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**“Listen to What your Jotería is Saying”: Media Coverage of the
2016 Orlando Shooting by English- and Spanish-Language Media**

by

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Lastly, I recognize and honor the 49 souls lost on June 12, 2016 to an act of senseless violence. I honor and celebrate their lives and wish to remember them by how they lived and not how they perished. They were dancers, hairdressers, nurses, immigrants, mothers, sons, boyfriends. It is my hope that their spirits and stories will guide me as I pursue my career and fight for a safer world for future generations of jotería.

Introduction

Problem

On June 12, 2016, 29-year-old security guard Omar Mateen entered Pulse, a popular gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. As the bartenders were serving the last drinks of Latin Night, Mateen fired his first shots into the establishment while hundreds of patrons were still inside the venue. Three hours later, Mateen was shot and killed by Orlando Police Department officers. By the end of the rampage, 49 people were killed and 58 were injured (Caplan & Edison Hayden, 2016) in what was the worst attack against the queer and trans community in United States history (Ravitz, 2016). Having taken place on Latin Night, the vast majority of the victims themselves were also Latinxs—most of whom were Puerto Rican. (Marcial Ocasio, 2016).

In the days, weeks and months following the shooting, media coverage was extensive. Having occurred at a gay nightclub during Pride Month, many news outlets noted the tragic irony of the event. Other news sources ignored this significant fact. Instead, they characterized the shooting as a terrorist attack on par with those that had been occurring in Europe at the time. That queer people of color, especially Latinx immigrants, were especially impacted that night was a fact ignored predominantly within English-language media.

The erasure of intersectional queer and trans Latinx experiences is nothing new and has occurred among other intersectionally marginalized communities as well. This tug-of-war between communities is further traumatizing for people caught in the borderlands of queerness, Latinidad, and migrant status. The stories of those killed and injured at Pulse epitomize intersectionality. Many of those impacted by the shooting were undocumented and were unable to bare the financial burden of medical bills; local hospitals luckily waived these bills for the victims (Hayes and Santich, 2016). Due to strict travel restrictions against Cubans by the United States government, several Cuban families struggled securing US Visas to travel to Orlando so that they could visit their injured relatives or bring bodies back home (Alvarez and Green, 2016). The father of an unnamed victim refused to claim his son's body in Puerto Rico because he was ashamed that his son was gay (Reynolds, 2016). Experiences of poverty, being undocumented, and confronting *machismo* — a patriarchal system of gender norms specific to the Latinx community — make up some of the many nuances that embody queer Latinx experiences. So often though, these stories were left out of the mainstream narratives put out by most media sources, even those that are queer- or Latinx-oriented. With the rise of anti-Latinx and anti-queer rhetoric nationwide as both communities continue to grow, Elena Avilés suggests that “the Orlando attacks remind America of the ways intersections of identity ensue hate crimes in the present moment; that hate crimes and their targets are constantly shifting (2017, p. 35). Even with this shift in hate crime targets, media outlets have still not accurately represented the stories of those that have been impacted by acts of hateful violence.

For queer and trans communities, particularly those of color, spaces such as gay clubs are sacred. In 1969, the Stonewall Inn in New York City was a beloved institution among the most ostracized and vulnerable in the city's queer community: drag queens, queer and trans people of color, sex workers, and homeless youth. At the time, homosexuality was still illegal throughout the United States and New York City's mayor at the time, Robert F. Wagner, Jr., had a particularly hostile view of gay people whom he saw as trying to destroy the city's image ahead of the 1964 World's Fair

(Carter, 2010, 29-37). In the early morning of June 28, 1969, the patrons of the Stonewall Inn finally became fed up with police harassment and rioted against the invasive actions that had taken place in their safe space. For the queer and trans community of Orlando nearly fifty years later, they too had their sanctuary invaded. Tragically, the attack in Pulse had a much more horrific outcome than that of Stonewall.

Media coverage and comments from elected officials regarding significant acts of violence, notably towards those acts that target or impact specific groups of marginalized people, often define how people talk about the event in the present and how they will remember it in the future. Following the 2015 Charleston shooting at a historically Black church, Republican governors Chris Christie and Jeb Bush condemned the shooting as an attack on faith (Peoples, 2015). The shooter, Dylan Roof made explicit White supremacist statements at the scene of the crime as well as supporting White-dominated colonies in Africa. However, Christie and Bush, among other colleagues, instead describing the shooting as an attack on the Christian faith or even as a general mass shooting was a way to white-wash the event and avoiding its root cause.

