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Plaza Fiesta: A Re-Imagined Homeland Contributing to Latino Identity and Community

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PLAZA FIESTA: A RE-IMAGINED HOMELAND
CONTRIBUTING TO LATINO IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

by

SARAH L. MARSKE

Under the Direction of Dr. Leonard Teel

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the relationship between Plaza Fiesta, a Latino shopping center located in Atlanta, Georgia, and concepts of Latino identity and community formation among immigrants in a U.S. city. It is focused specifically on the complexities of identification for Latin American immigrants, who relate in various ways to Plaza Fiesta. One chapter explores the relationships between product consumption, marketing, spaces, and memory in the production of hybrid identity formations. Another chapter considers the relationship between pan-ethnic Latino identity construction and notions of belonging and not belonging for these Latin American immigrants. The final chapter adds to knowledge about identity by analyzing the complexities and contradictions based on interviews, questionnaires, and observations at Plaza Fiesta. Moreover, this paper examines the importance these topics have with immigration issues and U.S. society. Overall, this paper suggests that Plaza Fiesta plays a role in establishing a sense of Latino community in Atlanta.

INDEX WORDS: Latino, Hispanic, Identity, Community, Homeland, Latinidad, Latinismo, Pan-ethnicity, Immigration, Hybridization

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SARAH L. MARSKE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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2008

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | |
|------------------|--|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | iv | |
| LIST OF TABLES | viii | |
| LIST OF FIGURES | ix | |
| CHAPTERS | | |
| 1 | INTROUCTION | 1 |
| | The Question of Identity | 4 |
| | Hispanic and Latino Identity Formation in the United States | 6 |
| | Methodology | 16 |
| | Findings | 18 |
| 2 | IMAGININGS OF HOMELAND AND NEW REALITIES | 22 |
| | A Slice of Mexico: Plaza Fiesta’s Atmosphere and Identity Formations | 24 |
| | ¡Viva Mexico! Major Events and Identity at Plaza Fiesta | 33 |
| | <i>Spanglish</i> : An Opportunity for Cultural Fusion | 41 |
| | Conclusion | 43 |
| 3 | SEPARATE BUT WELCOME: OTHERING AND LATINIDAD AT PLAZA FIESTA | 47 |
| | ¡It’s the Place, Our Place! Marketing Messages and Latinidad at Plaza Fiesta | 49 |
| | Localized Attempts for Latino Community Formation at Plaza Fiesta | 53 |
| | Othering at Plaza Fiesta | 58 |
| | Don’t Have Documents? Don’t worry. Here, you are welcome. | 61 |
| | Conclusion | 67 |
| | | vi |

| | | |
|---|--|----|
| 4 | THE STORY OF IDENTITY AT PLAZA FIESTA: CONTRADICTIONS & COMPLEXITIES | 74 |
| | Mexican? Mexican-American? Latino? Hispanic? Or all of the above? | 75 |
| | Contradictions and Identity at Plaza Fiesta | 82 |
| | My Personal Journey | 87 |
| | BIBLIOGRAPHY | 97 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 1: Plaza Fiesta Jingle | 51 |
| Table 2: Plaza Fiesta Commercial: Como en tú país | 52 |
| Table 3: Plaza Fiesta: The <i>sueño</i> | 52 |
| Table 4: Plaza Fiesta Jingle Revisited | 60 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1: Plaza Fiesta bakery designed in Spanish Colonial style used in Mexico | 26 |
| Figure 2: Plaza Fiesta's façades depicting Plaza-style architecture | 26 |
| Figure 3: Central Fountain at Plaza Fiesta | 26 |
| Figure 4: Mexican Patriotism at Plaza Fiesta's Mexican Independence Day Celebration | 35 |
| Figure 5: Patriotic marketing messages used by Plaza Fiesta | 36 |
| Figure 6: Corporate Sponsors at Plaza Fiesta's Cinco de Mayo Celebration | 39 |
| Figure 7: Mariachi Festival at Plaza Fiesta | 40 |
| Figure 8: Cultural performance at Plaza Fiesta | 40 |

Chapter One

Introduction

On one Saturday in April, 2008 at Plaza Fiesta, tunes of Mexican *ranchera* music floated through the halls of the market, played by a band of men wearing black suits with white cowboy hats by the central fountain. Little girls bopped up-and-down on the stage dancing, while shoppers crowded to watch the performance. Close by, customers rapidly bantered in Spanish while selecting which beautiful dress to choose for their daughter's *quinceañera*, or fifteenth birthday celebration. Down the hall a family rested on a bench, snacking on mango topped with chili powder and *granizados* (shaved ice drinks). The mother greeted a friend in Spanish who sat down to chat for a while. Kids ran by, playing chase and yelling to each other in English as they headed toward the play area, where some children had their faces painted as Spiderman or Disney princesses. A group of young men walked by and headed to the arcade to play games. A man wearing a black cowboy hat, ostrich leather boots, and a button-down collared shirt tucked into jeans that displayed a matching leather belt, walked with his family and held the hand of his son who wore miniature replicas of the same boots, belt and button-down shirt. Down the hall of the market, families sat down to eat roasted chicken, rice and beans, tortilla, and a flan dessert. The pace was relaxed, and some visitors took a slow walk, window shopped, or sat down to read the Spanish-language newspaper. Located in Atlanta, Georgia, Plaza Fiesta has served as a neighborhood gathering place for Latinos that offered shopping, entertainment, leisure, recreational activity, a variety of Latin American foods, and cultural celebrations.

With upwards of 30,000 people visiting each month, Plaza Fiesta serves as a beacon for Latinos in Georgia. The shopping center's events are well attended, and as many as 20,000 to

50,000 Latinos visited on a single day for festivals such as Mexican Independence Day and Cinco de Mayo. Interview respondent Roberto Peña,¹ a shopper from Mexico, described Plaza Fiesta's fame among Latinos: "It is a gathering place for Latinos, a signal that everybody can recognize easily. Even if somebody isn't familiar with the Buford Highway area, everybody knows where Plaza Fiesta is located." Plaza Fiesta's popularity among the Latino community in Georgia has garnered news coverage of the mall in well-known Atlanta publications. An article written by Mary Lou Pickel and published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* and *MundoHispánico* detailed the economic success of Plaza Fiesta and how the risky business venture of creating a Mexican marketplace in Atlanta has become a "big hit" among Latinos in Georgia.² The *Atlanta Business Chronicle* covered Plaza Fiesta's opening in 2000³ and six years later *Creative Loafing* published "Plaza Fiesta: How a Doomed Strip Mall Became Ground Zero for a Cultural Revolution," an article describing its transformation over time from an Oriental shopping mall to a central location for Latino culture and upstart businesses.⁴

Plaza Fiesta is a strip mall that combines a shopping center, community and recreational center, medical facilities, musical performances and traditional events into one facility targeted to Latinos. The mall evolved over time from a low-traffic shopping center that included shops such as Eckerd's and a movie theater, to an oriental shopping mall, to a current focal point of Latino activity and community events in Atlanta.⁵ Today, the shopping mall offers a variety of stores, healthcare facilities, and entertainment venues that attract Latino patrons by using cultural appeals and the Spanish language. Spanish is the dominant language used at the Plaza, including

¹ Some names have been changed to protect the identities of participants.

² Mary Lou Pickel, "Mexican Shopping Center a Big Hit." *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. 5 May 2008.

³ Erin Moriarty, "Mall Looks to Lure Latin Shoppers." *Atlanta Business Chronicle*. 24 March 2000.

⁴ Alyssa Abkowitz, "Plaza Fiesta! How a doomed strip mall became ground zero for a cultural revolution." *Creative Loafing*. 21 June 2006, p. 1.

⁵ Moriarty, 2000

signs in Spanish, healthcare services available in Spanish, and Spanish speaking vendors. The Plaza's décor is lively and reminiscent of Mexican pueblos, and Mexican and other Latin American products are sold. Plaza Fiesta hosts community events such as carnivals, holiday festivities, political protests, health fairs, and concerts that are advertised in Spanish and geared toward the Latino community.

Plaza Fiesta's significance in Atlanta's Latino community makes the center an important location for academic study, especially with regards to concepts of identity and Latino community formation in the United States. Plaza Fiesta is a unique combination of factors that relate to Latino identity and community in significant and complex ways. Scholars have recently turned their attention the issues of Hispanic and Latino identity formation and have shown that various factors influence the construction of Latin American immigrants' identity in the United States. However, a review of the literature revealed that little research has been conducted on Latino communities in Georgia, and Atlanta is highly under-researched in Latino scholarly studies. Most studies are based in areas with typically high populations of Latinos: Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Texas, Miami, and the Mexico-U.S. border. Aspects such as marketing, political and situational factors, personal narratives, geographical locations, consumer habits, and local festivals have been argued as contributing to the development of a Latino or Hispanic identity. The focus of this research project, therefore, is the question of identity construction and how it relates to one's sense of community. This study is focused specifically on the complexities of identification for Latin American immigrants, who relate in various ways to Plaza Fiesta. With this focus in mind, the research sought answers to the following questions:

1. How does Plaza Fiesta contribute to the construction of Latino immigrants' identity?

2. What role does Plaza Fiesta play in shaping Latino immigrants' sense of community?

The Question of Identity

Questions of identity, and its formation, negotiation, and development, are particularly relevant due to the recently intensified contact of different communities brought about by social processes such as globalization and human migration.⁶ While on the surface, the question of a one's identity seems to be a relatively simple concept, theories about identity have revealed that in reality it is very complex. Stuart Hall contrasted stable notions of identity with "disruptions of identity" which have undermined that sense of stability. He wrote that the concept of identity is illusive in that it appears to guarantee a certain stability and assurance of self and who one is. "The logic of the discourse of identity assumes a stable subject, i.e., we've assumed that there is something which we can call our identity which, in a rapidly shifting world, has the great advantage of staying still. The logic of identity is the logic of something like a 'true self.'" Hall explained that these stable identities were in one way "held in place by great collective social identities" such as class, race, gender and nation. However, in an increasingly globalized world those collective identities are constantly being undermined and, instead, identity proves to be a "process" and "ambivalent point" which is changed and developed through cultural, historical, and political factors.

Hall's arguments point to the fluidity of identity that other scholars have noted, and how one's concept of self evolves, changes, and takes on multiple identifications. It is in constant negotiation based on one's circumstances.⁷ Ana de Fina argued that the membership categories,

⁶ De Fina, 2006

⁷ Prasenjit Duara, (1995). *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.; Anderson, 1983; deFina, 2006, C. Rodríguez, 2006

or group identities, to which people are loyal are constantly evolving according to “historical and local circumstances. Both the way in which people relate to social groups, and the meaning given to social categories, change through time and in different social contexts.”⁸ Prasenjit Duara⁹ argued identity should be understood as a relational concept. He questioned whether a core, or essential, self that identifies with a certain society or culture really exists. Duara explained that “the ‘prior’ self which identifies, or is sutured with a representation of, say, the nation, is itself another set of subject propositions – say, woman, Korean-American, Baptist – produced by other representations. Thus the self is constituted neither primordially nor monolithically but within a network of changing and often conflicting representations.”¹⁰ One’s sense of self is comprised of multiple representations that are constructed and influenced based on one’s circumstances. Similarly, Clara Rodríguez’s suggested that “there is not a true and knowable self.”¹¹ Due to changing relationships and situational contexts, a person’s identity is constantly negotiated and changing. Instead of just maintaining one primary identity, people have plural identities that are brought out in different situations.¹²

One historical context in which identities have been shown to evolve was through the merging, or hybridization, of cultures. "Hybridization" is a phenomenon that is caused by the articulation of two cultural identities, including the merging of traditions or consumer products, among others factors. Post colonial theorist Homi Bhabha established the concept of identity hybridization, and argued that interactions between colonizing forces and colonized people created hybrid identities. By attempting to mimic or take on characteristics of colonizers,

⁸ de Fina, 2006, 355

⁹ Duara, 1995

¹⁰ Duara, 1995, 7

¹¹ C. Rodríguez, 2006, p. xii

¹² C. Rodríguez, 2006, p. xii

colonized populations actually created new realities of identification. Similarly, Susan Friedman described ways scholars have adopted performance theory to ethnographic studies at borders of difference. They have posited that performative mimesis, or imitation, at borders of difference produces hybrid forms of identity. Friedman argued that “such imitation in the borders between difference – cultural, racial, gender, sexual, class, and so forth – constitutes a performance with a difference, one that highlights the gap between the two in the form of hybridic representation.”¹³ Repetition or reiteration of norms of another group resulted in redefined and redeveloped cultural formations.

Hispanic and Latino Identity Formation in the United States

Notions of Latino and Hispanic identity in the United States are particularly relevant due to the increasing political, social, and economic attention given to Latin American immigrants migrating to the United States. Now proclaimed to be the “largest minority” living within U.S. borders, questions of community membership, belonging, and group identities for Latinos have particular significance with regard to social relationships, citizenship rights, and political freedom. The ways those identities are constructed points to broader social issues in the United States such as minority rights, struggles for equality, and the politics of language.

The terms Hispanic and Latino, popularly used to refer to Spanish speakers of Latin American descent living in the United States, have been critically analyzed, problematized, and complicated in scholarly literature. The origins, uses, and connotations of the terms have led scholars to question their viability as terms of identification for a vastly diverse group of people who come from many different nations and backgrounds. Suzanne Oboler, for one,

¹³ Friedman, 2002, 6

problematizes even asking the question, “Are we ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latino’?” She argues, “It is not self-evident that these umbrella designations are even valid given the diversity of the populations of Latin American descent in the United States, and the structural and sociopolitical differences within the ‘Latino’ community.” As a result, scholars have studied how these arguably arbitrary terms have been constructed and maintained in the United States.

The term Hispanic has been re-invented and re-interpreted in its U.S. context. The word was coined by Richard Nixon in the 1970s to refer to a growing group of people who came from Latin America and spoke Spanish.¹⁴ In his book *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* Richard Rodriguez explained that Nixon’s administration put together an exhibit that supposedly celebrated and reflected the diversity and cultural products of the United States. To display the exhibits, the administration divided the groups by racial terms including, “American, Asian, African American, and Hispanic”¹⁵ The new Hispanic category took root, and subsequently, the term was incorporated as a category in the U.S. census in the 1980s. Its use became widespread, and many forms and legal documents integrated the term as a descriptive category where people checked their racial or ethnic origin. With increased exposure to the term, many immigrants from Latin America who previously identified themselves as “Mexican” or “Puerto Rican” now called themselves, “Hispanic,” and the term became ingrained as a marker of identity.¹⁶

Jorge J.E. Gracia traces the term Hispanic to its Latin root *Hispania*, which Romans used to refer to the Iberian peninsula. *Hispano* came to be used in connection with the people of Spain, and when parts of Latin America were colonized by Spain, the term came to encompass Spanish speaking people in Latin America as well. Garcia explains the term Hispanic is an

¹⁴ Richard Rodríguez, (2002). *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. New York, NY: Viking Penguin.

¹⁵ R. Rodriguez, 2002, 105.

¹⁶ C. Rodriguez, 2006; R. Rodriguez, 2002

English “transliteration” of the Spanish adjective *hispánico*. When the word became popular in the U.S., it took on slightly different meanings. Often the word does not refer to people from Spain, but to those Spanish speakers of Latin American decent. According to Garcia, “Hispanic frequently carries a sense of not being European.”

However, the term still evokes a Spanish heritage, and its connection with Spain is one reason scholars find the term problematic. José Morín wrote the term “overemphasizes the legacy of European and Spanish colonial rule in Latin America.”¹⁷ Arlene Dávila also argued the term derived from the history of colonial occupation of Latin America by Spain. She claimed many people of Spanish origin have used the term “Hispano” to identify themselves since the 1800s. Additionally, elites of Mexican origin living in New Mexico referred to themselves as “Hispano” to emphasize their Spanish ancestry and recapture the superiority of Spanish colonials over indigenous Mexican populations.¹⁸ The term is problematic, therefore, because it simultaneously evokes Spanish colonial superiority and disregards the strong indigenous and African heritages of many people in Latin America. Oboler also argued the term Hispanic is also an “ahistorical” term that emphasizes a European colonial past, but disregards or diverts attention from a historical U.S. domination and control over Latin America.¹⁹

Other scholars argue the term Hispanic is problematic because it is arbitrarily constructed and placed on a vastly diverse group of people. Latin American immigrants arriving to the U.S. must negotiate the identity and figure out how to incorporate it into previously existing notions

¹⁷ José L. Morín, (2005). *Latino/a Rights and Justice in the United States*. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, p. 9.

¹⁸ Dávila, 2001, 15

¹⁹ Suzanne Oboler, (1995). *Ethnic Labels, Latino lives: Identity and the politics of re-presentation in the United States*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

of self. Richard Rodriguez²⁰ questions whether a group labeled by the term “Hispanic” really even exists. He defines Hispanic as the following:

Hi.spa'. nick. 1. Spanish, *adjective*. 2. Latin American, *adjective*. 3. Hispano, *noun*. An American citizen or resident of Spanish decent. 4. Ducking under the cyclone fence, *noun*. 5. Seen running from the scene of a crime, *adjective*. Clinging to a raft off the Florida coast. Elected mayor in New Jersey. Elevated to bishop or traded to the San Diego Padres. Awarded the Golden pomegranate by the U.S. Census Bureau: ‘most fertile.’ Soon an oxymoron: America’s largest minority. An utter absurdity: “destined to outnumber blacks.” A synonym for the future (salsa having replaced catsup on most American kitchen tables)... Highest high school drop out rate; magical realism.

In his definition, Rodriguez illustrated the variety of ways “Hispanic” is construed through discourse in the United States and highlights how the term is an invented construction. One overarching term is used to describe a slew of clichés. He argued immigrants from Latin American didn’t know they were Hispanic until they arrived to the U.S. Therefore, they confront the term when they arrive to the United States because it is an entirely new term of identification.

