

El Conejo Malo: How Bad Bunny Embodies Decoloniality in Performance

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Abstract

This research explores how reggaetón artist Bad Bunny embodies decolonization. I conduct a content analysis of his work using decolonial performance theory to better understand how Bad Bunny has come to understand or show the world his own journey of decoloniality. I use the concept of Ricanness created by Sandra Ruiz to better understand decolonial performance theory and how it relates back to Puerto Rico. I navigate how Bad Bunny's art has embodied Ricanness as an artist from Puerto Rico who has quickly become one of the biggest Latin artists in the world..

Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, also known for his stage name Bad Bunny, grew in popularity within the reggaetón genre and made a name for himself. Separating Bad Bunny from other reggaetón artists is his embodiment of the meaning of decoloniality through his performances and music. I conduct a content analysis of his work using decolonial performance theory to better understand how Bad Bunny has come to understand and show the world his own journey of decoloniality. I use the concept of Ricanness created by Sandra Ruiz to better understand decolonial performance theory and how it relates back to Puerto Rico. I navigate how Bad Bunny's art has embodied Ricanness as an artist from Puerto Rico who has quickly become one of the biggest Latin artists in the world. While Bad Bunny is not the single answer to the liberation of Puerto Rico, he can help us navigate the re-surgence of embodied decoloniality in popular culture figures and Puerto Ricans. This research also takes into account the imperfections in Bad Bunny's delivery and how, although he works to create his own interpretation of a post-colonial world, there are flaws which has given him the label of "beautifully problematic" by scholars and those who share a love for Bad Bunny on social media. I explore the good and the bad and how decolonial embodiment in performance within Bad Bunny as he pushes himself and others to use their body in the quest of a post-colonial future.

Background

The origin story of reggaetón starts in Panama, but it carries a story of transmigration and history of censorship that made its way into Puerto Rico. Reggaetón often speaks back to conversations of race, sex, and gender but at other times contributes to larger problems within these categories. Reggaetón is also the root of all different types of cultures coming together to create the beats that everyone dances to. Reggaetón originally comes from Afro beats and Jamaican dance hall (Johnson, 2016, p.95). It has become a sub-genre of hip hop and has also included other Caribbean beats based on geographical location (Johnson, 2016, p.95).

The history of reggaetón shares the tale of multiple of experiences. Petra R. Rivera- Rideau in his work *Remixing Reggaetón: The Cultural Politics of Race in Puerto Rico* explains the history of how reggaetón came to be and also how race plays a role in this part of Puerto Rican culture. Rivera-Rideau explains, “Musically, reggaetón incorporates beats, vocal styles, and other aesthetics from several genres popular in the African diaspora in the Americas, especially hip- pop and dancehall” (Rivera-Rideau, 2015, p.160). It is hard to pinpoint the moment that reggaetón came to life in Puerto Rico, but it is known that it was a mixture of different genres in music and culture that contributed to the creation. River-Rideau allows for us to further to explore how reggaetón has developed into a cultural practice of diaspora: “The term diaspora addresses both the histories of migration that are crucial to reggaetón, and reggaetón’s articulation of diasporic links across different sites, particularly between Puerto Rico and elsewhere in the African diaspora” (Rivera-Rideau, 2015, p. 418). \

The connection of African diaspora in reggaetón roots goes back to the colonization of Puerto Rico. Through the Atlantic Slave Trade, Africans who were forcibly taken to Puerto Rico brought things from their home, and spread their cultures throughout the Americans and Caribbean. The relationship of Latinidad and Blackness has long been an issue in Latin America and Puerto Rico which relates to the racial hierarchy created when the Spanish colonized Latin America. Puerto Rico much like the rest of Latin America has adopted a hierarchy of race that began through acts of colonization. Rivera-Rideau explains that “Folkloric blackness allows for the integration of blackness into the Puerto Rican nation without compromising the image of Puerto Rico as white(ned) due to its spatial/temporal distancing... Urban blackness thus symbolizes the internal black ‘other’ against which Puerto Ricanness can be defined as white(ned)” (Rivera-Rideau, 2015, p.11). Rivera-Rideau explains how the act of whitening Puerto Rico is been an act of social hegemonic structures, “As a result, urban blackness became the identifiable counterpoint to hegemonic constructions of whitened Puerto Rican identity” (Rivera- Rideau, 2015, p. 296). In the creation of reggaetón, blackness played a role in how it was named and categorized in Latin music. Reggaetón has been labeled as urban music. In addition to music and dance, reggaetón raises issues relating to the historic and ongoing complicated nature of Blackness and black identity in Latin American culture.

