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HOW **BAD BUNNY** BECAME THE GLOBAL VOICE OF PUERTO RICAN RESISTANCE



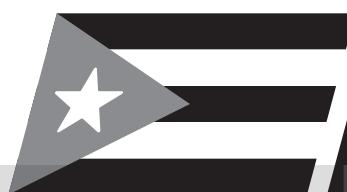
**VANESSA DÍAZ &
PETRA R. RIVERA-RIDEAU**

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GLOBAL VOICE OF
PUERTO RICAN
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**VANESSA DÍAZ AND
PETRA R. RIVERA-RIDEAU**

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ESTE LIBRO VA DEDICADO A:

Anacaona, Clemente, Rafael, y Adrian,
y a todos los nenes de Borikén dentro de
Puerto Rico y en la diáspora.

Y PARA NUESTROS QUERIDOS PADRES,

Eugenio Rivera Jr. y Woodrow Díaz Jr.

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**“SOY GRANDE PORQUE VENGO DE
UN LUGAR PEQUEÑO. SOY LEYENDA
PORQUE SOY PUERTORRIQUEÑO.
AQUÍ NACÍ, Y AQUÍ ME MUERO.”**

BENITO ANTONIO MARTÍNEZ OCASIO, A.K.A. BAD BUNNY

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INTRODUCTION

“¿QUIÉN TÚ ERES?”: UNDERSTANDING BAD BUNNY AND RESISTANCE IN PUERTO RICO

It was December 2024, and Bad Bunny was wrapping up his 2025 album *DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOTOS* when he realized that the title track was not working out. Inspiration struck after Bad Bunny and his longtime collaborator and producer MAG joined a parranda to celebrate the Christmas holiday. Similar to Christmas carolers, Puerto Rican parrandas are groups of people going door-to-door singing holiday songs, accompanied by musicians with instruments such as the cuatro, güiro, and panderetas (handheld drums used in the Puerto Rican folkloric genre of plena).

MAG returned to the hotel after the parranda and couldn't sleep. "I was hearing bomba and plena circulating in my head," he recounted. "Then, at 8 a.m., with pitorro coming out of my breath, I thought, what if we try plena, but in our own way.¹ So I sent a voice note to Benito [a.k.a. Bad Bunny] and he was like, 'Eso me gusta mucho.'² They promptly headed to the studio to record the new song. "DtMF" opens with melodic synth

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chords, setting the stage for Bad Bunny's powerful, raw vocals. The two saw the need for some live instrumentation. Bad Bunny invited a group of young musicians whom he affectionately calls "los sobrinos" (the nieces and nephews). They were students or recent graduates of Puerto Rico's public music schools, the Escuela Libre de la Música and the Escuela Pablo Casals, and had already contributed to other tracks on the album. These young musicians were essential in creating the call-and-response vocals and percussion that are associated with plena, a traditional Afro-Puerto Rican musical genre. MAG recalled the communal recording process: "I was singing, Benito was singing. Everybody was in the live room having the best time. We recorded a live plena, and it was just this celebratory, beautiful moment. It was the most beautiful session I've ever been a part of."

Little did they know that "DtMF" would thrust Puerto Rican plena onto the global stage. "DtMF" swiftly reached number one on the top two music streaming platforms in the world—Apple Music and Spotify. By January 21, 2025, just a few weeks after the release of *DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOTOS*, the plena fusion song reached number one on Billboard's Global 200 chart, the chart that measures songs' worldwide streaming and sales.³ Prior to "DtMF," no plena song had ever entered the charts, let alone reached number one. In fact, given the folkloric nature of the genre, it is likely that most people outside of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican diaspora had never even heard of plena. "I didn't expect this reaction, this reception," MAG explained. "What's happening with 'DtMF' feels like a cultural movement. And it feels like the world is hugging us and Puerto Rico, and in such a beautiful way."

The song's success—and that of the album as a whole—was hardly surprising given Bad Bunny's dizzying array of accomplishments as one of the top artists in the world. *DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOTOS* was his fourth album to reach number one on the Billboard 200. In fact, the first Spanish-language album to ever debut at number one on the chart was Bad Bunny's 2020 album *El Último Tour del Mundo*.⁴ Remarkably, every single one of his eight studio albums has reached number one on the Billboard Latin Albums chart. More than one hundred of Bad Bunny's songs have reached the Billboard Hot 100, including fifteen songs that have made it into the Top 10 of the chart; this is a particularly notable achievement given that Spanish-language songs rarely make it that high.⁵ In fact, from 2020 to 2022,



11 Bad Bunny, wearing a suit reminiscent of those worn by salsa icon Héctor Lavoe, performs “BAILE INVIDABLE” and “DtMF” with a live salsa band, including Los Sobrinos, during the *SNL50: The Homecoming Concert* at Radio City Music Hall on February 14, 2025. Peacock/NBC Universal via Getty Images.

