Azteca America’s performance of Mexicanness in the pan-Hispanic television market

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ABSTRACT
The US Spanish-language television and advertising industries have assimilated their audiences into a homogeneous pan-ethnic market. Yet this article argues that the newest network, Azteca America, has contested this homogenization by pursuing Mexican viewers. Surveying network practices, this article shows how the market’s pan-Hispanic paradigm has restrained Azteca America from positioning itself as decidedly Mexican. Drawing upon ethnographic evidence and performance theory, this article particularly examines how the network accomplishes its cultural positioning through its ‘upfront’ events, the annual pre-broadcast happenings for advertising clients. Azteca America’s performance of Mexicanness displays Mexican immigrants as domestic consumers but cultural foreigners and, hence, non-citizens. Nevertheless, the network’s practices register a hybrid, transborder Mexican culture and occasionally critique sociopolitical disenfranchisement of Mexican immigrants.

KEYWORDS
cultural citizenship cultural performance Hispanic marketing immigrant audiences Mexican cultural identity upfront events US Spanish-language television

The US Spanish-language television and advertising industries have, routinely and purposefully, assimilated their audiences into a pan-ethnic market. In the 1980s, advertisers and the dominant broadcaster, Univision, manufactured the pan-Hispanic audience to reach the aggregate efficiently, disregarding national origins, cultural differences and language preferences (Dávila, 2001; Rodríguez, 1997, 1999). The other broadcasters, Telemundo and Univision’s
Telefutura, have participated in consolidating this audience construction. By contrast, this article argues that the newest network has contested this homogenization: Azteca America first pursues Mexican people, then targets ‘Hispanics’, a marketing category referring to populations of Latin American and Spanish Caribbean descent who immigrated to or were born in the US. The broadcaster’s Mexican focus is logical as its parent company is the Mexican network TV Azteca. Nevertheless, since its 2001 border crossing, Azteca America has not circulated its Mexicanness effortlessly; it has had to navigate the market’s prevailing pan-Hispanic paradigm.

Surveying network practices, the article shows how this paradigm has restrained Azteca America from positioning itself as decidedly Mexican. The article is especially concerned with how the network accomplishes its cultural positioning through its ‘upfront’ event. During the industry’s sales season, clients purchase advertising time ‘upfront’, or in advance of the broadcasting season. US television broadcasters and many cable networks stage upfront events annually in May to publicize their sales plans, target audiences and programming. The event guides associates and advertisers through a ritualized agenda from cocktail reception, to audiovisual presentations, to dinner and festive party. Timothy Havens (2006) and Amanda Lotz (2007) have observed how the ritual and festive aspects of television industry events serve to manage business relations and brands. This article, however, draws upon performance theory to examine the role of the upfront event in cultural positioning. Performance theory is exceptionally well-equipped to analyse how a company uses ritual and festival to display cultural identity. Therefore, I employ performance theory and ethnographic evidence to demonstrate how Azteca America used its 2006 and 2007 upfront events to negotiate its ethnic specificity within the Hispanic market.

This article also interrogates the cultural and political implications of Azteca America’s image of Mexican culture. Arlene Dávila has stressed why such an interrogation is critical: given that ‘Latinos’ – a self-chosen pan-ethnic identity marker – ‘have historically lacked access to public venues of self-representation, it is in the market and through marketing discourse that they are increasingly debating their social identities and public standing’ (2001: 2). Also vital to debate is how Hispanic media display cultural visibility, or recognition of a culture. Because a nation’s dominant group perceives cultural difference as a threat to their way of life, cultural visibility is inversely proportional to full citizenship (Rosaldo, 1993: 198–201). Nation-states and the media, moreover, construct cultural visibility in ways that create truths about populations and reinforce hierarchies of race and culture (Miller, 1998; Ong, 1999; Rivero, 2005). As Hispanic marketers advance a ‘unified, uncomplicated, depoliticized, and hence readily marketable’ visibility (Dávila, 2001: 13), they collude with institutions and sociopolitical forces that pronounce immigrant and US-born Latinos non-citizens. The central contradiction of Hispanic marketing is the casting of Hispanics as a culturally foreign (thereby easily identifiable and targetable) yet commercially
domestic consumer group (Rodríguez, 1999: 369–71). Azteca America has generally followed this paradox; still, the network’s practices have made visible a hybrid, transnational Mexican culture and occasionally have critiqued sociopolitical disenfranchisement of Mexican immigrants.

To investigate Azteca America’s cultural positioning and the cultural and political repercussions of its practices, the article concisely analyses Azteca America’s marketing to clients, sales, affiliate relations and network programming; it then examines in depth the network’s upfront events. It aims to answer the following questions: What have been the challenges for Azteca America in positioning itself as Mexican within a pan-Hispanic market? How has the network attempted to meet those challenges through various practices, particularly during the upfront event? What are the meanings concerning Mexican and Hispanic audiences that Azteca America exhibits? For Mexican and Latino peoples, what are the cultural and political consequences of the network’s displays?

