

LATINA WOMEN STEALING THE SHOW: THE SUPER BOWL HALFTIME PERFORMANCE UNVEILING THE HYPOCRISY OF TRUMP'S AMERICA

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As I already claimed in my latest post in this blog regarding “race,” these are times of relativism by which any strategically essentialist claim dignifying an oppressed group is deemed discriminatory by a supposedly neutral alt-right (Fernández Jiménez 2020, 1; 3). Well, in the midst of this deceiving panorama, Shakira and Jennifer Lopez have shamelessly screamed *girl power* at the 2020 Superbowl half-time show. I



am not assessing this performance as a fundamental pillar of intersectional feminism or as a crucial step for ending any sort of patriarchal oppression; nevertheless, considering what this industry feeds on, whereby women become invisible after 30 if not earlier and a rampant American nationalism must be shown, a 50-year-old empowered JLo covered with a feathery Puerto-Rican flag has given me goosebumps.

There have been allusions of all kinds. The show started with an “Hola Miami” in Spanish by the Colombian singer, alluding to the other America which has been so intently ignored. As writer Junot Díaz claimed in an interview, “Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why ‘other’ it? Why denormalize it?” (Céspedes, Torres-Saillant, and Díaz 2000, 904). Díaz’s claim does not only apply to Latinx migrants which form a community as important as the mainstream one and which has been there for centuries, but relates to the fact that the United States includes some Spanish-speaking territories like the borderlands or Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico—whose statehood rights have been for decades evaded by the administration through legal ambiguities (Erman 2014, 1182)—has had great relevance in the show. The performance has denounced what few times is said: the United States’ colonial condition, explicitly at the point when Jennifer Lopez’s daughter, Emme Muñiz, sang to her “I was born in the USA” as her mother was showing the Puerto Rican flag. In fact, assessing not only Puerto-Ricans but also other Caribbeans as migrants precludes the United States’ imperialist and colonialist condition, as much as it happens when the Indian community of Great Britain is considered ‘foreign.’ These powers fail to assess their imperialist actions over history. As novelist George Lammings explained in an interview for *The Guardian*, “the tactical withdrawal the British now so proudly call decolonisation simply made way for a new colonial orchestration. The Caribbean returns to its old role of an imperial frontier, now perceived as essential to the security interests of the US” (2002). Postcolonial America is a much better term.

Many critics indeed have turned away from diversity or multiculturalism models for analysing the United States’ cultural demography in favour of postcolonial ones, not only because of the country’s internal colonisation tendency (Liu 1976) but also because its effectively imperialist practices—not to mention its attitude towards physical frontiers such as the US-Mexico border. In an interesting analysis, Karen Piper rejects this multiculturalism denominator in favour of hybridity, as Homi K. Bhabha, the postcolonial critic, already did (Bhabha 1994, 56). Piper explains that:

the kind of essentialism that ‘multiculturalism’ often demands runs in direct contrast to the economic and property demands of capitalism in the US. It is not as if, upon entering the US, immigrants are told, ‘Okay, we are a multicultural democracy ... here is an equal share of our land base and economy.’ Instead, while cultural rituals and holidays may be maintained, they are entirely deterritorialized. ‘Multiculturalism’, in fact, is based upon the notion of equal representation and so is easily



adapted to the supposed 'democratic' ideals of the US. Precluding alternative forms of land tenure, multiculturalism instead maintains individualistic forms of private property, essentially leaving the land 'barons' intact while labelling, and thereby creating, a labour force of 'serfs'. These alternative land tenures, however, may be the basis of cultures and therefore essential to their preservation. 'Multiculturalism', therefore, places the non-Anglo subject in the impossible position of having to preserve difference without a land base or means of survival (1999, 18).

Instead, Piper defends that cultures are never intact in this contact with one another (1999, 16) and, thus, claims to authenticity—which have affected these two performers since the beginning of their careers—become absurd.

