**The Master’s House:**

**An analysis of Reggaeton's interpolation and commodification into the U.S mainstream culture**

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*"Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable (…) know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. "*

* Audre Lorde.

**Abstract**

Last year, Latin Music was reported to have generated $510M in revenues according to the Mid-term RIAA report. This means a 23% increase from last year, a growth that surpassed the overall market growth for recorded music revenues[[1]](#footnote-0), the principal contributor? Reggaeton, a worldwide musical phenomenon that rose above its Latinx roots to become a global movement. From its origins in 70´s Panama, to its big interpolation into the American Mainstream, it cannot be denied that the genre had to undergo several transformations in its musical framework and its lyrical content so it could win a place in Pop Culture. The question posed in the present investigation is not, then, about the existence or not of said transformations, but about how they affect the authenticity of the genre and its role as an identity assertion mechanism. It aims to understand if the genre still addresses self-empowerment for Latinxs now that it has changed to cater to the needs of larger, intercultural audiences. There is no doubt Reggaeton is now mainstream but there is a question that remains unsolved. In the process of achieving success, did Reggaeton have to completely sacrifice the values that made it an authentic Latinx cultural expression? Or, on the contrary, did it learn how to use the industry´s tools to gain a global platform for sharing its message? In other words, is Reggaeton today a puppet of the master or is it actually beating him at his own game? That's what we ought to discover.

**Introduction**

Music can be a profound site to explore the dynamics of culture and identity itself because it’s a direct reflection of them. It is deeply linked to the culture, region and time in which it is produced and helps portray cultural identities. It would be naïve to think that music is just a random melody with some words rhyming on top without any further significance. To look at music from this lens would deny the true purpose of all types of art expression which is to negotiate the every-day life and dig down into the soul, identity and life experience of its creator. Music is the result of people's stories. It’s a mirror in which the good, the bad, and every shade that is in between is reflected. In the words of John Blacking, *“The value of music is, I believe, to be found in terms of the human experience involved in its creation”* (34)*.* In view of music being a result of cultural patterns of expression acquired through socialization, it is natural for its forms and composition processes to vary from culture to culture. The way we enjoy them and understand their meaning or the feelings expressed on them also depends on the culture factor. If you grow up listening to rock music, you will most probably continue to listen to it and like it. It is what you know, you´re familiar with it and those around you are too, and that gives social value to this type of music. Yet, to someone who grew up listening to Salsa this kind of music would feel strange and not enjoyable. Besides, in the environment they grew up in, Salsa would be the general rule, not rock. You consume what the others in your close surroundings consume because *“The commentaries or liking from an individual in relation to music emanates from a common stock of understandings concerning music´s relationship to the local. Such understandings, in turn, crucially inform notions of collective identity and community in given regions.”* (Bennett 3). Music is more than a mere artistic creation for entertainment, especially for subordinated subcultures who use it not only as a way of expressing their culture, but as means to make it survive and counteract forces of acculturation and domination. Music has the power to synthesize someone’s history, struggles and message into a catchy 4-chord sequence that passes disguised as a “meaningless” creation when it is much, much more. A great portrayal of this is Reggaeton.

Indeed, music is a key resource for all communities to make sense of their everyday but, for individuals who have migrated from their origin countries and had to immerse into a new and strange culture, music is more than entertainment. It serves as a means to advocate for their traditional cultures, it allows them to acquire a sense of space and belonging within their own local communities and within the larger, and often dominant society, reconstructing the identities that the latter may have fragmented. Latino expressive cultures offer alternative narratives in which perspectives of migration, displacement and marginalization silenced by dominant histories are foregrounded (Aparicio 357). For this reason, it is logical to find in Latin artistic creations (or those from minorities in general) components that demarcate their resistance position and musical elements very typical of their culture, causing their music to be classified as Folk. Folk culture can be defined as the *“cultural products and practices that have developed over time within a particular community or socially identifiable group and that are communicated from generation to generation*” (Szeman & O´Brien 7). By definition, this would imply that the alternative narratives offered by Latino music cater to their specific taste and entertainment needs by addressing issues relevant to their community. The social and cultural meanings found in said productions, and the people´s fondness for them emanate from a shared history, which only they can identify and understand. So how does a genre born as a Folk artistic expression like Reggaeton, is becoming nationally and globally visible? How did an utterly exploited and dominated group manage to colonize mainstream music, which is relegated to the outermost margins of ‘high’ culture? (Brown 24). The answer relies on the particular metamorphosis it traversed.

