

Healing Perreo

DJ Sad Boy's Queer Femme Ministry

A DJ Sad Boy set is a queer portal where femmes of color, *suciedad*¹, and raunch aesthetics reign supreme.² The Bay Area-based Chicanx multi-media artist and DJ, who currently lives in New York City, has cultivated a sound that draws from Bay Area and 1990s hip hop, classic reggaeton and underground neoperreo, dancehall and R&B. The way these forms come together in a Sad Boy set, however, is informed by rave and their previous DJ work mixing reggae and ragga-based happy hardcore as Kid Orange in the early 2000s. For Sad Boy, the spaces of rave constituted an extended family. Music was an escape for them from a violent, machista and homophobic biological family context. Being raised Catholic also instilled shame.

For many of us, music does the kind of spiritual work that heteropatriarchal religious traditions fail to do, and it is perhaps this background that makes Sad Boy sets so appealing to “queer people who apprehend the risky medium of the night to explore, know, and stage their bodies, genders, and sexualities in the face of systemic and social negation.”³ Healing occurs through perreo’s hip(g)nosis.^{4,5}

Sad Boy’s practice interacts with the growing underground music culture “neoperreo” that was spearheaded by performers such as Tomasa del Real and DJs Lizz and Sustancia. Emerging from Chile and Argentina with satellite hubs in Los Angeles and Mexico City, the genre merges reggaeton with global dance music and an emphasis on femmes and sex. The femmes at the forefront of neoperreo depart from conventional standards of Latina beauty, even within the reggaeton world, by donning numerous tattoos, S/M gear, and

1. Deborah R. Vargas, “Ruminations on *Lo Sucio* as a Latino Queer Analytic,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 715–26.

2. Jillian Hernandez, “Carnal teachings: Raunch aesthetics as queer feminist pedagogies in Yo! Majesty’s hip hop practice,” in *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 88–106.

3. Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Queer Nightlife* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 3.

4. Borelli defines hip(g)nosis as a theory and dance practice that “serves to contest the historical objectification [of racialized people] while at the same time acknowledging the power and pleasure involved in wielding one’s hips . . . Hip(g)nosis is a way to reconcile the problematic separation of mind and body by demonstrating how that body possesses and articulates knowledge through embodied activity (13).”

5. Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She Is Cuba: The Genealogy of the Mulata Body* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

a goth aesthetic influenced by the digital realm. Through sound, Sad Boy and the cyberputas of neoperreo create communal spaces where rave culture extends to perreo and vice versa.

I had been following Sad Boy on Instagram (@dj_sadboy) for several years before having the privilege of enjoying a set in San Diego in 2018. The feeling it instilled in me and my group of girlfriends was pure joy; the delight of a Biggie tune following a classic by Don Omar, and Beanie Man transitioning into La Goony Chonga. We felt full, sexy and alive.

I was grateful to be able to access these feelings later during the pandemic while alone, tuning into one of the many late-night sets Sad Boy streamed from their apartment on Instagram live, and later, as part of a virtual symposium I organized on *Perreo as Queer Feminist Resistance*. DJ Sad Boy's practice, which is also shaped by their experiences as a sex worker, exemplifies the power of queer and feminist Latinx art making, which alchemizes shame into creative erotics of liberation. The *machista* messaging of mainstream reggaeton and hip hop become resignified on the dance floor, as femmes make it their own. No one is pure, and no one is damaged.

DJ Sad Boy's approach to mixing departs from the mechanized and routine standard of much EDM by employing long transitions and varied structures. In doing so, they bring a visual artist's eye to the sonic by using the found material of music to create a collage, with the cuts and mixes as the "visible seam."⁶ In fact, Sad Boy's DJing extends from their photography work, which centers on queer femmes of color in California.

Sad Boy and I have built a femme friendship over several projects we've collaborated on. In our interview, which occurred in December 2020 right around their birthday, we discuss how traveling within and outside of the U.S. has affected their sound, how the pandemic has affected their work, and the creation of *Noche de Travesuras* (Night of Transgressions), an underground queer perreo party that they established in 2017 along with queer LA-based artists DJ Baby Uniq and Jesuabones. After a long hiatus during the pandemic, the party has since resumed in New York.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Did your sound and approach to DJing shift when going from the Bay Area to LA and then LA to New York? Have there been ways in which that's impacted what you play and how you play it?

DJ SAD BOY: I would say that there's been a small shift in sound. In LA I was playing a bit more femme fronted Chicana hip hop and Bay [area] hip hop. Just by hearing my tracks folks in LA would be like, "Oh you're from NorCal" and I found that odd as when I was raving and DJing back then at the raves, people would always be trying to do the same—pit NorCal and SoCal against each other and I'm like *porque?! Like why?*

But definitely coming here [to New York] I did my homework and have been exposed to a bit more different musica, especially hip hop, which is what I started playing at the beginning of my Sad Boy shift [from DJing raves]. And so I would say the only change that has occurred is being able to really brush up on my East Coast

6. Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

queens, heroes, and MCs, reggaetoners⁷, etc. I'm exposed to so much more underground and regional perreo aqui that I've never heard. I'm so grateful.