Selling and programming Mexicanness in Hispanic USA

Azteca America has primarily positioned itself as Mexican due to its Mexican business and cultural ties. Established in 1993, TV Azteca swiftly embarked on a quest to expand its market by two-thirds by launching a US network at the turn of the century (PR Newswire, 2000). The directors planned to repeat in the US their success against Mexican broadcaster and former monopoly Televisa. In an interview TV Azteca’s CEO said: ‘Univision is the dominant broadcaster but it’s using Televisa’s programming. If we were able to snap [up] a share of Televisa’s market in Mexico, we may well repeat that here’ (Barrera Diaz, 2002). Commencing with shows produced by the parent company for audiences in Mexico, Azteca America has since aired as its staple TV Azteca’s fare. The transnational network has been exploiting the economic discounts of shared copyright and low production costs. In 2000, programming could be produced in Mexico for one-fifth to one-eighth of the cost of production in the US (Gentile, 2000). Regarding the audience, TV Azteca’s CEO signaled that the planned network would ‘concentrate on the Hispanic markets in the United States that are Mexican or of Mexican descent’ (Advertising Age, 1998). The population figures have supported this demographic focus: in the 2000 US Census, the US population of Mexican descent was 20.6 million or 58.5 percent of the Hispanic population; the Census Bureau measured a 34.4 percent increase in 2006 to 28.3 million or 64 percent of the Hispanic population. Through early distribution to affiliates in the West and Texas – where the measured Hispanic population in 2000 was 74.9 percent Mexican (Silver, 2002; US Census Bureau, 2001, 2006) – Azteca America proclaimed its Mexican target.

Despite its Mexican ties, Azteca America has had to contend with the pan-Hispanic paradigm cultivated by Univision. Originally, however, Televisa owned Univision when it was the Spanish International Network (SIN) and almost
exclusively aired Mexican programming. Still, SIN initiated moves toward pan-ethnicity through the 1979 commissioned market research study ‘Hispanic USA’, which established Spanish as a pan-Hispanic symbol. In 1981, the network inaugurated Noticiero SIN, the first US pan-Hispanic news show. These projects were pure posturing to attract advertisers who were shifting from ads tailored to Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban consumers to cost-effective one-size-fits-all-Hispanics publicity (Rodríguez, 1999). SIN’s pan-Hispanic identity appeared after the 1986 court ruling that forced Televisa to comply with US law restricting foreign ownership of stations. Televisa sold its US station group, SIN was reorganized as Univision, and Televisa was reduced to minority partner and program supplier. Also, in 1985, the network encountered national competition from Telemundo, which used its Puerto Rican origins and an East Coast–Caribbean identity to compete for the non-Mexican audience (Sinclair, 1999: 92–120). In response to these market-altering events, Univision constructed its pan-ethnic and transcontinental identity. The Spanish language and Latin America – through imported programming from Televisa and Venezuela’s Venevision network, and through domestic shows featuring regional talent – have been its signifiers. Telemundo, too, eventually adopted pan-ethnicity through imported Latin American programming, regional partnerships, domestic shows with generic Hispanic characters and locations, and studios in Mexico and Colombia (Dávila, 2001: 153–80; Hecht, 2007; Martínez, 2007).

The market’s entrenched pan-ethnicity has forced Azteca America to rein in its Mexicanness to compete for advertising devoted to the Hispanic audience. A year after network inception, a station owner asserted that ‘It’s a network that’s 100% Mexican, but is also reaching out to Central and South Americans’ (AZA Gazette, 2002c). Due to TV Azteca’s regional presence since 1997 (Anne Marie de la Fuente, 2008; Reuters, 1998), Azteca America and its affiliates were characterizing TV Azteca’s content as naturally attractive to Mexican people and familiar to Central and South American immigrants. Other station owners have intermittently declared Azteca America’s ethnic specificity – e.g. ‘We are a Mexican television network for Mexican people’ (Adam, 2004). Nonetheless, Azteca America’s monthly industry newsletter, the AZA Gazette (2002–7), persistently promoted the network’s competitiveness as ‘The Fastest Growing Hispanic Network in the US’. Pan-ethnicity has also impacted sales: an account executive’s sales pitch has been that Azteca America produces for Hispanics; his rationale has been that advertisers want to reach not only Mexicans but Salvadorans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans (interview with the author, 2007). During a sales meeting, a sales director sought to persuade clients that, contrary to assumptions that Azteca is just for Mexican audiences, immigrants from all over Latin America identify with the content (sales meeting, 2007). To secure investments from advertisers seeking the aggregate through Spanish-language television, the network’s national salespersons have positioned Azteca America as pan-Hispanic.

