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Carolina Ramirez Moreno
University of California, Santa Barbara

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La Diva del Bronx: Scopophilia, Counter-Gazes, and Feminist Latinidades in the Artistic Career of Jennifer Lopez

Carolina Ramírez Moreno

University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract

This paper presents the influence of Jennifer Lopez on American cultural conceptions of female agency and representation through her performance in the 2020 *Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show*, and the films *Bordertown* (2006) and *Hustlers* (2019). My research builds on Laura Mulvey's theoretical concept of the heterosexual *male gaze*, or "scopophilia," which explicates how heterosexual men and male-centered films have the power to objectify passive females and place them into the position of male desire. Regarding a female gaze, Joey Soloway explains that it is not specifically the opposite of the male gaze, but a way for women to show their presence and emotions on the screen rather than focusing on objectified body parts, such as breasts, legs, and back. I read Jennifer Lopez as an influential figure who reclaims her feminist agency against social stereotypical categorizations while also identifying and exploring the challenges arising from feminist negotiations of power.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Latinidad, Hyper Sexualization, Sexuality and Gender, Jennifer Lopez

Introduction

As a woman of color, I have identified the lack of representation of Latinxs in the media and how Latinas specifically are subjected to social stereotypes that objectify their bodies, generalize, and misrepresent their experiences in U.S. media. As Molina-Guzmán reaffirms, Latina performers, producers, and audiences are an essential part of global media culture whose visibility has increased since the so-called “Latin Boom” in the 1990s, “when several established Latin artists crossed over into English language markets in the United States” (1). Nevertheless, for Latinas, the gendered media practices that surround sexual exoticness, racial flexibility, and ethnic ambiguity position them as globally consumable docile bodies subject to the erotic and voracious gaze of the United States (Molina-Guzmán 13). Through dialect coaches, exercise, and dieting, among other bodily practices, Latina actresses are expected to display a familiar hyperfemininity and exotic sexuality that is usually associated to normative white heterosexuality (Molina-Guzmán 13). In relation to this oppressive norm, Latinas would appear on TV playing secondary characters such as nurses, maids, and nannies—characters that would stereotypically allude to immigration and class status. However, in current times, Latinas have counteracted such stereotypes by presenting their own narratives; and casting characters that avoid the objectification of their bodies, gender, and sexuality and instead represent empowerment.

Compared to previous representations of Latinas in the media as domestic workers, the twenty-first century has opened more complex representational spaces in which Latinas have become political advocates, global figures, and producers of their own media stories (Molina-Guzmán 1). Such is the case of Jennifer Lopez and the position that she has taken as a role model to current and younger generations of women. To have a clear understanding of Lopez’s

influence in American popular culture and how she has become a figure of female empowerment and agency for some Latinas and women of color, I consider her participation in the 2020 *Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show* and the films *Bordertown* (2006) and *Hustlers* (2019). In both films, Lopez plays the main characters, women that strongly represent female agency and empowerment in the story, and who become central to criticize the sociopolitical and socioeconomic context that affect each character. She personifies women who are part of spaces ruled by patriarchal powers that challenge the female characters in having better social, political, economic, and personal opportunities. With these ideas to expand, my research questions are as follow: If Lopez's ideology regarding female empowerment is taken into consideration, how can the audience understand the 2020 Super Bowl halftime performance as a reclamation of feminist agency on behalf of Jennifer Lopez? How are the performance and films portraying, representing, and challenging the male gaze or scopophilia, the oppositional gaze and the female gaze? How are the gazes connected to the concept of Latinidad, and do the gazes participate in the increase of stereotypes about Latinas?

Latinidad and Latinx Terminology

The term Latinidad was first coined in 1985 by sociologist Felix Padilla. The concept explains that the Latino ethnicity is fabricated out of shared cultural and structural similarities, and limits a diverse representation of people in terms of physical characteristics such as skin color and body type. As Frances Aparicio expands on the term, "In cultural studies and the expressive arts, Latinidad has been partly defined as the ways in which the entertainment industry, mainstream, journalism, and Hollywood have homogenized all Latinos into one undifferentiated group, this erasing our historical, national, racial, class and gender

subjectivities” (91). Likewise, the concept of Latinidad has multiple meanings based on various contexts such as political and cultural nationalism. According to Keara K. Goin, the concept of Latinidad must be contrasted with what she calls “Marginal Latinidad”—a type of Latino identity that does not align well with the ways US mainstream media represent Latino/ Hispanic figures (347). Goin denominates this representational modality as Generic Latinidad, which creates a Latina/o type that is physically adherent to what is called the “‘Latin Look:’ -- characterized by tan/olive skin—a light complexion, with dark hair and eyes” (Goin 347). In my research, I use Latinidad within the context of expressive arts and entertainment, “as a social construct that is shaped by external forces, such as marketing, advertising, popular culture, and the U.S. Census, and internally through the individual subjectivities and communal cultural expressions of people who identify as Latina/o,” as defined by Aparicio and built on by Molina-Guzmán and Valdivia (3).