Studies have examined how narratives and discourse of the immigrant community construct identifying labels such as Hispanic.²¹ Anna de Fina found that many Mexican immigrants accepted the term “Hispanic” as a frame of reference because they refer to themselves as Hispanic while telling stories. However, they simultaneously distance themselves from the term by using third-person narrative while describing their experiences of discrimination in the United States. Many times they do so because they have experienced prejudiced or racist attitudes from others against “Hispanics.” So, while the term was accepted as a form of identification, people separated themselves from it because others have attributed

²⁰ R. Rodríguez, 2002, 103

²¹ de Fina, 2006; Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998

negative associations to the word. Also, Latin American immigrants identify themselves as Hispanic, but they recognize that the term was applied to them by U.S. society.²²

On the other hand, the popularity of the term Latino was born from within the Latin American community living in the United States. The term represented a new “self-definition, re-thinking, and empowerment on the part of Latinos and Latinas, particularly in response to the government-imposed classification”²³ of Hispanic. Originally, the root of the word was derived from the word “Latin” in Latin America, a term that was used to describe the continent when the French had a colonial presence. According to Ed Morales, historically it was devised by “Napoleon-era France as a public relations ploy to explain why a French emperor was installed in Mexico City.”²⁴ More recently in the United States, however, the term evokes a sense of unification among Latin American immigrants. José Calderón’s research on Puerto Rican and Chicano identity suggested that the term “Latino” surfaced and became popular during the 1970s when Puerto Ricans and Chicanos were united through political groups and national coalitions.²⁵ The groups popularized the term in order to better represent a heritage of indigenous or racially mixed decent and to “symbolize their commonalities in issues and collective action.”²⁶ Also, Arlene Dávila’s research indicated that activists adopted the term because the label “Hispanic” did not justly reflect the myriad cultures of people claiming Latin American decent in the United States, and ignored “their struggles for civil empowerment.”²⁷ In fact, some say Latino has now become the preferred choice of representation for Latin American immigrants.²⁸ A sense of

²² de Fina, 2006

²³ Morín, 2005, 10

²⁴ Ed Morales, (2002). *Living in Spanglish: The Search for Latino Identity in America*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

²⁵ Calderón, 1992

²⁶ Calderón, 1992, 39

²⁷ Dávila, 2001, 15

²⁸ Gracia, 2000, 6

Latino community in the United States has become more prevalent, and scholars have critically examined ways this concept of self has been constructed.

One body of literature examines the concept of Latinismo, or pan-Latino ethnicity in the United States, and how that concept is developed and maintained in the United States. Laurie Kay Sommers explained that Latinismo forms part of a “larger phenomenon of panethnic movements worldwide, either on the continental or cross-regional scale, such as Pan-slavism, Pan-Africanism, Pan-Latin Americanism”²⁹ etcetera. Panethnic movements, she explained, are consciously employed strategies to unify a group based on “shared supraethnic traits.”³⁰ She argued Latinismo reflects Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined community. “Latinismo seeks a nation as an imagined community, distinguished by the style in which it is imagined, and which commands profound emotional legitimacy.” Thus, the pan-Latino community is “defined by perceived pan-ethnic ties that create a sense of boundary, continuity, and homogeneity for the group.”³¹ Group members imagine they share similar traits, backgrounds, and linguistic heritages, and have therefore unified under one pan-ethnic Latino identity.

A sense of being Latino in the United States has emerged from pan-ethnic Latino unification, which scholars have termed Latinidad, or a Latino consciousness. According to Patricia L. Price, Latinidad forms part of the pan-Latinismo concept.³² Scholars have attempted to conceptualize the notion of Latinismo, and have looked at localized and situational ways this Latino consciousness is formed.

²⁹ Laurie Sommers, (1991) “Inventing Latinismo: The Creation of ‘Hispanic’ Panethnicity in the United States.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 104, no. 411: 33

³⁰ Sommers, 1991, 34

³¹ Sommers, 1991, 32-53.

³² Patricia L. Price, (2007) “Cohering Culture on Calle Ocho: The Pause and Flow of Latinidad.” *Globalizations* 4, no. 1: 81-99.

Some argue the recent attempt to establish a pan-Latino community in the United States is a contemporary manifestation of nineteenth century intellectual attempts to unify the people of Latin America.³³ In the 1800s writers such as Cuba's Jose Martí vied for a "Latin American nationalist consciousness" as a form of anti-colonial struggle against Spanish rule, and later against "spreading U.S. imperialist incursions in the region."³⁴ Edna Acosta-Belen argued that there are existing trans-national connections between U.S. Latinos and people in Latin American countries. These connections create ties between the two Americas. Also, she suggested there is evidence of collective Latino cultural affirmation, resistance, and hybridization among U.S. Latinos. She argued that "more than any other group, Latinos are bridging the Americas and, in so doing, are restoring the original hemispheric sense to the name America by producing the kind of emancipatory knowledge that recognizes multiple cultural citizenships, experiences, and alliances."³⁵ Bridging differences to create a pan-Latino identity is necessary to undermine dominant discourse about what it means to be "American," thus undermining social, racial, and gender inequalities.

Local events and festivals, according to some scholars, have contributed to Latino identity construction. Sommers³⁶ studied how different Latino groups in the Mission District of San Francisco attempted to re-develop traditionally Mexican holiday fiestas into Latino festivals that included immigrants from various Latin American countries. According to the author, "although no single cultural symbol, beyond the Spanish language and a generic sense of Hispanidad, seems to unite the nation's Hispanics, one can document localized attempts to create

³³ Edna Acosta-Belén, (1999) "Hemispheric Remappings: Revisiting the Concept of Nuestra América." *Identities on the Move: Transnational Processes in North America and the Caribbean Basin*. Goldin, Linda R., ed. Albany, NY: University of Texas Press.; Sommers, 1991

³⁴ Acosta-Belén, 1999

³⁵ Acosta-Belén, 1999. 102

³⁶ Sommers, 1991, 32-53.

at least temporary panethnic solidarity through cultural performance.”³⁷ She asserted that festivals serve as frames for the exploratory enactment of Latino culture. “These festivals, and others like them across the country, are part of an emerging model of unity in diversity that allows group-specific displays of ethnicity to exist within the larger umbrella of Latino cultural performance.”³⁸ Godfrey also conducted studies about identity in the Mission District and argued that “Latino ethnic solidarity is visibly displayed, and socially reinforced, by the cultural landscape of the Mission District. Communal festivals and community art help create a Latino sense of place with social, cultural, and political overtones.”³⁹ In an ethnographic study conducted by Renato Rosaldo and William V. Flores in San Jose, California, the authors also found Latinos developed concepts of identity and community through festivals and community gatherings. For example, Puerto Ricans used an important cultural event, Día de San Juan, to establish a sense of Puerto Rican community. The festival also led to increased activity and a more consolidated Puerto Rican community.

Padilla⁴⁰ and Calderón⁴¹ argued that a “situationally specific” pan-Latino ethnicity arose when distinct ethnic groups such as Mexican Americans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans shared certain political and social goals. As a result of those shared interests, the groups united together as Latinos. Felix Padilla argued the leadership of Chicano and Puerto Rican groups, for example, promoted a concept of “Latinismo” in order to overcome similar disadvantaged social situations.⁴² The author quoted Abner Cohen’s stance that “one need not be a Marxist in order to recognize the fact that earning a livelihood, the struggle for a larger share of income from the

³⁷ Sommers, 1991, 37

³⁸ Sommers, 1991, 46

³⁹ Godfrey, 2004, 94

⁴⁰ Felix M. Padilla, (1984). “On the Nature of Latino Ethnicity.” *Social Science Quarterly* 65, no. 2: 651-664.

⁴¹ Jose Calderón, (1992). “‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’: The Viability of Categories for Panethnic Unity.” *Latin American Perspectives* 19, no. 4: 37-44.

⁴² Padilla, 1984

economic system, including the struggle for housing; for higher education, and for other benefits, and similar issues constitute an important variable significantly related to ethnicity.”⁴³ Shared issues united immigrants as a consolidated group because creating political and social change becomes more attainable when the groups work together as a unit, or together as Latinos.

Another significant factor that scholars have argued relate to identity construction is targeted marketing to Hispanics. In her novel, *Latinos, Inc.*, Arlene Dávila argued that marketing campaigns advertised through radio, television, and print media play a major role in formulating, shaping, and maintaining a false concept of “Latinidad” in the United States.⁴⁴ Also, to maximize advertising profits, Dávila argued marketers attempted to create a cohesive market in order to effectively construct and target its messages, which has contributed to the creation of a problematic “Hispanic” market. Flores and Yudice also pointed out that targeted marketing to Latinos attempts to unify the group. They argued “diverse Latino communities are also partially united by market and media courting of the 100+ billions of dollars that the 30+ millions of Latinos offer. Through their own interested motives, advertisers reach out to the ‘Hispanic’ market with campaigns custom-made for the culture, with special attention to holidays, family and religious life, and to the up-beat, success-story side of Latino experience.” The authors pointed out that language is used as a unifying factor for heterogeneously diverse Latino groups, especially by television stations such as Univision and Telemundo.⁴⁵

Consumption that evokes memories of homeland is also shown to play a role in formulations of identity. Marilyn Halter examined the links between consumer culture and the reinvention of ethnic identity. She found that immigrants modified and created aspects of their

⁴³ Padilla, 1984, 656-657

⁴⁴ Dávila, 2001

⁴⁵ Flores & Yudice, 1990, 68

ethnic identities through the consumption of ethnic consumer goods. Meanwhile, those ethnic goods also “assist in negotiating and enforcing identity differences.”⁴⁶ Through purchasing goods typical of homeland, immigrants both maintained and re-understood notions of group identity.

Finally, scholars have noted that borders of difference represent spaces of cultural blending that construct new cultural realities and identities. Gloria Anzaldúa argued the blending of cultures at the U.S.-Mexico border created the new *mestiza*, who lived between two cultures, flowed in and out of both, and therefore assumed characteristics of both. This merging of cultures, thus, created new hybrid forms of identity. Anzaldúa, who grew up in a town on the U.S.-Mexico border, wrote, “I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the Planet. I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and give them new meanings.”⁴⁷ The flow and movement of people creates opportunities for combinations of distinct cultural products that are interwoven to create something altogether new. Juan Flores and George Yudice wrote that the “Latino experience in the U.S. has been a continual crossover, not only across geopolitical borders but across all kinds of cultural and political boundaries.”⁴⁸ Borders of difference occupied by Latinos deep within the United States, according to Ed Morales, have created the concept of Spanglish – in a literal sense, the blending of two languages, Spanish and English – and in a figurative sense the blending of cultures.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Halter, 2000, 7

⁴⁷ Anzaldúa, 1991, 81

⁴⁸ Flores & Yudice, 1990, 71

⁴⁹ Morales, 2002

Methodology

The method of ethnography was used to gather data during this research study. Observations were gathered over the course of seven weeks and totaled approximately 77 hours. Observations were recorded through field notes. A total of 100 questionnaires were collected from shoppers at Plaza Fiesta. Questionnaires included 24 short-answer questions. Ten semi-structured and tape-recorded interviews were conducted with shoppers (5 men and 5 women) at Plaza Fiesta ranging from seven minutes to 35 minutes in length. Interview times varied depending on the answers respondents gave and their time availability. One 58 minute interview was conducted with the original manager and marketing director at Plaza Fiesta, Arturo Adonay. A 50 minute interview was conducted with Plaza Fiesta's current manager, Julio Peñaranda and another 35 minute interview was conducted with the current marketing director, Maritza Garcia. A 40 minute interview was conducted with Tony Guerrero, the master of ceremonies at each of Plaza Fiesta's major events. Finally one 36 minute interview was held with a marketing director who participates as a sponsor at Plaza Fiesta. Data was analyzed based on major themes found throughout interview responses, observations, and questionnaires.

With any ethnography comes a biased outlook because each observer is influenced by his or her own frame of cultural reference, and it is important to note that research findings reflect my own narration and interpretation of events at Plaza Fiesta. According to Kathleen Dewalt and Billie Dewalt, "all of us bring biases, predispositions, and hang-ups to the field with us, and we cannot completely escape these as we view other cultures" (Dewalt & Dewalt, 1998, 288). When doing my own field work, I attempted to remain open minded and not let my focus of research or my own preconceived notions about culture, identity, or Latino immigrants affect how I gathered

and interpreted data. However, the study was conducted through the lens of my own cultural experiences, background, and understanding about society. Also, although I speak Spanish, I am not a native Spanish speaker. I am not from Latin America, nor am I a descendent of anyone from Latin America. As a result, some factors may have been lost in translation and cultural differences and perspectives may have influenced my interpretation of answers. Finally, with recent laws passed about immigration reform, the respondents may have been more reluctant to give more in-depth and detailed answers for fear that their immigration status might have been revealed.

The focus of this study's research questions and the time and scope of the project limited the extent of data gathered and number of interviews, and therefore has provided opportunities for future study. The project was limited to marketing techniques used by only Plaza Fiesta itself, and therefore did not include a substantive number of interviews with marketing directors at companies who participate in Plaza Fiesta events as sponsors. As a result, an in-depth analysis of marketing messages used by these participating companies and the relationships those messages may have with Latin American immigrants' identities was not conducted. A deeper look at how local companies market to the Hispanic community through events at Plaza Fiesta would be a beneficial subject of future study. Questions about what message strategies companies use and how they relate to identity and Latino community in Atlanta would be useful. Also, Plaza Fiesta potentially means different things to first, second, and third generation Latinos, however, this study focused on interviews and questionnaires with adults and mostly first generation Latinos. Another suggestion for further study would be to focus on children or teenagers by analyzing the role Plaza Fiesta plays in identity construction for second generation Latinos. A more detailed and focused analysis of Plaza Fiesta based on the process of transnationalism would also be

beneficial. One research question could consider what role Plaza Fiesta plays in the process of formulating transnational identities for Latino immigrants living in Atlanta.

Findings

The outcome of this research is detailed in three chapters. Chapter two examines hybrid identity formations that occur among U.S. Latinos in the context of Plaza Fiesta. This chapter stretches notions of border identifications to represent Plaza Fiesta as a metaphorical border of difference located within Atlanta, Georgia. Understandings of identity at Plaza Fiesta expand beyond traditional notions of geographical borders, to include a social, cultural, and linguistic border created by a space of consumption. The relationship between marketing, product consumption, and localized constructions of identity is expounded. This chapter examines how grassroots marketing and localized memory appeals are used to attract customers, thereby resulting in hybrid identity formations. It also expands theories about hybridization through examining ways performance of culture contributes to new identity formations. The chapter argues that Plaza Fiesta is a space where imaginings of homeland and reinterpretations of culture create new understandings of identity in the following ways: First, Plaza Fiesta's design, architecture, and atmosphere, including its food and product offerings, simultaneously evoked imaginings of homeland and reinvented the meaning of homeland. Second, traditional Mexican Festivals were performed and reinvented at Plaza Fiesta, thereby carrying out cultural blending through re-presenting the holidays in a U.S. context. Third, language usage at Plaza Fiesta has created opportunities for new forms of communication such as *Spanglish*. As an outcome of these factors, Plaza Fiesta fostered multiple and combined identifications with Mexican culture, Latino culture, and U.S. culture.

Chapter three explores the relationship between pan-ethnic Latino identity formations and notions of belonging and not belonging for Latin American immigrants living in the United States. The chapter further expounds upon the relationship between marketing and the creation of Latinidad, or Latino ethnic consciousness, in the United States by focusing on a localized, grassroots case study of Plaza Fiesta. The chapter also illuminates ways local festivals at Plaza Fiesta contribute to establishing local Latino community in Atlanta. Examining the ways in which Latino identity gets constructed at a local level contributes to understandings about national pan-ethnic Latino identifications. The chapter adds to literature about Latino cultural citizenship and feelings of belonging by looking at how the othering of Latinos is carried out at Plaza Fiesta. It also complicates notions of “othering” by examining how Latinos draw strength and a sense of belonging from a marketplace targeted specifically to them. First the chapter argues that Plaza Fiesta contributes to pan-ethnic Latino identifications through marketing messages and through events that target and bring together people from a variety of Latin American countries. Second, it argues that by targeting Latinos and portraying Plaza Fiesta as a “home-away-from-home,” Plaza Fiesta casts Latino visitors as foreigners and different, and therefore “others.” Third it argues that despite this separation, Latinos find a place of belonging at Plaza Fiesta, especially during a time of tough immigration policies. Overall, the chapter highlights the layered and multiple ways notions of identity have been established through various factors at Plaza Fiesta including, marketing, festivities, consumption, and political and situational factors.

Chapter four reviews the complexities and contradictions about identity found during research at Plaza Fiesta. The chapter adds to identity theory and knowledge about how Latin American immigrants identify in the United States by analyzing the contradictions found at Plaza

Fiesta. It explores the fluid and often ambiguous nature of identity by analyzing how visitors at Plaza Fiesta preferred to identify themselves, and demonstrates that identifications often inspired mixed emotions and inconsistencies. Some visitors simultaneously embraced and distanced themselves from labels such as Hispanic and Latino. The chapter looks at the meaning of the word Hispanic, adding a nuanced understanding of the word that focuses solely on language instead of country origin, as found in previous scholarship. The chapter compares how participants responded to questions about Latino and Hispanic identity formations in questionnaires with how those same identities were interacted with at events. The pride questionnaire respondents showed of being Latino was not necessarily reflected at events. The chapter explores how national differences among Latinos can undermine attempts at Latino solidarity. By mainly focusing on a Mexican audience, Plaza Fiesta weakens its claims to be a Latino center. The chapter illuminates the contradictions between the political empowerment demonstrated at Latino and Mexican solidarity events and often passive community connections and identifications found at Plaza Fiesta. Finally, it argues that some visitors at Plaza Fiesta held on to previous identities, while others were encouraged to discover new ones.

Additionally, in chapter four I explore my own personal journey experienced through research at Plaza Fiesta. I examine my own experiences of “othering” at Plaza Fiesta and the role I played in the process of hybridization of identity occurring at the shopping center. This section also probes how dominant discourse about illegal immigration in the United States has a very local and real impact on how Latinos conceptualize their identities and notions of belonging in the United States. It explores how aspects of immigration issues permeated Plaza Fiesta and reflected how anti-immigrant attitudes have influenced participants’ concepts of themselves. Based on these factors, I call for a more nuanced understanding of immigration issues that takes

into account the complex economic and political factors that drive immigration as well as a more open-minded approach that values the enriched cultural diversity that Latin American immigrants bring to the United States.

