

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

“YO PERREO SOLA”:
BOUNDARY CROSSING IN REGGAETON

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will examine modern reggaeton through a combination of musical analysis and interviews. Although there have been significant writings on reggaeton, its development, and its explosion in the late 90's and early 2000's, few have written extensively about the reggaeton of the last five years or so. Reggaeton has transformed significantly in recent years, especially with the progressive and experimental contributions of such artists as Bad Bunny. I will focus on the ways reggaeton has transgressed and transcended musical, cultural, and ideological boundaries by analyzing music award shows, events like the Super Bowl, as well as recent releases and music videos by reggaeton artists. I argue that recent changes in reggaeton have attracted a new generation of listeners, cultivating an increasingly diverse pan-Latinx identity in the process. Reggaeton has moved beyond standard genre conventions and is no longer defined by the dembow beat, but instead continues to develop into a broader style that is becoming more inclusive than ever before.

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INTRODUCTION

*“After the hurricane...I didn’t hear from my friends for months. As soon as the lights came back on, Bad Bunny released his debut album. Everybody was singing it; everybody knew the songs. So, the next time I visited Puerto Rico, it wasn’t so much like, damn, you know, a natural disaster just happened. It was more like, shit, this new Bad Bunny album is fucking amazing.”*¹

In 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico. 2,975 people were killed, the island was without full power for nearly a year, and more than 200,000 Puerto Ricans ultimately fled to the mainland U.S..² Puerto Ricans and fellow Latinx people in the diaspora desperately attempted to get in touch with friends and family on the island. One such person was Pedro Noel Doreste, a Ph.D. student in the department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago.³ In my interview with him, he detailed how, “like any Puerto Rican in the diaspora,” he felt “disconnected from the island [and] its culture... and then those feelings were only exacerbated after the hurricane.”⁴ When asked what role reggaeton has played for him, he explained how listening to popular artists like Bad Bunny allowed him to have “something in common with the friends that [he] had felt that [he] had abandoned back home.”⁵ It was in this vein that he brought up Hurricane Maria and how reggaeton unified and uplifted the island’s inhabitants: “I don’t want to reduce it to a coping mechanism, but [reggaeton] really helps me keep plugged in with cultural production in Puerto Rico... And it’s also been a source of pride.”⁶

Pedro’s sentiments about reggaeton and Puerto Rico were shared by all of the Puerto Ricans I interviewed. Nicole Laboy, a first-year student in the college who was born and raised in San Juan, explained the importance of reggaeton in her identity: “it defines part of who I am...

¹ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

² Acevedo, “Puerto Rico Sees More Pain ...,” NBCNews.

³ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

and where I grew up”.⁷ Tami Pérez Cantalapiedra, another San Juan native, described how, as a student at the University of Chicago, reggaeton helps her stay connected to her roots: “That way when I go back home I know what I’m talking about... [Reggaeton] is very much Puerto Rico to me... it’s something that connects me to my home.”⁸ For many Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, reggaeton doesn’t just remind them of home — it *is* home. It offers a shared sonic space in the U.S., allowing them to maintain their Puerto Rican identity and connection to the island. This is even true for second and third generation Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, such as Oscar Zetino, who grew up in Chicago and has listened to reggaeton all his life: “[reggaeton] holds an identity to it because if there’s one musical style... that you can say is Puerto Rican to a fault... it’s reggaeton.”⁹

Given the connection of reggaeton to Puerto Rico, it is not surprising that so many Puerto Ricans identify with this music in this way. However, this importance of reggaeton for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora is not unique to them: every single one of my Latinx interviewees described the instrumental role reggaeton plays in their identities. What is it about this music that resonates so profoundly with such a diverse range of Latinx people, many of whom don’t have a direct connection to places where reggaeton production has flourished? How has reggaeton managed to inspire a new generation of listeners from all backgrounds, both Latinx and not? What does this music signify for its listeners? Most importantly, why do so many people *identify* with reggaeton?

* * * * *

Since its inception, reggaeton has functioned as signifier of pan-Latinidad, and it continues to do so in new ways and for more people as the style evolves. In particular, reggaeton is taking

⁷ Nicole Laboy, interview by author, November 4, 2020.

⁸ Tamara Pérez Cantalapiedra, interview by author, November 11, 2020.

⁹ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

on new cultural and social meanings for many of its listeners, especially second and third generation Latinx people in the U.S. Artists like Bad Bunny have been imperative to this new wave of reggaeton — a reggaeton that rejects the hypermasculinity of its roots and pushes for progress; a reggaeton that has crossed over into the American mainstream and is not turning back; and most importantly, a reggaeton that symbolizes a new, more inclusive pan-Latinidad for those in the diaspora. In its diverse and at times paradoxical manifestations, reggaeton has defied categorization and definition. Over the past five years, it has transgressed and transcended musical, cultural, and ideological boundaries, and it continues to do so, cultivating a new pan-Latinx identity along the way. In this thesis, I will argue that such developments and boundary crossing in modern reggaeton have enabled this music to represent a broader pan-Latinx identity than ever before, especially in its growing inclusivity that continues to empower a diverse, global audience.

I will examine modern reggaeton through an analysis of recent releases and performances by mainstream reggaeton artists, as well as how they have been received by my Latinx interviewees. Part I of this thesis focuses on findings in my academic research, whereas part II is driven by my interviewees' experiences and interpretations of reggaeton. In chapter One I will offer a brief history of reggaeton, and in chapter Two I will discuss existing literature on this music. Chapters Three, Four, and Five are the bulk of my thesis, detailing the ways in which modern reggaeton has transgressed musical, cultural, and ideological boundaries. Finally, I will conclude with some discussion of the future of reggaeton.

My primary focus is on mainstream reggaeton, and in this thesis, 'mainstream' has two meanings. There is 'mainstream' with respect to reggaeton and Latin music, and then there is the 'mainstream' music industry in the U.S. The latter will be my focus in discussing how reggaeton has overcome different cultural boundaries and limitations. My approach to reggaeton's presence

in the mainstream will be a qualitative one¹⁰; I will analyze reggaeton on American music charts, award shows, as well as in different American events such as the Super Bowl. The question of ‘mainstream’ in the context of reggaeton will arise in chapter Five in my discussion of underground reggaeton artists as opposed to more popular, mainstream ones like Bad Bunny.

In discussing the ways in which recent reggaeton artists have pushed against gender norms in reggaeton, I will focus on Bad Bunny’s rejection of hypermasculinity in the genre. The choice of ‘hypermasculine’ as opposed to ‘machista’ is a purposeful one. Although some of my interviewees described reggaeton, and even Latinx culture more broadly, as ‘machista,’ the term has more complex and paradoxical connotations. In his book *What it Means to be a Man: Reflections on Puerto Rican Masculinity*, Rafael Ramírez analyzes existing literature on machismo, arguing that “... the uncritical reproduction of the terminology of machismo and the use of “machismo” as an analytical category perpetuate an erroneous conceptualization of Latin American men.”¹¹ Although ‘machista’ takes on a negative connotation in many circumstances, Ramírez notes how it has more positive meanings in other contexts. In an effort to avoid producing any more reductionist work on machismo, I will focus on the hypermasculine instead. I use ‘hypermasculine’ to describe instances of exaggerated gender performance that reinforce the misogynistic frameworks that have defined reggaeton since its underground days. This includes but is not limited to the discussion of women in song lyrics, the lack of female representation among popular artists, and the frequent refusal to credit female vocalists.

A similarly purposeful decision is the use of ‘Latinx’ rather than Latino/a. ‘Latinx’ offers a gender-neutral alternative to Latino/a that has been used primarily among young Latinx

¹⁰ See Mateo Echeverria’s thesis, “Towards a Legitimation of Reggaeton?”, for a more quantitative analysis of reggaeton’s mainstream presence.

¹¹ Ramírez, “Machismo,” in *What it Means to be a Man*, 23.

populations, especially in the U.S. Although there has been some resistance to this term by native Spanish-speakers, it is one of the more widely accepted labels that encompasses various gender identities in a way Latino/a simply does not. Given that reggaeton is only becoming more inclusive, it seems appropriate to use ‘Latinx’ to mirror this inclusivity, and so as not to assume the gender identities of my interviewees.

Although reggaeton has undoubtedly made significant progress in recent years, it still has a way to go. Reggaeton is at its core a contradictory phenomenon — while artists like Bad Bunny continue to push reggaeton in more inclusive and progressive directions, others continue to grasp tightly onto the genre’s problematic stereotypes. This aspect of reggaeton was very much present at its inception. And yet, more and more people, including my interviewees, are listening to reggaeton despite this, demonstrating the importance this music holds for its listeners. This is nowhere more evident than in reggaeton’s ability to validate different Latinx identities and connect Latinx listeners to their families and cultures. For Grechell Verdecia Gonzalez, reggaeton allowed her to keep up her Spanish-speaking skills.¹² For Fiorella Robinson, it allowed her to bond with her cousins in Peru.¹³ And in Pedro’s case, reggaeton is home: “it makes me feel like I’m never that far away... you can insert me into the streets of San Juan right now at 10pm and I would be able to sing all the songs and talk like everybody else.”¹⁴

¹² Grechell Verdecia Gonzalez, interview by author, November 3, 2020.

¹³ Fiorella Robinson, interview by author, November 12, 2020.

¹⁴ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

METHODOLOGY

For this project, I primarily used musical analysis and interviews as my research methods. Although my interviews were crucial for my research, the musical analysis I conducted allowed me to better understand how current listeners respond to and interpret reggaeton, which I could not have gathered from interviews alone. Furthermore, my musical analysis also provided a sense of *what* my interviewees responded to in various performance settings, such as music videos and award shows. As an avid reggaeton listener myself, I was already familiar with both old and new artists at the start of my project, and I was always up to date on new releases and performances. However, I had never taken a chance to watch and listen to reggaeton more critically — after learning more about reggaeton, its history, and different artists, I saw reggaeton from a new perspective. Specifically, I realized how relevant themes of gender, race, and identity continue to pervade modern reggaeton, many of which were established at the outset of this music. Through musical analysis, I was able to evaluate how these themes manifest in reggaeton today and how they resonate with different listeners, including myself.