The influence of Reggaeton within the popular mainstream culture is increasing and the explanation goes beyond the effects of the changing American demographic dynamics. Over the last years Reggaeton music and artists transcended its Latin, Afro and Caribbean roots to become globalized. Clearly, this meant a negotiation between staying truthful to its identity politics assertions and giving in to dominant acculturation in the name of "globalizing Latinx culture”. In order to reach success in the host land, Reggaeton had to learn how to get in the mainstream arena, learn its ways and understand how the culture industry works. This so it could keep up with the constantly changing pop panorama. No one would have expected an underdog like Reggaeton to stand a chance against other historically favored musical streams, and yet, it is undeniably breaking records worldwide and making history. So, the question in the present research is not about Reggaeton´s success but about the means it used to achieve it. It's a deep dive into the system and how Latino music is managing to work within it. Is Reggaeton changing the rules of the game? Or on the contrary, is it just a puppet of it? Audre Lorde has an interesting way of answering this paradox. Lorde states that seeing differences as anything but the foundation from which creativity sparks is, as she says, the grossest reformism it can exist. For individuals who fail to fit in society's definition of ´normal´, surviving means drawing strength from what makes them different at the core because, “*the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change¨* (Lorde 2). Applied to Reggaeton, and how Latinxs are using it to amplify their voices, her famous quote serves as a framework to raise questions around Reggaeton´s authenticity before and after its interpolation into the mainstream, its musical and lyrical transformations and the way it challenges – or on the contrary, caters – the dominant notions of what is popular.

**The birth of the Dembow beat, its musical evolution and its socio-cultural meaning.**

Reggaeton has been a transnational movement since its birth, and a shared social, cultural and artistic construction between peoples united by a common struggle: marginalization. We can trace Reggaeton’s history back to late 1970’s Panama where, thanks to the construction of the Canal, Caribbean, African and West Indian migrants interacted with local cultures. It was in the midst of arduous days at the docks and in their trips on board of the famous *Diablos Rojos* (term used to name the local buses), where these cultures exchanged their rhythms, eventually creating *Dembow* -- the foundation of what we know today as Reggaeton. The sound, recognizable by its two-bar loop, extra snare rolls and recurring drum rolls on downbeats (Figure 1), can be identified in hundreds of Reggaeton songs, old and new, and came formally to life in the song “Dem Bow” by Shabba Ranks. For many, this is the foundational framework to the genre. Ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall reported the track to have been re-recorded and/or covered by performers from all over the continent. Most impressively, elements of the song’s accompaniment track appear in upwards of 80% of all of Reggaeton’s productions (Marshall 131).

Figure 1[[2]](#footnote-1)



From that sound marked by "*Reggae's polyrhythms, dub aesthetics, and the 'skanking' keyboard accent on the on-beat*" (Rivera-Rideau 34), Reggaeton got part of its vocal style and beat. The other, it received from Puerto Rico. During its stay in the island, Reggaeton began to intertwine with U.S. sounds like Hip Hop and Rap (styles which also come from marginalized communities) modernizing its sound with the use of sampling and rapping. But it's also where Reggaeton began to be stereotyped as an ´underground´ sound and related with poverty, drugs and crime. Puerto Rico’s government and media played a big part in this, as they tried to portray Reggaeton as "*corrupting*" of the youth but despite their attempts and bad publicity they could not sabotage its growth. Young Puerto Ricans, both artists and audience, found in the genre a way to express their unconformity and make social problems visible, and nothing was going to stop them from doing so. And Puerto Ricans were not the only ones who used reggaeton to vent their frustration and discontent. Communities in places like Panama, Jamaica and some cities in the United States also attributed the same value to the genre making it a unified diasporic movement that represents the sufferings, joys and traits shared by the working, urban Latino people dispersed among different territories and allows them to connect with their heritage, even if they are far away from home.

“Underground” Reggaeton – or the earliest Reggaeton –used narratives of working-class life, anti-government movements and of strained relationships with the dominant system. Artists who succeeded in the late 90s and early 2000s denounced societal issues such as racism and colonialism in their songs. For instance, Tego Calderon, Daddy Yankee or Ivy Queen who told her story as an artist on her new podcast *LOUD* where she remarked that for her, Reggaeton is *“about how kids who were young or poor, Black or dark-skinned—kids who were discriminated against in every way—how we refused to be quiet.”* (Ivy Queen 1:15). Her words mark Reggaeton like a vehicle to navigate Latinx Identity Politics and respond to the invisibility and marginalization experienced by Latinx community. Identity politics is a manner “to *organize through lived experiences—through stories and marginalized identities; from the very personal, to the sharing of unknown or little-known narratives.”* (Hess 67). Identity connects intricately with music; to encounter music is to encounter and dialogue with that identity. And by asserting on a cultural unity, Reggaeton unequivocally challenges the dominant identity. Reggaeton conveyed in its lyrics the Latinx experience lived inside and outside the mainland. The commonalities it expressed helped organize and unite the new communities being formed during the time in the United States. Clear examples follow:

“*No todos somos iguales en términos legales Y eso está probao en los tribunales. En lo claro la justicia se obtiene con cascajos.”* (We are not all equal in the eyes of the law and that has been proven in court. In what is clear, justice is obtained with gravel).