Chapter Two: Imaginings of Homeland and New Realities

The art of cultural blending occurs when people live between two cultures and cross over into each. They juggle between two worlds, live in the “hyphen” of identity, and straddle the characteristics and values of each society. As a result, this merging of cultures creates something altogether new – a hybrid identity that forms the fabric of a new culture and consciousness. Homi Bhaba established the notion of identity hybridization, noting that hybridity emerged as a result of cultural collisions and fusions between colonizing Anglos and colonized populations. While there was an attempt to establish colonial power by creating “anglicized subjects,” the results turned out to be “something different – a mutation, a hybrid.”⁵⁰

Scholars working in cultural and Latino studies have adapted this notion of hybridization and applied it to areas such as the U.S.-Mexico border and the experience of Latinos in the United States. Gloria Anzaldúa and other scholars argue the U.S./Mexico border is a space where this fusion of cultures is carried out. Edna Acosta-Belén⁵¹ argues the experiences of Latinos living in the United States – the constant flux between “here” and “there” – create a “new cultural synthesis that emerges from a cultural and linguistic straddling.” Oscillations and struggles between two cultural worlds create “emerging new consciousness” and a new “hybrid or syncretic identity that incorporates multiple forms of consciousness based on the multi-, inter-, intra-, and cross-connections among the cultures.” In their essay, “Living Borders/Buscando America: Languages of Latino Self-formation,” Juan Flores and George Yudice wrote about the concept of identity crossover, where one’s identity crosses over between various boundaries.

⁵⁰ Bhaba, 1994, 117

⁵¹ Acosta-Belén, 1999, 100

They argued that the “Latino experience in the U.S. has been a continual crossover, not only across geopolitical borders but across all kinds of cultural and political boundaries.”⁵² Identity switches between two or more cultures and takes on forms of both.

These cultural borders have moved deeper into the United States and, as research has shown, Latino populations are increasing in size within the United States, including cities such as Atlanta. Cultural fusions are occurring not only at the U.S. Mexico border, but in cities well within the United States. Ed Morales wrote, “There is, of course, *the border*, the literal region of the Rio Grande, where Mexico blurs into the United States and vice versa. At the border, an obvious and often awkward mixing of cultures takes place... But the border also exists deep within the territory of North America, now more than ever, in its major cities; it is an imported border that is expressed through a dynamic, continuing recombination of cultures.”⁵³ Ethnic enclaves and areas highly populated by Latinos in the United State have created opportunities for cultural fusions and redefinitions of identity and one’s sense of self.

In Atlanta, Plaza Fiesta is such a space where cultures have been recombined and redefined to create something new, a hybrid between a largely dominant U.S. culture and introduced by Mexicans and other Latin Americans. This hybridity was constructed at Plaza Fiesta in various ways: First, Plaza Fiesta is a marketplace that evokes “imaginings of the homeland,”⁵⁴ and has constructed memories of Mexico or and other Latin American countries through its design and architecture, product offerings, and music. Dickinson wrote that “sites of memory are themselves open possibilities for a wide range of identities.” Plaza Fiesta is a place where memories of one’s homeland are strong, yet a new sense of home is created through

⁵² Flores & Yudice, 1990, 57-84.

⁵³ Morales, 2002, 4

⁵⁴ Price, 2007, 93

cultural fusions. Second, hybrid forms of identity have been created at Plaza Fiesta through the performance of activities with significant cultural import. Mexican identity was performed at events which were representations of cultural festivals in Mexico. However, because festivals and events were re-presentations, they were not exact replicas and, as a result, re-invented cultural identifications emerged. At Plaza Fiesta identification was strongly rooted in Mexico but allowed for the incorporation of U.S. consumption and other cultural ideals. Third, the fusion of two languages, Spanish and English, have created hybrid or mixed language usage, often referred to as *Spanglish*. Younger generations, especially, flowed between the two languages and incorporated Spanish and English in the same sentences when communicating between each other and with their parents.

A Slice of Mexico: Plaza Fiesta's Atmosphere and Identity Formation

Plaza Fiesta's architecture and design evoked memories of shoppers' homelands, and managers played on nostalgia and feelings of being in Mexico or Latin America to welcome customers. Dickinson suggested that memories are utilized in sites to "create intriguing spaces for consumption."⁵⁵ Founders at Plaza Fiesta based its design on locations in Mexico, a technique they used to intrigue Latinos and a majority Mexican consumer base. The design, decoration and architecture of the mall replicated a *mercado* (market) and plaza one would find in Mexico or Latin America. According to Arturo Adonay, original manager and marketing director for the Plaza, developers traveled to Mexico, took pictures of Mexican markets and plazas, and created the façades and decorations inside the Plaza based on the images. Arturo explained the plaza-style architecture is very typical throughout Latin America because it derived from the plaza-style architecture Spain transferred to the continent when it colonized most of

⁵⁵ Dickinson, 1997, 5

Latin America. Founders called the mall Plaza Fiesta because the name evoked the same community feeling of those plazas throughout Mexico and Latin America – a place where families gather, go for walks, socialize, eat and see entertainment. Fiesta, meaning party, was incorporated into the name because, according to Arturo, because festivals are strongly valued in Mexico. “We like to have that sense of party, where you celebrate 365 days. We celebrate the teachers, we celebrate the kids, celebrate the mothers, we celebrate the fathers, the godfathers, we celebrate everything.” This Mexican tradition of celebrating and spending time at the local Plaza is evoked in Plaza Fiesta’s name and atmosphere.

The exterior and interior architecture simulates both plaza-style architecture and a *mercado* environment. The exterior of the mall is painted in bright coral colors. The exterior walls of Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta and Burlington Coat factory are painted bright orange, and Burlington Coat Factory’s entrance is painted coral pink. Kool Smiles dental clinic and La Suprema Panderia and Bakery built a pueblo-style exterior with pale stucco outer walls, a red terracotta tile roof, and arched entry ways. The dental office and bakery are modeled after the adobe and Spanish-Colonial style architecture found in Mexico (Figure 1). The brightly painted walls continued inside the main mall area, with cinderblock walls painted in bright yellow and orange. Strings of small yellow, pink, lime green, aqua blue, orange, and purple flags were draped from the rafters throughout the arcade, food court and halls of plaza. Colorful façades depicting plaza residences, central clocks, and other structures lined the walls along the mall’s main path (Figure 2). The Plaza’s centerpiece is a large, round fountain at the center of the mall (Figure 3).



Figure 1: Plaza Fiesta bakery designed in Spanish Colonial style used in Mexico.



Figure 2: Plaza Fiesta's façades depicting Plaza-style architecture



Figure 3: Central Fountain at Plaza Fiesta.

The central market-like section of Plaza Fiesta was an interpretation of markets in Mexico and other Latin American countries, and represented a fusion of Mexican and U.S. consumer traditions. The plaza-style façades lined the halls of a flea-market set-up, which contained long rows of stalls where vendors sold a variety of different products, many made in Mexico. The fact that customers paid in U.S. dollars for products made in Mexico is a significant example of the hybridization of Mexican and U.S. consumption. Five respondents indicated shopping in Plaza Fiesta was just like shopping in Mexico, except that customers paid in dollars. Also, Plaza Fiesta's market is organized and has established business owners who rent stall space. It also combines many products and stores into one building. Three respondents pointed out that it was different from markets in Mexico because they are unorganized, where anyone could bring products to sell. One interview participant from Guatemala indicated that in his country the markets have rocky, dirt floors with tarps for ceilings. There people brought vegetables from their back yards and sold them at the market. A theme revealed by questionnaire and interview respondents was that the market-like atmosphere at Plaza Fiesta was similar to being in markets in Latin America. However, it represented a hybrid of Latin American markets and a U.S. strip mall. Plaza Fiesta adapted the market concept to fit a U.S. model where local business owners rented space and established businesses.

If people shop for identities, as Marilyn Halter⁵⁶ argues, then shoppers at Plaza Fiesta are shopping for an identity that combines strong nostalgic ties with Mexico, U.S. influences, and a mixture of other Latin American and some Asian products. The juxtaposition of shops at Plaza Fiesta demonstrated this combination of cultures. The Burlington Coat Factory, a U.S. chain retail store, offered reduced-priced U.S. brand names such as Ralph Lauren Polo, Unionbay,

⁵⁶ Halter, 2000

Beverly Hills Polo Club, and DKNY jeans. Shoppers could walk out of Burlington Coat Factory into the Mexican market atmosphere – the largest part of the mall which contains dozens of products made in Mexico, and a few from other countries, including Latin America and the U.S. Marshalls, another U.S. retail store that offers low-priced U.S. brand names, is located on the other end of the Mexican-themed market. The Atlanta Farmers Market sells a variety of Asian rice, cookware such as woks and service ware including chopsticks and Asian bowls, and specialty cuisines such as eels and frogs. Happy Valley Chinese Restaurant, which specializes in dim sum, Chinese dumplings and other steamed dishes, is located near Carnitas Michoacan, which offers Mexican soups and other foods.

Many products sold in the market section of Plaza Fiesta reinforced strong identification with homeland but allowed for the blending of cultural references. Marilyn Halter argues that immigrants modify and create aspects of their ethnic identities through the consumption of ethnic consumer goods.⁵⁷ Based on questionnaire responses 79 out of 96 respondents indicated products at Plaza Fiesta reminded them of their home country. For example, various vendors sold dresses and outfits for *quince años* (15th birthday celebrations for girls), baptisms, communions, and wedding celebrations. These shops had an abundance of white fluffy dresses hanging from the walls, ceilings and racks. Some also sold elaborate, princess-like dresses in a variety of colors, as well as tiaras and jewelry for the girls turning 15. Hand-made party decorations, favors, and large dolls were for sale too. Carmen, a shop worker from Mexico, explained the significance of the dolls. Fathers give the dolls to their daughters who are turning 15. It symbolizes the last gift that a father gives his daughter during her childhood. In addition to the products that evoked cultural ties with Mexico, Plaza Fiesta housed U.S. cell phone dealers, Suntrust Bank, electronics stores,

⁵⁷ Halter, 2000

perfumeries, shoe stores, and shops boasting products from a variety of countries. The candy shop sold a piñata that featured the Disney movie High School Musical's characters. Typical U.S. baby clothes were also sold alongside Mexican yarn and Mexican baby clothes. Mexican saddles were sold alongside U.S. brand jeans at Laredo Western wear. By consuming this mixture of goods, shoppers have maintained strong ties to their "homelands," while incorporating U.S. and Latino cultural affiliations.

Foods at Plaza Fiesta also played a significant role in creating opportunities for cultural fusion and movement between cultures. Upon entering the Mexican-market area of Plaza Fiesta, visitors found a variety of foods that were typical of Mexico. Six participants indicated they enjoyed coming to Plaza Fiesta to eat an *antojito*, or finger foods typically prepared in México. One participant, Maria Fernanda, said that *antojitos* reminded her of Mexico more than anything about Plaza Fiesta. Food stands and kiosks throughout the mall sold snacks including fresh fruit with chili powder, strawberries and yogurt, peanuts, and the popular *chicharrones*. One vendor, Clara, explained *chicharrones* are a popular snack in Mexico made by frying a type of flour. To add extra flavor and spice, visitors at Plaza Fiesta poured oil, Salsa Valentine (a hot sauce), and lime juice over the top. Children, young men, and parents at Plaza Fiesta often ate *chicharrones* while walking through the mall, sitting by the fountain, or in the food court. Consumers satisfied their sweet cravings at kiosks and the candy store in Plaza Fiesta, which sold a vast variety of *golosinas* (candies) and sweet treats made in Mexico such as El Original Vaquita, Mexican chocolate, or extra hot and salted tamarind pulp candy. Tamarind, a popular ingredient found throughout Plaza Fiesta, is a Mexican fruit that was prepared several ways. At one kiosk, it was used as a flavoring to pour over sno cones.

The restaurants at Plaza Fiesta's food court sought to offer authentic Mexican foods, but also incorporated typical fast foods found at many U.S. malls. For example, shoppers could order french fries with their Mexican *tortas* (sandwiches) from Puras Tortas restaurant. Customers ordered cheese or pepperoni pizza's from Michael's Pizza, which was located next to Mariscolandia, which served daiquiri-sized dishes of seafood cocktails that contained shrimp, octopus and oysters, sizzling fajitas, *ceviche* (a citrus-marinated seafood salad), and fish prepared to taste. The *panaderías* (bakeries) served bread and pastries from Mexico, including *buellos* (sandwich bread), *conchas* (pastries), *pasteles de tres leches* (three milk cakes), and wedding, 15th birthday, baptism, and communion cakes. Mexican brand drinks such as Sidral Mundel, *aguas frescas* (fresh fruit drinks), and *horchatas*, were served alongside popular brands such as Coca Cola and Fanta.

Plaza Fiesta's food court vendors reinvented the U.S. food court model, where many U.S. mall restaurants typically offer pre-packed fast foods and pre-made sauces, and incorporated a more homemade, community-oriented approach to serving mostly Mexican foods. At Mariscolandia, for example, Jessica blended and taste-tested the salsa of the day while Pancho snacked on crab legs for lunch. Also, employees at Pollos Mi Tierra and Carnitas Michoacan prepared fresh tortillas every day. They flattened tortilla dough in tortilla presses and cooked them on the grills. Pollos Mi Tierra provided several community-containers of toppings and snacks, and customers shared a selection of cilantro, lime, pico de gallo, and onions served in containers that were placed on the counter. A spicy green salsa was served in mortar bowls on the counter as well, along with tamales and onions that were served free-of-charge for snacking. Tacos La Norteña served fresh, home-made horchata as well. The food court represents a hybrid

form of typical food courts found in the U.S., with pre-prepared fast foods, and a Mexican twist including *antojitos*, homemade salsas, and a number of freshly prepared foods and drinks.

Music at Plaza Fiesta created opportunities for cultural crossovers, and a variety of genres from within Mexico, around Latin America, and the U.S. were intermingled. Music simultaneously evoked imaginings of the homeland, and reflected the myriad cultural influences experienced by people at Plaza Fiesta. Managers hired a mariachi band to play every Sunday at Plaza Fiesta. Mariachi is a form of music that originated in Mexico dating from the era of Spanish colonization led by Hernán Cortés. It is a fusion of indigenous, European and African influences.⁵⁸ The band traveled around the Plaza and played by the Marshalls, the central fountain, and the food court. Listening to Mariachi evoked memories of being in Mexico and small crowds gathered to listen when they played. The music store, Discolandia, also offered a wide variety of Mexican musical styles such as Ranchera, Norteña, Duranguense and Mariachi. To appeal to broader Latino tastes, managers played a variety of Latin American genres over the loudspeakers throughout the Plaza.

Other musical acts at Plaza Fiesta featured Mexican music. According to Maritza Garcia, current marketing director at Plaza Fiesta, all musical acts were targeted to the Mexican population and performances featured different Mexican and Mexican-American genres. Duranguense, for example, is a musical style that was started in Chicago by Mexican immigrants and inspired by Durango, a state in Mexico.⁵⁹ Managers at Plaza Fiesta brought Diana Reyes, a famous Duranguense Mexican singer, for autograph signings and a performance at Plaza Fiesta.

⁵⁸ Jonathan D. Clark, "A Brief History on the Mariachi Tradition." In *Mariachi Publishing's Education Resources*, 1996. Retrieved June 3, 2008 from http://www.sobrino.net/mer/entry_on_the_word_mariachi.htm

⁵⁹ Melissa Giraud, "Duranguense: Mexico Meets the Midwest." *NPR Music*. 14 Jan 2006. Retrieved June 3, 2008 from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5156569>

Another performance at Plaza Fiesta featured a Norteña band with played Northern Mexican music. The group of men played at the Plaza fountain and wore black cowboy hats. Julio Peñaranda, manager of Plaza Fiesta, explained how different musical genres of Mexico were fused at Plaza Fiesta: “When you’re in the south end of Mexico you won’t hear the same kind of music that’s being played in the northern part of Mexico. Here [at Plaza Fiesta] you hear both. You hear music from all sides of Mexico. You really get to see the whole country around, instead of just focusing in one state.” Plaza Fiesta showcased acts from various Mexican styles, and brought different cultural influences into one place. By doing so, it fostered identification with a broader definition of Mexican culture that merged different cultural aspects from across the country.

Events such as Festival de Las Americas held at Plaza Fiesta demonstrated how participants incorporated a variety of musical genres such as rap, rock, and reggaeton and other Latin American styles into their performances. The event, hosted by *Atlanta Latino* newspaper, was a singing contest for local Latinos. Performances included a variety of genres including mariachi, cumbia, reggaeton, Spanish pop, and rock. The performance by the Latin Mustangs, a local student dance group, at Festival de Las Americas particularly represented a fusion of cultures and musical styles. Their routine included a mixture of salsa (Caribbean-inspired Latin American rhythms), cumbia (a mixture of African and Indigenous rhythms originating in Colombia), and hip hop beats, among others. This fusion of musical styles at Plaza Fiesta represents how cultures are blended and crossed. Expanded knowledge and exposure to new things created opportunities for hybrid identifications that incorporated a multitude of cultural influences.

¡Viva Mexico! Major Events and Identity at Plaza Fiesta

Mexican culture was newly interpreted through performances during events held at Plaza Fiesta. These activities evoked memories of Mexico and both reinforced and reinvented cultural identifications. Events were a strong marketing tool used by Plaza Fiesta, which hosted monthly interpretations of traditional fiestas celebrated in Mexico. Plaza Fiesta's marketing director Maritza Garcia explained:

We have events every month and we focus a great deal on what the Mexican population likes because our market is 90 percent Mexican. So we like to bring their traditions, their culture, typical days they celebrate: Mother's Day, Father's Day, Kid's Day, Cinco de Mayo, Mexican Independence Day, Día de los Muertos, Posada Navideña and so on. Our goal is to provide what they [Mexicans] want and to do something that brings their roots to them. They are very nationalistic and patriotic, and events like Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day, we are totally sure that it's an event for them and they will attend. They do the events in their country but they are here now. They will want to continue doing them. And show their children and grandchildren what they customarily celebrated in their home countries, and unfortunately they are not there to do that.

Such events constructed a strong relationship with the Mexican homeland, but were localized to fit the Atlanta Hispanic market. Participants at Plaza Fiesta performed Mexican cultural activities at major events, thereby re-interpreting the traditional festivals for a local audience and creating new realities of identity. Plaza Fiesta's Cinco de Mayo celebration exemplifies the hybridization of a Mexican civic holiday and U.S. consumer culture. Perhaps there is no better example, however, than the Plaza's Mexican Independence Day Celebration.

In many ways, the Mexican Independence Day Celebration is a reimagining of Mexican culture and tradition. It has re-presented and re-interpreted the national day for a local Atlanta audience. Performance theory posits that when one culture mimics another culture, an exact replica is not created. Instead, according to Susan Friedman, theorists argue something new is created, and a hybrid identity or culture results. She wrote that performance theorists argued this

occurred when colonized people attempted to mimic colonizing cultures, or when cultures interacted in borders between differences. Plaza Fiesta offers a different interpretation of “mimicry.”⁶⁰ The Mexican Independence Day celebration has actually mimicked or re-performed a traditional Mexican holiday celebrated in Mexico for local Latinos of Mexican decent living in Atlanta. Instead of attempting to replicate the “other” culture, the events at Plaza Fiesta attempted to replicate immigrants’ own, previous cultures. People re-performed what it meant to be Mexican within the context of Atlanta and the United States. Local interpretations of the holiday were fused with Mexican interpretations, thereby creating an event that simultaneously evoked imaginings of one’s homeland, while re-defining that homeland.

