

**Contesting *Cinco de Mayo*:
Cultural Politics and Commercialization of the Postwar Fiesta**

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"*Cinco de Mayo* is not just a fiesta anymore, the *gringos* have taken it on as a good sales pitch. Back then we used the *fiesta* to accomplish something and made it work for *La Raza*," remarked Frances Martínez during a personal interview (Martínez 1999). As a longtime organizer of Corona's *Cinco de Mayo* celebration, Martínez recalled how Mexican Americans seized upon *Cinco de Mayo* during the 1940s to further the interests of the ethnic Mexican community (Gutiérrez 1993). Martínez's comments also reminds us how *Cinco de Mayo* has become a marketing opportunity for corporate America—from the onslaught of sexist television beer commercials to the all-you-can-drink happy-hour promotions. This incessant hyper-commercialization of *Cinco de Mayo* prompted comedian Paul Rodríguez to jokingly ask *Los Angeles Times* readers, "Aren't You Just Sicko de Mayo?" (5/5/98). Rather than simply bemoan how corporate America has changed the meaning of *Cinco de Mayo* from a symbol of anti-imperialist struggle and community self-determination to a drinking holiday, we should also to look to the past to examine the changing uses and meanings of *Cinco de Mayo* for ethnic Mexican communities and American culture in general.

Although *Cinco de Mayo* is recognized as a national holiday in Mexico, celebrations are limited to Puebla and Mexico City areas compared to the festival's rising popularity throughout the United States. One recent study found approximately 122 *Cinco de Mayo* festivals in the United States, a majority located in the southwestern states

(Carlson 1998). Despite the increasing popularity of *Cinco de Mayo* it is surprising to find so few scholarly studies on this important ethnic festival. Cultural anthropologists and folklorists have done much to aid our understanding of Latino festivals, both religious and secular, but a scarcity of scholarship on *Fiestas Patrias* (patriotic festivals) still remains (MacGregor-Villareal 1980; Cadaval 1985; Davalos 1996; Nájera-Ramírez 1993, Flores 1995). Anthropologist Margaret Melville (1978) noted long ago how *Diez y Seis de Septiembre* (September 16, Mexican Independence Day) celebrations evoked sentiments of ethnic pride and solidarity among Mexican Americans. A more recent study by folklorist Laurie Kay Sommers (1985, 1991) showed how Latin American immigrant groups in San Francisco's Mission District used *Cinco de Mayo* to construct a pan-ethnic Latino identity. Another excellent study by historian Mary Kay Vaughn (1994) shows how Mexican villagers negotiated patriotic festivals with revolutionary state officials to redefine identities and mobilize individuals into local community initiatives. These important studies affirm the importance of examining patriotic festivals as more than frivolous playful celebrations saturated by music, eating, dancing and drama, but as a highly contested events characterized by both affirmation and resistance to the established order (Miliband 1977).

For the purpose of this presentation I will examine the cultural politics and commercialization of *Cinco de Mayo* festivals in the Southern California town of Corona from 1930 to 1950.¹ In the face of racial discrimination and limited economic opportunities that characterized this small agricultural-industrial town, festival organizers used *Cinco de Mayo* to promote ethnic consciousness, build community solidarity, and defend the community against racist and nativist attacks. During the thirties and forties, American-

¹ The city name has no relation to Corona Beer, a popular corporate sponsor of *Cinco de Mayo* celebrations.

born youth of Mexican immigrant parents transformed *Cinco de Mayo* from a strictly nationalist celebration extolling the virtues of Mexican nationalism to a bicultural event that expressed their newfound Mexican American identity. The process of cultural change and "inventedness" of ethnicity, however, was not without conflict and struggle (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). As one of the oldest *Cinco de Mayo* celebration in Southern California, Corona's fiesta was a highly contested event reflecting larger generational, ethnic, class, and gender divisions within the community. One of the most contentious issues was corporate sponsorship. Local corporations sought to use the festival to advertise their products, sponsor queen candidates and allied with government officials changed the name of the festival to attract more publicity and tourist dollars. I argue that Mexican Americans not only used *Cinco de Mayo* festivals to promote ethnic solidarity but as an instrument for political opposition. Festival organizers appropriated the cultural pluralist discourse of corporate sponsors and government officials to seek community resources and demand full participation in the American body politic. Corona's Mexican Americans seized upon what Mary Kay Vaughn (1994) has termed, "interactive spaces" of patriotic festivals to redefine identities and redirect energies towards community-building projects, and most of all, demonstrate to the ethnic Mexican and Anglo community that they had indeed become a political force to be reckoned with.