As one of the oldest and most conventional variants, “Latino” is “commonly used as an ethnic designation that distinguishes Latin Americans living in the United States from those living in their countries of origin” (Rodríguez 146). In this research, the term “Latinx” is used as an intersectional identity term designated for gender fluid and gender nonconforming people, the LGBTQIA community, cisgender men and women, and those taking a political stance that ethnicity and gender exist on a spectrum and are not dichotomous (Garcia 210). According to Christine Garcia, the decolonization of Latino and Latina has two levels: the first one focuses on “confronting and challenging the gender binary, and second, rejecting the silencing and erasure of AfrxLatinx and Indigenous languages by standard Spanish,” which is the colonized language of much of Latin American and Southwestern United States (210).

Jennifer Lopez's Biography

Jennifer Lopez artistically known as JLo or La Diva del Bronx, is a recognized American singer, actress and entrepreneur of Puerto Rican descent from The Bronx, New York. She began her cinematographic career in the late 1980s in the film *My Little Girl* (1987) and later in 1991, she participated as a Fly Girl on the television show *In Living Color*. In 1997, Lopez's personification of the Mexican-Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla-Perez (1971-1995) for the *Selena* biopic made her the first Latina actress to earn over US\$1 million for a film and catalyze her acting career in Hollywood. She also started a period when the public's obsession with her backside merited analysis as a dominant aspect that physically differentiated her from the Eurocentric typical model that many other Hollywood artists had. As a result, Lopez became "a crossover figure between the American and Latinx audiences," which provided her the opportunity to further expand her career with international audiences (Beltrán 72). Due to her growth in film, music and business, Jennifer Lopez has managed to turn her Latinidad, identity, and [name] into a marketable commodity and a brand (Lugo-Lugo 110).

Different Gazes and the Hyper Sexualization of the Latina's Body

Due to social stereotypes, Latinas are categorized through the process of hypersexualization and otherness that classify their body as something different or exotic—the much-touted hot Latina mama. Scholar Malgorzata Martynuska has indicated that this is based on a perception by which the body of a Latina woman "will always be a source of curiosity and fascination as an exotic object" (Martynuska 329). This is due to the erroneous social representation of Latinas in popular culture, which has focused mainly on emphasizing "female breasts, hips, and buttocks to indicate sexual desire and fertility," and which is constructed by

patriarchal models that objectify women in these ways (Martynuska 75). However, the emphasis on physical features could detract from the recognition of the artist's talents and in this way diminish their value and importance.

Based on Licia Fiol-Matta's articulation of "Divascape," Deborah R. Vargas reclaims the term "Diva" from its derogatory reference to women of color who are said to be too much, too dramatic, and too demanding (xv). Such statements are parallel to the information published on tabloids regarding Jennifer Lopez's personal life during the beginnings of her artistic career. For example, in February of 2001, the end of her relationship with the American rapper Sean Combs (Puff Daddy), introduced a new, more racialized story line about Lopez as a celebrity. It was during this period that Lopez started to be described by tabloids "as an extraordinarily beautiful, hardworking but excessively demanding diva" (Molina-Guzmán 66). However, as more of her romantic relationships became public, the diva narrative increased as tabloids would victimize her romantic partners and categorize Lopez as too demanding in the relationship. The descriptions of Lopez as a diva mainly framed her as "no longer the universally appealing Latina who made it out of the Puerto Rican Bronx through merit and hard work" but as a diva "that made her a global commodity that also marked her as exotic, suspicious, [and dangerous]" to those around her (Molina-Guzmán 68). However, these descriptions eased in 2007, when Lopez's and Nuyorican popular singer Marc Anthony's pregnancy became public. This time, instead of highlighting Lopez's desirable attributes, she was framed as a loving mother and wife (Molina-Guzmán 83). Although her pregnancy positioned Lopez as a less controversial public figure in regards of her personal life, she was still targeted by the narratives about her corporality, sexuality and Latinidad.

As Molina-Guzmán states, “the gendering of Latinidad reproduces the dominant U.S. hierarchy of social identity that helps maintain the position of white male heterosexual elites who are the primary, but not exclusively, producers of mainstream news and entertainment,” which is the environment in which Lopez has navigated throughout her career (14). Laura Mulvey’s theoretical concept of the male gaze, which she frames as scopophilia, explicates how males, and male-centered films, have the power to objectify passive females, who are “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*,” placing the female figure into the position of heterosexual male desire (837). Similarly, Black feminist cultural critic bell hooks further explains that because “mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy,” the female bodies shown on the screen, were marginalized and underrepresented (hooks 117). Through the theory of the oppositional gaze, hooks includes the theory of the male gaze to emphasize how the lack of inclusion regarding race in visual representation clearly shows why Black women spectators would develop an oppositional gaze and start directing their own films in order to have representation in the media.