Due to COVID-19, my interviews were conducted remotely. I recruited my interviewees by distributing an interest form through different email list hosts at the University of Chicago, primarily those that were aimed at Latinx students. This included the Organization of Latin American Students (OLAS), the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, as well as the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS). I primarily interviewed undergraduate students at the University of Chicago who identify as Latinx and are avid listeners of reggaeton, though there were a couple exceptions to this. In the end, I interviewed twelve people in total, featuring students from Puerto Rico, Peru, Argentina, Cuba, and Mexico, as well as one student from China. My interviewees also had a diverse range of experiences with reggaeton, as well as different levels of

familiarity with current artists. While some, like Savannah Pinedo, grew up listening to old-school reggaeton in a predominantly Latinx community, others, like Elizabeth Smith, had only been listening to reggaeton for a few months.¹⁵ And while Pedro was largely hesitant to listen to reggaeton in his teenage years, Oscar Zetino clearly recalls his mother buying the most recent reggaeton releases on CDs as a child in Chicago.¹⁶

I was adamant about making my interviews as open-ended as possible so my interviewees could discuss whatever aspects of this music were most important to them. In my interview questions, I first began with some brief discussion of the interviewee's background, such as where they grew up and when they started listening to reggaeton. Some of the themes discussed in the interviews were: gender in reggaeton, old versus new reggaeton music, the commercialization of reggaeton, and finally, how reggaeton relates to one's identity. I ensured that my interviewees had room to expand wherever they wanted to, and especially in discussing themes of gender and identity. My interviews were by far the most impactful component of my research and this project, as they allowed me deeper insight into this music and its significance for fellow listeners from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences.

I was also able to compare my interviewees' interpretations of reggaeton to my own. I started listening to reggaeton religiously in my first year of college and have not turned back since. I was drawn to the dembow beat and the infusions of salsa and merengue that I grew up listening to at home. With a Colombian father and an English mother, I grew up with an eclectic assortment of musical influences and styles, and one music that we could always sing and dance to together was salsa. The musical hybridity in reggaeton was fundamental in drawing me into it, but what made me continue to listen was the way in which it validated my Latina identity. Whether at parties

¹⁵ Savannah Pinedo & Elizabeth Smith, interviewed by author, December 17-8, 2020.

¹⁶ Pedro Doreste & Oscar Zetino interviewed by author, November 17 & December 2, 2020.

or in meeting new Latinx people in Chicago and abroad, knowing every word to a Bad Bunny song was a clear signifier that there must be some Latin blood in me.

PART I: BACKGROUND

Chapter 1: The History of Reggaeton

In order to analyze modern reggaeton, it is first necessary to understand the rich and complex history of this music. To provide a complete history of reggaeton would take up another thesis entirely, so I will only focus on those aspects of reggaeton's development that are relevant for my project. This chapter will focus on three main stages in the history of reggaeton: (1) its roots; (2) its developmental years; and finally, (3) its early mainstream years.

The question of reggaeton's roots is an often contested one. This music has clear ties to Puerto Rico, but the island's claim to this music has inspired significant debate. This is evident in my Puerto Rican interviewees' responses when I asked if they considered reggaeton to be a Puerto Rican genre of music. Nicole, for instance, was unwavering in her conviction that reggaeton is Puerto Rican: "It is. It 100% started in Puerto Rico. You can google that; it's a fact... You have artists throughout all of Latin America, but it definitely started in Puerto Rico and the majority of the top rankers in reggaeton are definitely from Puerto Rico."¹⁷ Pedro took a different stance, instead focusing on the distinction between reggaeton today and the origins of this music:

"I guess this more commercial version that people have come to know... I guess you could say that that was a style that developed further in Puerto Rico exclusively... So, I guess those hard, developmental years did happen in Puerto Rico, but I'm not a fool. I'm not going to deny that the reggaeton rhythm and sound, dembow, happened in Jamaica and Central America, and it's not exclusive to Puerto Rico. And now it's happening again in Central America and Colombia. It's very much a transnational genre that found its own in Puerto Rico for a decade or so, and then it was re-exported."¹⁸

Although Puerto Rico played a fundamental role in developing the reggaeton that is played around the world today, the genre's roots are ultimately transnational and transcultural in nature,

¹⁷ Nicole Laboy, interview by author, November 4, 2020.

¹⁸ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

with Panama, Jamaica, New York City, and Puerto Rico all playing crucial roles in reggaeton's history. Many authors place the roots of reggaeton in Jamaica and Panama, or more importantly, in the migration between them. With the construction of the Panama Canal in the early 20th century came a flux of Jamaican immigrants to Panama, leading to an exchange of musical styles and cultures. Soon these different styles of music blended, and as migration from Jamaica to Panama continued in the 80's and 90's, so did the transmittance of Jamaican music.¹⁹ Perhaps the most important music in the history of reggaeton is Jamaican dancehall reggae: "without Jamaican dancehall reggae there would be no reggaeton."²⁰ It was from dancehall that the boom-ch-boom-chick beat we now call "dembow" was born. One of the earliest uses of the dembow beat can be heard in Shabba Ranks' 1990 hit "Dem Bow." With the explosion of this and other dancehall hits in Panama came *reggae en español*, a musical precursor to reggaeton. Some of the earliest examples of *reggae en español* are two Spanish language remakes of "Dem Bow": El General's "Son Bow" and Nando Boom's "Ellos Benia," both of which were released in 1991. **Figure 1** features the audio for the original "Dem Bow" by Shabba Ranks.

Figure 1: Shabba Ranks' "Dem Bow"



This is the audio for Shabba Ranks' 1990 hit "Dem Bow," featuring the dembow beat.²¹

¹⁹ Samponaro, "'Oye mi canto" ("Listen to My Song")," 490.

²⁰ Rivera et al., *Reggaeton*, 11.

²¹ *Shabba Ranks - Dem Bow [Best Quality]*, YouTube.

“Dem Bow” catalyzed the musical development that would eventually lead to reggaeton, and in the process it also engendered the hypermasculinity that remains ever present in this music. Shabba Ranks’ original song was incredibly homophobic, as was most dancehall music: “More so than reggae, dancehall took the male-centered focus of the traditional Rastafarian beliefs behind reggae to a new level by promoting intense male bravado through a combination of misogyny, homophobia, and, by the 1990s, artists’ brandishing guns and other weapons during performances.”²² When such hits were translated to Spanish for *reggae en español*, the homophobia was softened, transforming into an extreme form of misogyny, exemplified in the way men objectified women, both in the lyrics and in music videos. Thus, the hypermasculinity of reggaeton was intrinsic to this music before it was even called ‘reggaeton’.

The impact of circular migration on reggaeton’s history is not limited to Jamaica and Panama. As *reggae en español* developed, many Panamanians were also traveling to and from New York City: “As a major Caribbean “cosmopole” ... New York offered aspiring artists such as El General various opportunities for recording and performing, and its status as a major media hub facilitated the broader circulation of such music, including to Puerto Rico.”²³ New York was an especially important locale in the history of reggaeton due to its large Puerto Rican (and Nuyoricán) population. There was constant migration to and from the island, allowing *reggae en español* and American hip-hop and rap to reach Puerto Rico, where reggaeton as a genre “crystallized” in the early and mid-1990’s:

“the unique and pronounced mix of hip-hop and reggae which defined the nascent genre and provided the basis for what would come to be called reggaeton offers the strongest evidence for Puerto Rico’s claims on the genre — Jamaica’s and Panama’s notwithstanding

²² Samponaro, ““Oye mi canto” (“Listen to My Song”),” 491.

²³ Rivera et al., *Reggaeton*, 32-33.

— as a locally inflected and in some ways quintessentially Puerto Rican cultural product.”²⁴

It was during this developmental period that reggaeton or ‘underground’ was, quite literally, underground:

“In the early ’90s, Puerto Rican underground recordings literally circulated outside of formal commercial channels and centralized modes of mass production. Dubbed from cassette to cassette after an initial, small run of master tapes, the mixes moved somewhat easily through an informal economy until late 1994, when their appearance in certain “aboveground” stores allowed the authorities, spurred by Christian “watchdog” organizations such as Morality in Media, to commence a series of high-profile, controversial, and essentially illegal seizures.”²⁵

Such raids carried classist and racist implications, as underground spoke to the experiences of Black Puerto Ricans living in *caseríos* or housing projects, and thus “destabilized the prevailing social structures by speaking the voice of marginality.”²⁶ Reggaeton was also a target of criticism due to its association with *perreo*, a sexualized dance that “simulates the sex act between dogs with the female dancing in a submissive position beneath the male, who dominates her from behind.”²⁷ This furthered the perception of underground as “obscene and pornographic, thus immoral, thus dangerous,” especially as it moved beyond the boundaries of nightclubs and became more mainstream.²⁸ It was during this period that such pioneers as Daddy Yankee, Tego Calderón, Vico C, Eddie Dee, and Ivy Queen recorded some of the earliest tracks we now consider reggaeton. They also played a crucial role in marshalling reggaeton from the underground scene to the mainstream. Despite facing significant opposition from the Puerto Rican government, “the efforts

²⁴ Rivera et al., *Reggaeton*, 36.

²⁵ Ibid, 38.

²⁶ Ibid, 122.

²⁷ Samponaro, ““Oye mi canto” (“Listen to My Song”),” 499.

²⁸ Rivera et al., *Reggaeton*, 116.

to censor reggaeton transformed it from marginal to notorious.”²⁹ Much like today, early reggaeton drew in a younger generation of listeners who could truly identify with this music:

“In contrast to the commercialized and sanitized *rap en español* and *salsa romántica* that largely replaced the barrio-centric lyrics of salsa’s classic period, reggaeton spoke directly to the social conditions prevalent in the country: outrageous unemployment rates of up to 65% in some towns, failing schools, government corruption, and wide-spread drug violence.”³⁰

Reggaeton also spoke to Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, especially in New York:

“... the music directly and suggestively indexes New York. Remixing the sounds of home-away-from-home for San Juan youth, underground could thus express forms of Puerto Rican-ness commensurate with the vistas (and pistas) of a new generation.”³¹

Reggaeton transitioned into the American mainstream in the late 90’s and early 2000’s with such songs as Daddy Yankee’s “Gasolina” and N.O.R.E.’s “Oye Mi Canto.” This period of reggaeton was marked by “striking shifts in sonic, visual, and textual articulations of community” as reggaeton came to represent “the sound of an emergent, pan-Latino community.”³² This turning point was also marked by a shift in the marketing and production of reggaeton as cassettes became CDs that were distributed throughout the island and the U.S. Oscar recounted how his mother would buy reggaeton CDs in Chicago:

“[My mom] actually told me that at one of the malls... on the North side [of Chicago], they used to have these little vendors that would be selling CDs that came from the island... whatever came from Puerto Rico would start off there and get big for a year or so, and then that would make its way up to New York... From there, it would travel out to the Midwest to Chicago... So, my mom would literally go out and scavenge for CDs from Tego Calderon, Daddy Yankee, and whoever else was coming out at the time in the early 2000s.”³³

²⁹ Frances and Rivera, “Reggaeton Nation.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Rivera et al., *Reggaeton*, 42.

