (Sauphie). But twerking is just one of the many factors and cultural exchanges that contributed to perreo's production. Music editor of Remezcla, Eduardo Cepeda, wrote a 2018 article exploring the impact of cross-cultural currents in the production of perreo.

Ethnomusicologist and social dance professor Wayne Marshall argues that traditional African dances were in a sense “corrupted” by European social dance norms. It was perceived to be in bad taste to dance intimately with a partner in public. “[In traditional African dances] you might do dances that were associated with fertility and erotic movements and sexuality in the context of traditional collected dances,” he tells Remezcla. He goes on to explain that the cross-pollination of the dance styles came with colonization, and initially wasn't well-received. “African dance was always done collectively as a form of communal symbolic dance, not as a social dance. And then the Europeans come and they have their social dance traditions which actually were about a heterosexual partnering in public,” he adds. The movements that appeared sensual to colonizers performed in many African dances were then co-opted by colonizers as a way to get down.

As Marshall explains, the cultural imprints of European colonizers, particularly the Spanish in the case of Puerto Rico, and enslaved Africans blended to influence and create new modes of expression. Perreo, although it is a modern output, is deeply connected to the historical cultural flows of the region. Within these contexts, it is important to

recognize the oppressive regimes that have intercepted all layers of society, including perreo.

The framework proposed within this paper further explores these histories and cultural sensitivities that simultaneously complicate and empower perreo. However, critics of perreo challenge its legitimacy as a feminist tool. To better necessitate perreo femme-inism as a new wave of feminism, it helpful to understand the history of women and feminism within Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico, women's issues and histories have traditionally been defined by issues of labor, industrialization, poverty, and political and community organizing (Matos-Rodriguez and Delgado 28). For example, in 1917 Ana Roqué de Duprey founded *La Liga Feminista Puertorriqueña* (The Puerto Rican Feminist League) which primarily focused on issues of political empowerment for women. This league was the first of its kind and one of the first feminist groups created in the archipelago. As revolutionary as the work of organizations like *La Liga Feminista Puertorriqueña* was, the work lacked recognition of the role of intersectionality in the experience of Puerto Rican women. Issues of racialization and sexuality were rarely included, and when they were, they often existed in a vacuum, with activists and scholars failing to name the impact that race plays on issues of sexuality and vice versa. As feminism evolved on the island, it continued to struggle to confront these issues. It wasn't until the 80s and 90s, while reggaetón and perreo were being created, that feminist movements in Puerto Rico began diversifying. Groups concerned with Black women's rights, such as *Unión de Mujeres Puertorriqueñas Negras* (Union of Black Puerto Rican Women), were created with the aim of addressing issues of intersectionality that had been previously ignored by mainstream feminism. Another example of such groups is *Taller*

Salud (Health Studio), a feminist organization created in 1979 with the aim of addressing issues of sexual health for Latin women struggling with access (Taller Salud). These movements prompted more discussions about sexual rights and reproduction, along with the role of race in Puerto Rican women's experiences. Traditionally, Puerto Rican society has been heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, resulting in the implementation of conservative views on sex. This new wave of feminism began addressing issues with the traditionalist views that promoted heterosexual gender norms and abstinence-only education (Warren 666). It is important to recognize how movements, like these, that uplifted Black communities and women in Puerto Rico were coinciding with the development of perreo culture. In many ways, this left space for modern anti-racist feminist groups to radically uplift Black sexualities through various mediums, including perreo. In this day and age, groups like *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* (Feminist Collective under Construcción), *Con el verbo en la piel* (With the verb on the skin), and EspicyNipples are doing the work in confronting issues of race, gender, and sexuality. All three groups have and continue to utilize perreo in their activism.

As seen by its use in modern feminist collectives, perreo continues to be a creative outlet for Black women and femmes. Given the influence that it already carries, it is only right that cultural and academic rhetoric surrounding perreo and perreo culture begin recognizing it as an avenue for a progressive and inclusive form of feminism. Perreo, like Puerto Rico, is a tapestry that has been colored by complicated histories. These histories connect and clash in ways that uplift Black Queer Rican communities and challenge harmful societal norms. Engaging in the practice of perreo femme-inism, especially for those in the margins, is a means to reclaim heritage through movement,

reject colonialization and imposed standards of respectability, and redefine sexuality and gender.

RECLAMATION

As Bethanie Butler, a pop culture reporter, expertly explained in her 2020 article for The Washington Post, “Reggaeton is inherently Black and inherently political: poverty, racism, police violence and the genre’s own criminalization were persistent themes in the genre’s early days, anchored by Afro-Latino pioneers including Tego Calderón, Ivy Queen and reggae en Español legend El General.” Black artists were at the forefront of the creation of the genre and culture that has now been propelled to public notoriety. Given that reggaetón and, by extension, perreo are inherently black, all analyses must begin with an understanding of the history of blackness within Puerto Rico. By paying particular attention to how blackness and femininity have historically been negotiated throughout the history of the archipelago, we can begin to build an understanding for the impact that perreo has on modern day Black femmes.