* Tego Calderón. “Loíza.”

“*Soy de la capital del crimen y en el aire se percibe un espíritu de muerte que devora lo que vive. Si fuera por mi reuniría a todos los caseríos proponiendo una tregua en nombre de los que se han ido.”* (I am from the capital of crime and in the air, it is perceived a spirit of death that devours what lives. If it were up to me, I would gather all the *caserios* proposing a truce on behalf of those who are gone).

* Daddy Yankee. “Corazones.”

As it gained popularity, Reggaeton transformed its musical morphology and lyrical content to become what we know today. Music is highly reactive to its environment, and when I say music, I'm referring not only to the melodic framework but to all the other elements involved in musical creation and distribution: lyrics, production, meaning, audience and motive. So far, we've seen Reggaeton as a counter-hegemonic movement, provoker of ‘deviant behavior among the youth’ and today this has not drastically changed. Reggaeton is still considered - especially by older generations of Latinxs - vulgar and non-sense. What changed were the reasons. Reggaeton went through an expressive metamorphosis; From dealing with controversial issues such as racism or social inequality, the new songs took a more erotic perspective and not because it was something that the artists wanted to focus on for some underlying social or cultural reason. No, the change was so they could fit in the popular imagery of what it means to be Latinx: exotic, sensual, kinetic. It played into said stereotypes so vocalists and producers could target new markets, which in turn allowed the sound and reach of the genre to radically change. In other words, it used the master's tools. The romanticized new beat and the explicit lyrics of this new wave of Reggaeton perpetrated the stereotypical erotic aura surrounding Latinxs, especially women. But in a way, it also contributed to their sexual liberation as the dancing of Reggaeton music focuses on the women's movements and body.

As Marshall emphasizes, *“No longer bound by Puerto Rico's shores or even by Nuyorican and wider diasporic circuits, reggaeton artists and record labels began to address a new and increasingly diverse listenership in the expanded contexts of national and international media spheres. The contemporary sound of reggaeton as a slickly produced club music (...) quickly assumed the sort of stylistic orthodoxy one might expect from commercial ventures.”* (146). At this stage of the transformation process, it can be noted that the changes introduced to the musical framework had for a purpose abandoning the Jamaican and tropical origins to take a commercial direction. Producers and artists knew that the genre's survival outside of its cultural cradle depended on how it integrated outside influences into its sound. Combining sounds of Hip Hop and elements that inspired that sensuality commonly expected from Latinxs was their way of ensuring the genre a longer run in the competition.

A comparison between Ranks´ “*Dem Bow''* withits later versions, precisely the one by Wisin & Yandel, illuminates an example of the shift in the genre´s outlook and style. Shabba Ranks´ song conflated rejection towards emerging “deviant'' sexual tendencies with resistance to colonial oppression. Within traditional Jamaican Christian discourse, these intimate practices were products of the West, thus, they had to be rejected because being submissive to them was synonymous with being submissive to acculturative and racist pressures from abroad. As heard in the song: "*Freedom fi black people, come now, Dat mean say the oppressors dem, just bow"*. A decade later, Wisin & Yandel released “*Dembow '' where* the traditional snare drum-adorned two beat loop was now accompanied by synthesized instrument sounds and a mix of R&B and salsa in the vocal styles.But beyond the musical aspect, the biggest alteration is seen in the content of the song. In this new version, the term “Dembow'' loses all relation to anti-colonialist movements and simply refers to a rhythmic framework that evokes flirtatious, dance-provoking and/or erotic feelings. *"The underlying meanings in Wisin & Yandel's Dembow demonstrate, on the one hand, how the cultural politics of Spanish reggae have changed rather radically. It is clear that the more oppositional stance espoused by Shabba Ranks, Nando Boom, and El General has given way to the allure of commerce."* (Marshall 149). Although Reggaeton still retained an audible close connection to Reggae aesthetics, its content completely erased the political conversations and social statements so proper of the Dembow songs that initially played in Panama.

Digging deeper into the morphological shift in the musical framework, the original Dembow beat was adorned by fresh piano riffs - coming from salsa and merengue - and whirly guitars - courtesy of bachata -. This crossover appeal aimed to attract a bigger consumer base and satisfy the desires of prized demographics. As it moved into the U.S. Reggaeton beats were evoking other Latinx rhythms that had previous relative success in this new host land; rhythms which fitted into the previously mentioned stereotypes attributed to Latinos at the time. On one hand, this further pushed the genre into a commercial-focused phase setting aside most of its socio-political value and yielding to acculturation processes. On the other, it opened up an opportunity to modify the definition of Latinidad and create more hybrid communities. Using the master's tools entailed for Reggaeton to lose part of its counter-hegemonic essence and leave aside its explicit political and social statement. From Lorde's lens, this would mean sacrificing one of Reggaeton's elements of uniqueness and losing out to the dominant influences of Anglo styles. But we cannot forget that Reggaeton is not only about politics, nor is it a static genre. As explained above, the transnational nature of the genre and its poly-cultural construction allow it to morph to suit its context and audience. Moreover, although its sound and lyrics changed, other extremely important vernacular elements remained the same, such as Spanish lyrics, the characteristic drumroll and the 100% Latino interpreters and composers behind the songs

