Mi Casa Es Su Casa: A Critical Co-constructed Autoethnography of the Evolution from Assimilation to Acculturation of a Mexican Migrant Farmworker turned Professional

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ABSTRACT

Situated within critical race theory and Latinx critical theory (LatCrit), the result of this research was a 2-part presentation of a critical co-constructed autoethnography and a qualitative case study. The case study identified factors that promoted intercultural collaboration in support of acculturation efforts among a predominantly White receiving community and a Latinx immigrant community, comprised mostly of migrant farmworkers. Structured interviews with eight community members involved in establishing a community event that would become La Fiesta del Pueblo, a review of La Fiesta historical documents, and electronic and print media were used to explore the festival and discover factors that led to its success. The significant findings of the dynamics that drove the coalition-building process for how La Fiesta del Pueblo became an accepted community and state-sponsored cultural event and how La Fiesta influenced change in perceptions of the receiving community and immigrant population culture were the positive experiences had by those who attended it as well as the organizers and organizational aid provided by all walks of the community. La Fiesta was instrumental in promoting intercultural collaboration through enhanced awareness, which served as a vehicle for both communities to experience changes in perceptions of each other and their associated cultures and allowed for mutual accommodation as part of the integration process for the benefit of both. The co-constructed autoethnography was designed to be a critical reflection of my voice and journey through the acculturation process from the perspective of a Mexican migrant farmworker turned Latino professional. It articulates early, middle, and later phases of my assimilation to the acculturation experience. My exploration of La Fiesta and constant reflection of my own journey from assimilation to

acculturation brought about the critical co-constructed autoethnography and helped me emphasize the need to disrupt deficit ideology by engaging in critical reflections on the complexity of cross-race/ethnicity relations within Latinx and predominantly White communities.

Key words: La Fiesta del Pueblo, migrant farmworker, assimilation, acculturation, critical race theory, deficit thinking, Latinx critical theory, LatCrit, Latinx

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Lastly, I acknowledge the migrant farmworker families who consider me a role model for their children. I will always honor that trust.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Gail Exum de Gonzalez, and our children, Alejandro Javier and Camryn Victoria. I am blessed to have you as part of my continued journey in life. Your encouragement and support fueled me to complete this dissertation during those times when I did not think I could do it. For all you do for me, I love you.

Dedico este logro a mis padres, Juan Alberto y Eustolia, por tomar el primer paso en mi jornada hace muchos años y siempre velar por mí y mis hermanos. Espero siempre hacerlos orgullosos de mí.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This dissertation was not just an academic exercise. It was, among other things, a very personal depiction of my transformation during the process. To honor the growth and change, I set forth the value of the transformation for those *Mejicanos* who come after me. Thus, my committee and I decided to use what Four Arrows (2008) called an *innovative structure* in order to represent the work. This dissertation is divided into two parts: "My Cultural Journey: from *Mejicano* Immigrant to Latino Professional," and "My Traditional Dissertation Journey: A Conventional Beginning to an Unexpected End."

My Cultural Journey introduces the people, theory, research, and constructs that inspired me to look inward, assess my experiences, and transform my way of being. This journey is one through which migrant farmworker immigrants will embark as more and more of them continue to come to the United States seeking a better life. *My Dissertation Journey* details the more traditional components expected within a dissertation that opened the door to my profound epiphany expressed in the reflective components of Part 1: *My Cultural Journey*. In Part 2, I demonstrate the traditionally associated skills for which academics often judge doctoral candidates' worth for recommendation for the degrees to which they aspire. Yet, with consensus between my committee members, I organized my non-traditional dissertation with the inclusion of the two parts, which demonstrates the stark contrast between the non-traditional and traditional ways scholarly learning and contributions did and can occur.

The parts are ordered with, as I see it, the most important and meaningful part first, *My Cultural Journey*--a story I hope will inspire you as I was inspired by creating and sharing it. The second part, *My Dissertation Journey*, was done mostly before

writing the first part, and at times simultaneously, because of the innovative process. My specific identities are *Mejicano* (Spanish for Mexican) and Latino; however, in this dissertation, I use both terms synonymously. When referencing the larger population outside of my own identity, I use Latinx as an ethnic description of people who are Hispanic, Spanish speaking, or who have immigrated from Latin American countries (Espino, Leal, & Meier, 2008) beyond the gender binary (Scharrón-del Río & Aja, 2020).

Part 1

MY CULTURAL JOURNEY: FROM MEJICANO IMMIGRANT TO LATINO PROFESSIONAL

This dissertation is a critical self-reflection of my life-altering administrative circumstances, which led me from the onion fields of central Georgia to a respected administrative position in the public school and higher education fields. Through a critical co-constructed autoethnography (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012), I discovered how my life experiences helped me develop my self-identity as a Latino professional, educational leader and doctoral student.

How I Got to This Point

My journey from migrant farmworker to middle-class success was filled with challenges, which could have easily caused me to give up had it not been for my desire to escape the cycle of poverty that defined my family's lives. It is this desire that drives me to finalize this dissertation now in the face of many personal challenges and self-doubts. These challenges included my personal responsibilities to provide as a husband and father for my immediate family in addition to *mi familia*, as well as my professional responsibilities to my departmental staff by keeping grant programs funded requiring long workdays and constant interstate travel, all while struggling to navigate the dissertation process as the only Latino in my cohort. This led to the creeping self-doubts questioning if my dissertation was good enough compared to my doctoral peers of the dominant culture and the high standards I set for myself. This dissertation had to be the

near-perfect capstone of my whole life's hard work and determination to be the best I could be in academics.

Traditional dissertations comprised of an introduction, literature review, methods chapter, results, and conclusions reflect the scientific method. This formatting was not sufficient for my dissertation or conducive to the qualitative nature and complexity of humanities-oriented social science research, as Archbald (2008) and Duke and Beck (1999) indicated. The complexity led me to decisions that stayed true to humanities-oriented research and relies more on individual interpretations and meanings of personal experiences (Hughes, 2008; Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

In developing it, I relied on Four Arrows' (2008) alternatives to establishing a dynamic dissertation that does not follow traditional formatting or conventional rules and goes against established educational and cultural hegemony. Four Arrows (2008) further described works like the one that I developed as graduate-level work capable of being innovative, remaining authentic, and maintaining the value of the researcher's voice, experience, creativity, and decision making. I designed this dissertation to incorporate a critical autoethnographic reflection of my quest and journey and process of assimilation from my perspective as a *Mejicano* migrant farmworker to a Latino professional. Part 1 articulates this reflection and consists of sections that cover my experiences in acculturating into the dominant society. These sections include my beginning, which covers family and school influences, my dream and professional career in public and higher education, and my transformation through the process of realizing my deficit thinking, attempts to amend my woke views and overcome the damage of deficit thinking as well as a brief look at La Fiesta.

Dissertation Evolution

This dissertation evolved as I grew in critical knowledge and realized more about what needed to be shared and received more guidance and direction on how I could make it happen. As I was debating between incorporating some of my work with first-generation, migrant college students and undocumented students' experiences in higher education, my dissertation chair shared a story that led me in the direction of telling the story of La Fiesta del Pueblo (La Fiesta), an annual community festival that celebrates Latinx culture and heritage in a small, rural community of South Georgia. We discussed doing this as a case study. Dr. Schmertzing commented on the unusualness of a scene that he and his wife happened upon several years earlier while driving the backroads of Tift County. As he was driving on the main street in a rural town, they came across an event that surprised them both. The scene he described was a festive one, including vendors, music, and people dancing in the street to loud Mexican music. Intriguingly, the professor described older White couples dancing among the predominantly Latinx crowd.

This scene stood out to the Schmertzings because it took place in a predominantly White community's main street, yet it had a large number of Latinx farmworkers present at the event. At that time in the late 1990s, the scene would have been unusual in any part of the state, much less in a rural community. Historically, southern main streets were segregated places for the communities and almost always the dominant group's domain. The story of La Fiesta upon which the Schmertzings stumbled many years before, reminded me of my efforts to organize a Latinx festival in other communities. The attempts were short-lived due to a lack of community support and because city officials mostly relegated them to take place only in the Latinx parts of the community instead of

being in the main downtown area. Eventually, Latinx leaders, including myself, were able to initiate and maintain a large festival known today as La Fiesta del Pueblo that occurs annually in Tifton, Georgia.

The dissertation began as a case study on the festival to examine how and why it was created and analyze the factors that contributed to the growth and success of bringing the particular communities together. Upon researching the festival, I made a connection between the festival's evolution and my journey from migrant farmworker to middle-class professional educator. In subsequent conversations in which I expressed interest in comparing the similarities, Dr. Richard Schmertzing and I ultimately determined that the case study approach would not be the most appropriate method to blend my story and the festival's evolution. Consequently, we looked at other options that would permit me to tell the La Fiesta story and incorporate my *testimonio* (Urrieta & Villenas,2013) as part of the process. After careful consideration of a variety of options, the professor and I agreed that a critical co-constructed autoethnography (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012) best fit my need to share my *lived experiences* (Bochner, 2014) using a type of thick description (Geertz, 1973) of my personal stories.

The associated methods for doing critical co-constructed autoethnography are well established in the literature and continue to grow in popularity and notoriety (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012). This methodology evolved from critical theory, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory (CRT)/Latinx critical theory (LatCrit) and emphasizes the researcher's self and interaction with others (Hughes, 2008; Hughes & Willink, 2015). Critical co-constructed autoethnography uses a traditional analysis to examine power relationships and provides an avenue for mutual collaboration of the research

participants to evaluate their identities and privileges within the cultural contexts of relational ethics (Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Suriel, Martínez, & Evans-Winters, 2017). My critical co-constructed autoethnography dissertation uses inquiry to provide a voice to unheard voices in ways that reveal lived experiences in sociocultural contexts (Hughes, 2008; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Furthermore, the steps I went through to create the resultant product of the critical co-constructed autoethnography helped me examine the colored spaces of race, class, and gender in order to present my cultural experiences with the triangulation of critical narrative sources as suggested by Ellis and Bochner (2000), as well as Hughes and Willink (2014).

Although I knew this methodological tool was the appropriate vehicle that would allow me to compare the evolution of La Fiesta with my evolution of immigrant farmworker to respected higher education administrator, I had much to learn when I thought I would also discuss my experiences of cultural assimilation as a Hispanic within South Georgia culture and White culture of the United States. This was revealed to me when I confidently presented an overview of my study to my dissertation committee. Expecting unanimous consent, I was instead dumbfounded when one member expressed disappointment with the deficit language I used to lay out the research. Specifically, the committee member expressed disappointment with my use of the term "Hispanic" to refer to the Latinx population I discussed and my focus on framing the La Fiesta festival as an assimilation activity. He also noted my far-right terminology referring to "hard work" and the boot strap mentality, the anchor babies, and the Asian student as the model minority. His comments initially irritated me but subsequently "woke" me to my subconscious deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). I was not aware that the language I used

in presenting the information came from an ultra-traditional and often politically offensive perspective, reflective of my having succumbed to assimilation through acceptance of dominant U.S. cultural views.

I was initially insulted and defensive when these facts were pointed out by a committee member, Dr. James Martínez. I remember wondering and questioning, "What's wrong with the information I am presenting? The language and terms are all in the literature! And, I do not find any of it offensive." Although my chair did not have an issue at the time with the language used or the angle I was presenting, Dr. Martínez asked me to consider changing the language to reflect a critical perspective. In my ignorance, my initial reaction was to dismiss him, and I had the passing thought of replacing him on the committee. I was not that impressed with the fact that he had a Spanish surname but did not necessarily look Latino and couldn't even speak Spanish (Martínez, 2016), about which he was admittedly upfront when I introduced myself to him in Spanish. Who was he to have an issue with my view? Nevertheless, despite some coursework on the topic, that interaction introduced me to critical theory, critical race theory, and my need for anti-deficit viewpoints within my proposal. This caused me to rethink my voice and grow beyond awareness to some competence about how dominant U.S. culture had shaped my deficit views towards my upbringing, identity, and views of U.S. society as a whole. This new knowledge gave me a *critical* perspective and insight to examine power structures and how they shaped my social interactions and expectations as well as my longing to fit in and be accepted as part of assimilating into the dominant U.S. culture (Zamudio, Bridgeman, Russell, & Rios, 2009). Originally, I was going to use my voice to parallel La Fiesta's evolution as a community event that was owned jointly by two distinct

communities. Yet, a further reflection of my personal, critical narrative had me also use this as a vehicle to invite readers to enter my world to help make sense of and cope with their own lives, something advocated by Ellis (2004). In the context of assimilation and its pitfalls, my critical narrative became the dissertation's focal point as a way of knowing (Bochner, 2014; Muñoz, 1995) and telling about the social world. To better understand the upcoming narrative, I briefly introduce some of the key terms that I learned as I approached this point in my academic journey and will be used in the dissertation in the following section.

Discussion of Terms

The purpose of this critical co-constructed autoethnography dissertation was to make sense of the life experiences that shaped my then desire for assimilation and subsequent absorption of the deficit views of mainstream White culture, using La Fiesta as a vehicle for recall of those experiences. To that end, the following key terms are drivers of the dissertation:

Acculturation - phenomena resulting from groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous, first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups (Redfield, Linton, & Herskavits, 1936; Sam & Berry, 2010). My dissertation relies on Keefe and Padilla's (1987) multidimensional and quantitative model of acculturation, which includes two major supra-constructs—cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty. This model outlined cultural awareness as the understood information that people have of their cultures of origin and of their host cultures. The model also defines ethnic loyalty as the self-acclaimed ethnicity of the people, the ethnic group membership of their friends, and personal likings for such things as entertainment

and recreational activities (Keefe & Padilla, 1987; Padilla, 1980, 1987).

Assimilation - dated term, the process of assimilation has been historically associated with the United States, despite the many years of segregation that has existed along racial and ethnic lines. Accordingly, that perception clashes with the assimilation goal of merging all cultures into the dominant one (Alba & Nee, 2005; Teske & Nelson, 1974). Theoretically and ideal to the dominant culture is that all minority populations in the United States are to be assimilated into the White middle-class society, whose values are widely accepted as the norm. This process represents the control of the strong over the weak, but the procedure is generally considered a means of raising the weak to the category of the strong (Valencia, 1997).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) - framework that can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses (Banks, 2006; Nieto, 1996; Zamudio & Rios, 2006). Also, CRT provides a framework to consider how common legal doctrine, policies, and practices serve to maintain systems of racial inequity by not considering how deeply embedded racism was in American history and social order (Bustos, Cerezo, McWhirter, Peña, & Valdez, 2013; Perea, 2012). In this dissertation, I selected interest convergence and testimonio storytelling as tenants from CRT to explore my assimilation to acculturation journey.

Hispanic - dated term for people who speak Spanish or are descended from Spanish-speaking populations, in contrast to Latino, which refers to people who are from or descended from people from Latin America (Cantú & Fránquiz, 2010; Scharrón-del Río & Aja, 2020).

Interest Convergence - stresses that racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of White people (Aguirre, 2005; Bell, 1980). Furthermore, interest convergence advances the principle of loss and gain; typically, someone or some group, often the dominant group, has to negotiate and give up something for interests to converge or align (Bell, 1980; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013).

Latinx - all-inclusive label used instead of "Latina/o" to deemphasize the cisgendered "o/a" and uneven "Hispanic" terminology regarding individuals of Latin American heritage (Cantú & Fránquiz, 2010; Scharrón-del Río & Aja, 2020).

La Fiesta del Pueblo **(***La Fiesta*) **-** ethnic festival highlighting the Latinx culture that takes place each fall in Tifton, Georgia ("20th Annual La Fiesta," 2016; Weise, 2015). The festival evolved from a small community event in a rural South Georgia town to become the largest Latinx festival in South Georgia and a state-sponsored event that draws over 13,000 people from all over the state and six surrounding states ("20th Annual La Fiesta," 2016). Over its history, La Fiesta faced and overcame challenges with being accepted by the communities it represented.

Migrant farmworker **-** individual whose principle employment is in agriculture on a seasonal basis and establishes a temporary home for purposes of employment (Arcury & Quandt, 2007; Hansen & Donohoe, 2003). The rural area where La Fiesta was established is located in a highly agricultural region of the state, heavily dependent on migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

Testimonio - counter-storytelling to elevate voices of people on society's margins whose experiences are not often heard by the majority (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado-Bernal, &

Solórzano, 2001). Testimonio is rooted deeply in raising critical consciousness, or what Freire (1973, 1997) referred to as "conscientização" (achieving an in-depth understanding of the world) and challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance.

Getting clear on the terminology was a journey. In the upcoming description of my personal life journey, I start at the beginning. The path to my American identity began with the first steps as detailed in the following section.

My beginning from *Mejicano* immigrant to Latino professional

My story mirrors the experiences of thousands of immigrants who came or were brought to this country in search of the American Dream. Like previous generations of immigrants, I succumbed to the temptation of assimilation in order to reap the benefits of acceptance by White society. My assimilation was seemingly complete, as I was satisfied with the success my hard work and dedication brought me. Unlike the typical immigrant success story, the dissertation process held a mirror to my experiences and reflected images I did not like or recognize.

To recall my experiences, I examined historical documents and photographs, conducted interviews with La Fiesta stakeholders and my family members, and reviewed personal memos. I learned a great deal about myself and the culture gaps that I created through this dissertation. Some aspects were pleasant, but others not as much because I did not want to accept my loss of Mexican culture and identity as I navigated the path to success in this country. Particularly painful was my realization that I had betrayed the cultural upbringing instilled within me by my parents and somehow discarded the cultural armor (West, 1994; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011) they provided to guard

me against the insignificance, impossibility, and lovelessness (Martínez, 2016; West, 1994; Zamudio, et al., 2011) that they knew I would encounter when assimilating to U.S. dominant society.

It is also hypocritical and an unintended consequence that as a parent, I was attempting to give my children, ages 8 and 16 at the time, advice and guidance about learning and retaining their Mexican culture and language after not encouraging it during their early years. In the process of this dissertation, I conversed with them about my experiences growing up in Mexico and working as a child in the fields. Admittedly, these conversations were in the context of explaining why they couldn't get something they asked for by telling them how hard it was for me to even ask for stuff growing up because of our limited resources. I believe the main reason why they can't believe my impoverished upbringing is due to having seen only the successful version of me, the suit and tie-wearing professional living the middle-class lifestyle with little financial hardships. For them and others who have lost their Mexican identity in exchange for wanting or achieving the "American Dream," I share my personal experiences.

At the onset of my dissertation write up process, I heard Mr. Trump's speech (Ye Hee Lee, 2015) announcing his candidacy for the office of President of the United States. It gave me grave concern and reminded me of the significance and timeliness of my dissertation.

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (Trump,

2015).

In response to Mr. Trump's deficit narrative, which promoted negative stereotypes of marginalized communities, I used my *testimonio*, described by Brabeck (2001) as a "verbal journey . . . of one's life experiences with attention to injustices one has suffered and the effect these injustices have had on one's life" (p. 3), to examine the impact that assimilation had on me, my family, my native language and culture, and my identity as I strived to be one of the *good ones* who is not a threat to mainstream society. I will tell my story, but in so doing draw on components from interviews I did while researching La Fiesta del Pueblo, a state-sponsored and community-supported Latinx ethnic festival in South Georgia. La Fiesta had a significant impact on influencing community collaboration and acceptance among the native, mostly White, and immigrant, mostly *Mejicano* populations. It was the early, single focus of the case study idea for my dissertation. Alongside developing the story of La Fiesta and its importance, I realized I was struggling personally to face my reactions to some of what I heard. I intended to interject my experiences and my way of navigating what I believed to be the dictated pathway to success—assimilation (Alba & Nee, 2005; Teske & Nelson, 1974) into the dominant U.S. culture. My plan was to prioritize the story of La Fiesta and the festival's organizers' recollection of things they saw that were similar to my story, but as things progressed the focus of the story changed to what is now Part 1 of this work.

My name is Javier Gonzalez Gonzales. Prior to realizing the "American Dream," I used to be *Mejicano*. I was born on the United States side but raised on the Mexico side of the international border in south Texas. One side, Brownsville, Texas, gave me the gift of American citizenship, and the other side, Matamoros, Mexico, gave me the deep

roots that grounded me to my native *Mejicano* culture. These two worlds are so close geographically, separated only by a river boundary fewer than 300 feet wide, that one can literally stand on one side of the riverbank and see, feel, and almost taste the other side. From the Mexico side, I recall seeing the lights, hearing the sounds, and experiencing the smells of the United States, a far different sensory experience than what Mexico provided. In fact, many from the U.S. side viewed the Mexican side as a poor and dirty place (Padilla, 2001; Perea, 2012). I often imagined the United States side as a glamourous noise with big lights, delicious fast food, and a better life. For many, the relatively short distance is impossible to cross. For a select few, the distance is covered with relative ease if they possess the *papeles*, legal citizenship papers, to traverse the international bridge that connects both countries. *El Puente*, the bridge, was the point of reference for many of us living along the border. Our lives revolved around that structure that was so much more than a physical entity. It was a point of reference that defined our access to opportunity. We were either from, as Anzaldua (1993) put it, *este lado,* this side, or *el otro lado*, the other side, in Texas. My parents, like many immigrants before us and since, dreamed of a life in *el otro lado* where "the pursuit of happiness," as promised by the U.S. Declaration of Independence (US 1776) were abundant. Their dream became reality when I was born in *el otro lado* and provided our entire family with the opportunity for which many Mexicans would risk their lives.

