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# The Evolution of Conguitos: Changing the Face of Race in Spanish Advertising

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Conguitos, which are chocolate-covered peanuts that are wildly popular in Spain, derive their namesake from citizens of the Congo, who should officially be called *congoleños* in Spanish. The name Conguitos has remained the same for more than five decades; however, its advertising campaign has undergone substantial changes. Whereas the original Conguitos were caricatures of spear-wielding African natives, modern-day Conguitos are anthropomorphic blobs that lounge around swimming pools in an atmosphere of fun and leisure. Even though the advertisers have gradually disassociated the product from its “primitive”<sup>1</sup> origins, they continue to benefit from the nostalgia generated by the original name and logo. In fact, in 2010 the marketing director of this product stated: “el negrito del Congo histórico . . . es algo que está intrínsecamente dentro de los españoles” (“Puro chocolate” n.p.). The purpose of this investigation is to analyze how the marketing of Conguitos has evolved from its inception in 1961 until the present and to gauge the degree to which this reflects changes in Spaniards’ perceptions of African identities. This study also raises a number of other questions that will be touched upon: Why would something so incredibly foreign like the icon of the Conguitos be considered intrinsically Spanish? What are the roles of post-colonialism and the cultural politics of consumption in these advertisements? Are acts of cultural cannibalism, or assimilating icons associated with foreign cultures, driven by an underlying imperialistic impulse?

In recent decades, the increase in the number of articles that examine representations of race and immigration in Spanish cinema and literature reflects the growing interest in this field.<sup>2</sup> This critical attention has even extended to alternate forms of media such as news reports and posters for cultural festivals, as found respectively in studies by Teun A. van Dijk (2005) and Daniela Flesler (2008). However, to date there have been few investigations of race in Spanish marketing, and, aside from a chapter that I wrote titled “The Metaphorical Consumption of the Racial Other in Spanish Advertising” in *Constructing Identities: The Interaction of National, Gender and Racial Borders*, there have been none (to the best of my knowledge) specifically in the field of Spanish cultural studies. Patricia Izquierdo Iranzo’s doctoral thesis (2004) provides an excellent study of race in newspaper

advertising from a sociological perspective. Jill Lane (2007) published an insightful analysis of racial imagery in Spanish advertising which concentrates primarily on the performativity of race in a specific Magnum Ice Cream ad. Starting in 2000, María Frías, a Spanish professor of African American literature, wrote several letters to the company that produced Conguitos attacking their ads and in 2003 gave a series of unpublished talks at Universidad de Coruña condemning racial stereotyping in Conguitos advertising (Hernández n.p.). This present study, which focuses primarily on Conguitos television commercials, is an extension of these recent trends in research and proposes to fill an important gap in investigations about race in Spanish cultural studies.<sup>3</sup>

Since the product Conguitos first appeared in Spain in the early sixties, it has enjoyed remarkable success. Thirty million packets of Conguitos are sold annually to consumers in forty different countries (Hernández n.p.). According to *Conguitos.com*, “Somos los conguitos” was voted the 6<sup>th</sup> best slogan in the history of Spanish advertising and one of the earliest ads ranked as the 7<sup>th</sup> best in the category of “anuncios de televisión míticos.” Moreover, the official Conguitos Facebook page has over 460,000 people who like them and there are numerous websites containing extensive commentary about them.

The creator of the logo for Conguitos, Juan Tudela Férez, described its origins in a 2003 interview with *El periódico de Aragón* (“Juan Tudela Férez” n.p.). In 1961, his first assignment as an illustrator was to design a mascot for the chocolate-covered peanuts. The logo consisted of the image of a small, naked, pot-bellied, spear-bearing African native with enormous lips. Tudela Férez acknowledged that the design of his logo was influenced by the physical appearance of the chocolates and the tendency toward giving “un toque exótico a algunos productos” (n.p.). What made this construct of blackness especially appealing to Spaniards at this particular historical juncture was the increasing presence of Africa in the media, as there were several movements in the early sixties supporting pan-Africanism and the economic and political independence of many African nations. During this time period, Spaniards became fascinated with representations of other cultures and events such as the 1960 fight for political independence in the Congo that appeared in the international news. This overall interest in the Other was also sparked in part by the increased liberalization of the Spanish economy, growing exposure to films and literature from abroad, and expansion of the tourism industry. In this respect, the construct of blackness served as a means of symbolically overcoming the isolationism of Franco’s autarchical regime.



