

Article

Let's Get Loud: Intersectionally Studying the Super Bowl's Halftime Show

Sofie Van Bauwel ^{1,*} and Tonny Krijnen ²

¹ Department of Communication Sciences, Centre for Cinema and Media Studies, Ghent University, Belgium;
E-Mail: sofie.vanbauwel@ugent.be

² Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands; E-Mail: krijnen@eshcc.eur.nl

* Corresponding author

Submitted: 5 February 2021 | Accepted: 27 April 2021 | Published: 13 September 2021

Abstract

The study of popular culture has always been closely related to the study of class, gender, race, and sexuality. An increasing number of authors have called for an intersectional approach. However, the contradictory, fluid meanings articulated in popular culture render such an approach difficult, and many ignore the call for intersectional analysis. We will not. We will try to engage with an intersectional analysis of popular culture, using Shakira and Jennifer Lopez's performance at the 2020 Super Bowl Halftime Show as a case to study the intersections of identity markers. We aim to bridge the different meanings attributed to their performance and to understand them as different elements in the intersectional configuration. A discourse analysis of the performance, and of reviews thereof, was performed to unravel five elements highlighted in the discourse: the quality of the show, Shakira and Lopez's empowered performances, the incorporation of Latinidad elements, the performers' sexiness, and perceived political messages. Our aim to understand how the contradictory discourses about these elements arose urges the reader to use listening to grapple with the complexity of intersectional analysis. Truly listening includes putting effort into opening up academic cultures, finding other voices. It is important to recognize global gender inequity, but we need to start investing far more to understand the politics of media representations as a transnational affair that causes multiple conceptions of gender (and other related) concepts to clash, mesh, and integrate.

Keywords

discourse analysis; intersectionality; Latinidad; listening; popular culture; Super Bowl Halftime Show

Issue

This article is part of the issue "From Sony's Walkman to RuPaul's Drag Race: A Landscape of Contemporary Popular Culture" edited by Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands), Frederik Dhaenens (Ghent University, Belgium) and Niall Brennan (Fairfield University, USA).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

The study of popular culture, everyday life culture, has always been closely related to the study of class, gender, race, and sexuality. Popular culture is political and forms the arena in which the meanings of the aforementioned identity markers are established, negotiated, contested, and refuted. Recently, an increasing number of authors have argued that we can understand gender, class, race, age, (dis)ability, and sexuality only in relation to popular culture within a full intersectional configuration (Collins

& Bilge, 2016). In other words, to fully understand the political meaning of popular culture in relation to gender, age, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and so on, we need to understand that all these factors, including the markers not listed here, mutually inform each other. However, adopting an intersectional approach is often called for but seldom carried out, and hence, the adage is often honoured in the breach, perhaps because of the contradictory, fluid meanings articulated in popular culture. As Hermes and Kopitz (2021) recently argued, as popular culture scholars, we aim to be open to new ideas

and opinions but find it simultaneously challenging to be open to “definitions, intuitions and experiences that are diametrically opposed to [our] own” (p. 3).

Hence, in this contribution, we challenge ourselves by engaging in an intersectional analysis of popular culture. How do we understand gendered genres of popular culture if gender is a dynamic, fluid concept that exists only because it is articulated as such? Our case study of Shakira and Jennifer Lopez’s performance at the 2020 Super Bowl Halftime Show investigates the intersections of identity markers in this media representation. Questioning the discourses about this performance, we will focus on the political understanding of Shakira and Lopez’s gendered performance from an intersectional perspective. With this case study we want to illustrate how we can understand popular culture in relation to gender.

This case, we feel, illustrates eloquently the contradictory meanings articulated in popular culture. The performance by both artists generated lively debate on different topics: sexuality, gender, race, and political messages that were read into their performance. The Federal Communication Commission received over 1,300 complaints about the performance. These complaints ranged from references to the #MeToo movement and sex trafficking to calls to boycott Pepsi and the Super Bowl for the “overly sexual character” of the performance, which complainants considered unsuitable for the Super Bowl Halftime Show. However, other voices argued for other, deeper meanings in the show that supposedly criticized child trafficking or the captivity of people of colour. These contradictory responses exemplify the current complexity of gender’s relations with popular media culture and are embedded in shifting formations of power (Hedge, 2011).

Additionally, the Super Bowl itself, televised globally, is a showcase of popular culture experienced by a large audience. Already in 1975, Michael Real discussed the Super Bowl as a mythic spectacle, claiming it reveals American values and ideology. Real (1975) elaborated on this claim from different angles, including social structures: “If one wanted to create from scratch a sport that reflected the sexual, racial, and organisational priorities of American social structure, it is doubtful that one could improve on football” (p. 38). Thus, the Super Bowl Halftime Show is an inherently American pop culture product that forms the context and arena for the contradictory processes of sensemaking surrounding Shakira and Jennifer Lopez’s performance. In our analysis, we aim to bridge the different opinions and meanings attributed to their performance and to understand them as different elements in the intersectional configuration that positions both artists as female, famous, Latina, middle aged, and sexual. Hence, we will not argue for “right” or “wrong,” “informed” or “disinformed.” Rather, we will return to what we understand as the root of the study of popular culture: Understanding everyday culture and its political meanings.