Relations with Hispanic-oriented affiliates have also limited Azteca America’s ability to claim an unequivocal Mexican identity. Notwithstanding its concentrated distribution in the Southwest, the network hastily secured...
affiliates in Miami and New York City (AZA Gazette, 2002a, 2002b). These areas – along with Los Angeles – are in the top three Hispanic television markets ranked according to Hispanic audience population (Nielsen Media Research, 2009). Of Hispanics measured in Florida and New York by the 2000 census, Puerto Ricans and Cubans were 2.4 million or 44.8 percent; Mexicans were 624,814 or 11.3 percent (US Census Bureau, 2001). These figures have motivated East Coast affiliates to lobby the network to adopt pan-ethnicity. The Senior Vice-President of Sales and Marketing explained the dilemma over affiliates:

When he [the programming director] and I talked about this, I said ... ‘Let’s be the best Mexican network, go after that target, really embrace our Mexicanness.’ And he said, ‘I can’t because the East Coast markets of New York, Chicago, and Miami would get upset if we’re too Mexican.’ (interview with the author, 2007)

Azteca America has had to placate non-Southwestern affiliates as the expansion traveled from markets of Mexican to Hispanic demographics.

The imperative to compete for the pan-Hispanic audience has likewise pressured Azteca America to moderate the ethnic specificity of its screen content. The conflict between that market imperative and the network’s economic motivation to exploit its Mexican resources explains the evolution of both its programming practice and the content’s cultural identity. In 2001–3, the content was almost entirely from its parent network, even at times matching TV Azteca’s schedule (AZA Gazette, 2003b; EFE News Service, 2001; Hoag, 2002). In late 2003 to early 2004, Azteca America supplemented TV Azteca’s programming with a few shows produced exclusively for the Hispanic market (AZA Gazette, 2003a, 2004). The network capitalized on the economic discount of shared Mexican content with the parent company while trying to compete for the pan-Hispanic audience.

The early programming evaded the complicated nature of Mexican immigrants’ hybrid cultural identities. In 2004–5, by contrast, Azteca America brought hybrid Mexicanness to its screen. The transnational network aired simultaneous broadcasts of telenovelas in Mexico and in the US (AZA Gazette, 2005d), a practice whose purpose was to stimulate cross-border advertising. The Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing (interview with the author, 2007) reported that this strategy failed: advertisers showed no interest because they have separate plans and budgets for each nation. This short-lived practice, nevertheless, resulted in programming hybrid Mexicanness. Azteca America represented the experiences of Mexican migrant women through Semana de la mujer migrante (Week of the Migrant Woman), a special with migration-themed episodes from TV Azteca’s dramatic series, Los que callamos las mujeres (What We Women Don’t Talk About) (AZA Gazette, 2005a). The network more profoundly transmitted Mexican hybridity through Mexican Americans on its screen. TV Azteca’s telenovela La heredera (The Heiress) featured the love interest of a Mexican woman and a Mexican-American pilot. Journalists of Mexican descent
hosted Noticieros Azteca. From 2001 through 2009, TV Azteca’s singing contest and reality show La academia has held US auditions, has included Mexican immigrant and first-generation Mexican Americans, and has been concurrently broadcast across the frontier. Therefore, Azteca America broke with transcontinental pan-ethnicity and programmed cross-border Mexican sentiment.

In late 2005 through mid-2006, the company reverted to screening TV Azteca content alongside a few pan-Hispanic shows. Azteca America attained official national network status: it reached 70 percent broadcast coverage and was included in Nielsen’s national ratings (Azteca America, 2006). Along with national ratings and distribution, pan-Hispanic programming provided an opportunity to compete directly with Univision and Telemundo for the Hispanic audience. Azteca America aired its Latin music show Billboard Latino and co-produced it from Miami and Mexico City, with reporters in the US, Mexico, the Spanish Caribbean and South America (AZA Gazette, 2005b). The broadcaster also launched La academia USA and Ventaneando América, Hispanic adaptations of TV Azteca’s reality and talk show formats (AZA Gazette, 2005c, 2006c). Despite these pan-Hispanic shows, the 2005 through mid-2006 content largely retained its Mexicanness.

The achievement of network status, however, led the network to re-position its programming through 2007 as pan-Hispanic after its May 2006 upfront event. Azteca America moved its production headquarters from Mexico City to Los Angeles (Russell, 2006). While this meant the network would be permitted to market itself as US-based, the move contrasted with Univision and Telemundo’s bases in Miami (Sinclair, 2003: 221) and symbolized Azteca America’s Mexicanness. Still, the content evinced a more fervent pan-ethnicity. News anchors and telenovelas hailed from Mexico and South America (AZA Gazette, 2006a, 2006b, 2006d). The network co-produced the reality dating show Suegras (Mothers-in-law) with 2003 Miss Universe and Dominican national Amelia Vega hosting contestants of Mexican, Colombian, Venezuelan, Uruguayan, Puerto Rican and Cuban descent – the ultimate pan-Hispanic tokenism (AZA Gazette, 2007). Its official strategy being pan-Hispanic, Azteca America continued to disseminate its parent network’s programming. The economic incentives to air TV Azteca’s programming, as well as its Mexican demographic focus and cross-border ties that generated hybrid Mexican-American shows, have been at odds with the network’s sales and marketing, affiliate relations and pan-Hispanic programming. These practices for dealing with the reigning pan-ethnicity have created the contradiction in Azteca America’s cultural positioning.