Bad Bunny became the most streamed artist on Spotify for three years in a row, beating out the likes of Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, and Harry Styles.⁶

In addition to these trailblazing chart metrics, Bad Bunny has repeatedly broken barriers for Latin music and Spanish-language artists in the United States. Cumulatively, Bad Bunny has received over forty nominations for Grammys and Latin Grammys, becoming the first Spanish-language artist to earn a Grammy nomination for Album of the Year for his 2022 album *Un Verano Sin Ti*.⁷ *Un Verano Sin Ti* became the most streamed album in the history of Spotify, and it received numerous accolades, including its ranking as number nine in *Rolling Stone*’s top albums of the twenty-first century.⁸ The album’s success also paved the way for Bad Bunny to be the first artist in history to stage two separate \$100 million-grossing tours in less than twelve months (El Último Tour and the World’s Hottest Tour, both in 2022).⁹ On the heels of these tours, Bad Bunny became the first Spanish-language Latino artist to headline Coachella in 2023.¹⁰ In 2024, Bad Bunny’s Most Wanted Tour was the seventh-highest-grossing tour in the United States, earning over \$200 million.¹¹ In

the summer of 2025, Bad Bunny performed a historic residency in Puerto Rico. Bad Bunny is indeed a bona fide superstar.

Although many have celebrated Bad Bunny's success in the US mainstream, others have questioned whether his fame has distanced him from his Puerto Rican roots and communities. These criticisms came to the fore with his 2023 album, *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana* (often referred to as *Nadie Sabe*), which immediately preceded his 2025 *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS*. Bad Bunny presented *Nadie Sabe* as an album for his "real fans" and harkened back to his days as a Latin trap artist.¹² The album's lyrics spoke of Bad Bunny's discomfort with fame while simultaneously boasting of his riches and success. Bad Bunny released *Nadie Sabe* after having relocated briefly to Los Angeles, where he lived in a modern mansion off the Sunset Strip. There, he started a romance with the supermodel and reality star Kendall Jenner, who has faced criticism for appropriating Mexican culture in the marketing of her tequila brand 818.¹³ The move to Los Angeles, hobnobbing with US movie stars, dating a member of the Kardashian-Jenner family, and complaining about his fame made many fans surmise that Bad Bunny had eroded his commitment to Puerto Rico and to Latinos more broadly.¹⁴

What fans *didn't* know is that alongside this Latin trap record, Bad Bunny had also conceived of and begun working on *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS*, which, upon its release, many reviewers would call a "love letter to Puerto Rico."¹⁵ Bad Bunny is known for fusing genres in unique and unexpected ways; however, *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS* marked the first time that the artist blended more traditional Puerto Rican genres like plena, bomba, and salsa into his characteristic reggaetón and trap sound. He also highlighted a plethora of young Puerto Rican artists like Dei V, RaiNao, and Chuwi in addition to Los Sobrinos and Los Pleneros de la Cresta.

But it was more than the music that made *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS* Bad Bunny's most Puerto Rican album yet. *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS* is perhaps Bad Bunny's most politicized work to date. The album celebrates Puerto Rican resilience and joy while simultaneously offering a searing political critique of US colonialism in Puerto Rico. The media campaign leading up to the album's release on the day before the important Puerto Rican holiday Three Kings' Day (January 6) included a twelve-minute short film that starred Puerto Rican actor and film director Jacobo Morales and an animated sapo concho, which is a critically endangered crested toad that is endemic to Puerto Rico. Like many of the lyrics of the album, the short film tackled gentrification in Puerto Rico, which, as we discuss later in this book, is devastating to the archipelago's culture, land, and people. *DeBÍ TiRAR MáS*

FOToS was as much a musical masterpiece as it was a political rallying cry, one firmly rooted in the culture, concerns, and traditions of Puerto Ricans. As we described in our album review for *Latina*, “The album draws from the long history of Puerto Rican music-making as a form of resistance, particularly against U.S. colonialism, and the use of art and dance to tell stories of everyday Puerto Rican life, joy, and struggle.”¹⁶ For those who remained skeptical, *DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOToS* underscored that Bad Bunny was still committed to Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, and that he would continue to utilize his platform to shed light on the issues facing his homeland.

Bad Bunny was born in 1994 in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico, the eldest son of a truck driver and a schoolteacher. His life has been marked by a series of political, economic, and social crises in Puerto Rico, including a ruinous debt crisis, failing infrastructure, and pervasive governmental corruption. At the same time, the past thirty years of Puerto Rican history have also revealed the innovation and self-determination of Puerto Ricans in the face of their ongoing colonial realities. It is undeniable that colonialism and the acute moments of crises in Puerto Rico have shaped his life both as Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, in many ways a typical Puerto Rican millennial with working-class origins, and as Bad Bunny, the distinctive world-renowned artist. As opposed to growing distant from his roots in his ascent, Bad Bunny’s success is in large part *because* of his unapologetic championing of his homeland and *through* the intimate connections he maintains to Puerto Rico.