³² Ibid, 48.

³³ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

It was also during this period that producers such as Luny Tunes transformed reggaeton with new digital forms of production and distribution. Luny Tunes “proved crucial in moving the genre more squarely into the realm of “Latin” or “tropical” music by invoking the distinctive piano riffs of salsa and merengue and, especially, the trebly, swirling guitars of bachata.”³⁴ Luny Tunes are still active producers today and have created music for some of the most popular reggaeton artists since the 2000’s, such as Daddy Yankee, Wisin y Yandel, Zion, and J Balvin.

As will be discussed in part II, the initial explosion of reggaeton in the early 2000’s ended just as quickly as it began, and it wouldn’t be until the mid- to late-2010’s that reggaeton took hold in the mainstream again. A new group of reggaetoneros exploded in popularity in the 2010’s, including artists like J Balvin, Anuel AA, Ozuna, and Maluma. One artist that has perhaps been the most successful reggaetonero in recent years is Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, better known by his stage name: Bad Bunny. *Figure 2* shows a recent photo of Bad Bunny.

Figure 2: Bad Bunny



*Photograph of Bad Bunny.*³⁵

Like many of the reggaeton greats, Bad Bunny is from Puerto Rico. He initially gained a following on SoundCloud while a student at the University of Puerto Rico at Arecibo, but he soon caught the

³⁴ Rivera et al., *Reggaeton*, 57.

³⁵ “Bad Bunny Is Most Streamed Artist of 2020 on Spotify,” The Guardian.

attention of DJ Luian, who then signed Bad Bunny to his record label in 2016.³⁶ Many of Bad Bunny's early releases embraced the typical reggaeton style in the heavy inclusion of the dembow beat and the occasional womanizing lyric. Chapters Three and Five demonstrate how his more recent releases instead push the generic and social conventions of reggaeton. As will be detailed in chapter Four, Bad Bunny's music career has been on a non-stop, upward trajectory since the beginning, making him one of the most well-known reggaeton artists today.

* * * * *

This chapter has provided a brief history of reggaeton, which is important to consider because many of the themes that remain present in reggaeton today were engendered during reggaeton's development, and especially in its transformation into a mainstream product. It was during the late 90's and early 2000's that the framework for this pan-Latinx music was established, and many of the factors that inspired reggaeton's initial explosion have contributed equally, if not more so, to its revival over the past five years.

³⁶ "Bad Bunny: Biography." AllMusic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There are few academic writings that are dedicated entirely to reggaeton, which is likely in part due to how new this music is. Reggaeton is addressed partially in such books as *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (2000), *Musical Migrations: Transnationalism and Cultural Hybridity in Latin/o America* (2003), and *Oye Como Va! Hybridity and Identity in Latino Popular Music* (2010). These books focus on different forms of Latin popular music, musical and cultural hybridity, as well as questions of identity in Latin America and the diaspora. Each of these books also feature a chapter or two dedicated to reggaeton, with a particular focus on how this music developed and connected different Latinx communities. There have also been a handful of journal articles written about reggaeton, such as Wayne Marshall's "Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton" (2008), Kim Kattari's "Building Pan-Latino Unity in the United States through Music: An Exploration of Commonalities between Salsa and Reggaeton" (2009), and Phillip Samponaro's "Oye mi canto: The History and Politics of Reggaeton" (2009). These articles address different aspects of reggaeton's development and history, as well as the different factors that have allowed it to resonate with pan-Latinx audiences.

There are two books that constitute the most in-depth, comprehensive writings on reggaeton to date: *Reggaeton* (2009) and *Remixing Reggaeton* (2015). *Reggaeton* was edited by Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez. Raquel Z. Rivera and Wayne Marshall are two of the leading scholars on reggaeton, and both have produced extensive works on this music and its history. Rivera is an author, scholar, and singer-songwriter who received a Ph.D. in sociology, and Marshall is an ethnomusicologist who studies music production and culture in the Caribbean and the Americas. Deborah Pacini Hernandez is a professor of

anthropology with a focus on Latin America and the Caribbean. Each chapter of *Reggaeton* is written by a different author who analyzes a specific aspect of this music, including the roots and history of the genre, the circulation of reggaeton to other parts of the Caribbean as well as the U.S., and the politics of race and gender in this music. *Remixing Reggaeton* also covers various aspects of the genre and its development. However, unlike *Reggaeton*, this book focuses on how reggaeton relates to race politics in Puerto Rico. Petra R. Rivera-Rideau is an assistant professor of American studies whose research focuses primarily on the cultural politics of race in Latino communities. In *Remixing Reggaetón*, Rivera-Rideau looks at how reggaeton provides new ways to understand Puerto Rico's relationship to the larger African diaspora.

These books were central to my initial literature review for this project, as they offer the most extensive and thorough critical discourse on reggaeton and its manifestations in the 90's and 2000's. In particular, these books offer intriguing analyses of the role reggaeton has played for different Latinx communities, especially in the diaspora. Furthermore, many of the themes I explore in this thesis were relevant in these authors' examinations of reggaeton. The primary intervention my thesis offers is an analysis of *modern* reggaeton, or reggaeton from the last five years or so. Although there have been a few recent works on gender in reggaeton, no author has yet attempted to dissect how reggaeton has changed since the early 2000's and *why* such changes have inspired a new revival of reggaeton on a previously unforeseen scale.

This thesis will also offer a new definition of reggaeton, one that encompasses the reggaeton that is produced today. Almost every scholarly work on reggaeton has attempted to define it — its hybrid nature has made it difficult to pin down and categorize. *Reggaeton* features one of the more thorough definitions of this music:

“By reggaeton, then, we refer to a relatively new genre (and related set of cultural practices) strongly marked both by a particular approach to musical style (e.g., dancehall's boom-ch-

boom-chick as reshaped by urban Puerto Rican sensibilities and informed by a fusion with hip-hop) and a relation to the market (i.e., explicitly commercial, courting a wide audience).”³⁷

Some aspects of this definition remain true, such as its commercial nature, but modern reggaeton is no longer marked by a particular musical style, as will be explained in detail in chapter Three. Reggaeton has always been more than simply a genre of music; it constitutes a variety of sonic and social aspects that have resonated with myriad listeners since its inception. Modern reggaeton differs, however, in its shift away from a genre marked by a specific rhythm, namely the dembow beat. Reggaeton has transformed into a broader style that has become a symbol of pan-Latinx identity, a sonic home for Latinx people in the diaspora, and a hopeful indicator of progress in Latinx music.

³⁷ Rivera et al., *Reggaeton*, 8.

PART II: HOW REGGAETON HAS TRANSCENDED AND TRANSGRESSED MUSICAL, CULTURAL, AND IDEOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES

In the last five years or so, modern reggaeton has exploded and expanded beyond the musical, cultural, and ideological boundaries that defined early 2000's reggaeton. It is no longer limited by the typical dembow beat as a signifier of reggaeton music and increasingly incorporates new, diverse musical styles and genres, so much so that it's difficult to consider reggaeton as simply a genre in and of itself. Through this process of musical diversification, reggaeton has managed to cross over into mainstream American culture while also gaining more international appeal and recognition. Reggaeton is also becoming more progressive in its lyrical content, its inclusion of female artists, and its rejection of hypermasculinity, led most notably by artists like Bad Bunny. A new generation of underground artists, such as Tomasa Del Real and Chocolate Remix, have pushed the genre further than ever before in their advocacy for and representation of the LGBTQ+ community within reggaeton. This music continues to be embraced by a new generation of Latinx listeners and has in turn come to represent a broader pan-Latinx identity that recognizes and honors the myriad influences on Latinx people in the diaspora. This part of my thesis is based most heavily on the experiences of my interviewees and myself, as well as my analysis of different musical examples and performances.

Chapter 3: The Transgression of Musical Boundaries in Reggaeton

“The critique that reggaeton is just the same beat over and over again... with some, like, slapdash melody attached to it... that is no longer a valid critique. If you listen to a reggaeton album in 2020, it is all sorts of genres.”³⁸ Pedro’s observation about modern reggaeton illustrates how it no longer subscribes to standard genre conventions. Take Bad Bunny’s most recent album, *El Último Tour del Mundo*, for example. It is difficult to define the album’s “genre” when it features only a handful of “typical” reggaeton songs interspersed between almost indie-like soft rock pieces, most of which are coupled with a Latin trap beat. *El Último Tour del Mundo* exemplifies how modern reggaeton transgresses and subverts genre conventions and expectations. Artists like Bad Bunny have managed to blend both old and new styles of reggaeton with genres such as pop, rock, and trap: his album *YHLQMDLG* is an ode to old-school reggaeton and the underground era of this genre, while *El Último Tour del Mundo* is a flashy and provocative demonstration of how reggaeton has reached new musical heights. But Bad Bunny is not the only artist to have pushed genre conventions in reggaeton; Karol G’s “Tusa” featuring Nicki Minaj epitomizes the genre’s growing move towards pop music, which has proved immensely successful for artists trying to enter the American music industry. Whether reinventing old-school styles or embracing the new, reggaeton is pushing musical boundaries in all directions, drawing more and more listeners to its increasingly diverse sonic landscape.

