

Bad Bunny:  
A Contemporary Latinx Activist

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**Abstract**

Oppressive and hostile values of sexism, racism, and homophobia remain active within the Latinx community: values resulting from a continued history of U.S. imperialistic practices. This research explores the resistance against these values within the Latinx community through Reggaetón. I focus this work on Bad Bunny (also known as Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio), an increasingly influential and popular Reggaetonero from Puerto Rico. Using a feminist approach to textual and media analysis, I demonstrate how Bad Bunny is engaging in politicization, gender-play, and cultural resistance to challenge and dismantle the oppressive themes of citizenship, white privilege, and gender/sexuality hostility that maintain the prejudiced perceptions of race, gender, and sexuality within the immediate Latinx community as well as society as a whole. With the increasing academic attention to Reggaetón and its unique potential to serve as a global means of resistance, this investigation is an important contribution to the growing body of scholarly work seeking to outline the significance of Reggaetón to Latinx activism, praxis, and community.

**Keywords:** Latinx activism, Latinx praxis, imperialism, gender-play, citizenship, politicization, Reggaetón, privilege, colonialism

Music is an extremely valuable tool for resisting gender and sexuality norms. Musicians have a significant scope of influence as their platform—the result of a globalized economy that drives the transmission of artistic productions like music—allows a viable space to engage in cultural discourse and advocacy. Reggaetón, specifically, is gaining increasing attention for its ability to transcend traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality. The most visible contemporary Reggaetonero challenging those conceptions is Bad Bunny, also known as Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio: he is working to counter and transform cultural/gender norms resulting from imperialism, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia. Ocasio's identity as a straight, cis-gendered male allows him the privilege to speak out on the oppression and the violence that comes with these injustices. Utilizing careful analysis and review of various forms of media—including performance, visuals, and literature—through a feminist lens, I establish Ocasio's intentional gender play, politicization, and cultural resistance demonstrated through his career and activism are valuable to overcoming and challenging the overarching oppressive themes of citizenship, white privilege, and gender/sexuality hostility. The purpose of

this analysis and investigation of Ocasio is to expand the literature on Latinx activism and praxis while serving as a reference for additional analyses on Latinx artists and activists to create a more holistic view of resistance within the community.

### Literature Review

Subverting long-lasting, conservative perceptions of gender, race, and sexuality is not an easy task: it is a complex and dynamic process. To understand the nuances, this process must be approached through a lens that encompasses feminist theory literature. As Bad Bunny—a Latinx musician—is the focus of this analysis, it is important to engage with pop culture literature and media; by doing so, the implications of gender, citizenship, and privilege on the process of cultural subversion being enacted by Bad Bunny can be better understood.

*Puerto Rico: US Imperialism and Power.* Puerto Ricans continue to be denied their civil liberties due to the racist and xenophobic attitudes perpetuated by the United States government. The federal government of the United States has, time and again, turned a blind eye to the needs and liberties of Puerto Rico and its inhabitants. (See fig. 1).



Fig.1. Items recovered from a destroyed home: pictured 3 weeks after Hurricane Maria. “The facts: Hurricane Maria’s effect on Puerto Rico”. *Mercy Corps*. 9 September. 2020.

Recently, this disregard for the well-being of the Puerto Ricans was extremely obvious through the lack of assistance provided to the island after Hurricane Maria struck in 2017. The Hurricane left many homeless and without power for inexcusable periods of time (“The facts...”). Even now, the island is struggling to recover.

The blatant disregard shown by the federal government is further reflected in cultural and historical research focusing on the Puerto Rican experience. Articles on Reggaetón detail the colonialism and imperialism demonstrated by U.S. interactions—and even the lack thereof—with Puerto Rico. Philip Samponaro studies the origins of Reggaetón and, perhaps unintentionally, the political implications surrounding the Puerto Rican experience. He asserts that Puerto Rican Reggaetoneros are in a constant process of resisting and

appropriating what it means to be “American” by U.S. standards (Samponaro, 496). The imperialistic and racist attitude of the federal government makes it clear that Puerto Ricans are not seen as citizens of the U.S.

From a sociological perspective, Evelyn Nakano Glenn concludes that citizenship is not just a classification, but instead a social identity that has to be recognized and affirmed by other “citizens” to hold significance in the society (Glenn, 3). Although Puerto Ricans legally maintain the title of “American citizens,” their lived experience contradicts that. The disconnect is caused by the racialization of citizenship and the “otherness” it causes Puerto Ricans to experience. As expressed by Cherry Harris, whiteness has been historically deemed synonymous with “citizen”; as a result, whiteness is a factor that entitles

individuals to liberties, services, and opportunities denied to other citizens that do not check the preliminary box of whiteness (Harris, 1713, 1744). As Puerto Ricans are unable to meet this prerequisite of whiteness—a description that remains completely arbitrary, as it is defined by those who meet the standard—they are refused liberty and respect allotted to white citizens. Resistance is a natural result of this suppression and oppression.

