



## ‘Si quiere,’ mi Machete te muerde’: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of “This is not America” by Residente

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### *Abstract*

The social problems of Latin America have been extensively examined in diverse fields and music has become a significant way to inform and interpret these social problems. Residente, a Puerto Rican singer, presents his song “This is Not America” that demonstrates a valuable interpretation of the issues that impact Latin American and its people through the song lyrics and music video. Thus, this paper analyzes the discursive and visual features of the music video for the single ‘This is Not America’ and reports on how Residente interprets the political and social problems in Latin America. Multimodal critical discourse analysis has been implemented for the exploration of the music video and lyrics alike.

**Keywords:** multimodal critical discourse analysis, Latin America, social problems, corruption, migration, colonialism.

### 1. Introduction

“This is Not America” is one of the latest singles from Residente, a Puerto Rican lyricist, singer and producer, film maker and one of the founding members of *Calle 13*. The insight to write this song comes from Residente’s experience as a Latino living in the United States. The constant event of hearing people referring to the United States of America as “America” was an idea that made him feel unconformable but was not distressed by this. Considering that America is a continent and not a country, listening to this conception made Residente to think that the scope of the people in the United States was limited. This could derive into the prevalent assumption about the hegemonic positions of the United States and their citizens that make them unaware of what happens outside the land they decided to call “America.” Therefore, this song was created as a counterpart of the 2018 single “This is America” by Childish Gambino in order to address issues that advance beyond the United States of America or the so-called “America” (Genius, 2022).

This paper presents a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MMCDA) of the song “This is Not America” by Residente. This analysis aims to identify the linguistic features of the song in order to interpret how the author portrays and discusses the social problems in Latin America such as poverty, corruption, migration, militarization. This paper comprises a theoretical framework that discusses themes related to the history of Latin America such as colonialism, social problems affecting Latin American countries and the prevailing oppression of Indigenous groups in Latin America.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This section offers an overview of the major concepts that provide context for the song lyrics; it addresses concepts such as colonialism and a brief history of the Americas. This brief history will examine some of the social problems that Latin America has been facing through the years such as the militarization of the governments and migration movements. Additionally, I will examine the current situation of Indigenous groups in Latin America as these are elements analyzed in the lyrics of the song.

### 2.1 *Colonialism and neocolonialism in Latin America*

According to Borocz and Sarkar (2012), colonialism represents a practice and a worldview. As a practice, it involves the domination of a social group over another social group and as a worldview, colonialism imposes diverse geopolitical, economic and cultural principles that are commonly related to the worldwide expansion of West European capitalism. Colonialism extended for over three centuries in Latin America since the initial confrontations of Amerindian peoples and European colonizers in 1492. Stern (1985: 3) explains that “in somewhat transmuted form, the legacies of colonial rule conditioned the contour of social relations, economic life, culture, and political struggle in the nineteenth and, in some regions, the twentieth centuries”. The authority of colonialism influenced and continues to influence diverse aspects of what Latin America has managed to construct after their so-called independencies. For example, Puerto Rico (PR) has an extended and bold practice of struggle for its national independence and while PR has a nationality of his own, this has become settled by making its history, culture, traditions, and interests different from the ones of the United States, the metropolitan colonial power. Furthermore, “the colonial experience has also proved critical in political and theoretical debate about Latin America’s contemporary and future condition” (Stern, 1985: 3). In other words, colonialism has extended its reach into modern society as neocolonialism, contributing to new concerns toward Latin American countries and their independence.

According to Intersimione (2016: 1), neocolonialism is a “conceptual node of great complexity because it links many concerns – or rather, many signifiers of interest to postcolonialism gravitate toward it, namely populism, colonialism, coloniality of power, internal colonialism, dependency theory and imperialism.” This influences the changes and decisions that the so-called independent and democratic nations of Latin America make toward the greater good of the countries. For example, PR managed to become an independent state from Spain with its independence in 1898. While the Puerto Rican rebellion forced Spain to grant the country a relative degree of autonomy, in the same year the armed forces of United States invaded the island asserting that they were liberating the inhabitants from Spanish colonial rule. Moreover, the United States placed a military in its territory, dissolved the Parliament, and established the United States of America in Puerto Rico by force of hand (NACLA). This emphasizes that the colonialist burden has not extinguished but just switched the ways it is inserted in the independent countries of Latin America.