The Mexican Independence Day celebration was a localized re-presentation of celebrations done in Mexico to celebrate the country’s independence from Spain in 1810. Organized by Plaza Fiesta, the local Mexican Consulate, and Univision 34 Atlanta, the event is the most-attended festival done by Plaza Fiesta, and approximately 50,000 people participated in 2007. Participants performed Mexican identity by sporting Mexican jerseys, bandanas, and sombreros that said ‘Viva México.’ Some draped Mexican flags over their shoulders to honor their former country or that of their parents. *El Grito*, or Cry of Independence was recreated by the local Mexican Consulate based on traditions in Mexico. Plaza Fiesta simulated the church bell rung by the Catholic priest Hidalgo on September 16 when Mexico was victorious against Spain, by playing a bell over the loud speakers. The local Mexican consulate led the gathered crowd in a series of resounding “VIVA MEXICOS!” in the traditional method of celebrating Independence Day in Mexico. A local mariachi performer sang the Mexican national hymn.

⁶⁰ Friedman, 2002



Figure 4: Mexican Patriotism at Plaza Fiesta’s Mexican Independence Day Celebration.

Marketing messages surrounding the event also demonstrated how the event was localized and reinvented for Mexicans living in Atlanta. For example, one poster for the 2007 event read, “Atlanta is wearing the Mexican Tri-colors! Show your pride and come celebrate Mexican Independence Day! (Figure 5)” For participants at the event, Plaza Fiesta became the site of Mexican patriotism in the United States. Mexican pride and culture was newly developed and reinforced in a location far from Mexico and identifications with Mexico were re-imagined in a local context. Going to Plaza Fiesta on Buford Highway, as opposed to, for example, Mexico City’s central plaza, for the Independence Day celebration represented showing Mexican pride. Wearing bandanas and sombreros sold at Plaza Fiesta represented affiliation with the country. Through its localized re-interpretation of the festival, the event appealed to immigrants’ nationalistic feelings for a Mexican homeland. Mexicans living in the United States gathered together to celebrate their independence. A feeling of solidarity was established with fellow patriots through repeating the Mexican Independence Day celebration performance.



Figure 5: Patriotic marketing messages used by Plaza Fiesta.

The Cinco de Mayo celebration is an example of how a Mexican civic holiday was reinvented to fuse Mexican tradition with U.S. consumer culture. Cinco de Mayo, organized by Plaza Fiesta and Univision 34 Atlanta, a local Spanish language television station, is the second most popular event at Plaza Fiesta. The Mexican holiday commemorates the defeat of the French at the Battle of Puebla in 1862,⁶¹ however it is celebrated only modestly in Mexico. According to Arturo Adonay, who grew up in Mexico, the event is a small civic ceremony. “Cinco de Mayo is in Mexico. We celebrate it. But when I moved to the states it was huge. In Mexico it’s a civic ceremony that we hold that day. We don’t have big parties. What we have is a civic parade. Other than that we don’t do parties and we don’t celebrate with festivals.” In fact, according to Marilyn Halter, “Cinco de Mayo is hardly celebrated in Mexico, but it has become widely recognized holiday in the United States in recent years.”⁶² Godfrey noticed in his own research of the Mission District in San Francisco California that “visiting Mexicans often remark on how

⁶¹ Godfrey, 2004
⁶² Halter, 2000, 15

the Cinco de Mayo celebrations of U.S. Latinos surpass those in their homeland.”⁶³ At Plaza Fiesta the celebration represents a hybrid event that combines U.S. business and economic interests with a Mexican civic holiday. Mexican culture was performed in a highly corporate backed event.

Cinco de Mayo at Plaza Fiesta combined corporate interests to reach the Hispanic market with Mexican cultural performances. The event is a celebration for the Latino community, but is driven by corporate sponsors and corporate organizers. One organizer explained, “Cinco de Mayo is a celebration of Latino community, yes, but it’s basically been brought on because of beer companies. Corona started to make it huge ten plus years ago, and basically over the past two decades it’s grown in popularity. It’s become a beer and restaurant celebration where you eat chips and salsa and drink your corona with lime. It’s not really celebrating anything necessarily. I know that there’s a historical meaning, but I don’t really think [the event] is as important to the Latino community as Mexican Independence Day is. It doesn’t drive to their hearts as much.” A questionnaire respondent echoed that sentiment. When asked if he thought the event was important to the Latino community, he replied, “No,” because “Cinco de Mayo doesn’t exist for Mexicans and it’s just a pretext for young *anglos* to drink.”

At Plaza Fiesta’s Cinco de Mayo celebration, dozens of corporate sponsors lined the edges of the Plaza’s parking lot where the event was held. U.S. companies carrying out Hispanic target marketing were stationed at booths alongside Latino businesses and Mexican product vendors (Figure 6). Comcast Cable company, Nationwide Insurance, Bank of America, BB&T, Bill Heard Chevrolet, and Best Mexico calling cards were intermingled with booths promoting

⁶³ Godfrey, 2004, 94

food products such as Maggi, Charras tortilla chips, Frontera Mex Mex Grill, McDonalds and Tropical, the self-proclaimed flavor of Mexico. Lawyers such as Abogados de la Raza and Abogado del Pueblo, and Spanish-language media outlets including Univision 34 Atlanta, *Atlanta Latino* newspaper, *MundoHispánico* news paper, *Georgia Latino News*, and *El Universal Gráfico* tabloid were also present to promote their products. Health clinics such as Clínica de la Salud Hispana (Hispanic Health Clinic), Kool Smiles dental clinic, and Vital Smiles dental clinic were present to attract patients. Event participants formed long lines to spin prize wheels, or even win a prize by kicking a soccer ball into a small goal at Astral's booth that promoted their horoscope services. Univision 34 Atlanta's banner was featured prominently on the central stage and several other corporate banners were hung on the Plaza's outside wall, visible to event attendees. The event also had amusement rides that provided fun for kids and families. Despite the holiday's commercialization, Latino community members give substantial support to the event, and insist that it continue. Each year approximately 20,000 participants attend at Plaza Fiesta and, according to one organizer, when Plaza Fiesta and Univision 34 elected not to host the event, they received many calls from community members and decided to continue hosting it every year.



Figure 6: Corporate Sponsors at Plaza Fiesta's Cinco de Mayo Celebration

The 2008 Cinco de Mayo festival reinterpreted the holiday by incorporating a Mariachi Festival and Mexican folklore dancing. Organizers brought popular Mexican culture and traditions to Atlanta. This year's Cinco de Mayo was advertised as the first ever Mariachi Festival in Atlanta, and aimed to provide a unique, more authentic Mexican festival atmosphere for Plaza Fiesta's visitors (Figure 7). The Mariachi Festival is a popular event held in Guadalajara, Mexico. According to one organizer "there are mariachi festivals in other cities like Orlando, and the biggest one is out of Guadalajara, and it's basically a contest to pick the best mariachi band." Mexican patriotism was evident at the event, and one mariachi singer called out to the audience, "Keep supporting the music of Mexico!" and "Remember your homeland, your people, your country!" The event even brought the *Mariachi Internacional de Guadalajara* to Atlanta, a famous mariachi band from Guadalajara, Mexico. Local Atlanta mariachi bands were featured as well and the crowd sang along with the songs played. The celebration also featured a *ballet folklórico* performance, or Mexican folklore dancing performed by a local group of children (Figure 8). The group wore various costumes to enact traditional dances of Mexico. They dressed up as "Abuelitos" or grandparents, and wore masks, colorful Mexican ponchos,

and danced with canes. They also performed a dance where they balanced cups on their heads, and in one routine, girls wore brightly colored ruffled skirts and danced with boys wearing mariachi hats and suits.



Figure 7: Mariachi Festival at Plaza Fiesta



Figure 8: Cultural performance at Plaza Fiesta

At Plaza Fiesta's Cinco de Mayo celebration identification with Mexico is both reinforced and reinvented according to U.S. economic interests. Close to the event, Plaza managers even decorated the food court area of the Plaza using large streamers and sombrero-shaped decorations in the colors of the Mexican flag, red, white and green. They also switched the draping flags throughout the Plaza, which were previously a variety of colors, to the Mexican tri-color. Decorations inside the Plaza and cultural performances such as folkloric ballet and a Mariachi Festival suggested identification with Mexico and reinforced patriotism and nostalgic connections with the country. However, the Mexican civic event was reinvented for a U.S. Latino audience. Plaza Fiesta and corporate partners redefined the patriotic holiday, and turned the day into a popular celebration among Atlanta's Latino population. Underlying corporate interests drove the event through sponsorships and have combined product marketing with Mexican cultural performance. This hybridization of the event has created a new interpretation of Mexican patriotism and identification in the United States and a synthesis of U.S. economic interests and Mexican history.

Spanglish: An Opportunity for Cultural Fusion

Language has offered a significant opportunity for hybrid cultural expression at Plaza Fiesta. The use of *Spanglish* by families and especially children demonstrated how language was intermingled and became fused to create new forms of communicating. For example, one family of about seven sat down in the food court and conducted an entire conversation using *Spanglish*. The conversation was filled with statements switching from English to Spanish. For example, the mother said to her daughter, "*Aquí está* (here is) half of the hamburger. You didn't eat any of your hamburger." And the child replied, "Yes I did, *mira* (look)!" The mom also talked to the

male adult about an old friend, “*Ya que se casó se ha puesto muy fat, sabes?* (Since she has gotten married, she has gotten really fat, you know?) That’s what she’s like now.” There was also a widespread use of English by children at Plaza Fiesta amongst each other. However, they immediately switched to Spanish when addressing their parents. Signs in Marshalls were in both Spanish and English. For example, signs read, “Men’s Shoes / Calzados para Hombres; Ladies Shoes/ Calzados para Damas.” Conduct rules established by Plaza Fiesta were also posted in English and Spanish.

Interactions with people at Plaza Fiesta revealed that several visitors and employees wanted to learn English in addition to Spanish. Flores and Yudice wrote that “even for the most monolingual of Latinos, the ‘other’ language looms constantly as a potential resource, and the option to vary according to different speech contexts is used far more often than not.”⁶⁴ Four employees at Plaza Fiesta wanted to tap into this language resource, and two sisters explained they were in process of learning English at a local school in Doraville. Also, during observation’s, several men bought how-to-learn English books from the Librería Book Store. One was titled, *Inglés para Latinos* (English for Latinos) and was targeted to immigrants living in the United States. The cover boasted, “If you want to get ahead in the United States, graduate from college, get ahead at work, and become a citizen, this book is for you.... English is the most spoken language in the world.” The influence of both Spanish and English at Plaza Fiesta has created opportunities for people to learn both languages and become bilingual, resulting in the hybridization of language and identification.

⁶⁴ Flores & Yudice, 1990, 57-84

Conclusion

Memories evoked by Plaza Fiesta's atmosphere simultaneously authenticated the identities of visitors and opened possibilities for new identifications. The Plaza reinforced strong connections with Mexico and other Latin American countries, but brought about cultural fusions and new hybrid identifications. Dickinson wrote that "memory offers to consumers the possibility of coherent identities firmly situated within a warmly remembered past."⁶⁵ Indeed, a major theme that arose from research data was that shoppers at Plaza Fiesta felt like they were at home, or back in their home nations. One respondent called Plaza Fiesta a *pedacito de México*, or a little slice of Mexico. The people at Plaza Fiesta, the products, and the foods reminded shoppers of being at home. Enrique, when writing about if Plaza Fiesta reminded him of his home nation, answered, "Yes, but Plaza Fiesta could be more like a hybrid between my home country and the U.S.A." By simulating a Mexican or Latin American market and Plaza, the shopping center created a new combination cultures. As Dickinson wrote, sites that are designed to evoke memories are themselves "open possibilities for a wide range of identities." Mexican culture is an influence that is strongly maintained at Plaza Fiesta. However, its juxtaposition with other Latin American cultures and location within Atlanta and the United States offered opportunities for cultures to merge, musical traditions to fuse, languages to intermingle, and nuanced identifications to form.

Plaza Fiesta highlighted the relationship between consumption and localized constructions of identity, and represented a place that elicited memories of the old and acceptance of the new. Dickinson argued that "together, memory and consumer culture provide

⁶⁵ Dickinson, 1997, 1-2

the possibilities for creating meaningful identities.” Consumer culture at Plaza Fiesta included products and foods from a variety of nations, but the two strongest cultural influences were Mexican and U.S. Marilyn Halter suggested that consumerism and the products people buy are deeply intertwined with the consumer’s sense of self. In a sense, visitors at Plaza Fiesta were shopping for an identity that was strongly connected to homeland, but also left open possibilities for other cultural influences. The food court at Plaza Fiesta combined both Mexican and U.S. fast food traditions. Products that evoked memories of Mexico were sold alongside typical U.S. products and brands. A piñata, or paper container that is typically filled with toys and sweets at parties in Mexico, was sold at the candy store and pictured Disney’s High School Musical characters, a recently popular movie for youngsters in the U.S. The piñata is a symbolic example of this hybridization of cultures and show an acceptance and combination of Mexican and U.S. popular traditions. If “acts of self-definition” are carried out through consumer goods, then shoppers at Plaza Fiesta have re-defined homeland in a U.S. context to incorporate influences of both cultures.

Homeland was re-imagined and remembered through recreations of patriotic festivals by Plaza Fiesta and other corporate sponsors. Dispersed immigrants joined together at events such as Mexican Independence Day and Cinco de Mayo to perform and re-invent traditional festivals of their pasts. Dickinson wrote that “Identity is a project, a constant repetition of stylized acts that are not founded on any secure structure, but instead are enmeshed in constantly changing, socially constructed forces. These constantly changing, socially constructed forces are the workings of memory, for the sedimentation of past actions, past proscriptions and past sanctions compose the cultural resources people utilize in the performance of themselves. Identity, in this

formulation, is the creative performance of memory.” Memories of homeland were constructed at Plaza Fiesta’s Mexican Independence Day Celebration, and the patriotic event was reinvented and localized for Mexican immigrants living in Georgia. Immigrants performed Mexican identity based on past memories and current conceptions of home in Georgia. Cinco de Mayo was reinvented based on corporate interests to take on new meanings for Mexican immigrants living in Atlanta. The hybridization of U.S. consumerism and Mexican tradition reconstructed Mexican patriotism and identification with the country.

Plaza Fiesta’s environment has created an interplay between the imagined and the real⁶⁶ where imaginings of “homeland” were strong but a new, hybrid concept of reality was created. Gupta and Ferguson wrote that “remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people. This has long been true of immigrants who use memory of place to construct imaginatively their newly lived world. ‘Homeland’ in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples, though the relation to homeland may be very differently constructed in different settings.” A newly lived world has been constructed at Plaza Fiesta that incorporated the ambiguities, cultural complexities, and cultural fusions that Anzaldúa argued one finds at a borderland. Reconstructions of homeland have been incorporated into a U.S. strip mall. The image of the mariachi band playing outside of Marshalls is a powerful example of this juxtaposition of cultures. Marshalls, a U.S. chain store that carries popular U.S. brands, formed the backdrop of mariachi band members who were dressed in sombreros and Mariachi suites, and playing mariachi songs in Spanish. Gloria Anzaldúa argued that the new *mestiza* living at borders not only sustains contradictions, she turns

⁶⁶ Price, 2007, 92

the ambivalence into something else. The imaginings of homeland created at Plaza Fiesta, combined with the reality of being in the U.S., have maintained strong identifications for a majority of Mexican visitors but have also created newly interpreted, hybrid identifications that incorporated aspects of various cultures.

Chapter Three

Separate but Welcome: Othering and Latinidad at Plaza Fiesta

To be and feel *Latino* is both an intriguing and problematic concept. The notion of pan-ethnic Latino connection was born with Simon Bolívar who wanted to unify the people of Latin America and create one Latin American consciousness in the face of Spanish colonial domination. Modern concepts of Latinidad have materialized in the present day through attempts to unify Latin American immigrants living in the United States based on common language, backgrounds, and affiliations with Latin American. Scholars have shown that Latinidad, or Latino consciousness, and a sense of belonging to a Latino community in the United States is constructed by different aspects of society.

Identification as Latino can be produced through various means and narratives in society. For example, local events that bring immigrants from different Latin American countries together demonstrate localized attempts to unify Latinos as a community. Situational contexts such as fighting for immigrant rights or for better access to education have also served as means for unification of Latinos in the United States. Hispanic marketing efforts have attempted to group people from distinct backgrounds into one Latino market that is easily targeted.

A seemingly unified Latino community is realizable on many levels. However, establishing Latino community and identification can also be seen as problematic. By perpetuating the idea that Latinos are a distinct “nation within a nation,” constructions of Latino identity also perpetuate the group’s difference and “otherness” in mainstream society.

Recent scholarship has adapted the post-colonial concept of the ‘other’ to modern concepts of identity, and social and racial structures in the United States. Stuart Hall wrote that

“racism is a structure of discourse and representation that tries to expel the Other symbolically – blot it out, put it over there in the Third World, at the margin. Identity is about the relationship between one person and the other. Only when there is an other, can you know who you are.”⁶⁷ Scholars have problematized categorical labels such as “minority,” “gay,” “illegal immigrant,” and “alien.” The labels are used by the so-called mainstream to describe people that seem “different” – the “other” people who are often marginalized and seen to not fit in with the mainstream mold. The “other” is then contrasted with what is considered to be “normal,” which in many cases is white, heterosexual, and protestant.⁶⁸ U.S. society’s obsession with giving people labels and dividing society into categories of difference are based on the mainstream’s desire to maintain the status quo. Many perceive that their lifestyle is being threatened by something different, something strange, and as a result negative attitudes, discrimination and prejudice arise, more often than not because there is a lack of understanding, communication, and a fear of what is unknown.

As a case study group, the population at Plaza Fiesta has revealed a complex and dynamic relationship between belonging and othering. Observations and interviews substantiate that Plaza Fiesta’s combination of local events, design, architecture, and marketing messages have reinforced the population’s connections to a pan-Latino community, thereby perpetuating feelings of Latinidad, while simultaneously separating Latinos as “others,” in the following three ways:

1 - Plaza Fiesta contributed to pan-Latino identifications at a local level. Marketing messages especially emphasized Latino connections. The Spanish language, Plaza Fiesta’s atmosphere,

⁶⁷ Hall, 1989, 16

⁶⁸ Dávila, 2001, 219

and local events for Latinos were also unifying factors that contributed to a sense of *Latinidad*.

