

Media event and Latin performance: Bad Bunny at Super Bowl LX and the symbolic reconfiguration of “America” (2026)

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Abstract

This paper examines Bad Bunny’s (Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio) televised halftime performance at Super Bowl LX, broadcast on 8 February 2026. Drawing on the theoretical framework of media events, media rituals and the culture of spectacle, it interprets the performance as a device of visibility and memory that reorganises the ritual of the major sporting event. The staging unfolds a symbolic grammar centred on Puerto Rico and the Latin diaspora: the opening amid sugarcane fields activates a colonial memory; the little house condenses home, community and cultural pride; the live wedding and the neighbourhood party advance a politics of affect; and the sequence focused on electrical infrastructure positions the island’s material precarity within the global public sphere. In its closing movement, the re-signification of the formula “God bless America”, through the enumeration of countries across the continent and the display of flags, constructs an inclusive pan-Americanism that challenges the appropriation of the term “America” as an exclusive synonym for the United States. The analysis argues that the spectacle offers a counter-narrative of citizenship: against contemporary discourses of fear, criminalisation and exclusion directed at Latin migration, Bad Bunny articulates recognition, self-esteem and continental fraternity without resorting to belligerent rhetoric.

Keywords

Bad Bunny; media events; Super Bowl; *latinidad*; reggaeton.

1. Introduction

Bad Bunny, the stage name of Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, ranks among the most influential cultural actors of the post-digital cycle, both for the sheer scale of his global consumption and for his ability to translate local experience into transnational pop idioms. His career forms part of the expansion of reggaetón and Latin trap as sonic industries that have reshaped hierarchies within the music market, displaced the geolinguistic axis of the mainstream, and established Spanish-language urban music as one of the commercial cores of contemporary audiovisual culture (Rivera et al., 2009; Wikström, 2020; Negus, 2019). Bad Bunny has advanced a notion of authorship that combines mass repertoire, aesthetic experimentation and control over his public image, in dialogue with a media ecology in which music circulates as visual archive, staged event

and platform-based conversation (Jenkins, 2006; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). From Puerto Rico, a territory of ambiguous citizenship and enduring colonialism, he has turned Boricua identity into a symbolic centre capable of contesting external representations, and has linked that contestation to a communitarian ethic and an aesthetic of shared festivity (Duany, 2017; Negrón-Muntaner, 2017).

The Super Bowl, the National Football League (NFL) championship game, functions as one of the largest televised events on the planet. Its cultural dimension exceeds sport: it concentrates extraordinary advertising investment, generates cross-cutting public conversation, and presents itself as a national ceremony in which imaginaries of belonging, consumption and power are negotiated (Kellner, 2003; Couldry, 2003). The halftime show operates as the centrepiece of that ceremony, with its own logic of spectacle, choreography and televisual montage. Its recent history suggests that the show serves as a showcase for cultural legitimation, but also as a terrain of symbolic struggle, where identity, race and nation are articulated under a ritual promise of entertainment (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Van Bauwel, 2021).

Within this context, Bad Bunny's performance on 8 February 2026 acquired a historic character for several converging reasons: it unfolded primarily in Spanish; it mobilised a dense Puerto Rican iconography; it incorporated guests with high media capital; and it delivered an explicit message of love in the face of hate without turning the spectacle into a discursive rally (Associated Press, 2026; Chow, 2026; Lopez, 2026). The primary aim of this article is to analyse and interpret that performance as a political-symbolic discourse mediated by the aesthetics of spectacle. It argues that the show constructs a counter-image of Latin citizenship in the United States through representations of home, labour, celebration and community, and through the re-signification of "America" as a plural continent. The performance replaces a rhetoric of confrontation with a politics of affect, and proposes self-esteem and continental fraternity as a cultural response to a public climate marked by securitised discourses around migration.

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of media events offers a key contribution to understanding televised occasions that interrupt ordinary scheduling and concentrate collective attention through live transmission. Dayan and Katz (1992) described such events as media ceremonies that convene mass audiences, organise an exceptional time, and renew forms of symbolic authority. Their account foregrounded temporal exceptionality, ritual organisation and the promise of social integration. The value of the concept lies in its capacity to position television as a technology of public ritual: the live broadcast does not function as a mere channel, but as a device of cohesion and memory.

