

Cultural Identity, colonialism, and gentrification in Puerto Rico: Bad Bunny's *El Apagón* as a case study

Barbara Barreiro Leon

University of Aberdeen

barbara.leon@abdn.ac.uk

Abstract

A new phenomenon of Latin music, Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, better known as Bad Bunny, has triumphed worldwide, being the most listened-to artist on Spotify in 2021, 2022 and 2023 (Spotify, 2023). Through his lyrics, he redefines masculinity and engages with post-feminist discourse. However, another important aspect worth noting is his cultural identity and the distinctly Puerto Rican aesthetic of his lyrics and videos.

The Puerto Rican artist's relationship with his country of origin has always been very close, as cultural references to the island abound in his lyrics and song narratives. This fosters a nationalist sentiment that contrasts with the US mentality that often views Puerto Rico as merely a state, connecting to transnationalism in addition to presenting postcolonial cultural differences. Puerto Rican culture is rich in diversity and heritage, not only musically, but also within popular culture. In this context, Bad Bunny frequently references Puerto Rican figures, pre-Hispanic themes and widely known songs and musical genres from his homeland.

KEYWORDS: identity, music video, Puerto Rico, reggaeton, gentrification, colonialism

Introduction

Latin music is booming, and one of the biggest personalities responsible for this surge is Bad Bunny. However, he is not the typical reggaeton singer one might expect; instead, he has worked to transform many aspects of the reggaeton industry, from addressing *macho* lyrics to challenging the toxic masculinity often associated with this genre (Díaz Fernández, 2021). Above all this, Bad Bunny takes pride in his patriotism, the love for his country, and his fight to preserve cultural and linguistic traditions. The artist has remained true to his native jargon and language,

a commitment he reaffirmed when he accepted the VMA Award for artist of the year in 2022.

Bad Bunny presents a strong national identity while also advocating for sexual, gender, ethnic and body diversity. The singer is known for his lyrics and inclusive visual culture aesthetics and imaginary. However, what we will discuss in this article will be the importance of the Bad Bunny's national identity as reflected and presented in both his lyrics and the visual culture that surrounds him. His lyrics address not only cultural appropriations, but also colonialism, resilience and the repression that the country has suffered from the Spanish conquest in the first place and the later adhesion to the United States. These multiple occupations have strengthened Puerto Rican cultural identity, a theme that recurs throughout Bad Bunny's lyrics and music videos.

This study employs a new approach regarding the use of reggaeton as a reconciling element concerning Latin culture and global popular culture but also a meeting point between decolonial studies, visual studies, and music studies.

This article is not only interdisciplinary but also innovative concerning the figure of Bad Bunny, an artist who, due to his growing and recent success, has not been deeply studied by scholars. For instance, there are only a few studies regarding his views and representations of gender (Platt 2018; Diaz Fernández, 2021). However, there have been no further research to this date concerning his figure with the cultural identity of Puerto Rico, postcolonialism and diaspora through his songs, and environmental and gentrification issues through the devastating Hurricane Maria. This will be demonstrated for the first time in this article, which will pay special attention to the music video "El Apagón" (2022).

Methodology

The methodology followed for this study is the analysis of visual culture through the music video "El Apagón" (2022). As previously mentioned, this is an interdisciplinary study that, due to the scarcity of bibliography regarding this artist, will include an analytical and critical examination of his visual work and his song lyrics. This detailed analysis will help us understand the meaning of the videography and the sociocultural importance that this performance presents with respect to safeguarding the cultural heritage of Puerto Rico. Additionally, it makes a plea against the current policies and the total abandonment and exploitation suffered by the country by its colonizer, the United States.

In addition, after analysing the bibliography concerning reggaeton music and further studies that will accompany the analysis of the work of Bad Bunny, this study will support the idea of the representation of identities through this artist and how he also plays an activist role in the fight for the preservation of the cultural identity of Puerto Rico with a special focus on migration and diaspora, something that no other reggaeton artist has highlighted before in this way. This publication is drawn from a larger study that I am conducting on the artist regarding this last point.