My lived phenomena and life process are what I now refer to as my journey of assimilation to acculturation. Redfield, Linton, and Herskavits (1936) defined acculturation as the changes in the original cultural patterns of either of both groups of individuals when they come into continuous first-hand contact. This is much like the

results of my departure from and subsequent return to my original native culture, and the associated realization of the importance of sustaining that cultural competence of my own lived patterns from my original ethnic culture patterns, which Sam and Berry (2010) noticed in others as they presented in relation to the psychological sciences. I took for granted and never considered that assimilation even had a downside. When I gained access to opportunity and the proper resources not readily available to most in my home country, there was no price too high that I would not pay to reap the benefits of U.S. capitalism. By delving into my experiences as part of this dissertation, I realized the cost of my assimilation on my life and beliefs. For a long time, I was so blind to the consequences of my assimilation that I did not realize the true cost until I became exposed to the deficit thinking paradigm, which is founded on race and class biases and "blames the victim" (Valencia, 1997; 2010) for school failures instead of examining structural factors (Gabriel, Martínez, & Obiokor, 2015) as part of my dissertation readings from Dr. Martínez. The personal assessment and critical reflections that I agonized over throughout the coursework helped me realize the extent to which one is conditioned to be accepted by the dominant culture. I was so focused on fitting in that I wasn't able to see how I discarded and stepped on many of my own along the way to my success, and that has become an almost unbearable burden now that I have sight of what I could not see before.

As an almost 52-year-old Americanized *Mejicano*, I have seen the changes brought about in me through my dissertation research from "making it" in this country. The dissertation process guided my evaluation of my life trajectory through the lens of my acculturation experience in rural South Georgia, which incorporates a critical view of

my deficit views. Through the experience of self-reflection, I took stock of the actual cost of crossing that bridge on a personal level in terms of the language, culture, and traditions that I selfishly sacrificed, as well as the opportunities I denied my children as a result. Through my testimonio, I detailed my assimilation experience as I searched for a home and place of belonging while claiming and being part of two worlds and being rejected by both.

"*Tu familia es lo único que te pertenece y a que perteneces*," your family is the only true thing that belongs to you and that you belong to, were some of the best words of advice from our mother given to us as children when we argued among ourselves. To her, family is of utmost importance because she believes that we are the only ones who will bring each other home when we lose our way. We would get lost and find our way through family. This advice served us very well as we migrated across the country in search of agricultural work, many times guided by relatives assuring us that work was available and plentiful. These words of advice ring so true to me now as I am seeking a way back home to *mi familia* amid a stable, middle-class American lifestyle.

The fourth child born to Juan Alberto Gonzalez Vega and Eustolia Gonzales Garcia in a border town in south Texas, I was given the name of Javier Gonzalez Gonzales, named after one of my father's favorite artists, Javier Solis, and given his and my mother's last names to carry forth, Gonzalez Vega and Gonzales Garcia, respectively. I proudly carried both names for almost 12 years of my life, until it was stripped from me within the conformity of the U.S. school system. I remember that I easily bought into the argument that it would make it easier to fill out school documents and for the teachers to remember our names. I also remember how we willingly accepted the Americanized

names my siblings and I received from teachers: *Juana* became Janie, *Jaime* became Jamie, *Juan* became John, and ironically, my name remained *Javier*, as there was not a similar name in English. At times, in my youthful need for assimilation, I remember being pissed (upset and disappointed) that there was not an English name for me. I was forced to stay, "*Javier*." I was the first to cross over and was the most versed in American culture, so why couldn't I also get my English name? The U.S. public school system forced me to keep my name, the birth name I was willing to dismiss to fit in at the time.

Looking back, I was unpleasantly surprised at how easily I gave up my cultural identity for a chance to be more accepted into the American school culture. The cultural identity that was developed in my father's hometown along the border and the *ranchito*, the small village, in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range where my mother was born, defined us as a family and provided us a strong foundation of identity. Reflecting on the process and the ease with which I discarded those valuable traits makes me value them now even more. While both of my parents overcame difficulties, including extreme poverty and limited educational opportunities, to raise my seven *hermanos*, brothers, and one *hermana*, sister, within two cultures, it is my mother Eustolia who exemplifies the Gonzalez resilient spirit.

Matriarch: Eustolia Gonzales Garcia

Eustolia, the cornerstone of the Gonzalez family of 11 siblings, stands fewer than 5082169 feet tall with about a third-grade education. This is an accomplishment considering girls typically were not expected to be exposed to or gain any knowledge outside the home. The limited education she obtained came through her perseverance

and much sacrifice; she sporadically attended school because of her household responsibilities. Her schooling allowed her to add simple numbers and write phonetically, which made her functional in her community, but also it raised her profile with me. I think of her as one of the smartest and strongest-willed persons I know, and I often seek her advice on major decisions. She was the fifth of six girls in a family of 11 children born to my grandparents, Cirilo Gonzalez Cordova and Juana Garcia Obregon, in a rural village in the northern part of Mexico in the high Sierra Madre mountain range with a semi-dry climate.

Two humble adobe structures along a long-dried creek that served as home for the family reflected the family's economic situation. One structure was for sleeping, and the other for cooking and eating. In that kitchen, my grandmother spent most of her day grinding corn into cornmeal for tortillas, overseeing a pot that resided continuously over the fire, and hosting friends and family. Those thatched-roof structures with dirt floors, no indoor plumbing or electricity, and at least half a day's ride in a horse-drawn buggy from the nearest town were where my mother developed her resilient nature. In that environment, she learned the lessons she would share with all her children later in life.

Like many traditional indigenous families, her family life dictated roles and responsibilities based on age and gender. To be a girl like her meant learning to cook for the family, deferring decisions to males, taking care of younger siblings, and feeding the multitude of animals that provided food and services to the family. While the family was not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, they did have two horses to help with transportation and plowing fields, some goats, and a few pigs and chickens, along with some cows for milk, which provided the basics and were critical to the family's survival.

During a difficult period, the family went into heavy debt to cover medical expenses for one of the older male children hospitalized for an extended period. To pay off the debt, my grandfather was forced to sell off most of the animals, a valued form of currency in that community, and older family members were forced to leave their rural community and seek employment in a town that was as foreign to them as another country. As our family began to experience American life and become more exposed to the individualism it promoted, my mother would share this particular story to emphasize the importance of family and the collective duties owed by all members, as an effort to keep us grounded in that tradition and belief.

It was during this trying time that my mother, not quite 15 years of age, left the security of her home village and ventured out to seek employment as part of her duty to her family. Reflecting on her life experience in general and on that instance, I realized that she lived the migrant experience many years before we became part of the migrant farmworker community. As we experienced many years later, the migrant cycle begins when a family, as a result of limited or non-existing employment options locally, is referred by family members to farm work. Usually, relatives secure work in destination locations through their network, and after ensuring stable work, contact family members to join them as work becomes plentiful. This phenomenon was experienced by my mother and our family and was also expressed by several organizers of La Fiesta whom I interviewed, like Mr. Alfredo Garcia, a retired Army chaplain and migrant farmworker advocate who recalled the Latinx population growth he witnessed in South Georgia:

> Most of the Hispanics here were coming on H2B visas for 6 to 9 months and eventually going back to Mexico. A lot of them started staying, and then some

> started bringing their families from Mexico; and of course, they would invite some of their relatives to sign up and come on a contract. Eventually, they figured out they could stay because work was available and started inviting family members to come also. (A. Garcia, interview, February 17, 2017)

Likewise, Lupe Mendez, a member of the Girl Scout troop that birthed the La Fiesta del Pueblo festival, and her father, Miguel Perez, patriarch of one of the first Latinx families in Tift County and a member of the inaugural La Fiesta del Pueblo committee and an interview subject for this project, supported Mr. Garcia's narrative through their descriptions of how they came to be in South Georgia. According to Ms. Mendez:

> My uncle followed a guy that he knew that told him there were jobs here and later brought my dad and his brother to the Worth, Colquitt, Tift county lines. They found stable work, and we all stayed there ever since. My uncle is still in Colquitt and a farmer. (L. Mendez, interview, November 6, 2016)

Mr. Perez recounted:

> My brother had been working here for several years, and he told me to come try it. There was plenty of work, and well you know, one always follows family. They tell you that there's a lot of work, and I came with my other brothers to try the work for 2 weeks. Then [I] brought my family and my parents and this became our home. (M. Perez, interview, April 3, 2017)

Mirroring their experiences, my mother was recruited by a female cousin as a house servant, the only job she was qualified for as a rural girl with little formal education. That cousin was working for a rich family in the border town in Mexico far

from her village and would often tell her of the modern life beyond the mountains that enclosed the area. Her cousin shared stories of the long train ride that took her there and brought her back every few months and the modern conveniences she experienced, such as electricity, indoor plumbing, and movie theaters that made life easier. Mom recalls that people did not know what to think of her when she periodically returned as she changed from when she lived in the village. In particular, the way she spoke, and her clothing made her different. It made other girls in the village jealous of her because she had her own money, was able to travel independently, and was perceived as attaining higher socioeconomic status. Mr. Perez echoed this same situation in his description of the reception he experienced when he went back to his hometown in Mexico after several years living in the United States:

> When one goes back, it is not the same. Your friends may still be there, but they don't see you the same. You were broke when you were there, but because you go back in a nice pickup truck and have nice clothes, people assumed you have a higher status and things are easier for you. They don't realize the amount of hard work one has to go through to afford those things. (M. Perez, interview, April 3, 2017)

The thought of a good-paying job that would help the family during the difficult economic time they were experiencing was a strong factor in my mother's decision to leave her *ranchito*. As it happened, the family her cousin worked for needed a cook and nanny, and they had agreed to let her bring a family member back for that job. Given the circumstances and the offer, it did not take much to convince my grandparents to allow my mother to take the job and travel back with her cousin. Following their approval, my

mother and her cousin started to develop strategies to help her adapt to the life of a domestic worker. At that time, and even today, the relationship between workers and bosses was formalized and followed strict protocols. The relationship falls in line with comments from Mr. Garcia and Mr. Perez as they described the social structure in their home country. Mr. Garcia said:

> In Mexico, you know, we have the upper class, the people in the politics, government, the unions, and so on. They are the movers and shakers. They have the power, money; they pass the laws; they basically rule. And their relatives, friends, *compadres*, so on and so forth are part of that. We don't have a middle class per se. You may know we talk about teachers, pharmacists, and so forth that you could possibly say the middle class. But they don't always participate. Then you have the workers: All they want to do is work, pay their taxes, and stay out of the way. (A. Garcia interview, February 17, 2017)

Mr. Perez said:

> In Mexico, if you are poor, you are at the bottom. Yes, you don't have status. A thing I admired here was that you would get to work at the farm with the boss, and you would drive the owner's truck. He would say, "Take the truck and go to this place or that." In Mexico, you don't see that. There, it's "get in the back." And at their homes, you have to use the service entrance. (M. Perez, interview, April 3, 2017)

Despite my mother going through a short adjustment period, she succeeded in adapting to the demands of her new job. She was set on proving to herself and her family that she could make it in the city and vowed to make them proud. The coping strategies

developed with her cousin, such as using a wood soda crate to stand on so she could reach the back burners on the stove and having her cousin write shopping lists phonetically so she could get the correct items, helped her adjust even quicker.

My mother acculturated slowly to life in the city and eventually met and married my father there. She proceeded to make the border city her home. Although she accepted and became part of city life, she insisted that her home culture and values, which her parents passed down and focused on respecting elders and family, having strong work ethic, and personal responsibility, were also passed to us as children. She ensured that we were exposed to that simple lifestyle through frequent trips home where we would receive life lessons from her family. Going back to her village, in many respects, was like stepping back in time to a much simpler period. In her village, we learned that we showed respect to elders by kissing their hands when we greeted them, deferring to them for decisions, and accommodating their needs ahead of ours.

In addition, we learned to care for animals, work the land with our hands, and as we had no electricity, to tell time by shadows. Many times, when we would return to the city, we thought we had missed out on large chunks of time as our friends caught us up on the latest news. Although we as children were not always amused, her insistence on these trips home was her way to help us and her stay grounded amid the fast-moving culture of a border city, and it worked. Similarly, her strong stance against us children speaking English at home as we were learning the language was instrumental in our level of assimilation and kept us tied to her native culture. While she valued and encouraged formal education, she did not consider it as important as learning the values of respect, ethics, and loyalty. She subscribed to the concept of being *bien educados*, well-educated

or well rounded, which emphasizes cultural values over formal education and places the educational responsibility on the family as the children were a representation of the family. She often told us, "*La gente no sabe cuantos años estudiaste, pero si se dan cuenta que educado eres por la manera que tratas a otros,"* which in English means "people won't know how many years of school you had, but they will know how educated you are by how you treat others." My parents taught us valuable life lessons and held high educational aspirations for us, despite their low socioeconomic status. Apparently, this was not uncommon as Gandara (1995) and Zamudio and Rios (2006) found the practice among many other Mexican parents.

My mother always had a way of simplifying things for us children, and I always felt that the world made sense through her interpretation. As I assimilated into American society, her words became distorted and stopped making sense to me. There was a time when I judged everyone by the formal education they attained and assigned value to their words. In my erroneous view, her words lost their value to me, and I started to believe that mine were more important due to the educational *papeles* (e.g., diploma papers) and knowledge I was accumulating. I became more American; I started to willingly lose my connections to what once grounded me. Mr. Perez also spoke to this stage:

> There are cases where they [my children] are ashamed of how you dress, how you act, those things. One time, trying to encourage grandchildren how to dance folkloric dances, they said, "No, we don't want to learn that." They are embarrassed. I said, "If you don't want your kids to dance, it's okay, but don't be embarrassed by it; on the contrary, encourage and support it. After all, it's part of the Hispanic culture." It's hard but I tell you, we have to walk in two worlds

because we can't also close our eyes to what is here. But we also have to have our culture alive always. (M. Perez, interview, April 3, 2017)

He was able to maintain his Mexican roots yet observed the struggles of his children and grandchildren as they assimilated to U.S. society. As he expressed his experience with the youth of his family, I too started to relate to them as I was sometimes ashamed of our Mexican culture, like bringing homemade tacos for lunch to school.

Javier Gonzalez Gonzales

In alignment with my mother Eustolia's experience of being first at doing things for the family's benefit, in 1969, I became the first of five children born in the United States of America. Similar to how her venturing outside the local community allowed her family to benefit economically and set the precedent for other family members to seek employment in the city, my birth in this country provided a golden ticket to better options for my family. As the "privileged" one who was born *en el otro lado*, on the other side, of the Rio Grande that separated my two countries, I was referred to as the *Americano* or the *Gringo,* derogatory slang for a White person*,* as a baby to highlight my unique status among my family and their status in the community. As a critical scholar reflecting on that particular time, I can state that the status given to me by virtue of my birth and documented by an official State of Texas certified birth certificate identifying me as "White" was the only time I was afforded *White privilege* (Holladay, 2015; McIntosh, 2015), albeit in Mexico. There, the fact that one was American was seen as a great opportunity because of the potential one has to benefit the family and the community. The nickname brought me status in terms of the benefits I could provide to my family, most importantly, facilitating their *papeles* (i.e., immigration papers) to

legally cross the river. Those documents made me the bridge for my family to get to *el otro lado*.

Although I was born in this country with American citizenship and could provide a path for legal immigration for my parents and the rest of my siblings, their economic situation did not allow for that at the time. Contrary to the prevailing narrative that immigrants can easily access legal pathways into the country, our family did not have the resources to make the transition. So, we lived in Mexico until we could afford to make the trip across the bridge for good. One of my uncles likes to tell a story about traveling with my parents from my father's hometown to my mother's village during one particularly harsh winter night and seeing me bundled up and lying inside a wooden tub by my mother's feet as she tried to keep warm by a fire while waiting on the bus to come. He recalls joking to the group, "*Este es un Amerciano y debe de viajar mejor"* (this is an American baby and should be traveling by better means). The expectation was that Americans should be traveling in more comfortable conditions and not subject to what they were experiencing. Many years later, as I reflect on this story and following conversations with my parents in Mexico regarding a planned trip to visit my siblings and their families in Georgia, I realized how much of my cultural identity I had lost.

While I have the resources to provide more convenient and faster means of transportation for them, such as a plane ticket, they prefer to make the 3 drive in their more than 20-year-old pickup truck to visit with relatives along the way and travel at their own pace. As with many of the experiences I am having through writing this dissertation, I have realized that my contribution to helping my parents access the United States was not about them making a better life for themselves as much as it was for them

to make it easier for us to have a better life. They have always been grounded in who they are and were never mesmerized by what they could have in this country. Their main goal was always to bring their children here, for our benefit, and I was the vehicle by which they accomplished that.

There is a saying that one does not miss what one never had, and although we were poor, by material standards most of our lives, my brothers and I had a happy childhood in Mexico. Because all our friends lived in the same socioeconomic conditions as we did, we did not have exposure to the material things we could not have. Our parents were able to provide the basics for us in terms of housing, clothes, and meals. Despite our economic situation, our family continued to grow. By age two, my siblings included an older sister and two older brothers who are 2 years apart. Even now, it is easy to guess their ages given that fact. When I was 2 years old, my mother gave birth to a set of twins who again provided another first distinction for our family. By that time, my parents had secured green cards to legally cross the border and had planned to deliver what they believed to be a single baby by the midwife who delivered me 2 years earlier. My mother recalls that the delivery of the baby was normal, and the midwife, after the birth, gave both her and the baby a clean bill of health, and they were sent home to rest. She recalls feeling stomach pains as they drove back across the border but didn't think much of them, as she thought they were normal after delivery. As stated earlier, my mother is a very tough and determined woman. Like her mother and most of the women in her family, she was raised to not complain or otherwise be a burden to the family. As with previous deliveries, she was used to overcoming any issues on her own and being back to work one or two days after the birth. The fact that she complained about the pain

at all should have indicated that it was very severe, but neither she nor my father gave it much thought.

Later that evening, as she was bathing, she experienced pains and was taken to the local hospital for evaluation. Due to her rural background and cultural upbringing, my mother did not have much faith in the Mexican health care system. In her village, her family relied on natural and traditional medicine provided by a local *curandero*, faith healer, who is anointed with *el don,* the gift of healing. She was weary of institutionalized medicine. In her rural community, hospitals were a last resort due to the perception that the staff lacked competence; stories of healthy individuals going to the hospital, many times in far-off places, and coming home in a casket were common. My mother's agreement to go to the hospital was indeed an indication of an emergency.

At the hospital, she was evaluated and found to be in labor. Soon after, she delivered another baby boy, approximately 6 hours after the first one. They did not know to expect twins due to her lack of prenatal care. Their births, in two different countries, were certainly a first for our family and have been a fun trivia fact, but we never thought much about it. In writing about this event, I Googled the phrase "twins born in two different countries," and discovered a Guinness World Record awarded to a pair of twins born on either side of the border between England and Wales in 1976 as the first twins to be born in different countries. That is obviously an error, as my brothers were born in 1971.

Following my twin brothers' birth and complications from the traumatic experience, my parents decided that the family would be better off with the resources available *en el otro lado.* Starting shortly after the births, my parents began planning for

the family's transition to the United States. Following the established pattern of migration, they started to consider options for moving the family. Initially, *mi padre*, my father, secured a day job on the U.S. side, traveling across the border daily, and sought support from his siblings who were living there to make the permanent move.

Becoming American and the Role of Schooling

My assimilation journey began the summer I turned eight, and I was forced to attend American school in Texas. Before that, I was a typical *Mejicano* kid. I played with friends in the neighborhood, helped my mother at home, and did kid stuff most of the day. As my older brothers and sister started going to school, I remember that I couldn't wait for my turn to enroll and wear the hand-me-down uniforms required in the neighborhood elementary school. The thing I looked forward to the most was books. I have always loved to read. From an early age, I tried to read whatever I could get my hands on. I remember learning to read from the textbooks my older siblings brought home from school, newspapers that my brother brought home after his route, and comic books I borrowed from friends. Because I associated school with reading, I became jealous of the school uniforms they wore; the way they talked about their day, including their walks to the school; with whom they played at recess; and the activities they did in class. I imagined school to be a great place where I would have access to more of their books. I could not wait to join them.