For years reggaetón and perreo have also been used to talk about feminism and gender-based violence. Perreo is a sexual dance which Johnson explains: “Its dance style is similarly explicitly in its mimicking of the sexual act and equally grounded in an Afro-Caribbean choreographic repertoire that invests in rhythmic isolation of the hips and articulation of the buttocks... In the most basic version of this dance, women position themselves with their backs to their male partners as in a back grind or a freak but bend over fully, sometimes touching the floor with their hands, to flaunt their buttocks in a back-and-forth rocking hip isolation against their co-performer’s groin area” (Johnson, 2016, p.95). Perreo translates into twerking which has been explained as a sexual dance popular in reggaetón and other hip-pop subgenres. Perreo culture within reggaetón has become very popular and throughout time has changed significance with time.

Perreo culture has always carried an aggressive machista attitude on the dance floor and has been the center of gender-based crimes. Velda González argued that perreo has displayed a history of sexual violence in reggaetón and has been the cause of many assaults for women. She made this claim in 2002 and the same conversation is being had even in the present day. Many feminists have called out reggaetón for its objectification of women and also for the murder of trans women who have participated in perreo. Addressing the role women and dance play in reggaetón is crucial when looking the role this music plays in popular culture because they are interconnected in more ways than one.

Both reggaetón and perreo have played important roles in how Puerto Rico has navigated

activism surrounding class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Since reggaetón is a subgenre of hip hop it follows the same pattern of speaking about how marginalized communities fight to be seen in a system that works to kill them. This paper argues that Bad Bunny has bent the norms of reggaetón, by exploring topics of gender, sexuality, feminism, and decoloniality.

Estamos Bien: Theoretical Analysis

Exploring decolonial performance theory I bring in the work of Sandra Ruiz and the term she coined, Ricanness. “Ricanness is shaped by a collective colonial condition, marred by debt, existential angst, displacement, and dispossession” (Ruiz, 2019, p.7). Ricanness explores how Puerto Ricans have endured the violence and history of colonization in the archipelago and also in the mainland. Ruiz explores how the act of colonialism has impacted the aesthetics of Puerto Rico and how artists have reacted back to this and created work to showcase the reality of Puerto Ricans and the everyday reality of death that they face in colonial rule. Ruiz showcases how art embodies an act of resistance in colonial rule and how each performative act translates back to a history of pain and death, writing, “The history of Ricanness embodies colonialism’s global desires—an everlasting conquest of land, resources, cultural and social practices, and native peoples themselves—that began even before the dawn of global empires in 1492. The Rican body—indigenous, African, by consequence European—is marked by a common ongoing endurance and death that infiltrates the center of the subject’s call to life, whether on or off the island. In colonialism’s abiding assault against the present, then, we are forced to contend with its future at the very limit of its historical past” (Ruiz, 2019, p.2). Time plays a role in Ricanness and Ruiz utilizes time to showcase the aesthetic access to Ricanness and how the past and future play a role in a nature of postcolonial promises.

