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“Borracha, Y encuerada, que bonita vida me caí! ¡Y arriba las Viejas Borrachas!”

Intoxicated and Naked! What a beautiful life! Cheers to all those Drunken Ladies!
1. The Entrance

It was 8:45 pm on August 10, 2013 and the doors of El Rodeo nightclub in Pico Rivera, California were still closed. People in line looked confused and impatient. Suddenly, one fan started shouting, “Open the door already!” Her loud, deep voice grabbed everyone’s attention and inspired others to also demand entrance. Another fan joined her by shouting, “Jenni! Jenni! Jenni!” “¡Que Viva Jenni!” “¡jenni Vive!” Their chants were so vivid that, for one minute, I forgot that Jenni Rivera was dead.

What I have begun to describe here is the moment of anticipation from fans who were excited to be part of the “CD and Tequila Release Party” of La Gran Señora brand of tequila. Everyone knew that the La Gran Señora bottle referred to Jenni Rivera, and, in her absence, it stood in for her; this party offered an opportunity to celebrate Jenni Rivera’s legacy by also supporting her brother the Mexican musician Juan Rivera and his CD Oveja Negra “Black Sheep.” The party took place eight months after Jenni Rivera’s unexpected death in a plane crash on December 9, 2012. Clearly, for these fans, Jenni was still alive. Their piercing cries reminded me of her past concerts, when Jenni’s fans celebrated Latina empowerment by drinking, dancing, and un-dressing for and with her. This time, their cries also had feelings of sadness. Attending the tequila release party inspired me to ask, how has Jenni intoxicated her fans both before and after her death? What is the cultural meaning of this particular sort of intoxication—one resulting from consuming a woman and her tequila—to the women who have attended this memorial celebration? And what is the cultural meaning of this socio-emotional state I am calling “intoxicated by Jenni,” which I consider a form of intoxicating feminist pleasure?

Born to immigrant parents Rosa and Pedro, Jenni Rivera was born in Long Beach, California on July 2, 1969; she was a Chicana singer, songwriter, actress, television producer, and entrepreneur known internationally for her work in Mexican regional music. Rivera sold over 20 million albums worldwide and was awarded various gold and platinum records. Her songs were about love, breakups, disillusion, body image, divorce, single motherhood, partying, drug dealing, survival, and being a tequilera “tequila girl.” According to ethnic studies scholar Deborah Vargas, Jenni sang “testimonios of gender nonconformity” and the reason that fans played Jenni’s music is that it allowed them to “transmit undisciplined desires, endorse immigrant civil rights, and protest women’s abuse” (“Un Desmadre Positivo” 286). Since Jenni’s death, her fans have continued to embrace her through the consumption of her music, tripling her record sales and, more recently, through the consumption of her brand of tequila.

In what follows, I employ an integrative and interdisciplinary framework using Meredith Abarca’s Chicana ethnographic method of charlas “informal conversations,” and Patrick Johnson’s method of critical performance ethnography to understand Jenni Rivera’s music, performances, fan culture, the drinking of La Gran Señora tequila, and the posthumous tributes to the artist via live music and social media (2006; 2008). I engage in critical performance ethnography by conducting and interpreting charlas as co-performances. Patrick Johnson states that to construe ethnographic research as co-performance, one has to acknowledge “that both the researcher and the narrators are performing for one another; it also entails ‘paying attention’ in a way that engages the bodily presence of both the researcher and the researched in the moment of the narrative event” (8). As a “co-performative witness” the night of the tequila release party, I approached several tables and asked fans why they had attended the nightclub that night (Conquerwood 1991). All of the women I spoke to were Latinas between the ages of 18-50.
Most of the charlas were conducted in Spanglish (a mixture of English and Spanish) and all the translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