Puerto Rico has existed in a perpetual state of colonialism since 1508 when Ponce de Leon established the first European settlement on the island of Borinquen. During the 16th century, Spanish rulers began importing enslaved Africans to the island. These forced laborers were brought to work on coffee, cotton, tobacco, and most prominently, sugar plantations. In fact, the relationship between sugar production and the volume of enslaved Africans brought to the island can be described as “intimately linked” (Stark). As was common practice for the Spanish empire, a caste system was imposed within the colony, with enslaved Africans being placed at the bottom of the caste. As Kinsbruner states “racism was promulgated and perpetuated by the caste system.” It is important to note the motivating factors behind introducing slavery to the archipelago. In part, the

genocide of the native Taino population prompted the Spanish to search for alternative means of supplying the colony with forced laborers. In addition to this reality existed the ideology that the indigenous peoples of the “new world” were feasible subjects for conversion to the Catholic faith. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, a 16th-century friar, is especially noted for his outspoken activism regarding the “spiritually salvageable” nature of the indigenous peoples. However, this attitude of white saviorism only applied to native populations. African slaves were “deemed less civilized and capable of conversion to Catholicism” (Alamo-Pastrana). This gave justification to the establishment of a social hierarchy that placed the white Spanish colonizers above all others and the enslaved Africans below all others.

With time, racial mixing occurred between the Spanish, Taino, and Africans on the archipelago. However, the systems and beliefs that the Spanish colonials established and utilized to understand race permanently affected attitudes towards race within Puerto Rico. The harmful effects of these attitudes are often dismissed or flat out ignored by those who wish to bury both the history and persistent reality of racism. A tool in promoting this erasure is the adoption of “racial democracy” as either a shining ideal or a present reality. Multiple issues exist with this rhetoric. The “racial democracy” purports to give homage to the three pillars of Borinquen identity: Spanish, Taino, and African. However, it neglects to confront the violence experienced by many non-white women who birthed mixed children. Additionally, this rhetoric fails to acknowledge how whiteness and a proximity to the Spanish culture are upheld as the ideal, with sentiments like *mejorar la raza* (better the race) being coded calls to lighten the racial demographic of the island. In essence, blackness and whiteness exist on a rigid spectrum, where

blackness is devalued and undesirable (*Remixing Reggaetón*). This affects how black media is viewed, consumed, and practiced in Puerto Rico. An analysis of two Afro-diasporic cultural artifacts, bomba and perreo, best exemplifies how black music, dance, and media confront histories of blackness.

Bomba is a performative and participatory style of music and dance. The creation of the genre is believed to be contemporaneous with the growth of the enslaved population on the island during the Spanish colonial period, with the first documented account occurring in 1797 (Alamo-Pastrana). An article by Colón-León on the National Association for Music Education website explains the origins of bomba and its historical significance:

The practice was developed by West African enslaved people and their descendants, who worked in sugar plantations along the coast of Puerto Rico (Ferrerias, 2005)... [C]ane workers released feelings of sadness, anger, and resistance through fiery drums played in dance gatherings called *Bailes de Bomba* (Bomba Dances). Enslaved people also used them to celebrate baptisms and marriages, communicate with each other, and plan rebellions (Cartagena, 2004). The roots of this tradition can be traced to the Ashanti people of Ghana, and the etymology of the word “bomba” to the Akan and Bantu languages of Africa (Dufrasne-González, 1994; Vega-Drouet, 1970).

Bomba was and is a means for staying connected to West African tradition despite realities of displacement. Bomba created an avenue to fight against oppressive colonial rule while regaining a sense of power and humanity. Although there isn't robust

documentation informing the traditional role of women in these spaces, the current role women have taken as they continue to utilize bomba in spaces of resistance helps to create imaginings of their status as leaders. For example, bomba was utilized in various Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, with many of the dancers leading the *bailles* being women (Gellman; Diaz and Buckner). Additional evidence for the leadership of Black women in these spaces is seen through the use of bomba to protest violence against women in Puerto Rico. The music video for “Canción Sin Miedo” exemplifies this leadership, strength, and influence (“Canción Sin Miedo: Barrileras Del 8M, Puerto Rico”). Considering the role bomba has played in rebellions of the plantation era up until the present day and the ways women are able to command the space through their central positioning as dancers, we can imagine women as continual leaders of rebellion through bomba. This tradition of women as leaders of resistance is one that perreo attempts to reclaim from bomba, as its historical predecessor.

Despite this historical and cultural contextuality, much of the national and global discourse surrounding bomba and perreo exacerbates the othering of blackness in the racial fabric of Borinquen. A prime example of this is observable in the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture’s (ICP) treatment towards African heritage during a campaign to promote cultural programming.

