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# Fall 2017 Second Prize Essay

## AN AMERICAN FIESTA

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Holiday celebrations, no matter how big or small, are important to many Americans as they create traditions for families and offer a sense of unity. On May 5<sup>th</sup> of 2016, shortly after becoming the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party with his victory in the Indiana primary, Donald Trump shared his celebrations of the holiday Cinco de Mayo by posting a photo to both Twitter and Facebook that was captioned: "Happy Cinco de Mayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!" (Tatum). The photo, seen in Figure 1, shows Trump with a taco bowl on his desk at Trump Tower. The post was bombarded with criticism, as many were confused and outraged about the inaccuracy, hypocrisy, and offensiveness of his Cinco de Mayo celebration (Tatum). However, Trump's way of celebrating the original Mexican holiday is seen as normal for many Americans. According to José M. Alamillo, "It's customary for presidents to celebrate Cinco de Mayo on the White House lawn with margaritas flowing, mariachi music playing, and dancers in brightly colored traditional costumes," highlighting that the development of Cinco de Mayo from a Mexican holiday into a reason for partying for Americans is evident in our culture today. I argue that although Cinco de Mayo is widely celebrated throughout the United States, Donald Trump's celebration of the holiday, which is similar to how many other Americans today observe the holiday, is a form of cultural appropriation.

In Part I, I first describe the origin of Cinco de Mayo and what it truly is meant to celebrate. Excluding the town of Puebla, the holiday has lost much meaning in Mexico and has developed into an American observance. American celebrations like those of Donald Trump are concerned with consumerism, differing from those in Mexico. The influence of Cinco de Mayo on America's culture can additionally be seen in Corona's beer campaign. In Part II, I analyze two different definitions of cultural appropriation, the first from an introduction to a scholarly book written by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao and the second from an academic journal article written by Richard A. Rogers. These definitions will allow me to express how I was able to configure my own definition of cultural appropriation and set of criteria. Ziff and Rao reveal that cultural appropriation is a complex phenomenon, as both "culture" and "appropriation" are open-ended concepts. Through providing examples of various modes of cultural appropriation that fit criteria of a dominant group taking from a subordinate group and a distinct outsider and insider group, Ziff and Rao assert their argument that cultural appropriation is universally used as a form of empowerment to take something from another culture. Similarly, Rogers emphasizes that cultural appropriation is not a straightforward subject, as it occurs in various ways under various conditions; however, it is inevitable that when a culture comes in contact with another culture, one culture will begin to use a concept or item of the other, often times as exploitation. Thus, I define cultural appropriation as the adoption from



*Fig. 1. Sophie Tatum, "Pictured with Taco Bowl, Trump Proclaims, 'I love Hispanics!'"*

one culture to another culture of any physical or intellectual element that defines the culture that is being taken from, due to a concern for power. Finally, in Part III, I prove that Donald Trump's celebration of Cinco de Mayo, like many other mainstream American Cinco de Mayo celebrations, is cultural appropriation by intertwining my description of Cinco de Mayo in Part I and my definition of cultural appropriation in Part II. Since the holiday originated in Mexican culture, and was adopted and stripped of its meaning in current American culture, present-day American Cinco de Mayo observances, like those depicted by Donald Trump, are a form of cultural appropriation.

## **Part I**

Even though Cinco de Mayo is mainly celebrated in the United States, the origin of the holiday is entirely Mexican. It all began with the election of Benito Juárez as the Mexican president in the early 1860s, a time at which the country was struggling financially and could not repay its debts owed to England, France, and Spain. French leader Napoleon III became too impatient and invaded the Mexican port city Veracruz in demand of land and money. While traveling to gain more territory, 6,000 French troops charged Puebla de Los Angeles, a town southeast of Mexico City. Juárez sent a group of 2,000 men to Puebla on May 5, 1862 in hopes of a victory. Even though the Mexicans were outnumbered and short of supplies, the battle lasted most of the day and ended with the French finally retreating. This win at the Battle of Puebla on May 5<sup>th</sup> became a symbol for Mexican courage and triumph throughout the rest of the Franco-Mexican War, which lasted until the French withdrew in 1867 ("Cinco de Mayo"). The celebration of the victory quickly traveled to the United States, as the Gold Rush led to a heavy population of Mexicans in California. David E. Hayes-Bautista recalls in his book titled *Cinco de Mayo: An American Tradition*, "those who could read shared the glorious details with their illiterate fellows, and up and down the state, Latinos savored the blow-by-blow reporting from the front lines of the conflict that had so riveted their attention" (72). This network of Latino groups kept the memories of May 5<sup>th</sup> alive and well in the country, as the next generation followed in their parents' footsteps and became connected to their history (186).