* * * * *

The artist who has pushed the boundaries of reggaeton the most is also one of the few who has looked to the genre’s roots as a source for musical material, simultaneously honoring and reinventing the foundational styles of reggaeton along the way: Bad Bunny. *YHLQMDLG*, which

³⁸ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

stands for “Yo Hago Lo Que Me Da La Gana” (“I do what I want”), is one of the few albums in recent years that has integrated traditional and contemporary reggaeton styles. *YHLQMDLG* reminded Oscar of the very reggaeton CDs he grew up listening to in Chicago.³⁹ Both he and Pedro, who is also familiar with the old-school, underground days of reggaeton, were particularly drawn to this album because: “he took it all the way back to the late 90’s, early 2000’s... he has these really stripped down beats, the repetitive sort of sampling in the back of men or women shouting, and some of the early dancehall and reggae rhythms, too, which is really fascinating.”⁴⁰ With *YHLQMDLG*, Bad Bunny managed to combine the best of both old and new styles of reggaeton, especially with songs like “Safaera”:

““Safaera” arrives in the middle of Bad Bunny’s second album... like a gut punch of memory. The mood is early to mid-2000s: the hard-snapping vintage reggaeton production redolent of the Luny Tunes’ pioneering “Mas Flow” compilations; the tinny, wobbly melody line familiar from Missy Elliott’s “Get Ur Freak On”; the guests, Jowell & Randy and Ñengo Flow, flashes from the genre’s past.”⁴¹

“Safaera” clearly takes the listener back in time with its prolific sampling, and as Wayne Marshall points out in “Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo,” sampling was elemental in the development of reggaeton: “hip-hop’s sample-based approach was brought to bear on these reggae recordings and Puerto Rico’s homegrown style came into its own, laying the aesthetic groundwork for what would eventually be dubbed reggaeton”.⁴² Thus, underground, “proto-reggaeton” was built on endless layers of sampling, and the main format for such recordings were “non-stop, 30-minute DJ mixes” of such samples.⁴³ “Safaera” sounds like a snippet of one such DJ mix, which can be heard in

Figure 3.

³⁹ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

⁴⁰ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

⁴¹ Caramanica, “Bad Bunny Finds Gold in the Past, While J Balvin Is Trapped in the Future.”

⁴² Wayne Marshall, “Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton,” 144.

⁴³ Ibid.

Figure 3: “Safaera” by Bad Bunny



This image links to the music video for “Safaera.”⁴⁴

Perhaps even more striking, however, are those songs such as “Si Veo a Tu Mamá,” which blends pop elements with an occasional trap beat (see *Figure 4*). The endless sampling and rapid-fire rapping that defined 2000’s reggaeton is nonexistent in this piece, the hip-hop influences that inspired many old-school reggaeton artists have now been replaced with trap, and any traces of Jamaican dancehall have completely disappeared. Although Bad Bunny blends genres and musical styles with the finesse of a Tego Calderón or Daddy Yankee, he and other reggaeton artists increasingly incorporate musics that up until recently were completely alien to the genre. The juxtaposition of “Safaera” and “Si Veo a Tu Mamá” on a single album, a *reggaeton* album, exemplifies the musical ingenuity and generic ambiguity that would come to define Bad Bunny. With this album, Bad Bunny ultimately made old reggaeton new again, and thus was able to draw in both old and new fans of reggaeton.

Figure 4: “Si Veo a Tu Mamá” by Bad Bunny



This image links to the music video for “Si Veo a Tu Mamá.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Safaera - Bad Bunny x Jowell & Randy x Ñengo Flow / YHLQMDLG, YouTube.*

⁴⁵ *Si Veo a Tu Mamá – Bad Bunny, YouTube.*

On the surface, *YHLQMDLG* appears to be a strategic attempt to appeal to various generations of reggaeton listeners. But a closer look reveals so much more — *YHLQMDLG* is not just an ode to old-school reggaeton, but rather an almost auto-biographical account of the myriad musical and cultural influences that shaped Bad Bunny into the artist he is today. A New York Times interview with Bad Bunny details how he has “repeatedly described *YHLQMDLG* as “the album that reggaeton deserves,” and it pays a debt of gratitude by featuring many of the genre’s elder statesmen: Jowell and Randy, Yaviah, the one and only Daddy Yankee.”⁴⁶ And his fans are loving it: Oscar argues that Bad Bunny “embodied... old school reggaeton” with this album, and it’s a large part of why he prefers Bad Bunny to other modern artists.⁴⁷ For Oscar, reggaeton is the music he grew up listening to; unlike some of my other interviewees, who began listening to reggaeton in high school or college, Oscar had reggaeton playing in his home “since [he] was born.”⁴⁸ As a result, reggaeton is an integral part of his identity: “growing up with it and always having it in the household always kind of reminded me to have pride in it. And as I got older, I realized that... this is my music. It’s an affirmation of my identity.”⁴⁹ In his revival of old-school reggaeton, Bad Bunny also reignited a passion and pride in reggaeton for people who grew up listening to it.

YHLQMDLG was also partially a response to recent pop influences on reggaeton, which have in many ways obscured the genre’s roots: “Since reggaeton went pop all over the world, I don’t feel like people really know the sound that raised me, that I grew up studying. This is the album I would’ve wanted to release when I was 15 and dreamed of being a singer.”⁵⁰ Almost every

⁴⁶ De Valle, “The World According to Bad Bunny.”

⁴⁷ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ De Valle, “The World According to Bad Bunny.”

one of my interviewees made some mention of the fact that there is a growing pop influence on reggaeton, creating a sort of “gray area nowadays” in terms of defining this music.⁵¹ But of course, Bad Bunny is not one to limit himself to one style or sound — he made it abundantly clear that his next album wouldn’t “have anything to do with *YHLQMDLG*.”⁵²

That Bad Bunny’s next album, *El Último Tour del Mundo*, has nothing to do with *YHLQMDLG* is an understatement: this album exudes a refreshing, almost revolutionary disregard for existing understandings of reggaeton, both old and new. Only a handful of songs on the album seem to fall under the conventional “reggaeton” label in their inclusion of the dembow beat — the rest offer an exhilarating mix of Latin trap beats, soft and hard rock moments, as well as a single traditional Puerto Rican Christmas song (the album was released in December). For example, songs like “BOOKER T” and “EL MUNDO ES MÍO” are undoubtedly trap — the back beat is a typical one used in many trap and rap songs, with a heavy bass beat coupled with a snare drum. Both songs also include more heavy rapping. Songs like “TRELLAS” instead sound like they belong on a completely different album, with its light, soft-rock acoustic guitar and Bad Bunny’s soothing vocals. The stark contrast between “BOOKER T” and “TRELLAS” can be heard in **Figure 5**. Although Bad Bunny includes some genres that were previously alien to reggaeton, this very act of merging different musics is intrinsic to reggaeton itself: Pedro points out how “reggaeton emerged from a blending of reggae and hip hop, so it’s going back to its roots in a way as well.”⁵³ It is Bad Bunny’s flawless ability to jump from one genre to another that has made him the face of reggaeton today. He epitomizes the roots of reggaeton in his genre-blending and transgressing of musical boundaries.

⁵¹ Tamara Pérez Cantalapiedra, interview by author, November 11, 2020.

⁵² De Valle, “The World According to Bad Bunny.”

⁵³ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

Figure 5: “BOOKER T” vs. “TRELLAS” by Bad Bunny



Click on these images to hear the stark differences between “BOOKER T” and “TRELLAS.”⁵⁴

Bad Bunny’s incorporation of Latin trap is a particularly important instance of this, and it also offers a clear example of American influences on modern reggaeton. Bad Bunny has straddled the line of Latin trap and reggaeton throughout his career, and he was largely at the forefront of the recent Latin trap movement. Latin trap, much like reggaeton, is hard to define; it’s most distinct from reggaeton in its lack of the dembow beat and its incorporation of American trap beats. For reference, *Figure 6* shows a comparison of the standard dembow beat and the trap beat used in “BOOKER T.”

Figure 6: Dembow vs. Trap Drumbeats

6(a): Dembow Drumbeat



6(b): Trap Drumbeat



These transcriptions show very stripped-down versions of dembow versus trap beats, featuring the bass and snare drum rhythms in each example.

⁵⁴ BAD BUNNY – BOOKER T, YouTube. & BAD BUNNY – TRELLAS, YouTube.

In the same way reggaeton was originally influenced by American hip-hop and rap, Latin trap, a “style of bass-heavy hip-hop,” was in many ways “derived from Southern rap traditions created by African American emcees.”⁵⁵ Arcángel and De La Ghetto are a reggaeton duo that made some of the earliest recordings that are considered Latin trap, and De La Ghetto has described how he “lived in Memphis for a while, so [he] started seeing that South style.”⁵⁶ He goes on to explain how “trap music... brought hip-hop to the club — you could dance to it, you could jump to it, you could party to it, and that’s what caught [his] attention.”⁵⁷ Latin trap soon exploded in Puerto Rico with artists like Bad Bunny, Anuel AA, and Ozuna drawing in a new generation of listeners who identified with hip-hop and trap, much like the generation of listeners that were drawn to reggaeton in the late 90’s.

The incorporation of Latin trap has played a fundamental role in attracting listeners like Pedro to reggaeton. Pedro did not start listening to reggaeton on his own until relatively recently, but he began listening to hip hop and rap at an early age.⁵⁸ His appreciation of rap led him to reggaeton, and one crucial facet that pulled him in was the development of Latin trap: “people like Bad Bunny or Anuel started using beats, using flows and rhythms that I was already accustomed to, having listened to American hip hop for so long. And they were doing it better... they were doing trap better than some Atlanta rappers.”⁵⁹ The example of Latin trap points to the importance of diasporic manifestations of Latinidad. Second and third generation Latinx people in the United States (including myself) often grow up with distinct musical cultures that become inevitably intertwined, forming a crucial part of their identity. For instance, I have always been drawn to

⁵⁵ Lopez, “Record Labels Said Latin Trap Was 'Going Nowhere.'”

⁵⁶ Lopez, “Record Labels Said Latin Trap Was 'Going Nowhere.'”

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

reggaeton's incorporation of salsa and merengue, two musical genres that were constantly played in my home growing up. But I also really enjoy American pop music, and I can hear both within a single reggaeton song. In this vein, the blending of genres in reggaeton reflects a similar blending of musical meanings and representations for Latinx people in the diaspora. This was an instrumental factor in the original boom of reggaeton in the late 90's and early 2000's, and it is only more fundamental in the explosion of reggaeton today.