In the immediate postwar years returning Mexican American veterans discovered not much had changed in their hometown of Corona, California. The Mexican population still faced racial discrimination in the community and limited job opportunities outside the citrus industry. One noticeable change, however, was the increased presence and participation of Anglo city officials and companies at the fiestas.

In their desire to attract tourist dollars city officials launched a publicity campaign to entice southern Californian residents to attend Corona's *Cinco de Mayo* fiesta. One advertisement in the local newspaper read: "Corona will don festival attire in preparation for the coming [1945] fiesta when Corona's Mexican population lays down its citrus tools and dons fiesta regalia to celebrate *Cinco de Mayo*" (*Corona Independent* 4/10/45, thereafter *C.I.*). City officials elicited the participation of Euro-American community groups by sponsoring a booth and attending the main events. The city mayor reminded Anglo residents that, "the fact that the Mexican people make up a permanent part of Corona's population and are an integral part of the city's social and economic life is reason enough for cooperating with them" (*C.I.* 2/26/45). The mayor attempted to lead by example when he participated with the Mexican consul in the crowning of the *Cinco de Mayo* queen.

Corona city officials viewed these festive occasions as a means to improve intercultural relations in the community and abroad. Corona city officials joined forces with the San Bernardino Mexican consular offices to promote "much city-wide cooperation and good-neighborly feeling" through Good Neighbor Policy (*C.I.* 2/26/45). Franklin Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy" sought to move away from its aggressive political and military interventionist policy and promote more liberal relations with Latin America counties through the use of press, radio, motion pictures, and cultural festivals (McWilliams, 1948). According to one Mexican vice consul, "No doubt the fiesta will tend to a better understanding and to strengthen the friendly relations with happily now exist between our two people, and sincerely believe that they will continue to receive your help and cooperation in various endeavors" (*C.I.* 5/6/45).

In response to proponents of the Good Neighbor Policy, Corona's Mexican Americans appropriated the policy's liberal pluralist discourse to make demands on government and corporate officials to improve postwar conditions for the ethnic Mexican community. In May 1945 Corona's Mexican American leaders attended several meetings of the Mexican Affairs Co-ordination Committee (a sub-committee of the Southern California Council on Inter-American Affairs) whose president reminded them that "Americans are doing their best to make the [Good Neighbor policy] work, now if any racial or religious discrimination exists within this country, the old world will accuse the Americans of not practicing what they preach" (*C.I.* 5/4/45). A few days later, the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Ezequiel Padilla spoke at the Cinco de Mayo observance in front of Los Angeles city hall declaring that "Mexico's foreign policy is one of justice and mutual trust between nations [because] without trust and good faith among nations and goodwill among statesmen no permanent peace is possible" (*Los Angeles Times* 5/6/45).

Upon returning to Corona Mexican American leaders decided to incorporate Pan-American themes at the 1946 fiesta. The festival planning was led by the Corona Americanization Club, a newly formed group of Mexican Americans whose objective was "To improve conditions among the Mexican-Americans and Mexicans living in Corona. Believing in our American institutions and in the democratic way of life, we believe that by raising the social level of Mexican-American people and improving their living conditions we are helping to improve our community" (*C.I.* 5/1/46). One of the most memorable "good neighborly" symbols of the 1946 parade, according to Alice Rodríguez, was the *mestizo* Uncle Sam. "We had a dark *mestizo* person on the parade

float and we needed somebody to represent Uncle Sam standing in front of a big globe of the world. As the parade float went by he was dressed in star and stripes, Uncle Sam in brown face, carrying the Mexican and American flags, and people were looking and laughing" (Rodriguez 1998).