**Understanding Reggaeton within the dynamics of the Culture Industry and the Mainstream model.**

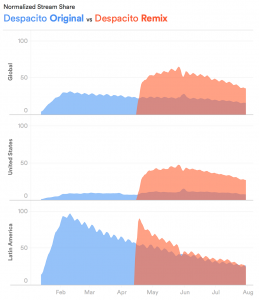
To better understand the transformations depicted above we must first define the place where they took place and this is the culture industry. As described by Horkheimer and Adorno in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* it refers to entertainment and culture industries which produce standardized cultural goods and use them to manipulate the masses. From this collection of mass culture products (designed to reach as many consumers as possible, producing for all kinds of audiences and being transmitted massively) popular culture emerges as those elements highly favored by the majority of consumers. Given that it produces the higher profit they are promoted and widely disseminated once they hit popularity. In other words, mass culture is all about production (providing a wide array of products to all types of audiences) and pop culture is preoccupied with consumption (the products popularized from mass culture because they were highly liked). Outside of this picture we find Folk culture encapsulating the cultural products from relatively small and homogenous social groups. Given that “*Popular culture is neither the popular traditions of resistance to these processes; nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked*" (Hall 235), from time to time, Folk culture elements metamorphize to mass culture, and then to pop culture even though they encompass practices and products from a particular or socially identifiable community. It all depends on where and how this relationship of resistance and submission stands.

Pop culture is an ongoing process in which control and subordination is constantly being passed around causing certain cultural forms to gain and lose support from institutions. Preferred or marginalized cultural content and forms are not fixed, according to Hall there is a constant movement and interchange between them as a result of shifting power relations. A great example of said dynamic is Rap, a multibillion‐dollar industry that emerged relatively recently from the African American street culture of the South Bronx (Szeman & O’Brien 7). Nonetheless, this is a weird occurrence because pop culture or “mainstream” elements are determined by the highly imperialized culture industry: the way it works is a result of our society's functioning ways. Cultural industries have the power to rework and reshape what they represent to go accordingly with the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture. This is the concentration of culture-making means in the heads of a few. Throughout history, Europe and the US established themselves as dominant cultures whereas other countries – mostly from the third-world – grew to be considered as counter-hegemonic. Following this logic, art forms generated by and within dominant cultures are the ones prone to be “enjoyable” by most people. Moreover, given that the institutions which determine the guidelines for success were traditionally established here, it’s only logical that styles originated in counter-hegemonic and relatively smaller cultures (i.e., Latinos, Asians, Blacks…) were directly related to their respective cultures and therefore, considered folk culture, meant only to be enjoyed within a delimited territory and community. Their crossover to mainstream culture creates a paradox for cultural and musical studies, and the main question for this case analysis.

First and foremost, mainstream will be defined as the set of ideas, entertainment products, attitudes or activities that are considered by the wide majority of a society as conventional. It is the general rule on the social, economic and cultural life of individuals within said society. This helps us understand the difference between “Pop” and “Mainstream”. To be Mainstream means not only to be Popular but to become socially validated as normal. Yet, as Adorno and Horkheimer will criticize, in our overly-consuming and demanding society, trends come and go very fast. The mainstream is not something static, it is constantly changing and the Culture Industry will always make sure to be on top of these changes so it can keep producing profit. Its predisposition to adjustments is a natural consequence of its tight relation with culture and the alterable power relations that surround it. Changes in the mainstream can be further explained by the Mainstream Shift Model proposed by Will Heikes in his study on the awareness of Spanish-language music in the United States. His theory states that the process begins when the mainstream is faced with a disruption which becomes popular. This disruption is then followed by adoption by a major mainstream body, which leads to further adoption by other members of the mainstream. Eventually, this disruption ends redefining the mainstream (Heikes 10).

