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“I don’t play no tennis. It’s a rich-people sport”:

Exploring a Cultural Divide in Brenda Peynado’s “Yaiza” Through the Lens of Postcolonialism

Although taking a feminist approach to “Yaiza” would seem like the most obvious route, nevertheless my essay uses postcolonialism to explore the internalized hatred of class within the Latinx community. As a Puerto Rican myself, I have witnessed people constantly belittling others who are Puerto Rican or Latinx from a different country (ex. the Dominican Republic). In Peynado’s story, a cultural divide emerges when one Spanish speaker looks down on another Spanish speaker for her accent: “[s]he had a Miami accent when she said hello, those Spanish l’s that flicked from the back of the mouth instead of the front” (Peynado). The narrator creates a physical and economic distinction between herself and Yaiza due to Yaiza’s dialect. This essay shows how class distinctions prevail, even at the early age of eleven and impact the treatment of people. By incorporating a Fanonian lens, I argue that elitism causes the narrator to suffer from a superiority complex, which damages her perspective on other individuals. In order to do so, I first introduce feminist scholar bell hooks, secondly Frantz Fanon, thirdly Karl Marx, and finally Laurent Berlant.

Despite Yaiza’s being known as the “scholarship girl”, at the high school football game, the narrator encounters the star-player facing defeat into the classist system and referring to tennis as a “rich-people sport” (Peynado). The feminist scholar bell hooks elaborates on how minorities face similar issues that Yaiza experiences due to her socioeconomic status: “[t]he overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss” (bell hooks 2481). A sense of alienation and “otherness” separates Yaiza from the other girls in her tennis team.

Frantz Fanon, a recognized “French Marxist,” heavily influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, helps shed light on the development of postcolonial theory, as well as explain it (Stevens 190). Fanon and hooks share their struggles as the “other”, which conveys their sense of alienation within their works to prove the reality of elitism that currently exists within the world. Utilizing postcolonial theory by Fanon, Karl Marx’s basic theory becomes essential. Returning back to the nineteenth century, Marx centralizes the idea of where classism initially begins, and Fanon demonstrates the degree that race played into classism under capitalism. Marx strongly believed that “capitalism produces alienation” as workers are alienated from themselves in society in means of production (Stevens 212). Alienation can be attributed to financial separation of social classes, with the working class being seen as less in comparison to the wealthy class.

In the modern world, Marx expresses that all ideologies and beliefs are created by economic systems. He applies that affirmation to further justify how today’s “certain belief-systems come into being to support the status quo” (Stevens 183). Status quos are just the way things are in society, due to cultural or societal acceptance. Unfortunately, since race and class have been implemented in society’s belief system for so long, people scrutinize others who are “below” them. Twenty-first century queer theorist Lauren Berlant provides careful insight on “cruel optimism” concerning social status and classism. Cruel optimism carefully elaborates on why challenging the status quo comes off as difficult, the “varieties of immiseration” they are forced to endure but choose instead to ride the wave of the system of attachment they are used to (Berlant 23). Options to improve her home life are not readily available for Yaiza, as she understands that she will never be like her wealthy peers.

Defeating the status quo transcends to be out of the question, due to hierarchies of power. Following a Marxist mentality, it becomes evident that “[r]acism is another form of ideology” (Stevens 183). The government, the world, and society all exist withholding a sense of power, and race exists in a power dynamic. Historically, attempted justifications for racism were that there were “different biological ‘races’ of people”, which led to a hierarchy of races, and became so ingrained into the beliefs of people during the nineteenth century (Stevens 183). Power exists within racism, with white at the forefront and “other” at the very bottom of the scale. Alienation becomes the result of power inequivalence. With hierarchies implemented into every aspect of human life (economic, race, political), living in a classist society becomes nearly impossible.