And indeed hybridity was all there was in the show. Many would analyse Shakira's—who has got Lebanese ancestry—tongue ululation or belly dancing as cultural appropriation but these are in fact—and have been along her career—well researched. The contesting to the dominant culture in the United States cannot be thought of without hybridity. The migrant's hybridity caused not only by contact with another culture but by the inevitable mobile processual nature of cultures and identities the poststructuralist motto of Stuart Hall defends (Hall 2003, 17) has been compared with the hybridity present in any area touched by the hand of colonialism. This is the way Antonio Benítez-Rojo explains the presence of the *corneta china* in Cuba's carnival: "What had to occur in order to incorporate the rough and out of tune sound of the Chinese horn into a rhythm which was basically African was the closeness of the Chinese and the African men in the sugar plantations of the last century" (in Álvarez Borland and Bosch 2009, 1). In fact, Álvarez Borland and Bosch go a step further and explain that this continues in the Americas today, even suggesting it is part of its hemispheric identity:

The cultural juxtapositions that Antonio Benítez-Rojo mentions in his commentary on the *corneta china* are not only applicable to the Cuban nation, but also permeate the sensibility of today's Cuban-American cultural production wherein diverse ethnic and racial groups (European, African, Asian, Jewish) blend to form a fluid identity traceable to Cuban cultural and societal patterns" (2009, 1)

And while Shakira's tongue ululation is "a traditional Arabic expression of joy and celebration called a *zaghrouta*," it has also been read as "a reference to the world-famous Carnaval de Barranquilla, which is held in Shakira's homeland in Colombia" (Chiu 2020). Surely, if when one talks about cultural appropriation it must include a shallow deformation of the culture in question for the sake of profit, this then does not seem to be the case.

When talking about hybridity is impossible that the Mexican borderlands do not come to mind, probably because of the seminal work of Gloria Anzaldúa. Despite the



commercial nature of the event, which may cause the readers' amazement about my defense of it as a subversive performance, we should applaud it considering the current state of affairs at this border in Trump's America and given the amount of people which must have watched the Latina children in cages singing "let's get loud." In an event so popular and which has come to be assessed as one of these things truly American, this is important. Apart from the violence which has defined the Mexican borderlands for decades—"una herida abierta" in Anzaldúa's words (1999, 25)—the show has focused especially on a new phenomenon endemic to the Trump administration: the separated families, which furthermore allows for the sexual harassment of the female children involved (Sherman, Mendoza, and Burke, 2019). The presence of children in the show was no coincidence. Apart from stressing the diverse nature of what will be the American adults of the future and giving protagonism to girls is such future-making—also highlighted with the sign of Venus drawn on the stage—the performance pointed at Trump's family separation policy (Stein 2020).

The commercial nature of the show and its relation to capitalism has been contested by some feminist circles while applauded by others. Many fear that commodification is also at work with Latina products, which only come to be accepted if they fit under certain parameters. As Spanish journalist Irantzu Varela has noted, Latinas have to be represented as extremely sexualised in order to fit this market (2020), particularly notable if we consider Shakira's previous look and rock songs having been replaced by unoriginal rhythms and collaborations with popular reggaeton artists which exploit sexism in lyrics and videos. Nevertheless, this view has also been accused of being 'white feminism.' White artists are never so harshly assessed as being 'inauthentic.' In fact, such authenticity in cultures aligns with the aforementioned definition of multiculturalism by which cultures respond to one bounded definition. Criticism that the show was extremely sexualised, that it was not child-friendly, and that the singers were not wearing enough clothes mostly take place when such artists are Latinas (Cain, 2020.). In fact, Carol Cain interestingly explains that such criticism has not taken place within Latina circles (Cain 2020).