My argument is twofold: First, I argue that Jenni intoxicates her fans through her music, raunchy performance, and tequila. Second, I argue that fans’ responses to Jenni (drinking Jenni Rivera’s brand of tequila, La Gran Señora, along with partying, celebrating, singing, undressing, and mourning Jenni) perform a working-class feminism that expresses a love and pleasure for oneself that is not typically sanctioned for women in Latina immigrant spaces. I call these responses “intoxicating feminist pleasures.” The second argument is based on my ethnographic observations of Banda Sinaloense culture in Los Angeles. These observations demonstrate that compared to Latino men, Latinas have to negotiate notions of respectability politics when they decide to prioritize their own pleasure and live a double life that traverses both the politics of home and the nightclub. Therefore, parrandiando, “partying with Jenni” was and continues to be a radical act that shamelessly seeks pleasures without being concerned about depending on or satisfying men. These moments of posthumous fandom are powerful examples of quotidian working-class practices of female agency that helped both her fans and Jenni negotiate the politics of class, gender, and sexuality. These moments demonstrate that even after Jenni’s death, her fans refuse to give up the empowerment and pleasure she provided for them. Their partying, drunkenness, and bra-throwing are all examples of how fans will continue to enjoy being intoxicated by Jenni.

2. Intoxicating Feminist Pleasures

According to Jenni, drinking tequila, or the condition of being intoxicated, influences her fans and herself to toañorlas más, in other words, to be more sexually loose, active, and available. Tequila was a major part of Jenni Rivera’s songs and performances. She would perform with it, drink it, and sing many songs about women drinking it to overcome heartbreaks. Indeed, many of her fans left her concerts drunk. In Jenni’s autobiography, Unbreakable: My Story, My Way, she describes an experience from one of her concerts:

My band and I were set up in the small circle in the middle of the palenque, and thousands of fans surrounded us. The closest fans were less than ten feet from me, and they were handing me tequila shots throughout the night as they sang along to my songs. The energy was so high and so contained, and when I finished that concert, I was buzzing on alcohol and adrenaline. (149)

Jenni’s anecdote transports us to the concert space where she interacted with her fans very intimately and describes intoxication as a two-way pleasure experienced both by Jenni and her fans. Inspired by Jenni’s “buzzing on alcohol and adrenaline,” I use “intoxication” here to indicate embodied pleasures aroused by various stimuli (i.e. music, performance, tequila) that provoke a productive abandonment of inhibitions in order to thwart gendered social norms that oftentimes do not allow Latina women (particularly mothers) to express a love and pleasure for themselves. For Latina women, the shame of religious discourse informs so-called notions of proper and respectable femininity that, within traditional Mexicana culture, is practiced by the act of a women not drinking; women who drink are often perceived as deviant. However, through her music and performance, Jenni encouraged many of her fans to enjoy being intoxicated. The phrase “intoxicated by Jenni” is a metaphor that I use to frame how Jenni’s music and performances inspires fans to chant, dance de cartoncito, a voluptuous dance that people perform when they get drunk and remove their bras for her. I read these gestures as a form of liberation, particularly through a refusal of gender norms. Being intoxicated by Jenni is about not caring about respectability politics, about feeling comfortable and confident, and about prioritizing your own bodies and pleasures (Foucault 1978).

At the center of Jenni’s music and performance is the employment of “raunch aesthetics,” which ethnic studies scholar Jillian Hernandez defines as a use of non-apologetic sexualized humor in music that generates pleasure for minority audiences and is a tool from which young women theorize gender and sexuality (“Carnal Teachings” 91). Moreover, for Hernandez raunch aesthetics are also “creative works that do not search for or affirm the truth of sexual subjects but rather, celebrate, often through hyperbolic excess, multiplicities of bodies and pleasures” (“Raunch Aesthetics as Visceral Address”). The theoretical framework of raunch aesthetics helps illustrate how Jenni’s music and performance teach fans to embrace “slutty,” working-class, Latina sex-positivity and appreciates how this moment of intoxication, this suspension of time, is a feminist pleasure. Intoxicating feminist pleasures are an embodied archive and epistemology of fandom, women celebration, sexuality, freedom, liberation, empowerment, love, and desire.

