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## *Remembering Super Bowl 50 through a Mestiz@ Sport Consciousness*

**Andrew McGregor** / 22 February 2016

**By Jorge E. Moraga**

*\*Author's Note: For the spring 2016 semester, I was fortunate to be assigned 'The Cultural Politics of Sport', an upper division course housed in the [Department of CCGRS](#) at Wazzu. As a new teaching prep, I chose to pivot our class around American football: a sport that sells campus identity, ensures a national(ist) discourse, and guarantees (counter)narratives of 21<sup>st</sup> century belonging. For their first essay, I asked students to examine the ritualized and mediated spectacle of Super Bowl 50. As a believer of ['engaged pedagogy'](#), I promised my students I too would complete the assignment. For all the insights, questions, and patience, I dedicate this Sport in American History blog post to the critical minds enrolled in Comparative Ethnic Studies 308\**

On Saturday February 6, comedian Conan O'Brien commenced Super Bowl 50 by hosting the 5<sup>th</sup> annual NFL

Honors. From introducing the evening's purpose to be just like the Oscars, 'if the Oscars nominated black people', to later reviewing one of the 'greatest plays' of the 2015 regular season (when the entire St. Louis Rams franchise relocated to Los Angeles), [O'Brien's 11:02 opening monologue](#) was a humorous, yet necessary critique to the permeation of raced and classed politics in U.S. media and sport. The annual event drew in some of the National Football League's greatest players, coaches, Pro Football Hall of Fame inductees, and Hollywood stars alike. [Even Commissioner Roger Goodell showed up.](#)

Akin to Stan Cronke's tenure with Missouri, the mythic spectacle that was Super Bowl 50 came and went. In their 24 to 10 victory over the Carolina Panthers (17-2), the Denver Broncos (15-4), led by an unrelenting defense, secured bragging rights to the half-century American ritual. And, like the season long battle, the remembrance of Super Bowl 50 continued to make its way across mainstream and social media outlets. Whether discussing [the racial-gendered politics of QB'ing](#) in the NFL, or the [envisioned boycotts over this year's Pepsi "politicized" halftime show](#), one thing is certain: Super Bowl 50 highlights the necessity to discuss social issues of race, gender, and national belonging through an intersectional framework ([Patricia Hill Collins](#)). And despite all these important circulated conversations, one facet remains under the radar: what do we make of the imprint that Latino brownness leaves behind?

While NFL Honors acknowledged Ron ['Riverboat'](#) Rivera as the 2015 Coach of the Year. Surely, the impression left behind by Conan O'Brien's opening monologue necessitates a critical pause. When discussing the forthcoming NFL season, the veteran late-night talk show host jested: "Here's another big change for next season, the NFL is going to play a game in Mexico City. Yeah, no, I think it'll be very interesting to see two NFL teams go missing [laughter, pause] ... I love Mexico." Describing the league's renewed efforts at growing the NFL-Mexico market, O'Brien's crass joke subliminally invokes the notion that ventures into Latin America – and by association the American Latino – equates to criminality, danger, and violence.

Thus, the build up and aftermath to Super Bowl 50, offers a timely moment to reflect on the ways Latin Americans/American Latinos permeate ["America's new national pastime."](#) Remembering Super Bowl 50 through a Mestiz@ Sport Consciousness allows us to go beyond the plays, commercials, and consumption as ritual, and instead confront historical erasure, identity politics, and ongoing power struggles.

## *Situating Brownd Subjectivities in Physical Culture*

In her seminal essay "Occupying a Middle Space: Toward a Mestiza Sport Studies," [Katherine M. Jamieson](#), associate professor in the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at UNCG, provides a critical mapping of how "sport studies scholars" can go "beyond naming the dominant and the subordinated" and instead "begin to understand the lived experiences of woman [and men] of color, rather than fitting them into categorical analyses" (2003). Through formal interviews with various Latina softball athletes, Jamieson introduces readers to the ways Chicana/Latina feminisms – particularly Gloria [Anzaldúa's mestizaje](#) (1987), Maria [Lugones' coalescence](#) (1994), and Chela [Sandoval's differential consciousness](#) (2000) – enriches analyses of physical culture. According to Jamieson:

“ Subjectivities are like the debris in an ocean tide moving within and against social, cultural, and political currents, and it is this intermingling of the constantly shifting tide and the temporarily stable sandy base that produces new citizen-subjects.

Jamieson's interrogation of brownd sport subjectivities remind us that conversations about Latina/Latino identity does not exist in a sociocultural vacuum. Rather,

Latina/Latino subjectivities negotiate what authors of *Latinos in the End Zone* describe as the “brown color line—a line expressed through deep prejudice and that has continued to create a disparity between life for Latinos [and Latinas] in the U.S. and those of Anglos” (Aldama and González 2014, p. 6). Surely, this brown color line has impacted the life of athletes like Ron Rivera.