Figure 1. Conguitos logo

Even though Tudela Férrez naturally fixated on the Congo in choosing a name for the product because of its presence in the media, it would have been logical to actually focus his attention on Equatorial Guinea for a number of other reasons. While the Congo was a former colony of Belgium whose natural resources included uranium, cobalt, and diamonds, it was in fact Equatorial Guinea which was a colony of Spain and which actually produced cocoa prior to its independence in 1968 (N’gom and Ugarte 109). Given that the Spanish government subsidized cocoa production in Equatorial Guinea after the Spanish Civil War (109), it was clearly in Spain’s interest as an autarky to increase Spanish consumption of, and consequently advertising for, cocoa-related products. Thus, the Conguito could serve as an alter ego for the Spanish African colonial subject from Equatorial Guinea.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, given that imperialist nostalgia may be the strongest precisely when an empire is most in decline, the end of Belgium’s colonial rule in the Congo could open the door to discussions about Spain’s colonial past, present and future.

In an effort to give a cultural context to his design, Tudela Férrez described how in the early sixties there were very few African immigrants living in Spain.<sup>5</sup> Naturally his imagination and influences from abroad must have played an important role in the creation of his logo. A Spanish translation of the comic book version of *Tarzan of the Apes* (*Tarzán de los monos*) was published by Editorial Novaro in 1951 (following the 1929 comic strip in Mexico) and Tarzan films were popular in Spain throughout the sixties, as evidenced by the abundance of Tarzan movie posters in Spain from that time period (“Novaro. Tarzán #1” n.p., “Tarzán de los monos” n.p.). In *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Marianna Torgovnick notes that Henry M. Stanley’s books about Africa

and his quest to find David Livingstone in the Congo were instrumental in helping form “Euro-American attitudes toward the continent and its inhabitants” and provided the inspiration for Edgar Rice Burroughs’ original series of Tarzan novels (the first of which was published in 1912) (26). In Montserrat Alás-Brun’s investigation of the traces of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in post-civil war narratives, she explores how the perception of Africans in the Spanish imagination was also influenced by a proliferation of scientific studies, travel writing and travel guides about Equatorial Guinea in the forties and fifties (286). Moreover, images of Africans entered the international arts scene starting in the early twentieth century, when artists like Picasso became interested in primitivism. The accumulation of images and caricatures of Africans that percolated into Spanish culture throughout the twentieth century directly or indirectly influenced the design of the Conguitos.

### **Colonized Conguitos**

In one of the earliest Conguitos commercials, released in the seventies, “Anuncio Conguitos: Tribu color,” there is a cartoon image of tiny Conguito warriors marching across the screen, set against the backdrop of a jungle (n.p.).<sup>6</sup> Accompanied by a persistent drum beat and exotic music, the warriors march on while a large white hand whisks them away, one by one. When the leader of the Conguitos realizes all of his troops have vanished, he shouts out (supposedly in his native tongue, though it sounds like he is merely repeating an invented word that rhymes with Lumumba, the last name of the first democratically-elected Congolese prime minister, who was assassinated in 1961), drops his spear, runs away, trips over a rock, rolls, and morphs into an actual Conguito candy, which is then devoured with delight by a white Spanish woman.

Through the use of cartoon animation, the advertiser strives to appeal to children, as well as adults who wish to indulge in escapism in this exotic fantasy about the European colonization of Africa. The medium of cartoon animation, traditionally associated with humor, light entertainment, and the oversimplification of ideas, encourages the viewer to disassociate the absurd situation of the natives in this commercial from any problems that actual indigenous populations encountered in real life and to view it in an entirely comical light. The image of the large hand plucking up each of the tiny warriors calls to mind the thought a child playing gleefully with toys, as if dominating little plastic Indians in a game of Cowboys and Indians. Hannah Arendt observes a connection between child’s play and the imperialist impulse, as the latter implies “a certain conservation, or perhaps petrification, of boyhood noblesse which preserved *and* infantilized Western moral standards” (211).

Renato Rosaldo associates this “imperialist nostalgia” with an “innocent yearning” that “capture[s] people’s imagination,” while “conceal[ing] its complicity with often brutal domination” (70). Infantilizing the colonial discourse in this way both masks and trivializes the wounds of domination. In *The Empire’s Old Clothes*, Ariel Dorfman deconstructs popular cultural myths like the Lone Ranger and Babar in order to unveil their underlying narratives of imperialism. Like the Conguitos ad, in which Congolese people have been reduced to the diminutive, both in terms of their nationality (Conguito instead of congoleño) and their physical stature (as they are represented only as pygmies), these myths naturalize hegemonic relationships.

While on a literal level, this commercial highlights the pleasure of consuming a product with colonial origins, on a symbolic level, it reenacts the process of Europeans conquering natives. The tracking shot that accompanies the warriors as they walk across the screen emphasizes their vulnerability as their numbers decrease, with no way to escape from the almost god-like power of the single white hand. During Belgian rule, “the extent of the destruction in the Congo—compounded by famine resulting from forced labor and flight, and the unintended introduction of new diseases such as smallpox and sleeping sickness—probably decreased the population of the entire colony by half between 1880 and 1920” (Gewald 483). Even if one attempts to divest the commercial of its colonial subtext, it is clear that the condition of the captured natives in the ad mirrors the plight of many actual Congolese, who were forced into labor and died in massive numbers during the years of European colonization.

