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Bad Bunny, Good Scapegoat: How 'El Conejo Malo' Is Stirring a 'Moral Panic' in Post-Hurricane Puerto Rico (Op-Ed)



Burak Cingi/Redferns

Bad Bunny performs live on stage at O2 Forum Kentish Town on Aug. 4, 2018 in London, England.

The most popular artist to come out of Puerto Rico in the past few years may be 24-year-old global sensation [Bad Bunny](#). But even as he tops charts and sells out shows around the world, back home, he's found himself at the center of heated debates.

First, he became the subject of controversy when Ricardo Rosselló, governor of Puerto Rico, turned to social media to ask him to add an additional local show after his first two concerts sold out in a matter of hours, "on behalf of the people of Puerto Rico." Local residents felt it was unseemly for the governor to be tweeting about rap concerts during the complicated process of post-

hurricane recovery and debt restructuring. The singer himself said there were much greater issues the governor should be focusing on, such as the massive closing of schools being carried out in the name of austerity.

Controversy broke out once again when a "frustrated schoolteacher" [aired her anger in a Facebook post](#): "How is it that I, as a teacher with years of formal education, barely manage to pay my bills, while you earn millions by rhyiming obscene words?" she asked. "Will the time come when no one wants to learn and they'll only want to write indecent lyrics? Will denigrating women be their biggest accomplishment, and will our schools close???" Oh wait, that's already happening!!!" she posted.

Why would a schoolteacher lash out at Bad Bunny but not rail against the current executive director of Puerto Rico's fiscal control board, former Ukrainian minister of finance Natalie Jaresko, who makes \$625,000 per year? Why, if she is worried about the closing of schools and the future of education, does she not send her message to Puerto Rico's secretary of education, Philadelphia native Julia Keleher? After all, as Bad Bunny pointed out [in his reply to the teacher's post](#), he is not the secretary of education.

Why, I wondered, is Bad Bunny the target of so much criticism and the imagined root of so many social problems?



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[Bad Bunny: How a Latin Trap Artist Is Changing the World of Pop](#)

It seems to me that the fury around him has become what sociologists call a "moral panic": a symbolic debate that embodies the problems of society and through which the public channels its concerns and re-establishes social norms. The main characteristics of a moral panic are: 1) disproportionate fear of a perceived public threat; 2) media representations of the perceived threat that draw on common stereotypes which are easily recognized by an audience that is already used to reproducing such discourses; and 3) the use of the moral panic to reinforce social norms or justify policies that intensify hierarchies of race, class and gender. In the Bad Bunny debates, we can see each of these aspects at play.

But who is Bad Bunny? Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio is the son of a retired teacher and a truck driver who began singing in church choir as a kid. Benito studied communications at UPR-Arecibo while working part-time as a packer in a supermarket. From an early age, he showed interest in music and made his own songs, which he shared on SoundCloud.

This background reveals quite a bit: This supposed symbol of violence and criminality is not a child of the criminal underworld, but rather the product of a stable and supportive middle-class family. As such, his songs do not represent chronicles, but rather fantasies of the underclass. This is very common within many popular music genres, in which exaggeration reigns among young people seeking to represent themselves as heroic protagonists of what is in reality a banal and stifling day-to-day existence. Perhaps this is why Bad Bunny so deeply stirs the fears of the Puerto Rican middle class: He clearly reflects their fantasies and their prejudices.

Some say Bad Bunny's lyrics are misogynistic and violent. Undoubtedly his songs often fall into some of the more trite scripts of popular music: sex, drugs,

money, fame. But they are not actual chronicles of violence; instead they use metaphors of violence to talk about other usual themes of popular music: love, indifference, betrayal and spite. For example, in the song "Soy Peor," Bad Bunny declares that he has been betrayed and swears that he will not fall in love again. The only violence to which he alludes is when he says that out of spite, "compré una forty y a cupido se la vacié" ("I bought a gun and shot up Cupid"). The video features a man with a hood over his head tucked in the trunk of a car; later it is revealed that this is Bad Bunny himself, a hostage of his own feelings. As with many Latin trap singers, what characterizes most Bad Bunny songs is not really violence, but unrequited love, heartbreak and other themes common in emo rap.