Although Lopez is not a Black woman, the oppositional gaze applies to her Latina body for representation in the media and popular culture. Since the beginning of her career, her body has been classified as different compared to the other Hollywood actresses. This difference is commonly made by the heterosexual male gaze, which diminishes her representation to her corporality and social stereotypes. The connection between the oppositional gaze and Lopez also comes in the steps she has taken to represent the Latinx

community, especially women. Just like Black women would start directing their own films to have representation in the media, Lopez co-founded *Nuyorican Productions*, a production company that has released films that represent topics referred to the Latinx community. Likewise, American television creator Joey Soloway explains that the female gaze is not specifically the opposite of the male gaze, but a way for women to show their presence and emotions on the screen rather than focusing on objectified body parts, such as breasts, legs, buttocks and back (TIFF Talks). My research analyzes Jennifer Lopez as a popular symbol that has been used to define and represent a paradigm of fourth-wave feminist Latinidad that negotiates multiple gazes and counter-gaze techniques in American popular culture, with complicated results that are simultaneously empowering and problematic.

Mexican American Female Advocacy and Empowerment at the U.S-Mexican Border in *Bordertown* (2006)

Mexican women who live by the U.S.-Mexico border have been historically oppressed by patriarchal and capitalist systems that focus on the production of materials rather than the protection of their rights and well-being. Such is the case of the Mexican maquiladoras, foreign-owned assembly plants in Northern Mexico. These factories flourished after 1964, when the Mexican government introduced the Border Industrialization Program and began to offer incentives to corporations willing to locate manufacturing plants at the U.S. border (Cravey 1). Years after, the maquiladora factory regime became the model for the 1994 neoliberal North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Northern Mexico became a processing zone for bigger and foreign corporations. As a result, these corporations take advantage of “the unequal flow of U.S. commodities southward and the uninterrupted flow of cheap and increasingly

feminized Latina labor northward that manufacture goods with no tariffs and at a lower cost to be sold in the United States” (Molina-Guzmán 154).

Bordertown (2006) is a limited released film written and directed by Gregory Nava that portrays the sociopolitical and economic status that Mexican women face when they become workers at the maquiladoras. As one of the most successful journalists from Chicago, Lauren Adrian, a Mexican American woman played by Jennifer Lopez, is proposed to travel to La Anapra in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The reason is to investigate the violence and feminicides of the area, and the lack of support by the Mexican government to the victims. After briefly analyzing the statistics on the number of deaths, Lauren realizes that the information provided by the Mexican news is inaccurate; leading to a bigger challenge that involves politics.

While Lauren is considered one of the protagonists of the film, the story does not focus on her privileged character. Instead, the story shifts to the life of Eva Jimenez, a sixteen-year-old Indigenous teenager who left her hometown in Oaxaca, Mexico to improve her family’s economic life by working at a maquiladora. Unfortunately, after a long night shift, Eva is kidnapped and raped, drastically changing the course of her life and becoming a vital resource to Lauren’s investigation as it is a key event that could directly lead them to the attackers. As the film and the women’s plan to find the attackers progress, the audience can identify the connection between Lauren and Eva and how Lauren plays a heroic role to help Eva and other women in danger.

Although Lauren’s private life is not specifically discussed in the story, she decides to continue on the investigation to fulfill personal aspects of her identity as a Mexican American. After a series of flashbacks of her father working on a farm and the connection that she has

developed with Eva and other workers, she becomes conscious of her Mexican roots. In the following dialogue, Lauren explains to her boss how this experience helped her to have a close connection to Eva's investigation:

“My parents are from Mexico; I am one of these women. My parents came here as migrant farm workers. They were killed... So, I was adopted. When I met Eva, I saw myself. I've been running away from who I am my whole life because you don't want to be Mexican... not in this country. I could be one of the women in these factories. It could be me in one of those graves. I can't let this go” (*Bordertown*).

Although the audience is aware of Lopez's presence in the film, her role portraying a professional journalist challenges the hypersexual physical stereotypes she is often associated with. In fact, there is a limited number of scenes in which her body is portrayed sexually as the center of attention. There are approximately two scenes in which heterosexual male characters subject her to their male gaze and see her with sexual desire. As was previously mentioned, for them she is not considered a Mexican, but a foreigner that should not get involved in Mexican sociopolitical issues. As Lauren, Lopez does not subject her character to scopophilia. Instead of being portrayed by the male gaze, the experience of helping Mexican female workers develops an emphasis on the female gaze. This gaze is transmitted to the spectators when the women in the film support one another once any of them are subjected to patriarchal violence.