Born to a Mexican mother and Puerto Rican father, Rivera became an All American at Cal, was a second draft pick by the Chicago Bears in 1984, and a Super Bowl champion the following year. While his playing days in the NFL ended in 1992, Rivera went on to hold numerous coaching positions, starting in 1997 with teams like the Bears, the Philadelphia Eagles, and the San Diego Chargers. His success, both as player and as coach, culminated in 2011 when the “son of a U.S Army official” became the NFL’s third Latino Head Coach.

## *The Latino Browning of NFL Super Bowls and U.S Sport/Media*

Although Ron Rivera’s leadership in the ‘hot seat’ made for an emblazoned Panthers season, it’s certainly not unprecedented. Back in 1981, the Oakland Raiders were led by not one, but two American Latinos. The NFL’s “first Latino head coach” Tom Flores recollects how his “presence in pro football touched a chord nationally” (quoted in Aldama and Gonzalez 2014, p. 97). Along with Heisman Trophy Winner Jim



The Latino duo, Jim Plunkett (left) and Tom Flores led the Oakland Raiders to two SB victories.

Photo Credit:

<http://www.raiders.com/history/ti>

Plunkett, the 1971 number 1 draft pick, Flores' Oakland Raiders went on to take Super Bowl XV and Super Bowl XVIII. Together, Flores and Plunkett's brownness helped to rupture cultural assumptions of the Latino male as lazy, incompetent, and intellectually inferior.

As 'official' vessels pioneering '1<sup>st</sup>' categories, Flores and Plunkett were to the Oakland Raiders' gridiron to what [Fernando Valenzuela](#) was to the L.A. Dodgers' diamond field. Together, they generated new fandoms, inspired brown communities, and have created counter-histories. Indeed, as authors to [Latinos in U.S. Sport: A History of Isolation, Cultural Identity, and Acceptance](#) remind us, "By the 1990s and 2000s, the presence of a Spanish surname on the field of the NFL no longer seemed out of the ordinary" (Iber et al. 2011, p. 244).



A Live NFL on ESPN tweet of Tom Flores (left) and Ron Rivera.

For all the inroads American Latinos have made in the NFL, it has not translated within the NFL's broader memory bank. Media coverage ranged from long-form pieces like Around the NFL editor Gregg Rosenthal's ["Ron Rivera's NFL voyage"](#) to ESPN staff writer David Newton's ["Super Bowl loss aside, Panthers get good marks on final report card,"](#) which summarizes Rivera's impact in 8 words.

In fact, for much of the season, mainstream sport/media seemed to neglect, if not openly critique, Rivera's Panthers. In [addressing the press](#)

after their only regular season loss to the Atlanta Falcons,  
[Coach Rivera notes](#):

“ I don't get it. I really don't. It's funny. At one point you've got a 14-game winning streak and people doubt you, then you lose one game and people doubt you even more ... I don't think we were fairly treated by some other people. People made statements about who we are, and they have no idea about who we really are.

Expanding Rivera's sense of 'they have no idea about who we really are,' this blog post considers exactly how U.S Americans, who have historically known racial and cultural difference through a Black/White Paradigm, are coming to grips with the Latin American/American Latino coach, athlete, fan, and consumer alike. Certainly, [Cam Newton's blackness and Peyton Manning's whiteness](#) will remain significant markers to situate ongoing dilemmas of race, class, and social belonging; however, because Latino brownness often exists at the margins to these dominant racial reference points, its performativity, affects, and senses become overshadowed.

Examining Brownness in U.S. sport/media invites us to explore broader ideological projects. Because [race always cuts through culture](#), Browned Latinos in the NFL remind us to how U.S society legitimates notions of citizen/non-citizen, national born/immigrant born, and legal/illegal. Or, as brilliantly proposed by [the late-José Esteban Muñoz](#),

“ [T]he life of Brownness requires a mode of analysis that can think about the intertwined nature of consciousness and history. Brownness is thus a mode of consciousness that responds to the historical pressure of the historical.

Perhaps, by centering the 'life' of 'American Latino brownness,' we discover how shifts in demographics, language, and mediascapes are 'responding to the historical pressure of the historical.' For an example, let's turn to the Spanish-speaking broadcasters for *Las Panteras de Carolina*: Jaime Moreno and Luis Moreno Jr.

Moreno and Moreno Jr. have covered the Carolina Panthers for the past six years. This past season, their excellent work intervened across English-dominant sport/media. Through their bilingual commentary, enthusiastic passion, and bringing a Latin-American soccer aesthetic to the NFL, they lively narrate the games in a way that monolingual sportscasters cannot. And despite being a rich story that goes beyond the game and cuts right into the heart of how Latin Americans/American Latinos are re-shaping a "New Latino U.S. South," for the most part, mainstream outlets described the Moreno's bilingual game calling as "announcer goes ballistic," "radio broadcasters go wild" and "muy bueno."

And while mainstream outlets found this story to be worthy of a 30-second time slot, (ESPN's Outside the Line being an exception) the bulk of the critical conversations related to Rivera and the Morenos were regulated to "Spanish-speaking" outlets. ESPN affiliates such as *ESPN Deportes* and the recently created One Nación Podcast con Max Bretos y Marly Rivera picked up the story. They examined, interviewed, and explored the growing influence and support behind Ron Rivera and the diversifying fanbase that #KeepPounding for Las Panteras de Carolina.