In the following section, I will add a brief description of some social and political issues in Latin America which will be analyzed further in the song lyrics and video.

### 2.2 *History in the Americas*

This section offers a brief exploration of some of the social issues that Latin America faces. These are issues that are faced in places such as Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia among other countries. Furthermore, these issues will be further evaluated in the data analysis below.

### 2.2.1 *Corruption*

Corruption is not exclusive to Latin America; it has become a worldwide concern that affects both developed and developing countries in their public and private sectors. Furthermore, corruption has permeated the political discourse over Latin America and has become a subject of discussion every time the polls are open. Myint (2000: 35) defines corruption as “the use of public office for private gain, or in other words, use of official position, rank or status by an office bearer for his own personal benefit.” Corruption could extend into practices such as bribery, extortion, fraud, embezzlement, nepotism, cronyism, appropriation of public assets and property for private use and influence in business and communication between parties (Myint, 2000). These problems are a constant issue and a major concern for local and national relationships inside and outside Latin America.

The Rice University’s Baker Institute for public society (2019) explain that Latin America has a prominent level of perceived corruption, and it is not showing signs of improvement. These high rates of perceived corruption are related with lower levels of economic welfare and foreign investment in Latin America. Similarly, in the past years around 11 presidents and former presidents in Latin America have been removed from their duties, jailed or are on trial (p.1). While there have been different proposals toward corruption control such as promoting government transparency (Cordis & Warren, 2014; Islam, 2006; Reinikka & Svensson, 2005) the simplification of government transactions to limit the opportunity for corrupt officials to extract illegal rents (de Soto, 1989) and granting protection and incentives to those who report wrongdoing (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016), there is still a long way to adopt these countermeasures as corruption not only affects those close to the government but those who attempt to speak up.

### 2.2.2 *U.S. imperialism*

Following a non-Marxist definition of imperialism, Cohen (1970: 16) proposes that imperialism is “any relationship of effective domination or control, political or economic, direct or indirect, of one nation over another.” Similarly, Weisskopf (1974: 42) adds that this imperialism movement involves “the use of power (or the threat of its use) to establish or maintain a relationship of domination or control over the government [...] of another nation.” This control has been extensively represented by the United States over Latin America in various instances of its story. Veltmeyer (2011: 92) explains that the motivating force of US imperialism in Latin America is clear enough: “to advance the geopolitical and economic interest of the US as a world power, including considerations of profit and strategic security (to make the world safe for US investments and to reactivate a capital accumulation process).” This implies that the USA uses whatever necessary to secure its economic and geopolitical interests in countries liberated from colonial ruling.

This promptly translates in the interventions of the USA over the issues of other developing countries to secure its future as a nation. Unkovski-Korica (2019) maintains that “the United States very openly intervened directly in the affairs of many Latin America states. There is an extensive list of direct American military interventions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Puerto Rico” (par. 4). This points out the resurgence of “advent and workings of powerful forces of resistance to the neoliberal policy agenda and the machinations of U.S. imperialism” (Veltmeyer, 2011: 97). This has allowed the creation of internal conflicts, guerillas and paramilitary forces that have influenced changes in Latin America, and some are still in force.

### 2.2.3 Militarization

Militarization is “a process that has been characterized by the reconstitution of military institutions and organizations as central axes of security policy and, on the other hand, by the adoption of military logic and practice by civil actors and institutions” (Morales-Rosas & Perez-Ricart, 2015: 85). This process of militarization also describes the socio-political situation that is reinforced when the American continent has a bad reputation in terms of stability and security (Ortega & Gomez, 2010). Similarly, militarization is not limited to placing soldiers on the streets but also providing a larger budget for military institutions (Morales-Rosas & Perez-Ricart, 2014a; 2014b). This is a phenomenon that has covered countries as Colombia, Cuba, Venezuela and more recently Mexico. This country has institutionalized the supremacy of the Armed Forces in the field of public security services and civilian security forces to adopt military practices (Artz, 2003; Sierra Guzman, 2003). This militarization becomes an obstacle for the democratic governance of security in Mexico (Morales & Ricart, 2015).