Many of the people we interviewed for this book observed how incredible it is that Puerto Rico, a tiny island just thirty-five by one hundred miles, could produce such an abundance of huge pop culture figures. From baseball icon Roberto Clemente to salsero Ismael Rivera to pop superstar Ricky Martin, legendary Puerto Ricans have made their mark in the United States and around the world. Jowell, of the popular reggaetón duo Jowell y Randy (a group that also is one of Bad Bunny’s own musical influences), told us, “Many times people like you ask us, ‘Look, what is so special about Puerto Rico that makes our music special?’ It is such a small island and yet somehow it is a powerhouse in culture, music, and art.” Another reggaetón and Latin trap artist, De La Ghetto, told us, “Everywhere I go, people ask me, ‘man, how can such a small island like Puerto Rico produce so many athletes and musicians?’ That’s the question they ask me in other countries. And I just say, ‘Cabró, I don’t know!’” For music producer Eduardo Cabra, Bad Bunny’s success is indebted in part to his Puerto Rican roots. Eduardo, who produced the song “WELTiTA” on

DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOTOS, told us, “It is no coincidence that Bad Bunny is Puerto Rican.”

We borrow the title of our book *P FKN R* from Bad Bunny’s anthem to Puerto Rico on his 2020 album *YHLQMDLG*.¹⁷ Short for “Puerto Fuckin’ Rico,” *P FKN R* itself reflects the impacts of US colonialism on Puerto Rican Spanish and culture. As linguistic anthropologist Jonathan Rosa notes, it is an example of expletive infixation that indicates deep knowledge of, and familiarity with, English linguistic norms that come as a result of over one hundred years of US colonial rule.¹⁸ But *P FKN R* is not just a reflection of US cultural imposition. *P FKN R* is a ubiquitous phrase in Bad Bunny’s repertoire because it embodies the struggles and joy of Puerto Rican life. It reflects the duality of life in the archipelago, wherein *FKN* refers to both the positive and the negative. It is an expression of both pride in Puerto Ricanness and frustration with the problems wrought by colonialism on the archipelago. This duality informs the magnificent art that has emerged from Puerto Rico and that contributes to the many evolving forms of daily resistance to oppression and colonialism that are part of Puerto Rican life.

Resistance is not a monolithic concept. Instead, resistance can take on many different forms to serve the particular circumstances and needs of resistors. In the case of Puerto Rico, its more than five hundred years (and counting) of colonialism—first at the hands of Spain and then the United States—has created a situation in which continuous resistance is the only option. As historian Jorell Meléndez-Badillo explains, from the moment Spanish colonizers arrived on the shores of Puerto Rico, the Indigenous Taíno people of Borikén—or what is now referred to as Puerto Rico—“realized that the colonizers were not to be trusted.”¹⁹ For this reason, Meléndez-Badillo refers to the Taínos as “the people who resisted conquest by Columbus.”²⁰ And so began the centuries-long resistance to colonization. Puerto Ricans have engaged in different types of resistance, from music and dance, to visual art and poetry, to organized protests and armed rebellion, to simply holding up a Puerto Rican flag (which at one point under American rule could land Puerto Ricans in prison).²¹ The phrase *P FKN R* is itself an exhibition of that resistance. Despite the infixation of the colonizer’s language in the middle of PR, *P FKN R* is prideful, powerful, and forceful.

P FKN R—as a title, as a mantra, as a way of life—also opens a space to honor the vulgar. As a reggaetón artist, Bad Bunny has been subject to the same cultural paranoia and concerns that have always impacted the genre.

Since the early days of his career, Bad Bunny has been publicly accused of being, in part, responsible for societal problems in Puerto Rico.²² Kacho López Mari, a renowned film director and producer who has directed several projects for Bad Bunny, told us in an interview that one of the most impressive things about Bad Bunny is the range of topics he covers in his songs, from the socially conscious to the vulgar: “He doesn’t give a fuck. He’s going to talk about sexual stuff. He doesn’t hesitate to get explicit, very explicit. But the way I see it, that’s the way he talks, and the world is able to consume it and somehow connect with that message. The truth is that he says it in a way that is very much his own. He is a musical genius.” In media coverage of Bad Bunny’s historic 2022 concerts in Puerto Rico, parents who brought their teenagers to the concert looked beyond the vulgarity of some of his lyrics, acknowledging that his work is part of a historical movement of young people in Puerto Rico, and they wanted their children to be connected to that history.²³

Vulgarity, or perceptions of vulgarity, were also key to the 2019 mass uprisings in Puerto Rico (also known as the Verano Boricua), which included perreo as protest. Perreo, the dance associated with reggaetón, is typically danced back-to-front, with the person in the front provocatively gyrating their hips against their partner’s pelvis. The term perreo presumably comes from the Spanish word “perro,” or dog, because it is said to mimic the sexual act between dogs. The explicit nature of perreo has made the dance a subject of concern, scorn, and even a censorship campaign.²⁴ At the same time, others have also considered perreo a space of liberation and freedom.²⁵ In this spirit, the (mostly queer) youths who convened on the steps of the iconic cathedral in Old San Juan to dance perreo were intentional in their audacity and “fearless vulgarity” during the mass protests in 2019.²⁶ Since queerness has historically been equated with vulgarity, Bad Bunny’s often gender non-conforming presentation of self, along with his advocacy for issues like ending gender-based violence that disproportionately impact women and LGBTQ+ folks, has contributed to perceptions of him as vulgar. Although reggaetón has rightly been accused of being misogynistic and homophobic, reggaetón’s relationship to vulgarity and broader social unacceptability has, at the same time, connected it to queerness.²⁷ Reggaetón has never been interested in respectability. Instead, reggaetón disrupts the associations between Puerto Ricanness and respectability while also shining light on the ongoing colonial realities facing the archipelago.²⁸