After the leader of the Conguitos loses his troops and his spear, he transforms into an inanimate object, impotent before the overwhelming control of the white person. However, the Westerner is initially represented only by a hand, a synecdoche of the power of European colonization. As the cartoon hand becomes associated with an actual person in the second half of the commercial, some significant transformations take place. Firstly, the replacement of Conguito warriors with Conguito candies mirrors the real-life sacrifice of natives’ lives for the production of goods for exportation. The transformation of the Conguitos from animate beings to inanimate objects emphasizes the dehumanization of indigenous people. Juxtaposing cartoon caricatures of Africans with an actual Spaniard draws added attention to the stereotypical characteristics of the Africans. At the end of the ad, the white woman, who represents one of the primary consumers of chocolate, only feels complete after having devoured the natives through a stylized form of capitalist cannibalism.

Regardless of the intentions of the writers of the advertisement, its attempted humor does not mask the ideological substrates of an iconography which bears the weight of history and culture. While the icon of Conguitos in this commercial probably would not cause many Spanish viewers to think about the struggle for independence in the Congo, Tarzan movies, or Livingstone, it has nevertheless played a significant role in the Spanish interpretation/(mis)appropriation of African iconography.<sup>7</sup> In her essay “Playing in the Dark,” Toni Morrison explores the implications of “Africanism” in Western societies, a term she uses to describe “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these peoples” (925). Besides the United States, “South America, England, France, Germany and Spain . . . have participated and contributed to some aspect of an ‘invented Africa’” (925). Applicable to this present study, Morrison’s essay poses the question: “What does the inclusion of Africans or African Americans do to and for the ‘work’?” and examines how blackness is often used as a substitute for dealing with other issues. More specifically, Africa is, in the words of Achille Mbembe, “the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious” (3). In the context of this commercial, blackness is a surrogate for a subconscious desire for escapism, imperialist nostalgia, revolutions, childhood innocence, exoticism, and Western exploitation of African labor and natural resources.

Conguitos is not the only consumer brand in Spain that has sparked controversy because of how it evokes racial imagery. In 1999, Philippine President Joseph Estrada declared Filipinos, which are chocolate-covered biscuits that are dark on the outside and white on inside, an insult to Filipino people and called for the name to be changed (“Phillipines” n.p.). Moreover, Cola Cao, a popular hot chocolate drink, has had several controversial ads that portray African slaves working on cocoa plantations.

Similar to the Conguitos commercials, the advertising campaign for Cola Cao has undergone a number of changes over the years. Earlier portrayals of half-naked, African men carrying heavy loads of cocoa leaves have been replaced by images of African women toiling away under the hot sun.<sup>8</sup> There is also a marked difference between the images of the African women in the advertisements from 1999 and 2007, even though at first glance they may appear almost identical.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the African women in the first ad are stockier, without facial features and working like slaves in a barren landscape, in the more recent ad they are thinner and distinctly smiling, with palm trees in the background. This change deemphasizes their arduous working conditions and replaces

them with a sugar-coated, tropical paradise. Also, by representing thinner women in the recent ad, there is an appeal to contemporary Western notions of attractiveness and femininity. Despite the effort to take a slight step away from the slave narrative, this progression of ads merely Westernizes the discourse and trivializes the harshness of the working conditions in the cocoa industry by fabricating an alternative fantasy about how it was produced. As Lane affirms, there is a “dense semiotic network that associates chocolates with colonialism, Africans, and, to that extent, with blackness,” so even when there is no direct effort to associate these concepts with one another, the connection still exists (385). The moral implications of the actual means of producing chocolate become even more problematic when taking into consideration the fact that “the production of cocoa to this day lies primarily in former colonies, particularly the countries of western Africa; the industry is fraught with the social problems, including child and slave labor, common to poor growers dependent on the volatile buying patterns of the First World” (385). Therefore, even though the modifications to the Cola Cao ads reveal a deliberate effort on the part of the marketers to distance the consumers from the reality of the harshness of the working conditions involved in cocoa production, the essential narrative remains the same. As will soon be demonstrated, the Conguitos ads become much further divested from their colonial origins as they evolve over time and are, to a much greater degree than in the Cola Cao ads, imbued with Western (particularly American) iconography of glamor, diversion and success.