2. Intersectional Representations in the Popular

Rincón et al. (2020) stated, “Together, Lopez and Shakira underscore the inherently relational, dynamic character of Latinidad” (p. 302), thus drawing attention to the intersectional understanding of both artists’ identities as female, Latina, middle aged, sexual beings. Shakira, Rincón et al. (2020) argued, is not to be understood in the same way as Lopez, and neither should their (il)legible political stances during the Halftime Show as they are subject of the debate. Rincón et al. (2020), hence, explicitly argued for an intersectional approach to the performance, or what Collins and Bilge (2016) called intersectionality, as an analytical tool, a way to grapple with complexity.

In her book *The Gender of Latinidad: Uses and Abuses of Hybridity*, Angharad N. Valdivia (2020) argued that Latinidad is a “broad multiplicitous and diverse category of ethnicity that is pan-national, multi-ethnic, intersectional, and transnational” (p. 2). Latinidad is a complex, hybrid, and unstable construct that has become more visible in transnational media content over the last five years. This hybridity is represented through gendered bodies and is, according to Valdivia, often equated with the Latina bodies in mainstream culture, where these bodies are “sexualized or relegated to abnegation narratives such as spitfires and dedicated asexual mothers” (Valdivia, 2020, p. 11), but a nuanced and layered conceptualisation is needed.

In feminist media studies, the need for complexity has been part of the debate for a few decades in two respects. On the one hand, a post-structuralist notion of gender draws attention to essentialist conceptions of sex and gender. On the other hand, complexity is more directly discussed in terms of intersectionality, initially drawing attention to the white gaze that was/is inherent in feminist media studies on popular culture but also focussing on the intersection of gender with sexuality. Feminist media studies of gender representations have moved “beyond the heteronormative and sexist” in their analysis of contemporary sex and gender scripts in popular media (Ross, 2012, p. xxi). The complexity of gender mostly draws on the work of Judith Butler (1990), who criticized the sex/gender dichotomy and the essentialist notions that underlie this dichotomy. As Butler (1990) and others have argued, both gender and sex are fluid notions, dynamic constructs. Hence, gender and sex are subject to change on an individual and social level. Understanding both sex and gender as notions on a continuum, which is also subject to change, over one’s life span not only challenges social and societal structures invested in maintaining the status quo but also contributes to complexity in the analysis of gender and sex. Rebecca Kern (2012) pointed out that gender is not static but rooted in gendered processes. It is an act of bodily repetitions where the body becomes a site of discursive practices. These bodily gendered processes relate to the notion of performativity (Butler, 1993). Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) explained that:

Performativity does not mean that gender is something you put in the morning and take off when you go to sleep. Rather, gender is assigned to the body through performativity. Our ways of doing gender produce something real, they construct meanings of gender inscribed to the body. (p. 6)

From 2000 onwards, scholarly work on gender and media has been using—and further developing—Butler’s work on gender identity performativity to analyse the articulations of gendered intersections in and by media, as in the work of Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi (2012), who studied Dutch Moroccan girls and their performance on instant messaging sites. Leurs and Ponzanesi found “intersectional constitution of selves through language in its focus has been on the wider context of power relations” (2012, p. 450). As in the work of Leurs and Ponzanesi (2012), power and power relations are an important element in the case study. Feminist media scholars have built on the work of Teresa De Lauretis (1987), where subject positions become important, and the historical and political contexts in which these subjectivities are constructed are intersectional, multiple, fluid, and contradictory (Dhoest & Simons, 2012). De Lauretis (1987) pointed out that gender is constructed by various technologies of gender (for example media representations), which control and reproduce the social meaning of gender. The contextual aspect of power in the analysis of gendered representations and their intersections is also important; for instance, Cynthia Carter (2012) noted the differences in representational status of different femininities. How, then, do we understand gendered genres of popular culture if gender is a dynamic, fluid concept that only exists because it is articulated as such? Though such complexity poses challenges, Butler’s work is vital in understanding contemporary heated debates and activism challenging the power structures invested in maintaining a sex/gender dichotomy. Two examples that illustrate the political meaning of transgressing the sex/gender dichotomy are the #MeToo movement and the transgender movement, whose voice grows louder every day.

Another layer of complexity is added by black feminist scholars, who criticised feminist media studies scholars on the white gaze embedded in their work, a perspective that has been broadened and fleshed out and is currently known as intersectionality. Collins and Bilge (2016) showed the presence of multiple narratives of intersectionality, and how intersectional perspectives are formulated in multiple places at multiple times. For our purposes, while we do not need to trace the history of the concept, it is essential to understand intersectionality’s contribution to the complexity of feminist analysis. As Rincón et al. (2020) showed, Lopez, “As a Puerto Rican from the Bronx... and [its] historically established Latina/o/x community” (p. 302), has unquestioned Latinidad status. Shakira, however, who was born in Colombia and is of Lebanese descent, takes a different

position. Thus, even though both artists are women and Latina, they are not treated equally in (American) society. For both artists, the power configurations are specifically situated in their particular positions. Importantly, both Shakira and Lopez are part of popular culture, the arena in which these power configurations are articulated, negotiated, and contested.