3. Intoxicated by Raunchy Jenni: Tequileras and Chuperamigos

In 2003, Jenni recorded a cover of the song “La Tequilera” in her album Homenaje a Las Grandes (Tribute to the Great Women.) In the acknowledgements, Jenni says that this song is in homage to Mariachi artist Beatriz Adriana (Track 6). The
song is about a protagonist who cures her soul with tequila because she has recently experienced a cruel, heartbreaking breakup. The protagonist describes the act of being "tequilicious" as a form of spiritual ecstasy and therapy, which allows her to forget her breakup. "La Tequilera" has been performed by other ranchera artists including Lola Beltran, Lucha Reyes, and Irma Villa, but of these recorded versions, it is Jenni's version that includes Banda Sinaloense instead of Mariachi, and the raunchy clarification "pero no, se las di a todos eh...?" (But I did not give it up to everyone) at the end of the song. It is important that Jenni sings "La Tequilera" this way because the sound of Banda, particularly the tuba, tambora, and tarolas, add a sonic drunkenness, dissonance, and out-of-tune feeling to the song. In the words of Deborah Vargas, this out-of tuneness of music "commands our attention to music as power as well as to the power of music with regards to Chicana gender and sexuality" (Dissonant Divas xiv). Here, Jenni's performance with the Banda sound points us to her gender disruption of this masculinist music genre and to a working-class transnational sound of Chicana gender and sexuality. Jenni's interpretation of the song responds to "community gossip" about drunk sex, and clarifies to the public that she only had sex with those she desired. Jenni's interpretation of the song claims agency and rejects slut-shaming discourse.

Similar to "La Tequilera," the song "Chuperamigos" also uses sexual explicitness to launch cultural critiques about "proper" and "respectable" femininity while heartbroken and intoxicated. In 2008, Jenni Rivera recorded the theme song for a show titled Chuper Amigos for the comedian Liliana Arriaga, also known as "la Chupitos." The song became so popular that Jenni would later commonly call her fans, "Donde estan mis chuperamigos?" (Where are all my drunken friends?). For Mexicans, the term chupar is a colloquial term that means to drink. However, the word chupar also means to suck and lick (to the point of milking-dry). In "Chuperamigos," Jenni uses both meanings of the term chupar, that of drinking and sucking. The song is about a woman who celebrates a break up by going out dancing with her friends. The woman recognizes that all her friends like el chupe, which motivates her to echarse a toditos "throw herself to all of them" as a form of freedom, agency, empowerment, and validation. In a concert performance at the Nokia theater in Los Angeles, as she sang this part, Jenni thrust her hands towards her hips, connoting to the audience that she was referring to drinking but also maybe, just maybe, also fucking Pedro, Jose Cuervo, El Presidente, and El Patron, in other words, all the male-identified tequila bottles. Conversely, the teasing with the audience started when Jenni's band began playing the music for her song "Chuperamigos." Jenni turned around to the audience and slowly teased them by shaking her butt (JenniRiveraVevo, 2012). Her performance expressed a mixture of humor and sexiness that transgresses norms of sexual respectability and privacy. After a few sexy moves, she grabbed her pants to assure fans that they were supposed to look at her butt, that she was performing the tease intentionally. She then walked over to her table, where she had a tequila bottle, fancy wine glasses, and bottles of water and said esta cancion la compuse para la gente borracha (I composed this song for drunk people) and the fans started screaming.

Fig. 2: “Chuper Amigos”

During the middle of the concert performance, Jenni explained to the audience that dancing de cartoncito is when a borrachito "a drunk" grabs someone from el carton, any body flesh available. “De Cartoncito” is a colloquial reference to a couple dancing, where a drunk man will slowly move his hands from the woman's waist to her butt. The reference is very heteromasculinist and only assumes the pleasure of men in this act. However, in “Chuperamigos,” Jenni inscribes feminine pleasure to this act by saying that this song can also be pleasurable for women because it feels like both massage and dancing at the same time (JenniRiveraVevo 2012). Moreover, Jenni teaches her female fans that they can also dance “de cartoncito” with men by grabbing them by their penises. Here, Jenni encourages her women fans to flip the male gaze, sexualize men, and prioritize their own pleasure over the pleasure of men. After this interaction with the audience, Jenni sang the rest of the song, which ended with her admitting that maybe after a couple of drinks, the woman protagonist will forget the name of her ex and, while dancing with her friend, her clothes might get in the way of her pleasure and she might take them off. Jenni screamed, “aaaayy borracha y encuerada, que bonita vida me caí” (naked and drunk, what a beautiful life). The song ends with the woman
protagonist realizing that with these types of intoxicating pleasures she does not need her ex lover in her life anymore. The songs “Chuperamigos” and “Las Tequileras” are examples of how Jenni oKered her Latina fans a refusal of conventional gender norms that transgressed the traditional belief that men are the only ones who find pleasure in intoxication, sexual touching, and getting naked. She created a space in her lyrics and performances that was sex/y-positive for women and assured them that raunchiness is pleasurable and empowering.