### **African-American Conguitos**

After the ownership of the Conguitos brand switched hands from Fedimar to Lacasa in 1987, the marketing of the product began to change (“Puro chocolate” n.p.). The primitive caricatures of the Conguitos were replaced with more contemporary-looking ones. In a cartoon-animated commercial from the mid-nineties, an urban jungle replaces the tropical one and African-Americans stand in for Africans (“Anuncio Conguitos” [1994] n.p.).<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the ad, the viewer is positioned high above a city, looking down at high-rise buildings and traffic. As the camera draws the viewer down into the metropolis, emphasis is given to the constant motion of the Conguito people that populate it. This creates the sensation of being dropped into an unfamiliar, but exciting urban environment in which everyone is black. The viewer observes two women passing by a break dancer and a skateboarder, followed by a limousine that pulls up in front of a Conguitos club. A wealthy man with large red lips steps out of the vehicle, decked out in a black jacket, an extravagant orange suit, and a bright red fedora with a plume. Upon entering the club, we see a



Conguito that looks like Tina Turner dancing with a microphone and another one modeled after Stevie Wonder playing the piano.

In contrast to the dehumanization of the warriors in the earlier Conguitos ad, which is made evident when they are turned into inanimate objects (i.e., candies), the focus here is on the personification of the chocolate. Aside from the popular jingle playing in the background (“Somos los Conguitos, estamos requetebién, vestimos de chocolate con cuerpo de cacahué, somos redonditos, y siempre vamos a cien, con chispa y marcheta para que te lo pases bien”), the suggestion of the act of consuming figurative representations of people has completely disappeared. Furthermore, there is no white presence or power struggle, as these urban Conguitos are never eaten. The environment may seem doubly exotic to Spaniards because all the inhabitants of this city are not only black, but also from the United States. Present are a variety of stereotypical images of African Americans that were prevalent in the global media in the eighties and nineties, ranging from break dancers to popular music artists. Blackness here serves as a surrogate for a Spanish fascination with city life and popular cultural icons. Whereas in the earlier Conguitos commercial the figures are portrayed as primitive and almost sub-human, these Conguitos come from a variety of walks of life, including the rich and famous. Even so, some may view the glamor and prestige of well-known icons like Tina Turner and Stevie Wonder as being undermined by how they are characterized in this commercial. The transformation of an image of a person into a caricature, especially one shaped like a chocolate-covered peanut, might well be considered a mockery of that individual, not a form of praise or respect.

### **Cosmopolitan Conguitos**

In recent years, Conguitos ads have become even more distanced from their origins. A 2010 ad shows a California-style pool party in which Conguitos are swimming, sunbathing and having a great time (“Anuncio Conguitos” [2010]).<sup>11</sup> Similar to the previous commercials, this one borrows images from another culture. In this case, the appropriation may be used to associate the product with the fun and excitement of an upper-class lifestyle in the United States. Unlike the 1994 commercial, this type of representation of American leisure, which has become popularized in the international media, is virtually void of any racially-charged imagery. Even though the lyrics of the song remain the same and the Conguitos are still dark complected, they resemble bleached blondes and white fraternity boys more than African Americans, and they now appear with small, practically non-existent lips. Other Conguitos commercials in recent years have also relied on a wide variety of

archetypal figures of American youth culture, and not exclusively on African Americans. Also, the representation of the cult of masculinity in this advertisement reveals, like the thinner African women in the recent Cola Cao ads, a move toward contemporary Western notions of sexual appeal.

In Izquierdo Iranzo's study, she analyzes in detail all of the ads with racial imagery in *El país semanal* from 1997-2003 and identifies three ways in which racial Others are commonly portrayed in Spanish advertising: 1) "los **alejados** . . . protagonizan escenas publicitarias que los ubica en sus propios lugares de procedencia . . . [y] sirven para enmarcar un producto físico," 2) "los **aceptados** . . ." appear to be integrated; however, "la base argumental del relato publicitario consiste en la explotación de alguno de sus elementos estereotípicos . . .," which can have "una connotación más o menos peyorativa . . . [cuando] . . . la utilización de lo peculiar puede rayar en la exageración y dejar al personaje en una situación ridícula," or "una cualidad positiva, en este caso la publicidad la utiliza como una manera rápida y clara de explicar su producto," and 3) "los **capitalizados** . . . pertenecen al mundo occidental y, en apariencia, están perfectamente integrados ya que en el anuncio desempeñan los mismos roles que los sujetos autóctonos" (303, 305). The progression of the Conguitos ads analyzed loosely follows this same general trajectory, as the Others are represented as "los alejados" in the earliest ads (the colonized Conguitos), "los aceptados" in the second set of ads (the African American Conguitos), and "los capitalizados" in more recent ads (the Cosmopolitan Conguitos). In the first case, the racial attributes of the Conguitos are as important for the marketing strategy as the exotic origins of the product. The original ads would not make any sense if the Conguitos were white. By completely relying on their Otherness to sell the product, the advertisers create distance between their target audience and the racial group that they are portraying. The Conguitos ads from the nineties reveal both an appreciation of and commodification of African American identity and culture. Essential to the representations of Tina Turner, Stevie Wonder, and the wealthy man in the 1994 ad are their stereotypical features. However, many viewers would not perceive this shift from the jungle to a glamorized ghetto to be much of an improvement, as one set of vulgar stereotypes is being swapped out for another. For the category of "los capitalizados," the question of race is so irrelevant that the subjects could easily be replaced by white people or any other ethnic group and the fundamental message of the commercial would remain the same. Using Iranzo's terminology, the Other could serve as a "símbolo del cosmopolitismo," void of racial stereotyping, and evoke a type of "xenofilia" (302). Although in the last of the Conguitos commercials analyzed there is more of an inclination toward multiculturalism than in the previous ads, the fact remains that Conguitos are still identified solely with people of color,<sup>12</sup> so it is hardly