As Phoenix and Pattynama explained (2006), intersectionality is used in many different ways, but the power, inequality, structure, and process of othering is always part of the conceptualisation. Intersectionality highlights the different positions of people rooted in sets of complex identities. Introducing the concept, Kimberley Crenshaw (1989) focussed on the oppression of African Americans. Later, intersectionality was used to relate power to a set of experiences based on a complex set of identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and disability. Now, most contemporary work on gender from a feminist perspective engages with intersectionality. According to Bachmann et al. (2018), a major criticism of earlier feminist perspectives was its failure to address the intersectional nature of gender. Gender identities should always be understood in relation to class, age, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. We will use this conceptualisation to use an intersectional approach to examine gender identities and the way they are linked to power configurations. Because the body is an important signifier for identities in popular culture, it is also important to conceptualize the body as inherently intersectional, as the body is always signified and “embodies” in relation to other bodies. However, while most of the bodies on display in popular culture belong to women, this discourse argues that these bodily representations preserve patriarchal and heteronormative hegemony (Wallis, 2011). Bodies have a colour, a dis-ability, are gendered and aged, and are often the first signifier to read into gendered identities. Mediated performances like the Super Bowl Halftime Show are considered as popular culture because they attract very large audiences through transnational media representation. They are also widely discussed on social and traditional media around the globe. What are the dominant tropes around the representation of Shakira and Jennifer Lopez’s Super Bowl Halftime Show?

This case study illustrates how we can understand popular culture in relation to gender. Transnational media environments—including media content and representations—can be seen as pathways to understand the constructions of gender across the globe (Hedge, 2011). Representations of bodies are often strong tropes of gender identity. The body, in this respect, could be seen as a site on which culture plays itself out (Barker, 2000; Weiss, 1999), and the increasing representations of the body as spectacle in popular culture contribute to the importance of the study of gender representations and performances in popular culture. For example, Valdivia (2010) studied Jenifer Lopez back in 2010 as an example of the spectacular

Latina in the way she was overexposed in contrast to the Latino. These kinds of gender spectacles are not new to popular culture in general nor to the Super Bowl Halftime Shows. Controversy around the performances during the Super Bowl halftime has become a tradition, and these performances are always gendered and disruptive. From the 1990s onwards, the Halftime Show began to present pop music acts and created several controversies around these performances. For example, during the performance of Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake in the Super Bowl XXXVIII Halftime Show in 2004—now referred to as Nipplegate—Justin Timberlake exposed one of Janet Jackson’s breasts for approximately half a second. In the Super Bowl XLVII Halftime Show in 2013, the performance of Beyoncé was also criticized, including the lace-and-leather bodysuit, which critics described as black-leather dominatrix wear. These two examples exemplify the controversy, critique, and the comments female performers are subject to, similar to those aimed at the performance of Lopez and Shakira.

3. Method

Our analysis engaged with multiple materials. First, we examined the Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show in 2020, which lasts approximately 15 minutes. The show was directed by Hamish Hamilton and featured Jennifer Lopez and Shakira as the main performers. Bad Bunny, J Balvin, and Emme Muñiz are listed as special guests. We viewed the show four times on YouTube (Trapeton 2020, 2020) and read blogposts and commenting sections in popular magazines and news outlets addressing this Halftime Show. This selection is not exhaustive as it is impossible to identify every opinion voiced on the web about this show. Rather, we looked for explicit opinions and interpretations of Shakira and Lopez’s performance, as we aim to understand contradictions, not to show the complete range of opinions. We analysed a range of texts about the show: five blogposts (Stace.com, Feminist Current, Pop Sugar, Refinery29, and BuzzFeed); four popular magazines (*Mr Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *Deadline Hollywood*, and *Entertainment Weekly*); and five news outlets (*USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Morning Call*). We worked on the basis that grounded theory and data are conceptualised as a site of ideological negotiations, and once we saw the same discourses, arguments, strategies, and arguments reoccurring, we stopped looking for more public discourses.

These two types of data were subjected to a Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1976) in order to answer three specific questions: 1) What is the political understanding of Shakira’s and Lopez’s gender from an intersectional perspective?; 2) Which strategies are employed to maintain the boundaries of these understandings?; and 3) Which subject positions can we distinguish within this discourse?

Instead of relying on fixed procedures, many contemporary scholars who use Foucauldian discourse ana-

lysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) share a common analytic language that is shaped by insights from hermeneutics, semiotics, deconstruction, and film analysis. A Foucauldian discourse analysis looks for latent meanings of a text and relates them to the social construction of reality (Larsen, 2002). We started with a semiotic analysis of the media text (i.e., the performance itself) by inductively and thematically coding the text complemented by a discourse analysis of the public discourses, which was also thematically coded. These codes were identified by re-reading the data (media text of the performance and discourse on the performance); the codes exist both at the surface (what is physically present in a text) and at a deeper level of meaning-making (the connotative meanings). First, we looked at the general descriptive elements, and second, we analysed the denotative meanings and the presence of the different elements and topics, using the following codes: gender, ethnicity, colour, sexuality, age, and empowerment.

