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# CINCO DE MAYO, INC.: REINTERPRETING LATINO CULTURE INTO A COMMERCIAL HOLIDAY

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## ABSTRACT

*Cinco de Mayo celebrations have become more popular in the United States than in Mexico. In the past few decades, this historic day has changed from a regional celebration of Mexican American culture into nationwide Latino/a holiday hijacked by the alcohol industry and other commercial interests. This chapter closely examines the varied ways in which Cinco de Mayo has been represented by U.S. advertisers, marketers, and restaurant owners. Using content analysis of Cinco de Mayo advertisements in magazines, billboards, liquor ads, and store displays from 2000 to 2006, five mediated representations emerged: Mexico's Fourth of July, Mexican St. Patrick's Day, Drinko de Mayo, Sexism in a Bottle, and Mexican Otherness. These representations are anchored in a new racism ideology that emphasizes cultural difference, individualism, liberalism, and colorblindness, which reinforce existing racial inequalities. The implications of the alcohol industry's Cinco de Mayo advertisements is the increased targeting of Latino/a youth from working-class communities with high rates of alcohol-related violent deaths and illnesses.*

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Julia Alvarez (2007, p. 84) offers a biting critique of the commercialization of a Latina tradition that marks a young girl's entry into womanhood that reveals "how our traditions are remade in the USA, repackaged and sold back to us as authentic at a higher price". In *Latinos Inc.*, Arlene Dávila (2001) shows how both Latino/a and non-Latino/a advertising agencies perpetuate stereotypical images of Latino/as, and construct a Latinidad that is commercially safe for consumption without challenging social inequities that continues to impact the Latino/a community. Some of these stereotypes include Latino/as as exotic, family-oriented, hot and spicy food lovers, cultural traditionalist and hyper-nationalistic, being present-oriented and overly emotional, prone to listen to radio, watch television, but not reading, and fiercely loyal to name brands. These stereotypes are continually being reconfigured by marketing agencies to explain Latino/a consumer behavior and to tap into their buying power. The amount of goods purchased by U.S. Latino/as increased from 1986 to 1996 reaching over \$223 billion. According to a 2003 report by the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia, Latino/a buying power is expected to increase from 5.2% in 1990 to 9.6% in 2008. Another report estimated that Latino/as currently spend \$400 billion annually in the United States (Douglas, 1996).

The commercialization of Cinco de Mayo should force one to pay attention to the gradual colonization of young Latino/a bodies by market forces. The alcohol and beer industry have been especially aggressive in spending millions in advertising to Latino/a youth. According to a report by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University, Hispanic youth ages 12–20 saw and heard 20% more alcohol advertising in English-only magazines and on English and Spanish radio and television during 2003 and 2004 than young people in their age group (Center for Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2005). During the same years, alcohol companies spent more than 3.5 million in advertising in both English and Spanish language media. As the director of Hispanic Marketing for Molson Coors Brewing Company put it, "If you're going to succeed in the beer business, you have to succeed in the Hispanic market" (Edwards, 2005, p.2). Corporate America's salvation for a growing Latino/a consumer base will continue to transform Cinco de Mayo into a selling opportunity while ignoring the high school drop-out rates and prison incarceration numbers among young Latino/as.

This chapter examines the multiple ways in which Cinco de Mayo is reinterpreted into a commodified holiday by advertisers, marketers, and restaurant owners. First, I will trace the origins and the development of the Hispanic market and show how during the 1980s the beer and alcohol industry appropriated Cinco de Mayo to gain a foothold into the lucrative

Several weeks before May 5, 1994, a Michigan radio station offered listeners their "own personal Mexican" as the winning prize for a Cinco de Mayo-inspired contest. The radio dick jockey announced that "Members of the station and their families are not eligible to own Mexicans—bathing and delousing of Mexicans is a winner's responsibility. The station assumes no responsibility for infectious diseases carried by Mexicans" (Bender, 2005). The view of dirty Mexican bodies carrying infectious diseases and polluting the American way of life seeks to justify their chief function as "cheap" exploitable labor that can be disposed at will. Cinco de Mayo presents a marketing opportunity for radio stations to mock Mexicans for profit (Calafell, 2006). Packaged commodified images and narratives of Cinco de Mayo are deployed and reinterpreted year after year by corporations and advertisers to sell food and beverage products. To do this effectively, marketers appropriate, refigure, and resell images of Mexican history, tradition, culture, and language to establish closer market relationships between a particular product brand and consumers.

At the beginning of the new millennium, there is no question that Cinco de Mayo has entered American mainstream. While many view this trend as a sign of progress, whereby Latino/a culture is becoming visible and reaching national recognition, others are more suspicious about its commercialization. The rising immigration rates and high birth-rates among Latino/as have contributed to the holiday's increased popularity. These demographic changes have led to the Latinization of Cinco de Mayo in selected cities, transforming the holiday from its exclusive Mexican-American focus to a festive day to celebrate pan-Latino pride and culture (Sommers, 1991). Cinco de Mayo celebrations can now be found in rather unexpected places in the East Coast, the South, Hawaii, and Alaska. During springtime, over 500 cities across the United States organize Cinco de Mayo celebrations. The largest of these draw high attendance and generate corporate sponsorship including Los Angeles' Fiesta Broadway, Chicago South side's Cinco de Mayo parade, St. Paul's Cinco de Mayo in District del Sol, Denver's Cinco de Mayo: Celebrate Culture Festival, and Portland's Cinco de Mayo Fiesta. The adoption of a Cinco de Mayo first-class stamp in 1998 and the 2001 celebration in the White House lawn were the latest examples of its growing recognition by the federal government. One geographer has even claimed that Cinco de Mayo has become more popular than St. Patrick's Day (Carlson, 1998, p. 13).