2 - At some levels, however, the Plaza carried out the “othering” of Latino immigrants living in Georgia and perpetuated an idea that Latinos are different or separate from broader society. By emphasizing foreign affiliations with Mexico or other Latin American Countries, and by creating an environment that is distinctly for Latinos, Plaza Fiesta highlighted Latinos as both “foreign” and “different.”

3 - On the other hand, the Latino community drew strength from this “otherness,” or “difference.” Plaza Fiesta provided a welcoming environment and sense of belonging to Latino immigrants where visitors experienced linguistic and cultural freedom, especially during a time of tough immigration policies.

¡It’s the Place, Our Place! Marketing Messages and Latinidad at Plaza Fiesta

Marketing messages at Plaza Fiesta have reinforced a Latino identification and connection with a broader Latino community. The slogan of Plaza Fiesta, *La Capital Latina de Georgia*, or the Latin Capital of Georgia, emphasized localized associations with a unified and connected Latino community in Georgia as a whole. First off, the slogan simply reinforced the use of the word Latino as a term of identification for people of Latin American descent living in the U.S. It indicated that there is a large population of people in Georgia who consider themselves to be Latinos. Secondly, the slogan invited this ethnically diverse group of people to participate in Plaza activities together as Latinos. According to Maritza Garcia, marketing director at the Plaza Fiesta, the center is called the “Latino” capital as opposed to the “Mexican” capital of Georgia, even though a larger percentage of patrons who visit are from Mexico. She

indicated they wanted to keep Plaza Fiesta open to people from all countries and not exclude anybody:

We called it the *Capital Latina de Georgia* because, although our focus is the Mexican market, Plaza Fiesta has visitors from El Salvador, Honduras, Colombia, and Venezuela, as well as tenants of different nationalities, such as Venezuelans and Colombians. So, describing Plaza Fiesta as the Mexican Capital would be segmenting only one group of people, and not letting the rest come. Calling it the *Capital Latina de Georgia* leaves it more open so that the rest of the Latino community, Hispanics, those that speak Spanish, can come.

Also, using the word “Capital” suggested that Plaza Fiesta was a popular and highly-frequented spot for Latinos not only living in Atlanta, but also in cities all across Georgia. One interview respondent incorporated the slogan’s messaging into his conceptualization of Plaza Fiesta. When asked why he visited Plaza Fiesta, Jose answered “because it’s the ‘Capital Latina de Atlanta.’” When asked what role Plaza Fiesta played in his community, another respondent indicated it was the “mall of the Latinos.” Two others responded that Plaza Fiesta is one of the most frequented locations by Latinos in Georgia. The slogan is incorporated into the majority of Plaza Fiesta’s marketing materials, including posters, banners, events promotions, and radio and television spots, and reinforces connections with a broader Latino community.

Plaza Fiesta’s jingle, as shown in the commercial script below (Table 1), also conveyed the idea of a distinct Latino identity in Georgia. The jingle promoted unification under a Latino umbrella because, though visitors at Plaza Fiesta come from different countries, they were all “Latinos, Hispanics, Friends, and Brothers.” The commercial implied visitors at Plaza Fiesta were Spanish speakers from all over Latin America who were able to enjoy Plaza Fiesta as friends because their shared characteristics made them brothers. Plaza Fiesta advertized itself as the center for the Latino family, and established a sense of belonging and togetherness by

extending an invitation to all Latinos to gather together at Plaza Fiesta. The jingle portrayed Plaza Fiesta as a place where people were able to identify with fellow Latinos, thereby establishing a sense of unified Latino community.

Table 1. Plaza Fiesta Jingle

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Es el sitio Nuestro Sitio Latinos, Hispanos, Amigos, Hermanos Plaza Fiesta! Plaza Fiesta! El lugar de reunión para la familia Latina</p> <p>Todo lo que necesitas para pasar los momentos más agradables y en la mejor compañía. Plaza Fiesta: El centro comercial para la familia Latina.</p> | <p>It's the Place Our Place Latinos, Hispanics, Friends, Brothers Plaza Fiesta! Plaza Fiesta! The gathering place for the Latino family.</p> <p>Everything you need to spend quality time in the best of company. Plaza Fiesta: The shopping center for the Latino Family.</p> |
|---|--|

The messages in another advertisement reinforced the idea that Plaza Fiesta was a home away from home (Table 2), while at the same time pointing to the idea of a Latino identity. The commercial called to immigrants' nostalgia for the countries they have left behind. It sent the message that if a Latino has left his or her hometown, missed being there, and wanted to feel at home again, Plaza Fiesta was the only place to be. Secondly, it offered a generic statement that welcomed people from any Latin American or Spanish speaking country. The commercial did not single out Mexico, for example, by saying "do you want to feel as if you were in Mexico?" The commercial indicated that the Plaza was an environment for all Latinos because it is a home-away-from-ANY Latin American-home. Whatever Latin American country a person has come from, they could feel as if they were at home at Plaza Fiesta because it was the *Latin Capital of Georgia*.

Table 2. Plaza Fiesta Commercial: Como en tú país

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Si quieres sentirte como en tú país, no busques más. Porque sólo hay un lugar. Plaza Fiesta: La Capital Latina en Georgia. Estamos en Buford Highway y Clairmont Road.</p> | <p>If you want to feel as if at home in your country, don't look further. Because there is only one place: Plaza Fiesta, the Latino Capital of Georgia. We are located at Buford Highway and Clairmont Road.</p> |
|---|--|

Marketing messages also situated Plaza Fiesta as a community center that fulfilled the dreams of Latinos. The following Valentine's Day commercial (Table 3) related the concept, history and origins of Plaza Fiesta with the desires of Latin American immigrants. The text implied that the creation of Plaza Fiesta fulfilled the dreams of Latino immigrants to have a community anchor and a place to belong and feel comfortable. It suggested that Plaza Fiesta answered immigrants' desires to have a place to shop in Spanish, socialize, and find the familiar products they needed. The idea was something Latinos had dreamed, and Plaza Fiesta made it come true. Overall, the commercial reinforced Plaza Fiesta as a community location, and situated Plaza Fiesta as the center, or heart, of Georgia's Latino community.

Table 3. Plaza Fiesta: The Dream.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Hace cinco años comenzamos un sueño que se pasó en el corazón de muchas personas. Y hoy los hemos convertido en algo más que un simple sueño. [PF jingle begins] Es el sitio. Nuestro Sitio. Latinos, Hispanos, Amigos, Hermanos. Plaza Fiesta! Plaza Fiesta!</p> <p>Nuestros mejores deseos en el mes del amor y la amistad. Plaza Fiesta, el corazón latino de Georgia.</p> | <p>Five years ago we began a dream that was held in the hearts of many people. And today, we have turned it into something more than a simple dream. [PF jingle begins] It's the place. Our place. Latinos, Hispanics, Friends, Brothers. Plaza Fiesta! Plaza Fiesta!</p> <p>Wishing you the best in this month of love and kindness. Plaza Fiesta: The Latino Heart of Georgia.</p> |
|--|--|

Marketing messages employed by the Plaza emphasized local connections to a Latino community in Georgia. They reinforced a sense of togetherness among Latinos by underscoring common ties to Latin America and a need for a home-away-from-home. By marketing the shopping center as the Latin Capital of Georgia, Plaza Fiesta played a part in establishing Latino ethnic consciousness for its visitors.

Localized Attempts for Latino Community Formation at Plaza Fiesta

Plaza Fiesta provided a community space for Spanish-speaking visitors. The atmosphere at Plaza Fiesta was unhurried and many visitors went to Plaza Fiesta for a stroll, to see friends, meet girls or boys, or spend time with family. Visitors stopped to watch and enjoy the frequent musical performances at Plaza Fiesta. Benches and the central fountain provided a place of rest for visiting Latinos. Families took breaks to sit and eat a snack, friends chatted, and others read local Latino newspapers around the fountain. Families and friends ate together at the food court. Some children ran freely through the hallways, playing chase and tag. Plaza Fiesta provided a family environment that included an arcade and indoor play area. Many parents sat on benches to watch their children play. Vendors offered face painting for children as well, and children painted as Spiderman or Disney princesses were common sights. The use of the Spanish language throughout the Plaza provided a unifying factor for visitors. Most employees spoke Spanish, and signs, and event proceedings were in Spanish. Speakers from a variety of Latin American countries could understand. Plaza Fiesta's environment drew Spanish speakers from many Latin American countries and provided a Latino community space.

Some pointed out the cultural variety of products offered at Plaza Fiesta, which called them to identify more as Latinos when visiting Plaza Fiesta. For example, Rodrigo Torrero, a native of Mexico explained during an interview: “Well, I tell you, here there is like a mixture, a mixture of people not only from Mexico, but Latin American, Colombia, Honduras, and El Salvador. If you notice, there are fruits from Colombia, Colombian chicken dishes; there is food from El Salvador, or certain drinks from different countries. So, I identify more than anything with my Latino people, not necessarily those from my country.” Plaza Fiesta appealed to a broader Latino audience by including some products that were targeted to people from different Latin American countries, including miniature flags from countries like Nicaragua, El Salvador and México and car plates with the names of different Latin American countries.

In a Latino rendition of American Idol, the event Festival de Las Americas, demonstrated a localized effort to establish Latino community in Atlanta. The yearly event, organized by *Atlanta Latino Newspaper* and hosted at Plaza Fiesta, brought people from diverse nations together for a singing contest. An attempt for solidarity and shared entertainment among Latinos was notable. The newspaper invited Atlanta’s local Latino community to sign up and put their singing skills – good or bad – to the test. There were two rounds in the contest – a preliminary elimination on day one and the last round with ten final participants on day two. A panel of judges gave feedback after each performance. The stage was set up outside Plaza Fiesta’s food court in the parking lot, and there was a back-drop depicting a painted map of North and South America. On the second and final day, ten participants competed for the title. In addition to the finalists, the event incorporated dozens of special performances, audience contests and sponsor mentions.

The performances varied widely and showcased different styles of music from all over the Americas; however, each performer lived in the metro-Atlanta area. For example, a brother and sister duo from Peru performed an upbeat dance and song number, dressed in traditional garb. Another performer, Jesus Rodriguez, and two women in his family performed a Mariachi song in tribute to Mexico. During the routine, the singer called out “Viva Mexico!” to the crowd. He was dressed in traditional mariachi garb, including a big sombrero hat and the mariachi suit. The ladies were his back up dancers, and wore traditional Mexican dresses with big skirts, ruffles and bright colors – orange, green and white. They did a traditional dance and waved their skirts in the air. Another group of three young men from Colombia performed a pop song, *La Última Vez*, on the guitars and drums, wearing Usher-style white hats. Another young male contestant from Puerto Rico sang a slower pop song. Still another pair of young men sang reggaetón, a form of music that blends Jamaican reggae, Latin American beats such as salsa, merengue and Latin Pop, as well as American hip-hop and rap.⁶⁹ Bringing together this group of local, yet nationally diverse, artists to perform on one stage is symbolic because it emphasizes affiliation with “Las Americas” or Latin America and the U.S. as an important unifying factor, instead of just one’s nation of birth.

Festival de Las Americas also fostered a more cohesive, connected and established Latino community through its community focus. The idea and organization of the event was community oriented. Family involvement was evident, and family members of participants cheered loudly and held up signs in support of their loved ones who were performing. Paula, another emcee, interviewed several families out in the audience over the microphone. One held a

⁶⁹ Steve Jones, “Spanish-spiced hip-hop.” *USA TODAY*. 4 August 2005. Retrieved June 2, 2008 from http://www.usatoday.com/life/music/news/2005-08-04-reggaeton_x.htm.

“Perla is #1” sign and the others wished their son good luck before his performance. Also, the event coordinators asked Alberto Sanchez, 2005 winner of Festival de las Americas, to return to the stage and perform. Before he sang, Tony Guerrero, the emcee, interviewed him about life after 2005 Festival de las Americas, what he would like to say to his Mexican people, and he asked him to speak about his day-time job. Alberto talked about an interview he did on Univision 34, the local Spanish language network, and how he continued to proudly work as a police officer in Sandy Springs. Festival de Las Americas brought back winners from past years, such as Alberto Sanchez, incorporated performances from different local schools, and encouraged audience participation. These activities were community-oriented and fostered Latino community cohesion by bringing recognized faces, local organizations, and local performers together in one event.

Special performances by local groups at Festival de Las Americas also represented a sense of Latino community in symbolic ways. One group of students, called the Latin Mustangs Dance Group, gave a performance that simultaneously highlighted the students’ diverse cultural backgrounds and unification as Latinos. Paula, one of the emcees, introduced them as representing the Latino community and they opened the performance by entering the stage dramatically – wearing white shirts, slowly marching and holding flags from various countries over their heads. The pace and style of the dance changed frequently throughout the performance, and they switched from salsa (a fusion of Latin, Afro-Caribbean rhythms⁷⁰), to cumbia (a popular dance style in South and Central American that started in Colombia as a

⁷⁰ Jaime A. Pretell, “A look at the origin of Salsa.” In *Salsa History of Dance*. Retrieved June 2, 2008 from <http://www.centralhome.com/ballroomcountry/salsa.htm>

fusion of indigenous and African musical styles⁷¹), and even hip-hop. They also changed costumes according to dance style several times during the routine. The performance was symbolic because the dancers came from different countries, but were dancing as one group – the Latin Mustangs. It also demonstrated how children of local immigrants especially negotiate their identities in the US. Not only do they identify with a Latin American heritage, but they also share multiple identities as Latinos and as Americans.

The repeated presence of media companies, especially radio and television stations promoted measures of Latino community cohesion. Participants at Plaza Fiesta's events saw the faces of the DJs they hear on the radio. For example, the Kids Day celebration was sponsored by sister radio stations Viva 105.7 and El Patron 102.5. DJs Panda and Brenda from Viva's morning show were at the event, broadcasting live, encouraging people to come out, giving away prizes, and organizing contests and activities for the kids. One quiz question during the event was "What are the Panda and Brenda Show hours?" Several audience members readily knew the answer. At the Cinco de Mayo celebration, Paola Salazar, the talent on Univision 34's *Nuestra Georgia* community show, was doing autograph signings at Univision's booth. Giancarlo Cifuentes, news anchor for Univision 34's local news briefs, also took part in handing out prizes at Plaza Fiesta's Mexican Independence Day event. The presence of Latino media personalities at Plaza Fiesta's events helped establish a sense of localized and connected Latino community.

Special events have been used to create a sense of Latino community cohesion through the recurring presence of personalities, performers, and participants at various Plaza Fiesta

⁷¹ Rebeca Mauleon, "Cumbia." In *National Geographic Music*. Retrieved June 2, 2008 from http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/worldmusic/view/page.basic/genre/content.ge_nre/cumbia_712

events. Familiar faces were present at multiple events. For example, Tony Guerrero served as master of ceremonies for every major event at the Plaza. Co-host Paula from Festival de las Americas, also gave a stage announcement at the Cinco de Mayo celebration. The same policeman who sang at Festival de Las Americas also sang the Mexican national hymn at Colombian Independence day and gave another performance at the Cinco de Mayo Mariachi Festival. Two participants who sang in *Atlanta Latino's* Festival de Las Americas also attended Cinco de Mayo and participated in a singing contest on stage. The same mariachi band who played at Plaza Fiesta on Sundays also gave a performance at the Cinco de Mayo mariachi festival. These observations indicated that visitors regularly interacted with Plaza Fiesta which plays a distinct role in the community by bringing its members together for various events and other activities.

Othring at Plaza Fiesta

By fostering a unique place for Latinos and Latin American immigrants, Plaza Fiesta carried out the “othering” of Latinos. Plaza Fiesta emphasized foreign affiliations with Mexico and other Latin American countries and created an environment that was distinctly for Latinos. In so doing, Plaza Fiesta highlighted Latinos as both “foreign” and “different.” Arlene Dávila argued that the inclination to divide society based on racial, cultural, or ethnic characteristics to carry out targeted, multicultural marketing carries out the “othering” of U.S. Latinos.⁷² Plaza Fiesta was a shopping mall targeted directly to Latinos, and methods used by the center to market itself portrayed and maintained Latinos as a separate group in society.

⁷² Dávila, 2001

The atmosphere that marketing directors created at Plaza Fiesta perpetuated the idea that Latinos are “others” by emphasizing their “foreignness.” Located 15 minutes north of downtown Atlanta, Plaza Fiesta resembled being in a foreign country and some called it a “little slice of Mexico.” Forty six out of 91 respondents indicated Plaza Fiesta reminded them of their home nations or that it was like being in their own country. Constituents of Plaza Fiesta saw their fellow countrymen, they spoke Spanish, and spent time taking a walk or relaxing by the Plaza fountain. Recreating the look and feel through fabricated façades and a signature fountain created a space that elaborated over and over again that people were connected to a foreign country. The environment created a contradiction because Plaza Fiesta visitors simultaneously felt at home in a foreign country; however, the environment also emphasized a feeling of being foreign in the country that is now home. Fabricated connections to homeland created a displaced feeling of being “not from here” and therefore underscoring a sense of being foreign and different.

Plaza Fiesta’s marketing messages played on the idea that Latinos were “foreign” and wanted to feel as if they were in a different country. One commercial said, “If you want to feel as if at home in your country, don’t look further. Because there is only one place: Plaza Fiesta, the Latino Capital of Georgia.” The commercial emphasized that Plaza Fiesta was like being in a different country. It reinforced the feeling of being transported to another country when shopping at Plaza Fiesta. Even though visitors were in the United States, they could feel like they were in another place like Mexico or Latin America.

The implications of Plaza Fiesta’s jingle (Table 4) were also double-edged. On the one hand, the jingle evoked a welcoming environment for Latinos. On the other hand, it also implied that Latinos were a separate community in Georgia and not part of the mainstream. The emphasis

that Plaza Fiesta was *our* place for “Latinos, Hispanics, Friends, and Brothers” was symbolic because it implied other places are not for them, and Plaza Fiesta was not for other people. The jingle said that Plaza Fiesta was “*our*” place, the gathering place for the Latino family, suggesting that it was a separate location in the community where Latinos gather.