Apart from transforming the parade into a symbol of inter-American cooperation the Corona Americanization club used *Cinco de Mayo* events to raise funds for a community recreation center. The need for a recreation center followed a slate of incidents in which police officers harassed Zoot Suiters and *pachucos* at a local dance. The city council's responded by sentencing the falsely convicted youth to juvenile prison, passing a curfew ordinance and denying dance permits to all community groups, with the exception of the Corona Americanization club. A better solution according to one Mexican American resident was to "Give troubled Mexican youth proper recreation rather than [prison] correction" (C.I. 4/13/46). Although the city recreation department was willing to donate the land the Mexican community needed to fundraise the building construction, which amounted to approximately ten thousand dollars. At the 1946 *Cinco de Mayo* festival organizers raised over two thousand dollars. While not close to the total amount the club president till praised their efforts, "Residents of Corona should be justly proud of living in a community where the Good Neighbor policy is not only a figure of speech but an actuality...The Mexican people are deeply grateful to each and every one who had any participation in the Cinco de Mayo that words fail us to properly thank all the Corona Good Neighbors. Let us cooperate with one another in a truly democratic city" (C.I. 5/17/46).

Despite placing their discourse and actions within the Good Neighbor Policy Mexican American organizers were still short of funds, so they turned to local corporate sponsors for assistance. In a controversial move several festival organizers proposed to the Corona Chamber of Commerce to move away from the "old Cinco de Mayo idea" towards the "Lemon Fiesta" theme "...in recognition of the importance of the lemon industry in the development prosperity of Corona" (C.I. 3/18/47). The proposed three-day weekend celebration would be called "Spring Fiesta and Lemon Festival" or "Lemon Fiesta." This name change was not well received by older members of the ethnic Mexican community. The most vocal critic was the *Comisiones Honoríficas* who accused festival organizers of "selling out" and "de-Mexicanizing" *Cinco de Mayo* by succumbing to the control of corporate America (C.I. 3/18/47). Another critic sarcastically asked what lemon-related events such as "lemon baking contest" and "lemon box derby race" had to do with "the battle of Puebla"? (C.I. 3/21/47). Despite strong criticism by community members several Mexican American groups still participated in the "Lemon Fiesta."

Apart from citing the need to fundraise an additional seven thousand five hundred dollars to build the recreation Center, Ray Aparicio explained his group's reasons: "We wanted to bring more resources to the community by improve relations with the city and get better paying jobs in lemon industry" (Aparicio 1999). France Martínez (1999) defended her group's decision against *Comisión's* criticism by citing the lack of financial support from the Mexican consul. She explained, "In the beginning, the [*Comisiones*] got money from the consul to help them set up *Cinco de Mayo* and celebrate among themselves. We worked with the city recreation department and chamber of commerce because we did not get the same kind of help from the consul apart from attending our

events, and because most people were poor and worked in agriculture they could not contribute to the recreation center, so we need to get help from the city, [company] sponsors and Anglos." These comments faulted the Mexican consulate office for their lack of financial assistance in organizing the festival, apart from making public appearances and crowning the queen, there was little monetary support. At the 1947 Lemon Fiesta, for example, the Mexican consul's praised the work of Mexican American organizers in promoting intercultural and inter-American relations. The consul stated, "The close and friendly relationship between Mexico and the United States are reflected in the Recreation project. Like Corona other cities will also be building recreational centers" (C.I. 5/5/47). Despite the consul praise, however, the community received little financial help. In the end, the *Comisión* finally decided to organize a separate *Cinco de Mayo* celebration on the 5th of May with their own slate of queen candidates, marching band, and speakers.

Despite valid claims of cultural cooptation, a closer analysis of Lemon Fiesta's programming revealed how Mexican American festival organizers maintained a limited degree of control. According to the bilingual pamphlet the first day was devoted to lemon-related events organized by Corona Chamber of Commerce, the second day's Mexican cultural events were led by Mexican American groups and in the final day both groups worked together to organize a big dance at the future site the recreation center. Some examples of the first's day events included: lemon pie-baking contests, free citrus juice drinks, a giant lemon pie to be placed in front of city hall and tours of the lemon by-products factory advertised as the "world's only lemon by-products plant." The biggest hit among festival-goers, however, was the appearance of a Walt Disney Dwarf named "Dopey" who related to audience members that "He had come to Corona from Los

Angeles to talk to the good people here of the uses of oranges, lemons, and grapefruit."

The purpose of these marketing ploys according to one company official was to encourage domestic consumption of citrus fruit. "Suppose each of the 3 million people in southern California could be persuaded to drink one glass of juice a day on an average that would mean the home consumption of 630 cars of fruit per week" (C.I.4/26/47).