We believe that, as researchers and feminist media scholars, we are both qualified to conduct such analysis. We were (academically) born and raised in the decades in which the study of popular culture was no longer obscure and in which it had become commonplace for a woman to acquire an academic education. We are in the same age range as Lopez and Shakira and have both followed their careers from their outsets. Our initial response to the uproar that their performance caused was lukewarm, and we viewed it as ageism, sexism, and racism. As with Janet Jackson’s Nipplegate in the 2004 Halftime Show, we were wary. Moreover, we are also continuously astounded by the increasing visibility of this sexism, racism, and ageism. Hence, we felt it was time to honour the adage of complex analysis. How do these understandings arise? How do they relate to everyday culture? Has society really changed that much over the decades with regard to these power configurations? While we may not be able to answer all these questions, we might be able to fulfil our expectations and bridge subject positions instead of denying or rejecting them (cf. Hermes & Kopitz, 2021). Next, we will discuss the analysis of the discourses, including the representation of the show: Both the representation and the public discourses on the show are connected, and analysing them together will deepen our understanding of the gendered representation, the strategies used to discuss the performance, and how they are linked to the subject positions within the text.

4. Female Spectacle and the Polarised Debate

The Super Bowl Halftime Show opened with Shakira performing in a red two-piece suit; she later changed to a gold outfit. Accompanied by female and male dancers, and later by rapper Bad Bunny, Shakira performed some of her songs and her trademark belly dancing, mapalé and champeta (Afro-Colombian dance styles), and the traditional Arabic zaghrouta (high-pitched vocal sound).

Hence, Shakira integrated various elements related to her Lebanese-Colombian background. After Shakira, Jennifer Lopez entered the stage in a black leather bodysuit, reminiscent of BDSM, which was later replaced by a sparkly silver outfit. Notably, during one of her songs, she wore a feather cape depicting the Puerto Rican and American flags. Lopez was accompanied by female dancers, the performer J Balvin, and a children's choir (including her own daughter) who were sitting in stylized "cages." During the show, she performed some of her songs and pole danced (Exposito, 2020). The so-called sexual spectacle of the performance became controversial due to the specific interaction with the camera of both J. Lo and Shakira, who were shaking their behinds while bending down. This intimate interaction between body and camera could be seen as the spectacle at work. This becomes significant because the audiences are constructed out of watching this particular television content broadcasted or streamed and not by live attending the Super Bowl.

In general, the responses to both performances were positive, highlighting five elements: the quality of the show; Shakira's and Lopez's empowered performances; the incorporation of Latinidad elements; their sexiness (though usually in combination with mentioning their age and fitness); and, finally, perceived political messages incorporated in the performances of both artists. However, discourses on each on each of these elements were contradictory. We discuss the five elements to achieve an intersectional analysis of the show.

First, the overall quality of the show was mostly lauded. Reviews on popular sites such as *Rolling Stone* (Exposito, 2020), CNN (Respers France, 2020), and Shape.com raved about the show. However, others described their performance as mediocre. For example, a commenter in *The Washington Post* site wrote, "Let's go on continuing to celebrate mediocrity in every aspect of life possible" (Rivera-Rideau, 2020). Interestingly, the discussion of quality is loaded with comments on "arts" in an intersection with both political value and class. Quality, therefore, is articulated in relation to taste and popular culture, and this performance is seen as either in good or bad taste. On the one hand, Shakira and Lopez's performance is framed as wholly artistic but only when the political value of their show is emphasised. For example, Alex Suskind (2020) remarks in his review of the Halftime Show on Entertainment Weekly: "The result? A punchy, political, and flat-out electric 14-minute performance that doubled as a salute to Latin culture and celebration of both stars' careers." On the other hand, the quality is deemed mediocre at best in intersection with lower-class features. Pole dancing, the folk-dance styles, and the dress style of both performers are regarded as lower class and, hence, not worthy. Though these comments speak directly about Shakira and Lopez, what is at stake is the "good-old" battle for cultural distinction and who and what belongs to it and what does not. We will later see that this notion of quality intersects deeply with

the debate on the political values embedded in Shakira and Lopez's performance, and taste and taste culture appear to be used as leverage to articulate a political standpoint in relation to the performance.