5. Charlas Tequileras

To me [Jenni] is everything. As a woman she gave us a lot of values and helped us with a lot of things. Even though she is dead, she will stay alive. (Jenni Fan)

During my charlas with the women at the nightclub, I heard throughout our conversations that the women were there to have fun and that drinking, chanting, and dancing were a sign of time-off from work, sadness, and stress. Rather than view their leisure time as wasteful, my interlocutors understood their engagement with intoxication as productive. Their activities at the club, as in Jenni concerts, opened spaces for embodied pleasures that are typically hard for them to obtain given the arduous and often under-compensated labor they perform in both home and work spaces as Latinas. One of the fans at the table said, “Yo quiero hablar pero no puedo” (I want to talk, but I just cannot). Instantly, the other women and I asked her why. Her sister-in-law, who was sitting next to her said, “ya va chillar, cuñada? Es chillona, igual que yo.” (Are you going to start crying, sister-in-law? She is a cry baby, like myself.) She continued to explain,

Today we are celebrating so “no chilles” [don't cry] “no chilles,” today is a good day. We actually all made it for the first time. She is my sister-in-law, she is my sister and this is the first time we have ever done anything like this together and then to have my best friend with us, nos robamos a la little niece, para descarillarla tambien poquito [all fans laugh]. It is a family thing for us so it is great that we are here together.

This was a very powerful moment during our charla because the woman's fear about shedding tears explained the enormous love and respect she had for Jenni and the meaning-making around coming together as a family of women to parrandiar “party” and celebrate an artist that they admired and identified with. She eventually shared some of her memories from Jenni’s concerts and told me that she has been a Jenni fan since the early 2000s, when Jenni was just starting her singing career.

After my charlas with the women at that table, they recommended that I go talk to the women at the table next to them. One woman said, “Go talk to them, they are big fans, we just met them outside; they are big Jenni fans. Big time, you have to go talk to them; tell them that we sent you,” and I did exactly what she told me. When I arrived at the next table, the fans were very excited to share their memories about Jenni. A fan told me that she identified with Jenni’s song “Mi Vida Loca” because her father was overprotective; he rarely allowed her to go out and expected her to obey gender restrictions. She explained:

I come from a family with a very macho father. I like playing that song because it demonstrates her joy. It also says very strong words. For instance when it says, “I am no one’s cat.” But it is the truth. I have seen it in my life. Men think we are going to be there whenever they want. That song gives women the courage to not be that woman.

Rivera’s music inspired this fan to privilege her own pleasure and not be passive with men. In this quote, the fan refers to her father as a machista, a man who does not allow her to go out to nightclubs and have fun. She explained that men expect women to be domestic gatas (cats), who are both passive, mujeres básicas (basic women), and obedient. The fan recognized that the songs afforded her a different gender experience where she could choose between multiple expressions of womanhood: the woman who makes hand-made tortillas at home, or the woman who drinks a tequila shot and lives the “crazy life” at the club. The fan told me that Jenni’s music oKered Latina women a space to celebrate the expression of womanhood they desired.