This approach requires updating in the context of media convergence and platform-based circulation. Contemporary liveness is accompanied by distributed conversation, the circulation of clips and re-edits that reshape authority and memory (Jenkins, 2006; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). As a result, the media event operates as a node within a network of screens. Attention is produced through the aggregation of gazes and the intensification of public conversation. This hybrid texture alters the status of the spectator, who shifts from recipient to participant in an economy of comments and shared signs.

This shift connects with the notion of media ritual. Couldry (2003) argued that media rituals produce the idea of a social "centre" from which what counts as relevant is

defined. Televised sport, given its concentration of audiences and its ceremonial character, becomes a privileged terrain for observing how the symbolic centre is constructed and contested (Kellner, 2003). In mega-events, centrality becomes tangible: the world is organised around a single audiovisual flow, and that flow installs hierarchies of visibility.

The Super Bowl can be understood as a high-intensity media event. Within it, the halftime show operates as a media event within the event, with aesthetic and symbolic autonomy: it mobilises large creative teams and is produced as an audiovisual spectacle with its own grammar. The institutional alliance between the NFL, Apple Music and the entertainment strategy associated with Roc Nation reinforces this industrial character and positions the halftime show at the intersection of sport, music and streaming platforms (Associated Press, 2019; Apple Newsroom, 2026). This industrial embedding does not cancel cultural meaning; rather, it conditions it: the show must persuade heterogeneous audiences and sustain the promise of an event “for everyone”, while also responding to brand logics and expectations of representation.

The halftime show has demonstrated an ability to carry identity discourses and, at times, political tensions, in a form compatible with the ritual. Within a ceremonial frame, politics takes indirect forms: repertoire selection, visual symbols, bodily gestures and invocations of collective memory. Van Bauwel (2021) showed, through the case of Shakira and Jennifer Lopez in 2020, how the performance became a field of media dispute around Latinidad and cultural power. This kind of dispute does not depend on explicit statements, but on operations of visibility: which bodies appear, which languages occupy the centre, and which imaginaries of the nation are affirmed or unsettled.

To grasp this negotiation, it is useful to integrate the tradition of spectacle studies. Debord (1994) understood the spectacle as a social relationship mediated by images. Kellner (2003) developed the contemporary character of media spectacle as a dominant form of popular culture, through mega-events that concentrate attention and produce narratives. In this frame, the Super Bowl functions as a ceremony in which nation and market are presented as a continuum: belonging is imagined through forms of consumption, and visibility is articulated through brands. This continuum admits fissures when an artist manages to insert, at the heart of the ritual, memories or identities that the event’s normative frame tends to marginalise.

Bad Bunny’s case also requires a framework attentive to Latinidad and diaspora. Latin cultural studies have shown that Latinidad operates as a historical and media construction, shaped by stereotypes, processes of assimilation and forms of cultural pride (Aparicio & Chávez-Silverman, 1997; Dávila, 2001; Cepeda, 2010). Within the US cultural industries, “the Latino” is positioned between commercial exoticism and political stigmatisation, and this ambivalence generates tensions in public representation. In the Puerto Rican case, the discussion incorporates the colonial dimension and the ambiguity of citizenship, producing an experience that combines formal belonging with structural subordination (Duany, 2017; Negrón-Muntaner, 2017). In musical terms, reggaetón has been interpreted as a transnational urban culture that condenses politics of class, race and gender, while operating as a global industry rooted in the Caribbean and its diasporas (Rivera et al., 2009; Marshall, 2010).

A political reading of the media event also benefits from theories of imagined communities. Anderson (2006) argued that the nation is imagined as a community because its members share stories, symbols and rhythms of life that generate a sense of simultaneity.

Live television intensifies that simultaneity: millions of viewers watch at the same moment and participate in a common temporality. For this reason, the Super Bowl functions as an apparatus of national imagination, even as its global reach adds transnational layers. From this perspective, Bad Bunny's performance can be read as a re-imagination of the event's "we": the imagined community is no longer defined through a homogeneous nation, but through a plural continent and a mediated citizenship composed of migrations, languages and memories.

3. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, interpretative methodology, close to the academic essay. The televised performance is treated as an audiovisual text with layers of enunciation that include music, lyrics, the body, costume, scenography, choreography, lighting and editing. The analysis is guided by tools from audiovisual textual analysis and by cultural-studies approaches connected to media ritual (Butler, 2018; Bordwell & Thompson, 2019; Couldry, 2003).

The procedure combines description with a semiotic-cultural reading. The principal motifs of staging and the repertoire are reconstructed on the basis of journalistic sources circulated around the event. Reports from Associated Press, TIME, Rolling Stone and Pitchfork are used for their detailed coverage of scenography, setlist, guests and verbal address, and institutional information from Apple Newsroom and NFL.com is also incorporated (Apple Newsroom, 2026; Associated Press, 2026; Chow, 2026; Lopez, 2026; Corcoran & Green, 2026). The interpretation then argues for the cultural meaning of motifs such as sugarcane, the little house, the wedding, the blackout and the flags, and contrasts these readings with academic literature on media events, spectacle and Latinidad.

The essay assumes that meaning does not end with authorial intention, but emerges from the articulation of production, text and reception. For this reason, the analysis also attends to how the event is framed as a response to public debates around language, belonging and migration, as reflected in reporting on the use of Spanish and on the place of "the Latino" within the televised national ceremony (Chow, 2026; Lopez, 2026). Interpretative validity rests on argumentative coherence, descriptive consistency and sustained dialogue with verifiable scholarship.

4. Results

Bad Bunny's halftime performance at Super Bowl LX can be understood as an intervention that re-centres Puerto Rico and Latinidad at the heart of a US televisual ritual, through a symbolic politics sustained by joy, memory and continental fraternity. The analysis argues that the show produces a counter-narrative of citizenship through a repertoire of affirmative images—labour, home, neighbourhood festivity, childhood and civil union—that contests securitised and racialised imaginaries without turning the spectacle into direct confrontation. This strategy aligns with the logic of the media event, which privileges ritual unity while still allowing shifts in the symbolic centre when enunciation adopts cultural forms that command broad emotional consensus.

The performance opened with a gesture of extreme symbolic economy: Bad Bunny emerged amid sugarcane fields, alongside figures that evoked Puerto Rican rural labour, pava hats, dominoes and piraguas (Associated Press, 2026; Chow, 2026; Corcoran & Green, 2026). This opening established an immediate visual thesis: Puerto Rico appears

not as a tourist postcard, but as a territory of work, history and community. The choice of sugarcane activates a colonial memory that links the Caribbean to plantation economies, slavery and extraction. The set condenses a genealogy: wealth produced through subordinated labour and the persistence of colonial hierarchies. Within the regime of televisual spectacle, sugarcane introduces a historical materiality that usually remains outside the event's advertising imaginary.

The initial musical block, organised around "Tití Me Preguntó" and a sequence of hits, set the festive tone and its wager on a global musicality. Rolling Stone highlighted the speed with which the performance moved through urban hits and the character of a large-scale party (Lopez, 2026). This choice carries an indirect political implication: mass celebration in Spanish turns language into a practice of centrality. The show proposes that body and rhythm generate social intelligibility, even without continuous translation, reinforcing a form of belonging grounded in shared affects (Jenkins, 2006; Wikström, 2020). Spanish, in this sense, does not function as a marker of minority status, but as the language of the ritual centre.

In the second movement, the performance introduced the little house, a staging emblem of the artist's recent cycle. Associated Press noted that he reappeared atop the house and that the set functioned as a "marquesina party", with celebrities gathered within the domestic space (Associated Press, 2026). The house operates as a metaphor for the diasporic home: a portable place reconstructed inside the stadium, capable of hosting an expanded community. Within the logic of the ritual, this home contests a dominant representation of Latin citizenship as suspicious exteriority. The house relocates the migrant imaginary within the register of dignified life, through a neighbourhood aesthetic that claims proximity and care.

The procession of celebrities reinforces this operation. The presence of Karol G, Pedro Pascal, Jessica Alba and Cardi B, among other figures, can be read as part of a scene of communal recognition that looks at itself through a global showcase (Associated Press, 2026; Chow, 2026). The selection constructs a plural Latinidad: Latin American artists, Latino figures within the US audiovisual industries, and presences that recall the migratory genealogy of the United States. This assemblage functions as an affective cartography of a transnational community: a network of trajectories and accents converging at the ritual centre.