Thus, taking cues from the pioneering Puerto Rican reggaetón artists who came before him, Bad Bunny has maintained that his music is not the reason for Puerto Rico's social woes. In 2018, the now disgraced governor Ricardo Rosselló requested via social media that Bad Bunny add a third night to his spring 2019 concerts at El Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot (locally called "El Choli"), Puerto Rico's largest indoor concert venue. In response, a Puerto Rican school teacher took to social media to critique Bad Bunny, accusing his vulgar, uncouth lyrics as contributing to a "generation of idiots" in Puerto Rico.²⁹ When the teacher's social media post went viral, Bad Bunny posted a multipage statement to his Instagram account to respond to both her and Rosselló. In response to Rosselló's request, he said: "My dignity as a Boricua won't allow it, knowing that there are much more important issues than me performing a third concert."³⁰ He was referencing the numerous problems plaguing Puerto Rico, from the ongoing debt crisis to the inept government response to Hurricane María. Then, Bad Bunny thanked the teacher for her service to the community but also held her accountable in her role as an educator of Puerto Rico's youths: "Know that this artist you're criticizing is just another product of the educational system of my country, so you and your colleagues have also contributed to a successful plan of creating a 'generation of idiots.' . . . [One] where they tell you that Christopher Columbus is a hero and is good, but it is bad to want to know more than the teachers and ask difficult questions."³¹ This incident demonstrates how Bad Bunny turns the accusations of vulgarity around to show that the real vulgarities happen at the level of state failure, colonial policies, and racist and classist attitudes that mark Puerto Rican society.

Bad Bunny has effectively utilized his platform to express the pride and the frustration encapsulated in the phrase P FKN R. He always represents Puerto Rico, which is partially what makes him so admired and respected by his peers. "Other people would have kept it neutral, because [they're] trying to be global and [they're] trying to get more ears," Marissa Lopez, head of Latin Artist Relations for Apple Music, who has collaborated with Bad Bunny and his team on several album rollouts, told us. "But Benito beats to his own drum." Bad Bunny's producer MAG explained to us that when Bad Bunny "started showing where he stands politically about things that are happening on the island," it endeared him more to Puerto Ricans both in Puerto Rico and the diaspora. Reggaetón artist Jowell explained to us that part of Bad Bunny's appeal is that he constantly represents Puerto Rico: "Well, I think Bad Bunny is like the

maximum expression of Puerto Rico. . . . He said, no matter how big I am, I'm always going to keep writing in Puerto Rico, talking about Puerto Rico, talking about the culture of Puerto Rico, which I think is something that is interesting for the whole world." As Kacho told us, "Benito uses Puerto Rican identity as a jumping off point for everything. He is truly inspired by it. There's something impressive about his ability to see the value and the potential in Puerto Ricanness. With it, Boricua creation has been able to conquer the world on a global level."

Since 2020, Bad Bunny has dominated global popular culture with his groundbreaking albums, historic performances, and dazzling chart stats. For Gus Lopez, veteran music executive and founder of reggaetón label Machete Music, Bad Bunny's unique voice, brilliant stage presence, connection with the audience, and unconventional approach make him a "once in a generation artist. He does everything you are not supposed to do, and it works! Then, on top of that, he's a beast on stage." Tainy, Bad Bunny's longtime collaborator and producer who is himself a legend in reggaetón, similarly sees Bad Bunny as a groundbreaking artist of their generation. Reflecting on the significance of Bad Bunny performing in US mainstream spaces like the *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, Tainy told us:

It's not normal for a Latin artist to be in those [US mainstream spaces]. It is important not just for Puerto Rico, but also Latin America. He's an artist who's famous right now. He's made it. He's making his money and he's doing his thing, but at the end of the day we can understand that he is a human being like any other person who knows the different circumstances that people live in. And you can see that he's someone so important, coming from our country, but also watching over the country. These are the things that separate him from other artists.

Tainy's view that Bad Bunny is a global icon not just for Puerto Rico but also for Latin America resonates with many, as does the fact that his politics have been instrumental in his rise. Bad Bunny himself regularly underscores that he intends to live in Puerto Rico forever. As he told Puerto Rican podcaster Anthony Cáceres, who goes by the nickname "El Tony," "I live here, I own property here, thank God I can afford it. If I need a property somewhere, let's say in LA because I'm making a couple of movies, so for work reasons, anyone who asks me 'Where do you live?' I don't say, 'I live in LA' or 'I live in New York.' I say, 'I live in Puerto Rico.' Right now, I'm sleeping in LA, but I live in Puerto Rico. It's different."³² Bad

Bunny still works with his high school friends, and he is still connected to his community of Almirante Sur in the municipality of Vega Baja. In 2023, he told *Billboard*:

I like to be connected with people. And when I say “connected,” it’s not “Ah I want to share this with my fans.” No, it’s “What’s happening in Puerto Rico?” If I were still working at the supermarket, how would I view things? I want to feel that connection. . . . Maybe I’m not walking around in the streets anymore, but I’m aware of what’s happening in the street. My friends are all there. They all live in their hometowns, where they’ve always lived, and everyone is still the same and they have their families and the same friends they’ve had for years like I do. If someone in the neighborhood dies, I know. If someone gets pregnant, I also find out.³³

In a similar vein, Bad Bunny told El Tony that, even though he has achieved so much success that he could live anywhere in the world, he wants to stay in Puerto Rico and live among Puerto Ricans. He said, “I don’t want to live in [the municipality of] Dorado where I have a house with a pool. I don’t want to live in a bubble where everything is fine when I know that beyond the gates, things aren’t good. . . . If I ever have kids, man, I don’t want to raise them in a little golf resort. I want to let them go out into the neighborhood, not live in a bubble.”³⁴ Bad Bunny’s references to Dorado and golf resorts point to the intensive gentrification happening in Puerto Rico. Laws like Act 60 paved the way for wealthy Americans to move to Puerto Rico and settle in areas like the highly gentrified seaside town of Dorado, where luxury buildings and exclusive resorts have displaced Puerto Ricans and cut off public access points to local beaches.³⁵ As a multimillionaire, Bad Bunny is one of the few Puerto Ricans who can actually afford to live in places like Dorado, but he prefers to stay in the “neighborhood,” around his fellow Puerto Ricans.

Bad Bunny has deftly utilized his platform as a global superstar to advocate for Puerto Rico, building on the long tradition of infusing joy and protest into his music as a form of resistance. This is what makes him such an effective spokesperson for Puerto Rico. Pablo Batista, who has worked with reggaetón artists since the genre’s earliest days, told us, “Everything that Benito has done to this day is always meaningful to Puerto Rico. For the first time, we have someone that can tell the world what we are feeling and is not a government person that has his own agenda. . . . If we’re fucked, he will tell you that, ‘Hey, we’re fucked. We need help.’” It is clear from

our interviews with producers, artists, and other industry figures that Bad Bunny has become increasingly intentional and open about using his work and his enormous platform to advocate for Puerto Rico, calling out its failing infrastructure or endemic corruption while also expressing utmost pride in and hope for Puerto Rico.³⁶ *P FKN R* demonstrates how Bad Bunny's work, from his earliest days as a SoundCloud rapper to his current global superstar status, reflects and helps to shape the discourse on Puerto Rican life over the past thirty years. His art is part of a long history of Puerto Rican resistance.

BRIEF PRIMER ON PUERTO RICAN HISTORY

When Bad Bunny released *DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOTOS*, his team hired historian Jorell Meléndez-Badillo to write text that would be displayed in the YouTube visualizers for each song on the album. Visualizers are streamed visuals such as a series of photographs or a scene that are loosely connected to an album's theme, appearing on screen while a song's audio plays.³⁷ For *DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOTOS*, Bad Bunny wanted the visualizers for each song to contain a different history lesson about Puerto Rico that fans could read while listening to the song. He wanted to leverage his platform to shed light on aspects of Puerto Rican history that even he, as someone educated in Puerto Rican public schools, never learned. Meléndez-Badillo wrote text about a wide range of topics, from the Grito de Lares in 1868, in which Puerto Ricans attempted to overthrow the Spanish, to the creation of the Puerto Rican flag, to early twentieth-century labor activism, to the growth of the Puerto Rican diaspora.³⁸ Blending popular culture with direct educational content was not only a clever idea; it also provided important context and information with which to interpret the songs on the album. Similarly, our goal with this book is to enlist Bad Bunny's work to shed light on both the many crises facing Puerto Rico and their roots in Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States. Although a full, detailed account of Puerto Rican history is beyond the scope of this book, in the following paragraphs we provide some basic background about Puerto Rico since 1898, when the United States established itself as a global power and Puerto Rico became one of its most important territories.³⁹

The United States obtained Puerto Rico—along with Guam, the Philippines, and Cuba—from Spain at the end of the Spanish-American War in

1898. After a brief military government, the Foraker Act in 1900 established a new government, led by a governor who was appointed by the US president, alongside Puerto Rican elected officials in the Puerto Rican house of representatives. Still, the matter of what to do with the Puerto Rican population remained a problem for many US politicians and elites who saw Puerto Ricans as racially inferior and unassimilable into the United States.⁴⁰ Shortly after the Foraker Act, a series of US Supreme Court cases known as the Insular Cases (1901–22) established Puerto Rico as a territory that was “foreign in a domestic sense,” meaning that Puerto Rico was a “domestic” possession of the United States but too “foreign” to actually be integrated into the country.⁴¹

Citizenship was one of the most critical complexities of this arrangement. Puerto Ricans were not US citizens, nor were they citizens of any other country (because Puerto Rico was not a sovereign state). In 1917, the US Congress passed the Jones-Shafroth Act that enforced US citizenship on all Puerto Ricans, including those born and raised in the archipelago. However, Puerto Ricans’ citizenship to this day does not grant full civic rights to people living in the archipelago of Puerto Rico. For instance, Puerto Ricans cannot vote in US presidential elections, nor do they have voting representation in the US Congress; however, Puerto Ricans are eligible for the military draft.⁴² In fact, legal historian Sam Erman refers to Puerto Ricans as “almost citizens,” meaning that despite being classified as US citizens, the US never intended to grant them full citizenship rights.⁴³