Furthermore, to talk about militarization in Latin America is “to speak of the innumerable military interventions and aggression carried out by the United States in almost all the countries of the American continent” (Ortega & Gomez, 2010). Following the aforementioned US imperialism, this foreign policy of the United States in Latin America continues exercising an indisputable and undisguised control over the internal policies of the countries in Latin America. This exercise of control and power extends to the excessive weight that military has played in the internal politics of the continent through *coups d’etat* and installing military dictatorships (Morales-Rosas & Perez-Ricart, 2015). Unfortunately, the militarization of a state not only places armed forces on the streets but provides the opportunity for exercising power and abuse over the civilians.

### 2.2.4 Migration

The migration flows in Latin America have changed significantly in size, direction and the reasons behind this phenomenon. One thing that has not changed is how the “U.S. legislation deals with illegal immigration in such way as effectively to treat any undocumented worker as a criminal” (Gonzalez Alvarado & Sanchez, 2002: 106). This ideology emerges from the agreements reached between the United States and Mexico when NAFTA was first launched. This program was interpreted as a solution for the migration problem as it would produce much better jobs in the migrants’ country of origin but functioned otherwise. According to Gonzalez Alvarado and Sanchez (2002: 101), “historically speaking, the migratory movements of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean have been closely related to the development of societies in these regions and, more specifically, to economic, social and political imbalances.” These imbalances have pushed many people to pursue opportunities in the United States, risking their lives and leaving everything behind.

## 3. Methodology

This section aims to elaborate upon the methodology that was used to conduct this article. Firstly, this chapter discusses the rationale for the selection and characteristics of Critical Discourse Analysis and the implementations of a multimodal discourse analysis that overlooks this study’s topic and research question. These approaches were used to carry out the analysis through which the lyrics of the song “This is not America” by Residente were analyzed.

### 3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), “focuses on social problems, and especially on the role of discourse, in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination” (van Dijk, 2001: 96). Furthermore, Fairclough (2001: 125), defines CDA as

a form of critical social science geared to illuminating the problems which people are confronted with by particular forms of social life, and to contributing resources which people may be able also to draw upon in tackling and overcoming those problems.

Critical discourse analysis allows this study to examine the meaning of the political and social discourse implicit in the song. CDA represents an interdisciplinary analytical frame of reference that interprets the relationship between power and discourse, and principally it examines thoroughly the ways speakers produce, construct, sustain, reproduce authority, dominance and social inequality in discourse through spoken and written text (Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014). In other words, it may be said that CDA analyzes the internal relationships of text and society and how these shape the ideology of those who use and attend this discourse. There are some concepts that can be inferred within CDA because they figure prominently in CDA studies such as power, dominance, ideology, discrimination, hegemony, order, reproduction, resistance, struggle among others (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018). Similarly, Wodak (1997) explains that written discourse is perceived as a “form of social practice” if it is seen through the lenses of CDA. Therefore, CDA offers the viability to analyze the lyrics of this single and scrutinize the ideologies *Residente* is implying to bring into account for those who listen thoughtfully to his music.

### 3.2 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) “represents the idea that texts which linguists study create meanings not only through language but also through visual features and elements such as images, color, the layouts of pages, through material objects and architecture” (Machin, 2013: 347). MCDA demands the understanding of the way the different semiotic resources are extended to communicate ideas, values, and identities and how these facilitate and restrain several types of interaction (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996).

MCDA combines various methods with the purpose of analyzing languages as well as the visual imagery in a provided discourse. This provided discourse represents the lyrics and the music video analyzed in this paper. Mayr (2016: 265) elicits that “MCDA applies tools many of which are derived from Halliday (1978;1989), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2001) and van Leeuwen (1996)”. Thus, MCDA invites us to harness a range of visual cues and interpret the meaning of the music video through the images and lyrics of “This is Not America.”

### 3.3 Procedure

The procedure for this analysis is carried out through CDA and MMCDA as mentioned above. Critical Discourse Analysis was mainly employed to interpret the lyrics of this song. Using CDA, themes and vital terms were identified; these relate to social and political issues present in Latin America. In addition, these themes are tied into the literature review presented above which discusses specific problems that are relevant to this analysis.