The aesthetics of performance in Ricanness shows how the body performs and reacts to the subjectivity of colonial time. Ruiz explains, “My investment in Ricanness, guided by performance practice, is tied not only to conventional markers of revolution, protest, and resistance (as the following chapters will disclose), but also to the experimental as a powerful aesthetic force against the burden of liveness and racial/sexual transparency for minoritarian subjects, specifically those in colonial destitution” (Ruiz, 2019, p.11). The idea of Ricanness is to explore the body and the site of the body’s reaction to pain, violence, and suffering all brought through this colonial time. The performance of Ricanness showcases endurance and growth but also the exploration of dreams and promises away from colonial rule. According to Ruiz, “as a theoretical paradigm, mode of analysis, and heuristic to read aesthetics, culture, and sociality, performance studies work between multiple ways of meaning making, from the intellectual corpus to the materiality of the physical body” (Ruiz, 2019, pg.13). It’s important to note that Ricanness branches from performative studies and works to break down how Puerto Ricans on the archipelago and everyone else in the world use their bodies to fight against colonial structures.

Decolonial performance, also known as decolonial gestures are defined as movements of the body or limbs that express a sentiment, idea, or attitude that respond back to the idea or attitude of decoloniality. These gestures or performances would be connected directly or indirectly with the act of disobeying a colonial model of life (Mignolo, 2014.). The act of using the physical body to disobey or to destroy colonial systems is a revolutionary act that encourages the re-existence of values, languages, thoughts, and bodies that were thought to be destroyed during the act of colonization. All this translates back to Ricanness and what Ruiz examines about the artists and activists of Puerto Rico and the idea of decolonial gestures. Ruiz writes, “Ricanness affords us a relational way to imagine, dream, and construct alternate forms of living under colonialism, across bodies of water”

(Ruiz, 2019, p.172). Ricanness ultimately shows how the acts of decolonial performance contributes to the re-emergence, re-surgency, and re-existence of the people pre-colonization and those fighting for a post-colonial Puerto Rico. It connects through different periods of time to create a different future. I argue that Bad Bunny embodies Ruiz's concept of Ricanness in the culture he has dived into, which is reggaetón.

Method

This study conducts a discourse analysis of Bad Bunny's songs and performances to determine how he has incorporated decoloniality into his artwork and I have used the theory of Ricanness to guide my analysis. Taking a total of four Bad Bunny songs, I closely examined the associated music videos, live performances, and lyrics. The songs "Afilando Los Cuhillos" [Sharpening the Knives], "Caro" [Expensive], "Ignorantes" [Ignorants], and "Yo Perreo Sola" [I Twerk Alone] are from his albums 'YHLQMDLG (*Yo Hago Lo Que Me Da La Gana*)' [I do whatever I want] (2020) and 'X100PRE' (2018). The songs were chosen because Bad Bunny speaks about race, gender, sexuality, and political activism in the songs and performances that were chosen. I used "Genius," which is an American digital media company that annotates music lyrics and also provides music news. I will be organizing my findings based on performance, social conversation, and decolonial embodiment.

Findings

Gender Performance and "Caro"

The music video for "Caro" released in 2019. The video starts with Bad Bunny in a robe getting his nails done and then the camera shot zooms into his nails and back out to show a feminine person now performing as "Bad Bunny." Throughout the video this feminine "Bad Bunny" sings along to the song and the colors that are presented in the video are meant to give off a feminine environment and aesthetic throughout the whole video. A lyric that keeps being repeated while it shows this female version of Bad Bunny is, "Me miran raro" [They look at me strange]. The song suddenly slows down and presents the female Bad Bunny with the actual Bad Bunny. Together they copy each other's movements as they sit face to face and with the slow tempo Bad Bunny sings the lyrics, "Por que no puedo ser así, y pue te hago daño a ti. En que te hago daño a ti, yo solamente soy feliz" [Why can't I be like this? How am I hurting you? How am I hurting you? I'm just happy] (Bad Bunny, 2018). During this slow moment in the song Bad Bunny shows vulnerability to the audience with his alter ego who is a woman.

The music video of "Caro" set a tone for the world to understand who Bad Bunny was and where he stood when it came to his understanding of gender and the performance of gender. Bad Bunny shows that the female "Bad Bunny" is a part of himself that he understands to be female. Bad Bunny throughout the song asks the question of why he can't just be who he is and perform in a way that is genuine to himself. He also asks why it matters to people how he is dressed and why it matters how he presents to the world. During this time many people on social media began to question Bad Bunny's sexuality and his relation to gender. While his alter ego was female in most of the video the clothing and style of dancing was still true to Bad Bunny's nature. The video itself shows the transformation of what it means to perform gender in reggaetón. Reggaetón is a male dominated space with hypermasculine performance and yet Bad Bunny shows it is possible to perform gender differently, with both elements of femininity and masculinity.