Within the racial triad, Spanish and Indigenous cultural and racial elements were prioritized within ICP research initiatives and activities emphasizing their active cultural life and permanency within the general Puerto Rican populace. Conversely, the use of bomba by the ICP is indicative of the process in which Blackness is seen as exclusively located in Puerto Rico’s premodern slave

agrarian economy. Such nostalgic representations easily depict “black people as happy and rhythmic tradition bearers who still inhabit homogenous and harmonious communities” (Godreau 2002: 283). (Alamo-Pastrana)

As discussed, blackness is still seen as an unfortunate outcome of the plantation societies that were a premodern reality on the island. The emphasis on premodern art forms like bomba as signifiers of blackness furthers narratives that place blackness outside of the “racial democracy”.

The lack of space given to the harsh realities of those doing the difficult work of advocacy and resistance through bomba and perreo creates romanticized visions of blackness that neglect reality. In her book, *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico*, Perta Rivera-Rideau explores how reggaetón and perreo help define experiences of, as well as attitudes towards, blackness within Puerto Rico. She calls out the expectation of invisibility that is placed on afro-borinquens and confronts the conflicts that result when these marginalized groups shatter expectations of silence. She coins the terms “folkloric blackness” and “urban blackness” as two stereotypical and (in their own rights) detrimental means of reconciling blackness within Puerto Rican society. As she describes, folkloric blackness represents African heritage and is regarded as the “‘least’ influential element in the racial triad that comprises Puerto Rican identity by positioning blackness as a historical and almost archaic relic of the island’s plantation era.” She utilizes bomba as a specific example of folkloric blackness. On the other side of the spectrum is urban blackness. A stereotypical portrait of blackness as violent, hypersexual, and working-class. Urban blackness is symbolized by perreo (*Remixing Reggaetón* 19). The emphasis here is on the fact that these rhetorics come from a national

level. In both instances, participants of these media are careful to make distinctions between nationalistic appropriations of the media and community-based reclamations. Nevertheless, these national depictions of blackness are detrimental to not only the cultural artifacts that come to be associated with them, but also to the existence of Black Puerto Ricans, as they are forced to negotiate stereotypical and harmful imaginings of blackness.

As a symbol of folkloric blackness, bomba is a more palatable expression. Bomba has been proudly demonstrated to tourists as a way to perform African heritage and promote the narrative of “racial democracy”. Revisiting its use by the ICP, we can see how national discourse takes advantage of bomba as an emblematic and nostalgic depiction of the “happy slave” (Alamo-Pastrana). Perreo as a symbol of urban blackness does not have this same effect. It is an “undesirable” export that highlights those that are seen as equally undesirable in the cultural fabric. Both representations attempt to squash the voice and the agency that bomba and perreo give to Black people. In actuality, bomba and perreo are two methods towards resistance that have many similarities.

As seen through “Cancion Sin Miedo” bomba is a powerful tool in the political activism of Black women. Perreo leans into the continued traditions of political resistance established by bomba as a means to face issues of modern-day society. The impact of this practice was best displayed in the inception of “perreo combativo”, which was a demonstrative use of perreo in the protest of #RickyRenuncia (Rodríguez). During these demonstrations, Puerto Ricans took to the streets to call for the resignation of then-governor Ricardo Rosselló. The demands for resignation came in response to the release of a series of chat messages involving Rosselló that “showed the governor and his allies

insulting women, gay people and mocking everyday Puerto Ricans, even victims of Hurricane Maria.” (Allyn). This movement served as a very public example of the power of perreo femme-inism. Despite the publicity, there were still voices that were not given the recognition or protection deserved after the protest. Black queer people were greatly involved in the activism that would ultimately lead to the successful ousting of Rosselló. In spite of this, mainstream media outlets released stories about perreo combativo that promoted the erasure of contributions from those in the margins. Dania Warhol, a member of the transfeminist network EspicyNipples and one of the panelists for “Perreo as Queer Feminist Resistance: A Creative Conversation”, recounted some of the backlashes that Black queer people experienced after perreo combativo. Dania describes how Black queer participants who were recorded at the event were later put at risk of losing their jobs, homes, and overall security in their wider communities. Despite these harmful after affects, the agency that perreo is providing for queer communities is still making positive waves. Contributions, like Dania’s, that consider all dimensions of queer activism are imperative to building understanding around the issues facing Black queer Puerto Ricans and will be dissected further through the pillar of redefinition.

Another area of comparison between the two art forms are the ways in which ideals of black femininity are negotiated through dance. Beginning with the historians of the “Generación del '40” Puerto Rican women have been depicted as “either passive, caricaturesque, or exceptional” (Matos-Rodriguez and Delgado 12). Marianismo reflects many of these depictions and has been a marker of femininity within the culture. Marianismo is inspired by the worship of the Virgin Mother Mary in Catholicism. Marianismo defines women as self-sacrificing, motherly, nurturing, and spiritually and

morally superior to men. Challenging these historical and oppressive regimes honors, reclaims, and renegotiates Black women's social positioning. In his analysis, Carlos Alamo-Pastrana explores the role of women and femininity in bomba. He is able to highlight how bomba subverts the colonial influence of marianismo and reclaims a sense of power for its femme practitioners.

Adopting a situated imaginary rooted in a history of marginalization, many female dancers argued that bomba dancing functioned as an ideal performative tool that allowed them to challenge and distance themselves from traditional gender roles that limit their contributions within the public sphere, and instead create useful and powerful meanings irrespective of men.