Although only two of the sixteen songs on *El Último Tour del Mundo* include the dembow beat that has come to signify typical reggaeton, the album is undoubtedly a *reggaeton* album. This could simply be because Bad Bunny as an artist is so tied to this music, but the genre-blending in this album reveals much more than that. Reggaeton has become a music for all musics: whether you're an American listener who loves pop or trap, or if you're like me and grew up listening to salsa, one can see various musical genres, styles, and cultures materialize in this music in incredibly diverse ways. Reggaeton, then, is perhaps no longer simply a "genre" in and of itself. Because it incorporates elements from various musical spheres and cultures, modern reggaeton cannot be categorized within conventional understandings of genre distinctions. It has transcended such boundaries, becoming a sort of neo-genre in its own right. Although it may no longer be held together by the dembow beat, reggaeton persists as a cohesive musical style that is increasingly defined more by its *artists* than any limiting musical elements.

Bad Bunny said it best in his 2020 "Ronca Freestyle": "Que si no fuera por [él] el género sería tan monótono" ("if it weren't for him, the genre would be so monotonous"). And in many ways, he is not wrong: Bad Bunny is by and large one of the most innovative and experimental reggaeton artists to date. However, he is far from the only reggaeton artist to include other musical influences. Many reggaetoneros have increasingly incorporated pop elements into their music,

especially in collaborations with American artists. “Tusa” is an especially successful collaboration between Karol G and hip hop/rap artist Nicki Minaj that is in many ways more pop than reggaeton. The dembow beat is there, but at times it’s barely recognizable under the violin lines that drive most of the song. Pop continues to be a genre that is perhaps most frequently blended with reggaeton, and such songs as “Tusa” exemplify the growing incorporation of American influences on reggaeton. But just as American music has crossed over into Latin America and most of the world, so has reggaeton.

Chapter 4: Blurring Cultural Boundaries: Reggaeton's U.S. Crossover

“Reggaeton has definitely gained popularity... I’ve heard it at frat parties and clubs downtown, so I think it’s gone outside the realm of just Latino people to everyone.”⁶⁰ When Fiorella first started listening to reggaeton, it was almost solely at parties and clubs; some of her fondest memories are dancing all night to reggaeton with her cousins in Peru.⁶¹ The reggaeton Fiorella refers to here is modern reggaeton by artists like Bad Bunny and J Balvin, but there are some early songs that remain pillars of reggaeton and continue to be played at parties and clubs in the U.S. One such song is Daddy Yankee’s 2004 hit “Gasolina.” This song launched reggaeton into the American mainstream: when it made Billboard’s Hot 100 in 2004, “it was the first time a Spanish-language song that was not a “novelty” had charted in decades.”⁶² “Gasolina” inspired a shift in the American music industry: radio stations and music labels alike scrambled to incorporate more “Urban” music to cater to the growing Latinx population in the U.S. And for a time, such attempts were immensely successful: “for the first time since the mambo craze in the 1940s, mainstream English-speaking fans... [were] gravitating to a music whose Spanish lyrics they might not understand but whose rhythms and attitudes they understood perfectly.”⁶³ However, this surge of reggaeton in the U.S. eventually died down and “language was cited as the primary reason: Non-Latino listeners simply would not stick with music whose lyrics they could not understand.”⁶⁴

Reggaeton’s presence in the U.S. mainstream was reignited in 2017 with Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee’s “Despacito.” This song became even more groundbreaking when it was released

⁶⁰ Fiorella Robinson, interview by author, November 12, 2020.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!* 74.

⁶³ Ibid, 161.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

as a remix featuring American pop artist Justin Bieber, allowing it to become an international success. The remix of “Despacito” “topped Billboard Hot 100 at Number One, becoming the third mostly Spanish-language track in the nation to reach that level.”⁶⁵ The song smashed so many records that Luis Fonsi earned seven Guinness World Record titles in the process, including: most weeks at No. 1 on Billboard’s Hot Latin Songs chart, most-viewed music video online, and most-streamed track worldwide.⁶⁶ For many of my interviewees, “Despacito” was fundamental in the recent boom of reggaeton in the U.S. Grechell, who now listens to reggaeton almost every day, argues that “Despacito” became “the gateway song” that “catalyzed” the growing presence and diversification of reggaeton in the American mainstream.⁶⁷ Although these examples constitute two important moments for reggaeton in the U.S., neither truly comes close to the proliferation of this music in the American music industry today. Whether on music charts and award shows, in collaborations with American artists, or in quintessentially American performance settings such as the Super Bowl, reggaeton has become more firmly entrenched in the U.S. mainstream than ever before.

* * * * *

One of the more obvious ways reggaeton is reaching American listeners is through its presence on mainstream music charts, as well as late-night television shows. For instance, Bad Bunny’s television debut was on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* in 2018, joining only a handful of reggaetoneros that had performed on the show previously.⁶⁸ In 2019, J Balvin made history as the first reggaeton artist to perform on *Saturday Night Live*, and Bad Bunny recently

⁶⁵ Raygoza, “Reggaeton Royalty Ivy Queen and the Noise Reflect on the Genre’s Rise.”

⁶⁶ Roiz, “Luis Fonsi Breaks Seven Guinness World Records Titles Thanks To ‘Despacito.’”

⁶⁷ Grechell Verdecia Gonzalez, interview by author, November 3, 2020.

⁶⁸ Exposito, “Bad Bunny Makes Powerful TV Debut on ‘Fallon.’”

made his *SNL* debut in early 2021.⁶⁹ In 2019, Karol G’s “Tusa” broke records as the “first collaboration by women to debut at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot Latin Songs chart.”⁷⁰ In both 2019 and 2020, Bad Bunny was one of the top five most-streamed male artists globally on Spotify, and his album *YHLQMDLG* was the most-streamed album globally in 2020.⁷¹ And in the same year, Karol G was one of the top 10 most-streamed female artists on Spotify.⁷² Bad Bunny then “set an industry milestone” in late 2020 with his album *El Último Tour del Mundo*, which was the “first LP entirely in Spanish to top the Billboard 200 album chart.”⁷³ Finally, in 2021, Bad Bunny won his first “gringo” Grammy for *YHLQMDLG*, shown in *Figure 7*.⁷⁴ Although Bad Bunny has won plenty of Latin Grammys, this win puts him on the short list of reggaeton artists who have won Grammy awards in the U.S. These examples do not capture every single important milestone for reggaeton artists in the last five years or so, but they do help illustrate the sheer explosion of reggaeton on American mainstream platforms in recent years. Compared to the early 2000’s, significantly more people are listening to reggaeton both in the U.S. and around the world.

Figure 7: Bad Bunny Wins His First Grammy



*Bad Bunny wins his first Grammy for YHLQMDLG.*⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Cepeda, “J Balvin Will Be The First Reggaetonero to Perform on SNL.”

Kreps, “See Bad Bunny Sing With Rosalía, Appear in Sea Shanty Sketch on ‘SNL.’”

⁷⁰ Villa, “Karol G On The Magic Of ‘Tusa.’”

⁷¹ “The Trends That Shaped Streaming in 2020,” Spotify.

⁷² Villa, “Karol G On The Magic Of ‘Tusa.’”

⁷³ Sisario, “Bad Bunny’s New Album Is Billboard’s First All-Spanish No. 1.”

⁷⁴ Roiz, “Bad Bunny Wins Best Latin Pop Or Urban Album at 2021 Grammy Awards.”

⁷⁵ Calvario, “Bad Bunny Wins First GRAMMY,” Entertainment Tonight.

Part of recent reggaetoneros' success in the U.S. has also been fueled by collaborations with popular American artists. The Justin Bieber remix of "Despacito" exemplifies this, but since 2017, the number of collaborations between reggaeton and American artists has skyrocketed. 2018 is a particularly important year in this regard, as it marked Bad Bunny's series of immensely successful collaborations before the release of his debut album, *X100PRE*. These included "I Like It" with Cardi B and J Balvin, "Mia" with Drake, "Está Rico" with Marc Anthony and Will Smith, and "Te Guste" with none other than Jennifer Lopez (J Lo). One New York Times article described Bad Bunny as the "most pivotal pop voice of 2018, the common currency that everyone wanted to trade in."⁷⁶ Although the classification of Bad Bunny as a "pop" vocalist is a strange one, this point does emphasize how American artists were eager to collaborate with artists like Bad Bunny, who were making notable headway in both the Latin American and U.S. music industries.⁷⁷

These collaborations proved lucrative for reggaeton and American artists alike, so much so that they became relatively common in 2020 and now in 2021. My interviewees had mixed reactions to the increased commercialization of reggaeton as it has entered the American mainstream. Some felt as though this catering to American audiences affected the song quality:

"It's definitely changed the sound overall, because you're having American artists try to involve themselves a lot more, try to hit that demographic and commercialize themselves into that [Latin] group."⁷⁸

"I don't necessarily have much of a problem with it. I just do feel that with the larger commercialization, a lot of song quality drops."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Caramanica, "Bad Bunny Broke Boundaries in 2018."

⁷⁷ Bad Bunny did just as many, if not more, collaborations with popular reggaeton artists, which allowed him to gain significant recognition in the world of reggaeton.

⁷⁸ Grechell Verdecia Gonzalez, interview by author, November 3, 2020.