Azteca America’s upfront cultural display

One can especially perceive how Azteca America has negotiated its cultural positioning by analyzing its upfront event as a cultural performance, or a
community event in which cultural traditions and social practices are enacted and put on display for an audience (Singer, 1972: 71; Stoeltje and Bauman, 1988: 589). Accordingly, I show how Azteca America performs television industry practices and puts on view the cultures of its audiences for associates and clients. The events are closed to the public, so I solicited an invitation from the network and attended the 2006 event. I returned the following year as a participant-observer; I witnessed the event and the rehearsals, participated in setting up the displays, and helped coordinate the performances. This section conveys my observations and analyses of the events’ material exhibitions that have the qualities of ‘cultural display events’, or ‘planned-for public occasions … in which actions and objects are invested with meaning and values are put “on display”’ (Abrahams, 1981: 303). I scrutinized the actions and objects, examining how the meanings invested by Azteca America served its positioning and assessing how the values displayed had implications for Mexican-American and Latina cultural citizenship.

Azteca America’s directors conceived the 2006 event theme, ‘Experience the Passion’, which communicated passion for working with a rising player that had reached official national network status. This theme was manifested through symbolic codes, such as specially marked spaces, representative food and drink, distinctive music, dramatic movement and emblematic visual displays (Stoeltje and Bauman, 1988). Reflecting how networks choose event sites for symbolic value and cultural capital (Lotz, 2007), the event took place at the American Museum of Natural History bordering Central Park in Manhattan’s Upper West Side. This district is known for its high-culture performing arts venues and its gourmet stores for the city’s affluent, cultured inhabitants. The location symbolized a network of rising prestige, confident and comfortable performing its decidedly Mexican refrain.

The ritual sequence began at the entrance where guests were greeted by five models whose elegant attire suggested prestige. Meanwhile, the performance signified Azteca America’s cultural positioning. As shown previously, the network marketed itself in early 2006 as primarily Mexican though with broad Hispanic appeal. The codes of the reception presented a festive exhibition to immerse associates and clients in a heightened sense of passion commonly attributed to Hispanics. The event played on mainstream stereotypes of ‘passionate’ Hispanics flaunting their smoldering desire, dramatic behavior and emotional self-expression. In the promotional materials and during the event, the network asked clients to ‘experience the passion’ and to ‘feel the heartbeat of a Hispanic heart’. At the same time, the codes evoked the network’s Mexican programming: romantic love, betrayal, revenge and exaggerated sentiments define the passion of popular Mexican prime-time telenovelas. Sentimental – passionate – music from its telenovelas resonated; banners promoting TV Azteca programs lined the walls; lighting from ceiling and floor lights radiated the colors of the network logo and the event motif. Hence, while guests were served cocktails and talked business, they were guided through a heightened experience and
display that merged Hispanic passion with the passionate generic traits of this Mexican network’s *telenovelas*.

The post-presentation dinner merged the idea of prestige with a festive atmosphere whose codes signaled Mexican traditions. Tuxedo-wearing waiters served fancy breaded salmon alongside quesadillas, tacos and Mexican rice. As guests dined and schmoozed, Mexican singers and a mariachi band performed. Although the event exploited Hispanic passion, the codes largely called upon clients and associates to contemplate the network’s Mexicanness and its challenge to the pan-Hispanic paradigm. Yet these codes did not reflect the mix of modernity and tradition nor globalization and migration that have transformed contemporary Mexican cultural identities. Mexican traditions have been fused with markets, technology, mass media and other manifestations of modernity (Bonfil Batalla, 1996; Garcia Canclini, 1995). Rural to urban migration within Mexico, transnational migration across the Mexican-US border and global consumerism have also hybridized Mexican identities (Garcia Canclini, 1995; Martín Barbero, 2000; Murphy, 1995). Not signifying this hybridity, the cultural display and festive atmosphere invited advertisers to immerse themselves in a less complicated, more palatable Mexicanness defined as festive, traditional and exotic.

The 2006 event’s cultural display, then, abided by those of previous upfronts, as indicated by the Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing: ‘In the upfront presentations, we’ve pretty much always stuck with we’re a Mexican network, Mexican-American … our focus is more on the Mexican market because we know that’s a good story’ (interview with the author, 2007). As explained earlier, the company leadership decided in mid-2006 on a shift to pan-ethnicity. Consequently, the 2007 event theme, ‘A New Day’, suggested Azteca America’s Mexicanness submerging, then emerging as Hispanic.