Furthering this notion, an extremely powerful example that illuminates how femmes can challenge the traditional gender roles and create new definitions for black femininity can be seen through a quote that Alamo-Pastrana obtained from a dance instructor and performer named Leticia. Leticia says, "For me, this is something that is very important. Just to have someone in front of you whom you tell what to do; you are the one running the dance." Perreo, much like bomba, provides an avenue for women to control the dance. As bomba allows women and femmes to command the *primo* (principle drummer) who sits in front of them, perreo allows the giving partner (the dancer shaking their buttocks) to lead from the front. Their movements as they grind to the distinctive rhythms of reggaetón tell their counterpart or their audience what to do and how to respond. Another layer of control comes from the consensual nature of the performance. In perreo, the femme holds the power to choose who will be their partner and for how long. This delineation of power is explored through the music created by reggaetoneras. An

infamous example of such discourse occurs in Ivy Queen's "Quiero Bailar". In the chorus, she sings: "*Quiero bailar/ Tú quieres sudar/ Y pegarte a mí/ El cuerpo rozar/ Yo te digo: 'sí, tú me puedes provocar'/ Eso no quiere decir que pa' la cama voy*" ("I want to dance/ You want to sweat/ And stick to me/ Touching our bodies/ I tell you: 'yes you can provoke me'/ That doesn't mean that I'm going to bed with you"). As Ivy Queen describes, the giving partner, who assumes the effeminate role, is free to participate in the exchange with the receiving, but ultimately has the final say on the extent of the exchange. This allows the giving partner to control the pace, the duration, and the overall experience that the receiving partner will participate in. In essence, this act restores women and femmes to the leadership status that we can assume they may have held during the *Bailes de Bomba* of the plantation era.

Both bomba and perreo elevate black culture to a national and global level. They are examples of afro-diasporic cultura, had to exhibit to survive the oppressive institution of slavery. However, one critical distinction between the two, is the way in which notions of respectability are negotiated. In bomba, the drummers are traditionally all men. Recently, women and femmes have begun assuming positions as drummers and creating their own women-only bomba groups. Although this act continues traditions of resistance in ways that further the positions of women and femmes in bomba, it still operates within the guidelines of respectability. Those who successfully command space as drummers gain respect from their male counterparts. On the other hand, perreo depends on anti-respectability. It doesn't seek to negotiate with societal norms and expectations in its resistance. Instead, it makes space for a reclamation of black feminine sexuality by

confronting respectability head-on. In this way, it redefines women and femme relationships with pleasure, providing them dominance in a traditionally male-led space.

REJECTION

The history of prostitution in the archipelago provides an interesting lens to explore how issues of class, race, and sexuality have continuously clashed to shape debates around women's bodies. Under Spanish colonial rule, prostitution was sanctioned in an attempt to address issues presented by the imbalance of genders. Seeing that there were more men than women, brothels were viewed as a means to "protect the honesty of married women" (Matos-Rodriguez and Delgado 84), which simultaneously positioned higher-class married women as morally superior to their lower-class unmarried counterparts. The racialization of the lower class leaned heavily into ideas of morality and, by extension, sexuality. Eileen Findlay explores this phenomenon in her book *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*. As described by Aline Helg in her review of Findlay's book,

With the abolition of slavery in 1873, elite concern for racial whitening and lower-class "moralization" increased. In the 1890s, unconventional honor codes came under the double assault of male liberals and bourgeois feminists. Both groups launched a campaign to regulate prostitution, aimed at cleansing Ponce of its "nondecent" population. The campaign received the backing of some working-class men. Although it did not mention race directly, according to Findlay, it racialized culture and stereotyped some patterns of behavior as black and negative, leading to the racialized sexual stigmatization of working-class women.

The sexual stigmatization of Black people was, by this time, a frequently utilized tool in the efforts by white society to continue the subjugation of Black people. This practice has

been continued through much of the discourse that surrounds perreo. Following in the footsteps of the anti-prostitution campaign of the 19th century came an anti-pornography campaign led by Senator Velda González in 2002. This campaign focused specifically on the role of women in perreo. It is interesting to note the similarities in the language utilized between the two campaigns to describe Black women, as well as, the motivating factors of each.

Both campaigns held significant religious backing that claimed to seek the protection of “Puerto Rican morals”, a coded phrase signifying the expectation of marriage and motherhood that is placed on women through white heteropatriarchy. In both instances, government officials latched onto a similar narrative as the religious leaders, claiming to seek the protection of family values. The rhetoric utilized often delineated between “morally upstanding” women and participants in the “obscene activities” claiming that their aim was to prevent the corruption of the former (Dávila and LeBrón).