appropriate to engage in discussions of post-racialism or to assume that this represents neutral ground in terms of race relations.<sup>13</sup>

Over the course of more than five decades, as the advertisements for Conguitos have become more deracialized (or rather, the question of race no longer plays as important a role in the marketing), they have also become progressively more affiliated with images of wealth and leisure. Whereas the earlier ads place the viewer in a position of superiority over the Conguitos because of their inferior power, status, and size, the later ads encourage the public to view Conguitos as worthy of envy or emulation. Michael D. Giardina, in his essay “Consuming Difference/Performing Hybridity,” points out how this trend toward creating a “commercialized multicultural vision” is so focused on consumerism that it is often void of any kind of political statement (29-30). In a similar vein, the movement toward a cosmopolitan lifestyle in the Conguitos commercials makes more of a statement about Spain’s obsession with consumerism in the era of globalization than it does about racial sensitivity.<sup>14</sup>

### **Perceptions of Conguitos**

Stuart Hall examines how the “dominant cultural order” is used to interpret codes, which have “institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized” (34). This naturally creates a hierarchy for modes of understanding cultural codes, leaving alternative interpretations either forgotten or unrecognized, or open to mockery and scrutiny. For many Spaniards, Conguitos are synonymous with fun, escapism, and nostalgia for youth, yet the persistence of the name itself and the ways that Spaniards have appropriated the cultural construct reveal (as will later be demonstrated) that the racial undertones have not disappeared. Still, Spaniards generally do not perceive racism in the advertising campaigns and have a hard time imagining how something as innocuous, amusing and trivial as Conguitos could be thought of as demeaning. In fact, they often view them with the same type of affection that they feel for Baltazar, the black king of the Reyes Magos, another figure revered by children. Some argue that the advertisers are only representing chocolate figures, which are logically black. Conguitos have become so integrated into the fabric of popular Spanish culture that most Spaniards rarely give a second thought to the name.

In a 2003 interview with Oscar Hernández from *El periódico de Aragón*, Anabel Cebollada, then director of marketing at Lacasa Chocolates, stated that since her company had taken over Conguitos, only three people criticized the logo and that, if the company thought it were racially

offensive, they would immediately change it (Hernández n.p.). She claimed that their modifications to the packaging design were not a response to the criticisms, but to the “evolución lógica” of the product, as Conguitos abandoned the jungle for a more urban environment. However, this leads one to question: What are the subjects in contemporary African cities like? Why are they absent from the newer Conguitos ads if the main concern of Lacasa is to modernize and urbanize the African subject? Mbembe takes on the challenge of describing the construction of contemporary African postcolonial identities, asserting that the African subject has been forced into “achieving a balance between his/her total identification with “traditional” (in philosophies of authenticity) African life, and his/her merging with, and subsequent loss in, modernity (in the discourse of alienation)” (12). The word “loss” is indicative of the problem related to the relative dearth of representations of contemporary Africans in the media. Symbolically displacing Conguitos from the African continent in the ads has the effect of figuratively erasing Spain’s colonial and postcolonial narratives. Lane asserts that Spaniards are “disavowing, hiding, or forgetting Spain’s colonial racist past,” even though “chocolate is already a racialized consumer object indelibly tied to Spain’s colonial past and to our neocolonial present” (385). Therefore, the progression of the Conguitos ads reveal both a step away from and yet an inability to escape from Spain’s postcolonial narratives.

Even though Cebollada claimed that the modifications to their ads were not related to racial concerns, Hernández suggests that the changes were a direct response to the series of letters of complaint initiated by Frías. Not long after Frías wrote a letter to the company criticizing the primitive, war-like appearance of the Conguitos in 2000 (specifically the fact that the Conguitos were nude, carrying spears and had exaggeratedly large eyes and red, full lips), the designers removed the spear and belly button from the logo on the packaging. The marketing director of Lacasa in 2010, José Antonio Iniesta, stated that some people failed to understand “la buena intención del creador” and that “el negrito del Congo histórico no tiene ninguna acepción que pueda herir a nadie ” (“Puro chocolate” n.p.). Nevertheless, they further modified the logo in 2010 by reducing the size of the Conguitos’ exaggeratedly large lips, one of the other features criticized by Frías.