So I would say the noticeable differences are that I play a bit more East Coast tracks now in my sets along with Bay Area rappers in an attempt to unify East Coast versus West Coast and just unify, you know?

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Yes. I really like how your sets mix reggaeton and classic hip hop.

Can you talk a little bit about your approach to mixing in general? How do you prepare for a set and how do you think about the genres that you mix together?

DJ SAD BOY: I'm a Capricorn, so I'm a little bit of a perfectionist. So let's say I'm booed up at the time and I have to practice for a set I'll be like "Boo, I might not be able to see you this week." He knows how I get when I have sets because for me it's really important to curate the sound. I really do my best to make the set fluid. And I like to generally work my way to 110ish BPM from 90ish BPM.

As far as how I curate, I would say that it's always very important for me to have some hip hop in there. And once I started playing like puro perreo I was like, damn, you know, going to Mexico and then coming here and traveling I was like, "Okay, it's gonna be kind of tricky juggling hip hop and perreo, and so I was like how can I do this?" And that's when I started downloading all the hip hop acapellas and mixing them with perreo and then, you know, making my own little Too Short perreo mashups. I want to work on more mashups, and I'm still working on this tribute to Oakland that's gonna be like, Keyshia, Mac Dre and Too Short.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: That's dope! Your perreo and hip hop mashups sound amazing. So how do you negotiate that move between the super popular perreo or reggaeton like J Balvin with the underground perreo you play? Do you find yourself emphasizing more underground perreo, or do you move equally between the popular and more underground tracks?

DJ SAD BOY: I always want to get some of the classicos in there. I always want to get some of the underground henta in there. It's always very important to me to keep it super queer and puti. So I will always get all the underground queer henta who are producing music and making tracks, and then I do my best to keep the drum and bass element in there tambien.

For example, I have a Bad Gyal drum and bass remix and a J Balvin drum and bass remix. I'll play current perreo because I feel like a lot of the current perreo is what everybody knows. And as far as how I curate that, I would say it depends on where I'm playing. I feel like, more so than LA, when you're walking down the calle aqui in New York, you hear the Dembow everywhere. So I've definitely learned about a lot of artists I would not have been exposed to on the West Coast. This has definitely influenced the tracks I play and my sound.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: It's like Miami. Everyone's driving with the windows down and like, the beat, the perreo beat is literally the beat of the city! It could be different artists, different countries' perreo, but everyone is playing that beat out in space as they're moving around the city.

7. Gender neutral term for reggaeton performer.

DJ SAD BOY: Yeah that Dembow. You can always hear it. Like *makes beat noise* do doo too.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Yup!

DJ SAD BOY: And I would say, for example, like when I go to Mexico and I played [club] Rico and the perreos in Mexico, they love the underground stuff, but they also love the classics. I try not to be too much into the hip hop perreo stuff there because from my experiences it's like, I mean, you know, with DJing you gotta read the crowd and whatnot. I also play a lot of underground and Oakland stuff as well and tend not to play too many mainstream tracks.

Sometimes when I play the Bay hip hop or trap I found that it wasn't doing it for them. So if it's Mexico I'll do straight up perreo, like classicos.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: That's interesting. So you have more room for moving between hip hop and perreo in the U.S., I guess, because it's music we feel more of a connection to. And maybe also as Latinx people there's always that move between hip hop and Latin music. So I think that for us that's much more intertwined. And how about when you went to Berlin? What did you play?

DJ SAD BOY: So when I went to Berlin the collective that I played with was a Latinx Collective, and I had actually done a little bit of homework and listened to La Bad Puppy and everybody from the Culoka collective.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Gotchu.

DJ SAD BOY: Being that it was Berlin, I felt like I had more freedom to get a little heavier with the drum and bass.

So I was doing hip hop, drum and bass, and perreo. I kind of mixed it up which is how I would like to keep my sets. But I've definitely learned through traveling and going to different spaces how I need to carry my set. So when I was there I played lots of hip hop and my underground queer perreo and mostly femme fronted stuff like all the girls. Aside from Mexico and maybe the Noche [de Travesuras] one-year anniversary that we did before I left LA, that was one of the most hyped crowds I ever played for!

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: That's dope.

DJ SAD BOY: It was so lit. I was shook.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: That's amazing! You know, Germany and Europe, when it comes to clubbing and dancing and the whole scene they just don't play.

DJ SAD BOY: They don't!

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: So you mentioned Noche de Travesuras. Can you tell me a little bit of the story of how that party began? How you would describe the space that you created? Is it still going on?