A proverbial phoenix-like rebirth was expressed through pre-presentation visual décor of a burnt orange sunset followed by post-presentation designs of light blue skies of a picturesque new day. The venue, the off-Broadway theatre New World Stages, evoked an underdog on the rise; the location, on the edge of Times Square, the garish tourist destination in midtown Manhattan, revealed its true status: compared to the 2006 setting, the 2007 site was less prestigious, less grandiose and cheaper to rent. The location and decor indicated a minor player harmonizing to the industry’s pan-Hispanic tune.

In addition, the directors wanted to rejuvenate excitement for Azteca America since the clients told them that the 2006 event was boring (Senior Vice President, interview with the author, 2006). As a result, ‘A New Day’ enacted not an elegant Mexican *soirée* but a festive Hispanic party. At the entrance, clients were again greeted by models, this year dressed in chic party dresses. Guests made their way into the reception area; three bars supplied them with alcohol as they socialized with friends, colleagues and business partners. The post-reception party vigorously connected a festive atmosphere to the network’s concept of Hispanic culture. Network associates and clients were transformed into party-goers as the boisterous revelry overshadowed the ‘New Day’ décor.
The codes communicated Hispanicness through a nightclub ambience: Latin music and on-stage dancers performing for background onlookers and party-goers on the dance floor; a gaudy table on wheels with alcoholic shots of festive colors rolling around; hazy neon pinks, greens, and blues shining upward from the floor lights. The codes of this scene – along with sushi as the main dish – underscored Azteca America’s desire to move away from the Mexican image and to establish a US-based identity. Furthermore, the event enacted stereotypes of Hispanic passion for parties, and the Latin music stars who performed during the presentations reinforced the pan-Hispanic paradigm. Azteca America, therefore, exploited passion as a transferable characteristic of Mexicans, Latin Americans, and Hispanics.

This festive atmosphere seemed to put in doubt the very purpose of the upfront event, converting this business gathering into a lively party. Given that the event stressed a US ambience, the network appeared to position Hispanics as part of the nation. In this regard, the festivities questioned the industry’s construction of Hispanic audiences as culturally foreign. The passionate party, in due course, depicted Hispanics as a consumer segment doused with ethnic flavor – and, hence, foreign to mainstream USA. The ritual performed its function: the festive codes and play served the ritual’s work of persuading clients of Azteca America’s new Hispanic day and ritually preparing them for upfront sales negotiations with this purportedly pan-Hispanic network. The 2006 event, by comparison, did little to incite behavior that might have interfered with everyday business routines. On the contrary, the atmosphere of class and elegance induced everyday tranquility, renewing of relations and business conversations. Whereas one event flaunted Mexican tradition and the other Hispanic festivity, the heightened enactments and materialized displays of both occasions supported the ritual purposes of the upfront event and justified the everyday objective of the industry itself: translating Mexican and Latina cultures into abstract, commercially valuable Hispanic audiences.

**Mexican programming, Hispanic audiences and cultural citizenship**

While the reception and party convey this industry objective and the network’s cultural positioning symbolically, the presentations of programming and audience data do so explicitly: they express the promotional discourse about the relations among the network, programming, audiences and advertisers (see also Lotz, 2007). These presentations are patterned according to genres, which in the context of verbal performance refer to ‘culturally definable, traditional types of verbal communication … conventionalized utterance types that key [signal] performance’ (Bauman, 1977: 25). Performance genres may conform to or depart from their historical conventions, supporting or challenging tradition and authority (Briggs and Bauman, 1992; Hanks, 1987;
Kapchan, 1995). As I observed the presentations, I analysed how their content and style abided by or deviated from the conventions of upfront genres and Hispanic marketing discourse. Azteca America’s 2006 and 2007 programming presentations followed upfront tradition in style yet broke from the Hispanic upfronts by exhibiting chiefly Mexican content. Consistent with the practices of Hispanic marketing, the network promoted a stereotypical Hispanic audience; the audience presentations also ignored economic and political disparities vis-à-vis Anglos and described Hispanics as just another middle-class American consumer group. Even so, the network diverged from Hispanic marketing discourse and upfront genres: they put forward reflexive discourses about corporate responsibility, the politics of immigration and a hybrid, transborder Mexican culture.

Azteca America adhered to the typical moves of programming schedule announcements via relating impressions of programming through speeches and videos edited to emphasize network identity and target audience. Programming presented in both years – in spite of the 2007 ‘New Day’ efforts to transform the broadcaster’s image to pan-ethnicity – confirmed that Azteca America has been targeting transnational Mexican viewers in the first instance and Hispanics as a secondary audience. Through a single video, the 2006 schedule announcements transmitted the 2006 theme of passion. On the one hand, Hispanic passion was communicated through images and voice-over that suggested frenzy for competitive sports, music and melodrama. On the other hand, the video highlighted intense emotions of betrayal, revenge and thwarted love characteristic of Mexican *telenovelas*. The video relayed a large volume of Mexican programming, such as Mexican soccer, TV Azteca’s news and *telenovelas*, and the cross-border reality show *La academia* starring Mexican and Mexican-American performers. The emphasis on Mexican programming was no doubt motivated by the economic discount of shared programming with TV Azteca. The presentation, however, also introduced a minority of pan-ethnic programs, e.g. US-produced news, *La academia USA* and *Boxeo Azteca* featuring Latin American and Latino boxers. These pan-Hispanic shows were consistent with Azteca America’s imperative to compete for the Hispanic audience; they also corresponded to the obligation to satisfy East Coast affiliates.