Therefore, this presents itself as a fundamental study to understand music related to contemporary reggaeton in general and the music of Bad Bunny in particular, serving as a case study of a primary element that shapes visual and cultural-musical representation in favour of resilience and against colonialism and gentrification.

El Apagón: Aquí vive gente (2022)

On September 16, 2022, the official music video of the song “El Apagón” (Bad Bunny, *Un Verano Sin Tí*, 2022) was released. This release presented not only a music video, but also a 15-minute documentary depicting the situation that Puerto Rico is experiencing at the time of writing. The documentary uses data, journalistic sources, and interviews with real people from the local community reflecting how Bad Bunny also sees himself. The artist leverages his global platform to bring attention to Puerto Rico's issues and share its story with the world.

This music video depicts the poverty in some neighbourhoods, the lack of electricity (in Spanish, *Apagón* means blackout, hence the name of the song), the scarcity of resources, and the poor state of the land after Hurricane María's devastation of Puerto Rico on September 19, 2017 (the date of the release of the video clip is not fortuitous either). Hurricane Maria remains one of the most devastating events in the recent history of Puerto Rico. However, it also brought people together, fostering a spirit of resilience. The Puerto Rico Rises (1) movement arose at this time and pointed to the difficulty that the state had associated with the natural disaster, compounded by governmental obstacles (Rodríguez Vázquez, 2022). Moreover, there is one more problem that is raised in this mini-documentary, and that is gentrification and how this is affecting the island.

The music video opens with a voice over declaring: “*A nosotros nos sale natural ser leyenda porque al final no hay orgullo más grande en cada logro que el de decir, yo soy de P fcking R*” [It comes naturally to us to be a legend because in the end there is no greater pride in each achievement than to say, I am from P fcking R] (Ramos Rosado 2021). The voiceover accompanies footage from the P FKN R concert series, two concerts held by Bad Bunny in San Juan in December 2021. These concerts broke all records for sales and attendance and have become ingrained in the popular culture of Puerto Rico (Roiz 2021).

In these two concerts, the introduction consisted of an almost 7-minute-long video highlighting the history of Puerto Rico, its significant achievements, key figures and the struggles that shaped the nation. Currently, Puerto Rico has a tight political relationship with the US since becoming a colony in 1898 and then an associated state in 1917 (Barreto 2001; Duany 2000). The island has an autonomous government but depends economically on the US (Giles et. al 1979). The aforementioned video was conceived by Bad Bunny himself in collaboration with writer Hermes Ayala, filmmaker Arí Maniel Cruz (Fullana Acosta 2021) and actor Benicio del Toro, who concludes the video with the same words that open the music video of “El Apagón”.

Following this, an aerial image of a deprived area on a Puerto Rican beach, is succeeded by an image of young individuals atop a military tank with the Puerto Rican flag. Bad Bunny enters the scene sitting in an area surrounded by nature, wooden cabins, and palm trees. As he sings the opening lines, the focus shifts to a series of people, inhabitants of that neighbourhood intermingling between the streets, the traditional houses of the island and shots of Bad Bunny. The video prominently showcases ethnic, body, and age diversity, reinforcing the notion of a

diverse yet cohesive community. It is a celebration of the people of the neighbourhood.

The song mentions Tego Calderón, one of the pioneers of Reggaeton in Puerto Rico and an advocate for the island's ethnic visibility. In addition to this, Bad Bunny also references Tego's song "Metete Sazón" (*El Abayarde*, 2003), when he sings 'pero les falta sazón, batería y reggaetón' [but they lack seasoning, drums and reggaeton]. Just before that line, Bad Bunny criticizes the Americanisation of Latin music when he says 'ahora todos quieren ser latinos' [now everyone wants to be Latin]. This is a reflection on how, despite how much North American musicians try, they will never master reggaeton as they lack *seasoning and drums*, meaning they lack the roots and the soul to do it.