I will use “*Despacito*” as a disruption case. In January of 2017, Latino artists Daddy Yankee and Luis Fonsi produced and released “Despacito”, a song which would break seven Guinness World Records for being the most viewed video of all times on YouTube, the most-streamed song worldwide and spending record time at No.1 place in the Billboard charts (Montoya). Even though it became a global phenomenon on its own, the English-language Remix featuring mainstream artist Justin Bieber made the song take off in the United States. Bieber´s participation marks the stage of Adoption within the model. Awareness of the original version of the song was not incredibly high in the United States until April of 2017 when a new version featuring Justin Bieber was recorded. At this time, music in Spanish or more specifically Reggaeton was not capable of taking over the Mainstream by its own means. In previous years, Latin artists such as Shakira, Ricky Martin, Santana or Enrique Iglesias achieved their popularity in the Mainstream because their songs were sung in English or relied heavily upon mainstream trends and production and although there was already a certain awareness of Reggaeton in the American country thanks to its Puerto Rican and New York roots, its listeners were primarily Latinos. *“Despacito”* marked a moment in history where Latino artists were not looking to collaborate with mainstream artists anymore but vice versa; By allowing itself to mix with other currents to create an *Americanized* version, Reggaeton found a way to enter the pop emporium; it got access to the master's tools. The “Despacito” remix with Justin Bieber not only gave the song the power to stay at the top of the Billboard charts but also increased awareness of the original song. American audiences, after hearing the song that included Bieber, went to look for the original version, increasing its numbers (Figure 2).

Figure 2[[3]](#footnote-2)



The popularity of the remixed song skyrocketed Reggaeton’s influence. Spanish-Language songs began to occupy more and more positions on the Billboard charts, artists of Latin descent began to embrace their heritage and use it in their productions, collaborations with Latino artists were becoming more common and revenue generated by Latin Music increased significantly. Years prior to the existence of the track, only four predominantly Spanish-language tracks got into the chart. In the year of “Despacito,” 19 mostly Spanish tracks made the chart, including J Balvin’s “Mi Gente”. In 2018, the number rose to 21, in 2019 to 22, and in 2020, with the help of artists like Bad Bunny, to 41 (Cobo). MBW reported that Latin artists generated $886.1 million on a retail basis in the U.S. music market in 2021, 35.4% more than it did in 2020 and was predicted to generate more than a billion dollars in revenue across 2022 (qtd. In Murray)*.* Nonetheless, we must unpack its global success before we call it a victory for Latinx musical expressions. As Heikes analyzes in his study, the increase in Spanish language music popularity was not something that happened organically as it was accompanied by other variables or disruptions that played a big role in fastening its spread in the United States.

The role played by the shift in U.S. demographics and music streaming services were key in catalyzing Reggaeton´s popularity in the mainstream. Pop culture in the United States has developed over time under the hegemony of western culture as it has been prevalently socially accepted, reproduced and reinforced by the majority of its population. But the demographic composition of the country is not the same as it was two or even one decade ago and the lines that delimit what is and is not the "*American*" popular culture increasingly become blurred as there is a constant growth of diasporas entering the demographic panorama. In a report made by the Pew Research Center in September of 2022, The U.S. Hispanic population was claimed to be 62.5 million in 2021, up from 50.5 million in 2010. The 19% increase in the Hispanic population was faster than the nation’s 7% growth rate. The growth from 2021 to 2021 was of 23.1 million people, and Hispanics accounted for 52% of this increase – a greater share than any other racial or ethnic group. The interpolation of Reggaeton into the mainstream is not a random crossover, but an indication of the current American society composition; the more Latinxs there are, the more socially reinforced their cultural expressions will be, weakening past hegemonies. The rapidly rising Latino populations within the States influences pop culture as it becomes a profitable and significant audience. Moreover, technological advancements in how people consume culture products has taken away the power of influence from the few hands who had it and given it to the people.

Institutions in control of determining what is ‘popular’ - meaning radio distributors, record labels or media outlets - were established in America and Europe, both historical hegemonic centers. The decisions of what became successful relied almost entirely on their hands. Not anymore. Streaming services and the internet have given more power to the audience as they are not tied to listen to what is determined for them but are exposed to a wide range of music genres, artists and hits from around the world from where they can choose. To quote Cary Sherman, RIAA Chairman and CEO, "*More than any other genre, the growth in streaming is powering Latin music´s resurgence. Streaming is helping break down walls between countries and continents*". (Qtd. In Studz) Platforms such as Spotify where Latinx music playlists have had great success recognize part of these numbers can be attributed to the consumption behavior of Latinx users. They are faithful to their genres, support their artists and spend more hours listening to music on these platforms and by increasing their number of inhabitants in the country, they clearly represent a weight that is tipping the balance. Latin music has always had a parallel audience and industry alongside mainstream English-language music in the US, that cannot be denied, but becoming part of the charts was only possible via collaborations with already established Mainstream artists and sounds. It was only possible to gain acceptance from the Anglo audience if their Latinx aspects were watered down. Now, Latin culture is finally being reflected more consistently and befittingly as an extension of U.S. culture.