⁷⁹ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

“I think maybe now they're going to try to appeal to what Americans like in their music, like pop music or like, music that plays in the clubs, which I think is why I don't like reggaeton now as much.”⁸⁰

Others are grateful that reggaeton is finally getting the recognition it deserves:

“I'm happy about it. First of all, for there to be successful Latin American artists, successful reggaeton artists on a wide scale, is cool because now Americans can get more of an insight to the kind of music and culture from some Latin American countries.”⁸¹

“I want people to listen to reggaeton. I want people to take it seriously as a genre and have it grow from there because that's how it got to Puerto Rico [in the first place] ... If it weren't for our initial cultural appropriation, then reggaeton wouldn't be what it is today... I am for dissemination of all types when it comes to cultural production.”⁸²

In either case, it cannot be denied that reggaeton's recent boom is in part thanks to the diffusion of this music across different countries and cultures. And in some cases, it took reggaeton breaking into the American mainstream for Latinx listeners to hear it in the first place:

“I think it's giving exposure to a lot of people who wouldn't have listened to it otherwise, including me. If it hadn't been becoming so mainstream, I don't know if I ever would have really discovered it.”⁸³

Even more striking than these examples of reggaeton's presence in the U.S. mainstream is its incorporation in quintessentially American events that are not explicitly branded as Latinx. For instance, the 2021 Inauguration Concert included a “Pass the Mic” section that featured Ozuna and Luis Fonsi singing their most popular collaborations with American artists: “Taki Taki” and “Despacito.”⁸⁴ Yet this brief segment seems irrelevant when compared to the 2020 Super Bowl Halftime Show: a moment of profound recognition of Latinidad in the U.S. Featuring four Latinx

⁸⁰ Fiorella Robinson, interview by author, November 12, 2020.

⁸¹ Savannah Pinedo, interview by author, December 18, 2020.

⁸² Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

⁸³ Elizabeth Smith, interview by author, December 17, 2020.

⁸⁴ *DJ Cassidy - Pass the Mic, YouTube.*

artists and a variety of American and Latin music genres, this performance served as a symbol of Latinx pride and identity in the U.S. on a tremendous scale.

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Before the lights even hit the stage, the 2020 Super Bowl Halftime Show (*Figure 8*) is clearly marked by sonic signifiers of Latinidad. An Afro-Colombian drum beat booms over the announcer’s voice as the camera swoops through the stadium and down to the stage.⁸⁵ Although Latin stars like Gloria Estefan, Arturo Sandoval, and Christina Aguilera have performed at the Halftime Show in the past, the 2020 one was by far the “most Hispanic yet,” with two Latinas, Shakira and J Lo, leading the charge.⁸⁶ Strobe lights fall on Shakira and her back-up dancers; we’re soon greeted with “¡Hola Miami!” as Shakira breaks into a mash-up of some of her hit songs, including “She Wolf” and “Whenever, Wherever.”⁸⁷

Figure 8: Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show



*This is Shakira and J-Lo’s full halftime show performance.*⁸⁸

One of the most striking moments in this performance is the transition to “I Like It,” Bad Bunny’s 2018 collaboration with Cardi B and J Balvin, which effortlessly blends salsa and Latin

⁸⁵ *Shakira & J. Lo's FULL Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show, YouTube, 00:07.*

⁸⁶ Somvichian-Clausen, “J-Lo and Shakira's Super Bowl Halftime.”

⁸⁷ *Shakira & J. Lo's FULL Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show, YouTube, 00:24.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

trap.⁸⁹ This song features a sample from the 1960's boogaloo song "I Like It Like That" by Pete Rodriguez.⁹⁰ Once Shakira breaks into "I Like It," Bad Bunny soon joins her on stage, rapping almost entirely in Spanish.⁹¹ After a short transition, Shakira moves into another piece, this time a mash-up of her song "Chantaje," another salsa, with Bad Bunny's "Callaita."⁹² This moment exudes Latinidad with various symbols of salsa dance and music, which is perhaps one of the most popular and ubiquitous musics across different Latin cultures. Much like reggaeton, salsa is a blend of various Caribbean musical styles, including Cuban son and Puerto Rican plena. One of the most obvious signifiers of salsa music is the clave rhythm, which booms throughout the stadium as Shakira is surrounded by a group of men in bright red suits, holding different brass instruments as they perform a salsa dance routine together.⁹³ Shakira's performance ends with one of her most popular songs, "Hips Don't Lie," which also happens to be one of her few songs that is considered reggaeton, mostly due to its clear dembow beat.⁹⁴ This moment is coupled with a colorful dance breakdown in which Shakira and her dancers incorporate mapalé, an Afro-Colombian music and dance that is "known for its swift and rapid movements that are meant to flow with the beat of the drum."⁹⁵

After Shakira's performance ends in fireworks, the stadium goes dark as we hear the intro to J Lo's "Jenny from the Block."⁹⁶ Much like the start of Shakira's performance, J Lo begins with a mash-up of her popular songs, this time with a series of Vegas-like dance moments.⁹⁷ After this

⁸⁹ Ibid, 03:21.

⁹⁰ "I Like It Like That (Pete Rodriguez Song)," Wikipedia.

⁹¹ *Shakira & J. Lo's FULL Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show, YouTube*, 03:44.

⁹² Ibid, 04:12.

⁹³ Ibid, 04:40.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 04:56.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 05:30. OkayAfrica, "Shakira Brought Afro-Colombian Dance to the Super Bowl."

⁹⁶ *Shakira & J. Lo's FULL Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show, YouTube*, 06:16.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 07:13.

sequence, J Lo undergoes a costume change before singing one of her most iconic songs, “Waiting for Tonight.”⁹⁸ The performance then changes drastically with J Balvin’s appearance on stage as he sings his hit song “Que Calor,” an upbeat reggaeton piece that has been blended with J Lo’s “Booty.”⁹⁹ They then segue into a mash-up of J Balvin’s extremely popular “Mi Gente” with J Lo’s “Love Don’t Cost a Thing.”¹⁰⁰ J Lo then moves into “On the Floor,” which is one of her songs that combines different American and Latin music styles.¹⁰¹

The performance ends with Shakira and J Lo together on stage. They start with a mash-up of J Lo’s “Let’s Get Loud” and Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” During this moment, J Lo steps out donning a huge cape with the American flag on one side and the Puerto Rican one on the other as she calls to all of her “Latinos” in the stadium.¹⁰² Shakira then breaks into her famous “Waka Waka (This Time for Africa),” featuring another Afro-Colombian musical moment with the inclusion of champeta, a music and dance style that originated in her hometown of Barranquilla, Colombia.¹⁰³ The performance ends with a final salsa dance moment by J Lo and Shakira.¹⁰⁴

The importance of this performance as a signifier of modern Latinidad, particularly in the context of the U.S., cannot be overstated. In their incorporation of different American genres such as rock and hip-hop with popular Latin musics like salsa and reggaeton, Shakira and J Lo emphasize the way Latin music has truly become a cross-cultural phenomenon. This performance emphasizes the blending of American and Latin cultures, which has proliferated with the growing

⁹⁸ *Shakira & J. Lo's FULL Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show, YouTube*, 08:40.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 09:40.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 09:58.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 11:01.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 12:13.

¹⁰³ OkayAfrica, “Shakira Brought Afro-Colombian Dance to the Super Bowl.”

¹⁰⁴ *Shakira & J. Lo's FULL Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show, YouTube*, 13:50.

Latinx population in the U.S. Perhaps most importantly, this performance serves as a form of representation for Latinx people across the diaspora, and not just for Shakira and J Lo's generation, but also for Bad Bunny's. He represents a younger demographic of listeners who have come to claim modern reggaeton as their own. I remember getting goosebumps when I watched this performance for the first time; the thought of one of my favorite artists, Bad Bunny, performing at the Super Bowl of all places was inconceivable to me. And to hear the very salsa music I grew up listening to on such an impressive platform was inspiring.

Furthermore, the fact that Bad Bunny and J Balvin performed entirely in Spanish marks a new transition in the American music industry. Both Bad Bunny and J Balvin have been adamant throughout their careers that they will never compromise their culture, language, and identity in order to become successful, and they both managed to “crack “the gringo market” without assimilating, without making the one concession that seemed unavoidable: [their] mother tongue”.¹⁰⁵ The same was not possible for artists like J Lo and Shakira, who throughout most of their careers were specifically branded as crossover artists, and thus likely *had* to sing in both English and Spanish in order to remain successful. In many ways such crossover artists paved the way for this new generation of Latinx artists, and the welcoming of Bad Bunny and J Balvin on stage at the Super Bowl symbolized a generational passing of the reins, not just in Latin music but within the American, crossover music industry.

The sonic and visual signifiers of both old and new styles of Latinidad in this moment was nothing short of groundbreaking. As Carol noted in her interview,

“in one of the most important moments for America during the year, [they had] two Latinas singing on stage. As a portrait of the entire country, as a symbol, that was really powerful, especially in the administration of Trump.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ De Valle, “The World According to Bad Bunny.”

¹⁰⁶ Carol Zhao, interview by author, December 14, 2020.

Carol was the only interviewee of mine who was not Latinx, and thus her observation reveals that the importance of this performance was felt beyond the Latinx community. This celebration of Latinx identity and pride within such a staunchly American context offered an incredible moment of recognition and visibility for Latinx people. The fact that the Super Bowl was held in Miami of all places emphasized this, as Miami is at its core a Latin city, home to a diverse range of Latinx peoples. The call to all “Latinos” in this performance highlights how these musics truly represent a pan-Latinx identity. Oscar noted this in his interview when he declared that reggaeton is truly for *all* Latinos today:

“... it’s become a genre that now... all Latinos can hold around it. It’s definitely changed. I thought it used to be just in the Caribbean... [but] now it has spread out to all Latinos and they just love it. Even in Spain.”¹⁰⁷

This performance exemplified the pan-Latinx character of reggaeton, and perhaps more importantly, the inclusion of the American and Puerto Rican flags served as an important commentary on relations between the U.S. mainland and Puerto Rico, a tension that many of my Puerto Rican interviewees highlighted in their interviews:

“Once you start growing your own opinions and getting more into adulthood... you start understanding the relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. more... and start wanting to separate that... So, I think that’s kind of how reggaeton started becoming more influential and important for me... it was a way of being more connected to my own culture.”¹⁰⁸

Thus, reggaeton is doing much more than just representing Latinx people in the diaspora: it has also served as an outlet for different forms of socio-political commentary, just as it was at its inception. And this has been of the utmost importance for recent listeners like Pedro:

“When I realized that reggaeton was a sort of manifestation of Pan-Latin American solidarities, that’s when I really got into it. And then in the last three or four years, when

¹⁰⁷ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Tamara Pérez Cantalapedra, interview by author, November 11, 2020.

there has been more evident investment in questions of feminism and gender justice, [and] discussions of anti-blackness, which have just simply not happened in Puerto Rico... that's when I realized the power and the influence that reggaeton probably has had this whole time... It is doing the work of sharing current affairs and events in Puerto Rico during one of its most difficult times historically... **It's not just an art medium; it's also a political one.**¹⁰⁹

Finally, it is important to emphasize that reggaeton's crossover into the U.S. mainstream functions on two different levels. On the one hand, it is a result of changes within the U.S. mainstream music industry in response to new assertions of Latinx presence in the U.S. On the other, it is influenced by musical and stylistic changes within reggaeton that are aimed at Latinx listeners, such as the inclusion of more pop elements and increased collaborations. As will be discussed in chapter Five, recent developments in reggaeton that have aimed to make this music more inclusive have only solidified its crossover status.