A group of local Pentecostal churches claimed that reggaetón music videos could dissolve the unity of the Puerto Rican people, stating, “We are living in a critical time in terms of the moral health of our people. Marriage and the family, indisputable pillars of our social structure, are being undermined and the entire structure is coming down on us with unprecedented repercussions that threaten the existence of our collectivity, our people.”³² Government officials supporting González’s campaign made similar arguments regarding the government’s responsibility to protect Puerto Ricans from such “extreme obscenity.” Governor Sila M. Calderón stated, “It seems positive to me that Congress and specifically

Senator Velda González are tackling an important problem and social preoccupation in Puerto Rico, especially when we have to protect the Puerto Rican family in all aspects.”³³ (*Remixing Reggaetón* 66)

In both campaigns, supporters utilized arguments based on “morality” to police women’s sexual autonomy. For the anti-prostitution campaign, this morality was heavily influenced by the colonial influence of the United States. Americanization and the adoption of “puritan morals” defined the ideal depiction of a “good” Puerto Rican citizen, which ultimately meant that “vices” like prostitution had to be eradicated (Matos-Rodriguez and Delgado 93). Notwithstanding the 100-year gap, the anti-pornography campaign possessed eerily similar rhetoric. This time the moral beacon backing calls for the censorship of reggaetón and perreo was not the American ideal, but rather the Puerto Rican family.

As seen through the anti-prostitution and anti-pornography campaigns, morality is the grounds on which sexuality takes center stage in maintaining cultural and political power and influence. Within Puerto Rican society, the burden for morality falls disproportionately on women and non-white citizens. For example, the desire to protect the morality of bourgeois women heavily influenced the legal standing of prostitution. Much like the attitude Spanish colonialists held regarding slavery, the reality of prostitution was seen as a necessary evil. Men had to have an outlet for their sexual desire which would exist at the expense of the racialized lower class, who were expected to serve as prostitutes. Years later, when calls by religious institutions to protect the moral sanctity of women’s role in society eventually coupled with aspirations towards Americanization and “puritan morals”, the morality pendulum swung to position

prostitution as immoral and undesirable (Matos-Rodriguez and Delgado 93). Yet again, the voices of the women who were working as prostitutes were erased from this debate. In spite of this erasure, the propaganda supporting calls for the end of prostitution would often depict images of “poor Black women” (*Remixing Reggaetón* 64). The use of Black women as pawns in Puerto Rico’s history of prostitution is reflective of a global positioning of Black women as objects of disgust and pleasure.

A careful balance has been struck between disgust and pleasure as a means of control over Black femmes and their bodies. Black femmes have been positioned as an erotic escape, detaching their bodies from their personhood, and leaving them to serve as instruments of work and pleasure (Meiu). In the case of Puerto Rico, Black women are seen as passive tools that contributed to the *mestización* (racial mixing) of the island’s demographic populations. Many harmful narratives recount this history without acknowledging the violence experienced by Black women. Instead, they “represent black female sexuality as an always available option for Spanish men seeking to ‘satisfy [their] sexual appetites’ when not presented with any other recourse (i.e., white or indigenous women)” (*Remixing Reggaetón* 63).

Possibly one of the most documented and highly visible examples of the violence experienced by Black women during the transatlantic slave trade is seen in the life of Sarah Bartmann, also known as Hottentot Venus. In *Difference and Pathology*, Gilman describes the duality of disgust and pleasure through the contrasting descriptions of Sarah Bartmann:

Cuvier's description reflected de Blainville's two intentions: the likening of a female of the "lowest" human species with the highest ape, the orangutan, and the description of the anomalies of the Hottentot's "organ of generation."

Sarah Bartmann had been exhibited not to show her genitalia, but rather to present to the European audience a different anomaly, one that they (and pathologists such as Blainville and Cuvier) found riveting: her steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, a physical characteristic of Hottentot females which had captured the eye of early travelers. (85)

As seen through Gilman's description, disgust, in particular, is an advantageous emotion to evoke feelings of "otherness", as it has a direct link to morality. In fact, our societies have traditionally exploited disgust in order to establish the social and moral codes that define our lives (Haidt 124). White colonizers, like those who stole Sarah Bartmann from her native land, have attempted to depict Black people, including their bodies, as the antithesis of the white ideal. This was strategic, as it served as a justification for many of the abhorrible acts that white colonizers would enact against Black people. A justification that has been extended under the dominion of the United States.

From the 1950s to the 1970s agencies and researchers based in the United States utilized Puerto Rico as grounds for testing birth control. Félix V. Matos Rodriguez describes women who were subjected to these trials as being "doubly victimized as a result of their status as colonial subjects and as women" (17). I argue that there is a third layer of victimization, which is the complete disregard for the health and wellbeing of Black people. As is historically evident through similar trials (like the infamous Tuskegee

study), the social positioning of Black people as less than their white counterparts serves as a justification for their inhumane treatment. This, coupled with the colonial status of Puerto Rico and the fact that these trials took advantage of women's bodies, renders Black Puerto Rican women and femmes invisible, a status that perreo directly challenges.