During the second day, festival organizers maintained many of the traditional events as in previous celebrations including the morning parade, queen contest, baseball tournament, and Mexican expressive forms such *mariachis*, *charros* and *ballet folklórico*.

The Cinco de Mayo queen contest evolved from a marginal event in the twenties to one of the most popular events in the late thirties and early forties. However by in the postwar years queen candidates found themselves seeking corporate sponsors to pay for their dress, crowning ceremony, and parade float. One of the largest companies in town and biggest employer of Mexican American women, the Jameson Company, only sponsored their own employees who entered the contest. The 1947 queen contestant and Jameson employee posed for several "Rosita the Riveter" like photos taken inside the workplace. Several months before the 5th of May these photos were featured in the local newspaper. One photo caption read: "during and after the war many beautiful girls contributed greatly to the company [Jameson Company] operating these [lemon] die-casting machines" (C.I. 4/21/47). The corporate sponsorship of queen candidates threatened the masculine and "breadwinner" role of some Mexican American men who believed that queen candidates should solicit votes solely from individuals, groups and small businesses. One *Comisión* member complained that "The small [Mexican-owned] businesses were not being asked to be sponsors because the companies have gotten too involved with the [Cinco de Mayo]

queens" (Lopez 2000). For Mexican American queen candidates, however, a corporate sponsor meant less time and energy selling ticket-votes door to door and they could potentially use their public role to negotiate better working conditions and higher pay. Such was the case with peasant women near Puebla, Mexico whose involvement in patriotic festivals, according to Mary Kay Vaughn (1994) "made [women] more mobile and encourage her increasing participation in the economy"(235).

Another significant change during the 1947 Lemon Fiesta was the introduction of a new parade route. The Lemon Fiesta parade route began in front of city hall (located in the white Southside of town) moving northward passing the main commercial streets and company packinghouses and finally arriving at the proposed site for the new recreation center, located in the center of the Northside Mexican community. The main parade float featured the queen, her nephew and niece, and the rest of the court surrounded by tree branches with lemons. One can view this public procession as a "political ritual" dramatizing the community solidarity behind this worthwhile cause as well as taking on symbolic importance as Mexican American participants pass by the centers of power reminding them of whose labor power they used to build the city (Marston 1989).

Despite widespread support for the recreation center the 1947 Lemon Fiesta only raised \$1,953 dollars and the following year the amount decreased to only \$486 dollars (*C.I.* 4/27/47). The declining dollar amounts revealed the limitations of the Lemon Fiesta that despite corporate sponsorship and city support, the fiesta failed to raise enough funds. By 1949 the recreation center still needed over eight thousand dollars for its completion. Nor did improved intercultural relations translate into significant economic gains for the entire ethnic Mexican community in the postwar years. To raise the remaining amount

Mexican Americans lobbied city council members and reminded them of their voting power for upcoming elections. One festival organizer complained to the city council that "It will take twenty years of holding fiestas get the needed the money to finish the [recreation] building...The Mexican people themselves are willing to help. They need a place where the children can meet and it should be a public enterprise" (*C.I.* 2/24/49). In December 1949 the city council allocated the remaining funds for the center's completion.

By tapping into the cultural traditions and nationalist ideologies of Cinco de Mayo corporations attempt to enter the largely untapped Mexican American, or so called Hispanic market. As cultural critic Arif Dirlik (1997) recently reminded us, "Given the centrality of management operations of capitalism...and the manner in which it deploys culture to resolve structural problems may give us a more concrete understanding of the more general, and controversial, question of the relationship between culture and political economy in the contemporary world. (186)" The turn to culture by corporations however was not a recent phenomenon. Nor were festival organizers passive victims of corporate power. Arlene Davila (1997) has shown how Puerto Rican festival organizers used corporate sponsors to specific cultural events in their attempt to impose their own meaning of "Puerto Ricanness." In Corona, Mexican Americans negotiated the cultural and political terrains of the fiesta, showing neither complete endorsement of corporate values and dominant Anglo culture nor direct opposition to the political economic order. Instead they opted for an unstable middle-ground position, from which they could appropriate the plural liberal discourse of the fiesta to make demands upon corporate sponsors and government officials.

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