Peynado initiates her short story by using an extensive amount of imagery to bring Yaiza’s character to life. Whether Yaiza’s teammates realize it or not, they are participating in Marxist ideals of elitism, believing that they are superior for having proper tennis equipment. Only within a few paragraphs of “Yaiza”, her alienation due to poverty in the world’s unfair, classist structure presents itself forward. Within the narrator’s “mostly Hispanic neighborhood”, many of the tennis players from her team reside there. Comprised of homes of different sizes due to financial income, the families that could afford tennis lessons for their children came from the larger homes (Peynado). It’s important to note that all the children that played tennis were of wealth, except for Yaiza. Peynado introduces Yaiza as a girl who “has only one racquet shoved in a ratty backpack” while the other girls had designated racquet bags that had multiple racquets, and team member identifiers such as the shared keychain (Peynado).

By being the coach’s favorite, the narrator exhibited superiority and grew accustomed to it. Being exceptional at tennis became a commodity for the narrator. To overcome a superiority complex, the narrator “must put an end to the narcissism on which [s]he relies to imagine that [s]he is different from the other” (Fanon 12). Everyone on the team, including the narrator, were extremely envious. Naturally, Yaiza excelled in tennis. Yaiza had never taken classes; she shined in tennis due to her consistent practice. The narrator could not stomach this information, the presence of Yaiza bothered her, Yaiza had appeared out of nowhere, and replaced the narrator from being the favorite and the perks that came along with it. “I wanted to earn it all, to feel like those moments were my own, the dust mine” (Peynado). Focusing on being superior, on being perfect, composes the narrator’s major dilemma. She focuses specifically only on being better than Yaiza because of an internal desire to reach self-fulfillment.

The moment Yaiza enters the story, it becomes clear that her physical appearance and dialect make her stand out. It seems that the narrator forgets that although Yaiza comes from a poor family, they both have something in common, their ethnicity. The narrator allowed assimilation of American culture to change her perspective of others within her own ethnicity. Whether the narrator sees it or not due to her being so young, Hispanic people are colonized. Fanon states, “[t]he colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (9). The narrator looks down at Yaiza, as she has not adopted American cultural standards, Yaiza still maintains her Miami accent and has not risen on the social ladder. Since the narrator suggested that Yaiza was the only girl on the team that came from a smaller home, had only one racquet and there was no sight of a backup one, and walked; her socioeconomic status was much different and lower than everybody else’s. While most of the girls were forbidden to walk across the highway due to safety reasons by their parents, Yaiza had no other option to get to practice but by crossing the highway (Peynado).

While lower on the socioeconomic scale, Yaiza’s grandmother works incredible amounts of time, implied since Yaiza walks home (Peynado). An implication of her busy work schedule suggests how Yaiza affords being on the team. In a Marxist analogy, Yaiza and her grandmother are the proletariats (the working class) while the narrator and her family are the bourgeoises (the high class). Implications on Yaiza’s parents’ involvement are uncertain, but she does live with her grandmother. Later, the fact that Yaiza’s and grandmother happens to be the narrator’s new housekeeper becomes revealed, the dynamic of the characters within the story changes. This specific dynamic causes a rift in their relationship. That was coincidentally the same day Yaiza joined the courts (Peynado). Yaiza feels an intense discernment of alienation, presumably due to her being on a diminished level in the hierarchical power scale. In a way, the narrator towers over Yaiza figuratively and literally due to economics.

Classism continually illustrates Peynado’s essay as a reoccurring theme. At the very young age of eleven when the narrator faces an internal dialogue, “[t]he people who lived on this street, had they not climbed high enough, had they not run fast enough?” (Peynado). Despite the leading characters being remarkably juvenile, the narrator contemplates the hierarchical system of socioeconomic status. She wonders if Yaiza’s behavior may be due to her family’s shortcomings and possibly not working hard enough. An acknowledgement of how Yaiza’s financial status impacts her daily life occurs within the narrator, “[b]ut then I remembered going to her house, her toughness in the face of our mocking, that racquet the only thing she seemed to have” (Peynado). The narrator exudes the personality of a hot-headed child, she desires to beat Yaiza with every inch in her body. Comprehensively, the entire discourse and exchange that occurred between Yaiza and the narrator, after walking to Yaiza’s house, induced the narrator’s thinking.