Not all discussions about Conguitos are so one-sided. Tudela Férrez himself revealed a certain degree of ambivalence about his design (“Juan Tudela Férrez” n.p.). On the one hand, he justified his logo by affirming that Moise Tshombe, who had been prime minister of the Congo for a brief period, found Conguitos amusing when he saw them on a visit to Spain. Then adopting a defensive stance, he contended that everything must be judged in its context and that if he were to design the logo today, he would not have drawn it like that. In fact, his interview is even titled “Juan

Tudela Férrez: ‘Hoy no lo habría dibujado así,’” leaving little ambiguity as to the intention of the newspaper, and perhaps of Tudela Férrez himself, to emphasize the apologetic nature of his feelings about his design.

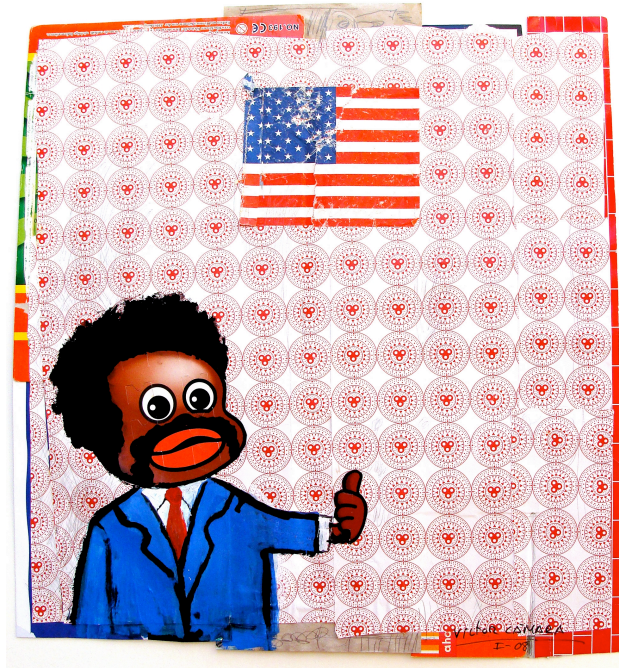
### **Conguitos in Other Contexts**

Even though Conguitos are just candies and Spaniards’ perceptions’ of them do not necessarily translate to how they deal with race issues, extension of the term Conguitos to contexts unrelated to the product has become more widespread in Spain in recent years. Synonymous with any person of African descent in common Spanish vernacular, the term Conguito was appropriated as a racial slur to refer to the Grenadine-born, British race-car driver Lewis Hamilton when he competed against the Spaniard Fernando Alonso at the Catalan Formula One Track in 2008. Articles by Gerard Couzens in *The Daily Mail* and Rob Hughes in *The New York Times*, as well as the editorial “Motorsport: Reviled Hamilton Faces Uphill Battle” in *The New Zealand Herald* describe how groups of Spaniards dressed up in blackface and wore shirts labeled “Hamilton’s family,” while others shouted “Black s\*\*\*” and “Black whore” at him when he was test driving a new car in Barcelona in February 2008. On a Spanish website titled “Pincha la rueda de Hamilton” (which was later taken down, even though 16,000 users had signed on), there were numerous statements such as: “Half-breed, kill yourself in your car” and “Conguito, you are going to die” (Couzens n.p.).<sup>15</sup>

An article in *The Guardian* titled “Racism, what racism? asks Spain” hones in on the overall response of the Spanish public to this incident, which was a mixture of “bemusement with outright denial.” In newspaper articles by Manel Serras in *El País* and E. J. Blasco in *ABC*, they adopted a defensive stance and they reiterated the arguments that just a handful of fans exhibited this behavior, that these actions were taken out of context, and that the individuals in blackface were preparing for Carnival celebrations. Most of the articles in Spanish newspapers suggested that the social implications of the incident were minimal and provided few details about the nature of the racial comments. Juan Díez-Nicolás, an advisor to Spanish government agencies concerning issues related to racism, contended: “What happened in Barcelona was a sign of stupidity, but to call it racism is to simplify things . . . In Spain, when they make fun about [sic] the colour of your skin, it is not necessarily racism. If he had been a woman, they would have made a joke about that, and we would be talking about sexism” (“Racism, what racism? asks Spain” n.p.). One may well ask if Díez-Nicolás’s distinction between racism (or sexism) and typical Spanish irreverence might not be too subtle for most people to appreciate.

