



# BAD BUNNY *PERREA SOLA*: THE GENDER ISSUE IN REGGAETON

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Reggaeton finds its origins in American hip-hop and rap as well as in Dominican merengue and Jamaican reggae. Due to its lyrics and visuals, it has traditionally been understood as an example of the ubiquitous gender inequality that permeates mainstream culture. The heteronormative dynamics of the dance and the dressing codes associated with the genre construct it as an embodiment of systemic violence toward women. The origins of reggaeton, however, provide us with a wider perspective on this issue. The context in which reggaeton is meant to exist and operate is key for its codification. Thus, when it is displaced, its meaning can drastically change. Dancing reggaeton while drinking and hardly paying attention to the lyrics in a small dark bar in your San Juan neighborhood is a different experience from listening to reggaeton while having a coffee at home in Madrid. The first scenario allows the reggaeton song to operate within the familiar codes of its own culture. In contrast, the second scenario proposes a new frame of reference that affects the product itself. This cultural resignification is key for examining the lyrics and videos of contemporary reggaeton songs.

In this article, I take into account both how reggaeton songs reflect the tradition where they come from by continuing to use its characteristic lingo and cultural references, but also how the genre is currently searching for new types of discourse that fit into the different sensibilities of international contemporary audiences. I argue that Bad Bunny's "Yo Perreo Sola" is a prime example of how artists are becoming aware of said change and are thus setting the basis for a new discourse within the tradition of reggaeton. Benito Martínez Ocasio, artistically known as Bad Bunny, began his musical career in 2016 and became widely popular with the album *X 100pre* (2018). He has been politically active during these past years, supporting the 2019 protests against the Governor of Puerto Rico Ricardo Rosselló (El Universal 2019). And, last February, he performed in Jimmy Fallon's "The Tonight Show" wearing a t-shirt reading in Spanish: "They killed Alexa, not a man in a skirt", in response to the murder of trans woman



Alexa Negrón Luciano. He often wears painted nails and skirts that suggest a different and more feminine style, in stern contrast with the traditional image of male reggaeton artists. However, he has also perpetuated certain behaviors commonly associated with gender inequality, such as performing at the 2019 PornHub awards. Nonetheless, his song “Yo Perreo Sola”, along with the imagery he employs, exemplifies how Bad Bunny is creating a new discourse within the genre that moves away from sexist cisnormative traditions. The music video premiered on March 26th, sparking great interest due to the artist’s appearance in drag. In order to explore how this reggaeton performer advances new types of discourse within the genre, this article begins by looking at reggaeton lyrics, and later moves on to analyze the imagery of music videos, focusing on the visual representation of women and gender performance in Bad Bunny’s “Yo Perreo Sola”.

## EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT SEXISM IN THE LYRICS

Analyzing the lyrics of reggaeton songs presents some cultural problems. Not only one does need to be familiar with Spanish, but also with localisms and with the lingo characteristic to the subculture. Research on reggaeton has mostly focused on exploring the inclusion of different forms of gender violence in lyrics and videos alike. A study from 2018 shows that, while content referencing sexual and physical gender violence has significantly lowered since 2004, symbolic and psychological violence has slightly increased. This research points out how lyrics reflect a progress that responds to a societal change in sensibilities (Arévalo *et al.* 2018). When proposing a close reading of reggaeton lyrics, one might easily fall into the temptation of subjectively evaluating whether a specific verse *feels* aggravating. Even though the criteria that the above-mentioned study employs are very well defined, it still leaves the door open for skepticism. For instance, the verse: “Pide que la empuje, que el pelo le desordene, que la encadene, que a la cama la condene” (Plan B 2013) is classified as an example of physical violence. The lyrics, however, tell us that it is the woman who has both the control and the agency in this situation. This is not to say that sexism is not explicit in many reggaeton songs, but it shows how subjective interpretations might easily influence the criteria in this type of analysis. Notwithstanding, the study proves that gender discrimination is still present in reggaeton in many forms, although they are often subtler than they used to be.

Other popular music genres are rarely held to the same standards. Pop and Rock artists have also sung, written, and produced songs with extremely sexist content. For instance, in “Run for your Life” (1965), the Beatles sing to a woman: “I’d rather see you dead [...] than to be with another man.” This line, borrowed verbatim from Elvis Presley’s “Let’s play house” (1955), makes gendered violence painfully explicit. In more recent songs like “Animals” (2014) by Maroon 5 with verses such as: “Hunt you down/Eat you alive/ [...] Maybe you think that you can hide”, we also find examples



of the systemic sexism still present in pop songs.<sup>1</sup> In general, these have not sparked as much criticism as Latin music has. There is, however, one notable exception that made it to the headlines some years ago: Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" (2013). One of the reasons why this song might have motivated said interest is because, just as is the case with most reggaeton songs, the sexism is embodied in sexually explicit content, both in the lyrics and in the music video.