Similar coverage was seen following the shooting at the Pulse nightclub on multiple media platforms: left- and right-wing, queer- and Latinx-oriented, and English- and Spanish-language. Mainstream queer and left-wing media sources characterized the shooting as an attack on the queer community alone, ignoring the fact that the vast majority of those impacted were of Latinx and immigrant background. Right-wing media strongly condemned the attack as an act of Islamic terrorism and used the shooting as a way to excuse themselves for supporting homophobic legislation by stating that Islamic terrorists were the true enemies of the queer community. Finally, Spanish-language media which is mostly consumed by older and more conservative generations of Latinxs, tended to avoid much discussion of the victims' queer identities and instead directed their coverage to the victims' Latin American heritage.

Research Question

This study will add focus on both English- and Spanish-language media coverage of the massacre at Pulse. A more specific emphasis on acknowledging the victims' intersectional identities as well as the quality of that coverage defines the scope of this study. The main hypothesis for this research is that ironically, English-language media outperforms Spanish-language media on the overall coverage of the events. In this case, because English-language media has a broader viewership while Spanish-language media in the United States has over time shrunk to an older and more conservative fan base, will the latter be less interested in providing coverage of queer issues?

Literature Review

Before discussing related research, it is worth discussing the quote used in the title of this paper: "Listen to what your *jotería* is saying." Found in lesbian Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's best-known work, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, the quote calls out cisgender heterosexual Chicanos for their erasure, marginalization, and outright hatred of the queer and trans* members of their community (p. 84-85). Even as the gay rights movement continues to make advances on many issues and as immigrant activism plays a major part in the American political process, the most vulnerable members of these communities — undocumented, queer, trans, poor, non-English-speaking — are often left out. Despite *jotería* having played critical roles in leading these movements, their contributions continue to be unheard, undervalued, and erased. Anzaldúa's usage of the word *jotería* is intentional as well. Rooted in the Spanish word *joto* (usually translated to "faggot" in English), it has been a word that has slowly become reclaimed in the face of racist, homophobic and transphobic violence similar to "queer" and "Chicano" before it. Lastly, while *jotería* has queer Chicana and Mexican roots, it has gradually become more popular in other queer Latinx communities

and organizations, such as the Association of Jotería Arts, Activism and Scholarship. Because the majority of those killed in Pulse were of Latin American descent — roughly half were Puerto Rican and the others encompassing many communities of the Latin American diaspora — *jotería* will be used as a pan-queer Latinx label unless otherwise indicated.

Reviewing past literature on media coverage regarding deadly or catastrophic events shows how the perceptions of these events by communities who were not directly affected can be altered negatively, primarily due to white-washing and acceptability politics. In a survey of San Francisco's largest weekly gay newspaper, the *Bay Area Reporter*, for a period of ten years from 1984 to 1993, Horacio Roque-Ramírez examined eulogies of gay and queer Latino men who died of AIDS-related complications. Roque-Ramírez notes how certain bodies — “white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, and Anglo” — are inherently privileged in their representation in memory archives (2010, p. 105). The voices of those who were either minimally impacted are elevated to bring increased attention to the crisis. In the eulogies that Roque-Ramírez researched, he found that certain code words such as “cancer” and “pneumonia” were used to avoid specifically mentioning that the deceased person had AIDS (2010, p. 106). Even within a gay newspaper, the failure to include this information in eulogies led to the queer and medical community to underestimate the magnitude of the virus among vulnerable communities, particularly queer Latinxs. Additionally, by the time that the AIDS crisis began to subside with the emergence of new medication, the virus was no longer seen as an important political or social struggle despite the impact the virus was still having on people who could not afford the medication, which tended to be immigrants and people of color. While HIV-positive athletes at the time such as diver Greg Louganis and basketball player Magic Johnson were able to project an image of strong and athletic people living healthfully with the virus, that was not the case for communities who were unable to bear the financial burden; this reality was largely ignored by both the mainstream media and the queer community as a whole.