The show's dramaturgy alternated urban energy with references to Caribbean musical tradition. Pitchfork emphasised the inclusion of fragments of classic reggaetón and the way the set articulated heritage and present (Corcoran & Green, 2026). From the perspective of musical genre, this alternation works as a historical argument: reggaetón is presented as cultural continuity rather than an ephemeral fashion. In industrial terms, that continuity legitimises the genre as a global language with specific roots, and positions Puerto Rico as the cultural matrix of a form that now dominates the international pop market (Rivera et al., 2009; Negus, 2019).

One of the moments with the greatest symbolic density arrived with the appearance of a real wedding on stage, linked to the segment featuring Lady Gaga. Associated Press stated that the union was formalised during the performance and that Bad Bunny signed as a witness (Associated Press, 2026). Rolling Stone noted the salsa version of "Die With a Smile" with Gaga (Lopez, 2026). Within an event that often celebrates an idealised nation, the wedding introduces a promise of future community at the heart of the spectacle and

presents the Latin community in terms of civil life and social affect. The rite also inscribes love within the public register: marriage becomes a scene of citizenship, and that citizenship appears in Spanish.

Gaga's presence adds a hierarchical inversion: a US pop figure adapts to a Caribbean musical form, rather than requiring the Latino artist's assimilation. Chow interpreted the gesture as an inversion of cultural assimilation on the most "American" stage possible (Chow, 2026). In representational terms, the Latin element ceases to be peripheral ornament and becomes the moment's aesthetic rule (Aparicio & Chávez-Silverman, 1997; Dávila, 2001). The gesture suggests a culturally composite America, where the norm is built from mixtures and diasporas.

The segment with Ricky Martin reinforced the diasporic and colonial dimension. Associated Press described "Lo Que le Pasó a Hawaii" as a claim for cultural autonomy within a context of neo-colonisation (Associated Press, 2026). Chow connected the reference to Hawaii with an imperial and plantation history (Chow, 2026). The gesture does not take the form of a direct accusation, but of a musical evocation compatible with the logic of the media event. Symbolically, Puerto Rico establishes an imagined alliance with other island territories that have experienced external control and appropriation, thereby expanding the critique from the local to the continental.

The show incorporated urban references to the diaspora. Associated Press mentioned the presence of Toñita, the owner of a Puerto Rican social club in Brooklyn, and the gesture of sharing a drink with her (Associated Press, 2026). This detail works as a bridge between island and city: Boricua culture is sustained by community networks that have turned neighbourhood social spaces into archives of memory. Negrón-Muntaner (2017) has shown how Puerto Rico participates in the Latinisation of US culture through popular practices. By bringing that archive into the stadium, the show turns the everyday into a public symbol and claims the diaspora as a constitutive part of the mediated nation.

The block built around "El Apagón" introduced a material tonality. Chow described the scene with electricity poles and workers positioned at height, and read the set as a reference to recurrent blackouts in Puerto Rico (Chow, 2026). Associated Press interpreted the poles and explosions as a symbol of the deterioration of the power grid and the trauma of recent hurricanes (Associated Press, 2026). This device turns a political-economic problem into a memorable image and places material precarity within the global public sphere (Kellner, 2003). Within the show's dramaturgy, this stretch acts as a reminder that festivity coexists with structural inequality and that joy does not entail forgetting.

Alongside precarity, the show unfolded an iconography of the future. Reports highlighted scenes of family conviviality and the presence of children as part of the neighbourhood-and-party imaginary (Associated Press, 2026). In a context where some media and political discourses tend to associate migration with danger, childhood functions as a sign of vulnerability and promise. The child, positioned at the heart of the televisual ritual, shifts the imaginary of the "other" towards a register of care and shared responsibility. This operation aligns with a politics of affect: the defence of the community is articulated through images of everyday life rather than through confrontation.