Republican America wants its wives publicly decent and its sex workers hidden behind a veil (they will not defend their rights when needed). I am engaging in the sex work debate because of Jennifer López's pole dancing bit, which has been claimed to be a reference to the film *Hustlers*—where she stars as an actress—not being nominated to the Oscars despite its cinema rooms success, impeccable acting, and careful dance performances, which suggests that it was the topic what did not seem Oscar-wise. Surely strippers or prostitutes have not appeared in a Hollywood film before? They have but usually they were murdered, raped, ridiculed or silent according to the decisions of male filmmakers. In fact, violence towards women has become one of the signs of identity of Quentin Tarantino (Monique 2019), whose nominated *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* has engaged in the tradition of making



profit out of the vicious murder of Sharon Tate (Tu 2019). It is the female gaze towards the state of affairs which is censored. Once again, white feminism advocated for the abolition of prostitution but it denied sex workers the right to unionise¹. Jennifer López's pole dancing has been analysed as speaking for sex work being legitimate work despite its controversies. A radical abolition is a reactionary measure leaving supposedly former sex workers in a stigmatisation and misery situation. A measure which supposedly cares for the well-being of females has never given them a voice.

Regarding the sexual nature of the choreographies and clothes, it is time we start seeing them the other way around. I am not going to deny—quoting Irantzu Varela again—that such “choice” comes determined from what capitalism expects from women. It is not a total freedom of choice but taking what will give them more money (Varela 2020). Nevertheless, this definition does not seem to sustain by itself. In a time when I am used to the fact that media entertainers and pop stars are increasingly over time younger than me, the long trajectory of these women grants an authority which made the two sexist reggaeton artists look ridiculous. Bad Bunny and J Balvin, known for their derogatory lyrics towards women, shortly appeared in the show fully dressed—unlike the female protagonists. Their lack of dancing skills, the secondary nature of their role, and the dull lay out of their performances contrasted with the smiling faces and joy of Shakira and Jennifer Lopez. Despite their sexual slur and obscene gestures towards the women's bodies, their lack of protagonism denoted a change towards the perception of sexuality. At this point we must ask ourselves: what is worse, sexism or sexuality? Some might say that perpetuating such role historically assigned to women derives into our everyday sexism. But once we are aware of this fact, cannot we enjoy it at some points? The fact that the age of these women is not usually that of pop performers adds a different weight to the balance. It is true, these are not your average 40-50-year-old ladies, but maybe the world should learn to assess JLo's pole dancing as a skill for which she must possess extraordinary physical skills. As a dancer myself, I have not been deprived of most of my weekends because of training for the sake of men. This is something that Jennifer Lopez herself must understand from her early auditioning days before becoming famous (Osenlund 2020). It is my humble opinion that education towards the end of sexism does not go through censoring sexuality but through being able of sincerely enjoying our own.

In conclusion, in the midst of Trump's America this performance has come as a breath of fresh air. All the possible topics that could create discomfort among conservatives were addressed in less than fifteen minutes. Indeed “uncomfortable” has

¹ See for example the 2018 controversy in Spain about the conformation of the syndicate OTRAS which the government revoked on claims that a truly feminist government would never accept such measure (in Elguea and Ballesteros 2018).



been the word of reactions to the show. Carol Cain in fact juxtaposes the two sides of discomfort:

Uncomfortable at the moves and well-choreographed motions that served to communicate both the joy and the pain of our Latinx community during the few minutes of freedom we were given to do so. Uncomfortable at the pain of watching our children being put in cages, the pain of our Puerto Rican brothers and sisters ignored and exploited by this government and their fellow American citizens, combined with the powerful show of both our strength and our endurance. (2020)

Apart from addressing all these extremely important topics using the privilege of their fame which has given them the opportunity of being “the first Latinas to lead a Super Bowl half-time performance” (Vanderhoof, 2020), Shakira and Jennifer López have—maybe unintentionally—raised awareness of hypocrisy, probably knowing that their performance would cause controversy and thus creating a scenario which is not uncommon in the present, by which certain fact cause outrage and other, usually linked to human rights, become ignored. Outrage at a film about strippers but not at a stripper strangled in a film, outrage at sex worker’s rights but not at the violence towards prostitutes, outrage at English not being spoken in the United States but not at the dismissal of Puerto Rico’s needs after several natural disasters, outrage at Latina bodies in movement, not at Latina bodies in cages.

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