Table 4. Plaza Fiesta Jingle Revisited

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Es el sitio Nuestro Sitio Latinos, Hispanos, Amigos, Hermanos Plaza Fiesta! Plaza Fiesta! El lugar de reunión para la Familia Latina</p> <p>Todo lo que necesitas para pasar los momentos más agradables y en la mejor compañía. Plaza Fiesta: El centro comercial para la familia Latina.</p> | <p>It’s the Place Our Place Latinos, Hispanics, Friends, Brothers Plaza Fiesta! Plaza Fiesta! The gathering place for the Latino Family.</p> <p>Everything you need to spend quality time in the best of company. Plaza Fiesta: The Shopping Center for the Latino Family.</p> |
|---|--|

This “othering” of Latinos at the Plaza happened as an unintended consequence of efforts provide festivals to the community and attract corporate sponsors to participate those events. According to Plaza Fiesta’s marketing director, Maritza Garcia, Plaza Fiesta has worked hard to position itself as the Latino Capital of Georgia, the place where all Latinos go. It has captured an “ever-growing” Latino market by creating an environment where people feel “at home” in Mexico or another Latin American country. Corporations looking to do Hispanic marketing advertised their products through events at the Plaza because that is where Latinos go. Some purchased sponsorship packages to the tune of \$55,000, \$45,000, or \$35, 000 a year. One marketing director gave the following reasons for participating in events at Plaza Fiesta:

I mean it’s obvious to us. It sits in the heart of a really high Hispanic area, with a huge population within walking distance of the Plaza. And it has really made its name as being the Hispanic epicenter of Atlanta. There are people that come as far as Gainesville to these events. They just have the clothes and the stores and the food that all, or not all, but a lot of what Latinos are looking for. They have made it very friendly.

Obviously you go in there most everybody speaks Spanish. And what we know from our research is that the Hispanics, whose native tongue is Spanish, want to speak Spanish over English. So, you know, you're coming from another country and you want to get the few foods you're used to from your own home or your clothing or whatever it may be. That's the place to go from what we know. And we don't know of any other place like it in Atlanta.

On some levels the Plaza had a vested interest in maintaining a culturally, nationally, and linguistically distinct group in order to be profitable. Creating a specialized environment that attracted an increasing number of Latinos and distinguished the group from other markets allowed Plaza Fiesta to consistently sell sponsorship packages to companies specializing in the Hispanic market.

Don't Have Documents? Don't worry. Here, you are welcome.

At the same time however, Latinos who were interviewed said they have drawn strength from this "otherness" and that Plaza Fiesta provided a space where many felt free from discrimination or fear. The tough immigration environment currently characterizing the United States and Georgia permeated many aspects of Plaza Fiesta activities. Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, illegal immigration has come to the forefront of legislative policy, media coverage, and agenda setting in local community governments. The Latino community in Georgia has especially felt the brunt of anti-immigrant attitudes and legislation, and the ramifications are largely covered in local Spanish-language newspapers such as *MundoHispanico* and *Atlanta Latino*. Articles are published frequently about how immigration legislation is affecting metro Atlanta's Latino community – families are split apart with deportations,⁷³ parents are taken to jail and children are left behind,⁷⁴

⁷³ Linda Pérez, "Fe a prueba de todo entre la celebración y la preocupación." *MundoHispanico*. 22 November 2007, 7. ; Linda Pérez, "En Manos de Dios." *MundoHispanico*. 3 April 2008, 9.

⁷⁴ Maria Guevara, "Crónica de un arresto en Cobb." *MundoHispanico*, 15 - 21 May 2008, A6.

people are afraid to leave their houses,⁷⁵ and racial profiling and prejudiced attitudes are apparent.⁷⁶ Editorial cartoons and articles satirically criticize the use of terms such as “alien” to refer to the immigrant community.⁷⁷ Such legislation and attitudes simultaneously create an environment of fear and send a strong message of “you are not welcome” to Latino immigrants, legal and illegal alike, resulting in a community of people whose feelings have been deeply hurt. Plaza Fiesta, however, provided a space where immigrants could experience linguistic and political freedom, and feel free to express their cultural heritage through activities.

There were, however, a few exceptions to the idea of strength in otherness. Maria, a native of Mexico, explained: “Yes, I feel more comfortable here because I can speak my language, but it’s also risky to frequent locations such as this one because, whether you have documents or not, you can find yourself caught up in complicated situations.” Another informant indicated Plaza Fiesta might contribute to negative attitudes about the Hispanic population: “The events are not good because if Americans see us all there together, they think we are invading their country and then they pass laws against us.” However, most respondents indicated they felt comfortable at Plaza Fiesta, and felt more free and tranquil.

Despite visitors’ legal status, Plaza Fiesta has fostered an environment that welcomes people, irrespective of their documentation. In an interview, Celeste Rivera, a shopper at Plaza Fiesta, mentioned she was pleased to find a welcoming health care provider during her pregnancy at Plaza Fiesta, even though she was not a citizen. When speaking about what he thought Plaza Fiesta meant for the Latino community in Atlanta, Julio Peñaranda elaborated:

⁷⁵ Linda Pérez, “En Manos de Dios.” *MundoHispanico*, 3 April 2008, 9.

⁷⁶ Judith Martínez-Sadri, “Racismo incrementa a escala nacional y será investigado.” *Atlanta Latino*, 22-28 May 2008, 9.

⁷⁷ Armando Caicedo, “Las 10 preguntas más frecuentes.” *MundoHispanico*, 4 October 2007, 26.

“It’s more of a safe place for them to be, and they feel comfortable and safe here. Even when there are raids and immigration scares and everything they still come here because they know it’s more like a safe harbor than anything else. Everybody speaks their language. They know that the people who have stores here are also illegal. So if they are here, why wouldn’t somebody else from the outside come to shop? They know that somebody is working here every day and is here without any fears. So they can come here without any fears.” This idea was also reinforced during one giveaway contest at Festival de Las Americas. Raffle organizers needed to see the winning person’s identification before giving away the prize, however, they understood that some people might not have licenses and that was okay. They could say their phone number or address instead.

Nonprofit organizations that serve Latinos also provide immigration information and support to the community at Plaza Fiesta. For example, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights hosted a fundraising event around the fountain in Plaza Fiesta. They organized a radio marathon broadcasted from Plaza Fiesta by El Patron radio station and sponsored by TV Azteca, two local Spanish media outlets. The goal was to raise money in order to put up panoramic billboards around Atlanta that showed the impact of Latino workers in U.S. society. They hung examples of the billboards from the ceiling, and each pictured a Latino working in an agricultural field with an attention grabbing statistic. For example, one pictured a Latino man lifting a bucket and said in English, “Have you seen them? They pick the crops we consume every day.” Another ad picturing Latinos harvesting crops read, “Did you know? Tax contribution by undocumented Latinos to Georgia’s coffers could total up to \$252.5 million?” A third sign read, “Did you know? Undocumented workers paid \$7 billion to the social security system in 2006.” During the

raffle, an immigration lawyer spoke about Latino immigrant rights in the United States and fielded immigration questions from the audience. The Latin American Association, another organization serving the Latino community in Atlanta, attended the Cinco de Mayo celebration and raised money for a scholarship to Georgia State University for undocumented children who must pay out of state tuition, even though they grew up in Georgia for the majority of their lives. Organized activities such as these demonstrated support to the Latino community and emphasized that even though one might be “illegal” they still have rights and opportunities in the United States. Plaza Fiesta provided a space and forum where those rights were communicated to Latinos.

Respondents also indicated they felt comfortable at Plaza Fiesta because they experienced linguistic freedom and less discrimination. Seventy nine out of 93 respondents indicated they enjoyed shopping in a center where Spanish was spoken by the majority. They gave reasons such as they felt more comfortable, it was easier to communicate, and they felt more confident. Pablo mentioned it was easier to ask for products, shop for different sizes, and make returns. Four people mentioned they felt freer from discrimination. Paco, from Mexico, said he liked to go to a place where everybody speaks Spanish because “sometimes we can’t go to other stores because at times we feel discriminated against when we can’t speak English.” Julieta also mentioned discrimination at other stores. She said, “No store should deny the entry to their store because they are immigrants. People are the consumers and without us, stores would go down in the market.”

Two out of 10 people interviewed mentioned they could come to Plaza Fiesta without the fear of encountering discrimination. They could feel free and more at ease at Plaza Fiesta. In an

interview with Enrique González, he explained why he thought it was important that sponsors at events supported the Latino community, demonstrating how he experienced less discrimination at Plaza Fiesta: “In some ways, the Latino community is a bit left behind, and well sometimes we are afraid to go out on the street where they will point us out for simply being Latino. I am thankful for those that think about us because we have a place where we can enjoy ourselves freely without problems, without them saying we are undocumented.” Latinos drew strength and support from Plaza Fiesta’s welcoming environment, which established a sense of belonging despite one’s language or legal status.

Jokes and music at events have provided comic relief and demonstrated how immigration issues became intertwined with entertainment and discourse at the Plaza. Jokes told at events made light of “illegal” situations and provoked some to laugh. For instance, during Festival de Las Americas emcee Tony made a joke with one of the cameramen, saying “Eres Hindu, Eres Hindu... Eres Hindocumentado.” The joke is a play on words because “Hindu” sounds very similar to the beginning of the word “indocumentado” (undocumented). At Cinco de Mayo, he made another joke when an audience member was brave enough to participate in a contest on stage. He joked that when the participant crossed the border, he didn’t follow the *coyote* (border smuggler), the *coyote* followed him! Event organizers also threw prizes to the audience over the fence that separated the stage from the crowd. The emcee joked with participants who were jumping for the prizes, and said, “Just jump the fence! It’s not new for you, you are good at that!” The comment referred to illegal immigrants’ savvy ability to cross the U.S./Mexico border. Themes of crossing the border also surfaced in musical performances at Cinco de Mayo. For example, a singer from Peru sang a popular Mexican song about the difficulties of crossing

the border, abusive encounters with *la migra*, or the U.S. Border Patrol, and remaining steadfast to overcome the hard journey.

La migra a mí me agarró (The *migra* captured me)
Trescientas veces digamos (About 300 times)
Pero jamás me domó (But they never broke my spirit)
A mí me hizo los mandados (They could not intimidate me)
Los golpes que a mí me dio (The beatings they gave me)
Se los cobré a sus paisanos. (Were paid for by their countrymen)

The song's theme showed that issues of immigration and crossing the border are relevant for Latinos visiting Plaza Fiesta. It provided a sense of togetherness for immigrants at Plaza Fiesta who may have shared similar border crossing experiences.

The repeated participation of Plaza Fiesta patrons in musical performances showed visitors felt comfortable expressing their cultural heritage. Plaza Fiesta hired a mariachi band to play on Sundays, and one day a young man eating in the food court got up from his seat and asked to join in. The band welcomed him and the man stood in front of the food court and sang the words by heart along with the mariachi singers. Similar occurrences happened at Festival de las Americas and at Cinco de Mayo. At Festival de las Americas, one man approached Tony, the emcee, and asked if he could sing a song on stage. He explained he didn't know about sign-ups for the event and really wanted to perform. They let him participate, and he got on stage to perform wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. He knew all the words by heart, was a wonderful singer, and the judges, crowd, and emcees were all very impressed. Finally, at Cinco de Mayo, one of the on-stage contests required people to sing a song on stage to win tickets to *La Lucha*, a wrestling match. A volunteer from the crowd readily stepped up. He told the band his song, they started playing, and he sang. The crowd whistled and yelled in approval for his performance.

These incidences showed that Plaza Fiesta was an inclusive environment where people were welcome to express themselves, embrace their cultural heritage, and be who they were.

Conclusion

Activities at Plaza Fiesta created both coherence within Atlanta's Latino community and disconnection between its visitors and the "mainstream." At some levels the Plaza carried out the "othering" of Latino immigrants living in Georgia. By emphasizing foreign affiliations with Mexico or other Latin American countries, and by creating an environment that was distinctly for Latinos, Plaza Fiesta highlighted Latinos as both "foreign" and "different." On the other hand, the Latino community drew strength from this "otherness," or "difference." Plaza Fiesta provided a community space for Latinos, and as a result, there were localized examples of Latinidad and the establishment of Latino ethnic consciousness.

The use of targeted events to Latinos, the prevalent use of the Spanish Language, and the popularity of Plaza Fiesta as a for targeted Hispanic marketing, perpetuated Plaza Fiesta as a site whose Latino visitors were disconnected with the "mainstream" population. Dávila argued that through the creation of a "Hispanic" market, media outlets perpetuate an idea that Hispanics are "others" in our society. For example, television stations such as Univision and Telemundo have a vested interest in selling this "Hispanic" market to potential clients or companies who might advertise with their stations. Putting Latinos into a neat "Hispanic market" package allows them to sell the concept more easily to potential advertisers. There is a desire to differentiate Hispanics from the mainstream, to make them seem exotic, and to make them seem culturally distinct from the rest of society.

“Othering” at Plaza Fiesta revealed a nuanced explanation of the social forces behind the disconnected, “us-them” relationship between Plaza Fiesta’s visitors and “mainstream” society. Dávila argued the desire to categorize and sell a Hispanic market reflects deeply rooted fears about “others” in our society held by the U.S.’s “mainstream” population. The segmented, culturally specific marketing approach “responds to and reflects the fears and anxieties of mainstream U.S. society about its ‘others,’ thus reiterating the demands for an idealized, good, all-American citizenship in their constructed commercial images and discourses.”⁷⁸

Categorizing people into minority markets to increase sales perpetuates ideas of difference and us-and-them dichotomies. “Us” represents what is considered to be normal – the English speaking, white, protestant majority - and “them” represents the minority markets who don’t fit the mold. The agency or impetus behind the separateness perpetuated and maintained by Plaza Fiesta, however, resulted from a complex relationship between desires for economic gain, desires to maintain traditions of home, and reactions to negative social attitudes toward immigrants. In a sense, the disconnection fostered by Plaza Fiesta was defined by Plaza Fiesta, but also embraced by its visitors.

The “othering” of Latinos at Plaza Fiesta was born largely from opportunistic capitalism. Developers recognized a large Hispanic population on Buford Highway and saw the need and possible economic gain of creating a targeted Latino market and community center. Arturo Adonay explained, “The Latino population was there before we got there and it was an opportunity for us to tap into that market because nobody was taking care of it. There were a lot of Latinos living there when we opened the Plaza and also that population has grown. Once we opened Plaza Fiesta, we offered a good environment and more safe and clean plaza for Latinos.

⁷⁸ Dávila, 2001, 218

By giving the community something better, a better place to be, they came into that area.” As marketing and managing director, Adonay recommended they turn it into a Plaza similar to plazas in Latin American where people gather. He also explained, “One of the strategies we used to make the Plaza successful was to host as many events as we could to give the community that sense of belonging and try to make them feel like there were in their own countries.” To capture the Latino market on Buford Highway, founders used cultural appeals and connections to homeland, a factor that contributed to the “othering” of Latinos at Plaza Fiesta.

Visitors at the Plaza responded positively to the mall’s cultural appeals, however, and data gathered revealed that there was a desire by immigrants to maintain customs and traditions of their home countries. Eighty two out of 91 questionnaire respondents indicated they recalled their native countries while visiting Plaza Fiesta. Cultural appeals were constructed by Plaza Fiesta, which evoked memories and connections with Latin America through its products and atmosphere. One theme revealed by questionnaire respondents and observations was that many visitors enjoyed coming to Plaza Fiesta because it reminded them of home. One respondent explained, “I come from another country and I like to remember. At Plaza Fiesta it feels like they have brought our country right to us.” Another participant indicated he enjoyed the feeling of being in his state in Mexico, “It makes us remember our country because in Plaza Fiesta its as if you were walking in your own state in Mexico, because here you see friends and family.” Still another participant said, “I like to come to Plaza Fiesta because they speak Spanish and its like you are in Mexico because there are a lot of people.” Therefore, on some levels, a desire to maintain connections with homeland by purchasing familiar products, attending traditional events and seeing familiar people showed a self-motivated self-separation on the part of Plaza Fiesta’s visitors.

On some levels, the separation fostered and maintained by Plaza Fiesta has resulted from reactions to being cast as “others” and from anti-immigrant attitudes experienced by some visitors. A desire to find a comfort zone where visitors felt free to use their own language contributed to the congregation with other Spanish speakers. Yanelli, a shopper at Plaza Fiesta, wrote that at Plaza Fiesta, “I don’t feel strange and I can feel at ease.” Also, a need to visit a place where one’s legal status wasn’t an issue contributed to the success of Plaza Fiesta to attract Latinos. As discussed earlier, visitors could shop, gather, and enjoy Plaza Fiesta without fears of being pointed out because of their legal status. The immigration march held at Plaza Fiesta in 2006, where Latinos from different nations issued a call for comprehensive immigration legislation, also demonstrated a stance against anti-immigrant attitudes. Plaza Fiesta, therefore, resulted in a duality where visitors have reacted to being considered as “others” by mainstream society, but have also carried out auto-othering or self separation as a result in order to find a comfort zone.

Plaza Fiesta demonstrated the strong connection between targeted marketing to Hispanics and conceptualizations of Latinidad in the United States. Arlene Dávila wrote that “advertising has long appealed both to their [Hispanics] feelings for their homelands and to their pride as Latinas in the United States.” Commercials and advertisements to Latinos emphasize many times stereotypical connections between a diverse group of Latinos into one Hispanic market. Many marketing techniques to Hispanics are based on the notion that Hispanics share “a fervent love of tradition, ethnic pride, nationalism, and longing to ‘connect’” with homeland. Images and commercials overemphasize connections to family, values, and religious views shared by

Latinos.⁷⁹ In many of its commercials, Plaza Fiesta used references to Latin American and homeland to attract customers to its shops. Plaza Fiesta was advertized as the place where Latinos could feel as if they were in their own countries. Feelings of nostalgia and memory were cultural appeals to attract customers, and reinforced identification with fellow Latinos from other countries who visited Plaza Fiesta as well. Instead of a figurative “Hispanic” market, Plaza Fiesta’s advertisements drew a diverse group of Latinos into a literal marketplace and community center for Hispanics. There was a direct local connection between its marketing efforts to a diverse group of Spanish speakers and establishing local Latino community and consciousness.

The semblance of Latinidad was also created during some of Plaza Fiesta’s events and performances, which drew upon common affiliations to Latin America and the experience of being Latino in the United States to bring people together. The Festival de Las Americas especially drew upon common affiliations to Latin America and showed how immigrants from a variety of nations gathered to celebrate diverse musical traditions in together as Latinos. Sommers wrote that “events are symbolic contexts, or what Ortner calls ‘key scenarios,’ for inventing Latinismo (1977). In particular, festive gatherings and parades provide a structure for national and ethnic expression within a larger panethnic event frame.” Latino cultural expressions were performed through music, on-stage contests, and traditional garments at Plaza Fiesta. The presence of local Latino media at events also established ties and connections between Latinos.