The moment of direct address added a component of political self-esteem. Associated Press reported that Bad Bunny introduced himself using his full name, invoked perseverance and urged people to believe in themselves (Associated Press, 2026). In a public climate that has constructed the migrant as a threat and mobilised imaginaries of

fear, the exhortation functions as an act of recognition. The look into the camera turns the spectacle into a discourse of dignity and transforms the performance into an affective pedagogy addressed to Latin communities subjected to stigmatisation. The gesture avoids directly naming an adversary and, nonetheless, produces a clear cultural response: self-esteem and care in the face of humiliation.

The show's closing movement carried out a decisive semantic operation: the re-signification of "God bless America". According to Associated Press, Bad Bunny delivered the formula, enumerated countries across Latin America, included the United States and Canada, and concluded with "Puerto Rico, we're still here" (Associated Press, 2026). This sequence contests a cultural habit and proposes America as a plural continent. The presence of flags reinforces the pan-American invitation and replaces a rhetoric of borders with a rhetoric of a shared table. Naming countries amounts to recognising their existence and producing belonging: the continent is imagined as a community invited to the same celebration.

The final message projected on the screen—"The only thing more powerful than hate is love"—sealed the show's public ethic (Associated Press, 2026; Chow, 2026). The phrase avoids naming opponents, yet it sits within a recognisable political climate. The show declines to answer hate with aggression and instead relies on a politics of affect that translates resistance into celebration. This strategy remains consistent with the ritual regime of the media event: unity is maintained, but its content is redefined.

Taken as a whole, the performance articulates a coherent symbolic politics: colonial memory through sugarcane, communal home through the little house, civil life through the wedding, material precarity through the blackout, and continental imagination through the recontextualisation of "America". Bad Bunny succeeds in making Puerto Rico and Latinidad function as the ritual's central point of reference: an operation of visibility with consequences for the public imagination of mediated citizenship.

This repertoire of affirmative images acquires a particular political charge when set against the media history of stigmatising Latin communities. The show reorganises the automatic association between Latinidad and suspicion through a visual economy of everyday life: a shared table, music as a bond, family and neighbours as a collective subject. The device does not seek to demonstrate "good behaviour" before a dominant gaze; rather, it asserts a normality of its own and installs it at the centre of the televisual ritual. In terms of mediated citizenship, this operation shifts the symbolic border: the Latino figure does not appear as a tolerated guest, but as a host who sets the rules of the celebration.

The closing pan-Americanism also functions as a rereading of the event's national imaginary. By enumerating countries and unfurling flags, the performance creates a continental simultaneity within the live broadcast and turns a dispersed audience into a plural imagined community (Anderson, 2006). The gesture repositions "America" as a space of shared belonging and, in doing so, neutralises a semantic appropriation that often operates as a subtle form of cultural hierarchy. Rather than a closed national identity, the show proposes an open continental identity, in which the United States appears as part of a broader migratory history and Puerto Rico claims visibility as a persistent homeland.

5. Conclusions

Bad Bunny's halftime performance at Super Bowl LX confirmed the halftime show as one of the most intense sites of cultural negotiation within the global televisual

ecosystem. The segment operated as a media event within the larger sporting media event, and its effectiveness derived from a dramaturgy capable of articulating mass entertainment, historical memory and indirect political enunciation.

The opening amid sugarcane fields installed a colonial memory that placed the Caribbean at the centre of the US televisual ceremony. The little house translated home and community into an architecture of visibility and offered a counter-image of Latin citizenship grounded in everyday life and shared celebration. The live wedding reinforced a politics of affect that presents the Latin community as a subject of civil life and a shared future.

The blackout segment introduced a material dimension that usually remains outside spectacle and turned infrastructural precarity into a public image without breaking the ritual logic. Bad Bunny's verbal intervention articulated self-esteem as a public politics, with an implicit addressee who recognises the pressures of stigma and exclusion. The closing movement, with the re-signification of "God bless America" and the enumeration of countries, proposed an inclusive pan-American community.

On the basis of Dayan and Katz's (1992) ideas, the show functioned as a ritual of integration, even as that integration was framed as continental plurality. From the perspective of media ritual theory, the performance demonstrated that the symbolic centre can shift through cultural action when an aesthetic successfully organises the occasion (Couldry, 2003). Ultimately, the performance operated as festive resistance: a cultural response to fear that wagers on love, fraternity and celebration, and that installs Puerto Rico and Latinidad at the centre of the contemporary televisual ritual.

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