Racial double-standards in how media outlets cover responses from marginalized communities after an injustice occurs, particularly among African Americans following the acquittals of police officers who have injured or killed unarmed civilians have lasting impacts in how communities interpret the motives from participants in social upheavals. Jason Stanley notes that more often than not, rhetoric used to describe the civil unrest following the 1965 Los Angeles police beating of Rene Price and her two sons after a traffic stop was often skewed in favor of law enforcement who were seen as trying to establish “law and order”. Mayor of Los Angeles Sam Yorty referred to this uprising as a “criminal, lawless element” while police chief William Parker described participants as “gangsters” (2016, p. 8). This coded language, which was alluded to earlier through Roque-Ramírez’s research, plays an important role in how media consumers of news outlets at home perceive these types of events. Words such as “riots” and “violence” are perceived much more negatively than would terms such as “rebellion” or “uprising” which are often associated with acts of resistance to some form of injustice. This same phenomenon is still seen today through the words and images used today to describe acts of resistance in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland following the police killings of unarmed Black men.

The power of media coverage of significant moments, be it a mass shooting or a political event, is its ability to significantly sway a population depending on the accuracy or bias of the coverage, particularly the tools it uses to convey its message. In the aftermath of the passage of Proposition 8 in California in 2008 which banned same-sex marriage in the state, exit polling showed that a majority of Latinxs and African Americans supported the measure in contrast to a slight minority of White voters. In an assessment of the ensuing climate between ethnic and sexual minorities, Marisa Abrajano remarked how anti-gay organizations were able to effectively turn communities of color against same-sex marriage. Among Latino communities, “the campaign in favor of Proposition 8 created a Spanish-language commercial featuring telenovela (soap opera) actor Eduardo Verástegui. The actor discussed his pride in the Hispanic community along with the importance of children being raised by both a mother and father” (2010, p. 924). Due to the tremendous influence

telenovela stars have within Latinx culture, the enlistment of actors who typically played hyper-masculine characters, were particularly effective in encouraging the predominantly older and conservative viewership of Spanish media to reinforce homophobia and encourage it as a “Latino family value”. This encouragement of machismo as an inherent Latino value not only motivated conservative Latinxs to support Proposition 8 but also pitted mostly the dominant White gay community against Latinxs and other people of color, seeing them as inherently homophobic.

Media is a highly effective and powerful tool in being able to shift opinions on issues quickly. As time moves on, different communities that were once vilified have entered into the mainstream. However, marginalized peoples that still exist within these communities are left on the sidelines. The attack on Pulse and the people that would come to represent the tragedy to the outside world would define this dilemma in which those who were never affected by the event were able to capitalize off of the trauma of others while reinforcing the same exclusionary behavior that once oppressed them.

Methods

Data Collection

Sources used in this study consisted of both written and video media among four major English-language news sources (ABC, CNN, the New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times) and four major Spanish-language news sources (Univisión, Telemundo, La Opinión, and El Nuevo Herald). Each news source will have been assessed through five sources each, forty total. Media coverage will be limited to the three months following the attack on Pulse. All sources were collected directly through online services as generally, these were able to be updated much more quickly than printed media as new information came in.

Measures

All sources were assessed in how well they were able to meet four criteria in their coverage of the 2016 Orlando shooting: (1) mentioning that the shooting took place on Latin Night and/or that primarily Latinxs were impacted; (2) acknowledging that the attack occurred during Pride Month and/or that the LGBTQ community was especially targeted; (3) including people who identified as both queer/trans* and Latinx during interviews; (4) including victims’ life stories rather than focusing solely on their deaths. For each criteria fulfilled, a source would receive one point out of a possible twenty.

Results

Data collection determined that English-language media was not significantly more accurate or representative when compared to Spanish-language media, as was hypothesized previously. Rather, news coverage of the 2016 Orlando shooting was generally limited to discussion of the details of the crime such as the motive, the shooter’s background, and the police’s actions. Interviews with survivors and victims’ families focused heavily on the deaths of the victims and offered little history into what the victims’ life was like before their murder. Analysis of Spanish-language media sources offered similar results.

Out of the four criteria, media sources performed better when mentioning that the attack occurred at a gay night club and/or during Pride Month; 19 out of 20 English-language sources fulfilled these criteria compared to a similar 18 out of 20 for Spanish-language sources. On the recognition of

Latinxs at the shooting, Spanish-language sources out-performed English-language sources simply because journalists selected survivors or family members who were Spanish-speaking. English-language media failed with this criteria, with less than half (9 out of 20) of the collected sources mentioning that the shooting occurred on Latin Night or disproportionately impacted the Latinx community of Orlando. Key aspects of *jotería* identity and experiences that were ignored in English-language coverage included migration narratives and citizenship status; a large portion of those killed and injured were migrants from Puerto Rico who had left the economic collapse of their island. Many were also undocumented and were unable to afford medical attention due to their inability to apply for health insurance. As per Spanish-language media coverage, most sources recognized that the attack did occur at a gay club but avoiding going into detail into the victims' queer identities and instead speculated on the sexuality of Omar Mateen.