⁷⁹Dávila, 2001, 101

The Plaza's welcoming environment has provided situational solidarity to Latinos participating in activities at Plaza Fiesta. Massey and Sanchez argued that "the undocumented especially, do not feel part of American society, yielding a configuration of Latino identities based on solidarity with others in the same political, historical, and cultural situation."⁸⁰ Felix Padilla analyzed Latino identity as a "situational type of group identity and consciousness." Similar political and social situations united immigrants from different countries as Latinos when "gains are sought for the collectivity." A type of political consciousness was established through discourse, political activism, and events at Plaza Fiesta, which illuminated the shared political, historical, and economic situations experienced by visitors. One respondent indicated he thought it was important that places such as Plaza Fiesta existed to serve immigrants because, "that way they don't feel like they are in a strange country and they don't feel sad for their families that some or the majority leave behind in search of a better future for their family and to succeed in life. They feel like there are in their native lands with their loved ones." Many were touched by issues of immigration, discrimination, and other negative attitudes, and found a place of belonging at Plaza Fiesta based on those shared experiences. On some levels, therefore, Plaza Fiesta established situational affiliations with a panethnic Latino identity through shared experiences as immigrants.

It is important that concepts of Latinidad be analyzed on a local level, as Patricia Price noted, including everyday encounters among people and between people and their environments that establish feelings of Latino ethnic consciousness.⁸¹ At the local and grassroots level, Plaza Fiesta has become a complex of myriad influences that contribute, as observations revealed, to

⁸⁰ Douglas S. Massey & Magaly Sanchez R., (2005). "Latino and American Identities as Perceived by Immigrants." The Center for Migration and Development Working Paper Series: Princeton University.

⁸¹ Price, 2007

Latino identity construction at a local level. Rather than one dominant constructive factor, multiple layers of influences have contributed to a Latino consciousness, including but not limited to consumption, marketing, events, political, and social factors. The constituents of Plaza Fiesta are immersed and surrounded by influencing factors that simultaneously foster separation from a “mainstream” society, while providing strength and sense of community.

Chapter Four

The Story of Identity at Plaza Fiesta: Contradictions & Complexities

Stuart Hall wrote that “identity is a narrative of the self; it’s the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are.” If this is true, then what story were people at Plaza Fiesta telling about themselves? When analyzing how Plaza Fiesta related to Latin American immigrants’ sense of identity and community, the story, rather than having a clear plot with a beginning, middle, and end, turned out to be complicated and full of contradictions. Five notable complexities and contradictions were the following:

- Participants in this study identified themselves in various ways, sometimes exclusively by country of origin, but often interchangeably and or simultaneously as Latino, Hispano, or with hyphenated identities such as Hispano-Mexicano, or Mexican-American, and even as “illegal” or “undocumented.” Some chose not to identify with a group at all.
- The term *Hispano* held a variety of meanings for respondents, and took on different meanings for different people. To some *Hispano* referred to language rather than identity.
- On the one hand, a sense of Latinidad, or Latino consciousness, was evident because questionnaires indicated people were extremely proud to identify as Latino. However, at Plaza Fiesta’s special events, responses to the term were less enthusiastic.
- Another contradiction concerned the Plaza’s Latino ideal in contrast with its Mexican reality. The sponsors of Plaza Fiesta, a self-proclaimed Latino center, actually emphasized Mexican culture and traditions, potentially undermining its status as “Latino.”

- On another level, the Plaza population's community connections and identifications were on the one hand passive but, on the other hand a source of political expression, as when they attended Latino or Mexican solidarity functions.
- Finally, identities appeared to be in flux. Some people held on to identities of the past, while others were called to discover an identity.

Situated within this complex story of identity and community formation at Plaza Fiesta, is my own story. During research for this project, I experienced my own journey of identity and community affiliation which shifted and became re-defined through my experiences at Plaza Fiesta.

Mexican? Mexican-American? Latino? Hispanic? Or all of the above?

Gloria Anzaldúa wrote that Latinos living among multiple cultures hold a “tolerance for ambiguity” and learn to juggle culture, maintain plural personalities, and sustain contradictions while turning ambivalence into something else.⁸² Results to identity questions in my study reflected this tolerance of ambiguity, and research participants showed they identified themselves in several categories - as Latino, Hispano, by their country of origin, and even with hyphenated identities such as Hispano-Mexicano, or Mexican-American. Based on responses to questionnaires, it was evident people who come to Plaza Fiesta have incorporated these various terms into their vocabulary of identification, and sometimes use each of them simultaneously. When respondents were asked to tell their identity, for several there was no one, clear answer. For example, one respondent said, “I am a Latina, Mexican woman who is very proud of her roots and of being Hispanic.” Another respondent indicated, I am Mexicana because I am very

⁸² Anzaldúa, 1991, 79

proud of who I am, and I am also Hispana.” There were some discernable patterns, however. The answers to questionnaires showed that most respondents identified first as Mexicans or *Hispanos*. The largest number of respondents identified themselves as Mexican with 43 percent (28 out of 65 responses). The second largest group identified as *Hispano* with 31 percent (20 out of 65 responses). Significantly, only 10 people out of 65 respondents (15 percent) identified themselves as Latino. Other answers included Hispano-Americano, Latinoamericana, Hispano-Mexicano, Mexican-American, and from the USA.

Others chose not to identify with a category at all and demonstrated a preference for identifying personally instead of with a group. Thirty five out of 100 questionnaire respondents did not indicate affiliation with any identity. An interview with Roberto Peña demonstrated the how he preferred to identify personally, but also wrestled with and juggled various group identifications:

Sarah: If I asked, “What is your identity, how would you answer?”

Roberto: Well, there are many ways to respond, but the answer is not concrete. It is a question that is not easy to pin down. Because I can have identities that are significant, but my identity is that I am part of these people. Although we speak the same language and although we are from the same country, we are all different. My identity, I don’t know, I like who I am. More than anything I am very proud of my country, but I am also ashamed of some Mexicans.

Sarah: What do you think about the terms Latino and Hispanic?

Roberto: They don’t bother me.

Sarah: Do you consider yourself to be Latino?

Roberto: I am Latino.

Sarah: What do you think it means to be Latino?

Roberto: To be Latino is to be part of. . . Well, those who identify as Latinos are those that are not from this country. They called the colony Latino. I believe they call me Latino because of my color.

Sarah: Why?

Roberto: Because they only see somebody with dark skin and they automatically assume he is Latino, and they call him a thousand different things. But, it doesn’t bother me. I am very content. But, truly it means somebody who is not from here.

Sarah: And what makes you feel Latino?

Roberto: Nothing. It doesn’t bother me. It doesn’t make me feel proud. It doesn’t make me feel anything.

Sarah: So you prefer Mexican?

Roberto: No, because they have never told me, ‘you are Latino.’ My name and who I am are what represent me. I cannot be thinking that others represent me. I walk my own paths, leave a footprint, and try to be my best. So, I don’t like to say that I represent a certain group of people or that they represent me.

This conversation demonstrated the often ambiguous nature of identity and the futility of finding one concrete answer to the question of one's identity. Roberto's responses indicated how the identification of Latino visitors at Plaza Fiesta was complex and often inconsistent. Respondents could belong to several groups at once, or to no group at all.

Discourse at events reflected the complexity of the identity terms and showed how Latin American immigrants at Plaza Fiesta shared multiple identifications. Calls by stage performers to event crowds showed a variety of ways the community could be united. For example, two young men gave a reggaeton performance at Festival de Las Americas and called out to the crowd, "What's up my Latino people!!!" In another special presentation by a band of three performers, the singer yelled, "How are my people from Mexico?! Where are the people of Atlanta?!" During one audience contest Tony Guerrero, master of ceremonies, asked where the contestant was from and he replied he was from Mexico City. However, he did not appear very proud and Tony questioned him why. The participant reverted his answer and explained, "No, ok, ok, I'm proudly from Mexico City, La capital! I am proud to be Latino. We all have something in common." In several events, people onstage went through a list of Latin American countries to energize everyone in the crowd, and called out "Where are the people from Colombia? From Honduras? From Argentina? from Venezuela?" and so on. Some even called out specific states in Mexico, for example, "Where are all the people from Guadalajara!? From Jalisco!?" and so on. Discourse at events and the way people referred to themselves and their own communities demonstrated how people's identities are constantly juggled, changing, and used interchangeably.

Results showed a variety of definitions for what respondents thought it meant to be *Hispano*, and demonstrated how the term takes on different meaning for different people. The two most prevalent answers were a person who speaks Spanish (19 out of 74) and a sense of pride (17 out of 74). The next most popular response was geographical, or a person from Latin America (14 out of 74). Other responses indicated that to be *Hispano* meant to be a foreigner, a hard worker, a Mexican, the same as a Latino, a person of different color skin and different language, a person with values, traditions and roots, and human, just like everybody else. Surprisingly, at least to me, was the fact that the most given response reflected the origins of the word explained by Jorge J.E. Gracia – the Latin term *Hispania* used by Romans to refer to Spanish speakers on the Iberian peninsula. No one characteristic was truly dominant, though, and perhaps the most accurate answer was given by one person: to be *Hispano* is to be many things. The large variety of different responses given reflects fluctuating and changing influences people encounter in society.

The use of the term Latino by patrons at Plaza Fiesta showed how issues of identity were even more complex. Some authors find the term to be very problematic and argue it is an umbrella for an incredibly diverse group of people who come from many different backgrounds.⁸³ However, answers given on questionnaires during this study indicate the category “Latino” is a viable and real form of identification for the people who visit Plaza Fiesta. Responses show the feeling of being Latino and the connection to the Latino identity is present. Being unified as Latinos is a very real part of people’s concept of group identification. However, observations during events tell a slightly different story. When it comes to rallying around the “Latino” identification, people are not quite as enthusiastic.

⁸³ Dávila, 2001; Oboler, 1995

One revealing point that emerged again and again in questionnaire answers was that most people felt extremely proud to identify as Latino. In fact, after the geographical response that Latinos were from Latin America, pride was the response given most for what it meant to be Latino. Twenty seven out of 80 responses related pride or another positive characteristic, such as honest, hardworking, happy, or tradition, with what it meant to be Latino. Respondents mentioned the unified nature of the Latino community as a source of pride as well. Meli, from Mexico, explained that being Latina is something to be proud of because of the culture and great unification that exists. In an interview with Enrique Gonzalez, a 30-year-old from Mexico, he explained that being Latino was also a source of pride for him: “What can I tell you about being Latino? I am proud to be Latino. It is wonderful that I was born a Latino. For me it’s a word with which I identify very proudly, we are all proud to be Latino. I think, well, how great it is that that word exists.” I asked why he thought it was important that the word existed, and he replied, “Simply because I was born Latino and it’s good that there is a word that can encompass or include all Latinos. We are all Latinos and we share the same language and practically the same customs.” Others said they were also proud to be Latinos because the community is very unified and Latinos are all *hermanos*, or brothers. Juan, from Mexico, said he was proud to be Latino because in this country “80 percent of immigrants are Latinos and 20 percent are from other countries.”

Others emphasized respect for one’s origin as a unifying factor for Latinos. Mariana, a 40 year-old from Mexico, summarized the shared qualities, experiences and values she felt characterized Latinos: “It’s to love the countries where we were born, to love our families, respect and love our elders, love and respect our parents, love our nation’s flag, their patriotic symbols, it’s to listen to the national hymn and miss our country, it’s to love our brothers, its...

many things.” Another respondent, Rodolfo, explained that to be Latino is to enjoy life, speak the same language, and celebrate patriotic festivals. These results suggest that identification with a larger Latino community was very real for many study participants. A feeling of Latinidad, or Latino consciousness, has been established and incorporated into people’s every day notions of who they are. Despite some arguments that the reasons may seem based on arbitrary, surface similarities, people not only accept the word as a valid term of identification, but it’s a word people have embraced and use with pride.

However, the difference in questionnaire responses and how people respond to the word Latino at events is considerable. This observation begs the question that if people are so proud of being “Latino,” why does the word not incite a lot of cheering or excitement at events? In an interview with Tony Guerrero, emcee for many Plaza Fiesta events, he mentioned the crowds never cheer loudly after addressing them as Latinos, or calling out, “Where are all my Latinos!?” He mentioned, however, that if you call out, “Viva Mexico!” or “Where are all the Mexicans?!” the crowd lights up and begins to cheer. This same pattern surfaced in observations at Plaza events. On several occasions stage performers called out to Latinos, only to be answered with silence and stares. At Cinco de Mayo, a man wearing a traditional mariachi hat was invited to participate in several contests on stage because he had a comical and attention-grabbing manner about him. Each time he was onstage, though, he took the mic away from the emcee and called out, “Arriba los Latinos!! Arriba los Latinos!!” Instead of breaking out into applause of support or laughter, people in the crowd just stared at him. The lack of response was significant and raises important questions about the viability of Latino as a term of identification for Latin American immigrants who visit Plaza Fiesta.

Did event participants not respond to the word Latino because their primary source of pride is their home country and, as some have indicated in my study, Mexicans especially are very patriotic? Is it because, as Tony Guerrero asserts, Mexicans do not want to be considered as Latinos? Only 10 respondents out of 65 put Latino as their term of identification, but many who identified as Mexican were proud to identify as Latinos. Is it because people did not grow up with the Latino identity, which is conceived here in the United States? Or is it because some associate the terms Latino and Hispanic with negative experiences of racism or prejudice they have experienced here in the U.S., as Ana de Fina's research has showed⁸⁴? Perhaps. Perhaps it is all of the above.

When describing what it means to be Latino or Hispanic, some informants' answers revealed a call for dignity and respect of who they were. These answers also revealed that some respondents perceived there are negative connotations attached to the identifying terms. Roberto, a thirty year old from Mexico who has lived in Atlanta for 10 years wrote, "Hispanic means that one is a human being with dignity. He has values like any person. It's not a delinquent or an animal." Another respondent emphasized that Latinos are human, "It's a human being like everybody else. People are honorable and hard-working." Julio, from Mexico, defended the good character of Hispanics: "Hispanic is to have Latino blood. They are warm people that come to work and forge a future in this country that has opened its doors to us. We are not bad people, for the majority. And this is something all the Americans should know." Another respondent claimed, "I am proud to be Hispano and I am not ashamed to be so." Each of these answers showed a rejection of negative connotations some might have felt were associated with being "Hispanic" or "Latino," i.e. delinquent, criminal, or animal. Respondents refuted these

⁸⁴ de Fina, 2006

connotations by showing the positive qualities they attributed to being Hispanic and Latino: dignity, values, human, honorable. Perhaps these negative things people might associate with being Latino or Hispanic in the U.S. prevented people from cheering loudly when Latino is called out at events.

The mixed emotions about the terms of identification highlighted that people were in the process of negotiating them. Plaza Fiesta is one space where those types of negotiations are played out. The way people used various terms at events, combined with how people spoke about terms of identity on questionnaires and during interviews, demonstrated that people were wrestling with the terms. A struggle for continuity was at play. People were still working out what exactly to call themselves. So, in the absence of one clear answer, people choose all of the above and every answer was correct. w

Contradictions and Identity at Plaza Fiesta

Plaza Fiesta has worked to position itself as the Latino Capital of Georgia, however, its emphasis on Mexican culture and traditions contradict that goal, and potentially undermine efforts to welcome all Latinos. Part of my own frustration to understand the relationships between identity and Plaza Fiesta were born from this contradiction. Plaza Fiesta's marketing initiatives sent two very distinct and significant messages to the community. First, its slogan, jingle, and television commercials showed Plaza Fiesta is the place for the Latino family. All Latinos are welcome there, and at Plaza Fiesta people can spend time and identify with other Latinos from different countries. However, marketing efforts such as major events highly targeted to the Mexican community reverse that Latino notion. One respondent, a 35 year old from Mexico who has lived in Atlanta 18 years, indicated he didn't think events at Plaza Fiesta were important for the Latino community because they focused too much on Mexico: "I don't

think the events create a more unified Latino community in Atlanta, because if they were in general for all of Latin America, they would. But they are always focused on Mexican people and the events don't leave a good image. All Latin American countries have Independence Days in September. Maybe if they did something for Latin American in general, yes. But, the Mexicans are the ones who go to the events, other people, no." For managers at Plaza Fiesta, it's simply a matter of the bottom line. "Ninety percent" of Plaza Fiesta's market is Mexican, and that is the target audience they focus on. The economic sense seems obvious, but it further complicates notions of identity and how they relate to Plaza Fiesta. Stuart Hall argued that identities are constructed in history. They are part of narrative. This particular history of identification at Plaza Fiesta is shaped by economic factors, and a unified Latino identity is at times forgone to capture a more profitable Mexican market.

The way events at Plaza Fiesta interacted with respondents' sense of community was contradictory – both passive and empowered. Observations and questionnaires revealed a passive connection and identification with Latino community events at Plaza Fiesta. Language used by questionnaire respondents reflected this, and events were described using us/them dichotomies. When people talked about events at Plaza Fiesta, most said "they organized events," "they bring our culture and traditions to us," "they bring us information," and "they support the Latino community." One main theme that was revealed through questionnaire responses was that people felt the events and event sponsors supported and helped the Latino community. However, there is no real sense that "we" as a community of Latinos, Hispanos, or Mexicans organized the event to celebrate our culture. When asked if he thought the events at Plaza Fiesta played a role in creating a sense of community, Tony Guerrero, master of ceremonies at major events, answered in the following way:

Um, we do try to do that, to create a sense of community. We see it. And we think up to a certain point we have a sense of community. But we don't see it fulfilled completely. There is something missing. There's something missing, we don't see it. We just see the people together. Once we gather them all together, and we ask them to fight together as a community. We saw it is difficult. So I don't know if those events really help or not. I really don't know. I've seen it through seven years that I've been doing this. It's like they are there, but they are not there. It's funny.

Thousands of participants were there together at the events, but not really involved in its origins, organization, thematic concepts, and so on. The events were organized by Plaza Fiesta, and were one method former marketing director Arturo Adonay instated to attract Latinos to the center. The events were created, designed, marketed, and designated themes by Plaza Fiesta and partner corporations. They were business or corporate driven, instead of being born out of neighborhood, community efforts to gather together. This begs the questions: To what extent did people bring their cultural identities and heritages to events at Plaza Fiesta? Or to what extent did Plaza Fiesta define that identification through events? Regardless of who is defining the cultural interpretations, questionnaire responses revealed the theme that bringing people together for the events makes the Latino community more united, and therefore created opportunities for empowerment.