Success in the mainstream can be analyzed in economic and popularity terms with metrics provided by said streaming platforms. From that $886.1 million Latin music generated on a retail basis in the United States back in 2021, streaming revenues made up 97% of this number and as expected, Latin music showed a 23% growth in the first half of 2022, outpacing overall recorded music revenues and reaching an all-time high in share (Friedlander and Bass 1). These numbers serve as a benchmark for the ground gained by Latin music in the music industry; the growth in reach and popularity of Latin music, especially Reggaeton, is undeniable. In terms of popularity, Streaming services allowed Reggaeton to expand globally with the creation of playlists available for all people around the world. For instance, Spotify’s “*Baila Reggaeton*'' and “*Viva Latino*” playlists occupy the 4th and 5th place respectively on the list of the most followed playlists globally with more than 10 million followers each (Newsroom Spotify).

The ease with which music can be discovered today and the rapid Latin demographic explosion in the United States are two disruptions that complemented each other to allow Reggaeton to achieve the success it has today worldwide. What is more, the Reggaeton listening is higher outside the countries in which it is produced. 95 percent of reggaeton is ‘exported’, in that listening happens outside of its nations of origin. Colombia and Puerto Rico, home of today’s biggest Reggaeton’s productions, have listened to what Spotify counted to be 7,500 years of reggaeton on the platform since January 2014, while reggaeton importers — i.e., the rest of the world — have listened to approximately 140,000 “reggaeton years” during the same time span. (Spotify). And is on this same streaming service that the most listened album worldwide and in the U.S. was announced to be Bad Bunny’s “*Un Verano Sin Ti*”, this Puerto Rican artist has held for three consecutive years the title of most streamed artist in the world on Spotify and is frequently seen holding the 1st places on billboard charts. It is correct to affirm then, that the success of Reggaeton in the American mainstream was accompanied with two other disruptions that directly affected its listenership base in the US and the world. Streaming services allow individuals from Latin America that have migrated outside their home countries to keep that direct linkage with their culture through music. They are not constrained to listen only to what the radio is playing or what people from said new host land is playing. They can now choose what they want to hear, follow their artists and keep track of music produced by and within their countries – or from whatever country they want -. This not only helps them keep adhering to their vernacular identity while abroad, but naturally gives them the possibility of introducing an element of their culture to the bigger culture in which they are immersed. It gives them the possibility to share their own identity rather than switching it to fit within the new culture they live in.

**Reggaeton’s transformation as an aftermath of acculturation forces which dominate and repackage the Latinx cultural expressions at their will.**

Although the digital revolution gives users a wider array of cultural content to choose from, the Culture Industry still holds a high share in the matter and uses Marketing and Pseudo-Individualization strategies to continue selling what is profitable for them, in this case Reggaeton. In a fast-moving world, where consumers crave for uniqueness and newness, those in the Culture Industries know that, in order to keep producing profit, their products must be exciting and appealing for said audiences. This is where Pseudo-Individualism comes into play. It refers to a paradigm created by the modes of production in which they create an illusion of differentiation among consumers while giving them products that have the same utility and are made in the same way but packaged in different forms. In other words, “*the peculiarity of the self is a socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural*” (Horkheimer and Adorno 125) that drives consumption by creating a value offer for each product that emphasizes its uniqueness. It is in the individual´s illusion of freedom that the Culture Industry found the way to make it slave of consumption and it is in Reggaeton´s particular and ´exotic´ elements that they found the perfect way of making it its goose that lays the golden eggs.

When these big industries witnessed the lucrative opportunities found in Latin music growing visibility, they began competing to capitalize on the genre. They wanted not only to take more participation in its distribution but in its production so that they could mold it to their liking and not only serve Reggaeton’s primary audience but a larger and more diverse public. The current sound of Reggaeton discloses the situation: the transformation of its lyrical content, and the way in which it is promoted. Sure, it always preserved its Dembow rhythmical essence but it is undeniable that it changed in the process of being absorbed into a larger -often international- and commercial entertainment atmosphere. As Malaquias Montoya said, “*The culture industry is a system that feeds with one hand with one hand and strangles with the other”* (qtd. In de Alba). Throughout a process of commodification, a traditional expression like Reggaeton, originally developed in a local cultural and commercial system of exchange moves into a wider one gaining more recognition, generating more profit and reaching more engagement, but not before sacrificing some of its original values. When explaining this phenomenon, Frances Aparicio remarked that “*as Latinos become increasingly integrated into U.S institutions, and as large conglomerates and the mainstream media begin to act as the sole producers of popular music, the alternative values of these expressive cultures are not as clearly delineated as in the past, when cultural productions remained at the margins of the industry and were still predominantly under the control of individual artists."* Reggaeton music was not only commodified in the mainstream but suffered a distortion of its products where its appearance and traditional behavior are exoticized as it is "*selected and transformed so as to appear very different, without a rational meaning, and above all aimed at creating the sensual-intellectual attraction of being intriguing.*" (Seitel 6). Amplifying the "exotic" side of Reggaeton was not to acknowledge and highlight its Jamaican roots, its motive was everything but doing cultural justice. By exoticizing the genre, the Cultural Industry was exercising standardization.