In this film, as a recognized actress, and one of the producers, Lopez takes advantage of her platform and skills to emphasize the sociopolitical relationship between Mexico and the United States even though she is not of Mexican descent or relates to their experience. The influence that public figures have on the visibility of social issues is important because they can advocate for marginalized communities affected by social oppressions. After the film's release, Lopez stated that “the idea of the movie was to shine light into the issue of violence against

women” and that she hoped to inspire some change that would create awareness on this violence that needs to stop (2DF). Even though the film focuses on a political and socioeconomic issue that involves Mexico and the United States, through Lauren’s character, the spectators could identify the message regarding issues of femicide and conflicts of identity in relation to cultural and ethnic background. Along with the victims portrayed in the movie, Lopez advocates for the empowerment of marginalized Mexican women and those who have been objectified by patriarchal and capitalistic ideals. Overall, this message is not just for the Mexican and U.S. populations, but also for those around the world who when watching this movie, recognize the critical importance of terminating violence against women.

Reclamation of Sexuality and Feminist Agency in *Hustlers* (2019)

Based on a true story, *Hustlers* (2019) is a crime and drama film written and directed by Lorene Scafaria. The film starts by presenting Destiny, an Asian American young woman seeking work at a strip club as one of her last economic resources to support her grandmother. As one of the new workers, she has less experience in pole dancing, which puts her at disadvantage to acquire a high number of clients. Destiny’s life changes when she sees Ramona performing pole dancing (see fig. 3.1). Ramona Vega, played by Lopez, is a veteran stripper acclaimed by the heterosexual male customers as soon as she steps onto the stage. The scene of Ramona performing pole dance sets her individual empowerment as the matriarch figure in the movie.

As previously discussed, Lopez’s body has been a major cultural shorthand for ideas about sex, race, class, and gender norms. In the approximately twenty years of her artistic career, Lopez “has been seen less as an actress or a singer or a dancer than as a body” (Grady). Although in *Hustlers* she performs pole dancing, the criticism narrows down to the fact that

Lopez was fifty years old when she started learning pole dancing and recorded the film. After the movie was analyzed and criticized, conclusions pointed out on how “Jennifer Lopez still has the body to believably play a stripper” and instead of classifying her body as a fetishized object, some members of the audience are now interested in the labor that she does with her body and the capital that she produces with it (Grady). I classify this film as a visual conversation that points out the female body as a source of labor through the stripping industry and how through the story, it challenges the heterosexual male gaze through the incorporation of the female gaze.



Figure 3.1. Ramona during her performance.¹

Destiny’s admiration for Ramona and the desire to attract more clients encourages her to ask Ramona for advice. Ramona quickly points out that Destiny is new, gorgeous, and Asian—which she describes as a “triple threat.” To understand this description of Destiny, I use Molina-Guzmán’s definition of sexuality, which she builds on Celine Parrenas Shimizu’s work on Asian American representations. Parrenas Shimizu’s study concludes that the sexualized representation of Asian American Women in popular culture is informative of how the United

¹ Image source: Everett Collection.

States makes sense of race through sexuality (65). In the same way, the hypersexualization of Lopez's body is connected to her ethnoracial Puerto Rican identity that portrays her as an exotic figure compared to the typical Eurocentric female body.

The thesis of the film is about how capitalism turns bodies and sex into tools through which women can make money. Overall, none of the scenes focus on the eroticism of sex work or the idea that strippers are just sexy and glamorous. In reality, the movie does not focus on sex scenes. The audience learns about the female characters, their economic and social position, and what makes them be part of the stripping industry. Although Ramona is presented as sexy and glamorous, and as she performs the camera focuses on some of her body parts (rear), sex is not the point of the scenes. According to Grady, the camera does not directly focus on the men watching Ramona or their lust for her. Instead, it focuses on the complexity of her acrobatics and men throwing money as she continues performing more challenging movements in pole dance. At the end of the three-minute show, the presence of men as she walks off the stage is important only to provide Ramona with money (see fig. 3.2). In this way, the male gaze is counteracted by subjecting men to Ramona's physical attractiveness. Instead of focusing on her as a desired object by the heterosexual male gaze, through Destiny's female gaze, we can identify the admiration that she has for Ramona's performance and the spectators can also sense the hard work and technical skill that strippers need to do the job.