Although Cinco de Mayo became a national holiday in Mexico, it is only observed in Puebla and areas surrounding Mexico City. The holiday is often celebrated with military parades and recreations of the iconic battle in order to commemorate the success and courage of Mexican troops in 1862 ("Cinco de Mayo"). Despite its origin, Cinco de Mayo has developed into a more American than Mexican holiday. José M. Alamillo, a professor at California State University Channel Islands who grew up in Zacatecas, Mexico during the early 1970s, proves this with a personal account: "It was in my elementary school's bilingual education classroom in Ventura, California, that I first learned about the holiday, which had been incorporated into lesson plans and school assemblies on cultural diversity." Like Alamillo, many Mexicans were unaware of the holiday until they encountered Mexican-Americans throughout the 1940s to 1980s whose celebrations were based on ethnicity and pride of their identities, rather than the Battle of Puebla (Carlson). Most of these celebrations occurred in the American Southwest and California as an expression of migrant workers' desires for equal rights in the United States. Migrant workers believed that the power of Cinco de Mayo celebrations could change negative perceptions of Latinos, thus leading to support for their freedom and democracy. These holiday practices by Latinos living in California and the Southwest during the mid-twentieth century defended their Mexican heritage and encompassed its history, embracing Cinco de Mayo respectfully and appropriately (Hayes-Bautista 192-195).

Current, mainstream American celebrations of Cinco de Mayo differ from those in Mexico and the past celebrations in the United States because "virtually no American holiday has escaped some degree of commercialization" (Hayes-Bautista 195-196). In present day, many Americans erroneously believe that Cinco de Mayo celebrates Mexico's independence from Spain instead of an important battle against the French. Thus, American culture observes the holiday in ways similar to Fourth of July celebrations, but

centered on Mexican elements. For example, a typical Cinco de Mayo celebration will consist of parades, parties, mariachi music, tacos, sombreros, and alcoholic beverages (“Cinco de Mayo”). As a result of this, major corporations have begun using Cinco de Mayo as advertisement. The beer Corona relies on the holiday to kick off its “120 days of summer” campaign, contributing to its successful sell of 3.18 billion bottles of beer in 2016 (Kell). In 2013, the company spent around \$91 million on advertisements in both Spanish and English that emphasized the beer as “the original party beer of Cinco de Mayo” (Alamillo).

This influence of Cinco de Mayo on America’s consumer culture has promoted the holiday as one of drinking, eating, and engaging in anything considered Mexican, seen in Donald Trump’s Cinco de Mayo post of last year. The photo posted was captioned: “Happy Cinco de Mayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!” (Tatum). The photo, shown in Figure 1, shows Trump smiling for the camera and giving a thumbs-up with a taco bowl on his desk at Trump Tower. The photo depicts Donald Trump as a Caucasian male of higher economic status, as he is shown wearing a polished suit in his own, private office. The post mentions nothing of the Battle of Puebla in Mexican history, which is the origin of the holiday, but rather focuses on him celebrating by eating a taco bowl. Trump also uses the word “Hispanics,” implying that the holiday is celebrated all throughout Latin America, Spain, Mexico, or any other culture that speaks the Spanish language (Tatum).

## **Part II**

Before Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao present their compilation of essays on cultural appropriation in their scholarly book titled *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, they first analyze the definition of cultural appropriation and address the central issues and problems present in the current debate on the subject. They provide a working definition of cultural appropriation as “the taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (1). Ziff and Rao then reveal that cultural appropriation is a complex phenomenon, as both “culture” and “appropriation” are open-ended concepts, thus making the definition more intricate than the one they provided. To provide a better understanding of the term, Ziff and Rao state that a form of cultural appropriation usually meets specific criterion: a dominant group taking from a subordinate group, a relationship between an outsider and insider group, and a common, universal practice within a community. They also stress the importance of considering cultural appropriation as a way that “power and the relationships of power can be constructed” (5). This relates to how the current debate of cultural appropriation has become a political phenomenon, concerned with gaining power in order to regulate various forms of cultural production, cultural expression, and cultural creation. Ziff and Rao then provide examples of various modes of cultural appropriation that follow claims of cultural degradation, aesthetics and stewardship, material deprivation, and sovereignty. I found the claim of cultural degradation important to their argument, as cultural appropriation “can have corrosive effects on the integrity of an exploited culture because appropriate conduct can erroneously depict the heritage from which it is drawn” (9). Even though cultural appropriation is universally used as a form of empowerment to take something from another culture, Ziff and Rao emphasize that a culture’s identity can be misrecognized and harmed through appropriated practices.