In the case of perreo, issues of pleasure and disgust inform its development, its controversy, and its cultural and political relevance. Harkening back to the narratives surrounding Sarah Bartmann's body, one can easily see the grand amount of attention and influence placed on her "protruding buttocks". All racist beliefs and actions were justified through social differentiation, which was often supported by physical characteristics, like a "protruding buttocks", that were said to define Black people. However, as Mellinger and Beaulieu explain, the visible hatred displayed towards Black people also masked a secret desire that the white majority held.

Images of corpulent protrusion and exaggerations of body parts served as ritualized and commodified status degradation ceremonies [Garfinkel 1956] in which Black bodies and lifestyles were encoded as inversions of white bourgeois norms, structures and customs. The process of social differentiation is dependent upon this disgust at the Other's body...But, as stated above, group loathing often masks group desire. The low and dirty features expelled as "Other" come back as objects of desire, longing and allure.⁴ (123)

The white gaze was and continues to be fascinated with the curvaceousness of Black women through the lens of disgust and pleasure. The complexity of this fascination on an island, which is still navigating the realities of colorism and internalized racism yet boasts

an attitude of racial democracy is not lost on those who have found empowerment through a dance that centers the buttocks. As a form of Black media and culture, perreo is explosive, expressive, and just plain sexy. All of which are ideals that conflict with the pressure placed on the Borinquen identity by the set of rules and regulations deemed respectable under white colonial rule. It is no wonder that anti-racist feminist groups, like Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, have activated spaces for perreo in their “*lucha contra el capitalismo y el patriarcado*” (“fight against capitalism and the patriarchy”) (ColectivaFeministaConstrucción). In a Facebook post promoting the collective's event entitled ‘*Si no puedo perrear no es mi revolución*’ (If I can’t perreo then it’s not my revolution), a play on the popular abridged Emma Goldman quote (Shulman). They describe the party as a way to get your body moving and partake in the joy of perreo to empower the individual and the collective. The prioritization of spaces that promote joyous movement speaks power to the effectiveness that perreo can play in rejecting the sexual subjugation of the Black female body. In this way, perreo femme-inism empowers us to destabilize the colonization of Black women and femmes.

REDEFINITION

The implications of morality on notions of respectability and societal norms extend far beyond the binary. Colonial notions of “natural” gender presentations and sexual attractions have been internalized by the Puerto Rican societal structure. These notions have attempted to position queer communities as antithetical to national and cultural standards. Judith Butler explains some of the motivations following these assertions, stating:

As Foucault and others have pointed out, the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests.⁵ Feminist cultural anthropology and kinship studies have shown how cultures are governed by conventions that not only regulate and guarantee the production, exchange, and consumption of material goods, but also reproduce the bonds of kinship itself, which require taboos and a punitive regulation of reproduction to effect that end. (524)

A key regulator of reproduction within Puerto Rican society is the religious right. The emphasis placed on protecting the Puerto Rican family in the anti-pornography campaign indicates the degree to which men and women are expected to contribute to society through their ability to rear and raise children. La Fountain-Stoke and Martínez-San Miguel summate this phenomenon perfectly, describing a “heterosexual matrix of Puerto Ricanness, which promotes monogamy, heteropatriarchal family, and the experiences of kinships and motherhood as forcefully imposed on feminine sexuality.” Considering this

notion, the associations that are presumed to define the Puerto Rican woman leave no room for Black queer femmes whose gender expression, romantic relationships, and/or family units often fall within the margins.

From this space, we can argue for the performative and political power of perreo. Jillian Hernandez, a researcher who studies Black and Latinx aesthetics and sexualities, investigates the role of raunch in her 2014 article “Carnal Teachings” published in *Women & Performance*. As she describes through her work on “raunch aesthetics” the modes of production and expression that can be characterized as raunchy also “serve to generate pleasure for minority audiences, affirm queer lives, and regularly blend humor and sexual explicitness to launch cultural critiques” (95). By examining how all three markers of raunch aesthetics are successfully negotiated with perreo, we can further support the effectiveness of perreo femme-inism with regard to queer movements. For this discussion, like many of those that analyze queerness through racial intersectionalities, the definition of queerness moves beyond an individual's sexual identification or gender presentation. Queerness means subverting narratives asserted by mainstream ideologies, disrupting the “violence of normative order”, and embracing tools of expression and “ways of being” that live beyond said order (“Revisiting Queer Puerto Rican Sexualities”; Tinsley).

To understand how perreo generates pleasure in minority spaces, we must revisit how its development as a dance that centers the buttocks through whining, grinding and twerking is culturally significant to a Black queer audience. As we have discussed previously, the focus of the buttocks in perreo is a direct reclamation of traditional West African dance and rejection of colonial control of Black women's sexuality. The queering

of the buttocks coupled with its racialization provides further evidence for the significance of this dance whose performance centers that portion of the body. Here it is useful to explore how the buttocks is associated with queerness as a symbol of the effeminate. In the book *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora*, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes analyzes various works of queer Puerto Rican authors through the decades. An analysis of “¡Jum!”, a short story written by Luis Rafael Sánchez in 1966, provides a basis for the importance of the buttocks in signaling homosexuality:

This association can be made as a result of the primacy of the buttocks as a site of (effeminate) homosexual identification in Latin America: as many scholars have argued, under traditional Latin American (and Mediterranean) paradigms of masculinity it is predominantly the “passive” or receptive partner engaging in anal sex who is stigmatized and considered to be “homosexual,” akin to a woman.¹⁴... [I]ts centrality extends to the entire gluteal region in a hetero- and homosexual matrix, where the buttocks and hips acquire hypersexualized connotations and greater socially recognized erotic value.