There was a very real sense of political empowerment at Plaza Fiesta's major events. For example, 50,000 people attended the Mexican Independence Day celebration in September 2007. During the event they joined together in *el Grito*, or Cry of Independence for Mexico. 50,000 voices joined together with the Mexican Consulate to shout, "Viva Mexico, Viva!" This act created a sense of purpose, unification, and political cause for Mexican immigrants living in Atlanta. When asked if events at Plaza Fiesta play a role in establishing a sense of Latino community in Atlanta, one event organizer elaborated on political empowerment:

“Yeah, I do think that there’s a whole sense of force in numbers. And I also think that’s why we saw as many people come out to the Mexican Independence Day celebration as we did. That was during and right after some really politically charged moments in time. And I think with all the new laws and ordinances that have been passed, and particularly in this state lately, it was almost kind of like a, ‘we’re not leaving, don’t try to push us out’ statement. I really kind of think that may have been happening. And what better place to do it other than Plaza Fiesta.”

The immigration march held at Plaza Fiesta in 2006 also demonstrated political empowerment. Immigrants wore white t-shirts and carried American flags, and called to be recognized as valuable citizens and participants in U.S. society. When talking about the Latino community’s feeling during the march, Plaza Fiesta’s manager said:

“Hope. Hope. That day was just filled with hope. Filled with dreams. That was the first time we’ve seen different groups of people join together for one cause. Every time we do these large events, it’s just to celebrate a Mexican date, a Mexican event. This is the first time we did it for the entire community. It was just spectacular. There were people from every country. You couldn’t see it because everyone was wearing white, but when you get down there and start speaking to everybody, you hear different accents you hear Colombian, Venezuelan, Costa Rican, Honduras, from every single country you had a least one family.”

Major events at Plaza Fiesta have provided opportunities for a shared sense of political cause among Mexicans living in Atlanta and the broader Latino community as well. Flores and Benmayor examine the ways Latinos and other groups claim space in society and eventually claim rights. They argue these claims create opportunities to incorporate into U.S. society while developing specifically Latino cultural forms.⁸⁵ Observations have shown that Plaza Fiesta

⁸⁵ Flores & Benmayor, 1997

provided a space where people begin to claim cultural citizenship and rights. While participating in events people become politically empowered, but it remains to be seen whether that empowerment continues outside the context of Plaza Fiesta.

Plaza Fiesta also presented an interesting duality of parents who held on to past identities and their children who were called to discover identities rooted in the past. Stuart Hall argues that “we tell ourselves the stories of the parts of our roots in order to come into contact, creatively, with it. So this new kind of ethnicity – the emergent ethnicities – has a relationship to the past, but it is a relationship that is partly through memory, partly through narrative, one that has to be recovered. It is an act of cultural recovery.”⁸⁶ This act of cultural recovery is seen at Plaza Fiesta – though its foods, products, ambience, but especially its traditional Mexican events. When asked what meaning events at Plaza Fiesta hold for the Latino community, the most predominant theme was they maintained the roots, traditions, and cultures that they left behind to come to the United States. At the same time parents are concerned with teaching their children about their customs. Stuart Hall describes how his son, who was born in London and is from London, cannot say that he is from Jamaica. “Part of his identity is there, but he has to discover that identity. He has to learn to tell himself the story of his past.”⁸⁷ Children at plaza Fiesta “discover” the identities of their parents. One respondent said events at Plaza Fiesta were important because “our children see what we do in our country.” Another person wrote that through events “you teach your kids and family that were born here and that don’t have the opportunity to get to know more about your culture. Here they come to learn a little more about their own people and culture.” Identity is recovered, rediscovered, and discovered anew. It is learned and it is constructed.

⁸⁶ Hall, 1989, 19

⁸⁷ Hall, 1989, 19

My Personal Journey

My own story, or personal narrative of self, adds to the contradictions and complexities about community and identity at Plaza Fiesta. On one hand, I experienced my own process and discovery of identification. My own identity was re-invented and changed through my work there. On another, I became a part of- and an agency for the hybrid experience of identity and community at Plaza Fiesta. By being at Plaza Fiesta, by shopping there, and by talking to people there, I created cultural fusion.

Finally, I became a first-hand witness to how anti-immigrant legislation and attitudes in society have deep impacts on the ways people identify and feel about themselves. These discoveries have led me to join other scholars in issuing a challenge for positive change and open-mindedness for things that are “different.”

The Gaze of the *Güera*

Like the many respondents who participated in my research study, I also hold multiple, fluid identifications that have changed from place to place, depending on where I was, who I was with, and what I was doing. For example, my name is Sarah, Sarita, Sarilla, Sarah Jane, Sarah Lindley, or even just Marske. I am a daughter, a granddaughter, and a friend. I am a student and an employee. I am white, an American, North Carolinian, and a U.S. citizen. I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, so I am a Tarheel too. I have been called *Gringa* (foreigner from the U.S. in some Latin American countries), *Gringuita loquita* (crazy Gringa), *Tica* (a Costa Rican term for being Costa Rican), *Gallega* (someone from Northern Spain), a Latina wannabe, and most recently, *güera*.

I never knew I was a *güera* until I went to Plaza Fiesta. One day, I was speaking with Rina, an employee at the Panadería, about the products offered there when a man walked in to make a purchase. While he was checking out, he asked her, “*Qué está preguntando la güera?* (What is the *güera* asking you?)” I overheard but didn’t understand the term *güera*. I was afraid it meant something bad because his tone wasn’t so friendly, so I asked Rina. She explained it was not bad, but that it meant someone of light colored skin, eyes, or hair. I felt like at that moment, when the man asked that question, I was fixed in the gaze of the *güera*, in the gaze of the “Other,” and my own difference and otherness was apparent. Stuart Hall wrote that “It is a fantastic moment in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* when he talks of how the gaze of the Other fixes him in an identity. He knows what it is to be Black when the white child pulls the hand of her mother and says, ‘Look momma, a Black man.’” Hall argues our sense of identity is intimately rooted in difference. We don’t know who we are, if we don’t know what we are not. A few days later, I was at Plaza Fiesta again observing an event outside of the Kool Smiles Dental Clinic. I went to pick up some information from a table, and began speaking to a vendor in Spanish. He exclaimed, “Oh! You speak Spanish. I thought that you were a *güera!*” I responded “Well, I guess I am ‘*güera*’ but I also speak Spanish.” The conversation sealed my new identity and also my own “difference” from others.

The idea of what I was not, or my own “otherness,” preoccupied me at times during my research. Some might have been confused by my presence at Plaza Fiesta. I was taking a long time looking at the candy selection in the candy shop because it was all new to me. The attendant asked if he could help me find what I was looking for, and I explained to him I was doing a research project for school. The transformation on his face from confused to understanding the situation was quite apparent. He was probably wondering what I was doing there, and knowing it

was for a school project made much more sense. Another interesting moment where my color of skin became a topic of conversation was when I was talking with a high school student working in one of the restaurants. In the midst of our conversation she asked me, “So, are you white?” I was so surprised by the question that I stumbled through a series of incoherent responses and finally asked, what do you mean? I suppose I had always thought it was obvious.

Whether people spoke Spanish to me also became a really interesting concern and challenge. This started when I walked into Burlington Coat Factory on day one and the greeter said to me, “Bienvenida a Burlington!! (Welcome to Burlington!)” I was honestly quite shocked that she spoke to me in Spanish. I said, “Gracias!” and walked on without missing a beat, but I felt very surprised and pleased about the encounter. From then on, I started to pay close attention to whether people spoke to me in Spanish, whether they hesitated to speak to me in Spanish, or whether they didn’t bother at all and just spoke to me in English. I wasn’t sure if by looking at me, people would assume I only speak English. On the other hand, maybe people would think I fit in and only speak to me in Spanish. The majority of younger people spoke to me in English; however most people addressed me in Spanish.

Through my presence at Plaza Fiesta, I also became a part of- and an agency for the hybridization of identity and community at Plaza Fiesta. For example, I spoke English with a few people who wanted to practice English. I spoke Spanish with many, and improved my Spanish language skills. I spoke English and Spanish with the children who participated in coloring at my booth while parents filled out questionnaires. Therefore, I contributed to bilingual and sometimes even Spanglish language formations at Plaza Fiesta.

If I was shopping for my own identity, I inherited an entirely new cultural frame of reference that included products previously unknown to me such as Mexican tamarind candies,

pastries, alligator or ostrich leather boots and belts, Mexican saddles, and even *chicharrones* (pork rind snacks). I incorporated a greater variety of musical genres into my own musical knowledge, and gained greater understanding the breadth of music in Latin America, and how those styles interact with each other and relate to U.S. genres to form new interpretations.

I have grown to identify more with visitors at Plaza Fiesta, understand how many visitors' past experiences in Latin American related to their shopping, recreational, and social habits at Plaza Fiesta. There was an appreciation of traditions and customs brought from Latin American and acceptance of how those traditions were newly interpreted locally in the U.S. There was also an acceptance of how those customs incorporated U.S. and other cultural influences, even my own. Through participating in events at Plaza Fiesta, my own understanding of community expanded and changed to incorporate new possibilities of relating to others and new possibilities for celebrating familiar and new holidays. Through interacting with shoppers, I understand more profoundly the varied concerns of Latinos, who form a very significant part of my own newly interpreted community. I learned to look at the world through a slightly different lens, which combined old perspectives and new perspectives learned from study participants. Research at Plaza Fiesta demonstrated that hybrid identities and cultural fusion are defined by relationships between people. When people come into connection with one another, something new is invariably created, including my own sense of self – the new *güera*.

A Challenge for Open-mindedness

One of the most surprising and significant findings at Plaza Fiesta was the extent to which immigration issues and legislation formed a part of people's everyday experiences, discourse and even identity. The "undocumented" situation was ever looming and filtered through at Plaza Fiesta on many levels. In many ways, discourse at Plaza Fiesta both

emphasized and erased the metaphorical border that a document, or green card, can represent for Latin American Immigrants living in Atlanta. Songs containing themes about crossing the border and *la migra* (U.S. Border Patrol), reminded people of immigration issues, but provided camaraderie and sense of political purpose. Immigration lawyers gave information to event participants and emphasized that people still have rights if they are not citizens. Participants learned their rights and became politically empowered but are also reminded of “undocumented” situations. Jokes about “illegal” situations, “coyotes” (smugglers), about being “*hindu*” or “*Hindocumentado*” (undocumented) and crossing the border illegally both made people laugh and kept immigration issues in the forefront of people’s minds. Jokes about the fence between the stage and the crowd at events as a metaphorical border emphasize illegal immigration, but it was ok to jump over it or cross it to participate on stage as a game contestant or even performer. The jokes and discourse at Plaza Fiesta simultaneously emphasized and broke down this metaphorical border of the “document” in the United States. At Plaza Fiesta, people can embrace their illegality, flip it upside down, make jokes about it, and become empowered in doing so. Categories such as “citizen” and “not citizen” fell by the wayside and being human became what fundamentally matters most.

The discoveries made about identity at Plaza Fiesta may reflect how we as a society identify and categorize immigrants, and may often undervalue one’s humanity. Some respondents showed how anti-immigrant attitudes deeply affected their personal identification and sense of self. For one person to describe that being Hispano is being a human with dignity and they are not a delinquent or an animal, suggests that somewhere along the way, society has sent a message that Hispanics are delinquents or animals. For one person to say that events at Plaza Fiesta are a “recognition that we exist” indicates that society has given the impression that

the Latino community is nonexistent, worthless. For another person to write that Hispanics are “not bad people, and this is something all Americans should know” indicates that Americans in the U.S. have given this person the impression that Hispanics are bad people. If people must defend their humanity and value, it shows society is sending messages that may undermine some people’s sense of being valued members of community.

Immigration issues have formed part of Plaza Fiesta’s visitors’ everyday consciousness. One person indicated they thought events at Plaza Fiesta unified the Latino community because, “When something bad happens regarding immigration, we are all united.” One person indicated sponsors at events were “those that give us hope in the face of those who want to see us leave this country.” Marie indicated, “events are important because they make the government take notice of us and it is like Latinos are a considerable force.” Another person indicated events at Plaza Fiesta were important because “Latinos were a people fighting for their ideals.” Flores and Benmayor wrote that “Increasingly, Latinos are outsiders in their homeland. They are considered foreigners and immigrants, even when they hold legal citizenship by birth...Borders, real and symbolic, jut seemingly ever higher and wider to encapsulate the United States against the perceived threat of cultural invasion from Latinos. So Latinos, even those who trace their ancestry and citizenship in the United States back for many generations, often feel rejected as full and equal citizens of the country in which they were born.”⁸⁸

My research and findings at Plaza Fiesta have led me call for a more nuanced understanding of immigration issues based on larger economic, historical, and political factors. Also, a break away from an “us-them” dichotomy to a more understanding and humanistic

⁸⁸ Flores & Benmayor, 1997, 2

approach to immigration is needed. Statements such as: ‘Are these people taking over our country?;’ “Why aren’t they learning English? They need to learn English. We are in America.,” “I hate the Spanish Language. It’s stupid. We are in America. People should speak English.”; and “Send them all back” are all things I have personally heard people say. Therefore, I call for a shift in focus that recognizes the humanity, dignity and valuable contributions of immigrants to the United States.

Border crossing and “illegal” immigration must be understood in broader economic contexts and in conjunction with the role the U.S. government’s own economic policies play in bringing immigrants to the United States. U.S. driven neo-liberal policies such as free trade, open markets, privatization, and economic global integration have actually resulted in unequal development between the United States many nations in Latin America, with the U.S. coming out ahead to the detriment of Latin America.⁸⁹ U.S. presidents have promoted the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a “model for development” in Latin American, however, the agreement has not stimulated the economic growth it promised, especially in Mexico. Morín explained:

Nearly ten years after NAFTA began, a study sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace concluded that ‘NAFTA has not helped the Mexican economy keep pace with the growing demand for jobs.’ The purported benefits of NAFTA for Mexico’s poorest have not been realized. ‘Real wages for most Mexicans today are lower than they were when NAFTA took effect.’ Moreover, ‘NAFTA has not stemmed the flow of poor Mexicans into the United States in search of jobs: in fact, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of migrants to the United States, despite an unprecedented increase in border control measures.’⁹⁰

In an article in TIME Magazine, Tim Padgett argues that “if there are jobs, there’s no need to go *al otro lado* (to the other side).”⁹¹ He also argues that organizations such as NAFTA

⁸⁹ Morín, 2005

⁹⁰ Morín, 2005, 37

⁹¹ Tim Padgett, “Home Work. If there are jobs, there’s no need to go al otro lado. How one town beat the system to fund start-ups.” *TIME*. 26 March 2007.

and “other Washington-backed free market reforms have failed to reduced illegal immigration.” There is an obvious disconnect with U.S. economic policies – which purport the fluidity of capital across borders – and its recent anti-immigration and border patrol policies. On the one hand, anti-immigration policies portend to keep immigrants out, but on the other hand economic strategies simultaneously promote and create this migration.

Issues of immigration and citizenship must be understood in a historical context as well. When considering the history of the American continent, the idea of “citizenship” in the United States becomes dubious. As my data has shown, the idea category of citizen has very significant implications for one’s sense of self, and the issue of “illegal” immigration is ever looming at Plaza Fiesta. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas question, “Who is a U.S. citizen? Who is a ‘foreigner,’ or an ‘alien’? Who is eligible for citizenship? Who is deportable? And moreover, who is a ‘real American?’”⁹² The historical relationship between the U.S. and Mexico and Latin America complicate the answers. In the 1800s, the U.S. actually crossed illegally over the Mexican border. According to Morín, the U.S. has a long-standing relationship with Latin American based on expansionism through military conquests and hegemonic intentions, which has repercussions for rights given to Mexicans and Puerto Rican “immigrants” today. He explains that “the legal framework constructed to delimit the rights of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans who found themselves under U.S. territorial designation in the 1800s is, in great measure, a product of the hegemonic aspirations and racial assumptions of U.S. policy makers that formed part of the ideology known as ‘manifest destiny.’”⁹³

⁹² Nicholas De Genova & Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, (2003). “Latino Rehearsals: Racialization and the Politics of Citizenship between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago.” *The Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 8, no. 2: 18-57.

⁹³ Morín, 2005

Indeed, Gloria Anzaldúa⁹⁴ argues that Anglos migrated illegally into Texas in the 1800s, which was then part of Mexico. The defeat at the Battle of the Alamo, and the U.S.'s invasion and occupation of Mexico in 1846 forced Mexico to give up almost half of its nation, including what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. The U.S. pushed the border 100 miles south to Rio Grande, and what was left was a large group of people who were stripped of citizenship in the place of their very own roots.

Finally, instead of focusing on “illegality” this study may challenge society to focus on the Hispanic population as people and humans who deserve respect and rights, and whose distinct cultural backgrounds enrich our country. It has been well documented that traditionally large influxes of immigrants incite exclusionary and negative attitudes in the United States. This was seen with the Irish, Chinese and Japanese during the late 1800s, and now with the anti-immigrant discourse directed towards Latinos.⁹⁵ It has also been well documented that people who look “different”, or are considered to be minorities, have been the subjects of discrimination. However, it has also been well documented that fusions of different cultural traditions make the fabric of the United States stronger and more vibrant. Flores and Benmayor argued that “this country is strengthened, not weakened, by the vibrancy brought to it by immigrant and non-white communities. The United States has thrived not because of its efforts at cultural homogenization, but despite them. What is more, rejection of difference prevents us as social scientists and as citizens from understanding the highly complex world in which we reside. Rather than “disuniting America” or tearing apart its “social fabric,” difference produces new cultural forms that, in fact, help define America – and have done so throughout its

⁹⁴ Anzaldúa, 1991

⁹⁵ Thomas J. Espenshade & Katherine Hempstead, (1996). “Contemporary American Attitudes Toward U.S. Immigration.” *International Migration Review* 30, no. 2, 535-570.

History.”⁹⁶ They point out the contributions that African Americans have made to music including blues, jazz, soul, and more recently hip-hop, genres which “define modern American music on a global scale.”⁹⁷ Latinos have also made an imprint on U.S. society, with salsa now outselling ketchup,⁹⁸ musical beats such as reggaetón, salsa and meringue spicing up dance floors, and Caribbean-style tapas and mojitos drawing crowds for a fun night out. A tolerance of difference and an open-minded attitude about “others” only serves to create a better, more intelligent and enriched society.

⁹⁶ Flores and Benmayor, 5

⁹⁷ Flores and Benmayor, 5

⁹⁸ Dávila, 2001

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