Similarly, Richard Rogers presents his argument by first defining cultural appropriation as “the use of a culture’s symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture” (476). He then emphasizes it is inevitable that when a culture comes in contact with another culture, especially through politics, one culture will begin to use a concept or item of the other. To further analyze the term cultural appropriation, Rogers divides it into four distinct categories: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, culture exploitation, and transculturation. While I acknowledge Rogers’ definitions of cultural exchange and cultural dominance, and his grand emphasis on transculturation, I focus on cultural exploi-

tation to relate his argument to that of Ziff and Rao's. According to Rogers, cultural exploitation is "the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation" (477). Like Ziff and Rao suggest, a dominant culture's appropriative acts towards a subordinate culture can lead to devastating effects for the latter. Rogers uses the example of the appropriation of Native American culture by non-natives to stress how the Native American identity has constantly been distorted and disrespected.

I draw on the similar arguments between Ziff and Rao's introduction and Rogers's scholarly article that I agree upon to define cultural appropriation as the adoption from one culture to another culture of any physical or intellectual element that defines the culture that is being taken from, due to a concern for power. Often times, the culture that is being appropriated from will be distorted and misidentified for the benefit of the appropriating culture. The key to understanding a form of cultural appropriation is to analyze the relationship between the two cultures, examine the true origin of the appropriated element, consider for what purpose or gain it was appropriated, and lastly, question if the identity of the appropriated culture has been harmed or dishonored.

### **Part III**

Current, mainstream American Cinco de Mayo celebrations, like the ones depicted in Donald Trump's 2016 post to Twitter and Facebook, are considered cultural appropriation because they consist of a dominant group adopting and distorting a subordinate group's culture for their own personal gain. The United States of America had adopted a holiday from Mexico that defines Mexico's history and honors a victory for their country. Even though Mexican-Americans make up a large population of the United States, Cinco de Mayo is now seen as a day to celebrate anything considered Mexican, rather than focusing on the Battle of Puebla, which is the true origin of the holiday. Cinco de Mayo is only celebrated in Mexico in the town of Puebla as a day devoted to honoring their town's important role in Mexican history, highlighting how important the true meaning of May 5<sup>th</sup> is for them. Donald Trump's post mentions nothing of the success and courage of Mexican troops on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1862 in the town of Puebla, but rather focuses on commemorating "Hispanics" by eating the best taco bowl.

Donald Trump's online post can additionally be classified as cultural appropriation because it shows that Cinco de Mayo has been distorted into a commercial holiday, rather than one honoring and respecting Mexico's history and culture. Unlike past celebrations of the holiday by Latinos in California and the American Southwest, which embraced Mexico's deep history, mainstream celebrations are focused on consumerism rather than supporting Mexican-Americans. For example, Trump Tower Grill uses the day to attract customers by serving taco bowls, a food many Americans consider Mexican and feel almost obligated to eat on Cinco de Mayo to observe the holiday. Like Trump Tower Grill, Corona beer relies on Cinco de Mayo celebrations for financial gain, attracting more and more customers each year by using the holiday to kick off its "120 days of summer" campaign. This commercialization of Cinco de Mayo can be contributed to the common misconception in America that the holiday commemorates Mexico's independence from Spain, instead of the Battle of Puebla during the Franco-Mexican War. Thus, Americans tend to celebrate Cinco de Mayo with parades, parties, music, food, and alcoholic beverages that stereotype the culture, similar to how they celebrate the United States' Independence Day. Trump's post also shows the common misunderstanding that any Spanish-speaking country pertains to Cinco de Mayo by his use of the word "Hispanics." The holiday has been altered to honor any people, nations, or cultures that speak Spanish, instead of a focus on Mexico's strength throughout the Battle of Puebla.

To end my argument, I turn to Daniel Enrique Pérez's untitled poem published in the journal *Confluencia* that contains a personal reflection on present-day Cinco de Mayo celebrations as forms of cultural appropriation. Pérez emphasizes Americans celebrating the holiday with "the tacos, the burritos, the

chimichangas, the beer and margaritas,” which he claims leads to the American belief that Americanized Mexican food and drink is what Mexico is all about (210). He also states that “they believe it’s Mexican Independence Day,” highlighting that many Americans mistakenly believe that Cinco de Mayo is actually Mexico’s anniversary of independence from Spain (210). Through this poem, Pérez addresses the misconceptions, stereotypes, and offensive practices that come about through American celebrations of Cinco de Mayo. In this light, it is easy to see why Donald Trump’s Cinco de Mayo post of 2016 was hit with such criticism and disdain. These celebrations are forms of cultural appropriation that not only reveal how cultures adopt elements of other cultures, but also how easily a culture can misidentify another. It is important to remember that Cinco de Mayo is much more than gorging Mexican food and drink, and exclaiming to the world how much Americans love Mexican culture and heritage. The day can be observed with an appreciation of Mexico’s deep history and strength throughout the war with the French, specifically in the Battle of Puebla. So before posting a photo of that taco bowl or bottle of Corona on May 5<sup>th</sup>, every American can remind themselves of the deeper, more accurate meaning behind their celebrations.

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