In 1948, things shifted slightly when Puerto Ricans were, for the first time, permitted to elect their own governor—a seasoned politician named Luis Muñoz Marín, who served four consecutive terms from 1949 to 1965. Under his leadership, Puerto Rico passed its own constitution in 1952 and established a new political status: the Estado Libre Asociado (ELA), or Free Associated State. For Muñoz Marín and other supporters of the ELA, this seemed like a great compromise that would grant Puerto Rico autonomy while maintaining its ties to the United States. Muñoz Marín’s administration and the US government claimed that the ELA was not a colonial arrangement but rather a unique “compact” into which both parties had entered voluntarily, an argument they made in front of the United Nations General Assembly to remove Puerto Rico from the list of non-self-governing territories.⁴⁴ However, in practice, ELA status only further entrenched US colonial rule in Puerto Rico. For example, when Puerto Rico sent its 1952 constitution to the US Congress for approval, Congress not only eliminated some of the policies the constitution included—those

granting free education, housing security, and the like—but also ensured that, at the end of the day, the United States would always have the final say when it came to Puerto Rico.⁴⁵ The US Constitution supersedes anything written in the Puerto Rican constitution, and the US Congress retains the right to modify or reject any legislation in Puerto Rico.⁴⁶

Throughout this time, Puerto Ricans also resisted US colonialism. Major pro-independence leaders, most notably Pedro Albizu Campos, emerged in the mid-twentieth century to encourage Puerto Ricans to fight for their sovereignty. Others participated in acts of armed resistance, such as when Blanca Canales led a small uprising in the town of Jayuya in 1950, or when four activists—Lolita Lebrón, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Andrés Figueroa Cordero, and Irving Flores—fired gunshots from the Capitol rotunda during a meeting of the US Congress in 1954.⁴⁷ In addition, students, union workers, feminists, and people in the Puerto Rican diaspora mobilized around workers' rights, reproductive rights, US military actions, and environmental justice.⁴⁸ These movements have faced repression from the United States and even from the Puerto Rican government; and yet, as we show throughout this book, mobilizations, organizing, and protest continue to be important facets of Puerto Rican life.

This context is necessary for understanding how the current moment in Puerto Rico has shaped Bad Bunny's work. The ongoing debt crisis, the aftermath of Hurricane María and other natural disasters, the massive gentrification and displacement taking place on the archipelago, and the more recent dramatic cuts to social services such as healthcare and education all have their roots in this long colonial history. What's more, Bad Bunny's work is also part of this long history of resistance in Puerto Rico. Whether by leaving his tour in Europe in 2019 to join protests to oust then-governor Ricardo Rosselló, or by adding a twenty-two-minute documentary about gentrification at the end of his 2022 music video for "El Apagón," or by incorporating imagery and lyrical references to Puerto Rican independence in his 2025 song "LA MuDANZA," Bad Bunny has increasingly used his platform to advocate for Puerto Rico.

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NOTES

Epigraph: The front matter epigraph is from the booklet that was distributed to attendees of Bad Bunny's October 12, 2023, listening party for his album *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana* as they entered the event's venue—the Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot (or “El Choli”). Both Petra and Vanessa attended this event.

INTRODUCTION

Note: The chapter title references the following song: Bad Bunny, “¿Quién Tú Eres;” *X 100PRE* (Rimas Entertainment, 2018).

- 1 Traditionally, pitorro is a homemade Puerto Rican moonshine.
- 2 Throughout this book we refer to the artist Bad Bunny, whose real name is Benito Martínez Ocasio, by his artist name, unless direct quotes from interviews refer to him otherwise. Several quotes included in this section appear in Vanessa Díaz, “Bad Bunny Took Plena and Salsa Songs to Number One. Here’s Why That Matters,” *Rolling Stone*, January 20, 2025, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-latin/bad-bunny-baile-inolvidable-dtmf-salsa-plena-1235239752/>.
- 3 Gary Trust, “Bad Bunny’s ‘DtMF’ Dominates Billboard’s Global 200 Chart,” *Billboard*, January 21, 2025, <https://www.billboard.com/music/chart-beat/bad-bunny-dtmf-global-200-chart-number-one-1235879525/>.
- 4 Keith Caulfield, “Bad Bunny’s ‘El Último Tour del Mundo’ Debuts at No. 1 on Billboard 200 Chart, Is First All-Spanish No. 1 Album,” *Billboard*, December 6, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/pro/bad-bunny-el-ultimo-tour-del-mundo-billboard-200-number-one/>.
5 Billboard’s website contains a full overview of Bad Bunny’s chart history. See “Bad Bunny,” *Billboard*, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://www.billboard.com/artist/bad-bunny/chart-history/hs1/>.
- 6 Althea Legaspi, “Bad Bunny Is the Most Streamed Artist on Spotify for Third Consecutive Year,” *Rolling Stone*, November 30,

2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-latin/bad-bunny-spotify-most-streamed-artists-2022-1234638759/>.