Yo Perreo Sola

The music video “Yo Perreo Sola” which translates to “I Twerk Alone” was released 2020. Bad Bunny appears in drag for multiple scenes and each scene carries feminist messages within the background or in his performance. In the scenes that Bad Bunny is seen in drag he is fully dressed as a woman and wearing prosthetic breasts. This method of representing femininity has raised questions about what authentic support for trans and cis women looks like and whether Bad Bunny’s chosen technique was the best way of delivering this message, as will be discussed more later.

Scenes are divided by brightly colored backgrounds of red, yellow, pink, green, black and white. I will start by examining the green scene that carries the most blatant visual feminist support. A sign in the background reads “Ni Una Menos” which translates into “Not One Less.” This message is connected to feminist movements in Latin America that work towards the equality of women and also call an end to the murder of women, cis and trans, in Latin America. In the green scene Bad Bunny appears both in drag and as his masculine self. At timestamp 1:45 of the video, these two characters of Bad Bunny come together to dance perreo. Then at 1:53 the shot pans out to show Bad Bunny performing as a male with his tongue sticking out insinuating a sexual act.

In another scene, Bad Bunny is chained up at the ankles and back and then hand cuffed. Bad Bunny’s wearing a skirt during this scene is typical of many of his performances. He is bending the predominantly Western European belief that skirts or skirt type of clothing is only meant for women. The chains are being controlled by several women sitting in a circle on thrones wearing traditional western royal articles of clothing. Bad Bunny stands in the center shirtless and with a skirt in water that reaches his ankle. Bad Bunny acts animalistic during this scene and he performs parts of the male role in perreo. His performance points to the expectation that men are expected to be out of control in spaces where perreo is practiced. The women are “controlling” the beasts, but also they are dressed as royalty to convey that in fact, women are the rulers of perreo.

The final shot of the video was not a scene of perreo but rather a message to everyone on a women’s choice to dance alone. The last shot in the music video it shows a message in red with a black background reading, “SI NO QUIERE BAILAR CONTIGO, RESPETA, ELLA PERREA SOLA” this translates to, “If she doesn’t want to dance with you, respect, she twerks alone” (Bad Bunny, 2020). This makes explicit the subtext of the video, advocating for women’s control and consent in perreo. This single scene created news waves throughout social media with many praising Bad Bunny for tackling a topic in his song that is important not just to perreo but to the women’s fight against oppressive systems.

Bad Bunny’s drag performance in the video also raised the question of whether drag was an effective and appropriate way to support trans and cis women. While many praised his video there were many within the academic community and reggaetón community that questioned the purpose of Bad Bunny dressing in drag. Some reggaetón artists stated that there was no space for what Bad Bunny was doing in the urbano community. Others pointed out that Bad Bunny’s representation of women in drag fails to account for the protection and privilege his male identity provides. It warrants consideration, understanding how Bad Bunny’s performance both succeeds and fails at standing with those marginalized in a space relies on the movement of their bodies.

Ignorantes (Live): Tonight Show

Performing his song “Ignorantes”, Bad Bunny inspired conversation during his appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* on February 27, 2020. Bad Bunny is seen standing in the background wearing a pink blazer, black knee length skirt, black shoes with calf length socks, long earrings, layered necklaces, and rings decorate his fingers. On his pink blazer there is a black flower attached and Bad Bunny hold his blazer closed while Sech sings. At 0:41 Bad Bunny begins to sing but keeps his blazer closed. It is not until the time mark 1:14 Bad Bunny is seen no longer holding his blazer closed. Rather now it is open displaying a white shirt with a message on it. It is towards the end of Bad Bunny’s performance he removes the blazer so that it hangs from his elbows and displays the message on the shirt reading, “MATARON a ALEXA, NO A UN HOMBRE CON FALDA” [THEY KILLED ALEXA, NOT A MAN IN A SKIRT] (The Tonight Show, 2020). His attire referenced the murder of Puerto Rican transwoman Alexa Negrón Luciano, also known as Neulisa Luciano Ruiz.