As exemplified by the analysis above, the buttocks yet again becomes a marker for discourse surrounding the social identifiers for a group of people. Reading further into the section, La Fountain-Stokes addresses how the racialization of the buttocks plays into its effeminatization. Again, we are forced to confront how “the concept of ‘race’ becomes embodied on a subject as a result of prejudiced social views that seek to mark and establish difference²⁰” (*Queer Ricans* 5). For Black queer femmes, these narratives converge increasing the emphasis and attention that is placed on the use of their buttocks. Given these pressures, the choice to engage the buttocks through joyous forms of

movement appropriates the power that has been placed on the buttocks as a marker of black queer identity. This pleasure is multi-dimensional. It can be sexual, sensual, voyeuristic, celebratory, and/or playful. As adrienne maree brown maintains, “pleasure is a measure of freedom” (“adrienne maree brown: pleasure activism” 2:30–2:40). The pleasure created by redefining the historical connotations placed on the buttocks marches towards liberation for racialized queer lives.

For many who choose to perrear the engagement of their body is a defiant act of agency, a physical affirmation through performance. As Butler states, “gender identity is a performative accomplishment” (520). She argues that the actions we take are performed and eventually believed by our audience and ourselves as we attempt to construct and formulate ideas around are gender. Although this view can be limiting in the ways it assumes that a set of actions must be inherently associated with a particular gender, it provides an interesting lens to reassess how spaces and subjects can be queered through their participation in and performance of perreo. Perreo, by nature, is a medium of performance. From its application in music videos and social media to clubs and protests, perreo is defined by audience. Even in the most intimate of settings, traditional one-on-one perreo requires the individual assuming the effeminate role to perform for their partner. This idea of performance is solidified by the expressions of the receiving partner (the partner assuming the masculine role) as they typically marvel at the movements of their counterpart. The same sense of marvel exists outside of the partner dynamic where groups will hype up the empowered femmes who “perreo sola” or in groups of other women and femmes. The highly performative nature of perreo has positioned it as an

outlet for queer, trans, and non-binary participants to communicate aspects of their identity with the use of movement.

Here we return to the example of *perreo combativo*, where images of people engaging in *perreo* were widely broadcasted. There were many protests that ensued prior to the night when Rosselló announced his resignation. The night of the resignation came to be the night that would be coined *perreo combativo* or *perreo intenso*. Dania Warhol, from *EspicyNipples*, recounts the anticipation that had set in among activists who were working furiously to ensure the bigoted Rosselló would no longer hold his position of power over the Puerto Rican people. The night of *perreo combativo* began with rumors that there would be an announcement of Rosselló's resignation, which added to the energy felt in the atmosphere. People gathered to protest on the steps of the cathedral situated in the center of San Juan. This was a powerful location that emphasized the celebration of the effectiveness that grassroots protest held in reshaping the fabric of leadership in the archipelago. As described by Rodríguez and López, two contributors towards an article for the Puerto Rican news site *80grad0s*, "the collective performance occurred before a blatantly patriarchal, sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic government, and against a consciously or unconsciously biased society." Essentially, the cathedral served as an icon for the hegemonic institutions that protestors were fighting against. It materialized what might have otherwise felt untouchable. As Dania recounts, there were two queer femme DJs who organized the event. The space was intended to be a "protest inside a protest" where the queer community could safely dance and enjoy. However, as the night went on the space was infiltrated by those outside of the community who began to make the space hostile and insight violence towards the queer

community. Even after the protest the visibility given to the event was detrimental to Black queer participants, who were subject to violence through digital and physical spaces due to their documented participation in the protest (Center for Gender, Sexualities and Women's Studies Research at University of Florida 30:30–50:32).

Despite such backlash, queer communities are making strides towards reclaiming space through *perreo*. The genre is still viewed as an avenue toward affirmation with queer artists making their own beats and songs that are redefining the genre's social positioning. Through these productions, the last marker of raunch aesthetics (“blend[ing] humor and sexual explicitness to launch cultural critiques”) is conceptualized (Hernandez 95). Here we revisit the music video for the song “Muñeca” by Villano Antillano and Ana Macho. From the setting of the video, the sexually explicit tone is clear. These visuals are combined with carefully crafted lyrics to harness this explicit nature in order to support and affirm queer identities. For example, Villano Antillano references hooking up with women, stating, “*Aunque me tire machito' con mujere' por deleite/ Siempre que se corren, explosivo como mayday*” (“Although I pull macho with women for delight/ Whenever they cum, explosive as mayday”). Mirroring these lyrics, the video shows a woman walking into the store front and asking to go to the back room with Villano. The video pans to Ana Macho who is playfully teasing Villano by making suggestive hand gestures and giggling with another worker. This displays some of the humor that Jillian Hernandez mentions as a key marker of raunch aesthetics. In the larger scope of *perreo* femme-inism, both the lyrics and visuals increase visibility for ways of being that affirm gender and sexual exploration. Even the way Ana teases Villano is uplifting, as it feels like a friendly empowering gesture affirming the sexual exploration of their fellow