For the music video, MMCDA was used because of its usefulness to interpret visuals and imagery. Some aspects that were interpreted were the relevance of the images focused on the social and political issues mentioned above. This interpretation provided deeper analysis into the lyrics of this song and the discursive features that are used to convey the social issues present in Latin America. As mentioned above, imagery is also discourse which carries meaning. In this case,

the meaning is constructed by the social problems that are present in Latin America. In the next section, I discuss the themes found by carrying out this analysis.

#### 4. Data analysis and discussion

Regarding this section, using MMCDA and a CDA I carried out an analysis on the song lyrics and music video. I analyzed the linguistic features of the song lyrics and the images of the music video in order to identify how Residente interprets and discusses the social problems of Latin America. For this analysis, I discuss a total of 7 themes that provide insight in the topics discussed in the theoretical framework.

##### 4.1 *Las huella’ de nuestro zapato’*: Colonialism and neocolonialism

The subject of Colonialism is a recurrent in the excerpt below, Residente points this message:

Table 1.

<i>“This is Not America” – Verse 1</i>
Desde hace rato, cuando uste’ llegaron Ya estaban las huella’ de nuestro’ zapato’ Se robaron hasta la comida ‘e gato Y todavía se están lamiendo el plato Bien encabrona’o con estos ingrato’

One of the major interpretations of this excerpt is the use of the first-person plural forms to represent the countries of Latin America while he uses third person plural forms to refer to the countries that directly have influenced the sovereignty of Latin America countries by imposing their colonial ruling. Furthermore, Residente asserts that this colonial ruling is still prevalent in the decisions carried out by these so-called independent countries. Furthermore, he expresses that colonialist countries continue to benefit from the resources of these countries and by imposing rules and restrictions to commercial agreements.

##### 4.2 *Los emigrantes sin papeles*: Migration

The topic of migration is concurrently approached in this song and music video. Figure 3 depicts a group of amputated men wearing baggy pants, glasses, tattoos and a bald haircut. The style that is associated with could be considered a gang member. Additionally, this group of men are praying toward the religious image of Jesus Christ on the cross.



Figure 1.

This image can extend into three possible interpretations. First, it explores the imposition of the catholic religion through colonialism that according to Borocz and Sarkar (2012: 3) comes with hegemony, a term coined by the philosopher Antonio Gramsci, which is “a combination of compromise, persuasion and the judicious use of strategic violence – through the gradual transformations of the educational, legal, religious, political and cultural institutions as well as the structures of the public and private spheres.” Second, the amputated men resemble many of the immigrants who have been injured or killed in their way to the United States by riding “La bestia”<sup>1</sup>, where many of them would not make it and suffer serious injuries or even death. Finally, the last interpretation comes with the appearance of the men in the frame. Over the last decade, politicians and scholars in the United States of America have constantly discussed the flow of undocumented immigrants and have argued that with this flow the criminal activities arise. All of this comes with the result that Hispanic immigrants are perceived as criminals and gang members (Ferrer, 2012). This promotes the discrimination toward immigrant communities by placing these labels with treachery and advantage by the United States.

#### 4.3 *Todo lo que robaron: Latin American corruption*

The image represents the conclusion of a series of images where a political figure is eating without noticing a young kid wearing traditional clothes of native groups of Latin America. After this, the political figure cleans his mouth with the flag of Brazil (Figure 2)



Figure 2.

Regarding this image, Residente clearly expresses that this image completely represents Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s current president. A person who started to destroy Latin America by burning the Amazonas (Avila-Claudio, 2022). While Residente states this, it is impossible to convey this interpretation without attending to all the different presidents in Latin America. These corrupt presidents have carried out different actions that wounded their countries forever because of their corrupt mindset and personal interests. Thus, this image represents the constant and numerous abuses of Latin America’s presidents toward their people.