Because our parents have always been ones to follow the rules, they have always complied with school enrollment requirements. Mexican schools did not offer kindergarten, so when one of us turned 6 years old, our parents walked down to the school and enrolled us into first grade. The process repeated every 2 years for my older

sister and two older brothers, and when my turn came, I was ready. Sadly, my idealistic dream of walking to school with my brothers was dashed when they were informed that I could not be enrolled because I was an American citizen and needed to attend school *en el otro lado.* As a child, I did not understand the reasoning for being denied. I remember feeling sad and mad because I could not be like my brothers. For all the benefits of being American that I presented for my family, that incident marked the first time I saw my citizenship as a curse instead of a blessing.

At that time, my father had a brother who lived with his family across the border on the Texas side. As he had children attending public school there, my father consulted with him about my situation. At that time, my uncle informed him that children in Texas did not have to enroll in kindergarten, but they had to be enrolled by the time they turned eight. So, a plan was developed for me to live with them by that time if my parents were not able to get *papeles* for everyone in the family. As it happened, they were not able to afford everyone's immigration fees and were forced to send me away to comply with Texas's compulsory school attendance requirements.

In the summer of my eighth year, I experienced the most painful part of my assimilation process: being forcefully removed from everything I had ever known and placed in a foreign environment "for your own benefit." That was when I had to go live with my uncle and his family *en el otro lado* and required me to separate from my family every other weekend. The routine got easier during the 2 years that I lived with my uncle's family. The first time I left my family was on a Sunday morning, and although we had talked about it, it was still a painful experience for all of us. I recall crying and fighting against my father as he loaded me into my uncle's car with a backpack of school

supplies and a suitcase. Every other weekend, I was taken home and brought back with the parting scene repeating itself. The separation was worse during the summer break as I pleaded with my parents to make me *Mejicano* and let me stay. Through that experience, I came to regret all the times my brothers and I stared across the river from our side and wished we could live there.

Also, through that experience and the discipline I received from my father and uncle, I learned that some things can't be changed, and the earlier one accepts that, the easier it is to get what one wants. I also learned that there is a process that one follows for almost everything in life, and compliance with the process dictates the outcomes. In my case, I understood that if I did my part, complying with good behavior and good grades, I would get to see my family more often. From my parents' side, I understood that if I didn't make a fuss every time my uncle came to get me, I would make the process easier for my mother, as she suffered every Sunday I was taken back to my uncle's house. In discussing this period of our lives, my mother explained:

> I did not want you to go away. I wanted to keep you home with your brothers and protect you, but that was not possible. You were American; you belonged on that side. You had a chance to do things they couldn't, and even though I died every time your uncle took you away screaming and crying, I know it was for the best. (E. Gonzalez, interview, August 21, 2017)

I was enrolled in the first grade the fall of my eighth birthday. The school I attended assured my uncle that I had to be placed in first grade to pick up the basics, including the English language. At the time, I was almost two years older than the children in that grade. Once I learned these skills, I would be placed in my corresponding

grade. For the first few months, I was completely lost. The reality of school was not what I imagined in Mexico. While it did not require uniforms, it had longer hours, required riding a bus, served food I didn't know or like, and forced me to speak only English. In my child's mind, I thought the whole concept was contrary to the fun that school was supposed to be. Nevertheless, I set out to learn the system and comply with it. Because I didn't understand what was going on around me, I knew the first thing I needed to do was learn the English language. I wanted to rely on my cousins to support me on this, but I was surprised that they did not seem to be willing to help me, as I suspected they wanted to keep that knowledge to themselves. That was my first experience with the *cangrejo*, crab in a barrel theory, a phenomenon that has come to define Mexican selfishness. The Mexican version of the theory is related through a story about a crab vendor selling crabs by the ocean. He has three barrels, two of them have a cover and the third one does not. When asked, he explains that the covered barrels contain Japanese and American crabs and he must keep the cover on because those crabs push each other to the top in order to escape the barrel. He then mentions that the third barrel contains Mexican crabs. He is not worried about them escaping because they pull each other down when one tries to climb out. Mr. Garcia expressed it in the following comments:

> We have an anecdote among Mexicans: "You take *cangrejos*, crabs in a bucket. You put them in at the bottom, and when some of them try to claw their way up, as soon as one is close to being free, the others will claw him back down and bring him down. No matter how many times one tries to crawl out, they bring him back down. That's the way Mexicans are. We don't like to see anyone excel.

> When somebody beats the system and accomplishes something, they keep that knowledge for themselves. (A. Garcia, interview, February 17, 2017)

I am very thankful for my parents' insistence on maintaining our cultural identity, sense of family, and never pushing us to fully embrace assimilation, as I believe that has been the key to not adopting that *cangrejo* mentality.

Memoing my experiences as I gathered information for this dissertation, I experienced, again, the overwhelming emotions of helplessness and frustration that I went through to be able to communicate the most basic information. I vividly remember two instances when my lack of English language skills caused me great embarrassment. One was when I was in that first-grade class and relying on my class buddy assigned to help me keep up with activities. He refused to tell me what the teacher said, and I missed an assignment. The other was when I had to use the bathroom and didn't know how to ask to go. I sat looking through notes trying to remember how to ask but could not find it. Finally, I just ran out of the room with the teacher running after me until I went into the bathroom. After that incident, I was punished for not asking permission to leave the room. Lesson learned. From then on, I memorized my first English words to be "bathroom" and "repeat, please."

At the start of second grade, my uncle moved, and we enrolled in a different school. That school had a larger enrollment of non-English speakers and used a bilingual education model that emphasized the development of a native language (Spanish) while slowly introducing the English language. In that environment, I witnessed the view that some children had for the non-English speaking students that manifested itself in the way they spoke to them and how they criticized how the non-English speaking students

dressed, their speech, and their manners. At first, I didn't notice it much because I was so glad to have permission to speak Spanish and enjoy school with people like myself, but it became a struggle as I was expected to be part of my cousins' circle of friends. Because of the change of schools, my progress in learning English slowed down considerably, but it also provided an opportunity to use my Spanish background skills. In contrast to the previous school, which provided most of the instruction in English with very few opportunities to speak Spanish, the new school provided the majority of instruction in Spanish with one period of English during the day. Given my background, I was assigned as a buddy to my cousins to help them with the transition. The aftermath of the change of schools confirmed for me the value of following the rules of the established system. I focused on learning English when that was valued at the old school and took advantage of my Spanish skills at the new school for my benefit.

In the summer before third grade, my family became whole again. That summer, my parents got immigration documents for themselves and my siblings and moved to the United States side of the bridge but this time for good. Because I had been exposed to the language and school culture longer, it was my responsibility to help my brothers navigate and avoid some of the challenges I faced. While I was glad to help them adjust, I also started to notice that they were lacking some of the motivation I thought they should have to make the adjustment smoother. Being allowed to become the expert at 10 years of age and support my family's transition to American life felt very good to me. It validated the painful experience I went through and gave me the confidence to make the adjustment easier for my siblings. I realized now that my perceptions toward assimilation had begun to shift as I adopted a deficit view of my brothers when they struggled with the

language and academics of our American schools. My views then, which remained the same until my dissertation research, had been impacted by the internalized forms of class and racial structures that permeate educational institutions (Chavez, 2012). The concept of motivation, or lack thereof, was reinforced during my middle school years in rural communities along our set migrant farmworker route. It was in those schools that I learned how to navigate the system and started to identify the process, now recognized as deficit thinking, which led me to believe that the fault for not achieving academic success lay with the student and their family (Milner, 2013). I fell victim to Rodriguez's (1981) description of the bureaucratic culture that when students misbehave or achieve poorly, they must be "fixed" because the problem inheres in the students or their families, not in the social ecology of the school, grade, or classroom (Valencia, 1997).

I became Americanized through navigating the language and culture of the U.S. "whitestream" school system (Grande, 2004; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013) and the White community early on in life. During my fourth-grade year, my father secured year-round employment with a farmer in South Georgia. Securing stable employment for the family meant that we didn't have to continue to migrate in search of work, which was great, but it also meant that we had to start school in the local community, which was not as good. Although I had learned the language well enough to be the designated spokesperson and translator for the family when it came to interactions with social agencies and the dominant community at large, I was by no means fluent in English. I had that realization when I was asked to translate at a doctor's visit for a farmworker who had a sore throat and could barely speak. As an 11-year-old limited English speaker, I was lost trying to explain symptoms. The sick farmworker told me to tell the doctor that his anginas,

tonsils, were hurting but not knowing what that word meant or the English translation, I made one up. Understanding basic Spanish rules, I knew getting the pronunciation of an unfamiliar word simply by sounding out all the letters is possible because Spanish letters rarely lose their sound. My idea was to take the word and give it an English pronunciation. The resulting word, *ah-n-hee-nahs*, was my contribution to medical vocabulary. Unfortunately, the doctor gave me a puzzled look when my made up came out of my mouth and so he then diagnosed the farmworker with a cold and sore throat. It wasn't until later when that man was taken to a hospital and had his tonsils removed that I learned that technique did not work in the English language. That experience led me to be more attentive to how things function in the English environment and learn to work within it.

In my office, I have a letter written by my third-grade teacher, Ms. Jackson, from the last school I attended prior to my family settling down in South Georgia. As far as I know, a letter of this kind was only included in my academic file and not with any of my brothers' educational files. The letter was written to the receiving teacher in my next school to let him/her know what to expect from me as a student. My teacher wrote:

> Please do not judge Javier's ability by the grades he received from me. His work was very good until he began being absent one to three days a week. His absence seems to be due to the temporary nature of his father's job. Javier's concern for his schoolwork seemed to lessen when the cucumber crop waned. My plea to you is give him a few days to adjust to the new school. He is a very capable, polite person and you will find him easy to learn and a pleasure to teach.

As I contemplated the meaning of letter many years later, I felt that my third-

grade teacher was looking out for me by trying to ease my transition to a dominant culture classroom environment. I remember this teacher's caring and empathetic manner as the last attempt by an educator to make me feel accepted and was the last time I truly felt that I belonged.

Enrollment in a new school was always the same routine. Our mom would gather all our school records and immunization cards and give them to me to take care of enrollments. At the nearest school bus stop, we would get on the bus and go directly to the school office to hand over all the documents. Normally in schools along the migrant stream, this process was not an issue because we would be with some older children from the migrant camp and/or the schools had Spanish speaking staff. This time when we enrolled in our permanent school was very different. I still remember the looks we got from other students and staff as my brothers and I arrived at the school and I confidently asked for the location of the front office. I was not sure what to expect, but I knew this school would be different. Still, I was not prepared for the reception we received. There was not a single Spanish speaker in the office. I then had to summon up the most perfect English to communicate our intent to register into the fifth and fourth grades and had to answer questions the secretary had about our documents.

Because some of the documents were in Spanish, and there was not a translator, the registration process was delayed until the high school Spanish teacher could get to the school. As a result, my brothers and I were placed together in a classroom filled with student to wait out the process. While I remember most of the events that day, one of the most vivid memories is of the teachers, staff and students who would peek in within the slightly open door to look at us in the back corner of the classroom. I relive this profound

experience through a 1996 M&Ms candy commercial that aired around Christmas time. The M&M candies are walking around a living room talking about Santa, and one says, "Do you think Santa will like the red ones?" to which the other replies, "I don't know. I have never met the guy!" They then go around the Christmas tree and come upon Santa by the fireplace. He turns around and sees them. At the same time, they see him, and one of the M&Ms yells, "He does exist!" and Santa says, "They do exist!" Then they both fainted backward.

The satire of the commercial captured my lived experience and also perfectly affirmed the comments made by two interview participants when speaking about the growth of the Latinx population in their community. Mr. Garcia, a former pastor and member of the original La Fiesta organizing committee recalled:

At that point, they [migrant farmworkers] were kind of almost invisible, because they came to town when the farmer would provide them transportation to go shopping et cetera, et cetera. They lived in the camps, so it was not a lot of presence in here and of course, there was no activity as far as dancing, music, or something. There was nothing really going on. So, they were strangers, workers.

Another person I interviewed was a former city council member who was instrumental in bringing La Fiesta to Tifton and addressed this idea when she noted:

> It [seeing farmworkers] was just kind of different, the agricultural community and being exposed to that. I don't really remember it being a good or bad thing, it was just different, and it was just odd that they [farmers] had all these people around their property that were doing all these things and they were just kind of part of the scenery. (Jones, interview, April 08, 2017)

Additionally, Ms. Jones commented on when she started to notice the Latinx population:

> In high school, I began to really register there's this group of people who are here for specific periods of time that do a specific job, and then they'd be gone. So I guess that's probably when I first realized that there was this migrant population that would come at specific times of the year to help with whatever they were supposed to help with then leave.

Both of their comments resonated with me because for many years, I was one of those invisible people. My family usually harvested crops in rural communities, lived on farmer-provided housing on the farm, and rarely interacted with the local community due to our work schedule.

Typically, because of the nature of the crops, we rarely had the opportunity to go into "town." Actually, except for the once-a-week trip to the grocery store and occasional visits to the social services office and health agencies, we rarely interacted with the local community. On rare occasions, when work or the weather allowed, the family would cram into the old pickup truck to make the 4-hour trip to Atlanta. There, among the international community along Buford Highway, we would enjoy the food and other cultural comfort items, such as Mexican music cassettes, VHS movies, and birthday piñatas that allowed us to feel connected to our language and culture. I warmly remember the feeling and excitement we as children felt upon learning that we would be "going to Atlanta" because we knew we would be fully immersed and engaged in the Mexican environment we were separated from, even if it was for one afternoon. Conversely, I also recall the dreaded feeling we experienced as we left Atlanta and returned to the rural community, an environment where we did not exist as people.

The feeling of not being wanted was a strange one for me to accept. Except for the time I had to go live with my uncle, I always felt loved and wanted. Growing up in a family of nine siblings in Latinx neighborhoods taught me the meaning of family and unity. Within those neighborhoods, everyone looked out and supported each other. The tight-knit and sometimes protective community bonds are key elements in the empowerment of individual members. I felt that we lost something as a family when we were forced to establish a home in an environment where our family was the only one who looked, spoke, and acted like Latinxs. That sense of community and sense of belonging was a part of living and interacting with others like us in the *colonias* (colonies) of South Texas and the migrant trailer parks in Florida. It would take many years for us to begin the process of belonging in the rural communities of South Georgia, where my parents' work had us settled.

This experience brings me to Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model. CCW is the wide array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts that communities of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) people (i.e., the term "minorities") use to survive and resist oppression. Yosso's (2005) model challenges the assumption that the knowledge of the upper and middle classes is considered valuable capital to a hierarchical society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) by arguing that all forms of capital can be used to empower individuals. The six forms of capital that Yosso (2005) identified as capturing strengths, talents, and experiences of communities of color include: *Aspirational* - the hope and dreams that students have despite persistent educational inequities; *Navigational* - the skills and abilities to navigate social institutions, including educational spaces; *Social* - peers and other social contacts that

assist individuals to gain access and navigate social institutions; *Linguistic* - the various language and communication skills individuals possess that allow them to navigate social and educational environments; *Familial* - the social and personal human resources that individuals have that draw from their extended familial and community networks; and, *Resistant* - the experiences of communities of color in securing equal rights and collective freedom.

As I recall my experience, I realize that my family circumstances did not allow for the full development of Yasso's (2005) capital tenants because we were transplanted from within a large community of peers to an isolated existence with no anchors to the local community. As a result of our isolation within a foreign environment, not identifying with or being accepted by the local communities, did not provide the opportunity to establish our CCW roots. Thus, the strengths, talents, and experiences that were supposed to be developed by our home community were never realized. Upon further reflection, I realize that my efforts to be Americanized come from a need for acceptance rooted in my disconnection from my home culture and language. However, I am very grateful to my parents for demanding that we maintain our Spanish language and cultural traditions, even though we lived so far away from anyone who would care.

Unfortunately, my negative attitude towards my Mexican heritage manifested itself more during my middle school years than my elementary school years. I believe that was because I attended elementary school in an environment where all of my peers looked like me and spoke the same language. By middle school, I had been exposed to a diversity of classmates in rural schools where none, outside my family, looked like me or spoke my native language, and I truly felt different. During those years, I felt and

expressed embarrassment of being Mexican and related wholly to the feelings Richard Rodriguez (1981) felt in rejecting his heritage. When I first read his book, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1981), I felt a kinship because I sensed he understood what I was going through. In the book, Rodriguez narrated his reflection on language and how learning English marked the beginning of his assimilation and distanced him from his parents' culture. In his book and reflection, I found reassurance that full assimilation is necessary for us to have a public identity and participate fully in American society. At that time, I wanted very badly for all of my family to embrace the American way because that was the only way for us to be accepted. I often felt ashamed of my parents for their lack of English skills, the way they dressed, and the dirty, manual labor they did to provide for us as detailed by Padilla (2001) and Perea (2012) in their discussions of oppression.

Like Rodriguez (1981), I felt that to become "American" we needed to stop being "Mexican" and we would fit right in. Furthermore, as I was exposed to dominant culture, I knew which type of American we needed to be. At the time my family settled in South Georgia, the farm work labor was predominantly Black. As I developed my deficit views through my participation in the educational system, the view of my Black classmates and coworkers as not willing to work hard was challenged by Milner's (2013) analysis of poverty as a factor and its influence on school experiences and outcome of students. My views were not supported in his analysis, as in my mind, my reality was that I also poor, but I still had the drive to do better, and their lack of motivation to do homework or extra work at the job that would lead them to better opportunities. In addition, the slang language that my Black classmates and co-workers used on the playground and the fields

did not make sense to me and further supported the deficit perception that I was developing of them as being less educated. Given my lived experiences at school and work, I determined that my family needed to embrace White culture. My perception was that White culture enjoyed the best classrooms, had prettier teachers at school, and owned the farms we worked on alongside our Black coworkers. As a result, I didn't see any benefit from wanting to be like my Black classmates or coworkers, but rather wanted to emulate my White classmates.

To get us started towards my goal of Americanizing my family, I encouraged my siblings to stop using Spanish at school with me and tried to get my parents to learn English. I wanted them all to be comfortable in the public space of our community and belong, like I longed to do. Unfortunately, my siblings were not as motivated as I was and rejected my efforts. Furthermore, because I was the one most comfortable with the language, I was assigned the role of interpreter for family and neighbors who needed to interact with the community. The rest of my family was happy to delay their assimilation for as long as possible and ignored my pleas to embrace the proper English language. At that time, I envied Rodriguez' familial support in doing what is "right" and forgoing the home language and culture and embracing the White American way.

Transition Complete

I vividly remember the moment that I felt I had made it, the moment I became American. It was during sixth grade during quarter report cards that I was informed that I had been promoted to the "A" group for the following semester. This meant that I would be moving from overcrowded and loud classrooms filled with unmotivated kids, mostly Black and poor Whites, and moved up to nicer classrooms taught by pretty White

teachers with mostly White classmates. My promotion to the "A" group was validation of my hard work and commitment to my academic success and something I would use to motivate my siblings. I recall the encouragement I received from my teachers and classmates during the transition of grade groups that made me feel wanted and accepted. Those praises meant everything to me then but are now a reminder of the microaggressions embedded in public-school systems (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined microaggressions as subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color that are automatic or unconscious for the most part. As an assimilated immigrant trying to recapture his heritage, I have become aware of the many instances that I was the recipient of microaggressions without realizing what they were, and I actually enjoyed them. In my quest to be accepted and validate my hard work, I took these acts as encouragement and motivation. As I reflect on my early assimilation path, I recall one of the most impactful experiences when an English teacher shared the results of an assignment with the class.

The incident unfolded in the following manner: "You should be embarrassed of your effort," this comment, directed at the rest of the class, as my English teacher announced that I had made the highest grade on a writing assignment for a district competition filled me with pride. I felt a sense of accomplishment knowing that I had outperformed native English speakers on a skill they should have an advantage over me. Although I did not win the district competition, the fact that I was selected, got to go off campus and have my name announced over the intercom validated my efforts. Prior to that, I was jealous of those students who got selected for school competitions, got to dress up to represent the school at events, and had their name called out over the intercom to

leave early from class to attend such events. That essay writing activity was the event that gave me access to everything I wanted.