In the music video, an image of Calderón is included along with that of Barea, a basketball champion. Musician Maelo (Ismael Rivera) is also mentioned, although his image does not appear in the music video. As Bad Bunny sings these verses paying homage to Puerto Rican figures, he is accompanied by the Puerto Rican flag, symbolising national pride and unity.

At this moment in the video, the song pauses and a sequence of images of an explosion follow one another. A new voice-over emerges, that of Bianca Graulau, the journalist who will later lead the documentary. She now reveals that the island is grappling with a series of blackouts, even affecting hospitals. To illustrate this, the video now shows images of that people captured during these blackouts with their own phones and resources, adding a personal and intimate dimension to these events.

Following the personal footage, a series of more official images start to appear from news outlets, further media and online newspapers. These images accompany a report stating that electricity in Puerto Rico became part of a private USA-Canadian company called LUMA Energy. Bad Bunny himself mentioned this fact in a concert at the Coliseo in the summer of 2022, saying that his country was the only one where he needed power generators to perform (*Diario Libre* 2022). The song is called "El Apagón" for these reasons: due to the island's ongoing struggles with power outages, and particularly because these issues stem from an eminently North American company taking charge of the power supply.

The music video continues with protest imagery, including a banner that reads *Fuera LUMA* [LUMA out], resuming the music with the phrase '*Maldita sea otro apagón*' [Damn it, another blackout]. The video now showcases images of the artist singing in the street, alongside other residents as well as scenes from protests, parties, *perreo combativo* (2), and other sporting and socio-cultural events of the popular culture of Puerto Rico. The song then shifts to another rhythm with the phrase: '*cuidado que somos un montón*' [be careful that we are a lot of people], which serves as a warning given the situation they are facing, particularly with regard to their most immediate colonizers.

In addition, a series of images follow one another in which large numbers of people are glimpsed. Eventually, they converge at an underground party led by Bad Bunny. In this party we can see different flags: the Puerto Rican flag, Puerto Rican Resistance flag (black and white), and Pride flags. The music shifts once more as people leave the party through a cave, entering a coastal landscape where an aerial view celebrates the nature of Puerto Rico. Past images of the people's struggling are

intertwined in these. For example, Bad Bunny is seen leading a protest in 2019 with the Puerto Rican flag. The song culminates in an ode to making visible the beautiful Puerto Rican coastline as the lyrics continue "*Esta es mi playa, este es mi sol, esta es mi tierra, esta soy yo*" [This is my beach, this is my sun, this is my land, this is me] giving way to a view of the city of San Juan that links perfectly with the start of the documentary.

The documentary, like the song, discusses how the Puerto Ricans are being practically expelled from their homes. The phrase '*que se vayan ellos*' [they are the one who need to leave] is mentioned in the song but also repeated in the documentary by the locals. This phrase, frequently echoed by the people of Puerto Rico, has almost become a hymn, symbolizing their collective resistance and determination to reclaim their homeland as seen in the documentary. In Puerto Rico, the power of language has also been strengthened, and otherness works in the opposite direction as well. For example, in cultural discourses, "we" (Puerto Ricans) and "them" (US citizens) are used as differentiating elements. This establishes a barrier between the island and the mainland through national sentiment (Duany 2000).

"El Apagón" also carries the subtitle, "Aquí vive gente" [People live here], a phrase that has also become part of Puerto Rican popular culture. This phrase alludes to the evident disregard by US businessmen who are buying properties and displacing residents, an issue that according to the documentary, is promoted by the Puerto Rican government itself. The power of this phrase is underscored in the documentary by its presence as graffiti in one of many neighbourhoods affected by gentrification in Puerto Rico.

