

The 'Cultish' Power of Bad Bunny's Fandom

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From the first time Bad Bunny's songs came blaring through a friend's car speakers, I've been struck by how his music gathers people into something larger than typical fandom, almost like a shared belief system. In Amanda Montell's book *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, she explains how certain kinds of language, repetition, and insider vocabulary can transform casual interest into deep emotional commitment, turning audiences into communities that act, dress, and even think in sync with their chosen figure. Thinking about moments in my own life, listening to Bad Bunny's newest album on repeat with friends and family, or watching my mom arrange a trip to Puerto Rico because she just *had* to see Bad Bunny perform live, I've realized how easily people can be swept up in that same sense of devotion without ever calling it "cultish" out loud. Using a conversational tone, metaphors, and concrete examples, Montell shows that language is the primary source of a group's power and reveals how strategic word choice and an "us vs them" mentality shape belief and belonging in both extreme cults and everyday communities. Applied to Bad Bunny's fandom, her framework illuminates how his lyrical mantras, insider slang, and symbolic narratives mobilize the same "cultish" rhetorical techniques to create a powerful, largely ethical sense of cultural pride and collective identity for his fans.

Montell employs vivid metaphors, anecdotes, and a conversational tone laced with irony to depict cultish behavior as a spectrum propelled by language that forges us-versus-them divides, insider jargon, repetition, and emotionally charged imagery, as in her scenes of chanting crowds in matching attire or shared slang that fuse speech with synchronized action. These techniques underscore her claim that "words are the medium through which belief systems are manufactured, nurtured, and reinforced, their fanaticism fundamentally could not exist without them" (Montell 16). This mirrors Bad Bunny's lyricism, where his song "Afilando los Cuchillos" rallies fans against the Puerto Rican government's corruption with motorcycle-patrolling imagery, "thousands in motorcycles/Patrolling 24 hours," "with the fist up," and taunts like "Marist asshole," manufacturing a belief system of Puerto Rican resistance that nurtures group identity through vivid us-versus-them framing. Likewise, "Estamos Bien" emerged as a post-Hurricane Maria mantra of defiance against government neglect. These repeated lines work like the mantras Montell describes. Fans are not just singing; they are reinforcing a shared emotional attitude and group identity. Bad Bunny also uses a distinctive mix of Spanish and Puerto Rican slang that functions as insider vocabulary. For fans who understand this language, it feels like a direct nod to their identity and experiences, creating a sense that they are part of an in-group that truly "gets" him. In this way, his lyrical style mirrors the kind of exclusive,

bonding language Montell associates with cultish communities, even though it appears in a mainstream musical context.

Another important parallel between Montell's analysis and Bad Bunny's rhetorical impact lies in the symbols and narratives that surround his public image. Montell shows how cultish groups often build powerful stories about identity, struggle, and belonging, which gives followers a narrative that explains who they are and what their participation means. Bad Bunny similarly frames himself not just as a performer, but as a voice for Puerto Rican pride, political resistance, and marginalized communities. Through his lyrics, performances, and music videos, he repeatedly returns to symbols of home, protest, and progressivity. When fans post about him, dress like him, or travel long distances to see him live, they are not only supporting an artist; they are participating in a larger story about culture and resistance that he has helped to shape. This shared narrative deepens their connection to him and to one another, just as Montell suggests happens in other cultish spaces where language and symbolism work together.

