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The Good, The Bad and The Bunny:

How Bad Bunny is Changing Reggaeton

Bad Bunny is currently the world's biggest streaming artist. The Puerto Rican singer, rapper, and songwriter has been the most streamed artist worldwide on Spotify for the last three years. (Spotify) Born in 1994 as Benito Antonio Martinez Ocasio, the singer has gained worldwide fame for his unique blend of Latin trap, reggaeton, and hip-hop music. Martinez first gained attention for his music on SoundCloud, before signing with a record label and releasing his debut album *X100pre*, he has since released several hit songs and even collaborated with major artists like Cardi B, J Balvin, Drake, Daddy Yankee, and others. In 2020, the Puerto Rican singer released two groundbreaking albums, and even an extra album with all the songs that did not make it into these albums. Since the release of his debut album, Martinez has won three Grammy Awards, nine Latin Grammy Awards, eight Billboard Music Awards, an MTV Music Video Award, two American Music Awards and thirteen Premios Lo Nuestro awards, among others. (IMDb) Known for his distinctive style, outspoken personality, and social activism, Martinez has become a cultural icon and one of the most influential Latin musicians of his generation. “He has also been heavily praised, by fans and media alike, for using his platform to bring awareness to issues like gender violence and inequality.⁷ This is remarkable because reggaeton, the genre that propelled Bad Bunny to fame, was censored and banned in its earlier years due to its promotion of gender violence.” (Hoban 2021) He has been rewarded for his

activism when he received the V. In this essay, I will argue that Martinez's music represents a powerful critique of dominant cultural norms and values, challenging traditional gender and sexuality roles, addressing social and political issues, and celebrating hybridity and diversity. Drawing on a range of scholarly sources and close analysis of Bad Bunny's lyrics, visuals, and performance style, I will show how his work reflects and contributes to broader cultural and political transformations in Latin America and beyond.

Bad Bunny is a powerful critique of dominant cultural norms and values who is constantly addressing social and political issues. Martinez has a history of social, cultural and even political activism especially challenging toxic masculinity within Latinx culture. In February of 2020, Martinez went on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* to promote his album *YHLQMDLG*. During his performance he wore a skirt, and a t-shirt that read “They killed Alexa, not a man in a skirt,” which was in reference to Alexa Negron Luciano, a transgender woman who was shot and killed in Puerto Rico for using a women’s bathroom. This statement was impactful in the Latinx community because it confronted the issues of transphobia and toxic masculinity especially prevalent in Latin America. Similarly, this statement was made on live, American television and presented this issue to a wide range of viewers. This, however, was not Martinez’s first time making a statement like this.

Bad Bunny is a unique Latinx artist because he is constantly challenging traditional gender and sexuality roles by celebrating hybridity and diversity. In 2007, Priscila Caraballo Vilagra offered an analysis of the ways in which male identities make themselves clear through reggaeton music and music videos. Vilagra argues that male identities “are defined by opposition to another...[and] are learned by autoimages or hetero-images in aspects that are considered positive or negative by the collective.” (Vilagra, 2007) Vilagra also argues that there are three

most common *autoimages* used to portray men in reggaeton. The first autoimage she presents is that of the *macho* latino, who is “surrounded and desired by multiple women.” (Vilagra, 2007) Here, sexuality works as evidence that these men are attractive and virile. The second autoimage that Vilagra presents is that of the violent man, who “uses violence as a way to enact control over other men and women,” (Vilagra, 2007) here men use violence to distance themselves from any feminine references. The third autoimage is that of the wealthy man, who “uses [wealth] to distance themselves from other men, and by doing so, represents themselves as powerful.” (Vilagra, 2007) This final autoimage is used by men to seem superior or inferior to others based on their wealth. Although Martinez is constantly fighting against these autoimages, it has not always been this way. During the beginning of his career, Martinez signed with *Hear This Music*, a music label company owned by DJ Luian and The Mambo Kings. While under this label, Bad Bunny was known for his violent narratives, and for sexualizing women. However, after breaking from this label is when Martinez began speaking out about issues that mattered to him. An example of this is his music video for his song *Solo de Mi*, which acts as a societal commentary about gender violence against women. He does so by showing a woman who is singing alone on a stage, but is somehow still getting hit and has bruises appearing on her throughout the video. (Martinez 00:55) Similarly, that same year the music video for his song *Caro* was released. In this music video, Martinez starts the video by getting his nails painted but then is replaced by a female actress who resembles him. In the same video, Martinez’s doppelganger is joined by older people, people with down syndrome, drag queens, pregnant women, plus sized people, and feminine men. (Martinez 1:52) All of which are people not commonly portrayed in music videos. The previous two videos are examples of how Martinez directly defies the traditional portrayals of reggaeton music. Regardless of how he started his