In Spain, it is common for people to dress up as Conguitos during carnival celebrations, and quite often to paint their faces black. They do not perceive this as racially offensive, but rather an attempt to make themselves look like chocolate. Lane questions why Spaniards do not view Conguitos ads as problematic, especially given that this type of marketing campaign would never survive in places like the United States. She asserts: “there is virtually no public controversy over this logo—because, one imagines, the association of chocolate and Africanness has been so thoroughly naturalized over the years, and further because no constituency has emerged to contest it” (385). Begoña Sánchez, a spokesperson of the anti-racism organization SOS Racismo, affirms that Spaniards “do not give it the importance that it deserves” because of “unawareness” (“Race Relations” n.p.).<sup>16</sup> Isabel Santaolalla confirms: “Whereas in countries like Britain, France and Germany or, outside Europe, in the United States, Brazil, Canada and Australia, among others, discussions centering on questions of ‘otherness,’ ‘assimilation,’ ‘integration’ and ‘multiculturalism’ have been commonplace for decades now, modern Spanish society has remained largely indifferent to these” (112). Concerted efforts to promote multiculturalism in Spain, spurred on by the influence of increasing immigrant populations and/or sympathetic Spaniards, could contribute to greater sensitivity regarding racial concerns.

Conguitos have also entered into popular culture through the art world. Artist Víctor Cámara has used their image to explore the relationship between race, advertising, and the dominant cultural order. In a series of recent paintings, he has experimented with different artistic representations of the figure. Cámara has created a variety of versions of them, ranging from Geisha Conguitos to “El primer conguipresidente estadounidense.”



**Figure 2. El primer conguipresidente estadounidense**

By adding layers of different aspects of Spanish and/or foreign cultures onto the base image, the Conguito, which is now thought of as being very Spanish (despite its exotic origins), is transformed into something malleable, and capable of embracing an amalgam of different cultures. This mosaic of cultural artifacts may be seen as perpetuating stereotypes by reinforcing the most common perceptions about certain groups of people, or challenging stereotypes by melding these images with that of the Conguito, who himself has endured various incarnations over the decades and transformed into a polysemic figure.

The question remains regarding what, if anything, the evolution of Conguitos over the course of more than five decades from stereotypically primitive African warriors to deracialized, anthropomorphic beings implies about changes in Spanish attitudes toward other racial identities. It would seem that these changes reflect a greater sensitivity to racial concerns, yet several of their marketing representatives have denied that any of their commercials, including the earlier ones, could give offense and suggest that one must understand them in the context in which they were produced. The original Conguitos warriors were fascinating to Spaniards in part because they were based on actual revolutionaries who gained attention in the international press. Also, Conguitos provided a means of escapism in the form of imperialist nostalgia, without actually directly reminding Spaniards of their own imperialist role in former colonies. Even though the popular icons and archetypes of African-American culture in the Conguitos commercials from the nineties were

admired in Spain, as well as in the international media, they appear somewhat buffoonish in the form of caricatures. The figures in contemporary representations of Conguitos could as easily represent wealthy white Americans as affluent members of any racial group. The focus is more on representing a cosmopolitan, consumer-based society. What these different incarnations of Conguitos share in common is that they reflect the racial issues and attitudes that were popular in the international and/or Spanish media during the eras in which they were produced. In light of the newspaper articles about Hamilton and other sports figures, and the fact that the name and the skin color of the Conguitos have not yet changed, it would be overly optimistic to assume that a change in marketing strategies necessarily reflects a complete shift in attitudes. Nevertheless, the very existence of this debate, investigations by Spanish scholars about race in advertising, and the defensive responses about racial attitudes in Spain, both in the media and in formal interviews with marketing representatives and government advisors, are evidence of an inchoate change of sensibility.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The use of the term “primitive” throughout this essay is employed to emphasize the stereotypes associated with traditional African cultures, untouched by Western civilization. The fabrication of the African primitive, which involves the conflation of all African subjects into a single, essentialist African identity, is further elaborated upon later in this essay, in a discussion about Spaniards’ perceptions of Africans during the period in which the Conguitos logo was designed.

<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to analyze the concepts of race and immigration in Spain as discrete entities because, as Isabel Santaolalla observes, “contemporary Spanish society is characterized by a fundamental paradox which affects the way it perceives and represents itself. This paradox is the result, on the one hand, of historical awareness that Spanish identity is the product of a rich amalgamation of cultures, races and religions, and, on the other hand, of the self-perception of Spain as an ethnically homogenous country” (113). Many Spaniards assume that an individual who appears racially different must not be Spanish and thus conflate the racial and immigrant Other.

<sup>3</sup> Television advertising is a particularly useful medium for analyzing perceptions of race because it requires “condensed codes of characterization” that can be easily understood and internalized by the target audience (Leiss et al. 776). The medium lends itself to stereotyping because, as Richard Dyer observes, “the effectiveness of stereotypes resides in the way they invoke a consensus . . .” about a group of people and provide, in Walter Lippmann’s words, a “short cut” for understanding them (207, 209). The very fact that advertising oversimplifies ideas and is hyperbolic in nature makes it a powerful tool for gauging common attitudes toward particular issues at specific points in time.