The majority of the upfront 2007 programs (*telenovelas*, reality, music, news, sports) featured Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Nonetheless, an executive positioned the content as part of the broadcaster’s Hispanic ‘New Day’. Reframing Azteca America’s heavy reliance on TV Azteca, he stressed that both the parent company and US independent producers were creating exclusive shows for the Hispanic market: ‘We’re leveraging our resources from Mexico … [programs] produced especially for us, for Azteca America.’ The presentation emphasized the network’s pan-Hispanic programming and its purchased Latin American shows. When introducing TV Azteca’s content, the video’s voice-over downplayed Mexicanness and played up universality. *Historias engarzadas* (*Captivating Stories*) and *Lo que callamos las mujeres* (*What We Women Don’t Talk About*) – programs with distinctly
Mexican content – were respectively described as ‘Get to know the real story behind the most important celebrities’ and ‘a show about issues facing women every day that often go untalked about’. Likewise, the executive portrayed TV Azteca’s *telenovela Se busca un hombre (Searching for a Man)* as ‘*Sex in the City* Latina-style’. Despite the effort to position Azteca America as a pan-Hispanic network, its exclusive boxing reality show, *Retador Azteca*, with Mexican competitors from Mexico and the US, clarified the continued strategy of reaching audiences of Mexican descent.

The presentation of audience data, conversely, sought to convince advertisers that Azteca America was seeking the pan-Hispanic audience. The 2006 address reiterated conventional Hispanic broadcasting assertions to general (Anglo, English-language) market advertisers planning a Hispanic buy. Spanish-language networks have contended that Hispanics are increasingly affluent and that Spanish is required to reach them, thereby suppressing Latinos’ class and linguistic diversity (Dávila, 2001: 60, 68–70, 158; Rodríguez, 1997: 294–9). Similarly, an Azteca America executive alleged that Hispanics are ‘70 percent more likely to buy in Spanish’. The broadcaster’s dependence on Mexican programming prevents it from considering the preferences of bilingual and English-dominant Latinas.

Vying for advertisers hunting affluent Hispanics, Azteca America’s directors asserted that, compared to the competition, their viewers are a ‘quality audience’. Without the high ratings to sell ‘spots and dots’ (commercial time and ratings points) like Univision, network salespersons push demographic concept sales (President of Spot Sales, interview with the author, 2007), or sales that promote a marketable image of the network’s ostensibly unique viewers. Thus, the network replicated upfront generic elements of rhetoric, charts and graphs to express the commercial value of its audiences. For example, ‘The Best Viewer Profile’ section of the 2007 upfront marketing brochure claims that ‘Azteca America’s audience has a larger proportion of the viewers advertisers are targeting: young, employed, middle-class Hispanics with children at home. In other words, our viewers are in their prime purchasing years’ (Azteca America, 2007). Accompanying this assertion are bar graphs proposing Azteca America’s advantages over competitors in percentages of viewers measured by age, income, percent employed and household size. In the 2006 event, the network publicized similar statements and figures about this ‘quality audience’, and the promotional CD duplicated this information with added figures for the percentage of viewers who own a car and have some college education. Azteca America, then, positioned itself favorably as reaching a middle-class Hispanic audience assimilated to US consumer lifestyles. In so doing, the company concealed those among its immigrant audiences who occupy lower socioeconomic classes, are less integrated into the values of American consumerism and are marginal to mainstream American society.

Because Azteca America’s 2007 ratings had fallen drastically, it no longer made sense to center the ‘quality audience’ in the event. As explained by the Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing:
The ratings are about half of what they were this time last year … what’s even more sad is that the ratings are about what they were three years ago when the coverage was about half…. Demographics are important and can help you get a little bit larger share of dollars. For example, if your qualitative skews a little higher, it may help you get a little more than if you have a lower. But, in general, at some point, clients want to see ratings. When you have Univision getting 2 million 18–49 [-year-old] viewers on a regular basis for their programs and Azteca has 40,000, it’s such a huge disparity that it’s almost ridiculous to talk about demographics. (interview with the author, 2007)

Instead of running through the conventional demographic figures, this year the network stressed its pan-Hispanic positioning by discussing Hispanic viewing habits based in conservative conceptions of gender and family. One slide promoted ‘more original programming for men after 10 pm’; a director justified the strategy through a universal story about apparently typical Hispanic men and women:

I mean, let’s not kid around, guys come home, they’re having dinner, they don’t control the remote until after dinner and after the wife gets to see the [tele]novela she wants to see. OK? And that’s why at 10 pm is when they get the remote because [tele]novela time is over.