7 See the Latin Grammy Awards website for a list of nominations and wins: <https://www.latingrammy.com/en/artists/bad-bunny/35119-01>.

8 Griselda Flores, “Bad Bunny’s ‘Un Verano Sin Ti’ Is Now the Most Streamed Album in Spotify History,” *Billboard*, July 10, 2023, <https://www.billboard.com/music/latin/bad-bunny-un-verano-sin-ti-most-streamed-album-spotify-history-1235368920> /; “The 250 Greatest Albums of the 21st Century So Far,” *Rolling Stone*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-albums-21st-century-1235177256/ghostface-killah-supreme-clientele-2-1235187823/>.

9 Eric Frankenberg, “Bad Bunny Closes Out 2022 with Record-Breaking \$435 Million in Tour Grosses,” *Billboard*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.billboard.com/pro/bad-bunny-2022-concerts-earn-record-breaking-435-million/>.

10 While it is known colloquially as “Coachella,” the full name of this event is the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. It is an annual festival that takes place in Indio, California, and it is widely recognized as among the most important music festivals in the world.

11 Robert Lang, “The 10 Biggest Music Tours of 2024,” *Deadline*, December 13, 2024, <https://deadline.com/gallery/top-10-music-tours-2024/>.

12 Jon Pareles, “Bad Bunny Looks Back and Hunkers Down,” *New York Times*, October 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/arts/music/bad-bunny-nadie-sabe-lo-que-va-a-pasar-mañana-review.html>.

13 Vanessa Etienne, “Kendall Jenner Faces Accusations of Cultural Appropriation in New 818 Tequila Ad,” *People*, May 21, 2021, <https://people.com/food/kendall-jenner-faces-accusations-of-cultural-appropriation-new-818-tequila-ad>. All the Kardashian and Jenner sisters have faced extensive scrutiny for appropriating Black culture as well as that of other minoritized groups. For example, see Cady Lang, “*Keeping Up with the Kardashians* Is Ending. But Their Exploitation of Black Women’s Aesthetics Continues,” *Time*, June 10, 2021, <https://time.com/6072750/kardashians-blackfishing-appropriation/>; Eve Buckland, “Moana Was a Person of Colour! Kourtney Kardashian Is Accused of ‘Cultural Appropriation’ for Likening Herself to Polynesian Disney Character in Snaps from Kim’s Controversial 40th Island Birthday,” *Daily Mail*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-8892821/Kourtney-Kardashian-accused-cultural-appropriation-likening-Moana.html>.

14 *Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana* did, in fact, contain many references to Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican culture, even if they were lost on fans. We discuss this in more detail later in the book.

15 For example, see Maria Sherman, “Music Review: Bad Bunny’s ‘Debí Tirar Más Fotos’ Is a Love Letter to Puerto Rico,” *AP News*, January 5, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/bad-bunny-debi-tirar-mas-fotos-review-856f8e4f89e4e6ab104a491ae3dbcde>.

16 Vanessa Díaz and Petra Rivera-Rideau, “Bad Bunny’s New Album Is So Much More Than a Love Letter to Puerto Rico,” *Latina*, January 15, 2025, <https://latina.com/bad-bunny-debi-tirar-mas-fotos-album-review/>.

17 *YHLQMDLG* is an acronym for “Yo Hago Lo Que Me Da La Gana,” which translates to “I do what I want.”

18 Rosa, “Bad Bunny, Good PR,” at 00:24:00–00:27:25; the expletive infixation is specifically mentioned at 0:26:13.

19 Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 1.

20 Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 4.

21 La Ley de la Mordaza, also known as the Gag Law, prohibited Puerto Ricans from displaying the Puerto Rican flag, even in private spaces, from 1948 to 1957.

22 Isabelia Herrera, “Bad Bunny Pens Statement Criticizing Puerto Rico’s Failing Education System,” *Remezcla*, October 22, 2018, <https://remezcla.com/music/bad-bunny-education-puerto-rico/>.

23 Jan Figueroa Roqué, “Atraídos por el ‘fenónmeno,’” *El Vocero*, July 29, 2022, 24.

24 We discuss this at greater length in chapter 4, but for more information about the censorship campaign, see Rivera-Rideau, *Remixing Reggaetón*. For instance, see Rivera-Servera, “Reggaetón’s Crossings.”

25 Feil, *Fearless Vulgarity*.

26 For example, Marisol LeBrón points out how the policing of Puerto Rican underground in the 1990s occurred simultaneously with the policing of queer nightclubs and spaces. She writes that the two were connected because “a general concern with policing bodily autonomy, particularly displays of nonnormative sexuality in the public sphere, played an important . . . role in designating certain populations for surveillance and control.” See LeBrón, *Policing Life and Death*, 103.

27 For more analyses of reggaetón and queerness in Puerto Rico, see Rivera-Servera, “Reggaetón’s Crossings.”

28 Herrera, “Bad Bunny Pens Statement.”

29 Herrera, “Bad Bunny Pens Statement.”

30 Metro PR, “Bad Bunny le contesta a maestra frustrada,” *Metro PR*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.metro.pr/pr/entretenimiento/2018/10/19/bad-bunny-le-contesta-maestra-frustrada.html>.