Throughout the seventh and eighth grades, I continued to advance academically and earn recognition such as Honor Roll, BETA Club invitation, and advanced class placements. Through the advancement, I was encouraged by words and comments from my classmates and teachers fueling my motivation. Comments such as "you speak English so well," filled me with pride because I was focused on learning proper English so as not to be confused with those Latinx students, the Black students, or the poor White students. I remember that I wanted to sound like an educated person, so I checked out a dictionary from the library and memorized synonyms for common words that I could incorporate into my everyday language. While the strategy helped me make headway at school and in the community, it did not help me at home and at work. At home, I tried to encourage my brothers to forgo the slang language they were repeating from their friends at school and in the fields by correcting their slag or incorrect words to "proper" vocabulary. Without realizing, or maybe on purpose, I was alienating myself from the home and work environment through my language use. The strategy did not work as I was forced to use the slang at work and Spanish at home because the language I wanted to use was not welcomed. The experience furthered my belief that neither my brothers nor our coworkers were willing to put in the effort to advance beyond their stage in life.

"You don't look like them. Are you sure you are related?" was another common question made by classmates as we spent time in the playground during recess. I like to think that the question was asked due to my skin tone being lighter than my brothers, but I now realize it was more than that. During recess, my brothers tended to play with their

Black friends while I stayed with my group of mostly White classmates, although there was one Black member among the group also. Throughout the school, there was an invisible barrier that separated the academic and social groups. However, it was most prevalent during recess. As I had connections to both sides, I could cross it at will. Nevertheless, I consciously chose to stay with the affluent group and discard the one with my brothers in it.

In eighth grade, my group was selected to be part of a pilot program to introduce high school classes to advanced students. I remember being in the Algebra class and the teacher introducing formulas and other concepts when he noticed me and commented, "You should have no problem because the numbers are the same in Spanish, right?" causing the class to chuckle. He, of course, was right. But I didn't know what to say at the moment because I had not had a formal Spanish lesson since elementary school, so I didn't respond. The comment stuck with me because at that moment I realized that as much as I tried to be an academic success, regardless of my background, my name, and my accent, these would always be noticed and give me away.

Nevertheless, I pushed forward towards my assimilation goals fueled by my cultural deficits. High school registration was an emotional experience. There was so much potential for our class, as we had successfully piloted advanced placement classes and were ahead of some high school students in terms of the classes we had taken in middle school. I remember I was signed up for Trigonometry, English Literature, Biology, and other difficult classes that are now standard for ninth grade, but at that time were part of the 10th or 11th-grade curriculum. All the excitement was shot down by the secretary, who was registering me for classes, when she asked, "Gonzalez, when are you

going to drop out?" She was referring to the fact that my two older brothers had not gotten past the tenth grade before leaving school and assumed I was the next one. This experience was another example of "subtractive schooling mentality" where educators, instead of building on students' strengths, diminish their academic efforts (Flores-Villarreal, 2017; Villenas & Foley, 2011; Young, 2012).

While I was looking forward to my high school experience in my adopted White space, my Mexican reality dictated my educational future. At the time of my enrollment in ninth grade, I was 17 years old with home expectations that were not being fulfilled and academic hopes that were not obtainable. Although my parents valued education, the family's financial needs outweighed the educational advantage in the short term. So, to no surprise to anyone at my school, I dropped out after the first semester of my ninth-grade year and began working as a full-time farm worker, which was the path laid out by my brothers. Through all my efforts to assimilate into the dominant culture and constant resistance to my native heritage, my assimilation journey seemed to end at the place I was trying to escape.

There was a time that I loved going out in the fields with my parents and family to harvest whatever crop was in season. As a kid I enjoyed the experience of getting up early and helping my mother make and pack lunch for the family, climbing into our old pickup and heading to the assigned field, and getting the assignment for the day from my father. I treasured the feeling of working together with all my family, feeling proud of contributing what I could to the effort. Out in the fields, I didn't know the differences that dominant society assigned to manual laborers, but instead experienced the pride, work ethic, and sense of equality among all workers. I learned to see that we were poor

and disadvantaged and developed a negative perception of our lifestyle through my exposure to dominant culture.

An old saying that I have heard most of life, "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" certainly applied to me. After having been a part of White society through class placements and involvement in club activities and social events, which all made me feel accepted, it was hard for me to fit back into the farmworker lifestyle after leaving school. I had drunk from the shallow end of the knowledge pool, and I couldn't satisfy my craving for more in the waters provided by the migrant farmworker environment. It was during my reintroduction to the farmworker lifestyle that I noticed the poverty, substandard housing, and other deficits that I started to feel ashamed of.

The frustration with how my life was going culminated with an event that occurred while I was working in a packing shed one hot weekday afternoon in 1989. The packing shed was on a farm that provided tours for people who stopped to buy whatever vegetables were in season. That particular afternoon, an older White couple was touring the sorting area I was working in. In that area, I and others sorted vegetables for packing on a conveyor belt. This activity required fast hands and focus to ensure each vegetable is sorted to its correct package. I remember that a lady stood next to me and was talking to her husband, pretending to sort vegetables with me while he took a picture from the other side of the conveyor belt. These instances were common in the farm and not a big deal to the workers. However, it truly bothered me that I had become a prop for a vacation picture. That day, I made it my goal to escape the farmworker lifestyle and started to work my way to the other side of the vegetable-sorting conveyor belt. That process began in 1989, when I earned my General Educational Development (GED)

diploma which allowed me to enroll in college and graduate in 4 years.

An American Dream and Professional Assimilation

In 1993, I was hired as an Adolescent Outreach Specialist (AOS) with the Georgia Migrant Education Program (MEP). Established by the federal government in 1966, MEP seeks to alleviate the educational disruptions that occur due to the migrant lifestyle by implementing a variety of educational programs for students and their families designed to address the factors that most frequently inhibit migrant children's ability to do well in school (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002). I was attracted to the position because the person in the position was responsible for enforcing public school compliance in support of migrant farmworker families. As a former non-English speaking farmworker myself, the MEP supported my academic progress through intensive English language instruction and made my assimilation transition easier. I wanted to do my part to help them succeed academically and socially in their new communities because I had experienced the same challenges that the young workers were going through.

A significant responsibility was to assist farmworker families in enrolling children not yet in the local school system and educating them on the state and local attendance policies and parent responsibilities. I leveraged my background, language, and culture to develop trust with newly arrived families and promoted the "education is the key" mantra of the American Dream. I pushed the same thoughts to children struggling with their identity and sense of belonging in their new surroundings. Part of my approach to convince them to learn English and embrace their new normal was through motivational workshops, which I developed and presented monthly to groups of students. It was an hour-long session on how I struggled with language and fitting in and understood that

learning English and becoming Americanized would be a great benefit for them and their family. In those sessions, I encouraged the perception that we as Latinxs would need to fit in and exceed expectations to be accepted into the dominant, White culture. I put unfair expectations on those children to choose the American option when faced with honoring their heritage and ignoring it for their future benefit.

As an AOS with the state department of education and migrant student success, I became a subject matter expert for school systems not prepared for dealing with influxes of migrant students. Over time, my position evolved into providing professional development and strategies to rural school administrators to successfully integrate the migrant students into their school culture. In those early years, very few resources for dealing with immigrant non-English speakers were available to rural school systems. There were even fewer people with success stories like mine who could speak from experience about navigating two cultures and successfully assimilating into the mainstream community.

For over 10 years, I worked with the Georgia Migrant Education Program, advancing professionally within the department. Like in my school days, I learned the requirements for supervisory positions and worked toward achieving them. I earned ESL endorsements, leadership certifications, and a master's degree. However, I never met the criteria for becoming the director of the Migrant Education department, even though the director's position was opened twice during my tenure. Both times it was filled by monolingual White friends of the superintendent who had no background in working with immigrant populations. Although I was aware of the local politics involved in hiring decisions in rural areas, I was disappointed in not being selected for the director position

because I knew I was uniquely qualified to fill the position. The experience has remained with me as the start of my realization that my efforts were never going to be enough to be selected over less qualified dominant culture individuals to guide a program for migrant farmworker families in rural South Georgia.

I had heard of the "glass ceiling" that women faced in making strides towards leadership positions, but I ignorantly did not believe it applied to me. I was not prepared then for the "circuitous paths" towards leadership positions that Eagly and Carli (2007) described as part of the "labyrinth" (p. 6). They described the path to leadership positions for Latinas as not being a simple or direct path. They posited that to reach the center of the labyrinth, one must be persistent and be ready to face the twists and turns of a journey (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

My commitment to migrant families never wavered, despite the leadership decisions made on behalf of the program. Always the loyal employee and team player, I continued to provide support to families in enrolling their children into rural schools, provided professional development workshops to the administrative and instructional staff at those schools on integrating non-English speaking students, and educated the new administrators to the needs and culture of the families enrolled in the program. The optimist in me continued to believe that I would get my opportunity eventually; however, the realist in me realized that was not going to happen, and I started to seek other employment opportunities.

That search led me to Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC). I was selected to head two newly established federal grant programs to support farmworkers' children earn a High School Equivalency and enroll in higher education institutions.

Like the MEP, the High School Equivalency Program (HEP) and the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) were and continue to be funded through the Office of Migrant Education at the federal level. At that time, the two grants combined brought over $4.5 million to ABAC, by far the most external funds at the college. When I arrived as HEP/CAMP Director, the CAMP grant was in jeopardy of being defunded due to non-compliance with grant guidelines. Therefore, one of my initial charges was negotiating continued funding and committing to improving the grant management system in place. Fortunately, I had developed a good relationship with the National Director of the Office of Migrant Education from my time with the Georgia MEP, and I was given the opportunity to correct the course of the issues. ABAC, of course, was pleased to hear that the grant would not be terminated and offered tremendous support in implementing initiatives to enhance Latino student presence on campus. Thus, my almost 13-year journey through the University System of Georgia's (USG) leadership bureaucracy began.

Latinx enrollment in colleges and universities in Georgia at the time was a challenge. There were very few initiatives aimed at Latinx students outside the Atlanta area. ABAC was no exception. Therefore, one of the first things I established was a day to recognize the Latinx influence in the United States.

The first Hispanic Heritage Day (HHD) at ABAC took place in the fall of 2003. It featured internationally known scholars from Mexico and the United States and the Mexican Counsel of Atlanta discussing immigration in a panel setting. The event also included food, music, and games on campus to share Latinx culture with everyone. The event was a great success and garnered very positive media coverage for the college. As

a result of the positive exposure and providing an avenue to recognize Latinxs, the ABAC administration continued to provide additional resources to my department. That support led to a highlight of my college tenure in 2013. That year's HHD celebration included an advanced screening of the PBS documentary, "Latino Americans," led by the producer, John Valdez, who also lectured on campus for the day. Attendance at that screening and discussion exceeded the estimated capacity of 600 people at the auditorium on campus. The subsequent media coverage lifted ABAC as a Latino advocacy leader and brought recognition from across the state. It also brought additional funding from Private organizations, state grants, and additional federal funds. At the height of my time there, my department had grown from two grants with $4.5 million to seven grant programs funded at over $10 million.

The growth in my department's grants led to ABAC establishing a grants office to focus on seeking and supporting external grants for the whole college. During its initial stages, I supported and guided staff on grant management due to my experience with the multiple grants I oversaw.

My ABAC success helped me participate in numerous national opportunities, including becoming the President of the National HEP/CAMP Association, which advocated for and represented almost 100 grant programs across the country in congressional meetings and with the Office of Migrant Education. In 2008, I was a Federal Negotiator on the Federal Negotiating Rulemaking Committee for Discretionary Grants as part of the Reauthorization of HEA. I was a participant in conversations with incoming Obama education staff to address Hispanic education issues. While I am proud to have participated in those events and was recognized by the college's administration, I

was also part of the efforts spawned from the deficit thinking of those involved. My department's rapid success due to fulfilling their efforts to racially diversify and bring in higher caliber students who fit the mold of a successful ABAC student, and the great publicity it generated for the college and I, made me start to believe that the dominant culture had finally accepted me. For a time, I felt like part of the decision-makers on campus and let that cloud my judgment. An example that I vividly recall but did not pay much attention to at the time occurred as my "Latino" department was growing, and I was asked to integrate the existing Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) grants into my department.

The TRIO programs have been designed to prepare qualified individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds for postsecondary education and encourage their success throughout the educational pipeline from secondary school to undergraduate and graduate education (Dortch, 2018). At ABAC, the TRIO grants had been established for over 30 years. They primarily served African American students and were mostly operating in isolation. When the long-time director retired, I was selected to oversee the grants as part of my department to promote diversity in participants and establish accountability. I was also complicit in restricting the advancement of long-tenured TRIO staff by accepting the position without an open application process. When I thought I was "in" with the college leadership and the sky was the limit for my advancement. Later, I realized that I was selected because I "could play the game" and would not question the direction in which I was being led.

I was strengthened in my belief that the administration was not accepting me for my expertise or skill set, but for my willingness to follow their desires through my

inclusion in college and USG committees and initiatives. These included hiring committees, Latino taskforce initiatives, and nomination and acceptance into the USG's inaugural Executive Leadership Institute, and others. The accolades culminated in my nomination and selection of the 2015 E. Lanier Carson Leadership Award. The top award was given to college administrators at the college. Unfortunately, I realized I was not as essential as I thought when my grant was not funded, and the administration started to reduce support for my department. My realization that I had hit the proverbial glass ceiling occurred when I could not meet requirements for advancement at the college and when I showed interest in leaving, minimal effort was made to retain me. So, after 13 years of loyal service to the college, I left the USG completely and took on a position with the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start in North Carolina to work with fellow Latinos and continue to advocate for farmworker families and children.

In this position, working alongside other Latinx professionals, many from the same background and experience as me, I was finally able to be myself and remain there to this day. I no longer feel the pressure to be somebody else. My background as an immigrant, second language speaker, migrant farmworker, and advocate is valued independently of my positionality. Because I am now in an environment where leadership looks like me, and the mission of the work is driven by the same core beliefs I have, I don't sense a need to cater to the dominant culture and "play the game" to fit in or pick sides to be successful. Although the environment for advocating for the underserved farmworker population continues to be challenging, I am finally comfortable with who I am and can freely express that without fear of judgment or limitations. I recognize my

past deficit views and am working towards reducing and eliminating them in all interactions with others.

Woke, Growing, and La Fiesta

Octavio Paz (1950) described fiestas as expressing a sense of communality and emphasizes the idea of not being alone. In so doing, fiestas help bring out the true Mexican that is usually hidden behind a mask of self-denial. That description perfectly captures the special bond that fiestas have in our Mexican hearts, particularly for those of us living in a foreign land. As I struggle with expressing the overwhelming feelings of anticipation I experienced each time my family planned our annual trip to Mexico, those few days allowed me to be carefree without regard to judgment, and I turned to my source of inspiration, *mi mama*. At that time, she was actually in Mexico, eagerly awaiting the local Fiesta's start. I shared that I wanted to know why we hold fiestas in such high regard, and she provided an answer more accurate than any scholarly article I could have found in my research. She simply said, "*porque las fiestas son nuestras,"* because fiestas are ours. She continued to explain that the church may sponsor them, the politicians come and take credit for them, but it is the people that make them. She emphasized that the fiesta belongs to the people, so we all have ownership and responsibility for it. That is when I realized that all those times we made the long trek to her hometown, regardless of where we were in the United States, was in support of her fiesta. It remains the reason why even now, she and my father, both in their early 80's continue making the 2-day trek in the middle of summer in their 25-year-old truck, overcoming mechanical issues, inclement weather, and criminal activity to be part of the

festivities there. She truly believes some of the fiesta's impact is lost if she does not attend, and I completely agree.

Fiestas were a constant activity in my early life. Between my family's Catholic religious upbringing and large extended family, there were always birthdays, baptisms, first communions, weddings, engagements, and other celebrations to be part of. Octavio Paz (1950) pointed out that for Mexicans, any reason is an excuse to stop the passage of time and celebrate accomplishments. That characteristic is certainly true of our family, as we have always been able to gather the resources to host, sponsor, or be part of any event despite our poverty.

The small town we grew up in in Mexico celebrates *La Feria de la Virgen de la Asunción,* The Fair of the Virgin of the Assumption, during the summer each year. I remember how we as children would prepare for the week-long celebration by working extra hours to earn additional money to spend on the many attractions there. My mother reminded me that she would hardly see us during the celebration as we spent all day and most of the night at events with our relatives and friends. That celebration is a common trigger for memories amongst all my family members. Each summer, when we get together, we always recall memorable events from our childhood during the Fiesta. Some happy events include tasting our first beer, kissing girls for the first time, and staying out until the early morning without getting in trouble at home. Even tragic events did not diminish the festive environment. My mother told me a story of one of our uncles who was in charge of the fireworks for the festival and died preparing for the event when powder exploded the shack he was in. Despite the accident, the festival went on, and his death was considered honorable, as he died in service to *La Virgen.*

The regard for fiestas within our Latinx community, I believe, has been a major reason why La Fiesta has been recognized, accepted, and embraced by the local Tift County community for almost 25 years. In Mexico, the fiestas brought together the religious, political, and social aspects that are the building blocks of Mexican communities and blended them into a delicious buffet for the senses. The fiestas incorporated religion as its base because all major fiestas are in homage to a patron saint(s) and usually begin with a religious service that legitimizes the activities during the fiesta days.

The political aspect is bought in by the local elected officials who fund the activities to show off their accomplishments to the people and overpromise their administration activities. The local official, usually the mayor, opens the festivities and provides the official welcome to the crowd. The event is also a stage for opposing political parties to show a unified front to their constituents and promote the concept that political alignments are gone during the Fiesta. The show of political unity at fiesta time promotes the idea that there are no distinctions of political affiliations or class during the Fiesta. Everyone is equal for the following several days.

The social aspect is demonstrated in the activities that occur before the festivities. Traditional fiestas include a beauty pageant to select a community representative to be the festival's face. As part of that process, the young ladies, representing different sections of the overall community, and their families, conduct fundraising activities to maximize participation. Like the political show of unity, the beauty pageant aims to promote unity among the community as they participate in the pre-fiesta activities.

My journey to becoming American includes many of the same features that make for a successful fiesta. In my life I have experienced successes, disappointments, and challenges that have made me who I am. I have also been fortunate to have continued support from family and friends who push me to be the best version of myself. In the following section, I share my and La Fiesta del Pueblo's growth.

The evolution of the *Fiesta del Pueblo* (La Fiesta) can be traced to the Latinx population's historical growth during the decades of the 1990s and the 2000s in South Georgia. Mainly driven by employment opportunities within the agricultural industry, Latinx, mostly Mexican immigrants, settled in the Tift County, Georgia area. The growing presence of this immigrant population created benefits and challenges for the local communities, which led to a range of initiatives. Reaction from the local communities varied from efforts to integrate the population and accommodate their needs through social outreach to the passage of anti-immigrant legislation that criminalized their presence and prevented access to educational and social services. Supporters of the immigrant population, including local politicians, farmers, religious leaders, and community organizers, were instrumental in facilitating the *Fiesta del Pueblo* concept. Initially proposed as a socialization piece using community and school resources and headed by a local church and the Girl Scouts of America, the festival gained popularity as a showcase for Latinx culture and a vehicle for assimilation into mainstream culture. In 2020, *La Fiesta del Pueblo* was prepared to celebrate its 25th anniversary in Tifton, Georgia, having grown from a small photography showcase for Latinx farmworker children to becoming the largest Hispanic festival in South Georgia. The festival's

success to be integrated into the mainstream community and my progress to belonging within that same population intersected in the small rural town of Tifton, Georgia.

In 2003, I arrived in Tifton, Georgia as the administrator for federal grant programs at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. The grant programs were targeted to supporting migrant and seasonal farmworkers, who were predominantly Latino. I was hired, in part, to establish a positive perception of the grant programs at the college, which was and still is a predominantly White institution. The position was challenged by perceptions within the college and community that it was catering to "undocumented" individuals. Additionally, the grants had undergone a recent federal review, and the college was faced with some questionable findings that resulted in the previous administrator's release. At the time, I got the impression that I was selected as administrator due to my experience working for the Migrant Education Program and my background developing positive relationships with rural school administrators in developing integration programs for immigrant students. At that point in my journey, I was still in my assimilation phase and had not realized how much of the way I conducted myself was based on a deficit model.

Upon moving to Tifton, I became aware of the *La Fiesta del Pueblo* festival and became a volunteer with the planning committee shortly thereafter. Having lived in several rural communities in Georgia, where the Latinx population was significant but not as visible in comparison, I was inspired by the local community and state support for the event. Even though the festival had experienced some political turbulence, especially in terms of immigration and funding, La Fiesta has always enjoyed great turnout and support from the local and state community ("20th Annual La Fiesta," 2016).

To learn more about the community and state support, I approached a professional colleague and community member who was also an original organizer for the festival. I asked her about the history between the community and La Fiesta. I was surprised to learn that Tifton was not the original site for La Fiesta but that it had taken it on after a nearby community refused to continue its support. In continuing my friendship with this individual, I grew curious to discover why La Fiesta del Pueblo thrived in this community but failed in the original one, less than 10 miles away. Those dynamics encouraged me to explore La Fiesta's history and understand how it had become so successful in being accepted by the dominant community while clearly being loyal to its immigrant Latinx roots. That was the balance I did not realize I needed to find until I began my dissertation adventure.