*Gendered Exclusion.* The subordination experienced by Puerto Ricans is amplified for Puerto Rican women in their homes and communities. Women are consistently excluded from the public eye; and such exclusion is visible in Reggaetón. Reggaetoneras have tried to uplift their experiences as women of color into the

media spotlight: Ivy Queen, La Bruja, Camille, and Queer Reggaetón artists, too, have tried to amplify the plight of sexism, racism, and homophobia not only in the Latinx community but wider society as well (Samonaro 501, Viera). However, they have not managed to break into the mainstream because of their marginalized identities in and outside their immediate communities (Crenshaw 1283). This is evident in a comparison between Ivy Queen’s “Yo Quiero Bailar” and Bad Bunny’s “Yo Perreo Sola” music video views. The most popular music video posting on YouTube of Ivy Queen’s song has over one hundred forty million views after 12 years, while Ocasio’s music video (see fig.2)--posted March 2020--has over three hundred eighty-eight million views (Bad Bunny, parodiamix).

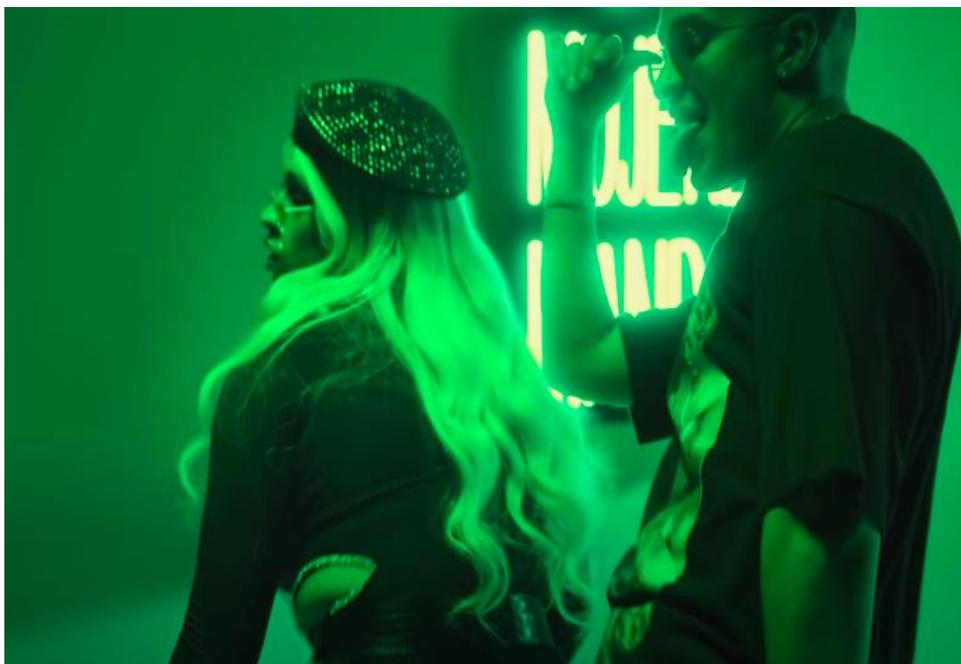


Fig. 2. Ocasio (right) dancing with himself, who is dressed in drag (left). A sign reading “Las Mujeres Mandan (roughly translated: the women are in charge)” is present in the background. Bad Bunny. “Yo Perreo Sola – Bad Bunny (Video Official)” *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtSRKwDCaZM> (accessed September 24, 2020).

“Yo Quiero Bailar” and “Yo Perreo Sola” share the message of respecting women’s wishes, yet the male rendition has received copious amounts of engagement in contrast. This comparison only touches the surface of oppression experienced by women of color in a patriarchal society.

*Intracultural Implications of Privilege.*

Citizenship and gender oppression are scaffolded phenomena relying on one another to maintain their grip on society and the individuals within it, and these factors hold increased influence depending on the status of privilege held by an individual. In totality, this connection can be encompassed by the theory of intersectionality put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a pioneer and guiding researcher of feminist theory and literature. The hierarchy that determines the liberties of individuals is created by biases of race, class, gender, sexuality, documentation status, and an unending list of identity factors that carry greater or less weight according to the societal context they occur in. (Crenshaw, 1242; Zinn, 324).