This helps situate an important part of the feminist critique against reggaeton on the specific issue of explicit sexual connect. It is true that in "Blurred Lines" the woman appears as an objectified and passive subject who exists only to satisfy the male fantasy described in the discourse of the song. Nonetheless, this is not always the case in reggaeton. As we can see in Plan B's verse discussed in Arévalo *et al.*, the portrayal of female agency and sexual desire is sometimes overlooked. It can be argued that the above-discussed line from Plan B's song reflects the hegemonic culture within which it operates by providing a biased description of female desire. However, it could also be interpreted as a reluctance to accept that this is in fact what the woman wants, reflecting a moral judgment commonly passed against sex in general. This association between sexual desire and lack of morality is reminiscent of Kantian ethics, whereby the categorical imperative, sexual desire is necessarily and always morally wrong due to its objectifying nature. According to this ethical reasoning, the fact the parties involved consent to the sexual act is not enough to make it right, since they are consenting to a wrong action (Halwani 2020). This logic reflects how songs with explicit sexual content are often perceived as more problematic from a gender studies perspective and sometimes, in a sense, held to a higher standard. In conclusion, while these lyrics are not without its problems as regards to the gender issue, there is a much more complicated confrontation going on here, which deals with the troubled relationship that many cultures have with explicit mentions of sex and sexual desire. Also, the taboo becomes even more acute when dealing with female sexuality, since under an overtly sexist mindset women expressing their desires are often inadvertently brushed aside.

The lyrics of "Yo Perreo Sola" are relevant in this context. While written by a male artist, the song makes female desires explicit. Although this time, she is not expressing sexual desire, but assertively letting all men know that she wants to dance on her own. Bad Bunny told *Rolling Stone* that he wrote the song from a "woman's perspective" (Exposito 2020). Young Puerto Rican artist Nesi (Genesis Ríos) sings the female parts in the chorus of the song. It has been noted by many critics and news outlets that she is not credited either in the song or in the video, which implies a disservice to feminism by further making female reggaeton performers invisible. However, Nesi clarified in an interview with *El Vocero de Puerto Rico* that Bad Bunny wrote the lyrics and that "he

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<sup>1</sup> The music video for the song also explicitly portrays gender violence as it shows the protagonist (Adam Levine) stalking a woman he does not know and looking at the pictures he has taken of her without her consent, while covered in the blood of raw cow meat. See Maroon 5. 2014.



only wanted [her] voice” (2020). I would argue that the fact that the song is written by a man does not impoverish the representation of the female narrative. It serves as an example of the possibility of empathizing with different narratives and stories that are not our own. It highlights artists’ capacity for narrating stories that are told from the perspective of the Other in a way that fosters understanding and equality.

## GENDERED DANCE AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMALE BODY

Priscilla Carballo is a relevant scholar for the analysis of reggaeton from a feminist perspective. Regarding the videos, she argues that the female body appears “fragmented” and often as a “collective mass” that simply fulfills the role of “surrounding the man who is producing the discourse” (2010, 187). This remains true for most of Bad Bunny’s videos, as well as for most of contemporary reggaeton. Interestingly enough, it is also the case in music videos and songs produced and sang by female artists.<sup>2</sup> Reggaeton is constructed from a heteronormative perspective that reinforces marked characteristics of “virile masculinity and sexy femininity” (Rodrigues 2012, 17). This sexualization has also been noticeably associated with hip hop, R&B and rap music, predominantly performed by black male artists. The aesthetic codification of women in rap and hip-hop videos and lyrics has had a clear influence on reggaeton. It includes stereotypes that portray the man as the pimp/gangster and the woman as the prostitute/stripper seducing the rich man. Furthermore, reggaeton’s origin in Latin-American music and Afro-Caribbean rhythms cannot be set aside. Other highly sexual dances such as Colombian champeta have had a key impact on the development of *perreo* as we know it nowadays.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary reggaeton artists are necessarily situated against this backdrop of highly sexualized, objectifying and heteronormative imagery that greatly defines their style and culture. As is the case when analyzing the lyrics of the song, the agency of the people participating in the dance is of utmost importance. Rodrigues argues that, “when young people accept and negotiate these stereotypes, they are also at the same time rejecting a series of norms regarding the position of women” (2012, 17).