career, the impact Martinez continues to make through his music and videos is immense and it continues to challenge traditional ideas of latinidad. According to Petra Rivera “The pressure to conform to music industry standards that erotocize and exotizice black and Latino performers may motivate some reggaeton artists to feel obligated to act out stereotypes in order to achieve broader success.” (Rivera 166) This is something that can be clearly seen in the beginning of Martinez’s career, but his growth as an artist demonstrates that it is not always necessary to conform to dated and sexist ideologies. “For some Puerto Rican artists, reggaetón is a site for political commentary that continues to address issues of violence, police brutality, and disenfranchisement, while some extend their critiques to the island’s ongoing colonial relationship with the United States.” (Rivera 168) This being said, Martinez is one of the few Latino artists who actively speaks out about such issues. “Martínez has a track record of social and cultural activism challenging toxic masculinity within Latino culture.” (Lobo 2023)

Martinez is known for being outspoken about political issues that affect his homeland, Puerto Rico. In his 2022 song *El Apagon*, Martinez critiques how often the power goes out on the island of Puerto Rico, a direct cause of hurricane Maria in 2017. Martinez released a documentary-style music video about the political climate of Puerto Rico. In the video, the island's electric crisis is highlighted and brought to light. Another issue that is heavily discussed in the song and video is that of white westerners moving to the island to benefit economically while displacing locals. Martinez’s girlfriend is featured on the song, and she has a verse about how locals do not want to leave their home, and that the foreigners should leave instead. She sings “*Yo no me quiero ir de aquí... Que se vallan ellos... Lo que me pertenece a mi, se lo quedan ellos...*” (I don’t want to leave... They should leave... What belongs to me, they’re taking...) (Martinez 2022) In the video, true stories of Puerto Rican people who have been

displaced are shown and highlighted. (Martinez 04:33) Similarly, Martinez calls out certain people who are guilty of displacing locals to benefit economically. (Martinez 11:00) Besides political issues, Martinez also tackles other issues not usually spoken about in Latin America.

In his 2020 music video for his song *Si Veo a Tu Mama*, Martinez tackles the issue of depression and loneliness. The music video starts off at a New Year party, where a man is about to end his own life while surrounded by people. A child walks up to the man and asks him what he is doing, to which the man replies “Everything I do, I do it wrong. I’m a failure... My family hates me and my friends don’t listen to me. I am alone.” (Martinez 1:00) The child then tells the man that when he is sad he listens to Bad Bunny, and takes the man to listen to him. The party continues, and there are scenes of people having fun together as well as people who are alone. The music video brings up issues not commonly talked about such as men's mental health and the fact that a person can still be suffering even when surrounded by people. Besides mental health, Martinez also speaks on themes of gender violence.

In his 2022 song *Andrea*, Martinez tells the story of women “with the desire to grow, be free, dream, be respected and understood.” (Yahoo) In this same song, Martinez sings about the feminist movements that have taken Latin America by storm. The lyrics of the song make direct references to political issues regarding women's rights. “*Quiere quedarse en PR... Pero todo se ha complicado, como si ser mujer fuera pecado... Pa’ colmo ahora el gobierno la llama asesina... Ella no quiere una flor, solo quiere que no la marchiten... que le den respeto y nunca se lo quiten.*” (She wants to stay in Puerto Rico... But everything becomes complicated, as if being a woman was a sin... To make matters worse the government is now calling her a killer... She doesn't want a flower, she just doesn’t want to be withered... she wants respect and for it to not be taken away) (Martinez 2022) The song *Andrea* has lyrics that give the listener an inside

look at Martinez's ideologies. Martinez also does this by combining both lyrics and music videos.

In 2020, Martinez directed and released a music video for his song *Yo Perreo Sola* (I Twerk Alone). In this song, Martinez sings about a woman who is free and expresses this by dancing on her own. In the song, a female voice sings "Antes tu me pichaba, ahora yo picheo. Antes tú no querías, ahora yo no quiero." (Before you used to pitch to me, now I pitch to you. Before you didn't want to, now I don't want to) (Martinez 2020) Here, a woman is telling a man that she used to desire that she no longer feels the same way. The overall theme of the chorus is about the shifting dynamics of a romantic relationship, where the woman is now empowered. Similarly, the music video has themes of empowerment. In the music video, Martinez can be seen wearing three different drag outfits, and is surrounded by adoring men in multiple scenes. The video ends with a strong message about consent, "Si no quiere bailar contigo, respetala. Ella perrea sola." (If she doesn't want to dance with you, respect her. She dances alone.) (Martinez 2020) With songs such as this, it is clear that Martinez is constantly trying to challenge certain ideologies, and by doing so he defies many of the shared ideologies both in and about Latin America.