After our conversation, I left the table to wander off, drink a tequila shot, and try to talk to more people. Very soon, the audience that was once spatially divided by tables united on the dance Poor to dance and sing to the music of Voces del Rancho (one of the music groups Jenni grew up with); after them came Grupo Addicion (the norteño group Jenni practiced with before she left to Monterrey), then Gustavo Rivera (Jenni's brother), and finally Juan Rivera (her other brother). Only when Juan Rivera came to stage, did fans start to cheer, chant, and remove their bras for Jenni.

6. The Performance: Deschicharse “Un-Bra”

“Today we are celebrating so “no chilles” [don't cry] “no chilles,” today is a good day. We actually all made it for the first time. She is my sister-in-law, she is my sister and this is the first time we have ever done anything like this together and then to have my best friend with us, nos robamos a la little niece, para descarillarla tambien poquito [all fans laugh]. It is a family thing for us so it is great that we are here together.

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6. The Performance: Deschicharse “Un-Bra”

“I want to hear a loud yell from all the women here!” said a man through the microphone before introducing Chiquis Rivera, Jenni’s daughter, as the master of ceremonies. Before Chiquis came to the stage, the family made sure that there were several
La Gran Señora tequila bottles on the table that was on stage. Having Jenni’s tequila displayed was important because it represented her legacy and was a way of keeping her alive. The bottle they presented that night depicted Jenni dressed in all black, her hand throwing a semi-“West side” gesture as it touches the fedora she wears, chin down as smoke comes out of her mouth. After being introduced, Chiquis took the microphone and passionately said,

Hi, first of all I want to thank everyone for being here, supporting my family and overall my mother. I want you to do me a favor, can we send my mom a loud cry to heaven?! [fans start screaming]. I want to thank you so much, I hope you buy my mom’s tequila and her book. I want you to learn my mother’s story and get drunk with her. With you all, is my Uncle.


Through their chanting, Chiquis provides a space for fans to mourn Jenni and keep her alive. The fans did not care if they were too loud and too sexy for Jenni Rivera; they felt so comfortable and intoxicated by Jenni's legacy that throughout the night, three fans removed their bras and threw them towards the stage at the release party. Juan, Jenni's brother, caught each of the bras, and made these comments (holding up the bra towards the audience): “Y'all began to fuck around already, whose is this? It matches my outfit huh? I don't know whose this is but this lady got some big ass tits!” The removal of bras is not a new cultural practice in Mexican regional music; it is common for fans to throw their bras at male singers like Juan. However, in my ethnographic research with male Banda musicians and audience members at places like El Rodeo, where this tequila release party took place and the music scene that Jenni was a part of, I have found that men view bra-throwing as a promiscuous act, one that they read as indicating that female fans are sexually available to them; and oftentimes, promiscuousness is correlated with slut-shaming and viewed as a negative act. In my reading of bra-throwing, I deliberately fight back against these heteromasculinist/hypermasculine views of Latina sexuality. I read the removal of bras for Jenni as a ritual that symbolizes desire, admiration, and liberation.

The intoxicating pleasures of bra-throwing at the tequila release transported me back to that intimate and safe concert space Jenni created for her fans. For example, at Jenni’s last concert in Monterrey, Mexico on December 8, 2012, as in many previous concerts, Jenni caught bras thrown to her on stage and spun them around like a striptease to the rhythm of the song. In this performance, Jenni used sarcastic language to interact with fans; she clarified that “slutiness” is not what is happening, but suggested instead that these women take their bras off because of how hot it is. Although Jenni loved the intoxicating effect that she had on her fans, which motivated them to remove their bras for her, she strategically drew upon language, that aimed to temper the raunchy actions of her fans in order to deflect the gender policing and the media bashing she had regularly been subject to. However, the exaggerated, tongue-in-cheek manner in which she made these statements revealed that she was enjoying, sanctioning, and encouraging her fans' public undressing. In this suspended Jenni time, the women turned the social order around and did not care if they were seen as embodying an unrespectable femininity. Bra-throwing was turned into a positive ritual, something that she made acceptable through the themes of sex-positivity in her music and performance.