The presentation conveyed as obvious that Hispanic women watch telenovelas, Hispanic men watch comedy, sports and sex, and Hispanic families tune in to safe educational and variety entertainment fare. These Hispanic stereotypes expediently serve programming practices that attempt to order viewing habits by gender, genre, and day part. The process naturalizes manufactured relationships among programming strategy, viewing habits and Hispanic demographics. Taken together, Azteca America’s 2006 and 2007 upfront audience presentations reinforced standard practices of classifying viewers by class and gender, and the executives specifically assumed that advertisers preferred a pan-Hispanic audience of young, middle-class, traditional families.

In contrast, Azteca America departed from traditional upfront genres by including an appeal to corporate responsibility linked to the network’s cultural positioning. In 2006, the company promoted its fundraising foundation, Fundación Azteca. The brochure distributed to clients connected the foundation to the network’s transnational Mexican identity; it proclaimed that Fundación Azteca is ‘dedicated to improving the lives of US Hispanics so that our commitment to improve the lives of Mexicans transcends borders’ (Fundación Azteca, 2006). To underscore how the network ‘gives back to the community’, executives presented evidence of Azteca America’s ‘social responsibility’: the company had donated 90,000 pairs of eyeglasses, had given bicycles to Latino children and had helped burn victims pay for transplants. The brochure takes an even bolder stance for a corporation: beside a photo of child, the caption states, ‘Identifying poverty is not enough, we must act’ (Fundación Azteca, 2006). Hence, Azteca America asked associates and clients to consider
the life circumstances and socioeconomic conditions of Latinos, to treat them as citizens deserving health, prosperity and the pursuit of happiness.

Accordingly, the topic of corporate responsibility diverged from Hispanic stereotypes and Hispanic marketing discourse. Declaring that the shifting demographics of the US ‘has nothing to do with illegal immigration’, an executive asserted that Hispanics ‘change when they cross the border’ and that they and their children become ‘part of the fabric of the US’. The executive’s assimilation rhetoric denied that continuity of traditions exists alongside hybridization when cultures cross borders; this rhetoric also disavowed that US law, border policing and socioeconomic marginalization aggressively regulate membership in the fabric of US citizenship. The director’s statements, nonetheless, countered Hispanic marketing and US Anglo discourses that position Latinos as always outside of US national culture, always foreign, never citizens. Simultaneously, marketers embrace Hispanics as ‘safe, authentic, and ready for mass consumption’ and disregard Latina political rights and historical roots in the US (Dávila, 2001: 86–7). Anti-immigration laws, cultural arrogance and racial discrimination conspire to reject Latino claims to political and cultural citizenship – whether such claims are based in birth, decree (Puerto Rico) or social, economic and cultural contributions (Flores and Benmayor, 1997: 2–4, 11). Thus, Azteca America’s appeals for corporate responsibility encouraged advertisers and associates to view Latinas as integral and internal to US sociopolitical and cultural life. The network proposed an obligation to regard the audience as Latino citizens rather than abstract, marketable Hispanic consumers.

In fact, the shifting demographics of the US and the enterprise of Azteca America have a lot to do with undocumented and documented immigration. As already noted, the network’s primary audiences are Latin American and especially Mexican immigrants. Both the programming presentations and corporate responsibility appeals linked the company to a transnational Mexican audience. Azteca America’s upfront event, therefore, displayed a cross-border Mexicanness that blends alien and host cultures, traversing not only national borders but marketing classifications. Under reflexive consideration were not simply Mexican traditions nor Hispanic consumer tastes but a Mexican-American fusion of cultures as they are lived and experienced on US soil. Ignoring hybridity, disregarding intra-ethnic diversity and taking the more traveled pan-Hispanic road may be Hispanic marketing’s detrimental outlook. Even so, hybrid Mexican culture conceptually confounds the expedient marketing binaries of foreign ethnicity and domestic consumption.

As for Azteca America’s responsibility towards Latino citizens, we should question the contradiction between the network’s promotion of a ‘quality audience’ and its professed concern for its lower socioeconomic class viewers. Rather than take seriously the realities of poverty, racism, border patrol harassment, and unequal access to health care and social services; in preference to following through with its avowed concerns for the welfare of Latina communities; instead, the idea of a lower-class and
marginalized immigrant group was reframed as a middle-class ethnic audience. The directors depicted immigrants as attractive Hispanic consumers who, they asserted, wielded US $700 billion purchasing power and constituted 14 percent of the population. Complaining that Hispanics draw only 2 percent of advertising spending, the executives declared this audience a missed commercial opportunity. Azteca America’s quantifying of the Mexican immigrant audience in this way re-established the paradox of the pan-Hispanic construct: a politically and culturally foreign group that doubles as a commercially attractive ethnic segment.