While important to note the mediated celebration, so too the call to remain vigilant against racial sport projects that commodify and criminalize. One example suffices: During #SB50 media day, @NFL tweeted:

“ @J\_No24 rockin' his own @panthers Nacho Libre mask ... Because #SBOpening Night. #SB50.

Surely, Josh Norman's donning of a Luchador mask, noted to have been distributed by one (if not both) of the Moreno broadcasters, captures the nexus between race, ethnicity, and cultural hybridity in late-capitalist America. Going beyond the celebration of cultural differences for its own sake, it's

important to mention that this is not a 'Nacho Libre' mask, in reference to white American actor Jack Black's 2006 comedy-drama-sport movie, but rather a *Lucha Libre* mask, in reference to the century year old Mexican sport, culture, and ritual practice that continues to give meaning to a people, community, and nation. Like the ever-present inclination to segregate topics of American brownness to "Spanish-media," so too are pro sport corporation's willingness to conflate difference for branding purposes. In both cases, a denial to consider the real, material consequences invoked remains present.

### *Fútbol Americano: Is another NFL possible?*

On the Friday night before Super Bowl 50 weekend was set to begin, a Latino pioneer to American football, Joe Kapp, dubbed by Sports Illustrated in 1970 as The Toughest Chicano, announced his ongoing battle with Alzheimer's and the long-term effects of CTE. The following night, during the NFL Awards Night, 4X Super Bowl champion Tom Flores was nowhere to be seen; Jim Plunkett received a whopping



A live NFL tweet of Super Bowl 50 media day.

two-seconds of video footage; and the only reference to Latin American/American Latinos – beside Rivera’s Coach of the Year video acceptance speech – was in the form of O’Brien’s ‘I Love Mexico’ bit described above. And despite the phenomenal grassroots efforts that exist to educate the folks out in Canton, Ohio, as well as the seminal work of historian Mario Longoria, the Flores and Plunketts’ remain locked from the Pro Football Hall of Fame. One wonders if in the next fifty years those efforts will only change by the sheer quantity of its names: Gonzalezs, Riveras, and Morenos.

In the important essay “Beyond the Latino Sports Hero: The Role of Sports in Creating Communities, Networks, and Identities,” professor at Cal State Channel Islands José M. Alamillo highlights the vital bond between athletic triumphs and the American Latino *barrio* (neighborhood, local community). Alamillo writes: “Latino and Latina athletes have made significant achievements in American sports, but these have not been individual accomplishments.” Complimentary to Jamieson’s call for a Mestiza Sport Studies, Alamillo reminds us to see the browned sporting individual in relation to both family and community. In other words, we must go beyond seeing individual Latina/Latino as Hero, Star, and Superhero.

Arguably, the question of whether another NFL is possible remains intrinsically tied to how the organization remembers, acknowledges, and treats American Latinos. Indeed, coupled with a surge of NFL names like [Hall of Famer Anthony] Muñoz, [Tony] Gonzalez, [Victor] Cruz, [Tony] Romo, [Mark] Sanchez, [Ron] Rivera, and Super Bowl 50-champion [Louis] Vasquez, the NFL Latino player is in a viable position to shape the NFL’s foreseeable future. Similarly, perhaps it is time American Latinos – as fans and consumers of the game – grapple with how we consume pro sports, especially one as nationalist, hyper-violent, and consumerist driven as the NFL.

Remembering Super Bowl 50 through a mestiz@ sport consciousness centers the fluidity of identity and its impact on/off football fields. As an influential part to the browning of American sport, it becomes our task to ensure a NFL venture off to Mexico, to reach its 25 billion dollar goals, does

not simply reduce the richness of Latin American/American Latino brownness to lucha libre masks, margaritas, and colorblind narratives of inclusion a la Hispanic Heritage Month. Ultimately, SB XV, XVIII, and 50 serve as key anchors to consider, think, and teach about the state of the Latinos in the NFL and their impact in U.S society. For now, and for what it's worth, Coach Ron Rivera's American brownness motivated this 'Latino in an unexpected place' to #KeepPounding another year in the gridiron that is the U.S academy.

*Jorge E. Moraga is a PhD candidate in American studies at Washington State University. His research explores questions of identity, media, and capital as it pertains to the American Latina/Latino browning of U.S pro sport. He can be reached at [jorge.moraga@wsu.edu](mailto:jorge.moraga@wsu.edu)*

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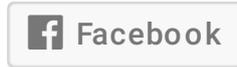
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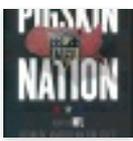


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**Hank Olguin** 23 January 2017 at 3:49 pm

Just another example of the persistent and damaging practice of the media ignoring, stereotyping, or demeaning Latinos. By now we should not be surprised that our many contributions are easily and habitually dismissed and that we are often thought of as foreign, in spite of our 500-year-old presence on this continent. The beat goes on.

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