¹⁰⁹ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

Chapter 5: A New Era of Progress: The Rejection of Hypermasculinity in Reggaeton

“[Bad Bunny has] really opened the doors for other future reggaeton artists...he’s pushing reggaeton into a more progressive direction by talking about actual issues.”¹¹⁰ Nicole’s enthusiastic response to Bad Bunny’s music video for “Yo Perreo Sola” highlighted the importance of this video for many listeners.¹¹¹ In this video, Bad Bunny dresses in drag — something that no reggaetonero had done before. Released shortly after the murder of a transgender woman named Alexa in Puerto Rico, this video was perceived by many, including Nicole, as a commentary on anti-transgender violence:

“it was a very transcendental moment... that was one big step from “Solo de mi”, which is about domestic violence, to “Yo Perreo Sola” ... after Alexa, people were enraged.... We cannot keep living like this. And to have him embody that in a video was crazy... It was a big shock for some people, but it definitely needed to be seen and heard so people realize this is a change that needs to happen.”¹¹²

Although not all my interviewees interpreted the music video as such a form of social commentary, no one could deny the fact that Bad Bunny uses his platform in a way that many reggaeton artists do not:

“Bad Bunny has done a lot of great advocacy... and not just for Puerto Rico but also for the LGBTQ+ community by going against gender norms.”¹¹³

“... you may not agree with what he’s saying, but at least he’s saying something, which is more than most rappers have done. Rappers are more likely to be involved in anti-trans violence than, you know, pro-trans gestures like this video.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Nicole Laboy, interview by author, November 4, 2020.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Tamara Pérez Cantalapiedra, interview by author, November 11, 2020.

¹¹⁴ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

Bad Bunny is by and large considered one of the most progressive artists in mainstream reggaeton today, and songs like “Yo Perreo Sola” point towards a new move away from the hypermasculinity so intrinsic to this music. Although reggaeton still has a way to go, the recent inclusion of socio-political issues in the lyrics, as well as the growing number of female artists, demonstrates that this music is moving in a more progressive direction, one that has made reggaeton more accessible for everyone. “Yo Perreo Sola” exemplifies this in its discussion of female empowerment, its inclusion of a female vocalist, and finally, in the reversal of gender roles in the music video.

“Yo Perreo Sola” was a huge success, as was its remix featuring Nesi and Ivy Queen. The performance of this remix at the 2020 Billboard Music Awards was particularly revolutionary. This performance begins with only Ivy Queen on stage as she raps the first verse, soon encircled by a group of male back-up dancers wearing tutus and roller skates.¹¹⁵ As she did in the underground rap battles in the late 90’s, Ivy Queen dominates on stage, and when Bad Bunny eventually comes out to join her, it still very much feels like Ivy Queen’s show.¹¹⁶ Finally, Nesi joins Ivy Queen and Bad Bunny, shown in *Figure 9*.¹¹⁷

Figure 9: “Yo Perreo Sola” Remix Performance



*Ivy Queen, Nesi, and Bad Bunny performing at the Billboard Music Awards.*¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ *BAD BUNNY X IVY QUEEN X NESI*, YouTube, 0:15.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 00:36.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 01:45.

¹¹⁸ Jacobs, “Ivy Queen joins Nesi and Bad Bunny for ‘Yo Perreo Sola’ Remix.”

What is especially impactful about this performance is the fact that Ivy Queen and Nesi take the stage with Bad Bunny not as sexualized back-up dancers, but as fellow performers and rappers. This performance encapsulates the myriad ways reggaeton has transgressed and subverted different musical and cultural boundaries. It exemplifies reggaeton's growing presence in the American mainstream, as this was all three artists' inaugural performance at the Billboard Music Awards, an American award show. Furthermore, this performance was the only one by Latinx artists, and they sang entirely in Spanish. If there was ever an obvious instance of crossing over into the American mainstream, this was it.¹¹⁹ This performance also exemplifies Bad Bunny's simultaneous incorporation of old and new styles of reggaeton. Only those who have really listened to old school, underground reggaeton know what it means for a young reggaeton artist to get the chance to perform and collaborate with an icon like Ivy Queen. She played a revolutionary role in reggaeton, both as a leading rapper during the underground days and as a female artist who provided a voice for women in a genre that had largely excluded them. Ivy Queen is one of just a handful of artists who truly represent the roots of reggaeton. Today, Bad Bunny is carrying on the very legacy that Ivy Queen engendered, so to have her featured on this remix was a way to simultaneously honor the role of women in the development of reggaeton. Finally, the actual song "Yo Perreo Sola" is at its core an anthem of female empowerment. This fact and the incorporation of female rappers demonstrates how the genre is moving towards a more progressive inclusion of women, both in terms of the lyrics and as fellow artists.

Even more powerful than this performance was the original music video for "Yo Perreo Sola" (see *Figure 10*). Bad Bunny starts in a bright-red outfit featuring a short skirt and long

¹¹⁹ For reference, at the 2019 Billboard Music Awards, the only non-American performance was by K-Pop super group BTS, and even then, they were performing a collaboration with an American artist.

earrings, lip-syncing to the female hook.¹²⁰ He then transitions to a revealing jumpsuit with large fake breasts as he continues to lip-sync.¹²¹ Rather than maintaining the association between his drag costumes and the female vocals, Bad Bunny flips through the many drag outfits while still rapping his part, and oftentimes doing so with his regular reggaetonero gestures. This is an important point because it clarifies that Bad Bunny is not just pretending to be a woman in the video but is actively participating in a drag performance.

Figure 10: “Yo Perreo Sola” Music Video



This image links to the music video for “Yo Perreo Sola.”¹²²

In many parts of the video, he appears in his regular apparel. At one point he stands at the center of a circle of thrones with fire in the background.¹²³ Upon each throne is a woman holding a metal chain that restrains Bad Bunny. This moment is a very poignant reversal of standard gender roles in reggaeton music videos: Bad Bunny stands shirtless in this ring, stomping in a pile of water, which is reminiscent of many sexualized scenes of women in music videos.¹²⁴ This video lacks any sexualization or objectification of women. In fact, at the end of the video, there is a compilation of women of all shapes, sizes, and ages *perreando* without a man in sight. Through

¹²⁰ *Yo Perreo Sola - Bad Bunny, YouTube*, 00:26.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 00:46.

¹²² *Ibid*.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 02:08.

¹²⁴ This is a typical image in many different music videos and is by no means unique to reggaeton.

their expressions and movements, it is clear that they are dancing for themselves and simply having fun in the process.¹²⁵ As the music cuts out, the video ends with a line of red text on a black screen: “SI NO QUIERE BAILAR CONTIGO, RESPETA, ELLA PERREA SOLA.”¹²⁶ This line roughly means “if she doesn’t want to dance with you, respect her. She dances alone,” serving as a sort of call for consent from his audience.

To *perreo sola* does not always literally mean to dance alone, but rather that one does not need to dance in a male-female pair to enjoy themselves. When I think of *perreando sola*, I think of going out with my friends and dancing all night without a care in the world. Thus, this slogan is a call for female empowerment and liberation. Furthermore, the entire video serves as a critical rejection of hypermasculinity in reggaeton, and it was for this very reason that many of my interviewees, and myself, were especially proud of it:

“Bad Bunny proved to a very masculine Latin American world that... you don’t have to just be super macho all the time.”¹²⁷

“I thought it was amazing... it was such a groundbreaking music video, [especially] in a genre that’s super hypermasculine, super misogynistic, [and] homophobic... I was shocked that it didn’t win many awards.”¹²⁸

“I just felt so happy because... for you to have a Puerto Rican reggaeton artist dress up as a woman in a genre that’s traditionally been very hypermasculine... [it] goes back to Bad Bunny absolutely changing the world.”¹²⁹

Some of my other interviewees did not perceive this music video in the same way. For instance, Tami noted that she “thought it was fun,” but didn’t “necessarily think he was trying to say any

¹²⁵ *Yo Perreo Sola - Bad Bunny, YouTube*, 02:34.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 03:14.

¹²⁷ Fiorella Robinson, interview by author, November 12, 2020.

¹²⁸ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

¹²⁹ Nicole Laboy, interview by author, November 4, 2020.

message.”¹³⁰ Others were more shocked by the video than anything else. Another interesting factor was how some of my interviewees’ Latinx parents responded to the video: “my mom was definitely shocked, but she was laughing... she thought it was so funny”¹³¹; “...my dad first responded to the song just like, “oh, that’s gay, what the hell is he doing? That’s not what we do.”¹³²

These comments point to some of the more problematic implications of dressing in drag for a music video. Pedro outlined this tension perfectly:

“The immediate laurels that he received about him being brave and all that — those are true... My problem... is that it seemed like a sort of gut reaction to recent headlines in Puerto Rico. I’m glad that he’s plugged in, but at the same time, I don’t think that dressing in drag is as progressive a signifier as he thinks it is.”¹³³

Pedro then went on to discuss the problematic implications of viewers finding the video “funny”:

“... the way it was received among my cis, straight friends... it was a joke, you know. People were laughing at this like, this Bad Bunny’s crazy. And it’s also perpetuating this myth between like trans identities and mental health, sort of like, you know, being trans means that you must be suffering from some sort of mental illness... But it is funny, and some people might consider that that’s a problem.”¹³⁴

Pedro is touching on a tension in this video that is very much present in much of reggaeton and its history: namely, that reggaeton is an intrinsically contradictory music.¹³⁵ Even in its underground days, reggaetoneros would use their music as a form of socio-political commentary while simultaneously reinforcing certain gender stereotypes and hierarchies. The same is true today. This is perhaps exemplified in the original release of “Yo Perreo Sola,” when Bad Bunny did not credit

¹³⁰ Tamara Pérez Cantalapedra, interview by author, November 11, 2020.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Grechell Verdecia Gonzalez, interview by author, November 3, 2020.