The interest in “Yo Perreo Sola” lies primarily in Bad Bunny’s drag performance. The video aggressively subverts all the above-mentioned imagery while maintaining the sexualized and gendered dancing roles. Drag has always had an important connection with aesthetics and art. It has conquered the mainstream during the past decade with the immense success of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-present). In a 2016 interview with *abc*, famous drag queen RuPaul discussed the show’s success and argued that the show could hardly ever go truly mainstream since “drag is the antithesis of the matrix

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<sup>2</sup> See for example “Punto G” by Karol G (2019). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgBZVLr91ug>.

<sup>3</sup> See for example “La voladora” by El Sayayin (2000). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d440d-C11Mbo>.



[that tells you to] pick an identity and stick with it” because it allows you to see identity as “a joke” (Dawson & Valiente 2016). Drag culture is very diverse, reflecting issues of class, race, and gender. Through its aesthetic and the inclusion of fluid identities, as RuPaul argues, drag operates in direct opposition to normative values and understanding of gender. Drag aesthetic, at its core, is based on playing with the performativity of gender. But it goes much further by also dealing with a preoccupation with appealing aesthetics, challenging traditional understandings of high fashion often associated with the idea that *less is more*.

In this vein, the drag aesthetic is intertwined with kitsch, a form of art that rather than appealing to high art (sic.) sensibilities, it appeals to popular taste. The imagery and objects commonly associated with kitsch have emerged in the mainstream during the past years through trap music videos. This shows that there is a widespread interest in introducing imagery from very different sources within the subculture. Furthermore, “Yo Perreo Sola” is not the only video in which Bad Bunny includes a person from the opposite gender singing someone else’s verses. In “Caro” a woman appears for most of the video lip-synching Bad Bunny’s lines. However, “Yo Perreo Sola” offers more than a case of mere genderswapping. Bad Bunny in drag, more than simply lip-synching to Nesi’s verses, performs and dances utilizing characteristically female hand movements and dancing style. When we connect the idea of drag with the ever-present gender performance in *perreo*, the video and the performance highlight part of the sexism previously discussed. Having Bad Bunny perform the parts of the woman in the dance, reinforced by the scene in which he dances with *herself*, helps resignify the sexualization and objectification that women face in mainstream culture. It is noteworthy, though, that the way in which certain dances are performed as well as the portrayal of femininity do not operate in a cultural vacuum. They are based on social constructs developed within a culture of systemic inequality. Because of this, it is controversial to argue that individual freedom dominates the decision of the way women dress and dance. However, it does not negate the value that this music video adds to the feminist discussion.

The first time we see Bad Bunny as himself in the video, he presents traditional elements associated with reggaeton and hip hop imagery wearing a big baggy coat and standing on a fancy car; but there also feminine elements, such as the room overfilled with flowers and the dominance of saturated pink (his clothes, his sunglasses, the flowers and the background). We infer from “Yo Perreo Sola” that there is an interest both in the audience and in the industry of moving away from the more traditional sexist representation and aesthetics. This does not imply that it renounces the sexualized nature of both the music genre and the culture it comes from. However, it takes its sexualized essence and resignifies it. It allows us, just like drag does, to play with identity – be it gender or the traditional pre-conception of what a male reggaeton singer is supposed to do and is meant to look like. Other than playing with gender,



Bad Bunny allows for a different subject to speak: the feminist subject. Furthermore, it appears to do so from a place of empathy and understanding. In Bad Bunny's video there is paratextual information that conveys the meaning of the song reinforcing its feminist message. First, on the walls of one of the rooms where he is dancing with *herself* we can read two separate messages: "Ni una menos", and "Las mujeres mandan", both referencing famous slogans used in feminist protests around the globe. Moreover, at the end of the video, the following message appears in white letters on a black background: "Si no quiere bailar contigo, respeta, ella perrea sola."

While mainstream feminism has gained prominence by taking economic advantage of the situation, and "Yo Perreo Sola" could be an example of this, the proposed masculinity and aesthetic that the video offers endure. Regardless of the genuineness – or lack thereof – of the message, the audience will still be exposed to it. When analyzing a cultural product with an audience as vast as Bad Bunny's, it is key to consider the impact that it might have on culture and society. If we focus on the information contained in the video itself, we see a literal portrayal of his audience. The video opens with a young boy sitting on a beanbag chair in his room – the same boy that we have already seen in Bad Bunny's "Safaera", "Si veo a tu Mamá" and "Ignorantes". He is the one diegetically listening to the song and the one being told – as a stand-in for a generation of young men – that a woman sometimes wants to dance alone, and that the hegemonic roles traditional conceptions of gender have imposed are changing.

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