Figures 3.2. Ramona at the end of her performance.²

As an independent and mature woman that has worked in the stripping industry for years, Ramona uses her body to attract the heterosexual male gaze and achieve her main goal: get money. Instead of being subjected by the male gaze, as explained by Mulvey, Ramona counteracts it. Overall, *Hustlers* is a film that reclaims female agency and the oppositional gaze because it is written, directed, and produced by women. Furthermore, it is also about the struggles that women go through in the stripping industry and the physical labor put into the performances. Through Destiny's failures as a new and inexperienced stripper, we perceive that it is a demanding job that requires "technical skill, athleticism and emotional labor" (Grady). Compared to the female characters, men are diminished to mockery throughout the film. Women do not take them seriously and they are portrayed as something disposable that can be misled for their financial benefit. Likewise, through Ramona's character, Lopez also reclaims

² Image's source: Film *Hustlers* (2019).

female agency because “she brings with her decades of cultural baggage around her body, around all the ways pop culture has drooled over and fetishized her body, around all the ways people have flattened her image into nothing but a body without a person inside it” (Grady).

As the story progresses and bars begin to lose customers due to the 2008 financial crisis, the worst financial crisis to face Wall Street, Ramona and Destiny start looking for other hustling opportunities to scam men. But the situation gets out of control when Ramona invites new and inexperienced women to join their business and who later partner with the police to investigate the increasing number of men being scammed by strippers. The lack of information from male victims was low because the men did not want to admit that they were victimized by women. The lack of information from the victims challenged the heterosexual male gaze that was used to objectify the strippers. In other words, it could be described as a humiliation to the men because while they enjoyed, desired, and were captivated by the women, the strippers were never attracted to them nor performed in a sexual manner. Instead, they strategically united against them and planned to economically benefit from these men to continue with their lives and future aspirations.

Taking in consideration the tropicalization of Lopez’s overall physical appearance, through this film, the female gaze appears through the admiration that the strippers have to one another. The female characters’ unity and empowerment as they resist against capitalistic power and the corrupt economic system makes the audience understand their need to use their bodies for economic benefit. The film concludes with Ramona stating the following metaphor:

“Look, there’s nothing I can really say to make sense of what went down... Everybody is hustling. This city. Fuck, this whole country is a strip club. You got people tossing the money and people doing the dance” (*Hustlers*).

This last part refers to the United States, its capitalist system, and the hierarchal inequalities and classism people are exposed to in society. In Ramona’s social context, the metaphor refers to the lack of representation that working class women have in the stripping industry and how she has managed to understand the inequalities within these entertainment sectors. Her reference to the lower-class population, how they always ‘hustle’ to have a place in society and get money tossed by those in power—specifically by wealthy men from Wall Street or the big enterprises that profit from the lower classes’ labor—is a clear reference to the country’s abusive relationship with capitalism.

The 2020 Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show: A Message of Unity and Female Representation

On February 2, 2020, during the LIV Super Bowl halftime show, Jennifer Lopez and Shakira, two internationally recognized Latinas, shared with the audience a moment of remembrance of their extensive artistic careers. Lopez and Shakira finished the show by joining their talents to demonstrate what, during an interview, they had previously called “the power of women and Latino representation” (NFL Press). Minutes before the show was over, social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram exploded with a wide variety of posts, comments, shares, and hashtags congratulating and challenging the artists on how this representation had been an important accomplishment for the cultural diversity of the United States but also to critique the generalization of Latinxs. Spectators also argued that this generalization excluded Black and Indigenous folks who might identify with Latinx heritages and who were not represented during the performance. As Petra Rivera-Rideau argues, “the show

celebrated Latina achievement and prowess, a message that clearly resonated with many people. But their performance fell short of its goal of unity.” Some spectators strongly criticized and attacked specific parts of the performance regarding the allegedly hypersexualized corporality and dance movements of each artist. This criticism led to argue that the Super Bowl, one of the most important American and traditional events failed to present a family friendly halftime show.

Because the criticism on social media and the approximately 1,312 complaints submitted to the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) mainly emphasized Lopez’s body and part of her performance, this section expands her position in American popular culture as a Latina and a figure that is associated with Latinidad.³ Nevertheless, I also reference Shakira’s part of the performance to represent how through her Latinidad, cultural traditions from the Middle East and Afro-Latinx descent were incorporated into the performance and interpreted by the American society. To further develop the artists’ position in contemporary American society, I start by highlighting the press conference that took place in Miami, Florida on January 31, 2020. In this event, both, Lopez and Shakira engaged in a conversation about the process of planning the halftime show and the general message that they wanted to share with the audience. The following are excerpts from the interview where both talk about the conveyed message:

Reporter: “What are you hoping that young people around the world are going to be able to take away from this history making performance?”

³ According to the Fox Broadcasting Company, during the 2020 Super Bowl game, there was an audience of approximately 99.9 million spectators and averaged 103 million viewers across several channels and streaming outlets during the halftime show.