¹³³ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

the female vocalist, Nesi. This has been a pertinent issue in reggaeton since its inception, and the irony was not lost on many listeners:

“Women have been singing choruses for male artists for three decades in reggaeton, providing samples and ad libs, and they never get their names mentioned, or at least they didn’t until very, very recently... it’s this assumption that women’s roles in hip hop [and by extension reggaeton] are minor, so minor in fact that they don’t even deserve to be credited.”¹³⁶

“Yo Perreo Sola” thus offers a complex example of how certain moves towards progress in reggaeton are often coupled with equally regressive, albeit sometimes unintentional, politics. Although the contributions of artists like Bad Bunny and the growing number of female artists in recent years cannot be ignored, reggaeton is not nearly as progressive and inclusive as it could be. My interviewees’ discussions of drawbacks to the genre emphasize this. For many, the hypermasculinity in the genre remains a primary issue:

“It’s super, especially amongst the male artists, it’s super machismo. It can be very misogynistic and homophobic.”¹³⁷

“When you look at it, there are only a few prominent women in it, like Karol G and Becky G, so it’s still very male-dominated.”¹³⁸

“I could probably count the number of female *reggaetoneras* on one hand.”¹³⁹

“I think it’s always been a male-dominated genre... [and] as far as I know, you don’t really see anyone who is part of the LGBTQ+ community singing reggaeton.”¹⁴⁰

“Right now, the representation for non-male genders in reggaeton is pretty awful; it sucks... You really have to dig deep to find artists that represent a non-male perspective. Anna Macho, a trans artist... they’re kind of blowing up in the underground reggaeton

¹³⁶ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

¹³⁷ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

¹³⁸ Savannah Pinedo, interview by author, December 18, 2020.

¹³⁹ Grechell Verdecia Gonzalez, interview by author, November 3, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Tamara Pérez Cantalapiedra, interview by author, November 11, 2020.

scene in Puerto Rico, sort of like the way Kevin Fret was blowing up a few years ago as a gay rapper. But then again, Kevin Fret was murdered. It was a hate crime.”¹⁴¹

There are, however, a variety of artists who are pushing the boundaries of reggaeton just as much as, if not more than, Bad Bunny has, but they are largely limited to the underground reggaeton scene. For example, Tremenda Jauría is a Spanish music group that is particularly experimental in their eclectic combination of different genres. Their song “Te echo de menos” exemplifies this, as it mixes a cumbia guitar line, flamenco accents, and the dembow beat with various electronic music effects (see *Figure 11*). This is also one of the few larger music groups, made up of two men and two women, all of whom perform and rap on equal footing. This group is also considered part of a recent feminist reggaeton movement in Spain.

Figure 11: “Te Echo de Menos” Music Video



This image links to the music video for “Te Echo de Menos” by Tremenda Jauría.¹⁴²

Another new artist in the underground scene is Chocolate Remix, a lesbian artist from Argentina who uses her lyrics to “satirise machismo and bust the taboos of female pleasure and lesbian sex. She also revisits reggaeton’s homophobic roots and rewrites songs for a queer audience.”¹⁴³ One of her most “radical” songs is “Cómo Me Gusta a Mi,” an anthem of sexual

¹⁴¹ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

¹⁴² *TREMENDA JAURÍA – Te Echo De Menos*, YouTube.

¹⁴³ “Chocolate Remix,” The Guardian.

liberation. The music video for this song was especially groundbreaking, as it is a rare example of “a reggaeton video full of women enjoying themselves, no man in sight” (see *Figure 12*).¹⁴⁴ Chocolate Remix also uses her music to provide commentary on gender violence, most notably with her song “Ni Una Menos,” which tackles domestic violence.

Figure 12: “Cómo Me Gusta a Mi” Music Video



*This image links to the music video for “Como Me Gusta a Mi” by Chocolate Remix.*¹⁴⁵

Finally, a recent artist who is blowing up in the underground, alternative scene is Tomasa Del Real, who both experiments with musical conventions and pushes for new levels of inclusivity in her music and performance. Tomasa Del Real is a Chilean artist who has been labeled the “Queen of NeoPerreo,” a new subgenre of reggaeton that she describes as “the cross between the digital era with the influence of reggaeton.”¹⁴⁶ In an interview on *The Zoo*, she goes into more detail about how she defines *neoperreo*, a term she coined:

“When I try to explain the type of music I make, I say I don’t know if this is reggaeton, but this is *perreo*. And it’s not regular *perreo* — it’s *neoperreo*... It’s a new wave of the *perreo* — *perreo* doesn’t mean reggaeton, it means dancehall, dembow, trap, whatever you can *perrear* to.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ “Chocolate Remix,” *The Guardian*.

¹⁴⁵ *Chocolate Remix [Lesbian Reggaeton] – Como Me Gusta a Mi, YouTube*.

¹⁴⁶ Aguila, “NeoPerreo Rising.”

¹⁴⁷ *Neoperreo Explained with Tomasa Del Real, The Zoo*.

This music is also more collaborative than typical reggaeton, and it offers a new level of inclusivity: “perreos these days are some of the coolest spaces because everyone comes — from rich to poor, trans people, gay people, heteros, all are coming together in the same spaces.”¹⁴⁸ One of her popular songs is “Sirena,” which some have described as a song of female empowerment (see *Figure 13*). Tomasa Del Real’s music is undoubtedly unique: “with heavy, driving beats and ample autotune, Tomasa’s sound is cyber-tropical ecstasy.”¹⁴⁹ And she also advocates for sexual freedom in a lot of her music, much like Chocolate Remix.

Figure 13: “Sirena” Music Video



*This image links to the music video for “Sirena” by Tomasa Del Real.*¹⁵⁰

Furthermore, Tomasa del Real is an especially important example of new underground, progressive artists in reggaeton as one of the few non-white artists. The *blanqueamiento* or whitening of reggaeton since its development has been a prevalent issue, one that some of my interviewees noted:

“Black people were very influential in the creation of reggaeton, and it wouldn’t have been possible without them. I think it’s very interesting to see that now, the genre doesn’t really have a lot of black artists in it... and I think it relates to the fact that there’s also a lot of racism in the Latino community.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Flores, “Introducing Tomasa Del Real.”

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ *Sirena – Tomasa Del Real, YouTube.*

¹⁵¹ Luna Splendori, interview by author, November 18, 2020.

“The genre was rooted in black people, in black Puerto Ricans... I remember as a kid you’d see Tego Calderón, Don Omar, and other artists like them — that was the face of the genre. And now that’s become a lot more white. And I think that feeds into the same thing of how it’s become more commercialized... it’s more palatable to have Bad Bunny or J Balvin.”¹⁵²

It’s promising that more non-male, queer, and non-white artists are starting to get more recognition in reggaeton, but a comparison of these artists with Bad Bunny reveals the limits of possibilities of resistance and social change when one is trying to be “mainstream”. Although Bad Bunny is certainly breaking boundaries in reggaeton today, he likely would not have reached such a level of success had he not conformed to a more hypermasculine performance at the outset of his career. There is still much work to be done, despite the huge strides artists like Bad Bunny have made towards progress. There is a clear line between mainstream and underground in reggaeton, and mainstream success in reggaeton, much like mainstream success in the U.S., is still very much limited to certain forms of gender performance and expression.

¹⁵² Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although I have only discussed a small portion of modern reggaeton artists and productions in this thesis, I have demonstrated how reggaeton has transformed into a neo-genre that is even more difficult to categorize than it was two decades ago. Reggaeton continues to push boundaries wherever possible, from its eclectic assortment of different musical styles and genres to its newfound crossover status in the U.S. to the development of a new underground scene that pushes for progress. Artists like Bad Bunny have played tremendous roles in this transformation, but the power of reggaeton ultimately lies in the hands of its listeners. Were it not for the countless ways in which reggaeton has come to represent a new, more inclusive pan-Latinx identity, it would not have reached the level of success and recognition it has today. It is thanks to the millions of streamers who have given Bad Bunny such a tremendous platform that he has been able to revolutionize reggaeton. There is no doubt that modern reggaeton is reaching a broader audience than ever before, and people aren't only listening to reggaeton for the "beat" anymore; they are listening to reggaeton because they *see* themselves in this music. For me, reggaeton validated my Latina identity in a way that no music had ever done before, connecting me to my culture and other Latinx people. The same was true for every single one of my interviewees:

“[Reggaeton] keeps me grounded in who I am... I think reggaeton and Spanish music in general has played a role in making sure I am still able to connect with the community that I left behind, in both senses of the word — the community I left in Miami and the family and friends that I have in Cuba.”¹⁵³

“It's a big affirmation of my identity. And I'm pretty sure that a lot of kids feel the same way about it.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Grechell Verdecia Gonzalez, interview by author, November 3, 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Oscar Zetino, interview by author, November 17, 2020.

“... reggaeton was a way to sort of find my own identity and see the biases that I grew up with as a middle class, white boy, basically, in Puerto Rico.”¹⁵⁵

“... reggaeton for me is when I really connected with my Latino side because that’s when I was learning Spanish. So, it does have a lot of sentimental value, because it’s when I realized that I can accept that part of me, because, growing up, I was kind of rejecting it.”¹⁵⁶

“Music adds solidarity across different Latin American cultures... So, I feel like [reggaeton] creates a connection, a solidarity.”¹⁵⁷

“It defines part of who I am ... throughout my entire development, reggaeton music has always been there.... It is part of my identity”.¹⁵⁸

Thus, reggaeton is much more than club music for *perreo* (though no one can deny reggaeton’s status as the ultimate dance music). Modern reggaeton marks a transformation among Latinx artists and listeners in the diaspora who have found themselves in this music. As reggaeton breaks free of conventions and labels, it encourages its listeners to do the same. Above all, to *perrea sola* is to join an ever expanding and diversifying pan-Latinx community, so *perreo sola* I shall.

¹⁵⁵ Pedro Doreste, interview by author, December 2, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Maya Ordonez, interview by author, December 17, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Savannah Pinedo, interview by author, December 18, 2020.

¹⁵⁸ Nicole Laboy, interview by author, November 4, 2020.

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