The class aspect of the show's quality also intersects with the second element apparent in all discussions: the two artists' empowering performance. While neither Lopez nor Shakira positions herself as clearly "feminist," both women are generally viewed as strong, talented, and professional artists. Over the last five years, performances by female pop artists have been regarded as feminist or as empowered by large audiences (Allmark, 2021), even though these artists are not always explicit about their positions in relation to gender equality. The uniqueness of being a successful female performer in the mainstream music industry as such is "enough" to label an artist as feminist or to understand the performance as empowering in relation to gender. This is especially the case for U.S.-based female pop music artists and their performances. This is also true for the performance of Shakira and Lopez during the Super Bowl Halftime Show. Many reviews discussed the Halftime Show in terms of empowerment: Two strong Latinas delivering a dazzling show. In particular, the artists' sexuality in tandem with their age (Shakira was 43 and Lopez, 50), their level of fitness, and Latinx descent was perceived as empowering for women. Contradicting this opinion, some argued that displaying the female body according to the rules of the male gaze is not empowering but contributes to objectification. The closeness of the camera and the sexual movements of their posteriors were seen as sexual objectification. Laura McNally on *Feminist Current* explored Lopez's pole dancing from that perspective. By listing the facts of sexual harassment/violence in the pole dancing industry, she established a convincing argument for objectification. McNally (2020) argued that women (and men) who defend pole dancing as empowering are misled:

The problem is that, instead of defending women's right to understand and express our actual sexualities, women are defending the *commodification* of our sexuality—a 'sexuality' that has little to do with female pleasure, and everything to do with performing for the male gaze.

Nevertheless, other voices drew attention to the power configurations inherent in the concept of objectification and the male gaze. For instance, Hannah Yasharoff in *USA Today* argued, "In the debate over whether something is empowering or objectifying, it's important to check who holds the power. Lopez and Shakira did nothing Sunday night if not command power." This part of the discourse on Shakira and Lopez's performances focuses on sexualisation, and it should be understood from the larger debates on the commodification of sexuality, post-feminist sensibilities, and hypersexualisation. These concerns in relation to sexualisation are often more explicit

when referring to girls or women of age. Ageing women are not supposed to express any female sexual agency or empowerment (Van Bauwel, 2018), including the idea that ageing bodies, and especially feminine bodies, are not supposed to be visible. However, a fit body that expresses health and agelessness is also admired, as we see in the comments on the show of Shakira and Lopez. For example, a comment on the *BuzzFeed News* website states, “Well, it’s my duty as a journalist to bring you this breaking news: JENNIFER LOPEZ IS 50 YEARS OLD” (Mack, 2020). Nevertheless, bearing in mind that Lopez and Shakira are not the first artists to deliver a sexually explicit Halftime Show, we feel we need to examine more deeply to understand these opposing readings of their performance. Moreover, Shakira and Lopez were not the first female artists to embrace a controversial dress style for a performance during a Halftime Show. Janet Jackson, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga each sported similar outfits.

One element of the show that may or may not be empowering is the Latin roots of both artists. As mentioned, while Lopez was born in New York, the Bronx, her roots are in Puerto Rico. Shakira, who was born in Colombia, has a Lebanese father and a Colombian mother. It is widely held that such diverse origins emphasise the variety of what it means to be Latina/o/x. As one commenter on Twitter remarked, “The Latino community was represented proudly tonight by two queens and we love that” (Nuñez, 2020). Others said the performance symbolized girl power and played its part in bringing women of colour together. In addition, the cultural element of both performances further emphasised cultural diversity. However, some of these elements need a specific cultural capital to be interpreted as such. For example, Shakira’s display of *zaghrouta* is easily interpreted as an attempt at sexiness (Rincón et al., 2020). In addition to the cultural capital necessary to be able to read the cultural aspects in the Halftime Show, many also felt the artists did not represent the Latina/o/x community as both Lopez and Shakira are light-skinned. Critics have even accused the artists of whitewashing the Latina/o/x. All the performers, including J Balvin and Bad Bunny, were Latina/o/x, but they were relatively white. According to some critics, this contributes to the further marginalization of Afro-Latinos (Rivera-Rideau, 2020). While these arguments relate to the idea of whitewashing Latina/o/x identity, they simultaneously steer the meaning towards ethnicization when elements of the Latina/o/x identity are dominant, openly articulated in the performance (which could lead to identification). The strong polarization surrounding the intersection of gender and ethnicity could be read as either a de-ethnicization or a re-ethnicization (Grosswirth Kachtan, 2017) of the Latinidad identity in popular culture. In the context of re-ethnicization of the Latinidad, audiences read the performances of Shakira and Lopez as outspoken cultural performances and as ethno-gendered performances against the hegemonic culture.

Finally, some viewed Shakira and Lopez’s performance as re-emphasising the stereotype of the Latina women as hypersexual. This stereotype is very dominant and deals with the “Madonna/Whore” dichotomy and the way Latina sexuality is represented (Arrizón, 2008; Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004). The artists’ roots intersect deeply with aspects of class and age. Not only were middle-aged women showing their sexuality, but middle-aged Latina women were displaying a sexuality deemed to be from lower-class environments (such as the strip-dancing industry). Together, these three elements are thought to have caused most of the consternation about the sexual explicitness of the show. As Ashley Jordan in *Ms. Magazine* argued, many scantily clad female performers, including Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Janet Jackson, preceded Shakira and Lopez in earlier Halftime Shows. Only within the intersection of age, class, and race can we understand the multiple interpretations attributed to their performance. Hence, our results emphasise the presence of ambivalence and distinction when reading the Latinidad representations pointed out earlier by Viviana Rojas (2004). Rojas (2004) demonstrated how the criticism of the sexualisation of women in television shows is often used to distinguish from stereotypical representations of Latina identity.