Even the song "Chambea," the one most associated with violence and glorification of weapons, is deceptive. The video begins with an introduction by Ric Flair, former star of American wrestling -- the genre par excellence of exaggeration and parody. In the video not a single weapon is shown. Instead one sees a group of friends vaping and playing Nintendo. As one listens carefully to the lyrics it becomes clear that the theme of the song is not violence, but the fake bravado of those who pretend to shoot, but have no bullets. It is true that the video shows stacks of money and women dancing suggestively, but it also features Bad Bunny dancing around with pink glasses and a flowered suit, while waving around a wrestling belt. It seems that what is celebrated here is not so much the violence but the spectacle and performative *guapería* so emblematic of American wrestling, and of Latin American *lucha libre*.

Some say that his lyrics are lewd and represent women as mere sex objects. However, it could be argued that his music is extremely "sex-positive," in that the emphasis is not exclusively on male pleasure but also on female satisfaction. In "Diles," he tells his lady that when anyone asks why she's with him, she should say it's because he knows her favorite paths to satisfaction.

The truth is that in the end Bad Bunny's songs are no more scandalous than

certain classic ballads, that narrate infidelity, and female sexuality. Indeed, many old boleros have significantly more violent lyrics, particularly in regards to domestic violence, but since they don't use obscene language or trouble traditional gender roles, they are considered "poetic."

In addition, although he certainly has videos in which women dance around in bikinis, he also has others, like "Dime si te acuerdas," which features a couple of senior citizens who reunite with nostalgia in a retirement home. Throughout his videos Bad Bunny himself flaunts a traditionally queer aesthetic with painted nails, flamboyant glasses, pastel colors, short shorts, and other style choices that trouble traditional paradigms of masculinity. Although he has not identified as anything but heterosexual, many queer-identified youth find in his look a certain solidarity with their own transgressions of traditional gender scripts. This might also be feeding into the larger moral panic that surrounds him.

One of Bad Bunny's most recent hits, "Estamos Bien," has caused a stir for different reasons. Some argue that the song's assertion of everything being "OK" conceals the troubles of Post-Hurricane Puerto Rico behind a facade of happiness and positivity. But the fact is that when Bad Bunny performed the song on *The Tonight Show*, he directly reproached Donald Trump for minimizing and denying the post-hurricane death count. It is only after addressing the president that he then says, "But you know what? Estamos Bien. [We're good.]" In this moment "Estamos Bien" is not an anthem of escapism, but of perseverance. It is part of the soundtrack of a people powered recovery where thousands have raised their own roofs, fed their own communities, and searched for ways to survive and persevere in the face of institutional abandonment.

Bad Bunny: Estamos Bien (TV Debut)



Given all this we must thus ask: Who benefits from the moral panics surrounding Bad Bunny? And who is at greatest risk of greatest harm?

Certainly, while distracted with the idea of Bad Bunny's negative influence on young people, it is easy to forget about the closing schools, the shrinking university system, and the lack of opportunities available for recent college graduates on the island. When fretting over the violence of urban music we steal attention from the fact that we still don't know the names or exact number of the thousands killed by government failure in the wake of the hurricane. And when we preoccupy ourselves debating the culture of misogyny evident in musical lyrics, we fail to address the fact that every eight days a woman is murdered in Puerto Rico, that gender violence has increased since Hurricane Maria, and that sexual abuse haunts the biography of even the highest of public officials in both Puerto Rico and the United States.

Moral panics over musical genres promote the idea that social problems can ultimately be explained and dealt with at the level of cultural production and

consumption, rather than by addressing larger structural issues. But it is the structural and infrastructural violence being experienced by Puerto Ricans before and after Maria which should be the real scandal and major preoccupation of a concerned public, rather than the lyrics of a 24-year-old who sings about being okay while dancing around in pink glasses.

A Spanish-language version of this guest post originally ran in [El Nuevo Dia](#).