Conclusion

This analysis of Azteca America first suggests the dilemmas of a media company in staking out its ethnic specificity in a pan-ethnic market. Economic motivations, demographic figures and market pressures are among the forces that determine a cultural producer’s capacity to target a particular ethnic group. Azteca America’s shared rights to TV Azteca’s programming and the sizeable Mexican population in the US have driven the network to pursue audiences of Mexican descent. All the same, the market’s pan-Hispanic paradigm has prevented the newcomer from proclaiming its Mexicananness unambiguously. The case, then, indicates the need to examine concrete practices through which a company confronts the challenges of ethnic specificity. The imperative to compete for advertising targeting the pan-Hispanic audience has directed Azteca America’s salespersons to downplay the broadcaster’s Mexicananness and to play up its broader Hispanic appeal. Because the national origin diversity of Latinos is, in general, demarcated by region, the East Coast affiliates, whose audiences are largely of Spanish Caribbean origins, have urged the network to embrace pan-ethnicity. Feeling the pressure from Hispanic advertisers, affiliates and competitor networks to engage the Hispanic audience, Azteca America has, therefore, broadcast varying (though generally token) quantities of pan-Hispanic shows alongside its Mexican programming. The economic motivation of cheap access to programming and production resources from Mexico, together with the substantial Mexican audience in the US, have been the more powerful forces that have shaped the broadcasts into their predominantly Mexican character.

Second, the extended examination on the upfront event underscores the importance of ethnographic research on practices of which those outside the media industries have a hazy understanding. More germane to the argument, however, the analysis showed how Azteca America used the event in the negotiation of its ethnic specificity. This article also proposes that, when discussing a media company’s cultural positioning – especially when it is making claims to represent an ethnic minority or immigrant population that has been historically denied access to self-representation through the media – it is critical to reflect on the cultural and political implications. Approaching the
upfront event as cultural performance enables us to scrutinize how the event’s aspects of ritual, festival and display foreground cultural identity in the service of consumer visibility. Azteca America’s upfront events by and large paraded Mexican and Latin American immigrants as domestic consumers but cultural foreigners. The 2006 cultural display was a traditional and exotic portrayal of Mexicanness that dovetailed with the Hispanic industry’s practice of depicting its audiences as culturally foreign. The 2007 event’s codes seemed to challenge that practice through emphatic promotion of a US identity; nevertheless, the festive atmosphere served the ritual’s work of preparing advertisers and associates to trade on Hispanic consumers defined as energetically and pleasantly passionate. Ultimately, both events exhibited Latino cultures as at once foreign and non-threatening to the values of mainstream USA.

The audience data presentations similarly articulated a ‘quality’, or middle-class and traditional pan-Hispanic audience assimilated to US consumerism. Even so, the programming presentations and corporate responsibility appeals registered a hybrid, transnational Mexican culture that confounds the rigid Hispanic marketing categories of foreign cultures and domestic consumers. The network broke upfront and Hispanic marketing traditions in 2006 by advocating corporate responsibility toward Latinos, including Mexican immigrants, as cultural citizens. In the end, the network re-positioned immigrants as quality consumers.

Since May 2008, Azteca America has followed other networks like NBC and Telemundo in replacing the upfront event with one-on-one meetings with clients to sell themselves as marketing partners (Anderson, 2007; de la Fuente, Della, 2008; Martínez, 2008; PR Newswire, 2008). Albeit they are not events, such upfront meetings will still enact cultural displays and presentation genres to define a network’s cultural positioning. In Azteca America’s 2008 marketing meetings with clients, the theme was ‘Made in Mexico, Tailored to the US’ (Consoli, 2008). The broadcaster has returned to its Mexican headquarters and demographics; its programming and marketing strategies are apparently based in nostalgia for Mexico and targeting a lower socioeconomic class audience (CEO, interview with the author, 2008). At the time of writing, Azteca America has not substantially changed its programming because it twice replaced programming directors in 2008 and has been in maintenance mode. If it does market and program for its lower socioeconomic target, that demographic will contrast with the network’s previously proclaimed ‘quality audience’. In turn, that contrast may inspire reflexivity about the practice of effacing Latina socioeconomic diversity and the economic disparities between immigrants and Anglos. Azteca America seemingly will continue to defy the pan-Hispanic paradigm and notions of territorially bound cultural identities – although it remains uncertain to what extent the network’s future practices will publicize Mexican-American hybridity and contest definitions of US cultural and political citizenship: the network may just as likely persist in promoting a Mexican immigrant audience as a culturally foreign yet domestic consumer segment.
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Notes

1 To use gender-neutral language and to evade the awkward ‘Latina/o’ and ‘Latinas/os’, I alternately employ ‘Latina’ and ‘Latino’ or ‘Latinas’ and ‘Latinos’.
2 The names of interviewees are withheld to respect confidentiality.

Interviews

CEO, Azteca America, interview with the author, 11 April 2008, Los Angeles.
Director of Sales, Azteca America, sales meeting, 9 May 2007, New York City.
President of Spot Sales, Azteca America, interview with the author, 8 May 2007, New York City.
Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Azteca America, interview with the author, 24 May 2006, New York City.
Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Azteca America, interview with the author, 11 May 2007, New York City.

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