According to Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman, "To tropicalize... means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values." (Aparicio/Chavez-Silverman 8) It can involve emphasizing certain cultural aspects, such as music, food, or language, to create a distinct identity that is associated with a culture or location. In a very unique way, Martinez goes against tropicalization while also tropicalizing certain aspects of his career. Martinez's music can be seen as an example of tropicalization. He often incorporates elements of Latinx and Caribbean culture into his music, such as reggaeton beats,

Spanish lyrics, and references to Puerto Rican identity. In doing so, he creates a distinct sound and image that is associated with Puerto Rico and Latinx culture. However, tropicalization can also reinforce stereotypes and other ideas about particular cultures or regions. As mentioned before, Martinez's music often challenges traditional gender roles and power dynamics, and he has used his platform to speak out against social and political issues affecting Puerto Rico and Latinx communities. "Bad Bunny is not only redefining the genre but also the construction of masculinity, due to his blurring and subversion of gender binaries, and the construction of women, in that he presents, in his lyrics, women as subjects with their own agency." (Diaz 1)

Therefore, while his music can be seen as an example of tropicalization, it also demonstrates the complexity and diversity of Latinx culture and experiences. Similarly, Martinez is becoming a worldwide celebrity, and his music has been making its way around the globe in Spanish. "It took Bad Bunny to show us the real leaps and bounds Latin music has been taking in the U.S. market." (Williams 2022) Martinez's latest album *Un Verano Sin Ti* (A Summer Without You) was a record-breaking album across all genres. During its release week, the album accounted for 16% of all U.S. Latin streaming. (Williams 2022) Similarly, the album peaked in the top 5 in Spain, Switzerland, Italy, and the Netherlands. (ACharts) By becoming a worldwide artist, Martinez is able to bring Latinx and Spanish-language music to audiences who are not typically the target audience. According to Luis Rivera, "the immediacy of *a click, a like, a trending topic, or a stream* help generate values, tastes, aesthetics, narratives, relevancy criteria and ways to relate to these devices which hybridize and influence the performative expectations of the male gender." (Rivera 35) Martinez demonstrates how it is possible to use devices such as clicks, likes, trends, and streams to change the way male Latinx performers are seen. "This process of hybridization becomes more complex as Bad Bunny becomes a phenomenon of popular culture

that belongs to the mainstream, which has its own rules, laws, and logic that influence the relationship between the public and media narratives.” (Rivera 35) However, Martinez is constantly showing that he does not care about the rules and laws set by his predecessors.

To conclude, Bad Bunny is one of the most influential Latinx musicians of this generation. He has gained worldwide fame for his unique blend of Latinx trap, reggaeton, and hip-hop music, and is currently the world's biggest streaming artist. Although some may argue that “he is “purplewashing”, or using feminist ideologies to cover up the misogynistic aspects of his music,” (Hoban 2021) Martinez's music represents a powerful critique of dominant cultural norms and values, challenging traditional gender roles, addressing social and political issues, and celebrating hybridity and diversity. He has become a cultural icon through his distinctive style, outspoken personality, and social activism, particularly on issues like toxic masculinity and transphobia. “One of the keys to Bad Bunny's stardom is the incorporation of apparently feminist inclusive messages in his songs, and his break with the more traditional lines of reggaeton based on macho and misogynistic ideas.” (Diaz 664) By drawing a close analysis of Martinez's lyrics, visuals, and performance style, it is clear that his work reflects and contributes to broader cultural and political transformations in Latin America and the world. Although Martinez’s use of Latinx beats and spanish lyrics can be seen as a form of tropicalization, by speaking out against certain issues, he is defying stereotypes and tropicalization. His impact and influence in defying traditional portrayals of reggaeton music continue to challenge the traditional ideas of latinidad and men in the reggaeton industry. “With songs containing feminist messages and videos that break with gender norms, the new reggaeton distances itself from its misogynistic and hegemonic beginnings.” (Fernandez 1) Through his music, Martinez has created a space that allows for an open dialogue on important social and cultural issues that affect the Latinx

community. Overall, Bad Bunny is a trailblazer in the music industry, and his work serves as a testament to the power of music to shape and challenge cultural norms and values.

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