The majority of English-language sources also did not include subjects into their coverage who identified as both queer/trans* and Latinx, while Spanish-language media would also out-perform because the subjects already were Latinxs and most of whom identified as queer and/or trans*. On this criteria specifically, English-language media scored 7 out of 20 while Spanish-language scored 14 out of 20. Media sources generally performed much more poorly in this area; focus was generally centered on one identity over the other (queer versus Latinx).

Lastly, both English- and Spanish-language media failed in their focus on victim's deaths rather than their life stories and accomplishments. Half of the English-language sources collected fulfilled these criteria while only 8 out of 20 Spanish-language sources did. For example, in the case of Juan Ramón Guerrero and Drew Leinonen, a gay couple who both died in the attack, garnered media attention due to speculated plans that they would have a joint funeral. When it was revealed that they would instead be remembered separately, this again brought more attention. Rather than bringing light to the impacts that these two men made in their communities such as Leinonen starting his school's first gay-straight alliance or even Guerrero's coming out story, they were instead remembered by the circumstances surrounding their funerals. This sensationalizing and unneeded coverage distracts viewers and readers from the homophobic and racist motives behind the attack and how a specific community was especially impacted by the event.

Discussion

Before collection of media sources as data, it was hypothesized that English-language media out-perform Spanish-language media in the inclusivity of their coverage of the 2016 Orlando shooting due to the latter having a more limited consumer demographic—older and more conservative generations of Latinxs. However, English-language sources only barely performed better in fulfilling the different criteria. This can be attributed to English-language media's failure to acknowledge how the shooting had a devastating impact on Orlando's Latinx community, especially among Puerto Ricans who accounted for about half of the deaths specifically. Often times when race is discussed as it relates to current events, it is presented on a Black and White binary, mainly due to race relations in the United States having been centered between these two groups throughout the majority of this country's history. Latinx experiences are frequently left out of media coverage. When they are covered, they (usually those of Mexican descent) are presented in the context of the immigration debate while ignoring that Puerto Ricans who claim American citizenship from birth are being neglected by the federal government and are forced to leave their island and move to the mainland for economic opportunities. This minimal yet overly-generalizing coverage presents a one-dimensional view of Latinxs in the United States and is a disservice to queer Latinxs who are already left behind in the borderlands of queerness and *Latinidad*. There are infinite nuances that can be discussed regarding the lives of those lost in Pulse, especially in regards to the different marginalized identities that the victims claimed. A significant number of those impacted were Afro-Latinx. Many

were undocumented and were disproportionately impacted unlike citizens who had an easier time accessing health care.

The impact that the Pulse shooting had on the Puerto Rican community of Orlando is reflective of the global Puerto Rican experience, notably regarding the silence from news media and the United States government. The attack on Pulse parallels similar crises affecting Puerto Rico recently such as the island's economic collapse and 2017's Hurricane Maria which brought catastrophic damage to the island. All three events either ignored the community entirely or, in the case of the United States' response to Hurricane Maria, severely downplayed the enormity of the storm's damage as evidenced by the significant undercounting of deaths following the hurricane (Almukhtar et al., 2017).

Limitations of this study, particularly when limited to using the four criteria, is that Spanish-language media is going to automatically out-perform English-language media when acknowledging how Latinxs were impacted by the shooting simply because Latinxs are the targeted demographic. Additionally, news segments were mostly very specific about the content they were covering in that period of time. It is unlikely that any source would fulfill all criteria for this reason.

Conclusion

In summary, the purpose of this study was to describe how both English- and Spanish-language media still do not accurately recognize the intersectional experiences of queer and trans* Latinxs. There are so many nuances that compose these experiences such as race, migrant status, class, sexuality, gender, and homelessness. Further research on this specific topic would need to look more closely at how media outlets present queer and trans* Latinx narratives in the context of the attack at Pulse. More work needs to be done in how the specific intersectional nuances of these experiences created a unique aftermath for Orlando's queer and trans* Latinx community. While it may be difficult to accurately represent everyone, media still needs to have a more active role and be accountable in changing how marginalized communities are perceived to the outside world.

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