A last point where intersectional configurations are vital to understand the discourse on Lopez and Shakira’s performance is the more overt political messages that were particularly visible in Lopez’s performance. Lopez performed part of her song “Let’s get loud” and Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” while accompanied by her daughter and a children’s choir. The children in the choir were each positioned in a cage, and the cages resembled a constellation, which is readily interpreted as a critique of the mistreatment of immigrant children (and adults) by the U.S. government. Lopez’s play with a cape that depicted the Puerto Rican and the American flag added to this message. Including the Puerto Rican flag in J. Lo’s cape is controversial and political because: first, it recognizes and includes Latinidad in North America identity; second, it acknowledges the difficult relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico; and third, it uses a symbol that does not represent the whole of the diversity of Latinidad.

Again, while some were positively affected by such a strong message, others felt that politics have no place in entertainment or in American football. Many commenters explicitly stated that the Super Bowl is supposed to be entertaining, and politics are not part of the entertainment. Of course, claiming the Super Bowl to be non-political might be an illustration of white privilege, as we would argue that popular culture, including the Super Bowl, is always political.

On the one hand, the performance was seen as a “no-nonsense affirmation of Latin pride and cultural diversity in a political climate where immigrants and American Latinos have been widely demonized” (Pareles, 2020). On the other hand, it was seen as not political.

Jon Pareles (2020) also stated in *The New York Times* that “A halftime show with a bunch of Latinx artists is not Latinx excellence.” He tweeted, “True Latinx excellence at the Super Bowl would have been showing solidarity with the POCs protesting the NFL and declining the offer to perform” (Pareles, 2020). These different interpretations of the performance’s politics need to be understood in the contemporary context of the U.S. and the presence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and at that time, the almost four years of a Trump government, with its specific policies on migration (e.g., building of the wall on the border with Mexico) and gender. The fact that a large number of Latinos supported Trump in the 2016 election adds to the gendered complexity. Moreover, while ethnicity appears to be at the core of the arguments on the political character of the performances, on social media, the political was discussed in relation to the fact that two middle-aged women performed, which was deemed empowering or a feminist articulation in mainstream entertainment. The age of the two performers could also be seen as political from a feminist perspective as older women are often absent in the entertainment industry. Certainly, this political aspect intersects with Latina identities and the way they are presented in this Super Bowl performance, a huge and popular media performance showcasing non-hegemonic identities in the context of North American popular entertainment media. In her work on the “Latinidad feminista,” Jillian Báez (2007) examined the duality and multiplicity of Latinidad representations in popular cinema and, as we did, found that representations of Latinidad in popular culture are diverse and complex and demonstrate the layered and dynamic intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, and age. The bodies and performances of Latina pop artists become sites of social struggle (see also Beltran, 2002). The political understanding of the gender performance from an intersectional perspective put forward a political articulation of nationhood, feminism, age, Latinidad diaspora, female empowerment, and ageing femininities in a popular media representation and the discourses surrounding this particular media text. The political in this case also entails being present and being represented in a popular mainstream media text. The strategies used to articulate these identities are mostly linked, and the subject positions are mostly linked to ethnicity and femininity articulated by Latina identity and femininity.

5. Conclusion

Once more, this article suggests that the relationship between gender and popular culture is incredibly complex. Multiple aspects construct a field of power configurations in which and through which this relationship is articulated. For approximately half a century, gender and media have been the focus of scholarly attention—sometimes with a clear feminist motivation, sometimes without one. While the former theorized how gender takes shape and represents a discursive praxis, the lat-

ter has been invaluable in showing inequalities between genders. Digitalization and globalization have posed new challenges to scholars in the field. On the one hand, they facilitate a space for diverging viewpoints that enrich the study of gender and media. On the other hand, both developments also emphasize the limitations of theoretical viewpoints. It is time to ask about the elephant in the room: How to proceed? What possibilities lie ahead for future researchers? Are any tools available to transcend these limitations and to address these challenges? The answer sounds rather undeveloped, as dialogic approaches seem to be the most important factor. However, a dialogue does not only contain speech, but—most importantly—also listening.

A dialogic approach would be useful to address challenges posed by developments in the study of gender and popular culture: We must not only ensure that different voices can speak but must also listen. The backlash caused by feminist scholars in the 1980s led to self-criticism, which resulted in discrediting gender studies (or pausing them, as Van Zoonen suggested), also resulted in the emergence of important concepts: intersectionality and queer studies. While intersectionality is rooted in standpoint feminism (Krijnen, 2017), and hence advocates a form of essentialism, queer studies advocates a fluid identity that is constructed continuously by interacting with one’s environment. De Ridder et al. (2011) suggested a pragmatic approach, proposing a synthesis between essentialist and post-structural views in order to obviate the rather polemic debate between them. In a more pragmatic sense, this means insights formulated by either perspective are given equal weight.