Amidst the political and emotional turmoil of today's society, Bad Bunny delivered a powerful universal message after his album *DeBÍ TiRAR Más FOTOS* became the first Spanish-language album to win album of the year at the Grammys: "The only thing more powerful than hate is love." For Latinos, this Grammy win means far more than an accolade; it symbolizes the blood, sweat, and tears poured into building identities in a country that hasn't always valued them, with Bad Bunny's mantra manufacturing a belief system where love trumps hate and cultural resilience reigns supreme. He carried this message into his widely anticipated Super Bowl halftime show, its setlist showcasing creative lyricism, cultural pride, and symbolic nods to U.S. colonial exploits and government failures in Puerto Rico. Throughout the show, he swiftly moved across cultural symbols, from the piragua stand and domino tables, a tribute to jibaros (traditional Puerto Rican farmers), boxers honoring Puerto Rican and Mexican heritage, to the iconic plastic lawn chairs featured on his newest album cover. Montell captures the importance of this symbolism, explaining how "language is a leader's charisma," empowering them "to create a mini universe—a system of values and truths—and then compel their followers to heed its rules" (Montell 16) While at first glance, the decision to include these symbols may not seem so meaningful, they anchor his "mini universe" of values, transforming everyday Puerto Rican icons into badges of resistance and belonging that rally fans into a unified in-group, much like the loaded imagery Montell describes in cultish rituals where shared visuals reinforce linguistic devotion and collective identity.

Social media intensifies this effect by allowing Bad Bunny to speak to his followers in a direct, personal way that echoes the intimacy Montell describes in influencer or guru communities. When he posts casual photos, emotional messages, or spontaneous thoughts, he addresses his audience as a unified "we," strengthening the feeling that they are part of a shared community

rather than a distant fan base. Montell discusses how this direct address and informal tone can create a parasocial relationship, where followers feel like they personally know the figure, even though the interaction is one-sided. This parasocial relationship is intensified by Bad Bunny's choice to use informal language, humor, and vulnerability in his posts, which builds trust and emotional closeness, encouraging fans to see him as more than a celebrity. This rhetorical strategy makes it easier for fans to internalize his messages and treat his words as guidance or affirmation, a dynamic Montell recognizes as part of the cultish power of modern media figures. Despite these qualities that make celebrities like Bad Bunny seemingly "culty," Montell notes that not all intense communities are equally dangerous, and that the same rhetorical tools can be used for both harm and empowerment. She draws a key distinction between what she calls "ethical" and "noxious" groups, noting that "an ethical group will be membership" (Montell 19). This distinction is crucial for understanding fandoms like Bad Bunny's. His community, while devoted and passionate, is largely transparent about its goals— activism, pride, and shared identity rather than manipulation or control. Montell's careful tone helps us see that we can critique and analyze the language around us without automatically condemning every passionate group as a dangerous cult. She also notes, "an oppressive group doesn't let you leave ritual time. There is no separation, no going back to a reality where you have to get along with people who might not share your beliefs" (Montell 82). This is not the case with Bad Bunny; fans have free will to decide whether they like his music and whether they want to be part of the community that he creates. Applying this perspective to Bad Bunny allows us to recognize the cultish elements of his branding and language while also acknowledging the joy and solidarity his fans experience. He is not trying to spread a message of division, but of unity, as is obvious when he closed his halftime show holding a football inscribed, "Together, we are America." This balance reflects Montell's larger point that our cultish nature is part of being human, and that the real challenge is learning to notice how language influences us.

Ultimately, examining Bad Bunny's fandom through Montell's framework reveals less about blind devotion and more about the extraordinary power of language to shape identity, belonging, and emotion. Montell's rhetorical strategies, her conversational tone, vivid metaphors, and detailed examples invite readers to recognize the power of language in spaces far beyond notorious cults. Her concept of "cultish rhetoric" helps demystify why his lyrics, symbols, and media presence feel so magnetic: they create a shared vocabulary, a narrative of resistance and pride, and an intimate sense of "we" that draws fans together. Yet, as Montell distinguishes between ethical and noxious communities, Bad Bunny's movement stands as an example of how these same rhetorical tools can empower rather than exploit. His mantras of love over hate, his celebration of Puerto Rican culture, and his open, participatory fandom demonstrate that intense collective enthusiasm does not have to be manipulative to be powerful. Instead, it can be a source of solidarity, healing, and cultural affirmation. By

recognizing the cultish elements in everyday spaces, we become more critically aware of how language impacts us without losing sight of the joy and unity it can create.

Works Cited

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