Her performance lets the audience know that she wanted women to decide for themselves when they had too much clothing on. It was this performance, like many others, that helped me understand that the bras being thrown that night when Juan performed were not intended for him, but rather for his sister, Jenni. That night fans did not scream “Juan, Juan, Juan”—they chanted “Jenni, Jenni, Jenni.” Although Juan was promoting his new album Oveja Negra, he made sure he centered his presentation to honor his sister, and Jenni was the center of conversation that night. Even before singing his first song on stage Juan said, “Gracias por amar a mi Hermana Jenni” (Thank you for loving my sister Jenni). After this first song, Juan shared with
the audience how Jenni was transported to the cemetery on December 31, 2012. He told the audience that before taking her, all the brothers, including his niece Chiquis got intoxicated and hired a Banda Sinaloense to take her cruising all over Long Beach for the last time. Juan explained that this Mexican tradition of “que me entierren con la Banda” (Have them bury me with a live Banda Sinaloense) was not permitted in the United States. Hearing this anecdote filled me with joy because I was glad that Jenni, La Diva de La Banda, “The Diva of Banda Music” had gotten her last parranda “party” while cruising in the streets of her hometown, Playa Larga or “Long Beach.” To the fans that night, Jenni’s relatives Gustavo, Juan, and Chiquis stood in as figures for her to enable fan remembering, intoxication, and maintaining Jenni inolvidable “unforgettable.” The intoxicating pleasure of deschicharse stayed with the fans, even after Jenni’s death.

7. The Exit: Intoxicated and Naked

During the tequila release party, I learned that the fans did not need to have Jenni present to be intoxicated by her; they embodied Jenni through their interactions and responses via chants, removal of clothing, drinking, and cheering. The night of the release party, the fans I spoke with took tequila shots in memory of Jenni Rivera. The consumption of La Gran Señora tequila celebrated Jenni’s memory, a woman whose music challenged the gender stereotypes and labels given to women who were “Tequileras and Chuperamigas.” Unfortunately, Jenni passed away before her tequila release party. But the tequila and Jenni Rivera’s legacy will allow fans to continue drinking her feminist vision of intoxication. Jenni’s disruption of gender normativity invited her fans and community to challenge gendered ideas of intoxication. Instead of viewing intoxication as shameful, particularly for women, Jenni reframed going out and drinking, an activity commonly frowned upon (particularly for mothers), as a means of empowerment for Latinas. This case study demonstrates how intoxication in the form of several stimuli (i.e. music, performance, tequila) is a form of pleasure, agency, and distraction for many working-class Latina fans.

This pleasure, however, often comes at a high cost, as Jenni continues to be disparaged posthumously for her practices of drinking on stage. For instance, during the public hearing approval process to determine whether the city of Long Beach would name a park in her memory, a resident by the name of Andres stated that he disapproved of the park because he believed Jenni would represent the city in a negative way (Nelson). Via a translator, Andres said, “unfortunately, the idea that people have of her is that she induces other people to be alcoholics” (Nelson). Comments like these demonstrate how intoxication is read as deviant when it is engaged in by women. His comments are influenced by respectability politics and moral panic about Latina women losing control. Nevertheless, intoxicating feminist pleasure is not about being an alcoholic but about metaphorically drinking Jenni, and being intoxicated by her empowerment, music, performance, and La Gran Señora tequila. The Jenni Rivera fans I spoke with during the release party did not care about being perceived as loud; they felt intoxicating feminist pleasures from the dissonant Banda sound, dancing de cartoncito, removal of their bras, and drinking while saying yes to #SaludPorElApoje “cheers to sexual looseness!” These actions conspicuously reject the social norms that dictate that Latina women should center their energies on caring for others (particularly children and romantic partners) while denying their own desires for embodied pleasures and participation in nightlife culture. In so doing, they embrace the working-class Latina sex-positivity that Jenni Rivera inspired and agitates those who are invested in maintaining the established gender order.

Drunkenness, connections with other fans, public displays of the body, and sonic experience produce unexpected forms of feminist solidarity for these women, whether or not men and outside community members recognize it as such.

Works Cited


Figures


Fig. 2: Hernandez, Yessica Garcia. “Chuper Amigos.” Online video clip. Vimeo. n.d. 4 Mar. 2015.


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