The song, the music video, and the documentary, collectively reject U.S influence and emphasize the importance of Puerto Rican culture and people: '*Y de Barea, el que fue campeón, Primero que LeBron*' [and Barea who was a champion before than LeBron]. Puerto Rico has spent decades resisting the United States' attempts to absorb this territory and its culture, language, and traditions (Giles et. al 1979; Duany 2000). This was notably evident during the 1930s and 1940s when the U.S wanted to impose English as the official language in Puerto Rican schools which was met with significant opposition (Negrón-Muntaner 2004).

The song emphasizes the significance of the coast and the beach [*Esta es mi playa, este es mi sol*' - this is my beach, this is my sun] highlighting the impact of gentrification and current exploitation of the island driven by increasing North American tourism in Puerto Rico. The documentary reveals that access to Puerto Rican beaches is being privatised, preventing locals from enjoying their natural spaces. Further, lyrics such as '*El sol es taíno*' [the sun is *taíno*] asserts once again the authenticity and pre-Hispanic culture of Puerto Rico, reaffirming the island's indigenous heritage and connection to its land. This resurgence of pre-Hispanic rituals has been a way to combat US colonialism since the late 20th century (Duany 2000).

With these lyrics Bad Bunny celebrates his homeland and his roots. An ode to the island and the neighbourhood where he grew up. He underscores how, despite his success, he does not forget where he comes from, nor does he forget his people. Bad Bunny frequently acknowledges other influential artists who have succeeded in the genre or who have significantly contributed to its history and cultural

heritage. This celebration of his roots includes recognizing those who have paved the way and fought for the present.

In “El Apagón” Bad Bunny not only mentions personalities like Tego Calderón, Maelo or Barea, but also references various places, establishing a geographical identity for the island that is now facing renewed invasion. He mentions locations such as Carolina, Bayamón, Rincón, Rubicón, Palomino... In doing this, he also refers to one of the elements that make Puerto Rico distance itself from the US, thus establishing another symbol of colonial resistance. The geography and borders of the island are part of these elements, as studied by Duany (2000).

He also refers to RD, an acronym for the Dominican Republic, a country that shares colonial history with Puerto Rico. He calls them neighbours, a sentiment that echoes in several music videos and songs, and his overall visual culture. For example, it is very evident in the music video of the song “Titi me Preguntó” (2022) where a numerous flags of the Dominican Republic appear alongside those of Puerto Rico. In this other video Bad bunny moves to New York to reflect on the migrant and displaced citizens of the island known as Nuyoricans. Thus, he takes on the task of narrating this massive displacement and the new Nuyorican identity, following in the footsteps of Puerto Rican writers who did so in the 1950s (Duany 2000).

In this music video Bad Bunny walks the streets and spend time in convenience shops and barbershops, common hangouts for Latino men in New York. This idea of congeniality and close relationship between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (Giles et. al 1979) is visibly reinforced.

Bad Bunny also refers to Pipo in “El Apagón”, the nickname for Pedro Pierluisi, governor of Puerto Rico: ‘*Antes que a Pipo le de un bofetón*’ - [Before I slap Pipo]. This reference highlights Pierluisi’s responsibility for the issues addressed in this song. “El Apagón” serves as live narrative of these events, a cry for help from the Puerto Rican nation. It is an oral account of the contemporary history of a country that lives as a U.S colony.

Bad Bunny vindicated the message of “El Apagón” during the opening of the 2023 Grammys, where he performed this song in Los Angeles, a major metropole on U.S soil. This is significant since it is a song that addresses gentrification in Puerto Rico by the rich magnates from the U.S. He performed in Spanish, using this same language in the interludes, haranguing the audience to dance to the rhythm of salsa and other Latin rhythms. He was accompanied by a band from the Dominican Republic, traditional merengue dancers, and large heads from the folkloric group Agua, Sol y Sereno, creating a festive atmosphere to the gala, inspired by the San Sebastián Street Fiestas. This celebration featured representations of Puerto Rican figures like Tego Calderón, Roberto Clemente and Julio de Burgos (BBC News Mundo 2023). During the live broadcast of this performance, the US television decided to include the title “Speaking non-English” for their viewers at home. This signifies another form of colonialism, rejecting Spanish as a language on national television.