Drs. Richard Schmertzing and James Martínez were the people who opened my eyes to my deficit views and specifically to my own deficits. Through several, sometimes intense conversations, they slowly made me realize that I had some views that reinforced negative perceptions of communities of color and systems, especially the education system. I came to acknowledge by biases against these segments of society. The specific conversation that made me think very hard about my beliefs revolved around education's role in achieving success in mainstream America. I always believed that education was the great equalizer in the United States. I have promoted the belief that the U.S. is the land of opportunity and that if someone is willing to work hard, sacrifice, and get a good education, they can be successful regardless of where they come from. I shared that message with countless farmworker children and their families to encourage their commitment to bettering themselves in this country. I had always believed that and

held myself up as an example of what that commitment could result in. My foundational belief was shaken in 2013 when Drs. Martínez and Schmertzing shared their wisdom regarding how my long-held views were wrong. The realization that my perception of success might be wrong was similar to La Fiesta being forced to find a new home after the community where it was established refused to host it after the second year. The official reason for the decision was due to safety concerns as the number of people participating in the festivities was too large for the downtown area. However, several organizers shared that city officials were uncomfortable with the large population of Latinxs farmworkers descending on their downtown. The incident led organizers to move away from the Girl Scout origins and more towards Latinx focused activities and look for another home.

From 1980, when my father secured year-round agricultural work in the state until 2016, I lived mostly in rural Georgia. My view of the American Dream was shaped by the local community, the local school system, and my *Mejican*o culture. During those formative years of learning a new language and culture, I developed my views of how I could become a success, at least in rural South Georgia. In the small town we lived in, there were clear delineations of the communities. Although my family always lived out in "the country," usually on a farmer's land, I saw how one part of town always looked better than the other. The nice-looking part of town was clean, had more stores, and felt safer than the other part. The contrast to the nice side was less welcoming, looked more in need of repairs, and did not project a safe environment. On many occasions, when we did not have transportation, the farmer would take my family to town to shop and do

laundry in that part of town, and I did not enjoy those trips. I always wanted to go to the other side and wondered if that side had grocery stores and laundromats.

My experiences at school supported my perception of success and the American Dream. There, through students' deliberate placement in different classrooms and groups based on standardized assessments, I observed that one group had access to more resources than the others. That group was made up almost entirely of White students while the other groups, although in the same grade, consisted of Mexican, Black, and what I considered poor White students. I learned early on that all I needed to do was make good grades to get out of the group I was in. While I committed to that goal, I wondered why my classmates did not put the effort I did to improve their grades like me and thought them unmotivated and lazy. That negative assumption was reinforced many times when I reached the top group by fellow students and some teachers throughout my schooling. I never minded that characterization because I was in the top group and "one of them" already, even though they included my brothers in those comments.

The school activities and events further shaped the normalization of the dominant community culture in my way of being. I remember the routines that were indoctrinated in me daily, such as the act of standing for the Pledge of Allegiance, the act of devotional to start the day, and the act of prayer before lunch that was expected of "good students." Those activities focused on God and Country as cornerstones of student success in a rural school education. There was a distinction implied and I experienced, that the lower academic groups did not take these activities as seriously. In those groups, students did not stand up for the flag, did not take the devotional seriously, or pray before their meal. These patriotic and religious-based activities gave me the impression that I was lucky to

be at that school, in that group, because God approved. In conforming to school expectations, I learned that I could not afford to be one of the "bad" students if I wanted to be accepted by the dominant community.

One of my favorite television shows growing up was the *Dukes of Hazzard*. Other than *Daisy Duke*, my favorite character on the show was the orange 1969 Dodge Charger named *General Lee*. It had a confederate flag painted on its roof. The car also had a signature horn sound that played the start of the song "Dixie" as it jumped creeks, bridges, and other cars while escaping from "the law." My brothers and I loved the show so much that we watched every episode we could and even bought a horn that replicated the famous tune. Without historical reference, I fell in love with the South and what it represented.

At school, we sang Dixie at football games, cheered for the Rebels, celebrated Confederate Memorial Day, and learned about the War of Northern Aggression (also known as the Civil War). I wore confederate flag hats because I liked the colors and happily sang along to country music. Through that lens of ignorance, I became complicit in promoting discrimination towards the Black community, who struggled and continued to fight those racist symbols. I did not even flinch when the farmer or his supervisors made derogatory comments about our fellow Black farmworkers who did not work in observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day come every January. As immigrants with little knowledge of southern history, the holiday and Dixie symbols did not represent anything to me. They were simply labels. It was much later that I realized how hurtful they are.

Challenges Ahead

It is now 2021 and through this dissertation, I am still struggling to unlearn what was ingrained in me all those years ago in a rural South Georgia community. It has been 5 years since I left higher education and 18 years since I left public education. I can only imagine the negative impact I had on countless students and families, whom I advised that in order to be successful in this country, they must forgo part of their culture and language and become American. As shared in this document earlier, my belief was shaped by the lens through which I saw the world in the small community in which I grew up. That lens reflected a Black and White layout that accentuated the benefits of being in the White section and diminished the contributions of the Black section. In that scenario and more importantly, in my mind, there was no space for a Brown section. Yet, through exposure to *La Fiesta del Pueblo* it was clear that the dominant community and immigrant community can unite and establish a shared space that allows for identities to be blended and shared in a beautiful manner where colors are blurred to benefit all parties. It is from that vantage point I want to further my work with migrant farmworkers.

Throughout my professional experience, I thought I already held that belief. Until 2013, I did not consider how that view had been overcome in me and how my outdated thoughts promoted the very system that keeps Latinx and other marginalized communities from fulfilling their potential, achieving success, and keeping their identity by seeing and reflecting on La Fiesta. I saw how hypocritical I had been when I sent my son to college and encouraged my daughter to enroll in a soccer league. Before my son left home, I advised him to remember where he is from, hold up the Gonzalez name, and

never compromise his beliefs as he was going to enter the real world. Furthermore, I encouraged my young daughter to be proud of her four-word name consisting of a first name, middle name, and hyphenated last name, and not let coaches or teammates shorten it. That contradicts my advice to entering first-year students at ABAC and students in school to follow the established path to success by taking advantage of the educational opportunities that have been laid before them and fitting into the dominant culture definition of success.

At 51 years of age, I have now come full circle in my search for success. I am developing closer relationships with my siblings and parents and trying to make amends for shedding the valuable cultural lessons that cannot be replaced with any world-class education. I am making more efforts to be part of family events and activities that in the past I would find reasons to bypass due to schedules or inconvenience and supporting family members who do not choose to go to college. Lastly, I am committed to becoming a better role model and mentor to young Latinx leaders and others by sharing my transformation journey and continually educating myself.

When I stared this dissertation many years ago, I envisioned sharing the story of La Fiesta and including examples of my Americanization journey as part of that story. I saw many instances where experiences overlapped, from our humble beginnings, rejection by communities, to thriving in a different environment that was key in leading to success. In my case, I had school teachers and employers who saw my potential and guided me along the deficit model path to success. In most cases there was a benefit to them in the form of recognition for school staff or compliance for college administrators. La Fiesta, likewise, received support from local communities who received state and

national recognition and an economic benefit from the event. Indeed, a former city council member bluntly expressed the following when asked about why the city supported La Fiesta for more than 20 years, including during the recent economic downtrend:

> When we had the downturn in the economy, the city council was more selective in awarding funds to organizations. There were some long established activities that were not funded. La Fiesta, however, was one of the few that kept their funding because it was good for local economy. (M. Smith, interview, November 6, 2016).

In my position at my current agency, I am no longer under pressure to use my background as a "minority success story," and I do not feel any pressure to act White. I am now comfortable in my professional place and can confidently be *Mejicano*. I am further committed to reaching out to former students and families who I mislead in my attempt to guide them along the same path I traveled to reach my American Dream.

In Part 1, I told my side of the story and what was happening in my assimilation process. La Fiesta was mentioned but not prominently. In the end, I briefly laid out the parallelism I see between my personal journey and La Fiesta's evolution. The upcoming Part 2 provides more detail on La Fiesta and the data I gathered while interviewing festival organizers**.**

Part 2

MY TRADITIONAL DISSERTATION JOURNEY:

A CONVENTIONAL BEGINNING TO AN UNEXPECTED END

As a child migrant farmworker immigrant to rural Georgia, I became Americanized through navigating the language and culture of the White community early in life. Having begun my formal education in *Tejas*, Texas, where support for my native language and culture was promoted, the culture change to rural Georgia was a long struggle. At that time, my siblings and I were the first non-English, non-White or Black students to enroll in a public school in the community, and the county was not prepared to provide support for us. Although we brought significant prior knowledge in academics, it was not valued because we could not speak the dominant language, and we were placed in lower grades "until we learned English." That policy, along with an insistence that we refrain from speaking Spanish, made us question the value of our culture and instilled in us the notion that the American Dream was there for us only if we shed our *Mejicano* culture and identities.

As a higher education professional leading initiatives to support minority student access, predominantly Latinx and Black, I often was given role model status based on my successful transformation from a migrant farmworker immigrant and high school dropout to first generation college graduate. As a department head in higher education, I felt conflicted when I encouraged students to maintain and give value to their cultural and ethnic identities despite the negative perception others may have had of them because I

sacrificed significant parts of my identity to attain my position. At that time, working at a small, historically agricultural college in a rural part of Georgia resurfaced my struggles with acceptance within the institution. I was often involved in committees and led workshops because of my Spanish last name and not necessarily because of my knowledge. Additionally, I felt the need to overachieve by arriving to meetings early, being well prepared, and dressing more professionally than my peers just to be considered equal. I became known to the Latinx students when faculty began to brag on the academic success of Latinx students brought to campus through external grants and scholarships. That experience reminded me of Aguirre's (2005) concept of how we (non-Whites) can tell stories about institutional practices that result in unintended benefits for the majority (White). The success of Latinx students brought much needed positive attention to the institution as administrators leveraged it to access additional external funds. This background was significant in my early plans for dissertation completion.

Early Plans

As a *Mejicano* immigrant, former migrant farmworker, non-native English speaker, and higher education professional, I promoted educational opportunities for migrant and underserved populations for more than 20 years. Upon moving to Tifton in 2003, I became aware of the La Fiesta del Pueblo festival and became a volunteer with the planning committee. Having lived in several communities where the Latinx population was significant but not as visible as in Tifton, it was uplifting to see the local community and state support for the event. Amidst some political turbulence, anti-immigrant sentiment, and an economic downturn, La Fiesta has always enjoyed great turnout and support from the local and state community ("20th Annual La Fiesta," 2016).

My continued curiosity and interest in La Fiesta led me to explore the relationships and other factors among the immigrant and native communities that promoted its early success and eventual incorporation into the community. Consequently, I proposed dissertation research that would lead me to analyze historical documents, complete interviews with original organizers of La Fiesta, and conduct participant observations during the festival to identify factors that contributed to its growth. I believed that by finding the factors that led to success it will contribute to other rural communities' efforts to integrate immigrant communities in ways that mutually benefit people from both the immigrant culture and dominant culture. For that purpose, it seemed that a case study (Yin, 2003) of this nature could be quite significant**.**

Significance of Study

My plan was three-fold: to address the issue of assimilation to acculturation from the immigrant community efforts to assimilate while retaining their cultural heritage in rural Georgia to examine the status quo of rural communities experiencing significant and sudden immigrant growth, and to relate my connections to La Fiesta. I was approved to pursue that work, which I believed could contribute to several groups. Those planning similar events in other communities could gain inside information from the personal interviews with community representatives and festival founders as they spoke of the learning process they experienced as a result of their efforts. As one of the southern states with a large and growing Latinx population, Georgia's social and educational stakeholders could benefit from findings of attempts at assimilation of non-dominant populations in consideration of native cultural and language heritage to facilitate integration. Academics, historians, politicians, immigrants, and local members of the

community from the dominant culture could potentially gain knowledge, improve practice, and see the history of the festival from a new perspective.

Thus, Part 2 is the result of a qualitative case study of La Fiesta del Pueblo stakeholders' efforts in and around the Tifton, Georgia community. The study was conducted to solicit lived experiences with establishing this Latinx cultural event in a rural, largely conservative environment from the stakeholders. Originally, the following research questions drove the questions I asked during the time I had with participants and focused my review of related historical documents.

Research Questions

RQ1: What dynamics drove the coalition building process for La Fiesta del Pueblo to become an accepted community and state sponsored cultural event?

RQ2: What learning process occurred among the different communities that influenced perceptions and acceptance of each other's culture?

RQ3: How can educational leaders utilize findings to develop inclusive, educational programing to encourage cross-cultural understandings and encourage Latinx student success?

Conceptual Framework

In developing the conceptual framework for the research, I used Maxwell's (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan's (2012) definitions of a conceptual framework. Maxwell (2013) defined conceptual framework as "a primarily a conception or a model of what is out there that you plan to study, and what is going on with these things and why—a tentative theory of the phenomenon that you are investigating" (p. 33). Ravitch and Riggan (2012) stated that the conceptual framework serves as the foundation of the

study, communicating the reason and basis for the research while emphasizing the methodological rigor.

By combining the two guidelines (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012), I established several components of my conceptual framework. In the following order I present the review of associated literature, explain pertinent theories, and set forth my experiential knowledge with the topic by telling about my involvement with and attendance at La Fiesta del Pueblo.

Review of the Literature

The previously presented critical autoethnography built upon literature related to the personal experiences of migrant farmworker advocates, migrant farmworkers, and community representatives, and their efforts to establish a cultural celebration in a rural South Georgia community. La Fiesta's evolution from a small ethnic festival to a state-supported community event was examined through the assimilation to acculturation lens. Associated literature was sorted by categories related to assimilation, population, legislation, and identity.

Assimilation. Brubaker (2001) defined assimilation as a process of becoming similar through a direction of change that includes a degree of choice for newcomers concerned with the idea of a more procedural notion of searching for commonalities (Vasta, 2007). I aimed to use Brubaker's model to explore the perceptions held by the dominant community that were present during La Fiesta del Pueblo's conceptualization that assisted in the assimilation and acculturation of a Latinx immigrant population into the dominant White culture in a South Georgia community. I also incorporated Alba and Nee's (2005) modern assimilation theory that incorporated technology and institutional

acceptance, which influences how fast immigrants assimilate. They proposed that not all assimilation is linear as with previous generations but is defined by the immigrant community and local society. I also relied on Vasta's (2007) process of becoming similar through a direction of change that includes a degree of choice for newcomers concerned with the idea of a more procedural notion of searching for commonalities. These updated definitions provide for the mutual benefit of the native and immigrant communities, particularly in rural areas where the immigrant influx has been quick and substantial.

Small, rural communities are usually the least prepared to deal with the challenges brought on by a sudden immigrant influx (Vasquez, Seales, & Marquardt, 2008; Zuñiga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). To facilitate integration, Nelson and Hiemstra (2009) proposed assimilation through a framework of place and belonging that would encourage relationships and mutual respect among communities. In addition, Warren (2003), whose work explored the response to receiving communities in rural Arkansas to an influx of Hispanic immigrants, encouraged leveraging social capital to promote collaboration between Latinx immigrants and the native-born population. Similarly, Bowman (2011), whose research explored the obstacles and opportunities for Hispanics in rural Arkansas in their efforts to be integrated while maintaining their cultural identity and traditions, agrees. His findings encouraged the development of positive relationships between native and immigrant communities to overcome cultural and linguistic differences and facilitate assimilation. Eventually, the continued growth of the immigrant population may lead to what Haverluk (2004) described as Hispanization, or reverse assimilation, in which the local community begins to reflect the culture and values of the immigrant population.

Population. Latinxs are currently the largest immigrant group and the slowest to assimilate due to the proximity to their home country and the opportunities to continue to speak Spanish within their communities in this country (Castañeda, 2007). Partly due to the slow progress of assimilation among Latinxs, Artze (2000) identified three phases of the integration process for Latinxs. These phases include the recent arrivals, those who become bicultural, and those born in this country or brought at a young age and adopt the attitudes and beliefs of the native society. The phases were based on a *Washington Post* study of 2,400 U.S Hispanics and more than 2,000 non-Hispanic and Black Americans. The study also indicted that 9 out of 10 Hispanics believe it is important to change in order to blend into American society, and 9 out of 10 Latinxs feel it is important to maintain their cultural identity. It is paradoxical they were strongly supportive of these two seemingly contradictory ideas.

Between 2000 and 2010, the Latinx population increase accounted for 56% of the nation's population increase (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011). Ramos (2016) noted the influx of immigrants into the United States to impacted rural and urban communities, as they became home to an increasing number of immigrants settling or re-settling within the country, which was also noted by Martínez (2008). Zuñiga and Hernandez-Leon (2005) illustrated a shift of the Latinx population away from traditional (gateway) areas of the country. These gateway states were mostly concentrated in the Southwest and included Texas, California, Arizona, and New Mexico. However, more recently, a shift in destinations for Latinxs was documented in U.S. Census data (2011) that indicated the South led the nation in Latinx population increase in 2000 and 2010 as evident in Table 1.

Table 1

Top States with Hispanic/Latinx Population Increase

1990-2000 Census (percent increase)	2000-2010 Census (percent increase)
North Carolina (394%)	South Carolina (148%)
Arkansas (337%)	Alabama (145%)
Georgia (300%)	Tennessee (134%)
Tennessee (278%)	Kentucky (122%)
Nevada (217%)	Arkansas (114%)
South Carolina (211%)	Mississippi (106%)
Alabama (208%)	Georgia (96%)

Historically, U.S. Census data have indicated that Latinxs gravitated toward large urban hubs and central city settings primarily in border-states and their neighbors, such as Texas, New Mexico, California, Oregon, and Washington. Martínez (2008) showed a movement away from these large urban areas to smaller, suburban settings. These rural locations have become popular among immigrants because they are perceived as providing more affordable housing, more stable jobs, good schools, and looser enforcement of illegal immigration laws (Griffith, 2005; Olsson, 2013; Stull, Broadway, & Griffith, 1995).

The South experienced a tremendous and unprecedented growth in Latinx population over the last two decades due to the opportunities in employment and education, particularly in rural areas, that southern states provide (Mohl, 2005). The rise of the Latinx immigrant population provided a labor force that supports agricultural and other manual labor industries that further support local economies, which allowed for outreach opportunities to the immigrant community by established institutions.

The evolution of the Fiesta del Pueblo can be traced to the historic growth of the Latinx population during the decades of 1990 and 2000 into South Georgia (Zuñiga &

Hernandez-Leon, 2005). Mainly driven by the employment opportunities within the agricultural industry, Latinx, mostly Mexican, immigrants, settled in the Tift County area. The growing presence of this immigrant population created benefits and challenges for the local communities, which led to a range of initiatives. Reaction from the local communities varied from efforts to integrate the community and accommodate their needs through social outreach in some communities to the passage of anti-immigrant legislation at the state level.

Supporters of the immigrant population, which included local politicians, farmers, religious leaders, and community organizers, were instrumental in facilitating the Fiesta del Pueblo concept. Initially proposed as a socialization piece utilizing community and school resources, and headed by a community activist and supported by the Girl Scouts of America, the festival gained popularity as a showcase for Latinx culture. Eventually, the event earned state recognition by the Georgia Council for the Arts and praise by then-Governor Sonny Perdue who said, "La Fiesta showed how arts can change lives and be used as a tool to strengthen Georgia communities" ("20th Annual La Fiesta," 2016).

Legislation. This growing presence has also led some states to adopt legislation designed to be hostile to immigrants. These efforts include anti-immigrant initiatives in Alabama (House Bill 56), South Carolina (Senate Bill 20), North Carolina (House Bill 786), and Georgia (House Bill 87). These aimed to reduce access to social and educational services, restrict employment opportunities, criminalize assistance to immigrants by anyone, including individuals and organizations (e.g., churches and other charities), and encourage profiling of immigrants. Georgia's most recent contribution to these efforts is House Bill (HB) 87, enacted in May 2011 and modeled on Arizona's

Senate Bill (SB) 1070, which is considered the nation's harshest anti-immigrant law. Among other provisions, the legislation provides for criminal penalties for anyone who employs or transports undocumented workers and individuals and provides local authorities the right to question individuals whom they suspect may be in the state illegally. This controversial measure was adopted despite objection and opposition from Georgia's farming community, which claimed that it would have a negative impact on the state's number one industry. Counter to the law's intentions, some communities have embraced the Latinx immigrants and adopted the ethnic, cultural festivals that define own, as evidenced by the local and state support provided to La Fiesta del Pueblo in South Georgia.