worker. Further affirming this level of support for the erotic is the necklace that the worker, a Black femme, who joins Ana Macho in the playful teasing of Villano Antillano is wearing. The necklace reads *puta* in bright barbie pink letters with a white backing. Puta is typically used as a derogatory term for a promiscuous woman or a whore. Heteronormative projections of trans femininity are fully rejected by having one of the characters within the video adorn a large necklace that is fully in frame seconds before Villano begins making out with a woman in the back room (Antillano and Macho 1:25–1:26). In this way, puta is reclaimed and the expectations for feminine sexuality are redefined.

The work of Villano and Ana, as well as the efforts of queer activists in perreo combativo are just the beginning of a growing movement. The liberation that perreo provides has made it an irreplaceable tool in creating queered spaces that confront misogyny, homophobia, and racism head-on. Through performance and movement, those who have previously been pushed to the margins and rendered invisible by heteronormative patriarchal regimes are pushing back. From taking down bigoted leaders to reshaping roles for Black queer femmes, the impact of perreo femme-inism is already being felt.

CONCLUSION

Perreo is synonymous with resistance. Despite the traditionalist views that portray the genre as misogynistic and oppressive, Black and queer women and femmes have found power in perreo. This power reflects the history of perreo, which encompasses movements confronting purity culture, misogyny, racial discrimination, and socio-economic discrimination. Perreo has been a catalyst for combating ever-prevalent attitudes of “racial democracy” that limit the visibility of Black women in Borinquen society. Along with this visibility, it confronts the social positioning of black femininity as hypersexual and othered. In this way, the genre has offered women and femmes the space to reject the social codes of respectability politics. It has challenged antiquated narratives that negatively associate Afro-Latin sexuality with disgust while opening space for femmes to take ownership of their own pleasure. This awareness of anti-respectability gives way to expressions that are powerful for Black and queer communities. For queer communities especially, perreo allows for a performance of gender and sexuality in a celebratory way. It redefines many of the cultural norms that have wrongly attempted to ostracize queerness, inviting queer communities to proudly participate in the process of demonstrating joy and pleasure through performance.

Perreo deserves to be legitimized in the conceptual sphere of feminist debates, as it is already a cultural practice that honors the complexity and beauty of Afro-Latinidad. This work has attempted to establish a foundational framework that necessitates perreo as a tool of resistance. Despite the positive impacts of perreo femme-inism that have been

highlighted and explored in this research, many of the harmful narratives and attitudes surrounding race and sexuality within Puerto Rico continue to affect Black queer femmes. For this reason, more research must be done. In particular, a more robust study of the history of feminism in Puerto Rico must be conducted. This study should answer questions, such as what histories of feminism in Puerto Rico are challenged by perreo? What histories are supported? How do groups and collectives discern what artifacts to engage with to further their mission? For those feminist groups that utilize perreo, how do group leaders and members describe their experience with perreo? Along with this study more work should be done centering research on pleasure activism and sexual liberation with perreo. Here studies that link ratchet feminism and trap feminism would be a usefully endeavour. Finally, considering the infancy of the genre, cultural products utilizing perreo should continue to be monitored and discussed.

Afro-diasporic cultures in Puerto Rico have relied on dance and movement in the curation and maintenance of their cultures. Historically, bomba has been the avenue that allows for Black Puerto Ricans to perform their identity and call for resistance. As this research has attempted to establish, the traditions of resistance through performance are continued and expanded through the performance of perreo. The importance of conversations and activism involving perreo cannot be overstated especially in the present day. The world-wide attention brought towards Black Lives Matters movements coupled with the growing visibility of queer Latin communities, especially within Puerto Rico, affirms the need to continually expand our ideas and learnings of feminist movements. This reality is already affecting how feminist groups within the archipelago approach their work, with more groups naming themselves as intersectional anti-racist,

anti-colonial, queer friendly groups. The influence of perreo in this work cannot be overstated. As this paper tries to contextualize, Black, feminist, and queer histories and cultures are all negotiated through perreo. Hopefully, as more queered Black perreo spaces continue to be created and their influence continues to grow and expand, the thoughts presented in this research will serve as a basis for understanding the foundational themes and the historical connections that inform perreo.

In conclusion, perreo is a practice that actively reclaims the Black cultural identities, rejects respectability politics, and redefines sex and gender norms. It is a practice that combines joy, celebration, movement, sexuality, sensuality, protest, and progress. Perreo creates spaces for those who have been pushed in the margins. Overall, it is a powerful tool of resistance that Black queer femmes have proudly taken claim of as they pioneer a new wave of feminism: perreo femme-inism.

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