Alexa Negrón Luciano was a homeless transgender woman living in Puerto Rico who used the women’s bathroom inside a McDonalds and then was found dead 12 hours later. Luciano was walking when a group of men started to shoot at her until she was dead. Pedro Julio Serrano, who is a San Juan-based activist demanded that this hate crime be investigated (Fitzsimons, 2020). Following the death of Luciano, Serrano along with other activists spoke out against media outlets misgendering Luciano and describing her as a man in a skirt. Bad Bunny’s shirt speaks directly against this hateful assertion that Luciano was not a woman and also pulls her name and her story out of the shadows. In wearing a skirt Bad Bunny challenges the norm that skirts are meant for women, but the skirt also points back to the transphobic depiction of Luciano in the media. The outfit questions norms around gendered dressing while asserting a clear difference between Bad Bunny, a man in a skirt, and Luciano, a woman killed for her gender identity.

Political Performance

In the year of 2019 Bad Bunny along with Ricky Martin and rapper Residente, attended the national protest in San Juan, Puerto Rico which is now known as Verano 2019. The protest centered on then Puerto Rican governor Ricardo “Ricky” Rosselló and leaked messages between him and his cabinet that carried homophobic rhetoric and also made jokes about the lives lost to Hurricane Maria which struck the archipelago in 2016 (Villanueva, J., & LeBrón, M. (n.d.). In that moment Puerto Rico gathered all races, gender, classes, and ages in an act of resisting. Throughout protestors participated in dance included perreo, song, and in walking San Juan. For two weeks Puerto Ricans on the archipelago and on the mainland called for Rossello to step down from power. Bad Bunny has spoken about the experience as his first real call to justice which pushed him to understand his own identity more. He stated in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, “The first thing I asked myself was, ‘Why hadn’t I done this before?’ I didn’t go there to do anything that had to do with my music career. That day, Benito went” (Exposito, 2020).

In response to Verano 2019, Bad Bunny along with rapper Residente and singer ILe released the song “Afilando Los Cuchillos” which translates to “Sharpening the Knives.” It was recorded and uploaded in one day. In the song, Bad Bunny does not waste time before calling out Roselló. Bad Bunny raps, “Eres un corrupto que de corrupto coges consejos. Arranca pa’l carajo y vete lejos. Y denle la bienvenida a la generación del ‘Yo no me dejo’” [You are a corrupt man who takes corrupt advice. Get the fuck out of here and don’t come back. And welcome the generation of ‘I will not let you take advantage of me’] (Residente. 2020). The song ends calling out not just Roselló and his

cabinet but also the United States and the lack of care for the archipelago and the people who live on it.

Conclusion

When looking into the work of Bad Bunny it is important to note that he is not perfect. Bad Bunny's performances have appropriated Black aesthetics and, as discussed previously, his performances around gender have sometimes failed to acknowledge or consider his privilege in being a cisgender male. Bad Bunny should not be the only answer or the final answer when looking at what it means to be a Puerto Rican reggaetonero, but rather he offers a foundation of questions to ask. What does it mean to be a reggaetonero in Puerto Rico and how does this translate back to the idea of decolonization? Bad Bunny, as a major popular artist in the genre, has shown that reggaetón as an art form still has much to reckon with around gender and also racial identity in Puerto Rico and with the island and region's history of colonization and slavery. The responsibility for these issues is not Bad Bunny's alone, but his work does show the promise of reggaetón continuing evolution in questioning norms and systems and as a means of decolonial performance. Bad Bunny's own transformation and understanding of decolonization is slowly making its way into the lives of his fans. He is using his platform to push his fans and those who interact with his music to understand and care about social issues.

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