Lopez: “The two teams that are playing (San Francisco 49ers and the Kansas City Chiefs) are run by women and then you got two women headlining the halftime show. That statement alone for me is empowering. When I think of my daughter, when I think of all the little girls of the world, to be able to have this, to see that two Latinas are doing this, at this time, in this country is just very empowering for us. I am very proud to be able to set and push for that message.”

Reporter: “There are going to be millions of little Latina girls who will be watching this performance. They’re growing up in a different world than the two of you did. What do you think of this moment? What do you think it would mean to see both of you together? And how do you think it might change their experience as a Latina growing up in the United States?”

Shakira: “...It is an example that anything is possible and the only thing that matters is the size of your dreams. I think that we [Latinxs] are going through a difficult time in the U.S. and it’s very important for us to convey a message of unity and also show the force of this country, how much we have to offer, our culture that is so unique and so diverse too because Latinos are a mix of every race that you can imagine and every culture”.

The main topics emphasized in this interview are female empowerment and cultural diversity within the sociopolitical context of the United States. It is also important to point out, that when both artists mention “this time,” “difficult time in the U.S.” or when they are questioned about this country, they refer to the targeting of the Latinx community by the Trump administration. Both statements delivered by the artists show the individual pride that each one has for their Latinx cultural identity and how important is for them to keep being role models to younger generations. This press conference becomes an important point of reference to identify and analyze the symbolism such as dance movements, traditional gear, and scenography that was purposely incorporated into the performance to denote a message of unity and cultural identity.

Ultimately, the LIV halftime show is read through the female gaze because as Soloway mentions, there was a female presence that was felt through the incorporated symbolism and performative elements that each artist included in the show. In addition, the show can be

classified as a way for Shakira and Lopez to represent their political thoughts on immigration, representation, and aspects of national pride. The whole performance inspires a collective Latinx power as they corroborate their position in society and use their artistic platform in collaboration to emphasize the power and diversity of this community.

The Sociopolitical Message at the Super Bowl

The lights of the Hard Rock Stadium in Miami, Florida dimmed, and fireworks lit up the sky as the audience excitedly waited for the show to begin. Shakira first appeared wearing a red two-piece skirt that included a cropped bustier top with crisscross straps and removable corset while she danced to the rhythm of drumbeats (see fig. 4.1). She then greeted the audience by exclaiming “¡Hola Miami! Let’s go” and singing one of her hits, *She Wolf* (2009)—a song that describes a woman, personified as a wolf, seeking to be liberated:

A domesticated girl that’s all you ask of me...
...There’s a she wolf in the closet
Open up and set it free, ah-ooh!
There’s a she wolf in the closet
Let it out so it can breathe.

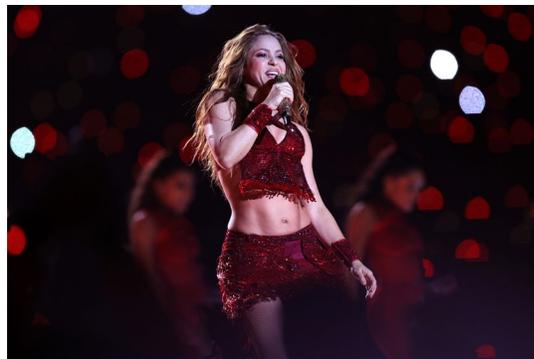


Figure 4.1. Shakira’s entrance.⁴

Shakira’s performance lasted approximately six minutes before closing with her famous song *Hips Don’t Lie* (2005) and thanking the audience in Spanish— “¡Mil gracias!” It is important

⁴ Image source: Getty/ Tom Pennington.

to unpack the symbolism that she incorporated into her performance to understand how it celebrated diversity, brownness, and blackness. First, the use of the Spanish at the beginning and the end of her performance represents the Spanish speaking community not just in Miami, but around the world. As a multilingual artist, Shakira's inclusion of Spanish phrases provides a sense of comfort and welcoming to those able to understand the language. Additionally, Shakira's artistic career leads to also identify the social stereotypes created to classify Latinas through the embodiment of the "Latin look". Specially, because the physical objectifications made about Latinas connect to gazes used by society to develop stereotypes that generalize and classify them as tropical, hypersexualized and with a sense of *otherness* compared to the Eurocentric female model.

As a Latina of Lebanese heritage born in Colombia, Shakira has used her career to represent this part of her identity as much as she can. Although the dancing movements she incorporated into the performance were indirectly criticized through the FCC complaints, her participation at the biggest American stage was a huge accomplishment for representation of the Middle Eastern and Colombian communities. The integration of mapalé, an Afro-Colombian dance; champeta, an Afro-Caribbean dance; and traditional clothing that represented the Barranquilla carnival was a way to represent her Colombian background. Similarly, she also included belly dancing, mijwiz, derbeke, and zaghrouta as notions of Arabic culture that are not usually represented in American society.