Reggaeton as a multicultural practice

Reggaeton itself subverts the Eurocentrism and Americanism of society. Although this musical genre has now expanded globally, it continues to be ridiculed by self-considered intellectuals and social agents who do not consider reggaeton a respectable musical genre (Rivera et al. 2009). In this sense, it is a distinctly Latin and especially Puerto Rican, expression. It also serves as a form of cultural expression for the less privileged areas and people of this island. The marginalisation of reggaeton and its artists stems from misinformation and colonialism.

Reggaeton emerged in the *caseríos*, the racialized neighbourhoods that are still largely ignored by the white population of Puerto Rico. These areas were significantly impacted by the initiative commonly known as *Mano Dura contra el Crimen* (officially, it was called *Operation Centurion*), as these neighbourhoods were associated with crime. The music also became a reason for raids in Puerto Rico in the mid-1990s. In 1995 six stores were raided for selling underground music, and CDs and cassettes were confiscated by the government office in charge of Drugs and Vice Control. The identity of the rapper is defined by society, as this figure is often associated with crime and marginalized by society. The hamlets themselves, affected by *Mano Dura*, have been seen as a hub that favours criminal actions (Rivera- Rideau, 2015).

With “El Apagón”, Bad Bunny includes and makes visible the different races and backgrounds of the people of Puerto Rico, especially those from the hamlets. The racialization and exoticization of black women in Puerto Rico have been issues since the origins of reggaeton and *perreo*, due to the eroticization of their image within Puerto Rican society. However, in “El Apagón” race is not the focus, and there is no eroticization. These individuals are presented as integral members of the community. Reggaeton has always fostered a space for the discourse of racialization and Puerto Rican identity, which is another historical element of identitarian process opposed to the US power (Duany 2000). And in this way, and thanks to the international fame of many reggaeton artists, these issues have been brought to a global audience, reaching people worldwide (Rivera- Rideau 2015).

The performance at the Grammys begins and continues with “El Apagón” to the rhythm of *bomba* and salsa, showcasing the musical, cultural, and racial diversity of the island. *Bomba* is strongly associated with the African heritage of Puerto Rico, especially in places like Loíza, a town with close migration ties to Africa, where the majority of its inhabitants are black (Rivera- Rideau 2015). Additionally, the mention of Tego Calderón in the song reaffirms the black identity of the island, as this artist has promoted and championed his African roots with his music often using rhythms like *bomba*.

Similarly, the mention of Maelo (Ismael Rivera) in the song connects the folklore and musical culture of Puerto Rico with the island’s cultural richness. In turn, Tego and Maelo are linked to Puerto Rico’s popular culture, as Tego was seen as the new Ismael Rivera due to his racial and political awareness. Maelo was a significant influence on Tego and his music (Rivera- Rideau 2015).

Bad Bunny breaks away from the idea that mainstream reggaeton is separated from *caseríos*, which would result in a more pop-oriented and less political music

(Rivera- Rideau 2015). In this sense, the focus is not just on the music itself, but on its lyrics and its message. Despite becoming a global and emphatically mainstream artist, Bad Bunny has not abandoned the political message in his lyrics. His songs consistently return to the village, to the people of Puerto Rico, and critique the current Puerto Rican government and the colonialist policies that have been imposed on the island.

Identity representations through Music and Visual Culture

There is great complexity when discussing identities particularly in the case of cultural identity representation. Various studies and scholars have offered different visions regarding the construction of identity. In this discussion, we are going to focus on music as an expression of identity, as well as exploring how it is formed, transformed, and represented in the case of Bad Bunny and “El Apagón”.

