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## Three Number-One Hits: "Despacito," "Macarena," and "La Bamba"

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## discovery:

# THREE NUMBER-ONE HITS: “DESPACITO,” “MACARENA,” AND “LA BAMBA”

## DESCRIPTION OF SCHOLARLY INQUIRY

In a U.S.-based media culture where English is the dominant language, Spanish-language music has made intermittent gains over the last few decades, most recently with “Despacito” in 2017. “Despacito” was not only the most-viewed video on YouTube that year—it was also the third Spanish-language song to reach the top of the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart after “Macarena” and “La Bamba” decades earlier. Researchers have studied Latinx music in media capitals such as Los Angeles (Kun 5) and Miami (Rivero 20), and in popular culture more generally (Cepeda and Casillas 7), but the question of why these three songs were uniquely positioned to reach the top spot on the chart has not been asked. That question bears on the problem of monolingualism and the relative absence of non-English languages from mainstream media.

This project employs the qualitative research methods of textual analysis and historiography in its interpretation of “Despacito,” “Macarena,” and “La Bamba.” Textual analysis often includes the interpretation of songs and moving images. Similarly, historiography lends itself to the study of artifacts such as *Billboard* charts. The aim is to use these methods to gather and analyze evidence in the form of lyrics, videos, and chart data.

## OUTCOME

This study found that the popular appeal of “Despacito,” “Macarena,” and “La Bamba” was not related to technology, sexuality, or melody as much as their *movimiento*, a Spanish-language noun that means musical, physical, and political movement; indeed, movement is inextricably bound to rhythm (Leymarie 7), motion (Macías 105), choreography (Thomas 34), the body (Slee 54), and politics (Delgado and Muñoz 222). As such, a textual-historical analysis of the songs shows how movement can be musical, physical, and political at once. These three songs lyrically and visually reference movement out of place, producing a historical narrative that all listeners, regardless of language or location, can understand.

Scholars have written about the Latinx music industry, but the question of why select Spanish-language music has gained traction at particular moments in history remains unanswered. In response, this project argues that “Despacito,” “Macarena,” and “La Bamba” were the only Spanish-language songs to reach number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart in its 64-year history because of their *movimiento*, or musical, physical, and political movement. This project’s historical-textual analysis demonstrates how the songs’ musical, physical, and political *movimiento*—captured in references to rhythm, dance, and power, respectively—allowed them to cross geographic borders and genre charts.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF OUTCOME

This study has at least three goals. First, it aims to build on my last project by extending the timeline to include a fuller picture Spanish-language music history in the United States. A longer view allows scholars to make broad comparisons between music and the political influences of monolingualism, nativism, and xenophobia. Second, the study combines textual analysis and historiography as qualitative research methods. In so doing, it shows how these methods are ideally suited for the research question. Third, the study bridges the divide between the industry and the academy. It positions my research at the junction between music industry workers and academicians, opening up the potential for JWU to “expand industry partnerships to provide greater career opportunities for students and professional development for faculty” (Focus 2022 3). The expected outcome is significant because it will result in a publication in a highly-regarded peer-reviewed journal. As such, this study also contributes to JWU’s goal of “supporting faculty scholarship to advance our status as a teaching and learning institution” (Focus 2022 1).