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<sup>1</sup> This term does not describe a ferocious animal or mythological creature but “a freight train, that Central American migrants board in [...] the south of Mexico and that will take them near Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juarez, Piedras Negras or Nuevo Laredo” (p. 9). It is important to mention that this is not a luxury train, and the migrants are “precariously tied from the roof of the train, and this risky path of more than 3000 kilometers will determine that many of those who undertake the journey will never reach the border” (p. 3). All this journey depicts the desire of many migrants to pursue the American dream and make themselves a life in the United States.

#### 4.4. *Las invasiones: U.S. imperialism*

The image below present young kids wearing traditional clothes from native groups in Latin America sitting on constructions made of McDonalds’ happy meals (Figure 3), and Coca Cola cans respectively (Figure 4)



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

From this image, it can be observed that many American companies are overthrowing and flooding the Latin American market with their products. These companies represent an outstanding force towards the control of the market that perpetuates the profit of the USA. The shadow of the U.S. imperialism slowly permeates into the culture and habits of Latin American countries that decide to adopt it. While this advancement in economic interest could be less threatening than a military invasion, this investment opens the opportunity for foreign countries to exceed in their numbers by any mean. This has become an economic invasion. Furthermore, it has not only affected the market in Latin America but the environment itself. Companies such as Coca Cola have slowly increased the scarcity of potable water in places in various places in Mexico (Pierce, 2018). Adopting these companies and practices are breaking down countries as Mexico from inside by promoting depredatory practices towards the environment and natural water reserves that might be crucial for the survival of marginalized communities.

#### 4.5 *Los periodistas asesinados, los desaparecidos: Militarization*

The image below shows two military posing and smiling over a pile of dead bodies (Figure 5).



Figure 5.

In the image, it may be observed that the two military or police officers stand proudly over a pile of dead bodies. This represents one of the many outcomes of militarization in a country; the military has intervened in protests, murders, and disappearances of regular people.



Additionally, their smiles and indifference to the slaughter reflect the impunity that military and police have in Latin America.

The positioning of their feet may be interpreted as a domination or triumph towards the people of these countries. The militarization process has extended to attacks towards journalists and other workers that have been affected. However, this militarization of Latin American countries has taken its toll with vulnerable groups such as students. Cases such as the disappearance of 43 students from a school in *Ayotzinapa* in Mexico and “*los falsos positivos*” in Colombia are just some of the events that replicate their targets and purposes. In these events, students have been treated and judged as criminals. They turned into a number that inflates the number of victims of Latin American countries ruled by militarized governments.

#### 4.6 *Si quieres mi machete, él te muerde: The figure of the machete*

The excerpts and image below, and the image representing Residente wearing a *Machete* necklace (Figure 6) convey constant instances of the use of the *Machete* in the music video and song lyrics.

Table 2.

“ <i>This is Not America</i> ” - Chorus	“ <i>This is Not America</i> ” – Verse 1
Aquí estamo' pa' que te acuerde Si quiere', mi machete te muerde, ah Si quiere', mi machete te muerde, ah Si quiere', mi machete te muerde, ah Si quiere', mi machete te muerde, ah Te muerde, ah, te muerde, ah	Pero ni con to'a la marina Pueden sacar de la vitrina la peste campesina Esto va pa'l capataz de la empresa El machete no es solo pa' cortar caña', también es pa' cortar cabeza'

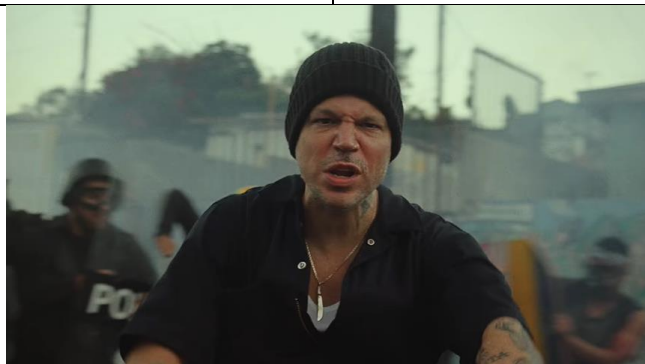


Figure 6.