31 El Tony PR, “Yo Quiero que mi gente viva feliz en Puerto Rico” Benito (Bad Bunny), interview by El Tony, posted September 2, 2024, YouTube, 01:14:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zw7bLZOnou4>.

32 Leila Cobo, “The Bunny King,” Bad Bunny special edition issue, *Billboard*, December 2022.

34 El Tony PR, “Bad Bunny le contesta,” around 1:14:43.

35 See Damaris Suárez, Víctor Rodruíguez Velázquez, and Omaya Sosa Pascual, “A Nightmare for Puerto Ricans to Find a Home, While Others Accumulate Properties,” *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo*, December 19, 2022, <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2022/12/a-nightmare-for-puerto-ricans-to-find-a-home-while-others-accumulate-properties/>;

Bianca Graulau (@biancagraulau), “Rich people are moving to Puerto Rico and some Puerto Ricans are not happy about it. #boricua #gentrification #doradopuertorico,” TikTok, April 15, 2021, <https://www.tiktok.com/@biancagraulau/video/6951534168668916997?lang=en>.

36 Bad Bunny declined an interview request for this book. All his quotes in this book come from publicly available interviews. His record label, Rimas Entertainment, is not affiliated with this project.

37 The popularity of visualizers has grown in recent years, at the same time as YouTube streams began getting counted in *Billboard*’s data for the Hot 100 charts. For more about YouTube’s influence on music distribution and data, see Molanphy, *Old Town Road*, 74–79.

38 You can see Bad Bunny’s visualizers on YouTube at “BAD BUNNY—DeBÍ TiRAR MÁS FOTOS,” accessed May 15, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRW7iEDD9RDT_19SQk3uKfkJUCA_uGr7Y. For more on Jorell Meléndez-Badillo’s involvement with the project, see Andrea Flores, “Bad Bunny’s ‘Debí Tirar Más Fotos’ Is a Love Letter to Puerto Rico. This Professor Helped Him Tell the Island’s History,” *De Los/Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/delos/story/2025-01-07/bad-bunnys-debi-tirar-mas-fotos-puerto-rico-jorell-melendez-badillo-visualizers>.

39 Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 1.

40 For an overview of these debates see Erman, *Almost Citizens*; Duany, *Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*; Ramírez, “Indians and Negroes in Spite of Themselves.”

41 For more on the Insular Cases, see Fusté, “Repeating Islands of Debt”; Erman, *Almost Citizens*; Burnett and Marshall, *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*.

42 For more details about the limits of Puerto Rican citizenship, see Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 84; Torruella, “To Be or Not to Be”; and Valle, “Race and the Empire-State.”

43 Erman, *Almost Citizens*.

44 Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 171–73.

45 Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 112.

46 Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 112. More recently, in 2016, the US Supreme Court issued a ruling in *Puerto Rico v. Sánchez Valle* that only strengthened this arrangement. The court case centered on two men who had been convicted on gun charges by both the US federal government and by Puerto Rican law. The

Supreme Court ruled that they could be prosecuted *only* by the US federal government. Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 173.

47 For more information, see Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*; Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*; and Powers, “Seeing the U.S. Empire.”

48 For an overview of these movements, see Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 229–46.

CHAPTER I. LAS COSAS ESTÁN EMPEORANDO

Note: The chapter title references the early Bad Bunny hit, “Soy Peor” (Hear This Music, 2016).

1 Bad Bunny, “Bad Bunny ft. Arcángel, De La Ghetto, Ñengo Flow—ACHO PR (Video Oficial),” March 10, 2024, YouTube, 00:11:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssdN7ZfavHs>.

2 Morales, *Fantasy Island*, 68–73.

3 Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 164.

4 Lucas Vila, “WATCH: Bad Bunny Gives Impassioned Speech in Puerto Rico Ahead of Elections,” *Remezcla*, November 4, 2024, <https://remezcla.com/culture/watch-bad-bunny-gives-speech-puerto-rico/>.

5 Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 268; Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 150.

6 For more on the impact of the international oil crisis on the Puerto Rican economy, see Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 192–93, 245–46.

7 Cabán, “PROMESA,” 166; Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 246; Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*.

8 Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 269; Cabán, “PROMESA,” 173; Morales, *Fantasy Island*, 65–67.

9 For more background on these policies, see Fusté, “Repeating Islands of Debt”; Dick, “US Tax Imperialism in Puerto Rico”; Cabán, “PROMESA.”

10 Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 150; Morales, *Fantasy Island*.

11 Cabán, “PROMESA,” 26.

12 García Padilla explained that this was because all states have to conform to the uniformity clause of the US Constitution such that “no state can have privileges that another state does not have. The federal taxes you pay in New York, you pay them in California, you pay them in Georgia, you pay them in Nebraska. Everyone pays them.”

13 Morales, *Fantasy Island*, 68–73.

14 Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico*, 171–72.

15 For a critique of the stereotype of Puerto Rico as a “welfare island,” see Rebollo-Gil, *Writing Puerto Rico*, 39–45; Morales, *Fantasy Island*; Dávila Ellis, “¿Dónde están las yales?”