While the synchronous influence of these factors is widely recognized, minimal literature is available to discuss them in a Latinx cultural context. The Puerto Rican experience—specifically—of oppression is still in need of intensive exploration. The majority of the literature available discussing this topic at an individual level is focused in cultural studies. Literature rooted in law does well in outlining the history and nature of imperialistic relations between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, but the research lacks a humanistic approach. It is a privilege for a community to be represented accurately in scholarship; yet, even as the Latinx population is rapidly growing, significant gaps remain in the literature exploring the Latinx experience, resistance, and activism

With my research, I intend to add to the body of literature to provide a more

humanistic, individualized approach to understand resistance and its significance to the Latinx experience. Ocasio is a recent novelty to the Reggaetón scene, and the influence he holds on the inclusion of Latinx people in pop culture and perceptions of race, gender, and sexuality held by Latinx people has yet to be investigated further.

**Methods and Approaches.**

Maintaining a clear focus and understanding of my research topic was essential in conducting this research. As I worked to refine my research questions, I intentionally conducted readings with my research topic in mind; doing so enabled me to identify implications and explanations for my research in dense theoretical literature as well as Bad Bunny’s performances, interviews, and/or philanthropic activity to clarify my position and rectify my doubts or confusion. Of course, it is important to address my own bias as an unavoidable factor in this process; I have long been interested in Ocasio’s activism and its significance. Acknowledgment of this influence is essential to producing honest and valuable research and understanding my selection, organization, and utilization of materials.

*Representation, Accessibility, and Diversity.*

Conducting research focusing on a pop culture figure allowed me a considerable amount of liberty in selecting resources from a vastly diverse range of materials to create a solid work of research. As my research is pop-culture centered, it is important to keep up-to-date with the content that is being released; music videos, live performances, and even tweets became valuable information to my research. I also utilized blog posts and articles from pop culture and Latinx culture dedicated sources to pair with more traditionally “academic” sources from the body of feminist theory literature. By

doing so, I was able to create a strong foundation upon which I could conduct research that encompassed the thoughts of the public and those within the academy.

Accessibility and author background were also important factors in my source selection. It was important to me that my sources could be easily accessed and understood by the average person. While I do enjoy the very intense theoretical works I chose to cite, I believe that solely relying on such elite source material serves to further exclude individuals from the feminist/progressive praxis. Further, I was intentional in allowing Latinx, women, and authors of color guide my research. As a Latinx person, it was important to me that representation remained a priority in research discussing the influence of another Latinx person on our community.

*Review and Application.* Carefully organizing my source material was vital to convey appropriately the significance of Latinx activism. I created annotated bibliographies, a literature matrix, and journal reflection on the significance of selected sources. Annotated bibliographies provided a quick analysis I could look to as I progressed in the research process, and I naturally advanced to a literature matrix. The literature matrix allowed me a system in which I could visually observe the similarities, differences, and overlapping implications of each source. My occasional journal reflections were essential to creating

these annotated bibliographies and the literature matrix—valuable guides to my process. Through this review process, I created a simple and organized pool of resources I could effectively engage with.

### **Findings**

*Platform Turned Political Tool.* Reggaetón has a history of neglect in the popular media and the commercial music industry, largely due to the connections it has with the working-class and Afro-Latino/Black identity (Samponaro, 494). However, today the genre is quickly rising to the mainstream, as demonstrated by Ocasio's career. The day his album YHLQMDLG debuted, Ocasio was the #1 most streamed artist on Spotify (Burgos).

Ocasio shows how a successful career can offer a large platform to engage in activism. During his first-ever televised performance in 2018, Ocasio called out President Donald Trump for his inaction and lack of aid to the island of Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria; he said that, at the time of the performance, people on the island were still without basic amenities in their homes, and that the many casualties that resulted from the hurricane had yet to be recognized by the federal administration ("Estamos Bien..."). More recently, Ocasio condemned the reliability of the United States federal government on twitter, likely in response to the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Ocasio's assessment of the U.S. government. @sanbenito. *Twitter*. 12 May, 2020, 12:40pm (accessed September 24, 2020).

In this instance, he classified the United States government as an inherently flawed system that needed to be completely uprooted (@sanbenito). Overall, as these examples demonstrate, he has continued to utilize his platform as a tool to criticize the imperialistic relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico and the negative effects that result. Ocasio does not limit himself to these forms of resistance; he extends his reach even further.