The *machete* has served as a tool and as a weapon in many historical events through the history of Latin America. Chevalier (1986) mentions in his dictionary of symbols that knife-like elements have several interpretations. A relevant interpretation is the following: “Generally associated with the idea of judiciary execution, of death, vengeance, of sacrifice. The knife is an essential instrument in sacrifice. A short blade knife suggests primal instincts while a longer blade evokes nobility and the high spirituality of, he who carries the sword” (p. 385). Consequently, this interpretation suggests that the *Machete* is an instrument to face inequalities, and abuse of power.

It also depicts a threat for those who do not respect those who govern. Similarly, the *Machete* represents the revolution in Latin America, from the visual representations of Mexican muralism to the *Macheteros* clandestine militant and insurgent organization in Puerto Rico with the patriotic cause of supporting the independence of Puerto Rico from the United States

(Reinares, 1995). Thus, we can infer that the song lyrics propose the *Machete* as the beginning of major social movement for the liberation of the people and a way ‘to cut the head’ of the social problems in Latin America and their main perpetrators.

#### 4.7 Gambino, mi hermano: Intertextuality and One America

The song offers an outstanding example of intertextuality. Bazerman (2013: 86) identifies intertextuality as the “explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has to prior, contemporary and potential future texts”. He continues by adding that “through such relations a text evokes a representation of the discourse situation, the textual resources that bear on the situation, and how the current text positions itself and draws on other texts” (p. 86). In other words, a similar meaning or interpretation could be experienced or presented in new formats.

The excerpt below identifies the intertextuality relationship explained above. Residente takes the single “This is America” by Childish Gambino from 2018 as the source of meaning; it is used to provide the background, support and contrast to draw the explicit social dramas that can be conveyed in his song ‘This is Not America’ and ‘This is America’ by his counterpart Childish Gambino. In this song, Residente does not attempt to aggrieve toward Childish Gambino but to share what happens in the rest of the American continent and “with good intentions, give it to the people and to him so that the American continent would be complete with the song; so, it’s completely addressed” (Genius, 2022). The closing song lyric of this verse: “Gambino, mi hermano, esto sí es América”<sup>2</sup> is anticipated by a long list of social problems and situations that encompass the long story of injustice and inequality that have characterized Latin America and make it no different to what other countries might face.

Similarly, Residente calls Gambino *hermano*<sup>3</sup> because Residente “considers him as a brother as any other African American. He believes that there must be a sense of unity between African Americans and Latinos” (Avila-Claudio, 2022). In other words, he does not challenge his vision of America but adds to awareness of the many challenges that America – as a continent and its people – have been through.

Table 3.

“This is Not America” - Verse 2	“This is America” – Childish Gambino
Los paramilitare', las guerrilla' Los hijos del conflicto, las pandilla' Las listas negra', los falsos positivo' Los periodista' asesinado', los desaparecidos Los narco-gobiernos, todo lo que robaron Los que se manifiestan y los que se olvidaron Las persecuciones, los golpes de estado El país en quiebra, los exiliados, el peso devaluado El tráfico de drogas, los carteles Las invasione', los emigrante' sin papele' Cinco presidente' en once días Disparo a quemarropa por parte de la policía Más de cien años de tortura La Nova Trova cantando en plena dictadura Somo' la sangre que sopla, la presión atmosférica Gambino, mi hermano, esto sí es América	This is America (skrrt, skrrt, woo) Don't catch you slippin' now (ayy) Look at how I'm livin' now Police be trippin' now (woo) Yeah, this is America (woo, ayy) Guns in my area (word, my area) I got the strap (ayy, ayy) I gotta carry 'em

<sup>2</sup> This song lyric translates to ‘Gambino, my brother, this is America’.

<sup>3</sup> Spanish word for brother.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how Residente conveys and interprets diverse social problems in Latin America through the song lyrics and music video of “This is Not America.” The findings revealed that there is still a prevalent influence of foreign governments in the decisions and economic affairs of Latin American countries. Furthermore, the imagery used by Residente clearly expresses diverse social problems that have continuously impacted these countries such as militarization, corruption, and the prevalent displacement of the Indigenous groups in Latin America in decision making and in economic affairs. Consequently, *Residente* manages to offer an appealing interpretation of the salient social issues and tools for revolution in Latin America. Finally, Residente manages to provide plentiful insight into these social issues through the song lyrics and music video in order to invite the listeners to be aware about what happens in America.

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