The metamorphosis Reggaeton suffered, from its beginnings in Panama to its current U.S. position in the American Mainstream, is a consequence, or rather, was managed under the control of the Culture Industry who has one thing and one thing only on their sight: Profit. Cultural forms and products can become predictable and therefore, no longer craved by the masses who want something new and exciting making Standardization of cultural production necessitated. One of contemporary pop culture´s key features is newness and originality and this serves the culture industry as profit continues to flow in as long as they have something “new” to offer the masses, but how? How can producers or industries create genuinely “new” objects for culture consumers? Standardization offers a paradoxical solution to this problem by allowing producers to continue to pass off apparently new objects in old shells (Szeman & O’Brien 101). Pseudo-Individualization, which creates the illusion of having a wide array of options to consume, gives users the idea that everyone can be differentiated, that everyone has an “original” taste dictated by their personality and no one else. It creates a feeling of creativity, originality, and freedom. In reality, consumers are more dominated and constrained than ever and the Culture Industry plays its part in perpetuating it by using a marketing of difference: Sell their products as exciting and engaging as they can by exaggerating their characteristics or differences. The marketing of difference has become a major selling tool as it generates profit by appealing to increasingly narrow and specialized segments but also by harnessing the idealized vision of unity through diversity. The previous explanation provides background to comprehend why the transmutations of the genre raise a question for many regarding its authenticity. Did it become successful while conserving its vernacular characteristics and purpose? Or did it only find success when it became submissive to acculturation forces from the dominant culture?

The flux of foreign people into the U.S. accompanied by their cultures, characteristics and way of living intrinsically causes cultural exchange to occur between the host land population and the outsider culture. In these cultural exchange processes of acculturation take place. Acculturation can be defined as a multicultural process of incorporating or adapting to the customs of an alternate culture where both migrants and the natives of the host land are influenced by the cross-cultural interactions” (Chan 2). When we set these interactions in a host land like America, whose culture has long enjoyed dominance over others, the acculturation spectrum takes place in a way that the host land starts a process of heterogenization as soon as the foreign culture gets in touch with the local. When an integration phase occurs, both cultures interact in equal ways, but for the migrant individuals the importance of maintaining a relationship with the larger society wins over the value of maintaining their own identity, because fitting in means surviving. As a consequence, the migrant individuals will decide to be acculturated to the host land culture in order to be accepted or integrated into their new communities (Chan 17). This was the way early scholars conceived acculturation, as a unidirectional process in which immigrants became completely assimilated into the dominant culture as time went by. And it is valid, this was the case for the last decades but times have changed, and when studying these types of sociological theories, we must take into consideration other factors which influence our world today. The current demographic context and the growing size and strength of diasporas are creating what it is believed to be a new sociocultural model for how acculturation works: Reverse Acculturation.

Contradictions to the old acculturation models have emerged where Acculturation is analyzed as dynamic and not simply one of increased assimilation over time and generations. It has introduced the possibility that once individuals become fully acculturated the acculturation process can reverse (Chan 26). With reverse acculturation a fully acculturated minority member introduces the heritage culture to the U.S. society. At a societal level, the cultural exchange starts at the center of the host society instead of its periphery (Kim 359). Pop culture and its expressions, such as music, are sites in which multicultural processes of adaptation engage, along with the inevitable fight for and against the dominant culture. And for historically disenfranchised cultures living inside a bigger dominant stream, it is a place where their cultures can find value again and win this fight once and for all. But for this to happen, these cultures must learn how to beat the master at its own game; how to use its tools to dismantle its house. Indeed, going back to Reggaeton, the Adoption phase within the Mainstream Model required the genre to negotiate between its vernacular Latino expressions and those proper to pop culture. Did it lose its authenticity in this “give-and-take” motion? Is its commodification a living proof of how the Latino culture is not accepted within the United States if it is not priorly manipulated or “whitened”? Or was it an intelligent move from Latinxs which in the end gave them a bigger platform and a louder voice? Sure, Reggaeton, its rhythm, artists and audience changed as it attempted to participate in a more global system but it must be remembered that since its birth, Reggaeton has been a socially, culturally and musically constructed genre by a variety of groups. It's a constant construction, and always has been. If Reggaeton lost a bit of its Latin identity to enter the Mainstream, today it is multiplying it and acting as a mechanism for Latinos to reassert their identity and find a place within the larger society. More importantly it reflects how Latinxs outside their homeland are at all times balancing between being assimilated into the dominant culture - by appreciating its forms and acquiring them - while still trying to carry on with their own identity.