DJ SAD BOY: I would say that I had this idea as a seed. I can't say that I planted it. It was a collective thing that was only possible because of the energy everybody involved brought to the events. Initially I was very inspired by the folks doing things locally, which were always fun and tended to have super impressive line-ups. At this time in LA it seemed as if there were no queer perreos and that it was time for that to change. It's not that all the events weren't inclusive, but it just hits different when it's for the hentx by the hentx. Having access to large budgets and sponsorships is a whole 'nother accessibility issue tambien.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Yeah that can get messy.

DJ SAD BOY: Being inspired by my background in the raving, my idea was to create an underground perreo. Queer but also kind of ravey and to bring that old-school map point underground vibe to the perreo, although that's much harder than I remember lol. The super-produced perreos are beautiful. I'm so grateful that, you know, perreo artists have access and opportunities now to these commercial spaces. But, I always tend to like the underground vibe, so I intended to create that feeling. When I had the idea me and DJ Baby Uniq, actually, we were like kicking it and hitting perreos up together. They were also queer, and I admired their sets for a while, so I figured hey maybe they're down and pitched the idea. They were down, and we started planning the first perreo.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: What did it feel like? Who came out, and is it still going on now that you're in New York?

DJ SAD BOY: Well, I would say it definitely felt very inclusive, very QTPOC. Definitely you would see lots of people out there you wouldn't see at the mainstream perreos and just lots of queer folk, and it was so amazing just to see those folks come out from so many different collectives in LA. And like just people being very supportive and like saying, "Hey, we needed this," and like somebody who's queer to relate. I know there's perreos going on in LA, but nothing felt as inclusive as *noche*.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Yeah.

DJ SAD BOY: So that's kind of the crowd that was in LA. We also had the chance to work with Chulita Vinyl Club which was dreamy. My intent was to keep it a femme fronted space. With the history of perreo, it can be and was a very much machista genre and we wanted the space to be the opposite—"femme."

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: For sure.

DJ SAD BOY: It felt like it was time for the femmes to take it back. So, you know, we tried to get queens and queers and lots of femmes to just, you know, come out and bless us with their sounds and their art and their presence. And it was really cute. I definitely never felt another vibe like that. As far as the current state of Noche De Travesuras, in March 2020 we had a show headlined by Chanty OTM but then Rona took the mundo by storm. They're a queer Reggaeton DJ. I relate to them a lot because now they're mostly focusing on their gabber and hardcore kind of stuff which of course is where DJing started for me.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Who are some of your favorite queer reggaeton folks?

DJ SAD BOY: I would say definitely some of my favorites are El Demonía, Elsa Brava, and Chocolate Remix to name a few. I really love what Sailor Fag is doing también.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: I'm so sad that I wasn't able to go to a Noche De Travesuras, and I just love the title (which is a play on the classic reggaeton song of the same name by Héctor el Father). I love what y'all did, it was just so on point on so many levels.

I also wanted to touch on how the pandemic has impacted your DJ practice. We talked a little bit about the event for Noche having to be cancelled right in March. You were about to go to Mexico also right?

DJ SAD BOY: Yeah.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: So how have you navigated the challenges, but also, has it made anything at all possible? If it has all been *caca* [crap] that is totally understandable.

Your sets at the beginning of the pandemic on IG were huge for me. Like they were just really super healing, just to be able to plug into them in the moment. So how have you been negotiating continuing to DJ under these conditions?

DJ SAD BOY: Well, firstly, gracias.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Of course, thank you!

DJ SAD BOY: And I would say that it definitely has not been all *basura*. My capacities, sound, and ability to adjust to digital mixing really benefited. I was using Virtual DJs to put my sets together, which is an application. And I was using my little MacBook trackpad. I learned on turntables but DJing is like a constant evolution. It's either you advance with it or lose out on opportunities in most cases.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Gotchu.

DJ SAD BOY: You don't have very much control with online sets but when the pandemic hit . . . and actually right when we got that first stimulus I was like, let me like, step my cookies up because I should have done this a long time ago. I bought a DDJ-400 controller and I bought a new system.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Oh, I love that!

DJ SAD BOY: A little controller and it was actually, like, once I started mixing I was like why the hell did I wait so long? Like why was I playing myself?

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Right. What have you been listening to these days?

DJ SAD BOY: Definitely I'm always listening to *perreo*, digging into the classics, staying in tune with all the queer families who are doing things with *perreo*. My oldies, my jazz, my *ska*, I kind of tend to be all over the place. And I still love my classic hip hop. Sometimes I forget my age haha.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: That's the case for me. And because I teach that's built in almost because I'm around young people all the time.

DJ SAD BOY: Yeah. I attribute my youthful looks to my mom lol j/k [knocks on wood].

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Lol! How old are you? Or how old are you turning?

DJ SAD BOY: I will be turning 36.

JILLIAN HERNANDEZ: Oh, you're young. I'm 41. You're good. you're totally good. Haha.

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