*Intentional Gender Play.* Despite Ocasio's non-traditional aesthetic, he has managed to infiltrate, and quickly rise, within the Reggaetón music industry. Reggaetón is traditionally a very masculine genre, even though there are women that have managed to infiltrate and become very successful in this male-dominated genre (King, 154). As a straight-cis male, Ocasio, naturally, is very securely established within this male-dominated space, and his suggestive lyrics and collaborations with other popular Reggaetoneros solidify that belonging (Viera). His collaborations with Anuel AA (see Fig.4), another popular Reggaetonero who has received harsh criticism for displays of homophobia, suggest male-

dominated nature of the genre (Arroyo). Yet behind the music, Ocasio presents himself freely (see Fig.5): he wears long, sparkly acrylic nails and "short-shorts" without any concern for the judgment of "more traditionally masculine" Reggaetoneros--like Anuel--he interacts with (Badbunnypr).



Fig.4 (left). Anuel AA pictured in his typical style. anuel. “Si la relación está inestable...” *Instagram*. 20 January, 2020.

Fig.5 (right). Bad Bunny pictured in his typical style: a hot pink suit jacket, almond-shaped acrylic nails, and gold jewelry are his statement pieces. badbunnypr. “que nadie te diga...” *Instagram*. 9 June, 2019.

Ocasio engages in these fashions and grooming activities simply because he enjoys them. Yet, his confidence has not halted the homophobic remarks directed at him for his style, an occurrence I have witnessed myself many times. He is fully conscious of the patriarchal societal norms that normalize the homophobia and sexism

behind these comments, and he continues to engage this aspect of his identity very intentionally as an activist. Most notable in recent events, he utilized a live performance to call attention to the murder of Alexa (see fig.6): a Puerto Rican transwoman, whom news agencies reporting the murder referred to as “a man in a skirt” (Brito).



Fig. 6. Ocasio (right) uses live performance with Sech—an Afro-Latinx Reggaetonero—to pay tribute to Alexa: a transwoman murdered in Puerto Rico. The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. “Bad Bunny & Sech: Ignorantes.” *YouTube*.<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vgXqw5ARLE>

In a skirt and shirt reading, “Mataron Alexa: No a un hombre en falda,” Ocasio performed live on national TV to call attention to this injustice (“Ignorantes”). It is through acts like this that Ocasio’s style becomes more than just an aesthetic; it is resistance in action.

*Resistance in cultural Context.* It is important to consider Ocasio’s activism in both the context of the Puerto Rican community and the larger Latinx cultural sphere in the U.S. As a Latinx male, he is combatting white Western perceptions that have designated Puerto Ricans as a “racialized” other. Ocasio exists in both the political strata of Puerto Rico and the Western spotlight as a darker-than-white man, who is from an island where people are treated as second-class citizens, if treated like people at all (Mohanty 501) He resists gender norms of Western society and the

conservative values prominent within the Latinx community. Ocasio maintains multiple identities, and his scaffolded experience speaks to one shared by many other Latinx individuals who engage in their own forms of resistance daily (Crenshaw, 1242; Zinn, 324).

### **Recommendations**

The body of literature speaking to concepts of gender, race, and citizenship is extremely saturated, but it is noticeably more difficult, if at all possible, to find material exploring how these concepts relate directly to the genre of Reggaetón or the lived experiences of Latinx individuals. Without focused research on Latinx and other communities color, these theories maintain their context in a white, middle-class background. Despite the intent of academics, this is an unavoidable consequence of the compulsory state of

whiteness in American society  
(Harris, 1712).

There is a humanistic aspect that has gone unaddressed in the current body of literature, and I urge researchers to recognize this lack of engagement in the lived experience of Black, Afro/Latinx, and other communities of color. To continue to engage in theoretical exploration without directly addressing the experiences of these communities and the individuals within them, we as researchers—and individuals as well—are complacent in maintaining the structure of white supremacy in our society. In summary, continued theoretical exploration and research on systems of oppression, discussion of theoretical findings by researchers in the context of lived experiences of the people of color, and—finally—activism/advocacy from marginalized individuals/communities are essential to improving the academy and society.

### Conclusion

Ocasio continually utilizes his platform to engage in activism through his performances, image, and identity as a Latinx/Puerto Rican. This activism is not a streamlined process, and there are many influencing factors aside from concepts such as privilege, citizenship, and gender. However, an exploration of Ocasio with these guiding themes allows a more dynamic understanding of what Latinx activism looks like. His promising career offers an opportunity for continued understanding as more scholars study the lived experiences of POC. This analysis of Ocasio, specifically, is one small addition to the body of literature on Latinx praxis and activism.

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