The word *identity* comes from the Latin for the “same” or *idem*. In turn, this term has two meanings, the first is the similarity of characteristics between two individuals and their common features; the other refers to a thing or person defined by its uniqueness, distinguishing it from others (García Martínez 2007). Both senses stem from the differences or similarities of things or individuals. In the context of this study, identity is based on the common traits that adhere to a group of individuals and that differentiate them from others, which do not belong to that group and do not share the same characteristics (García Martínez 2007).

As stated by Juan Gudiño Cabrera (2019), music is an integral part of Puerto Rican culture, serving as a powerful political weapon against colonialism. It is also a collective tool, effectively conveying messages of resistance to a broad audience. During the 19th century, musical expression in Puerto Rico was influenced by a growing nationalist sentiment and a quest for a form of expression, especially since literacy was not supported by the Spanish state that governed the island at that time (Manuel 1994). The importance of culture for the establishment of the self primarily provides us with interpretive repertoires when faced with the question of “Who am I?” and a sense of belonging. For this reason, cultural identity functions as a hypertext that refers us to different identity grounds: sex, gender, race, age, religion, ethnicity, nation, or sexuality (Giles et. al 1979; Kogan & Tubino 2001). This multiplicity of identity is prominently present in Bad Bunny’s songs.

In this sense, this style of music is prevalent among the younger groups in society, who act as intermediaries and distributors of these messages through internet platforms and social networks (Chalk 2022). This not only revitalizes music and popular culture, but also preserves this cultural heritage in a digital and immediate way. In this context Chalk (2022) discusses the new tools used for the conservation of this musical culture, as well as the creation of musical archives by the fan communities.

Bad Bunny bases his identity as a singer and artist on his representation of Puerto Rican culture. He constantly celebrates his heritage through his lyrics, clothing, decorations, and all the artistic elements that have accompanied him in his musical career. He does not forget his origins, the notable people of his country, and all those who have fought and continue to fight for the representation and visibility of Puerto Rico’s situation. His constant references to these patriotic icons are made

through his song lyrics or visually, as he did at the aforementioned Grammys ceremony. The nationalist sentiment that arose through intellectual elites has now moved to a wider popular culture approach with the use of flags and music (Duany 2000), something that we repeatedly see in Bad Bunny.

Various themes are claimed through music, and even though reggaeton was originated with an idea of *malianteo* – themes of street gang conflicts – it has adapted to society and was reborn in many ways (Rivera et al. 2009). National and Latino identity have always been integral to the concept of reggaeton or *género urbano* (Platt, 2018), reflecting the artists' need for inclusion and visibility. In this way, Bad Bunny sings to his people since, as Sarah Platt (2018) says, "music appeals to the feelings of the audience and of those people who identify with the lyrics and the discourse and share some of the narrated experiences". In this regard, Kogan & Tubino (2001) state that: "... cultural identity provides an "anchor for [people's] self-identification and the security of stable belonging without having to make any effort".

Moreover, reggaeton emerged as a musical genre that spoke to the underground, marginalized, and racialized neighbourhoods in communities with high crime rates. Consequently, the genre was persecuted very early on by the political and intellectual elites. Despite being one of the most diverse forms of expression in Puerto Rico, reggaeton has, until very recently, been excluded from Puerto Rican national identity discourses (Chalk 2022).

As Rivera et al. (2009) point out, the visual reading of this style of music provides insight into how this musical genre articulates themes of race, nation, class, and gender. When it comes to Bad Bunny, diversity should be also considered. Additionally, these authors already anticipated the significance of the musical genre in terms of resistance, class struggle, and identity.

Reggaeton's identity has been linked to the blackened Identity of Puerto Rico, yet many of these artists have not declared their racial identity or simply choose to identify themselves as Puerto Ricans, fostering a sense of inclusion (Giles et. al 1979). In this context, Bad Bunny frequently references artists who have identified themselves as being of black or African descent, such as Don Omar or Tego Calderón, as mentioned in "El Apagón".