Both visually and metaphorically, the narrator entered Yaiza’s life, she grew to understand her better as she physically entered Yaiza’s home. She found Yaiza’s grandmother in the living room, watching a novella. The narrator feels uneasy because although she wants to appear tough in front of Yaiza, the narrator feels embarrassed that Yaiza’s grandmother had seen the way she lived. By Yaiza’s grandmother picking up after the narrator, she suddenly feels inferior, which changes her position in the hierarchy. Perhaps it was the fact that she envied Yaiza as a tennis player that made the narrator feel sick, especially if her grandmother had told Yaiza. “She possibly knew me better than my mother did, who seemed not even to see me for who I was and kept wanting me to quit tennis for dance” (Peynado). Yaiza’s grandmother telling Yaiza about the narrator’s living conditions would make the narrator feel ungrateful, as she has wealth and does not take care of herself, meanwhile Yaiza lives in a small cramped house.

After that summer where Yaiza beat her in the tennis match, the narrator personally felt that she improved as a person. The narrator’s motives begin changing, her drive is stemmed from her want to show off to Yaiza, to get a sense of personal satisfaction. A jealousy drive will make someone go mad, someone who desires to be seen as superior “will lock himself into his room…desperately determined” (Fanon 11). Similar to the “other” in Fanon’s essay, Yaiza became determined to surpass Yaiza. The narrator spends a significant amount of time changing herself to be seen as perfect. The narrator essentially became more woman-like, grew boobs, had her first kiss with a boy; she wanted Yaiza to see her. (Peynado). Despite wanting to show off, the narrator never saw Yaiza again. A character flaw within the narrator exists revealing a deep sense of insecurity to redeem herself to Yaiza due to her superiority complex.

After calming down, Yaiza shared “I don’t play no tennis. It’s a rich-people sport” (Yaiza). To the reader’s surprise, the “scholarship girl” had failed. She had changed, she was no longer the girl with a ticket to success. The narrator masks her insecurity of being beat by someone of a lower class, Fanon addresses a similar topic within racism by stating: “[t]here is no forgiveness when one who claims a superiority falls below the standard” (14). Yaiza not participating in tennis provides a good indication that she does not see herself as “superior”, which caused a major shift in her life. Metaphorically, Yaiza winning to the narrator fits Fanon’s dialogue, the narrator finally suffers the consequences of elitism. Social classism removes the sense of “otherness” in the eyes of a minority as they adjust and absorb the culture they are assimilating to. Something within Yaiza had changed, the star player no longer played due to classism.

Examining Yaiza’s character change through a lens of postcolonialism of Fanon may help explain what happened to Yaiza: “[e]very colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of …the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country” (Fanon 9). Yaiza being alienated from her teammates of her own ethnicity for being financially different, may have caused the “death” of her drive for playing sport. As a Latinx individual from a low-income household, Yaiza seamlessly reached a point of existentialism and deep contemplation regarding her life and future. Individuals who do not have immediate privileges due to financial boundaries commonly find themselves feeling inferior to their successful counterparts. At the very end of “Yaiza”, the narrator shares that she will shortly be heading to the University of Florida with a scholarship to play tennis, she became recognized as the second-best player within her state. She realizes that she identified someone who looks similar Yaiza in the bleachers and becomes enthusiastic. When she does, she talks to her and she prompts her about her tennis career, at this point the narrator most likely presumes that Yaiza’s transformed into a tennis superstar and obtained a scholarship to a prestigious school. Yaiza appeared to be annoyed, in a fight-or-flight mode, ready to hit the narrator for even bringing up tennis.

After all of Yaiza’s hard work and dedication for tennis, the promise of success fell through. The “scholarship girl” changed, she showed emotions of hurt and annoyance when tennis was mentioned again. A sense of security is provided through obtaining a scholarship, a grand shift or event occurred in Yaiza’s life not be able to play tennis anymore. When the narrator’s mother fired Yaiza’s grandmother for stealing, it certainly impacted Yaiza’s life as she plausibly could not afford tennis lessons any longer. By admitting that she does not play because of the status attached to tennis, she proved to the narrator that she sees herself lower on the socioeconomic hierarchy. Yaiza no longer saw herself as another one of the tennis players, but she distinguished herself as the “other”. Yaiza no longer obtained the golden ticket out of poverty; she shows submissive actions which led her astray from being successful as a tennis player after graduating due to the unfortunate circumstances of classism.

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