Inspired by these insights, we would like to suggest a different research strategy than that commonly adopted in studies on gender and popular cultures, a strategy that takes essentialist and post-structural viewpoints into account. Traditionally, empirical studies on the relationship between gender and popular culture, be it in the production, content, or consumption thereof, start by explaining which view—essentialist or post-structuralist—is adopted. Next, a traditional empirical study demonstrates how genders manifest in the text, production context, or in audiences. Mostly, this leads to a rather repetitive exercise that shows how patriarchal constructions still hold strong and how social change is incredibly slow. Instead, we would argue, it is useful to change the starting point of investigation to something other than gender. For example, a study of the meaning of gender in the Super Bowl Halftime Shows could discuss gender roles and then identify them in the Halftime Shows. Undoubtedly, if we investigate more Halftime Shows, we could isolate stereotypical gender roles, and we could conclude that the series misrepresents women and men. Lopez’s performance, for example, can, as we have shown, be interpreted as a stereotypical display of the hypersexualized Latina. However, this route does not enable us to understand the discord in interpretations. Instead, our analysis started by determining the

key points in the debate on the show thus identifying what is at stake. By peeling away the layers of interpretation and paying attention to the different viewpoints, we attempted to reveal the intersectional power configurations that enable us to understand the relation of this arguably small case in popular culture to everyday politics. The results of this approach are, in our opinion, more interesting than the obvious stereotypes that can be identified. An intersectional analysis enables all characters to contribute to discourses on gender articulated by popular culture, which is more complex than the stereotypes presently in it. This also allows us to connect the text more readily to audience appreciation of it (cf. Fenton, 2000).

However, if we seriously want to understand current developments, such as #MeToo or the Super Bowl Halftime Show by Shakira and Lopez, we do need to do more than state that “Yes, intersectionality, indeed, is very important, but for now we focus on gender,” or “Yes, of course, other regions in the world might be different, but for now we focus on this locality.” Truly listening includes putting effort into opening up academic cultures, finding other voices that further challenge canonical theories, and referencing these when needed. We need not only to recognize global gender inequality but to understand the politics of media representations as a transnational affair that causes multiple conceptions of gender (and other related) concepts to clash, mesh, and integrate. So, let’s not only get loud, but also start listening.

Acknowledgments

A special thanks to the editors of the thematic issue.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Allmark, P. (2021). Dangerous women feminism: Female pop music artists’ concert tours and the hostility that has ensued. In B. Yanikkaya & A. M. Nairn (Eds.), *Multidisciplinary perspectives on women, voice, and agency* (pp. 134–158). GI Global.
- Arribas-Ayllon, M., & Walkerdine, V. (2008). *Foucauldian discourse analysis*. SAGE.
- Arrizón, A. (2008). Latina subjectivity, sexuality and sensuality. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 18(3), 189–198.
- Bachmann, I., Harp, D., & Loke, J. (2018). Through a feminist kaleidoscope: Critiquing media, power, and gender inequalities. In D. Harp, J. Loke, & I. Bachmann (Eds.), *Feminist approaches to media theory and research* (pp. 1–15). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Báez, J. M. (2007). Towards a Latinidad feminista: The multiplicities of Latinidad and feminism in contemporary cinema. *Popular Communication*, 5(2), 109–128.
- Barker, C. (2000). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice*. SAGE.
- Beltran, M. (2002). The Hollywood Latina body as site of social struggle: Media constructions of stardom and Jennifer Lopez’s “Cross-over Butt.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 19(1), 71–86.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”*. Routledge.
- Carter, C. (2012). Sex/gender and the media: From sex roles to social construction and beyond. In K. Ross (Ed.), *Handbook of gender, sexualities and the media* (pp. 265–382). Wiley.
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Polity Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- De Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of gender. Essays on theory, film, and fiction*. Indiana University Press.
- De Ridder, S., Dhaenens, F., & Van Bauwel, S. (2011). Queer theory and change: Towards a pragmatic approach to resistance and subversion in media research on gay and lesbian identities. *OBSERVATORIO (OBS*)*, 5(2), 197–215.
- Dhoest, A., & Simons, N. (2012). Questioning queer audiences: Exploring diversity in lesbian and gay men’s media uses and readings. In K. Ross (Ed.), *Handbook of gender, sexualities and the media* (pp. 260–276). Wiley.
- Exposito, S. (2020). *Let’s get loud: Jennifer Lopez, Shakira power through cultural minefield during Super Bowl Halftime Show*. Rolling Stone. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-latin/super-bowl-2020-halftime-jennifer-lopez-shakira-946734>
- Fenton, N. (2000). The problematics of postmodernism for feminist media studies. *Media, Culture & Society*, 22(6), 723–741.
- Foucault, M. (1976). *De orde van het vertoog* [The order of things] (C. P. Heering-Moorman, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Boom.
- Grosswirth Kachtan, D. (2017). “Acting ethnic”: Performance of ethnicity and the process of ethnicization. *Ethnicities*, 17(5), 707–726.
- Hedge, R. (2011). *Circuits of visibility: Gender and transnational media cultures*. New York University Press.
- Hermes, J., & Kopitz, L. (2021). Casting for Change: Tracing Gender in Discussions of Casting through Feminist Media Ethnography. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 72–85.
- Kern, R. (2012). Andro-phobia? When gender queer is too queer for L word audiences. In K. Ross (Ed.), *Handbook of gender, sexualities and the media* (pp. 264–282). Wiley.