Two primary reasons for the shifted migration patterns of immigrants to the South occurred during the 1980s (Wyloge, 1986). These were the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and the economic recession in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. IRCA aimed at tightening security at the Mexican border while granting amnesty to undocumented residents who entered the country before 1982. The bill provided farmworkers who could prove employment in agriculture for 60 or more days. This provision allowed for more than 1.3 million adjustments of status, far exceeding the 250,000 estimated by the Reagan administration (Wyloge, 1986). Meanwhile, the economic boom in the southeastern part of the country, led by Georgia's labor-hungry poultry, carpet, agriculture, and construction industries, fueled the Latinx family migration to the state.

Supporters of the immigrant population, including local politicians, farmers, religious leaders, and community organizers, were instrumental in facilitating La Fiesta

del Pueblo's concept. Initially proposed as a socialization piece utilizing community and school resources, and headed by a community activist and supported by the Girl Scouts of America, the festival gained popularity as a showcase for Latinx culture. Eventually, the event earned state recognition by the Georgia Council for the Arts and praise by then-Governor Sonny Perdue, who said, "La Fiesta showed how arts can change lives and be used as a tool to strengthen Georgia communities" ("20th Annual La Fiesta," 2016).

Identity. Unlike early European immigrants who embraced assimilation, current Latinx immigrants tend to maintain their cultural identity longer due to the close proximity of their home countries and ease of communication and travel that reinforces their cultural heritage (Alba & Nee, 2005; Castañeda, 2007). Alba and Nee (2005) reinforced the concept through their research on how immigrants maintain their connections to their home country through technology. Castañeda (2007) focused his research on the Mexican immigrants' connection to their home country by providing financial support and frequent travel to their home across the border. As the Latinx population continues to rise in the South in general, and Georgia, specifically, many rural receiving communities will struggle with fully integrating Latinx into the community and adequately addressing the barriers that prevent access to resources (Lichter, 2012; Sherrill et al., 2005). In assessing the impact of immigrants in rural communities, Jensen (2006) found that immigrant settlers may have a big impact on small, rural communities—sometimes straining resources but also offering promise for reinvigorating dying communities. His research suggested that the receptivity of communities can have a significant impact on immigrant assimilation and community prosperity.

As illustrated in Table 1, significant growth occurred in southern states,

specifically rural areas with little or no resources to accommodate the population (Zuñiga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005). While the traditional view of assimilation has been the Americanization of immigrants (Salins, 1997), recent shifts in the model have allowed for a more inclusive interpretation of the process that considers assimilation as a multidimensional process specific to populations (Brubaker, 2001). Using Brubaker's definition of assimilation, which designates a process of becoming similar through a direction of change that includes a degree of choice for newcomers concerned with the idea of a more procedural notion of searching for commonalities (Vasta, 2007).

My research explored the dynamics present during La Fiesta del Pueblo's conceptualization that may have promoted assimilation and cultural acceptance of a Latinx immigrant population into the dominant culture in a South Georgia community. It does so by incorporating critical race theory (CRT), the role of community cultural wealth (CCW), and interest convergence theory (ICT) as the base for a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The framework of this study expands on previous critical autoethnography work that uses inquiry to reposition and resituate unheard voices in ways that reveal lived experiences in sociocultural contexts (Hughes, 2008; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). It supports the intersectionality of multilayered identities derived from genetic custom and socially constructed means (Suriel, et al., 2017). It further considers the effects of political and economic status from the U.S. "whitestream" school system (Grande, 2004; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013), which originated from the practices, principles, morals, and values of White supremacy (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990, 2003; Urrieta, 2003,

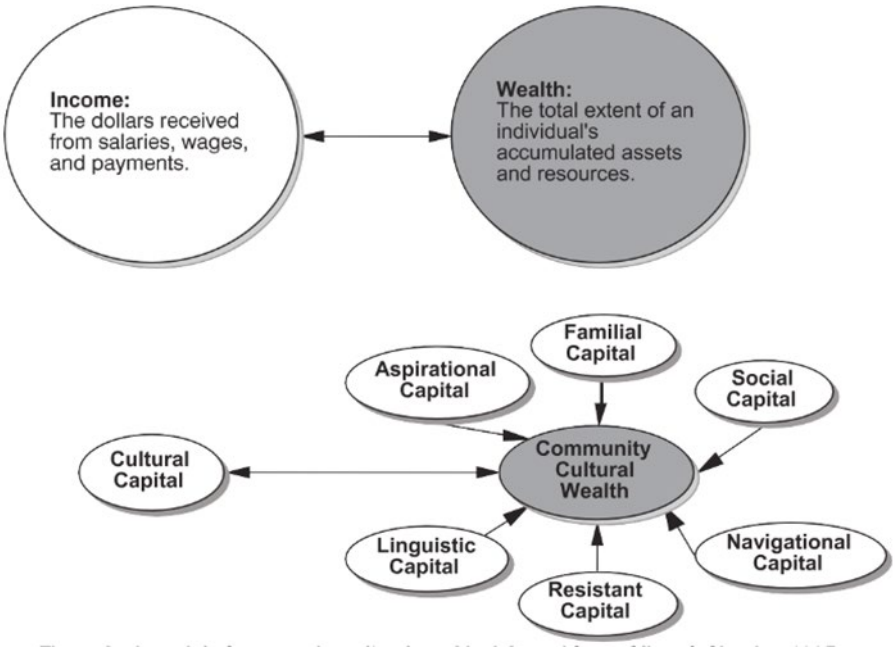
2009). These principles helped me develop a critical, activist, and inter-disciplinary discourse on law and policy towards Latinxs (Padilla, 2001), and fostered my knowledge to agents for social and legal transformation. Aware of the many centuries of conditioning, I acknowledge and dismantle the U.S. dominant culture's history of White Anglo-American and male culture in a hetero-patriarchal authoritarian, top-down system (Urrieta, 2009; Zamudio & Rios, 2006). La Fiesta's community relationships follow similar social and cultural patterns of oppression in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990, 2003; Padilla, 2001).

Through my *testimonio* in Part 1, I express my lived experiences as an acculturated *Mejicano* taking stock of the true cost of assimilation. Here I apply some of the same principles from critical race theory (CRT) and Latinx critical theory (LatCrit) to serve as the foundation to my examination of the development and continuous existence of La Fiesta and the impact of the associated communities. LatCrit is a critical "outsider jurisprudence" that includes critical legal studies, feminist legal theory, critical race theory, critical race feminism, Asian American legal scholarship, and queer theory (Bell, 1992; Zamudio, et al., 2011) to promote justice, consciousness, and engagement (Alexander, 2012; Anyon, 1980). Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth and Bell's (1980) interest convergence tenants were critical parts of the theoretical framework as well.

Community Cultural Wealth. Community cultural wealth (CCW) refers to the vast array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts that communities of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) people (i.e., the term, "minorities") use to survive and resist oppression (Yosso, 2005). CCW challenges the assumption that the knowledge of the

upper and middle classes is considered capital valuable to a hierarchical society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) by arguing that all forms of capital can empower individuals. The six forms of capital Yosso (2005) identified as capturing strengths, talents, and experiences of communities of color include: aspirational (the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers); navigational (skills in maneuvering through social institutions); social (networks of people and community resources); linguistic (the intellectual and social skills attained through communication in multiple languages and/or language styles); familial (those cultural pieces of knowledge nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition); and resistant (those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality). These forms are not mutually exclusive but are often built upon each other to enhance the value of individuals and communities, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Model of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Adapted from: Oliver & Shapiro, 1995.

I used Yosso's (2005) model to reflect on the great benefits I had as a member of the Latinx migrant community that I overlooked because of the attraction to the "American Dream." I also used critical race theory to validate beliefs that impacted my research.

Critical Race Theory. Critical race theory (CRT), the role of community cultural wealth (CCW), and interest convergence theory (ICT) formed the base of the theoretical framework. Critical race theory is the examination of White supremacy and its conditioning from hundreds of years (Bell, 1980). CRT is rooted on legal scholarship and was initially used as a method to analyze and study law's neutrality and objectivity (Abrams & Mojo, 2009). The theory further aims to analyze, deconstruct, and transform for the better the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Although CRT practitioners have developed multiple approaches, their

scholarship has commonalities to these five major components, or tenets: (1) racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) interest convergence; (3) race is a social construct; (4) storytelling and counter-storytelling; and (5) that whites have actually benefitted from civil rights legislation.

The first tenet posits that racism is rooted in the social fabric of American social systems, spreading throughout all structures and practices. The second tenet argues that the majority population, Whites, will accommodate the needs of minorities if and when their interests converge (Bell, 1980). The third tenet holds that race is a contrived system of categorizing people according to observable physical attributes that have no correspondence to genetic or biological reality. The fourth tenet advocates for a rewriting of history to include the lived reality of oppressed groups from their perspectives and in their own words to challenge liberalist claims of neutrality, color blindness, and universal truths (Delgado, 1989). The fifth tenet makes the argument that Whites have benefitted from school desegregation and affirmative action legislation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For this dissertation, I incorporated interest convergence as the main tenet to tell the shared stories of La Fiesta and myself, Javier Gonzalez Gonzales.

Interest Convergence. Interest convergence theory (ICT) states that the interest of Blacks will be accommodated only when they converge with the interest of Whites (Bell, 1980). Criticizing the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Bell (1980) argued that the resulting decision was made not as a result of the plight of Blacks, but to protect the country's global interests during the Cold War. Other legal scholars have also used Bell's theory to explain legal decisions that seem to favor minorities but also benefit the larger community. One example is Maria Pabon Lopez's (2005) analysis of *Plyler v. Doe*

that allowed the children of undocumented parents access to public education. In it Lopez argued that because the case was ruled before the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which provided opportunity for legal status for some undocumented immigrants, the community satisfied a need of the undocumented population maintaining a workforce willing to accept employment at lower wages (Wyloge, 1986).

In this part of my research, the aforementioned theories help explain assumptions about the significance of the historical evolution of La Fiesta del Pueblo's movement from a Latina Girl Scout troop activity to a state-sponsored cultural event, and also the factors that contributed to its influence. The framework also provided critical guidance on the learning process experienced by the immigrant and native communities regarding the perceptions held about each other's cultures that promoted both groups' shifts from assimilation to acculturation. In addition, the impact of community/political support, local policies, and commercial practices were examined in the context of how they influenced the development and acceptance of the festival. Along the way, my role as researcher and storyteller were influenced by my prior experiences.

Experiential Knowledge. From a CRT perspective and LatCrit framework, I, too, insist on making experiential knowledge of Latinxs central, authentic, applicable, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about our experiences of racial inequality and commitment to social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For me, this knowledge is gained from my critical reflection on the lived experience of racism and knowledge of the particulars related to the racism gained by my perceptions of these experiences (Yosso, 2005). As a result of being on the steering committee 3 years, I saw the level of commitment and pride from volunteers, the diversity of vendor participants,

and the number of people who participated in the festivities. Learning about the history of La Fiesta many years after my involvement as part of the annual organizing committee for five years, increased my awareness of the change in the group dynamics that focused the event more on Latinx culture. Based on interviews with some of the original organizers, La Fiesta was organized by a group of volunteers from the local community representing civic organizations, like the Girls Scouts and the Optimist Club. As such, the committee included White members who provided input and caution regarding event activities.

The first time I attended La Fiesta was in 2003. My family and I were new to Tifton, Georgia, and we were delighted that there was an event celebrating Hispanic Heritage in the community. I remember driving to Fulwood park, the venue for the event, on that Saturday morning and was surprised by the amount of traffic that lined the small city streets leading to the park. My family and I could hear the music and crowd noise from several blocks away. It was surprising because that was not the norm in the community from my experience. Upon walking through the arches at Fulwood Park, I experienced Latinx culture overload. Memories of my trips to the fiestas in Mexico came rushing back. The sight of a sea of people walking around the 28-acre park enjoying the rhythmic and loud music, the smell of popping grease, and shouts from vendors reminded me of home. La Fiesta hosted approximately 125 vendors, the majority of which were food vendors cooking and selling all types of gastronomical items from Latin America. During La Fiesta, participants enjoyed *tamales* from Mexico, *pupusas* from El Salvador, and *empanadas* from Honduras within steps from each other.

One of the most memorable instances was when I heard the Mariachi band play

on one of the two large stages set up around the park. Mariachi music, especially when heard live, elicits feelings in us *Mejicanos* that surprises even ourselves. The first trumpet notes provoke an almost involuntary *grito*, a cathartic yell that comes from the depths of the soul. The *grito* expresses joy and sorrow in a unique blend that only those of us that have experienced those feeling can truly understand. While I have Mariachi music on CDs and stream it on demand, there is nothing like hearing it live and outdoors in the community while sharing the day with loved ones.

At the event, I was introduced to members of the organizing committee and was quickly invited to be part of the group. During my involvement with the event, the organizing committee was made up of a core of 8-10 Latinx members. Although the committee's makeup allowed the group to focus more on Latinx culture more as the program developed, the small size required our almost constant year-round involvement. As soon as La Fiesta was over in September, planning for next year's event began. Activities, such as fundraising, promotion of the event, negotiation with performers, and coordination with city and county officials were constant throughout the year. In my role on the outreach committee, I gave promotional interviews with local media promoting La Fiesta throughout the area. Due to my employment at ABAC, I also assisted in coordinating volunteers from the college to help set up and take down booths and clean up after the event. My access to ABAC facilities also allowed me to coordinate the Annual Miss Fiesta del Pueblo pageant, held in the college's auditorium a week before the La Fiesta event.

Throughout my involvement with La Fiesta, I met numerous community leaders, like the mayor, city council members, and the chief of police. Each were instrumental in

ensuring a safe and successful event, and all actively participated in La Fiesta activities. The event program called for the mayor to give a welcome speech at the start of the event followed by a prayer from local religious leaders, and a signal to start the festivities from committee leaders. The event took place from 10:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Throughout the day, event organizers were charged with walking the grounds to help with vendor or performer issues along with surveying the crowd and parking lots to gauge attendance and out-of-area or -state visitors. The committee was always proud when the final numbers were tallied and exceeded the previous year's attendance. My greatest satisfaction was reading the positive reviews from the local media with regards to La Fiesta and its financial impact to the local economy.

Summary of Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework explained my early intentions with the dissertation and the literature, theory, and experiences that supported it. What follows is a discussion of the methods used to gather and analyze data related to factors that made La Fiesta successful. Before I took a turn with the dissertation and changed the main purpose from this one of exploration and presentation of La Fiesta to the development of my critical co-constructed autoethnography as presented in Part 1, I was focused on a qualitative case study to answer the "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2003) of the festival's conception and long-term sustainability. The following section will detail the related people and places involved, data collection procedures, data analysis strategies, and results of the analysis.

Methods

This section contains the methodological components I started with when the

focus of the dissertation was an exploratory, basic qualitative case study of La Fiesta del Pueblo. As mentioned in the *Author's Note*, the traditional dissertation process shifted to the non-traditional dissertation during the research. Therefore, this section is informative and yet will not be as thorough as it would have been had I stayed focused on the case study. The development, impact, and history of La Fiesta was explained to me in interviews by eight individuals who were influential in its continued success. Included in this section of Part 2 is an explanation of the qualitative paradigm and the rationale for its selection. A description of the site, participant selection, and the researcher's role are discussed in *People and Places*. The data collection, data analysis, and results each have a section. The Valdosta State University (VSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured (Appendix A) prior to going into the field to recruit participants and gather data. All participants were informed of the significance of the research and signed consent letters before participation. All policies of the VSU IRB were followed, and participants were free to leave the study at any time.

The qualitative case study was chosen because the associated methods were designed to "explain, explore, or describe a phenomenon of interest" (Ellram, 1996, p. 94) and would provide insight into La Fiesta. Hughes and Willink (2015) talked about the importance of the researcher's positioning and repositioning within the native and immigrant communities, which I did for La Fiesta within the dominant culture and Latinx populations. I also considered these communities' relationship to each other when doing my fieldwork and coding my interviews. Not limited to historical documents and interviews, I learned from critical dialogues and interpretations of personal and community histories. I was able to theorize based on my personal *intersectionality*

(Crenshaw, 1991) to engage in the migrant and White communities' everyday practices and life routines. In the next section, I explain the people and places involved in this work. They contributed to both the case study component of the research and as co-constructors of my autoethnography.

People and Places

Carmen Ramirez became the lead organizer for the event that eventually grew to become La Fiesta del Pueblo almost by happenstance. A native of Puerto Rico, Carmen moved to Tifton in the early 1970's from Illinois. She notes that at that time, there were very few Hispanics in the area. As a chemist, working for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), she was encouraged by her employer to get involved with the local community as a way to promote community engagement. She was then refereed to the local Optimist Club, which aims to improve the lives of children (Sitter, 2006), where she thrived, eventually becoming President for the region. At the time, her involvement with the Latinx community was limited due to her social circle not extending to that population.

Through her involvement with the Optimist Club and the increase in Latinx population the area, especially in the elementary schools during the early 1980's, she started to consider ways to get the children and their parents involved in the community. her efforts eventually led to a partnership with the Girls Scouts of America and successful establishment of two Latinx troupes. Carmen admitted that the relationships she developed with the girls and their families fueled her passion for advocacy on their behalf. Her efforts to recognize the growing Latinx presence in the community led her to establish friendships and relationships with Latinx community members that she would

not otherwise would have developed. Carmen's leveraged all her resources and networks to make the Girl Scout troupes successful because she felt a sense of responsibility to the girls and their parents. Her tirelessly advocacy to establish a way for the Latinx population to be recognized within the local community eventually led to the establishment of La Fiesta del Pueblo and became her legacy.

To fully observe the interactions between the White and immigrant communities, I attended La Fiesta del Pueblo in the fall of 2014 and 2015 in Tifton, Georgia's Fulwood Park, a 28-acre community park that hosts La Fiesta each fall. The seat of Tift County, Tifton is a majority White community. Demographically, the city is 52% White, 36% Black, 11% Hispanic/Latinx, and 1% other races (U.S. Census, 2019). Economically, Tift County's economic ranking with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs is at a Tier 1, the lowest of four job tax credit tiers ("20th Annual La Fiesta," 2016). Support for La Fiesta increases the tourism profile in the Georgia Department of Economic Development, identifying and creating tourism opportunities to positively impact Georgia's visitor industry ("20th Annual La Fiesta," 2016). To obtain pertinent information for my La Fiesta description, I chose participants who had insider knowledge about the event.

The participants were community leaders, city council representatives, Latinx organizers, and migrant farmworker parents involved in the development of La Fiesta, who were willing to share their *lived experiences* (Seidman, 2006). My background as an assimilated to acculturated immigrant helped me to interpret the context of those experiences and allowed participants to tell their stories more comfortably in their native language by conducting the interviews in Spanish.

I used purposeful sampling (see Table 2) to identify and select participants for interviews to gather *rich* (Patton, 2002), descriptive information from stakeholders involved in La Fiesta's origins. According to Bernard (2002), purposeful sampling is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the knowledge and experiences the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants. I relied on the guidance from La Fiesta's organizing committee chair, who had been part of the organizing group from its inception, to identify members from the migrant farmworker community, community advocates, and government representatives for interviews. A total of 10 individuals were identified, and eight were successfully contacted and interviewed. The participants included representatives from the Latinx immigrant population and the White dominant population who played key roles in the establishment of La Fiesta in their community. Observations of the site and interviews with chosen participants were part of the early steps within the data collection.

Data Collection

Historical documents were secured from La Fiesta organizers and were reviewed in the researcher's home in Tifton, Georgia. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, places of employment, and Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College library. I followed the three-phase interview protocol proposed by Seidman (2006) in which the first interview established the context of the participant's experience, the second focused on reconstructing their experience within the context in which it occurred, and the final interview asked the individuals to reflect on the meaning of their experience. As noted in Table 2, each participant completed the series of interviews.

Table 2

The Combined Interviews

Pseudonym	Relationship to La Fiesta	Interview 1 Date/Length	Interview 2 Date/Length	Interview 3[a] Date/Length
Lupe Mendez	Original member of the Girl Scout troop that founded La Fiesta	11/6/2016 63 minutes	01/08/2017 40 minutes	01/15/2017 15 minutes
Miguel Perez	Patriarch of one of the original migrant families in the community and original member of La Fiesta organizing committee	04/03/17 58 minutes	05/20/2017 35 minutes	06/03/2017 15 minutes
Alfredo Garcia	Latino pastor and original member of the La Fiesta organizing committee	11/06/2017 62 minutes	02/17/2017 40 minutes	02/24/ 2017 15 minutes
Jane Jones	Former city council member that brought La Fiesta to the community	04/08/2017 40 minutes	01/20/2017 20 minutes	01/30/2017 15 minutes
Mike Smith	Former city council member that brought La Fiesta to the community	11/08/2016 63 minutes	01/08/2017 30 minutes	01/15/2017 15 minutes
Maria Lopez	Latina community advocate in the public school and original member of La Fiesta organizing committee	11/06/2017 40 minutes	01/08/2017 30 minutes	01/15/2017 15 minutes
Gloria Green	Community leader and supporter of initial event that became La Fiesta	03/02/2017 60 minutes	03/12/2107 30 minutes	03/23/2017 15 minutes
Carmen Ramirez	Latina community advocate and leader of the original La Fiesta organizing committee	11/12/2016 75 minutes	01/06/2017 40 minutes	01/12/2017 15 minutes

Note: The third interview was shortened because by that time I was aware of my direction beginning to turn and knowing the case study would not be completed as planned. The interview shifted from how their experiences were meaningful for La Fiesta development and growth they became more about me making sense of what they told me

in relation to my co-constructed critical autoethnography.