Therefore, music is an important vehicle for representing cultural identity. As Platt (2018) points out, "music as a cultural expression creates and disseminates ways of understanding the world and understanding oneself based on otherness". For Bad Bunny, that otherness is the United States. In this sense, he demands through "El Apagón" the island not be expropriated from its rightful owners, the inhabitants of Puerto Rico. This has been a problem since the US colonization of the island in 1898. It became evident that the US did not only intend to annex the island to the country, but also to exploit it as a resource and as a tourist and economic colony. Today, Puerto Rico is an associated state, neither fully part of the United States nor an independent country. From those early moments, there was already reluctance among the islanders, as they saw their own culture and national identity threatened (Manuel, 1994).

Reggaeton is presented as a cultural practice that promotes, in this specific case study, a projection of struggle and resilience on the part of the Puerto Rican people, signifying cultural identity and national unity as part of their rejection of the

colonizer. The use of the flag is prevalent throughout the video, symbolising the past, present, and future of the identity formation of the people of the island.

The use of language and its recognition is one of the fundamental characteristics in the identity process, particularly in places like Puerto Rico, where the influence of their native language, Spanish, is prominent and enriched by its Caribbean vocabulary, usage, and jargon. If we look at "El Apagón" Bad Bunny uses terms such as *bleacher*, *pichea*, *perreo*, *corillo*, *calentón*, *chocha*, *está cabrón*, *hijueputa*. Not only that, but there is also the influence of English from the United States, resulting in what is known as Englañol o Spanglish (Giles et. al 1979), also visible in Bad Bunny's lyrics (*blunt* in "El Apagón"). We can basically look at any of his songs and find multiple examples of this use of both Caribbean jargon and Englañol, amplified by his own Puerto Rican accent.

The cultural identity of the island began to strengthen during the era of Spanish colonialism. The inhabitants of the island sought to distinguish themselves from their Spanish colonizers by promoting their own culture and revitalising their pre-Hispanic rites, such as that of the *jíbaro* – a quasi-mythological being who lives in the mountains (Manuel 1994; Barreto 2001). However, it was in the mid-20th century when the notion of a Puerto Rican identity was created as a resilient element against the American colonizer. This effort was driven by the island's cultural elites, who worked on the "objectification of Puerto Rican-ness" (Barreto 2001: 27), taking ethnicity, religion and language as the main elements for their argument on Puerto Rican identity (Barreto 2001).

The notion of representing the "El Apagón" at the Grammys as a sort of patronal festival is deeply rooted in Puerto Rican tradition. Patron saint festivities align with a Catholic religious context (Giles et. al 1979; Barreto 2001), which, although possibly containing latent residues, has been preserved from the Catholic and Spanish tradition. It's worth noting that this serves as another symbol of resistance against the imposition or Americanization that Puerto Rico endured upon becoming part of the US, as there was an attempt to shift the island's creed from Catholic to Protestant (Barreto 2001). However, this endeavour, much like the process of transitioning the language from Spanish to English did not succeed. Interestingly, the impetus to force the adaptation of American customs (language and other cultural aspects) by the United States in Puerto Rico led to the Puerto Rican population awakening to their identity and uniting to fight for it (Barreto, 2001).

Migration, Diaspora & Gentrification

Puerto Rico is a nation characterized by ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity, as well as the political consciousness of its people and migrant communities, all within the context of its ongoing colonial status (Duany 2000). Due to the latter, it is referred to almost as an obsession by the Puerto Rican people. For all this, the identity mark of Puerto Rican culture is deeply intertwined with music (Manuel 1994).

It can be argued that reggaeton is a musical genre whose influence extends to the migration and diaspora of various peoples and communities both within and outside of Latin America. As a result, migration, transnational influences, and cultural exchange contribute to the ongoing evolution of this genre. In this regard, the migratory movement of peoples such as Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and

Panamanians to the United States also plays a significant role shaping how these cultural exchanges also unfold on North American soil (Negrón-Muntaner 2004).