<sup>4</sup> Technically speaking, the majority of the workers on the cocoa plantations in Equatorial Guinea were actually Nigerian immigrants who moved there because of a shortage of workers in the industry (Aworawo 90). After the Spanish Civil War, Equatorial Guinea became better known for its high quality cocoa production, which contributed to it being one of the highest per capita-income countries in Africa (U.S. Department of State n.p.). Mistreatment of the workers was commonplace, however the situation did not improve after the country became independent. In fact, the plight of the workers worsened under the dictatorship of Francisco Macías Nguema, which all but terminated cocoa production in Equatorial Guinea in less than a decade (Aworawo 90).

<sup>5</sup> In the sixties, Spain was still primarily a country of emigration rather than immigration, as many Spaniards were working abroad. Only starting in the eighties was there a significant increase in the African population in Spain: “their numbers rose from 4,067 residents in 1980 to 82,607 in 1994” (King, Fielding, and Black 7). Even so, by 1990, all of the immigrants accounted for only around 1.5 percent of the nation’s population (Graham and Sánchez 414).

<sup>6</sup> The complete commercial can be found at the following website:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFOXOeBbhD8&feature=related>. Although Ana Belén Moreno, a marketing representative of Lacasa, was unable to supply an exact date for this commercial, she presumes that it is from the early seventies.

<sup>7</sup> One of the most well known Conguitos ads from the late seventies presents the image of a young Tarzan swinging from a vine and landing in the middle of a group of diminutive Conguitos singing a song (“Anuncios antiguos – Conguitos” n.p.). In “The Metaphorical Consumption of the Racial Other in Spanish Advertising,” I analyze this advertisement, as well as Spanish ads for Bitter Cinzano Soda and Magnum Ice Cream, in which the consumption of certain food and drinks parallels the consumption of the racial Other. Just as the literal act of consumption involves digesting a product, breaking it down, absorbing the useful parts of it and expelling the useless remains, the process of exploiting foreign people, cultures and commodities also consists of assimilating what is considered desirable into Spanish culture, while rejecting what is undesirable.

<sup>8</sup> Refer to the following image: <http://noshanmercado.blogspot.com/2010/09/yo-soy-aquel-negrito-del-afrika.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Refer to the following image: [http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2344/2127098081\\_2b212e7c50\\_o.jpg](http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2344/2127098081_2b212e7c50_o.jpg).

<sup>10</sup> Refer to the following video clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSCoJDr73RU>.

<sup>11</sup> Refer to the following video clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tf2An0sOKIc>.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that although Lacasa has also sold white Conguitos, they have never been as popular as their black counterparts.

<sup>13</sup> Izquierdo Iranzo’s study draws other interesting conclusions about recent trends in depictions of race in newspaper advertising. She observes that despite the dramatic increases in immigration from 1997-2003, the representation of people of other races in ads in *El país semanal* remained at 3 percent, thus underscoring their virtual invisibility in Spanish society (235). Nearly 70 percent of these ads contain blacks, even though Africans only constituted a small portion of the immigrant population at the time of the study (and not all of them necessarily dark skinned) (240). She demonstrates that blacks are overrepresented in ads containing different ethnic groups and that their images are disproportionately concentrated in a limited number of sectors, which are primarily dedicated to leisure, as they are associated with more intense, pleasurable experiences.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Spain is not alone in creating consumer products directly associated with blacks. In *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse notes: “A black represented as candy, as chocolate or liquorice, is a cliché as old as that of the little black page serving chocolate” (193). Pieterse further observes: “Over the years the role of blacks in the advertising and packaging of rum, cocoa, chocolate and coffee has hardly changed. As tropical products these things seem to be permanently associated with the colour black and with black labour” (194). For instance, “in Germany a chocolate cake such as Mohrkopfe or Negerküsse is referred to as the ‘edible negro,’” and in France, black women are sometimes referred to as chocolate Bon-bons (193). Pieterse highlights the black-faced caricatures that appear in the logos of Like and Fazer, licorice from Italy and Finland respectively, alongside the original image of Spanish Conguitos (204).

<sup>15</sup> The type of racism experienced by Hamilton hardly constitutes an isolated incident. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the entire Spanish basketball team posed for a photo making slit-eye gestures, apparently in an attempt to make a connection with the host country. One of the most recent incidents took place at Euro 2012, when the Spanish Soccer Federation was fined approximately \$25,000 because hundreds of Spanish fans repeatedly made monkey sounds at Mario Balotelli, an Italian player of Ghanaian descent.

<sup>16</sup> In recent years, non-governmental organizations in Spain like SOS Racismo, SOS África, and Contamíname: Fundación para el Mestizaje Cultural have worked hard to raise the level of awareness about racial issues.

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