Less understood is the role of big business in contributing to the holiday's popularity. How have marketers and advertisers used Latino/a culture to sell products? Has increased Latino/a consumer power contributed to increased attention of Latino/a cultural traditions? In *Once upon a Quinceañera*,

Latino/a consumer base. Second, I will analyze the mediated representations of Cinco de Mayo in billboards, print media articles, television commercials, and restaurant menus. These mediated representations have real social consequences for Latino/a community plagued with higher alcohol abuse rates, a negative self-image among youth, destructive forms of gender and familial relations, and other alcohol-related community problems. From a content analysis of advertisements in magazines, billboards, liquor ads, and store displays from 2000 to 2006, five dominant representations emerged. These include (1) A historical misreading of the holiday as "Mexico's Fourth of July," (2) The holiday's association with drinking also known as a "Mexican St. Patrick's Day," (3) The beer and alcohol industry has attempted to reinterpret the holiday into "Drinko de Mayo" by using appeals to nationalist symbols and cultural authenticity, (4) Marketers use sexual appeal and gendered representations of hyper-masculine Mexican males and "hot" "spicy" oversexed Latina women in their Cinco de Mayo ads, and (5) The holiday becomes an occasion for non-Latino/as to consumer "Mexican Otherness" inside bars and restaurants. Finally, I will examine the connections between the commodification of Cinco de Mayo and rise of the new racism in the United States. Ultimately, I will argue that the commodification of Cinco de Mayo resembles a form of "new racism" that relies upon racialized and gendered representations of "Mexicanness" that transforms a cultural tradition into a selling opportunity and distorts the historical and cultural significance of Cinco de Mayo.

This chapter foregrounds the ways in which racialized and gendered representations about Cinco de Mayo are produced and circulated in U.S. advertisements and restaurants. These "mediated representations" are powerful rhetorical forces that offer a positive, negative, or neutral interpretation with underlying racial assumptions and real socio-political consequences (Ono & Sloop, 2002). The analysis is drawn from a variety of alcohol and beer advertisements located inside mainstream magazines, grocery stores, billboards, liquor stores, and nightclubs and restaurants, and event posters. Using a discourse analysis (textual and visual), I seek to show the ways in which racial and gender ideology operates in contemporary understandings of Cinco de Mayo and Latino/a culture in the United States.

## MARKETING CINCO DE MAYO

The emergence of the "Hispanic Market" during the 1980s, also known by advertisers as the "Decade of the Hispanic," contributed to the widespread

popularity of ethnic festivals. Cinco de Mayo resembled New York's Puerto Rican Day Parade and other festivals that increased in popularity as they attracted more sponsors and direct marketing advertising (Dávila, 2001). For example, *USA Today* reported that "Until 10 years ago, Cinco de Mayo was largely ignored by the non-Latin community. Then, perhaps because there were a few other spring marketing opportunities or because they just realized what an untapped market Hispanics were, several large beer and soft-drink companies began sponsoring local events" (Stone, 1988, p. 1B). Since the 1920s, U.S. advertisers and retailers have appealed to the consumer tastes of Mexican immigrants and their children by tapping into their cultural traditions, Spanish language, and nationalist ideologies to sell products (Sanchez, 1994; Halter, 2000). By the mid-1970s, national magazines were predicting a sharp increase in the Latino/a population, and after the release of the 1980 census, companies were pleasantly surprised by the largely youthful Latino/a population (21-34 ages) and thus began bolstering advertising budgets and opening marketing departments to harness this growing Latino/a purchasing power. The construction of the "Hispanic market" emerged with the collapsing of U.S. residents of Latin American descent, originating from national, ethnic, class, and racial backgrounds into the homogenizing category of "Hispanic" (Dávila, 2001). To distinguish Hispanics from general American consumers, advertisers and marketing officials relied on a host of racial stereotypes to explain consumer behavior and used the Spanish language as the primary identity marker (Astroff, 1989; Peñaloza, 1994; Yankelovich & White, 1981).

During the early 1980s, Anheuser-Busch and Miller Company created their own Hispanic marketing departments and began to sponsor Cinco de Mayo celebrations. Apart from print and television advertising, Miller experimented with event marketing that included sponsoring concerts, art shows, and cultural festivals (McDowell, 1981). In 1989, Anheuser-Busch and Miller sponsored one of the largest Cinco de Mayo celebrations in Lincoln Park and Olvera Street in Los Angeles. However, the three-day celebration reportedly ended early when drunken individuals became rowdy, engaged in street brawls, and fired shots at a passing car (Maxwell & Jacobson, 1989). By the end of the night, six people were injured and one person killed. A Latino activist who attended the event observed, "They're [Companies] pushing a legalized drug [beer] upon our community. You're asking for trouble" (Maxwell & Jacobson, 1989, p. 49).

Despite the violence that resulted from heavy drinking at Cinco de Mayo festivals, Anheuser-Busch and Miller continued to woo Hispanic consumers. In 1996, Hispanic buying power convinced the beer and alcohol industry to spend over 26.3 million in advertising (Zate, 1996). Two years later, the top

