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Cinco de Mayo No Hecho en México, Actually

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People who associate Cinco de Mayo celebrations with the Mexican heritage of the United States are missing the point. Cinco de Mayo was created in the U.S. for the U.S. It has always been a uniquely American way to express the identity of *Hispanounidenses*, the "Hispanics of the United States."

Exactly how Cinco de Mayo turned into the signature celebration of the United States' 52 million Hispanics is a bit of a mystery—especially since it is hardly celebrated in Mexico outside of the State of Puebla. Cinco de Mayo has no association with Mexican independence. It commemorates a battle on May 5, 1862, in which the Mexican army vanquished the well-equipped French forces of Napoleon III.

No one knows exactly why Hispanics in California began celebrating Cinco de Mayo at the end of the 1860s. Nor does anyone understand why, a century later, the Chicano movement picked it up as an expression of their demands for civil rights—although that association did make the celebration even more truly American.

What we do know is that in the 1970s cultural organizers in

San Francisco selected Cinco de Mayo from among a slate of holidays as the best pan-national Latino celebration in the U.S. It was a savvy choice. Most Mexicans had never heard of the holiday, so it didn't carry the risk of pitting different Hispanic nationalities against one another.

Cinco is as American as apple pie. So is the U.S. Hispanic melting pot.

San Francisco Hispanics had grasped what U.S. Hispanics had going for them. Their population in the U.S. combines immigrants from 20 Spanish-speaking countries, predominantly Mexico, but also Cuba, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and more. In the land of the melting pot, U.S. Hispanics have created their own *crisol* (melting pot).

This peaceful coexistence of U.S. Hispanics is no small achievement. Latin America was, and continues to be, deeply divided politically. Yet once on U.S. soil, Hispanics overlook or overcome these divisions to create, instead, what Gonzalo Navajas, at the University of California Irvine, calls a

truly "transnational culture."

This transnational culture even has its own language. Thirty years ago, scholars spoke of Spanish in the U.S. as if it were a foreign language. Today, they speak of the Spanish of the U.S.

They don't mean Spanglish. They are referring to an entirely new brand of Spanish that is used in the official U.S. government services portal GobiernoUSA.gov. This form of Spanish even has its own language academy to oversee its evolution: the New York-based Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española.

No longer an outcast, U.S. Spanish is gaining clout in the club of Spanish-speaking nations. That's because the number of Hispanics in the U.S. is growing more quickly than in any of the 20 Spanish-speaking countries in the world. The U.S. is already home to about 11% of the world's 460 million Spanish speakers, and within the next decade America's Spanish-speaking population is expected to surpass Spain's, Venezuela's and Argentina's.

As the U.S. Hispanic population begins to compete with Mexico and its 112 million people for the rank of the world's largest Hispanic country, the purchasing power of U.S. Hispanics is overcoming that of the Spanish, who

are by far the richest population in the Hispanic world. This helps explain all the attention U.S. Hispanics are getting from business people and politicians.

The next major sign of respect for U.S. Spanish in global Hispanic culture will come in 2014. For the first time, the official dictionary of the Real Academia in Madrid (Spain's seat of intellectual discernment) will include some *estadounidismos*, or United-Statesisms, as legitimate Spanish words—including *departamento*, *van* and *elegibilidad* (eligibility). The Cervantes Institute—the admiral ship of Spanish culture and language—will open an office at Harvard in September, 2013 (its sixth in the U.S.), specifically so its employees can study U.S. Spanish.

Non-Spanish-speaking Americans might be surprised to realize how much America's 52 million Hispanics (and 20 million others who speak Spanish) are plugging them into global Spanish-language culture. Among other things, that means the popularity of Cinco de Mayo could soon spill over U.S. borders and head to Mexico, or beyond.

Ms. Barlow and Mr. Nadeau are the authors of "The Story of Spanish," to be published May 7 by St. Martin's Press.