Like Lopez, Shakira has been exposed to the media's commodification of gendered constructions of Latinidad, usually grounded in racialized representations of ethnicity. As a result, her body as a Latina is disciplined by the white heterosexual male gaze which uses media

“to reproduce dominant norms, values, and beliefs about Latinidad as a foreign, exotic, and consumable body” (Molina-Guzmán 66). In relation to Shakira’s Lebanese heritage, she has been famously recognized by her hip movements and belly dancing, which she often incorporates into her performances and music videos. Moreover, “for centuries, belly dancing has been mythologized in Western cultures as ‘sexualized dancing,’” which enables the exoticization of brown women (Hadadi). This establishes that Latinas are not the only ethnic group objectified by the male gaze and cultural stereotypes, but in general, women of color from minority groups are usually marginalized and frowned upon for proudly practicing their traditions.

Besides the belly dancing, there were a lot of iconic moments during Shakira’s performance, but perhaps the biggest for all Lebanese and Arab fans was the snippet of her performing a rope dance to the famous 1998 hit song *Ojos Asi*. The entire dance lasted approximately 30 seconds while the sound of the mijwiz, a common fixture in Arabic folk music, sounded during this part. Lastly, social media exploded with memes and criticism when Shakira directly looked at the camera and did a zaghroua (aka ululation in English)—a joyful sound that people from Arabic descent make to celebrate, cheer, or express happiness and joy. The inclusion of these cultural representations into her performances, show Shakira’s pride in being part of the Lebanese diaspora. Nevertheless, her hip movements and zahgrouta were negatively criticized as indecent and directed for the male gaze. Even with this information as a base, it is important to identify that the lack of cultural recognition by the critiques only objectify the female body and erroneously misinterpret the main message of her performance.

Shakira stood up for her Lebanese heritage in a country that unfortunately, is still overwhelmingly defined by ignorance and misinformation regarding the Middle East.

When it was time for the second part of the show, Jennifer Lopez appeared wearing a black Versace leather suit with a pink skirt that was pulled off while singing *Jenny from the Block* (2000), one of her most iconic songs as she stood at the top of an Empire State Building replica before making her triumphal entry and stage take over (see fig. 4.2). This song is a personal socioeconomic representation of Lopez because it narrates her social position at one point of her career. It remarks aspects of her artistic trajectory in which the media started classifying her as a diva (Molina-Guzmán). She claims that even though she is in a better economic position, the public should not be fooled by her economic and public growth because she still cherishes her beginnings at The Bronx, New York. The song's message overall is that upward mobility is not a betrayal of working-class values but rather their ultimate fulfillment, which in the Super Bowl's narrative, relates to women aspiring for better opportunities and accomplishing their goals. It is a motivational message that especially represents how as a Latina, Jennifer Lopez began her career from the bottom, excelled in media and turned into a successful super star and role model:

"Miami are you ready?"
Don't be fooled by the rocks that I got
I'm still, I'm still Jenny from the block...
...I stayed grounded as the amounts roll in ...
...Used to have a little, now I have a lot
No matter where I go, we're from the Bronx, New York.



Figure 4.2. Jennifer Lopez's entrance.⁵

Her entrance onto the stage was the first part of her performance where she symbolically referenced feminist empowerment. Later, on her Instagram account she explained that “The inspiration for [her] entrance was to represent women being on top of the world” (Jlo). As a proud Nuyorican, Lopez often uses aspects of New York to express the pride she has of her roots. She uses the Empire State building as a symbol that represents everything New York is known for: ambition, innovation, a competitive spirit, and wealth. But most importantly, Lopez being positioned at the top of the building depicts the idea of women being positioned at the top of the world—that women are strong, independent, and able to manage their own world and dreams in a society that subjects them to hyper sexualization and sexism. This representation portrays female power in comparison to the exclusionary factors associated to heterosexual male power.

As the show progresses and Lopez transitions from one song to the other, she makes a reference to the female power while performing *Waiting for Tonight* (1999). She performs

⁵ Image source: eelive – Entertainment news, videos, reviews.

acrobatic movements on a pole that was positioned in the center of the stage (see fig. 4.3). Ultimately, before singing, she balances her body, crosses her legs, opens her arms, and just with her body's strength, manages to hold herself at the top of the pole as if she is trying to say *look what I can do* (see fig. 4.4). This part is a reference to her most recent cinematographic participation in *Hustlers* (2019), a project in which, as previously explained, Lopez portrays a veteran stripper who is admired by others for her independence and strong character. This part, also remarks the weeks of physical preparation that Lopez had before the production of the film and how her body, instead of being a symbol of sexualization and otherness, is presented as her instrument to work and do what she enjoys.