All interviews were digitally recorded. I memoed field notes during each interview session showing expressions made, what was happening, and our surroundings. The length of these interviews varied with each participant due to their schedules and information shared.

A guided protocol of researcher-developed questions was utilized to ensure that participants could respond in their own words to similar prompts (Appendix B). The informal interview, as opposed to the guided protocol, typically required more time to collect systematic data, as participants may have answered different questions. Patton (2002) made the point that an interview guide provides some similar structure for each participant but also provides the freedom to "explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate . . ." (p. 343).

Finally, historical documents narrating the origin, challenges, and successes of La Fiesta were reviewed and compared with information gleaned from interviews. Historical documents included first person accounts, newspaper articles, La Fiesta promotional materials, and recognitions awarded to La Fiesta. These documents were provided to me for the duration of the research and safeguarded in my home with access to La Fiesta representatives only. Data analysis of these documents, as well as interview transcripts, was an ongoing process of reading, thinking, and sorting prior to adding qualitative data analysis software to the steps of sense making.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of organizing and examining the data to obtain meaning and was carried out continually as data were collected. Creswell (2012) stated:

> Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data **. . .** for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes and finally representing the data in figures, tables or a discussion. (p. 148)

My analysis involved reading and rereading to look for patterns in the more than 130 pages of text I transcribed. I transcribed the interviews by creating Word documents and then transferred the files to MAXQDA, a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative, text-based data analysis.

After reviewing the documents, I used Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) general guide to coding to code passages according to topics or comments I found interesting, insightful, strange, or informative. Specific coding strategies beyond this *(e.g. invine values, etc.)* were not employed as my focus shifted after this initial first cycle coding. Concurrent analysis was conducted using Saldaña's (2013) method of analytic memo writing as a constant guide to examine patterns and themes that I noticed while coding to also help identify bias. After coding transcripts in MAXQDA, rather than turn to my committee for guidance, which I do not recommend, I sought assistance from a colleague to run frequency tables on the raw and coded data to find the common themes of the interviews. The computerized procedure yielded four main categories of coded variables. These categories were labeled by me as: positive experiences, negative experiences, mixed experiences, and support from the community. My colleague and I then ran a Cochran-Armitage test to determine trend association.

Data and Model

Through the analysis process, I hoped to identify the underlying factors that

promoted La Fiesta's success and evolution from a small, community event to a state-sponsored cultural festival. Beginning with coded interview transcripts, I used a frequency table (Table 3) was used to count the number of key words or codes I assigned that were used regularly among the participants. The count was used by me to identify trends and ultimately themes. From the analysis and the subsequent statistical procedures, I concluded that La Fiesta stakeholders had positive thoughts related to acceptance of the event within the dominant White community. The gathered data was then used to address the three research questions and it was determined that both mixed emotions toward certain experiences and experiences that were decided as negative, support from the community, and interactions with Latinxs were all mentioned as influential and important in the growth of La Fiesta but were talked about independently of stories related to positive experiences. However, tales of assistance from the community or various organizations were often spoke of in terms of generating positive experiences. After running a Cochran-Armitage test for trends and comparing positive experiences with assistance from community or organizations, the p-value was less than 0.05 and found to be 0.002. This finding rejects that assistance from the community or organizations are independent of positive experiences and is in fact dependent upon positive experiences (Table 2).

Results

The purpose of this research was to find the underlying factors that allowed La Fiesta del Pueblo in Tifton, Georgia to succeed from its inception to its current form. The attitudes towards La Fiesta were composed from eight stakeholder interviews. The common three categories found within the eight interviews were the positive, mixed, and

negative experiences within the community. The consequential theme was how these experiences played part in their positive attitudes towards La Fiesta and a continued commitment. A positive experience theme was the community organizations aiding La Fiesta, either with volunteers, material, or financial aid, thus creating a positive experience for the stakeholders. I then inferred that because of the community organizational aid provided, the positive experiences continued to push for La Fiesta to be held each year even though negative and mixed experiences still occurred (see Table 3). Even though the participants identified associated negative experiences, the benefits far outweighed the negatives. Everyone had positive and negative experiences but learned from them and continued to work and believe in its value and importance. The initial interviews of the eight stakeholders provided the detailed background information that allowed me to see two underlying factors in the fiesta's success, experiences and support.

From within the initial list of themes, the quality of the experiences, i.e., positive, mixed, and negative, showed frequently with a large quantity of codes compared to all other themes. Organizational aid was also regularly mentioned by the interviewees which stated the importance of said aid.

Table 3

MAXQDA Codes

Category	Applicable Codes	Number of Times Used	Times Used by Participant
Positive Experience	Economic benefit Positive recognition Food Music Social services	55	Jane- 11 Mike- 9 Carmen- 9 Alfredo- 5 Lupe- 8 Miguel- 6

			Maria- 7
Negative Experience	Stereotypes Omega experience Law enforcement Resistance	24	Carmen- 5 Miguel- 5 Alfredo- 3 Maria- 4 Mike- 3 Antonio- 3
Mixed Experience	Crowds Diversity Traffic Family fun Schedule	19	Miguel- 3 Mike- 4 Jane- 4 Gloria- 3 Carmen- 3 Lupe- 2
Support from the community	Involvement of city leaders Religious leaders Diversity community Donations	41	Lupe -5 Miguel- 3 Jane- 6 Gloria- 3 Carmen- 8 Alfredo- 4 Maria- 6 Mike- 6
Support from community organization	Arts Council Social agencies School system	11	Lupe- 3 Jane - 4 Mike- 2 Carmen- 2
Key Individuals	Girl Scouts City Leaders Mexican Consulate College support	47	Lupe- 5 Miguel- 3 Jane- 6 Gloria- 3 Carmen- 8 Alfredo- 4 Maria- 6 Mike- 6
Involving Hispanics	Participants Performances Community leaders	22	Lupe- 2 Miguel- 4 Jane- 3 Gloria- 2 Carmen- 2 Alfredo- 2 Maria- 3

Table 3 shows the coded themes and represented number of codes. Note that positive experiences also had the most frequency from the combined interviews. The second highest frequency was key individuals, highlighting the importance of key individuals providing support for La Fiesta either through leadership or networking skills. The community organizations' aid was the third highest frequency theme, which the Cochran-Armitage test found significant for both positive experiences and organizational aid.

The analysis portion was performed on Excel Stats using Cochran-Armitage test for the analysis of significance from the coded points and themes. Two themes were found to be significant, positive experiences and organizational aid.

The Cochran-Armitage test was used to analyze the gathered quantitative data (codes) which was assimilated from interpretation of the qualitative data (interviews). This qualitative data was transcribed into quantitative data by using coded segments of the interviews that exhibited positive experiences, mixed experiences, and the other categories seen in Table 5. The Cochran-Armitage test found that after the positive experiences were grouped with the number of times La Fiesta received assistance from community organizations' aid, the combined proportions demonstrated a p-value less than 0.05. The p-value of 0.002 (see Table 4) shows La Fiesta's continued success resulted from the assisting community and organizations' aid and is valid because of the proportion of positive experiences recorded in each interview. The proportions of both positive experiences and assisting/community organizations' aid demonstrate a trend which increases overall and varies linearly, showing a strong association between the two

codes. This trend activity is best shown in Figure 2, where an association is expressed. This association confirms there is an element, or code, which kept La Fiesta a reoccurring event every year. This year, 2021, will be the 25th annual celebration of La Fiesta, which further solidifies the recorded position in multiple interviews that moving from Omega to the supportive location of Tifton resulted in a larger success and sustained existence of La Fiesta.

The Cochran-Armitage test was performed on the other codes seen in Table 5, but none of these areas showed a p-value (none were significant/below .05) that would result in rejection of the stance that La Fiesta had no success from the other codes seen in Table 1 because of the proportion of positive experience. The implications from this conclusion shows a need for further analysis possibly using a Mantel statistic test, where numbers of positive experiences scored for each interview would be measured against geographical distance. This further measurement would help define which community organizations helped more than others and give a hierarchy to which contributed the most to La Fiesta's success.

Noted is that there is a bias from those interviewed, as they were stakeholders and had an inherent investment for the success of La Fiesta. Interview 8 had limited meaningful codes which provided limited support. The Cochran-Armitage test was chosen for its qualitative and quantitative trend analysis power. The code or category of each assigned description to the statements are found within all 8 interviews. Coded segments reflected the number of recorded statements that were positive, mixed, and negative. All others were noted within Table 4.

Table 4

Coded Interviews

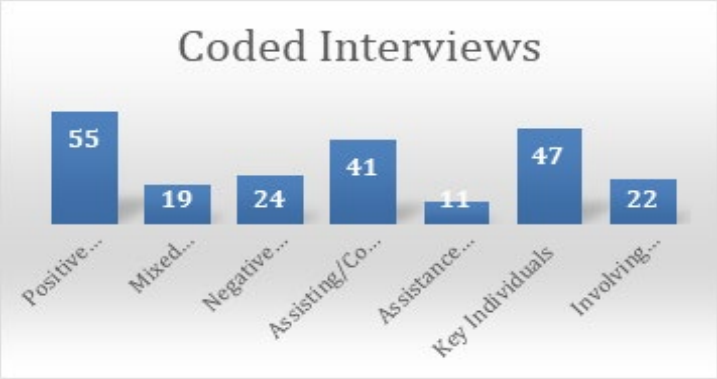


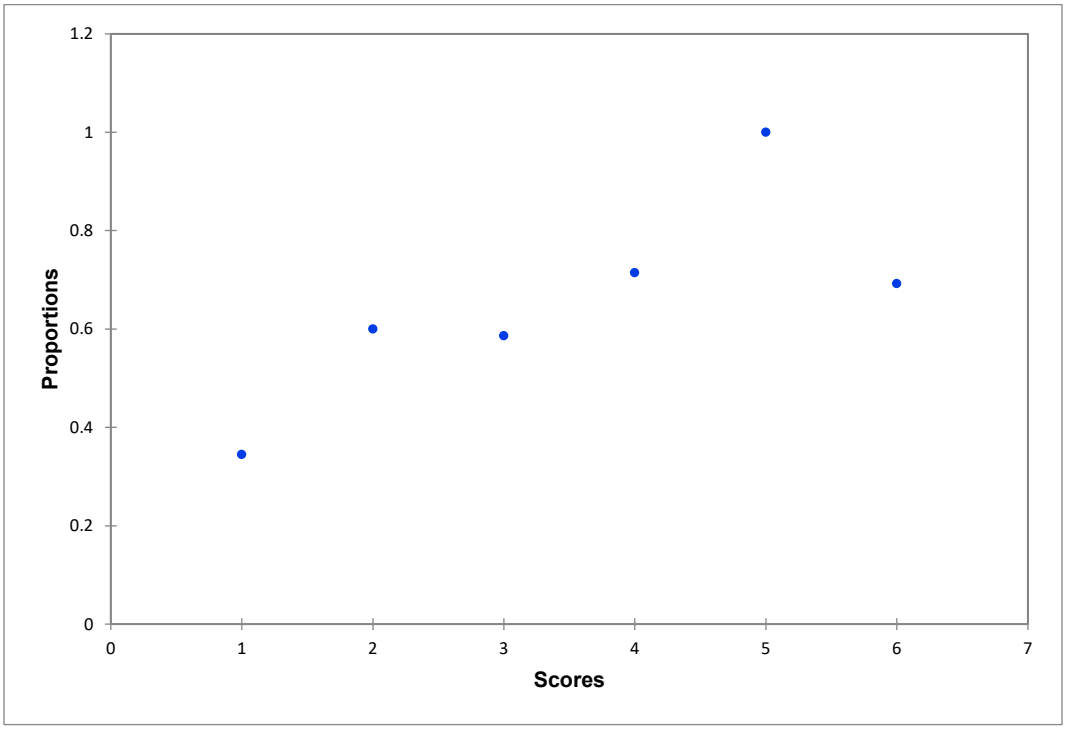
Table 5

Cochran-Armitage trend test (Asymptotic p-value) / Two-tailed test

|z| (Observed value)	3.064
|z| (Critical value)	1.960
p-value (Two-tailed)	0.002
alpha	0.05

The trend activity of the Cochran-Armitage test is in relation to the two code variables, positive experience and assisting/community organizations. The scores reflected the interviews 1-7 with the score 3, being a combination of interview 3 and 4. The proportion axis (see Figure 2) showed the combined binomial proportion of interviews as a linear variance.

Figure 2



Proportion Axis

DISCUSSION

The study of La Fiesta del Pueblo's evolution from a local, ethnic festival to a state recognized cultural celebration triggered my own evolution as a person. The experience took me on a personal rollercoaster ride that changed me on a deep and personal level, from an assimilated professional to an acculturated scholar. The initial purpose of the dissertation was to explore the perceptions that existed in a rural South Georgia community that allowed for La Fiesta to be accepted and sustained by the White community. Using CRT and LatCrit to examine La Fiesta, then led me to a critical self-reflection. In comparison with the historical analysis of La Fiesta, I too struggled with the history of the Americanized me of then and now, and also questioned my personal views to recognize how they were shaped and conditioned by the existing U.S. social

structures, as did La Fiesta.

My newly found and developed critical consciousness was not expected, as I anticipated that this research and findings would contribute to the efforts of community organizers who wanted to establish similar successful cultural events in rural communities, but did not know the process would change my personal and world view for the better. The valuable insight from La Fiesta stakeholders who were instrumental in navigating the early challenges faced in integrating the festival into the dominant community may provide a good framework for others to emulate.

Data was collected for the study by conducting a series of three open-ended, in-person interviews with eight participants in their native language of Spanish. Interviews were scheduled to accommodate the participants' schedules. That time allowed me to compare transcript notes, memos, and further explore items that I may have been concerned about. The open-ended questions related to the participants' connections to the immigrant or dominant community to discover their perceptions of the factors that influenced La Fiesta's success. Follow up interviews and member checking sessions allowed me to discuss and address any concerns participants had regarding the study and their interviews as clarify any questions regarding the information they provided.

In keeping with the intention of the Chi square tests, I analyzed my data to see if what I think is true based on my experiences, which is indeed an accurate model of what either is or others describe to be the case. At the suggestion of and with assistance from a quantitatively minded colleague, I employed a Cochran-Armitage Chi square test to examine the categorical variables I created after coding participant interviews. The

nominal variables and categories of codes I used were positive experiences, negative experiences, mixed experiences, and community support. Originally, to create the categories, I looked at the frequency of comments that were coded accordingly (See Table 4).

Curious as to whether the categories as I saw them were related significantly to positive experiences and support from the community. If there was no relationship, I expected my view of what was said within the interviews or my categories of the information that was told to me to have very little to do with the success of La Fiesta del Pueblo as a community-based cultural bridge between the immigrant and White populations. Although the tests showed the categories used to organize what I was told were topics discussed frequently due to random selection or because they really were significant, I was surprised at the results. Therefore, I further explored the assumptions necessary to apply the Chi square method of hypothesis testing. As my hypothesis that the positive experiences were a result of the community support, did not seem to be panning out as I expected, trying to validate the method of analysis I realized one possible reason.

According to Gangwal (2020), a random selection was required and was not part of this work. All participants were chosen intentionally for their role in the organization and development of La Fiesta. Each participant needed to fit into only one category. Statements from interviews were coded in multiple ways and at times coded passages intersected across categories. Originally frequency counts of codes used on the data were tabulated to see how each formed categories of information, but that was also subjectively done by myself and not clearly articulated by the participant. The lack of

meeting the assumptions of the Chi square test caused me to realize that the results it generated were not the most significant results found in this work. Rather, the qualitative coded, categorized, and theme-generating methods provided the findings that are the valuable take-away from the work.

Coding Categories

Out of the eight interviews, the three common categories of codes were positive, mixed, and negative experiences with the community. In addition, community organizations aiding either with volunteers, material, or financial aid provided a positive experience for the stakeholders. The two main factors that provided a successful La Fiesta were (1) the community organizations providing aid, which in turn led to (2) positive experiences for the stakeholders, as these experiences are perceived as acceptance by the dominant community. In short, the community organizational aid provided the necessary positive experiences to continue advocating for La Fiesta against the less significant negative and mixed experiences.

To give more background information, the process of getting to the two underlying factors (i.e., experiences and support), came through the initial interviews of the eight stakeholders. A series of questions (Appendix A) were asked of each participant and were transcribed for the assessment of each theme. These interviews were first transcribed to Microsoft Word document software and then transferred to MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data, text and multimedia analysis for academic institutions. Themes were then coded by key words/phrases. The initial coded themes were: positive, mixed, negative experiences, La Fiesta De Pueblo, Love Affair Art Festival, multicultural,

folklore dance, assisting/community organizations aid, Girl Scouts, pavilion activity, community assistance, photography project, involving Latinxs, key individuals, and background. The main themes were then shortened by the frequency and quantity of codes within said themes. Each interview, labeled numerically from 1-8, were analyzed by the frequency of codes and then combined to make a master code list (Table 2).

Out of the initial list of themes, the quality of the experiences i.e., positive, mixed, and negative), showed frequently with a large quantity of codes compared to the rest of the themes. Organizational aid was frequently mentioned by the interviewees, indicating its importance in their perception of community support for the event. Each of the themes identified were supported by the participants' personal recollections.

Positive Experiences. Based on their recollections, all the individuals interviewed expressed positive, negative, and mixed experiences during their involvement with La Fiesta. It was interesting to note that the White participants expressed mostly positive experiences, and in general, from an economic perspective. Comments such as "the festival is good for the economy," "proud that La Fiesta brings state and national recognition to the community," and "proud of the Hispanic businesses being established downtown" exemplified that sentiment. In contrast, Latinx participants expressed positive experiences from a more personal level. Excellent examples of this perception come from their comments which include, "support to bring the Mexican consulate to give out needed documents," "there are a lot of good people in the [White] community," and "has helped involve the Hispanic culture into the [White] community."

Negative Experiences. The negative experiences were exclusively expressed by the Latinx participants, who were five of the eight interviewees. The Latinx participants also

had the experience of being part of La Fiesta when it was established within the original Omega community. Their experiences included being subjected to discriminatory actions and denied the permit for the event, which led to its relocation to Tifton. The comments that support the negative perceptions included "the city did not provide support of any kind," "coincidentally, there were always [police] roadblocks during the festival," and "the perception that the event was dirty by city leaders." It was interesting that although the experiences were negative for the community where La Fiesta was established, one of the participants expressed his love of the community by referring to it as feeling "like home here."

Mixed Experiences. The majority of responses indicated a mixed experience, which also came from the Latinx participants. My belief was that they felt more comfortable honestly sharing their experiences with me, a fellow Latino, than the White interview participants. Even after the follow-up conversations with White interviewees to verify their responses, they did not share any negative experiences regarding La Fiesta. I suspect it may have been due to their prominent positions in the community that guided their responses. From the Latinx participants, I gathered comments that expressed their frustrations and appreciation of working with the dominant White community. These comments included, "they [community] needed the Hispanics in the fields but wanted them to disappear after 5:00 pm from the town," "there were negative and positive comments within the community. I kind of looked at where the comments were coming from. If they came from leaders in the community, we kind of paid more attention to those," "the festival was not embraced by all communities at the start. Some in the Hispanic community did not want it [La Fiesta] to take place," and "we got recognition

from Max Cleland [GA Secretary of State] that made the original community very proud, then they refused to grant us a permit for it."

Future Considerations

The themes that were identified through the interview analysis provided valuable insight into some key factors that may help other communities who are interested in establishing similar events to recognize immigrant populations within their rural communities. From the results, I have a few recommendations to guide the development of a framework for successful integration of ethnic festivals into dominant communities. The first recommendation is that any effort to organize a similar fiesta or event must be led by committed individuals from both the immigrant and dominant culture communities, at least in the beginning. The show of unity from group leaders is key in accessing resources needed to establish and sustain the event. Those group leaders must be well established within both communities to gain full support for the event within their respective communities. In the case of La Fiesta, the organizing committee included religious leaders, community organizers, civic organizations, and government leaders. I truly believe that having the support of the Optimist Club, the Girls Scouts, and the city council were integral to the event's initial success. Furthermore, the commitment to the events must be unwavering. As an example, when La Fiesta moved to Tifton from its previous home, Tifton leaders remained committed to it despite negative comments shared with them from the previous community representatives. Comments such as "it's a dirty festival" and "they [Mexicans] are going to bring gangs into your town" were shared with me by those city leaders.