Migration from the island has been an ongoing issue since the US invasion. As pointed by Duany (2000) almost 44% of Puerto Ricans were living in the US. However, it became more pronounced following Hurricane Maria. During this time and in the final months of 2017, a total of 6% of the island's population left Puerto Rico (Rodríguez Vázquez, 2022). Hurricane María is also referenced in other songs by Bad Bunny, such as "Bendiciones" (YHLQMDLG, 2020): '*que proteja a PR de huracanes y temblores*', [to protect PR from hurricanes and tremors]. Furthermore, criticism of the inadequate aid provided by the US government to the inhabitants of Puerto Rico is evident in songs like "25/8" (YHLQMDLG, 2020), '*Como el gobierno que todavía tiene la casa con toldo*' [like the government that still has the house with an awning] alluding to the disparity in the government's experiences compared to those of the hurricane-affected populace.

The practically non-existent aid from the US government favoured the migration of the island's residents to the United States. As mentioned, it also becomes evident in "El Apagón" that the aftermath of Hurricane María led to the construction of new mega-complexes, financed and purchased by North American magnates, which forced many people to leave their homes. This gentrification has contributed significantly to the mass migration of Puerto Rico.

"El Apagón" addresses the theme of forced migration. In the documentary, we can see how people are largely forced to leave their homes as buildings are bought by investors who profit from the tourist sector and the ruins left by Hurricane María. People have been displaced over the past few years, either due to natural disasters or man-made causes.

The migration problem in Puerto Rico is so significant that it has also influenced music and is a recurring theme for artists like Bad Bunny. The forced migration of Puerto Ricans is explored by the artist in various songs. For example, in "Andrea" (*Un Verano sin tí*, 2022) [*Quiere quedarse en PR no irse a ningún estado* - she wants to stay in Puerto Rico, not go to any state], "Agosto" (*Un Verano sin tí*, 2022) [*pa ver si estabas en PR o si te fuiste* - to see if you were in PR or if you left], "25/8" (YHLQMDLG, 2020), (*siempre estamos en PR* - we are always in PR).

The importance of emphasizing this connection lies in how Bad Bunny's music relates to real-world problems. It is evident that Bad Bunny advocates for discussing Puerto Rico's struggles, driven by its colonizer, which has led to the island's diaspora. "El Apagón" highlights this forced migration due to the gentrifying consequences of the government's actions after Hurricane Maria but the examples presented above underscore that this is a recurring theme in his songs.

Conclusion

The inclusion of social issues in reggaeton lyrics is not something new. Since the *malienteo* subgenre, artists have been addressing the struggles of the less favoured people in Puerto Rican society. What has changed is the way these stories are told and the international reach of the artists. The issues of the *caseríos* neighbourhood now encompass broader themes of human rights, depopulation, loss, and recovery

of identities. These are global issues, and music provides a platform that, alongside certain artists, amplifies the voices of the less favoured parts of society.

In the case that has been studied, Bad Bunny is as of 2023 the most listened-to artist in the world. He has achieved this despite not singing in English; moreover, he sings in a jargon very typical of Puerto Rico. The artist carries pride for his land not only in his lyrics but also in the theme of his concerts and in the visual culture that accompanies them. "El Apagón" is a song that tackles uncomfortable topics, such as colonialism, the lack of help from the US government when Hurricane María happened, and the gentrification that the island is suffering, which is causing locals to leave their homes and often leave the country. Bad Bunny has taken the word of Puerto Rico to the whole world and has even penetrated onto US soil with this lyrical discourse.

Raciality, gender issues, exploitation, forced migration, and peoples' rights now have a platform in a genre that for a long time was for a few. It is essential to give value to artistic expressions and interdisciplinary practices to understand and make sense of the different realities of each place, nation, and society.

Endnotes

- (1) Puerto Rico Rises official website <https://www.prrises.org/index.html>. Accessed: 25 April 2025
- (2) This is a protest in the form of reggaeton dance or *perreo*.

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