Figure 4.4. Lopez's pole dancing performance.⁶

Another symbolic moment of the night was when Lopez's daughter, Emme Maribel Muñiz, joined her on stage to sing a part of *Born in the USA* (1984) by Bruce Springsteen. It is in this section of the show, when the stage was filled with approximately fifty girls that danced and sat down inside circular and luminated cages (WW) (see fig. 4.5 and 4.6). Taking into consideration the sociopolitical circumstances of the country at the moment, under Trump's administration, this part could depict the situation that thousands of minors are living at the

⁶ Image source: Getty Images

U.S.-Mexico border. It symbolically portrays the children at detention centers and the dehumanizing treatment that families are experiencing under the racism inculcated by this administration. The song *Born in the USA* along with Lopez wearing a double-sided U.S. and Puerto Rican flag, shows her Puerto Rican pride and possibly the lack of representation that the island has in U.S. politics (see fig. 4.7). The inclusion of children in illuminated cages is an ambiguous depiction of immigration that people around the world could identify with. As spectators, we should not assume that this symbolism just represents Mexicans and Central Americans, but that it depicts a broader message of immigration and the position that children have in the country.



Figure 4.5. Aerial view of the 2020 halftime show stage.⁷

Figure 4.6 Girls' entrance to the stage.



Figure 4.7. Jennifer Lopez and her daughter.⁸

⁷ Image source (Figure 4.5 and 4.6): “Shakira & J.Lo’s FULL Pepsi Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show.”

⁸ Image source: eelive – Entertainment news, videos, reviews.

Even if the message of the halftime show was shared and clarified prior to the performance and some people were able to identify it during the show, it was wrongly misinterpreted by some spectators, leading to criticism and complaints at a national level. The following is one of the comments submitted to the FCC that categorized the performance as pornographic, inappropriate and that also promoted child abuse:

Jennifer Lopez was sleazy, and it was totally inappropriate for a network show. I felt like I was at an adult Vegas show. I couldn't keep watching and had to leave the room and take the kids with me. This show needs a R+ rating. In the MeToo generation this was just asking for trouble – Viewer from Utah.

Based on this viewer's interpretation of the show, Jennifer Lopez is described as immoral. The complaint is exaggerated in the way that it compares a national and international television event to the entertainment of Las Vegas, a city known for its entertainment and nightlife. In relation to the films previously presented, this critique indirectly makes a reference to the work of the body as a tool to obtain profits. It seems that the user misinterprets this labor as negative. The reference to the MeToo movement only demonstrates the lack of knowledge on feminism and how this social movement against sexual abuse continues to be misinterpreted by members of the public. The reference "asking for trouble" automatically positions women as the culprit of being assaulted primarily by men.

How can we possibly tell men/boys to respect women, to see them more than sex toys when they showcase this kind of thing as something worthy of female aspiration? – Viewer from Peoria, Illinois.

The previous comments do not make a direct connection to Lopez's or Shakira's ethnicity, however, they focus on how social stereotypes present Latinas as hypersexual (Rivera-Rideau). These complaints resembled how the male gaze is still being normalized and trained in popular culture to understand female work.

The comments reflect the heterosexual male gaze, which constructs the stereotypes about Latinas and emphasis on their body. However, much of the conversation around the performance was filled with praise for representing aspects of the Latinx culture, specifically from Colombia and Puerto Rico, along with the inclusion of girls on one of the most important stages of the United States. As was mentioned during the press conference, the message of the show was also geared toward younger generations of girls who can look up to Jennifer Lopez and Shakira as role models—not specifically for becoming artists, but for dreaming big and accomplishing personal goals.

Conclusion: Interpretation of the Gazes Regarding Female Agency

Since I started the development of this research paper, I have identified how the participation and visibility of Latinas in American popular culture have increased and will continue to do so. Unfortunately, the Latina body keeps being classified by stereotypes that erroneously represent the diversity that exists within the Latinx community and the value that they have as individuals. Based on this brief analysis of Jennifer Lopez's career, audiences can understand how this iconic Latina has been recognized by her body and sexuality. Through *Bordertown* (2006), *Hustlers* (2019), and the LIV halftime show, Lopez has had the ability to counteract the negative and sexual classifications of her body to send messages of feminist empowerment and motivation to all those who could identify with the goal. Through this project, the audience can understand that some aspects in popular culture are seen differently by each spectator. These are based on their experiences, thoughts, and opinions. However, something that we can clearly identify is how scopophilia is a factor that is still present in society when appreciating the presence of a female body.

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