- Krijnen, T., & Van Bauwel, S. (2015). *Gender and media: Representing, producing, consuming*. Routledge.
- Krijnen, A. F. M. (2017). Feminist theory and the media. In *The international encyclopedia of media effects*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0096>
- Larsen, P. (2002). Mediated fiction. In K. B. Jensen (Ed.), *A handbook of media and communication research: Qualitative and quantitative methods* (pp. 117–137). Routledge.
- Leurs, K., & Ponzanesi, S. (2012). The performance of gender by migrant girls in Instant Messaging spaces. In K. Ross (Ed.), *Handbook of gender, sexualities and the media* (pp. 436–454). Wiley.
- Mack, D. (2020, February 2). Just a bunch of tweets from Super Bowl viewers who can't believe that J.Lo is 50. *BuzzFeed News*. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/davidmack/super-bowl-half-time-j-lo-jennifer-lopez-50-age-shakira-43>
- McNally, L. (2020). *J.Lo's pole dancing during the Super Bowl is not benign*. *Feminist Current*. <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2020/02/10/j-los-pole-dancing-during-the-super-bowl-is-not-benign>
- Molina Guzmán, I., & Valdivia, A. N. (2004). Brain, brow, and booty: Latina iconicity in U.S. popular culture. *The Communication Review*, 7(2), 205–221.
- Núñez, V. [@v_nunezz]. (2020, February 3). The Latino community was represented proudly tonight by two queens and WE 🍷 LOVE 🍷 THAT 🍷 #SuperBowlHalftimeShow #PepsiHalftime [Tweet]. https://twitter.com/v_nunezz/status/1224143972349759490
- Pareles, J. (2020, February 2). Jennifer Lopez and Shakira restore sparkle to Super Bowl Halftime Show. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/02/arts/music/super-bowl-halftime-review.html>
- Phoenix, A., & Pattynama, P. (2006). Intersectionality. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3), 187–192.
- Real, M. R. (1975). Super Bowl: Mythic spectacle. *Journal of Communication*, 25(1), 31–43.
- Respers France, L. (2020, February 3). Jennifer Lopez and Shakira's halftime show was deeper than you thought. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/02/entertainment/jennifer-lopez-shakira-super-bowl-half-time/index.html>
- Rincón, L., Londoño, J., Vargas, J. H., & Cepeda, M. E. (2020). Reimagining US Colombianidades: Transnational subjectivities, cultural expressions, and political contestations. *Latino Studies*, 18(3), 301–325.
- Rivera-Rideau, P. (2020, February 4). What J-Lo and Shakira missed in their Super Bowl halftime show. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/02/04/what-j-lo-shakira-missed-their-super-bowl-half-time-show>
- Rojas, V. (2004). The gender of Latinidad: Latinas speak about Hispanic television. *The Communication Review*, 7(2), 125–153.
- Ross, K. (2012). Editor's introduction. In K. Ross (Ed.), *Handbook of gender, sexualities and the media* (pp. xx–xxvii). Wiley.
- Suskind, A. (2020, February 3). *Shakira and Jennifer Lopez bring a necessary punch to 2020 Super Bowl halftime show: Review*. *Entertainment Weekly*. <https://ew.com/music-reviews/2020/02/03/shakira-jennifer-lopez-super-bowl-halftime-show-review>
- Trapeton 2020. (2020, June 9). *J.Lo & Shakira | 4K—Super Bowl LIV Halftime (FULL HD AUDIO SHOW/BEHIND THE SCENES/REHEARSALS)* [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZLwHYQsOpM>
- Valdivia, A. N. (2010). *Latina/os and the media*. Polity Press.
- Valdivia, A. N. (2020). *The gender of Latinidad: Uses and abuses of hybridity*. Wiley.
- Van Bauwel, S. (2018). Invisible golden girls? Post-feminist discourses and female ageing bodies in contemporary television fiction. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(1), 21–33.
- Wallis, C. (2011). Performing gender: A content analysis of gender display in music videos. *Sex Roles*, 64(3/4), 160–172.
- Weiss, G. (1999). *Body images: Embodiments as intercorporeality*. Routledge.

About the Authors



Sofie Van Bauwel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the Ghent University and a member of the research group Centre for Cinema and Media Studies. She is involved in several projects with a focus on the media as signifying articulations in visual popular culture. Her research activities involve gender, sexuality, and media on which she has published. ORCID: 0000-0002-8554-2452



Tonny Krijnen is Associate Professor at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, department of Media and Communication. Her research interests lie with television (production, content, and reception), morality, gender, and qualitative methods. With Prof. Sofie Van Bauwel she is the Co-Author of *Gender and Media: Representing, Producing, Consuming* of which the second edition will soon appear with Routledge. ORCID: 0000-0001-5934-6346