**The importance of Reggaeton interpolating into the mainstream relies on how it mirrors the paradox Latinxs live in the U.S; The need to assimilate and integrate into the dominant culture while still wanting to practice and share their own.**

The newer generations of Latinxs living in the U.S. see Reggaeton as a direct linkage with their heritage, just as their parents saw other Latinx genres like Salsa when they first migrated. But these young individuals understood something their parents did not. With past genres their popularity was either only found among Latinx audience segments or seen as ‘crossover’. The term crossover positions these songs and their creators as outsiders or belonging to a different field. This is also the way American society felt about Latinxs and how they decided to represent them in popular culture, reducing their culture and history to a handful of negative events or behaviors that were attributed to them. Mainstream artists could give ‘Salseros’ any recognition they wanted for their small milestones, but never (or rarely) showed interest in artistically collaborating with them or using their sound in their own productions. Moving forward some decades to our present time, Reggaeton is spreading in the pop genre, getting the top places on every chart, invading popular music festivals and having big mainstream artists not only using their sound in their creations but wanting to curate hybrid sounds with Reggaeton musicians. The fact that they are playing on mainstream radio opens up the potential for the identification with, and reaffirmation of, Latinidad among minority and Latino youth, a Latinidad that expresses a higher degree of integration into U.S. society without necessarily implying assimilation but a mutual integration*.*

Reggaeton is located in a shifting dialogue between agreement and resistance, between the desire of fitting in and the responsibility of reaffirming what makes Latinx culture different, and its flow into the mainstream was ushered by the rewriting of older musical structures and lyrics to make them speak to new, broader audiences. The new Latinx artists recognize past traditions and their own heritage while keeping track with the innovations of the present; they do not abandon the positions of difference and resistance their predecessors articulated but create a new generational identity that reflects where the Latinx diasporas stand; with their feet in America but their heart in their homelands. This said, Reggaeton and its disruption into the Mainstream system could serve as an example of how the master's tools can dismantle the master's house. What Lorde contended was that the dominant system – in this case the American cultural hegemony and the culture industry – would never be truly challenged by its own methods. For her, the only way of stirring up a real change was by using methods and means that were unknown to the “master”, that come from outside its house. But, just as the Trojan Horse managed to deceive the Greeks, Reggaeton deceived those in control of the Musical Industry. By playing into stereotypes, modernizing its beat and finding ways to allude to more diverse audiences, Reggaeton got a platform big enough to turn the game around and start playing by its own rules. This means not sacrificing the use of Spanish in its songs, nor its Latinidad.

While factors such as the digital revolution have changed the way music becomes popular, there’s more to a cultural shift in musical tastes than just streaming and immigration movements. The soaring consumption of Reggaeton content by audiences different from Latinx listeners means a transition in how acculturation processes are taking place in America. The previous cultural adaptation strategy of Assimilation has evolved to an attitude of cultural pluralism where the retention and preservation of immigrant’s culture is allowed and even encouraged and where individuals at the host land are receptive to experience different cultures (Chan 20). Cross-cultural collaborations are increasingly common, Pop stars are working with Latin musicians, and unexpected pairings are churning out chart-topping hits. This is the power of music as a cross boundary expression that directly relates with identity. It embodies the dynamics of culture and creates wider and more hybrid communities by moving beyond territorial and racial identities.

Reggaeton is more than just music, and music is more than just artistic expression. When it is born from the cultural experiences and narratives of subaltern and historically disenfranchised cultures- in this case, the Latinx culture - it serves as a place for its people to not only preserve and honor their heritage but to transform it as their context changes. The current generation of Reggaeton artists took a genre and transformed it in a way that they ambitiously attended to the needs of a more diverse audience by allowing themselves to merge and dialogue with the dominant culture surrounding them. But they did it in such a way that the vernacular values, characteristics and social meaning of Reggaeton were not lost but adapted to our times and to cater the cultural needs of Latinxs abroad who no longer see their identity solely as Latina but as Hybrid after living both acculturation and reverse-acculturation processes. Reggaeton learned how to take a small window in the mainstream and amplify it to extraordinary levels; it learned to use the master’s tools to slowly take over the master’s house. In consonance with Petra Rivera, *“Reggaeton is above all a commercial music, and at this point a thriving, multimillion-dollar industry. But rather than assume that Reggaeton’s marketability renders it devoid of “political” messages* [and] *popular music may appear fleeting, it develops from entrenched historical processes and produces spaces for social transformation*” (Rivera 17). What started as a Culture Industry´s puppet today is a musical and social phenomenon that cut the strings that bound it and is helping Latinxs do the same. Having artists like Bad Bunny headlining at festivals like "Made In America'' ​​or giving speeches in Spanish at a ceremony like the Grammys (and not the Latino version) demonstrates Reggaeton is here to stay and Americanization or assimilation have not taken away its roots. It has given the Latinx community - especially the younger generations - a firm cultural and social platform where they can re-encounter, re- appropriate and fall in love all over again with their cultures. It gives them a reason to stand up to the dominant cultural current that surrounds them and say "this is who I unapologetically am, this is where I come from and that does not make me smaller".

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