The second recommendation is to establish a solid, open communication system

among all members, but especially with the members of the immigrant community. An example that was shared with me and the lead organizer by a parent of one of the Girl Scout members during the planning of the initial festival was when they disagreed on the event's focus. The organizer was planning La Fiesta from a broader perspective to be more inclusive of all communities and the Girl Scout parent strongly felt that it should be more focused on the Mexican population. This disagreement led to friction that was overcome by frequent conversations and development of a shared vision for the event. Both individuals shared that the key to overcoming their disagreement was their own willingness to listen and learn from each other. The experience led them both to promote the festival more successfully, and more importantly, kept the group united.

Lastly, I recommend that the event must provide opportunity for the local community to receive economic, public relations, or other benefits that will allow it to continue to receive support. In the case of La Fiesta, the city leaders capitalized on highlighting La Fiesta in their economic development efforts to demonstrate diversity and attract talent and industry to the area. These points were expressed by the city leaders I interviewed in comments that included, "when we do a community tour for the medical center as part of attracting medical professionals, I always talk about La Fiesta del Pueblo and mention the Hispanic population" and "you don't make the money that day, but folks come in and see and move here and buy here and open businesses here and good stuff, good stuff."

I have lived in rural communities in Georgia for over 30 years. My father settled our family in a small community in central Georgia in the early 1980s, and my professional career has allowed me to live in similar communities across the state

advocating for migrant farmworker families. In several of those communities, I was a member of a small group of Latinx individuals who tried to establish similar events with very limited success. Our efforts would follow a predictable pattern: excitement to organize an event, great involvement and support from the local community, and then a waned interest after the third year. When I arrived in Tifton and experienced La Fiesta for the first time, I wanted to know how an event could be sustained for that long and grow to be so large. After having gone through this dissertation journey, I realize why our efforts in previous communities fell short. My research findings confirmed that we were not able to sustain a cultural event because we were focused on the immigrant experience only and did not incorporate the needs of the host community as much as needed. We are not to alienate members of the immigrant community, but also consider the benefit of the host community. Those organizing groups were often short-sighted and focused on putting on the event one year at a time, rather than developing a long-term vison that would sustain it within the community.

EPILOGUE

It is almost 10:00 pm on the Saturday before my dissertation defense. I'm staring at my computer screen with a National Basketball Association playoffs game as my background noise. I am reviewing the loaded amount of information spread across my work desk, which is covered with printed notes, feedback sheets and two smartphones opened to the two different websites that I've been looking at for multiple primary resources. As I am reviewing my dissertation and its content, I am in awe of all the work that has been put in, accomplished, and completed. I have been on the road as part of my professional job for the past month. My travels have taken me to four different states in

four weeks and I am homesick. My daughter asked me recently, "When did one week turn into two, three, and four weeks? When are you coming home?" It is Father's Day weekend and I am alone in a hotel room for the holiday. For the first time as a father, I am not with my family, and it does not feel right. However, I am reassured by my wife and children that it's okay for now, and that completing this dissertation will be worth it!

The dissertation process has been a long, cathartic journey. I was reminded of this earlier this afternoon that it has been many years longer than any student in this particular program at Valdosta State University. Many times, I have come very close to throwing in the towel. Even recently. Each of those times when I have expressed my frustration, my impatience, and my desire to give up, I have been reminded by friends, colleagues, and family to not give up. Comments such as "you can do this," "we are so proud of you," and "you are a Hispanic role model," have been repeated to me many times in an attempt to convince me that too many people depend on me to finish this important task. My dissertation efforts will pay off.

The last comment is rather ironic to me, given that this dissertation opened my eyes to the fact that I did not want to be a role model. At least not in the way that I was when I began this journey and holding on strongly to my deficit views. That Javier Gonzalez Gonzales enjoyed being held up as a "success story" for Latinx middle and high school students. I took pride in sharing my personal story of achieving success through hard work and commitment to the system that allowed me to achieve the American Dream with impressionable young men and women. While my intentions in sharing the message of success was well intended, I wrongfully portrayed a capitalistic message of the *bootstrap mentality*. I wanted to expose students who were like myself at

that age, farmworker immigrants, to what successful individuals looked like, spoke like, and acted like. Namely, to become White, and not make excuses for non-White's lack of advancement.

At this stage of my journey, I am what some would consider "woke." I am more deliberate in seeing oppressive institutional systems through a critical lens and considering the value everyone has in society, rather than having society tell me their worth. Professionally, I am no longer in higher education and am very comfortable not being in that majority White environment, where I felt the constant pressure to not be a threat. My current job has taken me out of rural Georgia to an urban environment in North Carolina. I am employed with a non-profit agency that provides early learning support to farmworker children and is led by a Latinx professional. In this environment, I work among professionals who look like me and need not be impressed by my background, dress, degrees, or that I speak English so well, but rather what I can contribute toward our advocacy for farmworker families. In this space, I am free to be myself, to speak Spanish, and to lead. I bring homemade tacos to administration meetings without worrying about what my coworkers will think.

This week, I was in Valdosta for the opening of my agency's inaugural Head Start center in Georgia. While in town, I got the opportunity to catch up with colleagues from the Migrant Education Program (MEP), ABAC, and La Fiesta del Pueblo. While speaking with MEP friends, I was asked to provide the keynote to the Migrant Education Student Leadership Academy (MESLA) summer graduation class. I was very familiar with this camp, as I coordinated it at ABAC for over 10 years. I accepted the offer eagerly and considered how fortunate I was to be in Valdosta putting the final touches on

my dissertation during the MESLA graduation week! The opportunity to speak to high school migrant students was the first time I was able to address Latinx students from my critical consciousness, since I was now *woke*. After many years of delivering a message that highlighted the institutionalized system of hard work and reward, I used the acquired knowledge of CRT to develop a different, more critical engaged message.

At the ceremony, held on the campus of Valdosta State University, I delivered a message that was totally opposite of my previous keynotes to similar audiences. I focused my message on the students and their experiences and potential, rather than my background and success story. I encouraged them and their parents to focus on their value to society as immigrants. This time, I delivered the message primarily in Spanish, so the parents could also hear the message. I noticed some questioning looks from some of the English-speaking individuals in attendance (none of them students) and I tried to translate some of the message but rightfully stopped as I was losing the flow of my message to the Latinx students. I encouraged them to use their roots, culture, and language to achieve all their potential. I encouraged them to be critical thinkers, to question anything and anyone who advised them to give up any part of themselves to be successful. Most importantly, to support one another as our Latinx culture promotes. After the event, I was approached by several students who asked me about my job and background. I shared with them how I am valuing myself as *Mejicano* more now because I lost that when I was their age. I was also approached by a couple who had two daughters in the MESLA academy. The mother expressed appreciation for my consideration of their limited English abilities and thanked me for encouraging their daughters to remain rooted to their culture. The father also shared that he appreciated the

humility with which I delivered the message, noting that other Latinx speakers were often focused on themselves and their accomplishments when speaking to the group. Although not complete, those words were a great measure of my transformational progress and meant a lot to me.

Likewise, La Fiesta del Pueblo continues its successful trajectory in Tifton. This year's 2021 celebration is the 25th anniversary! The theme is *¡Mirando atras… siguiendo adelante! (*looking back… moving forward!*).* The current organizing committee chair shared that after not having the event in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, this year's event is scheduled for October 25, 2021 from 10:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. at Tifton's Fulwood Park! La Fiesta's mission now includes raising funds for a scholarship to ABAC for a deserving Latinx student. The organizing committee is also now composed of eight core members, all volunteer Latinx professionals from the community. Of course, the organizers are always looking for additional volunteers.

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Appendix A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-03006-2013 **INVESTIGATOR:** Javier Gonzalez

PROJECT TITLE: La Fiesta del Pueblo stakholder interviews and document review

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board oversight under Exemption Category(ies) 4. You may begin your study immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS:

Although not a requirement for exemption, the following suggestions are offered by the IRB Administrator to enhance the protection of participants and/or strengthen the research proposal:

NONE

☐ If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth W. Olphie *12/20/13*

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 12.13.12

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Autobiography

1. Demographic information, gender, age, marital status, years living in the community at the time of the Fiesta origin.
2. If not native to the community, where did you come from, and what brought you here?

Experience with Immigrants/ Natives and La Fiesta efforts.

1. How did you become aware about the Hispanic/Latinx community in Tift County?
2. What was your level of interaction with the Hispanic/ native community prior to La Fiesta?
3. Tell me about your experience with the outreach efforts to the Hispanic/Latinx community in Omega.
4. What are the things that you hoped to accomplish?
5. What did you think they were trying to accomplish?
6. Tell me about the challenges you faced, if any, in providing and promoting services to the Hispanic / Latinx community through La Fiesta del Pueblo.
7. Tell me about any challenges you faced, if any, in receiving and promoting the services offered by the native community through La Fiesta efforts.
8. Why did you see them as challenges?
9. Tell me about a negative or positive experience that you had with members of the Hispanic/ native community.
10. Did your interactions with members of the native/ Hispanic community change as a result of your activities with La Fiesta? How?
11. How would you describe your experience as a supporter of immigrant/native outreach and partnership to others who are attempting similar efforts?

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1

Top States with Hispanic/Latinx Population Increase

1990-2000 Census (percent increase)	**2000-2010 Census (percent increase)**
North Carolina (394%)	South Carolina (148%)
Arkansas (337%)	Alabama (145%)
Georgia (300%)	Tennessee (134%)
Tennessee (278%)	Kentucky (122%)
Nevada (217%)	Arkansas (114%)
South Carolina (211%)	Mississippi (106%)
Alabama (208%)	Georgia (96%)

Table 2

The Combined Interviews

Pseudonym	Relationship to La Fiesta	Interview 1 Date/Length	Interview 2 Date/Length	Interview 3[a] Date/Length
Lupe Mendez	Original member of the Girl Scout troop that founded La Fiesta	11/6/2016 63 minutes	01/08/2017 40 minutes	01/15/2017 15 minutes
Miguel Perez	Patriarch of one of the original migrant families in the community and original member of La Fiesta organizing committee	04/03/17 58 minutes	05/20/2017 35 minutes	06/03/2017 15 minutes
Alfredo Garcia	Latino pastor and original member of the La Fiesta organizing committee	11/06/2017 62 minutes	02/17/2017 40 minutes	02/24/ 2017 15 minutes
Jane Jones	Former city council member that brought La Fiesta to the community	04/08/2017 40 minutes	01/20/2017 20 minutes	01/30/2017 15 minutes
Mike Smith	Former city council member that brought La Fiesta to the community	11/08/2016 63 minutes	01/08/2017 30 minutes	01/15/2017 15 minutes
Maria Lopez	Latina community advocate in the public school and original member of La Fiesta organizing committee	11/06/2017 40 minutes	01/08/2017 30 minutes	01/15/2017 15 minutes
Gloria Green	Community leader and supporter of initial event that became La Fiesta	03/02/2017 60 minutes	03/12/2107 30 minutes	03/23/2017 15 minutes
Carmen Ramirez	Latina community advocate and leader of the original La Fiesta organizing committee	11/12/2016 75 minutes	01/06/2017 40 minutes	01/12/2017 15 minutes

Note: The third interview was shortened because by that time I was aware of my direction beginning to turn and knowing the case study would not be completed as planned. The interview shifted from how their experiences were meaningful for La Fiesta development and growth they became more about me making sense of what they told me in relation to my co-constructed critical autoethnography.

Table 3

MAXQDA Codes

Category	Applicable Codes	Number of Times Used	Times Used by Participant
Positive Experience	Economic benefit Positive recognition Food Music Social services	55	Jane- 11 Mike- 9 Carmen- 9 Alfredo- 5 Lupe- 8 Miguel- 6 Maria- 7
Negative Experience	Stereotypes Omega experience Law enforcement Resistance	24	Carmen- 5 Miguel- 5 Alfredo- 3 Maria- 4 Mike- 3 Antonio- 3
Mixed Experience	Crowds Diversity Traffic	19	Miguel- 3 Mike- 4 Jane- 4

	Family fun Schedule		Gloria- 3 Carmen- 3 Lupe- 2
Support from the community	Involvement of city leaders Religious leaders Diversity community Donations	41	Lupe -5 Miguel- 3 Jane- 6 Gloria- 3 Carmen- 8 Alfredo- 4 Maria- 6 Mike- 6
Support from community organization	Arts Council Social agencies School system	11	Lupe- 3 Jane - 4 Mike- 2 Carmen- 2
Key Individuals	Girl Scouts City Leaders Mexican Consulate College support	47	Lupe- 5 Miguel- 3 Jane- 6 Gloria- 3 Carmen- 8

			Alfredo- 4 Maria- 6 Mike- 6
Involving Hispanics	Participants Performances Community leaders	22	Lupe- 2 Miguel- 4 Jane- 3 Gloria- 2 Carmen- 2 Alfredo- 2 Maria- 3 Mike- 3

Table 4

Coded Interviews

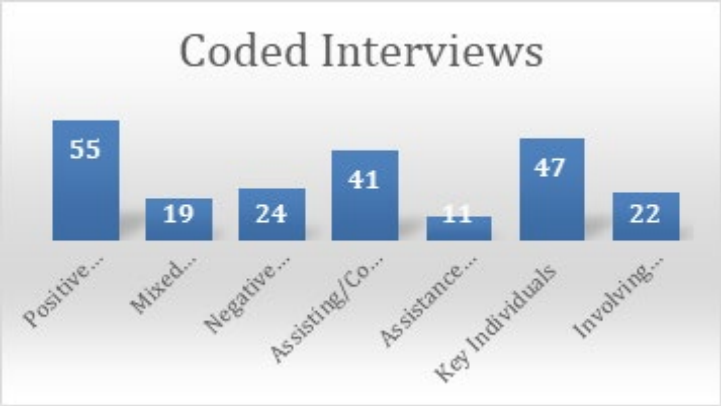

Table 5

Cochran-Armitage trend test (Asymptotic p-value) / Two-tailed test

|z| (Observed value)	3.064
|z| (Critical value)	1.960
p-value (Two-tailed)	0.002
alpha	0.05

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1

Model of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Adapted from: Oliver & Shapiro, 1995

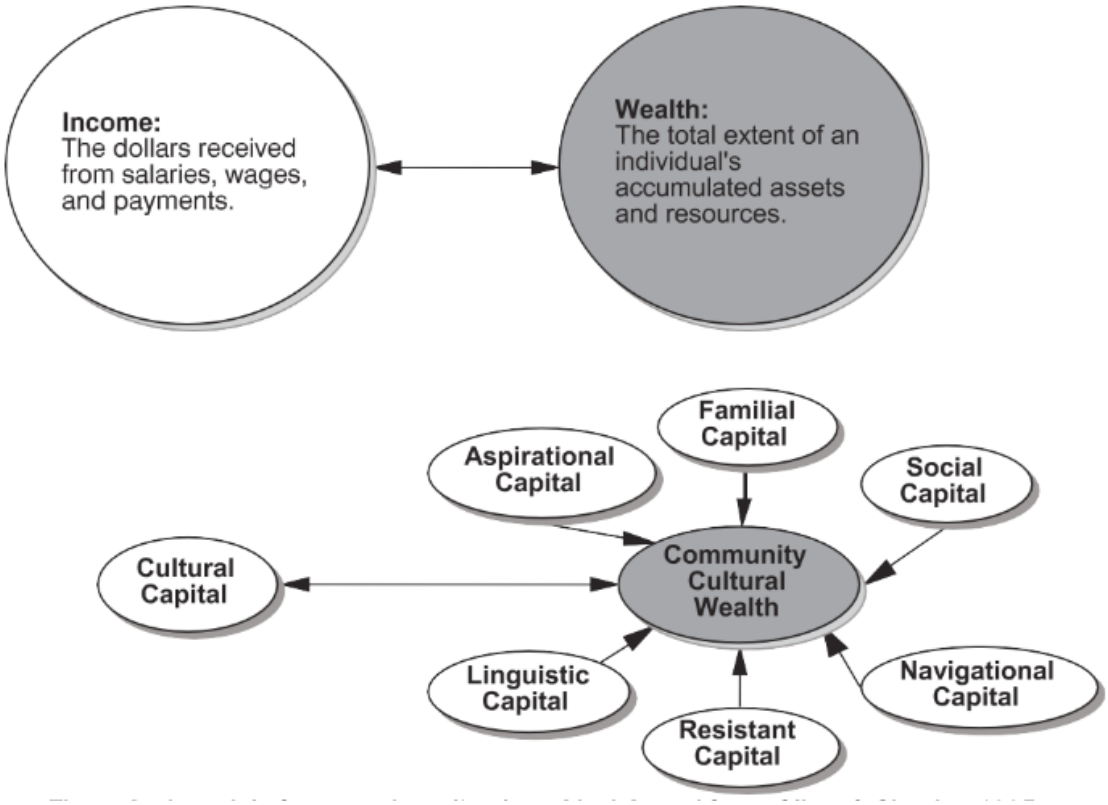

Figure 2

Proportion Axis

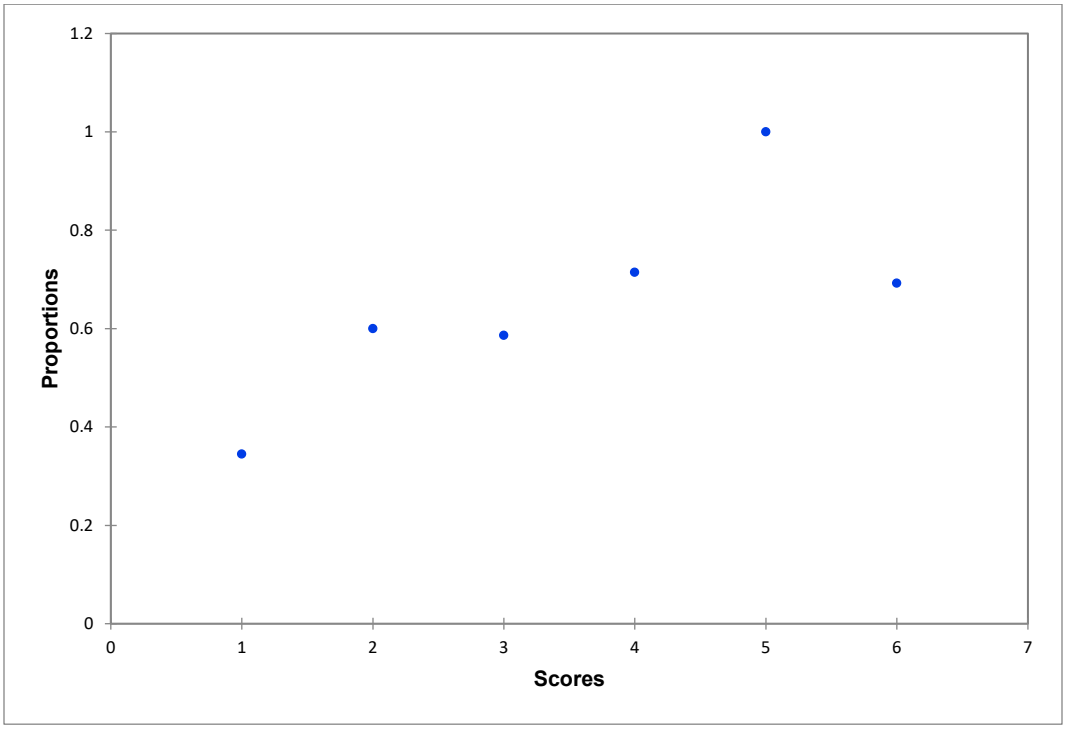

Figure 3

The Matrix of Dominance. Adapted from: Hill Collins, 1990.

Social Identity Categories	Privileged Social Groups	Border Social Groups ⟷	Targeted Social Groups	Ism
Race	White People	Biracial People (White/Latino, Black, Asian)	Asian, Black, Latino, Native People	Racism
Sex	Bio Men	Transsexual, Intersex People	Bio Women	Sexism
Gender	Gender Conforming Bio Men And Women	Gender Ambiguous Bio Men and Women	Transgender, Genderqueer, Intersex People	Transgender Oppression
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual People	Bisexual People	Lesbians, Gay Men	Heterosexism
Class	Rich, Upper Class People	Middle Class People	Working Class, Poor People	Classism
Ability/Disability	Temporarily Abled-Bodied People	People with Temporary Disabilities	People with Disabilities	Ableism
Religion	Protestants	Roman Catholic (historically)	Jews, Muslims, Hindus	Religious Oppression
Age	Adults	Young Adults	Elders, Young People	Ageism/Adultism